

# Smithville is 60

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It was exactly 60 years ago this past Friday, September 14, 1952, that the church of Smithville was instituted. Brothers of well-known name were ordained to the offices of the church: A vanEs, JJ Knecht, K Flokstra & JJ deBoer became elders, and C Blokker, JG Feenstra and C Ouwersloot became deacons. 60 years later descendants of all these men still have a place and task in the churches – if not directly in Smithville than surely in the neighboring churches. It goes to show: the Lord has not forsaken the work He has begun. A little plant representing a rich heritage took root here 6 decades ago, and it has grown richly and wonderfully over the years that followed. We'd be negligent not to take note of this work of God, and to thank Him for it.

The men and women present at the institution of the Canadian Reformed Church of Smithville did not parachute into the peninsula the day before. Some indeed were very recent migrants, arriving just months or even weeks before the institution; others had actually been in the area for some years already. In this Bit to Read I'd like to tell something about the developments leading up to this institution. Specifically, was a Canadian Reformed Church really necessary??

### Migration – and Then?

It's well known that World War 2 ravaged Europe from 1939 to 1945. Holland was so economically devastated (and socially in turmoil) as a result of the war that many saw little future in the Netherlands, and so sought new opportunities overseas. It's also well known (or should be in our midst) that the confusion and oppression of the war gave fertile ground for the apathy in the church to morph into tyranny – where the Synod compelled the office bearers to embrace and teach a doctrine simply not found in Scripture (in relation specifically to the covenant). Worse, when its errors were pointed out Synod held its foot stiff and, in the dark of war, deposed office bearers who cried foul. The result was the Liberation of 1944, where many shook off the unbiblical and unconfessional doctrine the Synod had imposed, and continued on the true and tried path of simple Biblical teaching. These churches were known as the (Liberated)

Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, in distinction from the (Synodical) Reformed Church of the Netherlands.

As members of the Liberated Churches migrated to the New World, they had to consider what church to join in their new country. Start a new church they would do only if there were no options, for they confessed that the Lord gathered a catholic church – and that should mean that there might well be a faithful church of the Lord already in Canada. Four ‘Liberated’ migrant families (the heads of families were C Groenewegen, TJ Hart, JJ Knecht and WJ Hamoen) concluded that the Christian Reformed Church was a faithful church of the Lord, and so in 1948 we find them members of the CRC in St Catherines, with br Knecht even serving in the office of elder. I understand that at the time the Harts and the Knechts lived in Fenwick.

### **Christian Reformed?**

The four brothers mentioned above (plus JJ Knecht jr, unmarried communicant member) wrote a letter to their Consistory dated 3 December 1948 in which they voiced concern about what they heard over the months in the preaching and in Catechism class on the matter of Common Grace. They also urged their Consistory to initiate action to terminate relations with the (Synodical) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and initiate relations with the (Liberated) Reformed Churches. They expressed the desire for an early and profitable discussion on these topics. Consistory promptly answered the letter of these five brothers on 22 December 1948. They wrote that they would unquestionably maintain their position on Common Grace (as the CRC had formulated it in a statement adopted by their Synod 1924), and wrote too that they would not consider exchanging their sister-church relation with the Synodical Reformed Church for a relation with the Liberated Reformed Churches. They added that the five brothers were, by their letter of concern, actually advocating propaganda for the Liberated churches – something (Consistory wrote) they had pledged not to do when they submitted their attestations to the Christian Reformed Church. They insisted: do not bring the Dutch church struggle to Canada! Some three weeks later br JJ Knecht sr received a letter from his Consistory (dated 10 January 1949) stating that he had been deposed from his office of elder.<sup>1</sup>

What strikes me as I read this bit of history is the ruthlessness with which the Consistory of the Christian Reformed Church in St Catherines set about quenching this request for a discussion. No willingness for a discussion was expressed, and Elder Knecht was deposed with (if the record is complete) not a single word of admonition. I find this striking because this is precisely the sort of behavior that characterized the (Synodical) Reformed Church in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Here no room was given for the fact that all members have received the Holy Spirit, and so are able to ask legitimate questions and evaluate honest answers. Not surprisingly, the five brothers (with their families) withdrew from the Christian Reformed Church. They had not become Liberated in the Netherlands in order to subject themselves again to doctrinal and consistorial oppression in another country.

