March 2014


Western Theological Seminary

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Records, 1848-1994. 34.50 linear ft.

Abstract

Founded in 1840 as First Reformed Church of Grand Rapids and later merged with the
Second Reformed Church in 1921 to form the Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids. The
churches were served by many ministers of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and
Dosker, Rev. Christian Vander Veen, Rev. J. Vander Meulen, Rev. Peter Moerdyke, Rev. M.
Kolyn, Dr. John A Dykstra, Rev. Marcus, Rev. Marion de Velder, Dr. Cyril E. Barker, Dr.
Frederick H. Olert, and Rev. Marlin Vander Wilt. The collection includes records from all three
churches: First Reformed Church, Second Reformed Church, and Central Reformed Church.

Accession No:   W99-1241
Provenance:   First, Second, and Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids
Custody:   Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids
Photographs:   Several hundred (in Boxes 18 and 26)
Processed by:   Carolyn Nienhuis, November 2000
                Geoffrey Reynolds, April 2001
                Elaine Bruins, August 2012

History

The First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Grand Rapids was formed in 1840 as a
mission church sponsored by the Reformed Church in America (RCA), prior to the second Dutch
migration from the Netherlands, which began in 1847. Rev. Hart E. Waring served as the
church’s first pastor. This English-speaking group held its services in the village schoolhouse on
the southwest corner of East Bridge Street (now Michigan Avenue) and Ottawa Street (now
Ottawa Avenue). The cornerstone for a new building was laid on May of 1841, but it was not
completed due to lack of funds. Mr. Young solicited funds from RCA churches in the eastern
United States, but the $943.93 he raised was consumed in payment of old debts. Because of lack
of unity, the church floundered and Waring resigned in 1843. Rev. A. B. Taylor became the next
pastor of the church. He led services on the west side of the river, carrying Bibles and
hymnbooks back and forth for each service.

Since there were many Dutch immigrant settlers in Grand Rapids following 1847, a
Dutch-speaking elder by the name of Young was very helpful to them by offering the use of a
basement for their services. Since the future of the English-speaking church looked bleak, Rev.
Taylor resigned in 1848. No one was found to replace him and the church did not hold services
for ten years.

In 1854, the immigrants built their own church, secured Rev. H. S. Klyn as their pastor
and continued holding services in Dutch. This organization became known as the Second
Reformed Church of Grand Rapids.

While First Reformed Church was about to be disbanded, the pastor of Second Reformed
Church seceded with half of its membership. He later returned to the church, but did not serve as
pastor.
In 1860, Rev. Philip Barry accepted a call to First Reformed Church to begin the reorganization effort with help from four members of Second Reformed Church.
In 1861, Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen of Second Reformed Church pushed the church toward the period of its greatest growth. Rev. Vander Meulen retired and Rev. Dosker led Second Reformed Church to the height of its prosperity.
As First Reformed Church became self-supporting, Rev. Christian Vander Veen was called to be their pastor in 1868. Elder Young, a dedicated supporter of First Reformed Church, died in 1870. The next pastor of First Reformed Church was Rev. J. Vander Meulen. He served until 1872 and shortly after his departure the church burned. The old Second Baptist Church on Division Avenue was purchased. In 1873, Rev. Peter Moerdyke became their pastor and led them to a period of growth. In 1890, the congregation built a new church at Fountain and Barclay.
In 1895, the Second Reformed Church was destroyed by fire. Following this discouragement, new chapels branched from Second Reformed Church. Under Rev. M. Kolyn, Americanization was completed. In 1905, all services were held in the English language instead of Dutch.
Since 1900, both churches have flourished. In 1917, when both churches were without pastors, talk of unity began, and in 1918 a merger took place and the name of Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids was adopted. A total of 275 families formed the congregation. The First Reformed Church building was chosen for worship and the parsonage of Second Reformed Church was selected for the minister’s home. Dr. John A Dykstra, Central Reformed Church’s first pastor, soon occupied it, in 1919. In 1922, they remodeled the auditorium and constructed a balcony, built a new choir loft, installed a new organ and heating plant. In 1931, a parsonage was built.
Central Reformed Church celebrated its 100th Anniversary in 1940. To coincide with the event, a pageant, written by Mrs. John A. Dykstra (Irene Stapelkamp) entitled “Yet Building,” was presented at the Civic Auditorium to a capacity crowd.
On February 10, 1953, Central Reformed Church was destroyed by fire. The congregation held services in the auditorium of Central High School before moving into the recently vacated Grace Episcopal Church, located on Lafayette S.E. They rented this facility for two and a half years before moving into the new building, which was initiated with the May 1954 purchase of the property at the northeast corner of Fulton and College streets. In 1956, the cornerstone was set in place and construction began with costs estimated at $700,000 to construct their new building, which was completed and dedicated in April 1957.
After rebuilding the church, the congregation soon felt the loss of Rev. Marcus as he took a call to New Jersey in January 1958. It wasn’t until August 1959 that a new senior minister, Rev. Marion de Velder, was appointed and remained there until 1961. A new minister of music joined him in April 1961 with the appointment of Dr. Cyril E. Barker, after a successful career in Detroit and Lansing. Under his leadership, the Annual Fall Festival Concert Series was introduced. In February 1962, a new senior minister was secured to replace de Velder, with the appointment of Dr. Frederick H. Olert. He was joined in 1963 by Rev. Marlin Vander Wilt from New York, the new associate pastor, and Miss Evelyn Varrone, Director of Christian Education, in October 1966.
As the memory of the 1954 fire began to fade from the minds of the church’s members, the wonderful event of a mortgage burning took place on May 21, 1967, just ten years after the new building’s dedication. With that debt extinguished, the congregation looked to the partial
funding and dedication of Dykstra Hall, a women’s dormitory on the campus of Hope College, in memory of past leader John A. Dykstra.

Scope and Content

The collection is arranged chronologically into three series by the inception of each of the three churches: First Reformed Church, Second Reformed Church, and Central Reformed Church. Folders within each series are arranged alphabetically.

Container List

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  Bulletins, 1912-1917
  Consistory
    Minutes/Membership Records, 1842-1873 (bound)
    Minutes, 1868-1869 (typed copy)
    Minutes, 1908-1918
  Constitution of Reformed Church in America, 1895
  Cornerstone
    Ceremony, 1890
    History Placed in Cornerstone, 1842-1890 (see History)
  Correspondence, n.d., 1871-1872, 1883
  Dedicatory Services, 1894
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  Early Charter of the Reformed Church in America, 1696 (typed copy)
  Finances
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    Placed in Cornerstone, 1842-1890
    Sale of Baptist Church, 1873
  Lawsuit, 1891
  Marriage and Birth Records, Steketee Family, 1835-1874
  Membership
    Baptized Members, 1906-1916
    Records, 1860-1910 (bound) (See also Box 1: Consistory-
      Minutes/Membership Records, 1842-1873 (bound) and Oversized)
Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
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Records, 1840-1843, 1860-1918 (indexed and typed)
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Women’s Organization, n.d.

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Second Reformed Church
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Treasurer’s Report, 1891-1917 (incomplete)
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History, n.d.
Independent Debating and Literary Society, Constitution, By-Laws, and Minutes, 1890-1894

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Records, 1850-1869 (typed, translated, and indexed copy), 1850-1869, 1870-1885
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Winter, Mrs. E., n.d.
Mortgage, 1875-1896
Newspaper (church’s weekly), *Een Stem Des Volks* (copy) (Dutch), 1895
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Proposed Constitution, n.d.
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Central Reformed Church
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      Treasurer’s Report, 1947-1961
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Box 23

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