

Fall 2006

# The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 16.03: Fall 2006

Daniel L. Ballast

Geoffrey D. Reynolds  
*Hope College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Ballast, Daniel L. and Reynolds, Geoffrey D., "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 16.03: Fall 2006" (2006). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 51.

<https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/51>

**Published in:** *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 16, Issue 3, Fall October 1, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the Hope College Publications at Hope College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Joint Archives Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Hope College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@hope.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@hope.edu).



# The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

## *A History of Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids*

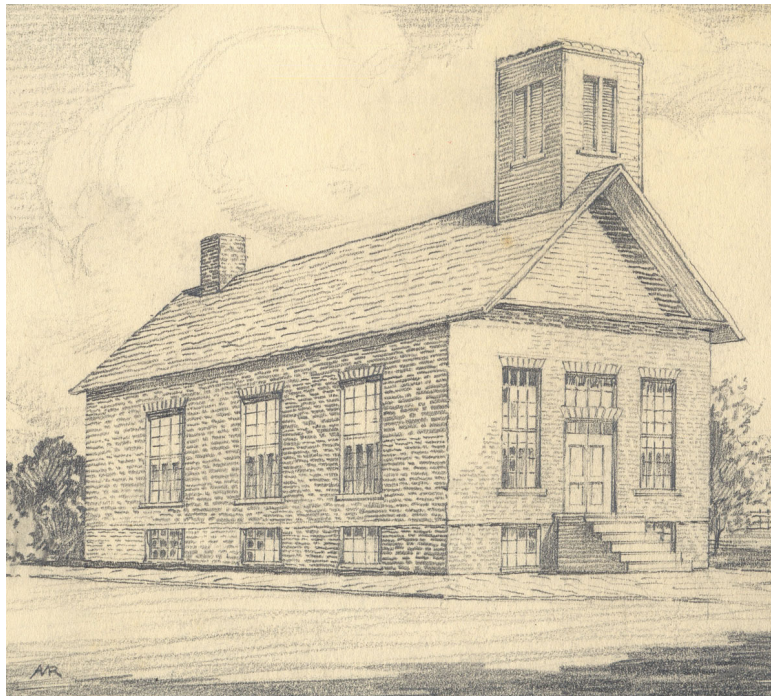
by Daniel L. Ballast

Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, is one of only a few congregations in the Midwest that can trace its origins back to the early seventeenth-century when the Reformed Church in America (RCA) was, itself, founded. Central was founded as First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Grand Rapids in 1840 as part of the Reformed Church in America's "Western Enterprise." Over forty English-speaking churches were started in Michigan in this way, as the denomination followed RCA members who traveled from the east to what was then the "west."

Preceding generations of these founders had been in America long before the Revolutionary War, in which many fought on the British side and many others on the Colonial's side. They were in America when its first president was elected. They fought in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, served as senators, representatives, governors, mayors, teachers, writers, worked in the skilled trades and occupations needed to make a community successful. And, during all of this time, over two hundred years, men and women raised thousands of children, many of whom were drawn west as pioneers in the nineteenth century, followed there by the RCA.

They were accepting of some variations in worship styles, and tended toward being revivalist. And there was a willingness to look for new insights into Holy Scripture. In

worship, the Eastern Church, including First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, practiced every one of the reasons several of the immigrant churches, within ten years of joining the RCA, seceded in 1857. These "eastern churches" sang non-Davidic hymns, they had an open communion table, preached many sermons not based entirely on the catechism, and had choirs. Because they tended toward revivalism, and preached sermons designed to bring people into a "born again" conversion, they were accused by the immigrant church of having Remonstrant, heretical views - a belief that



*First Reformed Church, 1842-1848;  
Second Reformed Church, 1849-1854;  
First Reformed Church, 1859-1863, 1866-1872*

humans shared in the implementation of God's intentions toward them. Some of the new immigrants also disagreed with the word "Protestant" in the title of the eastern churches, because it implied a relationship with other denominations.

In church governance, regional and local resolution of issues was encouraged. While they considered themselves Dutch, during the colonial period there was much intermarrying

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



In this issue you will learn about the wonderful and inspiring history of Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Through the ups and the downs of phenomenal growth, secession, fire, and declining membership, this church continues to serve those seeking the Word of God in the city of Grand Rapids.

The Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies (AADAS) will be meeting at Hope College in June 2007 for its biennial meeting. Our office colleagues in the A. C. Van Raalte Institute will be serving as your hosts for two open houses, as well as coordinating many of the venues, food, and programs. A call for papers can be found on page five, and there will be more information to come.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

---

### *History of Central Reformed Church (continued from page 1)*

between nationalities, including French Huguenots, English, and Walloons.