Other migrants to different places of Ontario (and throughout Canada) experienced similar frustration with the Christian Reformed Church, so that quickly the consensus arose that migrants who treasured the Liberation of 1944 could not join the CRC.

## **Protestant Reformed?**

Meanwhile, other migrants had followed a different course. A principle church leader in the Netherlands, Dr K Schilder, had enjoyed a lengthy correspondence and relationship with Rev H Hoeksema, an acknowledged leader of the Protestant Reformed Churches in North America. These churches, it should be noted, had their origin in 1924, as direct consequence of the CRC decision on Common Grace (mentioned above). There was much in Hoeksema's thinking that Schilder could appreciate, and so he advised Liberated migrants to join the Protestant Reformed Churches. These churches, however, had no congregations in Canada, but were happy to send 'missionaries' to Canada to help organize and settle the Liberated migrants. So, already in 1948 a number of PRC ministers came regularly to Hamilton to assist migrant families there.<sup>3</sup> While the Christian Reformed Church (see above) sought to silence the migrants about what happened in the Liberation in the Netherlands, these Protestant Reformed ministers encouraged openness and dialogue. Both the PRC ministers and the Liberated migrants soon realized that there were distinct differences between PR thinking and Liberated thinking, particularly on the subject of the

covenant. But certainly from the side of the Liberated migrants there was a willingness to work along with the PR brethren, as long as the basis of cooperation was simply the Word of God as summarized and confessed in the Three Forms of Unity – nothing more and nothing less. As a result, a Protestant Reformed Church was instituted in Hamilton on April 19, 1949, made up of migrants from the Liberated Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Members of this newly instituted church lived not just in Hamilton itself, but also in Smithville and even Fenwick – including the same TJ Hart, JJ Knecht and C Groenewegen who'd earlier been members of the Christian Reformed Church in St Catherines.<sup>4</sup>

Quickly enough, this new congregation called and received a minister from the United States, in the person of Rev Herman Veldman, a nephew of Rev Hoeksema. From the start of his ministry he insisted on stressing those points of doctrine where Protestant Reformed thinking differed from the views embraced by the Liberated migrants, to the point that he demanded that new migrants take a new-members class where he would teach them how to read the Three Forms of Unity (and hence the Bible) in the light of Protestant Reformed distinctives.<sup>5</sup> That would include that you could not say that all your children, though born to believing parents, were actually God's children by covenant.<sup>6</sup>

Invariably, this stance on Rev Veldman's part led to considerable friction between himself and his consistory. That tension increased when the Protestant Reformed 'missionaries' to Canada suggested the PR Synod (in opposition to Liberated thinking) adopt a statement essentially equating Covenant and Election.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Consistory of the Protestant Reformed Church in Hamilton decided in January 1951 no longer to recognize Rev Veldman (with one elder) as their minister.<sup>8</sup> Because classis had sided with Rev Veldman, the consistory recognized the difficulty of continuing in the Protestant Reformed federation, and so they became essentially an independent church known as the First Protestant Reformed Church.

The long and short: migrants in the Smithville area had sought a spiritual home in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and found out the hard way that there was no place for them there either.<sup>9</sup>

## **Canadian Reformed**

The flow of Liberated migrants to Southern Ontario increased as the years went by, so that the trickle of 1947 & 1948 became a veritable flood in the early '50's. The newer migrants took to heart the lessons learned from their brothers' experiences in the Christian Reformed Church and in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and so sought a third way. Since there were no other churches adhering to the Three Forms of Unity, many of them met on their own Sunday after Sunday, until there were sufficient numbers to institute a Canadian

