

Historical Journey of the CRC

The Christian Reformed Church has its roots in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. We believe that we cannot earn our salvation through good works and that the Scripture is the guide by which we evaluate our practices as Christians.

- [Memorable Events in the History of the CRC.](#)

We are a family-centered church.

We believe in the importance of the family. We encourage worship as families. And we believe that the church is the family of God and that we live as brothers and sisters under the authority, love and care of our heavenly Father. Sometimes we have family squabbles, but we know what it means to be together. We bear each other's burdens, increase each other's joys and enrich each other's lives.

The Word of God is central to our worship services.

For this reason the focal point in our churches is the open Bible on the pulpit and the focal point in our worship together is the sermon. The songs and hymns we sing in our churches are based on the Scriptures.

We believe that all of life is governed by our faith.

Our faith in God helps us to make the important decisions in our lives, not only on Sunday but every day of the week.

We have a strong commitment to Christian education.

Because of our concern for family and our belief that our faith is important in all areas of our lives, we support Christian schools and offer many programs to help families grow spiritually. We want all members to be informed Christians.

Where did we come from?

Historically, we came from the Netherlands. But today, although a majority of our members are still from Dutch backgrounds, we can't honestly be called a Dutch church - unless we're also called a Korean church, a Navajo church, a Southeast Asian church, a French-Canadian church, a Hispanic-American church, an African-American church, a melting pot church.

More important to us than such ethnic badges is our place as one branch of the tree that started growing on Pentecost, almost twenty centuries ago.

The early Christian church was like the single trunk of that tree. After about 1,000 years of growth, the trunk divided into two major branches - the Eastern and the Western

churches. In 1517 the Protestant Reformation divided the Western (or Roman) church into several new branches. One of these Reformation branches, formed under Martin Luther's influence, was called the Lutheran church. Another branch developed under the influence of Ulrich Zwingli and later John Calvin. These churches were called "Presbyterian" in Scotland and "Reformed" in continental Europe. The Reformed churches flourished in the Netherlands. In the middle 1800s, some of these Dutch Reformed people moved to the United States, and in 1857 they started the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

John Calvin

What sets the Christian Reformed Church off from many other denominations is its embrace of key teachings of John Calvin. In a nutshell, these all center on the sovereignty of God. The biblical teachings of predestination and election give us comfort because they assure us that no one and nothing, not even our own bad choices, can snatch us out of God's hand. And the realization that God owns all of creation and continues to assert his rule over it gives us a sure hope for the future.

John Calvin's teachings blossomed in many countries, including the Netherlands. While much of the Netherlands remained Roman Catholic, the Reformed faith established itself as the state church. As is often the case, politics and church make a bad mix. The Reformed Church in the Netherlands began to show its share of moral decay and of theological liberalism - the latter largely spurred on by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that idolized human reason at the expense of Bible-based faith.

In response to this trend, a grassroots movement developed among the less-educated lower-income folk, who clung to a simple, practical faith based on traditional Calvinist doctrines. Because the churches did not nurture such faith, those who joined this movement worshiped in small groups called "conventicles."

When the Reformed Church began to actively persecute the leaders of this movement, a number of groups, under the leadership of Rev. Hendrik de Cock and others, seceded from the church. This branch of Dutch Calvinism ultimately gave rise to the Christian Reformed Church.

Coming to North America

The next key event that led to the formation of the CRC was the decision of secessionist pastor Albertus Van Raalte to flee from the specter of religious persecution and famine in the Netherlands. Together with his wife, his family, and some forty others, Van Raalte immigrated to the United States. In 1848, they settled in and around what is now Holland, Michigan, establishing a "colony" on American soil that fervently held onto Calvinist doctrine, practical piety, and a strong commitment to living all of life to the glory of God.

It wasn't easy. Inexperienced and crippled by disease, the settlers faltered under the grueling task of extracting a living from the untamed ground. Only the steady trickle of

new immigrants kept their ranks replenished and even allowed for some modest growth in their numbers. Through these first terribly difficult and painful years, the settlers tenaciously clung to their most prized possessions: their faith and the freedom to live out that faith in their daily life.

