

# **The Christian Reformed Church in BC**

## **A Brief Sketch of Its History<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

**Nick Loenen<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>The piece was first presented at Willoughby Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Langley, BC on September 27, 2015 to 40 CRC visitors from Grand Rapids, MI. That city, along with the general West Michigan area, is where the denomination was originally started and where its denominational offices are located. It was also delivered to Classis BC North West, one of the two CRC districts in BC, on October 4, 2016, at a classis meeting in Vancouver First CRC.

Please note that the term “Classis” or its plural form “Classes,” refers to the districts into which the denomination is organized. It occupies the middle ground in the hierarchy that starts with the overall Synod and then ascends via the classes up to the local congregation.

It should be realized that the early history of the CRC in BC is much more than that of American “Home Missionaries.” The emphasis on those missionaries is due to the fact that the original target audience was a group of visitors who came from the “heartland” of the CRC that directly and indirectly funded that missionary movement. As Loenen indicates, the heroic efforts of these missionaries continues to be warmly remembered in the CRC of BC. Though I, the editor of this article, share in that appreciation, I deeply regret the lack of vision of the Presbyterian Church of Canada to embrace these fellow Calvinists. That denomination would have become a much stronger part of the Canadian Christian scene and what is now the constituency of the CRC in Canada would not be burdened by the problems caused by its being an addendum to a larger American denomination, though I readily admit that the current arrangement has its mutual benefits.

The presentation to the Grand Rapids visitors was followed up by a separate brief historical sketch of the public funding for Independent Schools in BC, a struggle in which the CRC played a crucial role. For that lecture go to the section on Education on this same page.

This item is included in this page because it deals with the denomination in which I, the proprietor of this website and editor of this article, like Loenen, grew up. It has played a crucial part in the development of my faith and worldview. It was the denomination that trained me, then ordained me back in 1965 and offered my services to the churches of Nigeria in response to their request for a replacement of a missionary who returned to his homeland. This history is all available in our memoirs, *Every Square Inch: A Missionary Memoir*, available to you on the Boeriana page of this website.

Behind the scenes, the CRC has wielded a lot of influence in BC and in Canada as a whole via its role in the establishment of a Christian school system that includes two small universities and one post-graduate institution known as the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto, an influential labour union called The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC. See *McLean’s* magazine insert, Sept 12, 2016), the public justice movement known as Citizens for Public

(Somewhat Edited by Jan H. Boer<sup>3</sup>)

The early history of the CRC congregations in Canada was heavily influenced by the ministry of American “home missionaries” as they were called. Humanly speaking there would be no Canadian congregations without those American home missionaries. They and their wives played a crucial role.

Where and in what year did the first Canadian CRC congregation organize? In Monarch, Nobleford/Granum in southern Alberta, 1905. A request to organize had been sent to classis Orange City, Iowa and the nearest, sponsoring congregation was Manhattan, Montana, 400 miles south.

By the time of WWI there were 6 Canadian congregations. The following had been added: Burdett and Granum, southern Alberta; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Edmonton and Neerlandia in northern Alberta. Note the concentration in Alberta.

90 years ago, in 1926, BC had its first congregation, Vancouver organized by classis Pacific. Houston in northern BC followed in 1939. A flood of Dutch immigrants followed WWII. Vancouver became Mother Church to a large family of congregations reaching into the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan Valley and Vancouver Island. To collect far-flung families, for a number of years Vancouver First ran a school bus to the Ladner area one week and to Pitt Meadows<sup>4</sup> the following week.

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Justice (CPJ) and a number of smaller social efforts. Both the denomination and its members often serve as a bridge between the evangelical and liberal wings of the Canadian church scene, moderating both extremes.

<sup>2</sup>Nick Loenen arrived as a child in Richmond BC, an independent part of Metro Vancouver, when his parental family immigrated from the Netherlands in 1956 and has been a member of the CRC since then. He currently worships at Ladner, BC, CRC. Loenen is a prime example of the participation of CRC members in the larger society. He has served on the City Council of Richmond as well as in the BC Government as an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly). He has and continues to play an active role in the movement for the reformation of the voting system of both BC and of Canada as a whole. He is and was prominent in the establishment and operation of a senior housing complex in Richmond.