Reformed Church. The first Canadian Reformed Church in Ontario<sup>10</sup> was instituted in Georgetown (it later became Orangeville) on 13 August 1950. Present at the institution were persons living in Hamilton who had shied away from joining the Protestant Reformed Church because of the tensions existing in that congregation.<sup>11</sup> However, since roads and cars were not then what they are today, these brothers and sisters chose not to travel every Sunday to Georgetown, but met on their own in Hamilton. The Hamilton part of the Georgetown Canadian Reformed Church instituted their own church in Hamilton on 20 May 1951. Amongst the members were several who lived in the Smithville area. The first Yearbook of the Canadian Reformed Churches, published in 1952, lists a "Women's Society" in "Fenwick-Smithville", with "Mrs H Ouwersloot" as its secretary. A further note in that Yearbook explains that "church services are held in the Labor Temple" on Catherine Street in Hamilton, and adds, "A small part, living in Fenwick and surroundings, meet there on the Heesfarms, for so-called house-church services."<sup>12</sup>

For the record it should be noted that the First Protestant Reformed Church in Hamilton and the Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton signed an Act of Union on June 13, 1952 and so merged into one church.

## **Smithville**

The number of migrants settling in the Niagara Peninsula continued to grow. They were registered as members of the church in Hamilton, a congregation that (says the Yearbook of 1952) now numbered 422 members, consisting of 73 families. The services once held in Fenwick moved to the old Legion Hall in Smithville. Inevitably, discussions soon began on whether a Canadian Reformed Church could be instituted in Smithville. A meeting was held on September 5, 1952 to finalize the process and elect potential office bearers. On Sunday, September 14, 1952, Rev Loopstra of Hamilton led the institution service, where the seven brothers mentioned above were ordained to their respective offices. The congregation at the time numbered 151 members, of whom 61 had made profession of faith.<sup>13</sup> In the years that followed, numbers grew so much that Lincoln was instituted in 1970, Attercliffe in 1985, Tintern in 1990, Grassie in 2001 and Dunnville in 2003.

## **Conclusion**

It's clear to me from the above material that the first Liberated migrants in the Niagara Peninsula travelled a difficult and circuitous route to come to the point of instituting a Canadian Reformed Church in Smithville. An "own" church was distinctly not the first option, but became a necessity only after the alternatives proved impossible. That is to say: the Lord God slowly and sovereignly made clear that it was His will that a Canadian Reformed Church be instituted here.

What marked the efforts of the fathers (be it invariably with weakness) was their expressed desire to remain faithful to the Scripture alone, as accurately summarized and confessed in the Three Forms of Unity. That's the heritage the Lord placed in the Peninsula – a heritage that we are duty-bound to treasure and maintain.

C Bouwman  
13 September 2012

1 For more details, see J. Faber, “‘Common Grace’ in Canadian Reformed History”, Clarion, August 17, 2001, page 401ff.

2 See the essay by Theodore Plantinga, “North American Developments”, in Rudolph vanReest, Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications), 1990, pg 412.

3 See further G. Denbok, “Early History of the Church in Hamilton”, in Clarion, March 7, 1997, pg 105.

4 See Denbok, pg 105.

5 See J. Faber, “The ‘Volendam’ Congregation”, Clarion, 1987, pg 194.

6 As related by G. Lodder, “Some Early History of the Hamilton and Georgetown Congregations”, Clarion, Year-End 1996, pg 573.

7 This move in 1950 led to the infamous Declaration of Principles adopted by Synod 1951, a declaration binding on all Protestant Reformed office bearers.

8 For details in this bit of history, the interested reader is referred to J. deJong, “Deposed?”, Clarion, March 20, 1998. Dr deJong had researched the archives of the Cornerstone Canadian Reformed Church and related what he discovered.

9 Of course, there was also a Protestant Reformed Church instituted amongst the Liberated migrants of Chatham, but that's a story beyond the scope of this Bit to Read. See WWJ vanOene, Inheritance Preserved (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1975), pg 68f.

10 Already Canadian Reformed Churches had been instituted in Coaldale (16 April 1950), Edmonton (9 July 1950) and Neerlandia (6 August 1950).

11 see G. Lodder, pg 574.

12 My translation. See Jaarboekje ten dienste van de Canadese Gereformeerde Kerken – Eerste Jaargang, pg 8. The “Heesfarms” is elsewhere called the “Haist Farm”. A picture of the place is printed on page 5 in Telling the Coming Generations, the booklet published on the occasion of Smithville's 40th anniversary.

13 Growing in the Lord: Celebrating 50 years of growth in the Niagara Region, pg 7.