Separation from the Dutch Reformed Church

The harsh conditions in the fledgling "colony" convinced Van Raalte to seek help from the Dutch Reformed Church. That church had been introduced to American soil over a century before, when Dutch Reformed merchants accompanying Peter Stuyvesant settled in New York, then called New Amsterdam. That line of communication between Van Raalte's Michigan churches and the Dutch Reformed congregations of New Jersey soon blossomed into a full-fledged merger.

In 1857 a small fragment of four churches, about 130 families, seceded from the new union. Among the reasons they cited were:

- a perceived lack of sound doctrinal preaching by American pastors;
- a perceived lack of piety and too much accommodation to American culture by these same pastors;
- the use of hymns in worship by the Americans - the seceders insisted on psalm-singing only;
- the practice by the American churches of "open communion," extending an open invitation to all believers to participate in the Lord's Supper;
- the perceived lack of solidarity on the part of the Americans with the secessionist cause in the Netherlands.

In 1857, the Christian Reformed Church was born.

Abraham Kuyper

The stream of Dutch immigrants into the CRC increased dramatically in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These new arrivals shared a commitment to the Reformed creeds and confessions, but they introduced a very different vision. Their views were shaped largely by the great Dutch theologian and statesman, Dr. Abraham Kuyper.

Won over to the simple, biblically based faith of those who had seceded from the Reformed Church of the Netherlands some fifty years earlier, Kuyper led a movement out of the Reformed Church that joined the seceders. Kuyper's great contribution to the seceder movement, and, through the immigrants, to the Christian Reformed Church, was a more outward-looking faith.

While still solidly grounded in Scripture and the confessions, Kuyper's vision was to claim Christ's lordship over all of life. Believers were not only called to maintain holy lives in relation to God and each other, they were also called to extend God's kingdom into the society in which they lived. Believers were to look beyond the hard, wooden

pews and their family altars to take on the world for Christ - using Christian schools, institutions, and organizations to make God's redemptive and recreating work a reality in the marketplace, city hall, and factory.

The new vision that began to live among CRC members did not displace the down-home piety, but it did spur the infant CRC to peer over the walls of its cradle to begin to engage a wider world.

Becoming North American

At the turn of the century the CRC began to make the difficult transition of moving from the Dutch language to English. That did not happen overnight. On the positive side, it meant the CRC could emerge from its isolation, engaging culture and society and forging relationships with other Christians. On the negative side, a major element of the CRC's cohesion began to dissolve. And CRC members, especially the youth, became increasingly vulnerable to the dangers and pitfalls of Americanism.

The First World War accelerated that process. Young CRC soldiers fought for the United States and came back more determined than ever to be Americans. The CRC as a whole supported the war effort, and its members became increasingly loyal to what they began to see as their land.

After the war the CRC had a difficult time defining itself. It wanted to become American but it also wanted to cling tenaciously to its Reformed beliefs and practices, which many felt could only find full expression in Dutch. This led to disagreements, and, in typical Reformed style, to secession. Calvin Seminary Professor Ralph Janssen left the CRC because of sustained investigations into his views on science as a legitimate source of knowledge that could contribute positively to Christians' understanding of the world. Herman Hoeksema's rejection of "common grace" sparked the secession of the Protestant Reformed Church from the CRC.

The Depression years were difficult for CRC members. The church had spread in pockets throughout the United States. The rigors of survival caused them to look more inward than outward. As a result they were losing touch with each other and with their roots. Banner editor H.J. Kuiper sounded the alarm, encouraging members to dedicate themselves afresh to the Reformed faith. Kuiper identified three factions in the CRC that we can still identify to some extent today: those who cling tenaciously to historical Calvinism, those who espouse a sort of fundamental evangelicalism, and those who follow behind the liberal, socializing, modernistic churches of North America.

The Canadians

The Second World War served to Americanize the CRC even further. But it also had the effect of spurring a new immigration of Dutch Calvinists - this time mostly to Canada. While CRC churches had been planted decades earlier in places like Nobleford and

Edmonton, Alberta, new churches sprang up overnight in Alberta, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia.