<sup>3</sup>This document was written as a speech, not an essay. As editor, I have inserted some textual changes and added many footnotes. In fact, all the footnotes are mine.

<sup>4</sup>That’s where the Boers lived during their first year in Canada and that’s where the bus picked us up. It was an ancient school bus that we children dubbed “chicken coop,” since chicken wire was embedded in its glass side windows.

By 1955, just 50 years after that tiny beginning in Nobleford/Granum, Canada was home to over 100 CRC congregations. Today, BC alone has two classes with a total of 40 congregations.

### **American home missionaries, what do we know about them?**

*First, they travelled much.* Our province is a pretty big place. The home missionaries, in the period between the two wars did not cover all of BC, but via Edmonton they reached out to Prince George and further west to Prince Rupert. From Washington State they moved into the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan, the Kootnays and Vancouver Island. They looked for stray Dutch immigrants on remote farms, in far-flung mining, logging, fishing camps and single-industry mill towns.

The early missionaries, a hundred years ago, travelled by train but after WWI most transportation was by automobile. In the late 1940s, Rev. *Hanenburg* was stationed in Edmonton responsible for northern BC. He would fly for the longer trips, yet, in addition, he often put 100,000 miles on his car per year. In the Smithers' anniversary book we read,

Rev. *Gerard Van Laar* (home missionary stationed in Smithers 1953-58) was not one to be daunted or hampered by weather. Every fall he loaded two bags of sand, two shovels, a set of tire chains, a tow chain, a pair of gloves, a pair of cover-alls and a flashlight into the trunk of his Buick.

*Paul De Koekkoek* (1949-1956) lived in Sumas, Washington. His territory was southern BC. He would be on Vancouver Island North, one Sunday and Vancouver Island South, the next Sunday and around the Lower Mainland the third and fourth Sunday. Each Sunday he preached in three different locations, played the organ, taught catechism and collected worshippers from far and wide. Mrs. De Koekkoek fed Paul his lunch of coffee and sandwiches while driving to the next place. The trips to Vancouver Island were 200 miles each, one way, and in the Lower Mainland 100 miles, one way.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I, the editor, pay tribute in this context to Rev. and Mrs. Gerrit Rientjes, who served the Vancouver Island churches during my early teens in the Alberni Valley. They came to us from the Reformed Church of America, the first Protestant denomination in the history of the USA, and moved on to pastor the First CRC of Vancouver. From there, they eventually returned to their homeland in WA State. The Rientjes were among the strong spiritual influences on me that eventually led to my turning to the ministry. Among the diminishing number of seniors who still remember them, they are loved for their extraordinary devotion to the churches and their sacrificial love for and encouragement of the people. They even organized a trip of the younger bachelors of the CRC in the Alberni Valley to a small rural congregation near Lynden WA to encourage interaction between the two sections of the denomination. We were all hooked up individually

The early American ministers also put on the miles visiting their far-flung flock and collecting them for worship. Casper Golhof Sr., till today a member of First CRC Vancouver, back to the 1930s wrote, “We used to call Rev. *Peter Hoekstra*’s auto ‘the immigrant’s car.’ He was minister and taxi driver.”

*Second, home missionaries made do with little.* Often far from home they lodged with settlers and immigrants in their primitive homes. De Koekkoek writes, “These folks gave us the very best they could offer, in this case an old couch to sleep on.” About moving from Edmonton to the Lower Mainland in 1949, he wrote, “Our new manse was an old house bought at a price lower than the Board ever paid for a home missionary. ... we suffered more from the cold than we ever did in that ‘cold Edmonton’.” The early home missionaries lived among settlers, the later among immigrants who had endured war. In both cases the missionaries shared the privations of the people they came to serve.

*Third, home missionaries and their wives opened themselves to endless service.* They provided more than nourishment for the spirit. Settlers and immigrants needed help to find housing, employment, dealing with the new language, government agencies, filling in forms, shopping for supplies, getting accustomed to a new culture. They performed like immigration field-men giving help for everyday living. In fact, they were often called that.