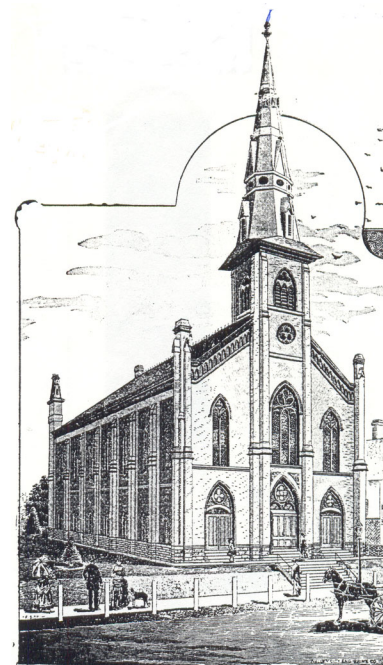
When the Dutch immigrants arrived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1846, they were invited by First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church to share their church building. This offer was part of an organized effort by the RCA to bring the immigrant churches into the denomination. With this ongoing influx of Dutch immigrants to Michigan, beginning in 1846, the “Western Enterprise” essentially ended, and by the end of World War One, only a handful of these original Michigan churches, established by the eastern RCA, remained.

Since First Church was struggling for survival already at that time, they met for worship only once on Sunday, in the morning. The immigrant church met for a Dutch language worship service in the afternoon.

After three years, the immigrants were ready to form a church of their own. Note that while they were meeting in the same church building as the English-speaking First Church, they did not join with them. They requested that Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, the person who led them to America, make the

trek from Holland, Michigan, to Grand Rapids to formally organize their church. They named this new church Second Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Because First Reformed Church continued to fail, it was not long before Second Reformed Church essentially took over the church building, and were then able to worship several times each Sunday.

Second Reformed Church met in First Reformed Church’s edifice until 1854 when they built their own church closer to the center of the small city. They could have taken over First Reformed Church’s building at that time, but they were afraid that they would be beholden to the “eastern churches” that had founded First Reformed Church in 1840. After Second Reformed Church moved to their new building, First Reformed Church building stood empty for several years, and it was occasionally rented to businesses or to missionary groups from other denominations in the city.



*Second Reformed Church,  
1870-1895*

First Reformed Church, however, experienced a re-birth, ironically because of the continued flow of Dutch immigrants to West Michigan, and to Grand Rapids. Many young people, and some of their parents, wanted their children to learn English and become Americanized. Four immigrant families left Second Reformed Church over vigorous opposition to help get First Reformed Church going again. After that, the more immigrants that came to Grand Rapids, the more First Reformed Church grew.

Second Reformed Church, on the other hand, did more than just grow – they were overwhelmed by the huge number of immigrants that came to worship. In 1857, however, their minister led over half of the membership out as part of the secession that eventually resulted in the forming of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) denomination. Second Reformed Church was forced to sell their parsonage in order to pay their bills. But, the decade of the 1860s brought new immigrants who joined RCA churches, including Second Reformed Church, still only one of the two RCA churches in the city of Grand Rapids, and the only one that worshipped in



the Dutch language. So many joined, in fact, that by 1870 they had to build a new, much larger church building.

Second Reformed Church, and by then other RCA churches in the city, was devastated in the 1880s because of the secret society, or lodge issue, and First Reformed Church was impacted indirectly because fewer persons were subsequently available to join them. Almost all immigrants from then on joined local Christian Reformed churches. And, by then, other RCA churches were being started away from the city center. RCA members could now worship closer to where they lived. Without realizing it at that time, both First and Second Reformed Churches were beginning an over thirty-year struggle for survival.

During this thirty plus year period of struggle, Second Reformed Church was able to respond to increasing internal pressure to adopt the English language in worship and in other areas of church life. The ongoing pressure to continue the Dutch language was significantly lessened because the influx of Dutch immigrants who wanted to join any RCA church had literally stopped. For over thirty years, both First and Second Reformed Churches worked hard to attract new members to worship in the downtown area of the growing city. But, there were few takers. First and Second Reformed Churches, who had grown apart in their competition and disagreements with each other, gradually began to form relationships. Their young people began meeting together, and they, as adults, became the force behind the effort to unite the two churches.