The large immigration of Dutch Calvinists to Canada in the early 1950s brought some significant culture clash into the CRC. While the Dutch Canadians shared a commitment to the Reformed confessions, they differed from their American cousins in life experience, mindset, and moral and religious values. Dutch Canadians tended to focus their spiritual energies on working out the social ramifications of the gospel, not on personal piety. Yet both groups shared a genuine desire and commitment to remain obedient to God's Word - a solid foundation on which to build a bi-national church.

The Sixties

The flood of changes in values, lifestyles, and social interactions precipitated in the 1960s profoundly affected the CRC. Tidier patterns of church life gave way to a rising disenchantment and disagreement over how believers should respond to the social chaos around them. While the CRC never overtly held racist teachings, members debated long and hard over the ways the church should combat racism - if at all. Even among Kuyperians there was strong disagreement over the extent to which the institutional church should become involved in significant social issues.

The role of women in church leadership also became a hotly contested conflict during the sixties. Changing roles for women in the larger society forced the CRC to ask whether women should be allowed to serve in ecclesiastical office. While both sides in this struggle sincerely sought to be biblically obedient and Reformed in their interpretation of the Scriptures, neither side was able to convince the other. The impasse has led to a compromise decision that allows individual churches to ordain women as elders and classes (if they so choose) to allow their constituent congregations to ordain women as ministers of the Word as well. That decision spurred the departure of more than forty thousand members from the CRC.

Called to serve

Despite the deeply divisive spirit that has caused such pain in the CRC, there have been many evidences of God's grace as well. People on both sides have reached out in forgiveness and love. While some have left the CRC over their disagreements, many others have stayed. And they continue to be committed to living together and working together in this part of the Body of Christ. Despite the variety of different positions and viewpoints held by members of the CRC, the denomination is still bound together by a deep commitment to respond to the good news that our world belongs to - and is being redeemed by - our faithful God. In the unity and empowerment of that conviction, CRC members join together in an amazing variety and scope of ministries.

What ministries do we have?

By combining efforts and ministering jointly as a denomination, we can do much more than we could if we were only working in a local capacity. These efforts are carried out through our denominational agencies.

The *Back to God Hour* is our church's radio and television ministry. In nations around the world, the Back to God Hour sends the gospel message over the airwaves in French, English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Spanish and other languages.

Christian Reformed Home Missions is responsible for helping all CRC churches and for starting new churches throughout Canada and the United States.

Abuse Prevention offers resources and support to prevent abuse and combat its effects.

Chaplaincy promotes and supports Christian ministry in specialized settings such as the military, hospitals, prisons, industry, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, universities, and pastoral counseling centers.

Disability Concerns encourages and enables churches to respond to the needs of persons with disabilities within the congregation and the community.

The *Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action* raises awareness and promotes action on issues of justice and world hunger.

The *Ministry of Race Relations* designs and implements programs to eliminate racism and to reconcile people from many different races and ethnic groups.

The *Canadian Board of Trustees* operates three aboriginal ministry centers. It also supports committees that engage in broadcast ministry and address the government on social issues.

Christian Reformed World Missions takes the gospel message out to the far reaches of the earth. More than 300 missionaries live and work in about 30 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The *Christian Reformed World Relief Committee* takes seriously Jesus' love for the poor and afflicted. The CRWRC also equips local deacons to do their work, brings relief in times of disaster, and establishes long-term projects in Canada, the United States, and about 27 other countries around the world.

Calvin College and *Calvin Theological Seminary* are educational ministries of the CRC. Calvin College is a four-year liberal arts college that seeks to engage students in a vigorous Christian education with a Reformed vision that prepares them to participate in life from a biblical perspective.

Calvin Theological Seminary trains and educates the future ministers of the CRC and, through its many degree programs, prepares leaders for all aspects of the church's life both in North America and throughout the world.

CRC Publications produces materials used in the education programs of local churches from many denominations and provides other resources for the church's life, work and ministries. Through World Literature Ministries, CRC Publications also translates material for use in other languages.

The *Loan Fund* has served the Christian Reformed Church since 1983 by providing loans to CRC churches in the U.S. at low interest rates and offering investors higher rates of return.

(This information is distilled from [The CRC and You, Belonging](#), and from the Leader's Guide accompanying the *Our Family Album* video.)

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