An example from my own family’s history. Not long after becoming a widow, my mother had a flat tire. Our American pastor *Alvin Venema*, came by, saw it and offered to put on the spare tire. Mother protested, “Dominee, you should not do that!” But Alvin did just that and for years Mother would tell with delight how this American Dominee was a real man, not above dirtying his hands. Little did she know that Alvin was a farm-boy from the American Mid-West. The construction of the Richmond church was by free labour and each Monday Alvin would go and swing his hammer with the best of them. The immigrants were astonished. They had never seen Dominees like that! Americans had practical skills no Dutch-bred Dominee could possibly equal.

The readiness to offer practical help forever endeared the American home missionaries to the hearts of the Canadian church members. To this day, American home missionaries and their wives are spoken of with admiration and affection.

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with individual female counterparts there over a weekend! Though I remember the experience—or was it an experiment?—, fortunately or unfortunately, no permanent relationships came out of that endeavour!

*Fourth, the home missionaries were peacemakers.* The Dutch settlers and immigrants came from different regions of The Netherlands, and, most importantly, from different branches of the Reformed faith. Some were determined to perpetuate their doctrinal differences, reluctant to worship with persons they had opposed back home. The home missionaries' tactfulness and firm persuasion convinced many of these obstinate Dutchmen that all can worship with integrity as brothers and sisters within the Christian Reformed Church.

However, soon the American home missionaries were replaced. By the late 1950's, Dutch Dominees had mostly taken over, although some churches extended calls to American ministers, provided they were conversant in Dutch.

*Cross or open grave, Saviour or Lord? How did settlers and immigrants relate their faith to their work, the sacred to the secular?* The early Alberta congregations were mostly settled by agricultural workers from the US - Manhattan, Montana; Orange City and Sioux Center, Iowa; Vespers, Wisconsin; Hull, North Dakota. In contrast, Vancouver and Houston attracted more non-agricultural workers with more recent Dutch roots. These different origins shaped how each group saw its task in the world, particularly as it pertains to Christian education.

In 1941, the consistory of Nobleford was asked to consider starting a Christian day school. The answer was No! Yet, an effort was made, a society formed, funds raised, but no school was built. By 1960 the society disbanded. In contrast, Calvin Christian School of Vancouver opened in 1949 with 11 students and 1 teacher in a dilapidated old house that parents converted under the leadership of the Society's president, Mr. van de Wint. The house also served as the teacherage. The Men's Society had collected funds for a potential school since the 1930's and the longing for a Christian school probably goes back to 1928.

All during the impoverished Great Depression and war years, Christian education was planned and sacrificed for, prayed about and anticipated in faith. The church council took an active lead. For years following the opening of the school, fundraisers, bazaars, auctions featuring homemade baking, knitted and embroidered goods were annual events.

Question: Where did the Christian Labour Association of Canada have its beginnings? Vancouver in the late 1940s. For some years, again in the 1940's, the congregation sponsored a radio programme, the "Calvin Hour" every

Sunday, on a prominent Vancouver radio station. It consisted of a message plus singing by church families or by a mixed, double quartet.

Sailors in port received invitations to visit a church family at their home. It was the beginning of the Ministry to the Seafarers. In 1970, the Ministry to the Seafarers was officially organized as a classical ministry with as chaplain, Jeff Dresselhuis, followed by Simon Wolfert, both passed away, and now Ernst DeVries, serving 5,000 seafarers in 2003, and 14,000 in 2014. Xxxx

Back to history. Why was the broader cultural outreach more pronounced in Vancouver than in Alberta during those early years? The difference is usually attributed to the Dutch theologian and statesman *Abraham Kuyper*.<sup>6</sup> Kuyper wanted faith to penetrate culture. He saw redemption as the restoration of the creation, not an escape from it; the central focus of faith is Easter, the open grave, Christ victorious. Redemption applies 24/7 and touches everything under the sun. Kuyper fuelled a powerful movement in the Netherlands to make secular life subject to God's will.

The US segment of the denomination had mostly left Holland well before Kuyper's day. The American settlers in Alberta were hardly touched by Kuyper, while the Dutch immigrants to Vancouver clutched Kuyper to their breasts. For the former, faith was introspective, personal experience-oriented, centered on the cross, Jesus as Saviour. Kuyper's faith was more intellectual, activist, social justice-oriented, focussed on the open grave, Jesus as Lord. These strains of the faith persist within the denomination to this day.