*First Reformed Church, 1895-1918;  
Central Reformed Church, 1918-1953*

In 1918, First Reformed Church, started by the “eastern” RCA in 1840, and Second Reformed Church, founded by Dutch immigrants in 1849, united to form Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. These two strong

impulses continue to run deeply through its veins. They called Dr. John A. Dykstra, a young man in his mid-thirties, to be the first pastor of the united church. He had been born and raised in Grand Rapids, but went to New Brunswick Seminary and had pastored two eastern churches, the second one in New York City. He was revivalist (must have made the former members of Second blush), and very energetic. And, his wife was a dynamo and active in the women’s organizations of the denomination, and became a leader in the congregation. The First and Second World Wars, the Korean Conflict, the growing modernism movement in the early twentieth century, made Central even more attractive. The church doubled in size between 1918 and 1946.



*John A. Dykstra, the first minister of Central Reformed Church, served from 1919-1954*

The last half of the twentieth-century, however, was difficult for Central Reformed Church, as it was for the RCA and other mainline – especially downtown – churches. The push and pull of demographic, religious, and political forces that dominated the cities of the United States have challenged Central’s preeminence among RCA churches in the city of Grand Rapids and the metropolitan Grand Rapids area. These challenges were many, and they continue:

- The city became a place to visit rather than live as urban renewal projects tore down buildings and built new ones, and neighborhoods surrounding the downtowns became blighted.
- The movement to the new suburbs brought a new culture symbolized by television and the new McDonald’s restaurants, shopping malls, and entertainment centers. This movement left cities alone, including many downtown churches, without much help, to exist as they had in the past.
- The 1960s brought further crises as Grand Rapids, along with many cities, erupted with violence. A trip downtown to church on Sunday became less desirable.
- Mainline denominations became more identified with government efforts to embark on a “War on Poverty.” Religion became more about humanity than God. The basic needs of humans were identified as physical, not spiritual. Evangelism and revivalism faded in mainline denominations and churches, as feeding bodies became more important than feeding souls,

and help was given in the name of the church, but the name of Christ diminished.

- In the "me" decade of the 1970s, nearly every identifiable group in the United States claimed victim status, as "shared responsibility" replaced "personal responsibility," and "village" replaced "family." "Downtown" churches became confused, and their visions faltered.
- In the 1980s, greed became healthy, individualism and privatism grew, and social justice themes permeated many mainline churches. An interest in spreading the gospel faded even more.
- At the end of the twentieth-century, saying the right politically correct thing became more important than doing the right thing.

As with First and Second Reformed churches, who began the twentieth-century without a vision for the future, so Central Reformed Church ended the twentieth-century without a clear vision for the future. But, also like First and Second Reformed churches, Central is facing the challenges of a new century. It has adopted a new vision and is now in the process of creating ideas with actions that are aligned with this new vision. Direction to this new vision is provided by what is called "The Constellation of Stars" - Excellent Worship, Christ-like Caring, Outreach Oriented, Socially Engaged, Excellent Facilities, Life-long Learning, and Ministry to Youth.

We believe that the future is very bright for Central Reformed Church, and that it will not only reach its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in the year 2040, but will also be thriving as new and mature Christians find ever new ways to grow Christ's Kingdom.

### **Writing a History of Central Reformed Church**

After joining Central in 1975, I soon knew about the information presented in the first three paragraphs that began this short article. It took a very short period of time for me to get involved in the challenges facing my new church. The older members were still talking about when the church edifice burned to the ground in the 1950s and about the very divisive infighting that ensued about where to rebuild. This conflict began at the end of the thirty-five year pastorate of the senior pastor who had led the church since the union of the First and Second Reformed churches in 1918, and who was instrumental to the growth it experienced. The timing could not have been worse.

It took only a short while before many questions began to come to my mind: Why was the "Western Enterprise" essentially abandoned and the churches established by the "eastern church" begin to die? Did the new wave of Dutch

immigrants to West Michigan in 1846 have something to do with it? Why did these two separate and so different factions (eastern RCA and mid-western immigrant) join together in 1850? What caused the fighting between the two factions that led to the secessions in 1857 and again in the 1880's? Why did some of the immigrant churches not secede and remain in the RCA? How was the RCA impacted by these two forces? How were individual churches in downtown Grand Rapids impacted? Why in the world would two of these churches – one established by the eastern RCA and the other an immigrant church – unite together in 1918 to form Central Reformed Church? Why did this new church prosper? How did the uniting of these two churches from very different beginnings impact Central Reformed Church then and now? Why the deep divisions about where to rebuild when the church burned in the 1950s?

What happened to Central Reformed Church during the rest of the twentieth-century, its challenges, its failings, and its attempts to understand and respond to the demands of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century? Will its actions in response to those challenges lead it to prosper, or will it fail to accurately understand the needs of the twenty-first century and fail to reach its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2040? And, of course, threaded throughout all of these questions is great curiosity about the people in Central's history, their motivations, and the short and long-term consequences of their actions.