### **Cross-border relations**

In 1941, classis Pacific gave birth to classis Alberta and in 1958 to classis BC. Houston, Telkwa, Smithers and Terrace were taken from Classis Alberta North. Both in 1941 and again in 1958 some voices spoke passionately against forming all-Canadian classes. Concerns centered on possible divisions within the denomination, alienation, failure to integrate and a weakening of mutual edification. Should a political border divide the spiritual brotherhood? We would all benefit from stronger cross-border relationships, they argued. But that view did not prevail.

What do you think? Now in hindsight, do you think it would have been better to have maintained classical, cross-border organizational links? You may come back to this in the discussion.

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<sup>6</sup>For detailed information about Kuyper, go to the Kuyperiana page of this website.

Let's compare how it was to how it is, today. Vancouver enjoyed robust Men, Ladies and Young People Societies from its inception in 1926 till the late 50's. While Societies thrived, contact with the churches in Washington State was strong because of conventions, joint sessions and league meetings. For example, in February 1927, eighty society members young and old from Lynden, Washington, travelled by car to Vancouver for a festive evening. By midnight they left, sadly, "because the border closed at two a.m."

Additional cross-border contact included:

- \* 'The Instructor', a Sunday School paper produced in Grand Rapids. Children appreciated it and adored its editor, Marian Schoolland.

- \* The Lynden churches, Sumas, Oak Harbour and Seattle all supplied BC with preachers when needed.

- \* Lynden and Sumas churches paid for the Vancouver immigration home, an old hotel on Water street.

- \* Money for buildings often came at reasonable rates from the denomination's Fund for Needy Churches.

- \* Cross-border classis meetings provided for sustained fellowship and mutual edification.

- \* The Back To God Hour sustained members in remote locations and the devotional *Today* was widely used.

- \* *De Wachter* and later *The Banner* shaped our understanding of what it meant to be Christian Reformed. The cross-border relationship was mutually beneficial and a constituent part of being Christian Reformed.<sup>1</sup>

- \* Golhof wrote of those years, "The cooperation between Canada and the US churches was very friendly; we felt like brothers (and sisters!) in Christ."

Most of that is now gone. In 1967 Golhof wrote, "From the beginning till today, Vancouver First was served by ministers from the U.S. We did not feel the difference, we were all brothers!" Two years later that was no longer true and today, American preachers serving Canadian congregations are as rare as churches that still sing hymns. Also, preachers no longer train exclusively in Grand Rapids. All these changes may have come anyway, but creating all-Canadian classes did not help.

### *Decline of Church Societies*

Why was there a sudden, sharp drop in the interest in Men, Ladies and Young People societies in the late 1950s? Attendance and interest dropped like a brick, why? Television! By 1960, we had succumbed to the lure of television, “Amusing Ourselves To Death”, to use Neil Postman’s expressive words.

### *Changes in Doctrine and Practice*

Just within my life time the church has changed its mind on many issues. In Vancouver First, women were not allowed to vote at congregational meetings till 1962. There used to be a prohibition against serving on church council while being a member in a secular labour union. The birth control pill was eagerly swallowed before family planning could even be talked about. Sunday observance has changed beyond recognition. My Dad lost his job two weeks after arriving in Canada for refusing Sunday work. Today, his great-grandchildren work at McDonalds and play organized sports on Sunday. The church changed its mind on baptizing adopted children, admitting children to the Lord’s Supper, marrying divorced persons and admitting women to church offices.

And it will not stop there!

Regarding ordained women it is interesting to note that in 2016, 20 years after allowing the ordination of women the CRC, there were 100 ordained women and 5 of those women were at one time or another active interns at First CRC Vancouver. This means that 5% of the ordained women ministers in the CRC have been part of Vancouver First--Willemina Zwart (London), Julia Prins-Vanderveen (Vancouver), Dayna Vreeken (Lacombe), Michelle Ellis (Telkwa), Janina Mobach (Vancouver) and Jen Holmes (Reformed Church of America, Michigan)

### *Personal Memories*

Some old-timers of Vancouver First generously shared many stories, too many to recount here. Without exception they praise God for the church of their youth and are grateful. In fine detail they recall the people, the building(s), the Christmas programs, church picnics, the organ and especially the wonderful singing. They see their interactions of long ago with preachers, fellow believers, catechism instructors, Sunday School teachers, even the janitor as a profound personal enrichment. They remember the Dutch services and singing Dutch psalms.