These questions brought about my interest in writing a book about the history of Central Reformed Church. And, this interest happened to coincide with the anticipated 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the current church edifice in 2007. The pastor and the consistory commissioned me to write a 315-page history book.

Some of those reading this might have similar questions about their own churches. I invite you to find answers to your questions, and in the process find more questions that will excite you to find more answers.

### **Getting Started**

**1. Decide if it is worth the effort.** Would a written history of your church help your congregation understand itself and provide incentives for making changes and/or excitement for the future? Should those that preceded you, those already "lost" to your history, be honored with rediscovery? Can your history reveal the working of God in the midst of those gone before, and inspiration for your future?

**2. Check your archives.** If you do not have an archive, you need to start one - one place for your past bulletins; newsletters; minutes of your consistory, boards of elders and

deacons; minutes of committees; pictures; newspaper articles about people, activities, and programs having to do with your church; directories; financial information; the construction of your church(es), etc.

**3. Check other archives**, like the Joint Archives of Holland. This archive has information about many churches in the RCA, not just those in the Midwest. Also, check with the archives at New Brunswick Seminary.

**4. Go to your local library** to search for information about your church, its people, and your community. You will be surprised at how much information is likely to be there. I found newspapers of the day to be especially helpful in providing anecdotes and flavor to historical details.

**5. Study the information** you are able to garner and pick out significant events and people. Deepen your research in order to find out more so that you can begin to interpret motivations and consequences.

**6. When the writing starts.** Decide whether your written history is to be a listing of historical facts about your church, spiced up with pictures, or a book that places your church and its people in the historical context of your city, state and nation. Look at and examine the political, economic, and social issues facing your pastors and membership.

One of the easier parts of writing history, as opposed to a novel, is that the beginning is almost always known. It is likely that you know the date your church was founded and the names of the people that founded it. It is interesting that so many people between the beginning and now are “lost” to your history unless you bring them to life. You are now living what will be the final chapter of your book. The “blanks” of people, events, dates, and their significance only need to be filled in.

The book, *Then, Now, Always, Jesus is Lord, the History of Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan*, is available and can be used as a model. It can be purchased for \$10.00 from Central Reformed Church, 10 College Ave., N.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49503.

---

### About the Author



Daniel L. Ballast is a native of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He holds master’s and specialist degrees in counseling and a doctorate in psychology and counseling. He has co-authored two books on program development in an educational setting and published several articles on the same subject.

A member of Central Reformed Church for nearly thirty years, he has served on the consistory as deacon and elder several times over.

## Call for Papers

The Association for the Advancement of Dutch-American Studies (AADAS) will hold its 2007 biennial meeting at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, on June 7-9, 2007 (Thursday noon -Saturday noon). You are invited to submit proposals for individual papers or panels. The conference theme is Dutch-American Arts and Letters.

One of the features of a strong subculture is the presence of a corpus of ethnic literature and art. How did art contribute to the formation of a Dutch-American subculture? What distinctive elements did Dutch-American artistic expressions possess? Were these inspired by trends in the Old Country? Which influence did these expressions exert inside and outside the subculture?

Subjects could include:

- \* Dutch-American artists
- \* Dutch-American authors (David Cornel De Jong, Frederick Manfred, Sietze Bunning, Peter De Vries, James C. Schaap, etc.)
- \* Dutch-American autobiographies and memoirs
- \* Dutch-American newspapers and journalists
- \* Reading culture among Dutch immigrants
- \* Publishers and art-dealers as culture brokers
- \* Sermons and eulogies—rhetorical styles, themes, etc.
- \* Dutch literature in translation
- \* Teaching of Dutch-language skills and its impact
- \* Story-telling in Dutch-America
- \* Dutch-American scientists
- \* Dutch-American musicians and musical writings
- \* The Dutch image in youth literature

Paper proposals on Dutch-American topics not related to the theme will also be considered.

As with the conferences at Trinity 2003 and Dordt 2005, papers relating to the conference theme will be considered for inclusion in a book to be published under the auspices of the Joint Archives of Holland

The program committee consists of Robert Swierenga, chair, Jack Nyenhuis, Nella Kennedy (Hope College), and Hans Krabbendam (Roosevelt Study Center). Proposals, consisting of abstract (about 300 words) and one-page cv, should be submitted by December 1, 2006 to:

Robert P. Swierenga  
Swierenga@hope.edu

or by mail to: A.C. Van Raalte Institute, Hope College  
P.O. Box 9000, Holland, MI 49422-9000





*Reformed Church in America General Synod meeting  
at First Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, 1895*