Sophie Ensing-Golhof writes:

For the Dutch worship we sang from a little ‘psalm book’ that each adult carried in his pocket or purse. The one that I remember best is “*God heb ik lief*” and each child, of course, knew the doxology, “*Dat’s Heeren zegen op U daal.*” The Psalms in Dutch were sung in slow moving notes. Among the hymns from the old red *Psalter Hymnal* from Grand Rapids were: “*I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love;*” “*Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow;*” “*I am a stranger here within a foreign land;*” “*There is a fountain filled with blood;*” “*I was a wandering sheep, I did not love the fold.*” It was in this church that I learned to love these precious songs.

Vera Pel, one of our seniors, is still visited by a woman the Pels first introduced to church via Sunday School years ago and whose own children now attend Vancouver Christian School. Thus God’s work continues in time.

Bea VanderBos-Piersma writes, “Vancouver First has been a balm to many immigrants, held many get-togethers, church picnics etc. She now has a long history we cherish. Her sins are pardoned, the very thing she still preaches albeit in newer format, led by the Holy Spirit.”

### *History*

The Bible thinks of history not as a wheel, everything going in circles and cycles but linear with a beginning and an end, a fulfillment, wiping away every tear, the coming Kingdom, the Feast of the Lamb. Moses prays, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12). Our days are finite, they can be numbered, there is an end, a glorious end, God and man reconciled, restored, complete communion between God and man, life as God meant it to be.

The meaning of our days is to be found in the end, the purpose, the goal to which we move. Moses says when we have God’s purpose in mind we gain hearts of wisdom. To know God’s purpose we look at the Bible, but we also look at history, our own personal history, the history of the church, and, in fact, all of history, because all history is His story.

Thank you!

## **Appendix**

*Some selected congregations and the year they were founded:*

1905 Nobleford/Granum

1908 Winnipeg

1910 Edmonton

1911 Burdett and Granum

1915 Neerlandia

1926 Vancouver First

1939 Houston

1950 Abbotsford (Gateway); Ladner; First Langley (Willoughby)

1951 Alberni Valley, Maple Ridge

1952 New Westminster; Victoria; Chilliwack; Terrace, Telkwa; Smithers

1953 Vancouver-Bethel

1954 Vernon

1957 Burnaby; Richmond

*Number of churches currently in the two BC Classes:*

Classis BC NW (North-West)--churches 17

Classis BC SE (South East)--23

**Sources:**

*Our Story First Christian Reformed Church Vancouver.*

<http://www.van1crc.org/our-story>

*Our First Twenty-Five Years, 1926-1951.* Vancouver CRC, 1951.

*Forty Years, First Christian Reformed Church Vancouver, 1966.*

*1926-1975, First Christian Reformed Church Vancouver, 1976.*

*Memoirs, Rev. Paul De Koekkoek. Elaine Smit, ed. Blok Printing, 2000.*

*The Strength of Their Years, Tymen E. Hofman, Knight Publishing, 1983.*

*Reflections 1950-1980, A History of the First Christian Reformed Church of Lethbridge, Ronalds Western Printing, 1980.*

*Faithful Through All Generations, 1952-2002, Smithers Christian Reformed Church, 2002.*

*A Time to Remember, 1957-1982, Richmond Christian Reformed Church, 1982*

*Persons who contributed:*

Sophie Ensing-Golhof

Wilma Bouma

Ernst DeVries, Chaplain to Seafarers

Henry Numan, former pastor of First Vancouver CRC

Harry Kruisselbrink

Vera Pel, widow of Fred Pel of Watling Street. Women were not allowed on church council, but, she told me with a mischievous grin, I knew everything, because for all the years Fred was clerk, I always typed out the minutes.

Joe Schalk

Alice van de Wint

Beatrice VanderBos-Piersma

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NICK—WHAT WAS THE ADDRESS OF THAT old hotel on Water street?