
Western Theological Seminary
W05-1293. Michigan, Zeeland. First Reformed Church.

Abstract

First Reformed Church of Zeeland, Michigan, was the first church was founded in 1847 by a congregation of Dutch immigrants from the Netherlands, led by Rev. Vander Meulen. The congregation continues to flourish today. The collection includes anniversary booklets, consistory minutes, membership directories, and a photograph album documenting the history of the congregation, its buildings, and the city of Zeeland, Michigan.

Accession No.: W05-1293
Provenance: First Reformed Church of Zeeland
Donor: Custody Agreement
Photographs: 33 images (Box 7)
Processed by: Geoffrey Reynolds, February 2006
Carolyn Nienhuis, March 2009

History

When the congregation was organized, Jannes Vande Luyster and Johannes Hoogesteger were elected elders; Jan Steketee and Adrian Glerum, deacons. Rev. Vander Meulen was asked to accompany them as their pastor and spiritual advisor.

Four hundred and fifty-seven persons left the Netherlands in 1847 with America as their destination. The company was divided into three groups, with the understanding that whichever group reached New York first should have the choice of definite location. The group in charge of Jannes Vande Luyster arrived first and, after considering Iowa and Michigan as the two possibilities, chose Michigan because of the material resources so necessary to pioneers. The Vande Luyster party arrived in Holland, Michigan, on June 27, 1847. Here they remained in temporary shelters until a few homes could be constructed on a permanent site. Six miles east of the village of Holland, Vande Luyster founded what is now known as Zeeland.

Log houses were built as quickly as possible. The home of Jan Steketee was used the third Sunday in August for the first services together as a reunited congregation. On many Sabbaths they worshipped God in the open; inclement weather found them in the home of Jan Wabeke, who presumably owned the largest house in the village. The block church was dedicated in May 1848. By the end of the first year, so many immigrants had arrived that it became necessary to build a new church. This one was forty-five by sixty feet and was constructed on the site of the present building. In 1849, the congregation was made up of 175 families. Three years later, this number was reduced to 146 families. This was due to the fact that many of the original inhabitants left the community to take advantage of larger opportunities in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids. Some who had settled on poor land moved into the outlying area. From 1853, however, the church membership had increased rapidly because of continued migration to the settlement. Occasionally we find a decrease in membership during a pastorate vacancy or quarrels which resulted from a difference of opinion.

The two men who had the most influence in the pioneer church and community appear to be Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen and Jannes Vande Luyster. Vande Luyster was the only man of means, and had it not been for his financial support, many of the congregation would not have
been able to make the trip to America, nor survive after having arrived. He was regarded as the civic leader. More important was the influence of the spiritual leader, Rev. Vander Meulen. His courageous outlook on life and his perseverance held the congregation together during the struggles against nature. “He was a speaker of force and eloquence, of a strong personality, and was generally admired for his many gifts and good qualities.” His leadership lasted until 1859, when he accepted a call to the First Church in Chicago, Illinois.

The second minister to serve this congregation was Rev. H. Stobbeelaar, whose pastorate seems to have been a very unsettled one. He was installed in September 1860. The church records show that there were many disagreements concerning his preaching; the number of families dropped to 147. These families organized what they called the “True Church” in 1862. The troubles seemingly increased until Rev. Stobbeelaar accepted a call to Holland, Wisconsin, in January 1865.

The church was not long without a minister. In May 1865, Rev. Seine Bolks was installed. In 1866, the present church building was erected on the original location. This building, eighty feet long, fifty feet wide, and twenty-eight feet high, has been remodeled several times, but in general, it retains the same floor plans. In April 1867, the consistory authorized the collection of funds for an organ, members of the congregation subscribing any amount they desired. By December 2, 1869, all but fifty dollars had been promised. The consistory decided to ask for another small contribution, starting with twelve dollars and fifty cents collected at their meeting. The necessary amount was raised, and a reed organ was purchased and placed in the balcony. “The preaching of Rev. Bolks was markedly evangelical, and large blessings attended his labors. He was intimately acquainted with every member of his flock. He was a man of prayer, of strong faith, and of commanding presence.” Rev. Bolks accepted a call to Orange City, Iowa, in January 1872.

Although the constituency had been essentially Holland in language, the American influences were being felt to such an extent that during the vacancy after Rev. Cheff’s departure, the consistory deemed it wise to settle the language question before another pastor arrived. After due deliberation, the question was submitted to the congregation with the result that the use of the English language in the regular afternoon service was introduced. The change was affected without loss in membership. The afternoon services were conducted in the English language from March 1918 until April 1922.

In March and April 1918, four congregational meetings were called before a successful ballot was obtained on the trios named. On April 2, Rev. Henry Harmeling was asked to serve the congregation. The call included two services each Sunday, with the exception of three services on one Sunday each month, Rev. Harmeling accepted the invitation and was installed on May 23, 1918. This pastorate was one of the more difficult ones in the history of the church, for both church and state suffered from the effects of the World War.

A new heating system, installed in 1918, was a great improvement over the former one. In November 1919, permission was granted to place a telephone in the pulpit, in order that invalids might be able to hear the sermons over private lines. The system was then improved, giving all shut-ins the benefit of the device; still later several pews were wired for the hard of hearing. The microphone now in use is the original one made by the late Johannes Pyl. In February 1921, the consistory first sat in the auditorium instead of in the side pews, which they were accustomed to occupy. Later in the spring, Rev. Harmeling accepted the call tendered him by the First Reformed Church of Roseland.
Scope and Content

The collection includes anniversary booklets, consistory minutes, membership directories, and a photograph album documenting the history of the congregation, its buildings, and the city of Zeeland, Michigan. The folders are arranged alphabetically.

Container List

Box 1

Addition to First Reformed Church
Architectural Specifications, June 1954
Blueprints, 1954
Electrical Specifications, 1954
Heating and Ventilating Specifications, 1954
Plumbing Specifications, 1954
Anniversary
90th, 1937
100th, 1947
125th, 1972
150th, 1997
Appraisal Report, October 10, 1973, April 17, 1977 (Revision)
Baptismal Certificates, 1920s-1940s
Records, 1869-1904 (Transcription done 1976)
Certificate Stubs, 1878-1943 (4 Booklets)
Ledger 1 (bound volume) (Oversized)
Ledger 3 (bound volume) (Oversized)
Birthday Calendars, 1954, 1961
Bulletins, 1928-1945

Box 2

Church Library, 2009
Cluster System, 1986
Congregational Meeting Minutes, 1857-1859
Consistory
Correspondence, n.d. (Dutch with translation to English)
Minutes
1849, translation
1849-1856 (D/E)
Ledger 1, 1849-1859 (Dutch) (bound volume)
Ledger 2, 1859-1887 (Dutch) (bound volume)
May 1887 (D/E)
Ledger 3, 1887-1908 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)
1908-1935 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)
1935-1947 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)
Box 3

Consistory (cont.)
Minutes (cont.)
1947-1952 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)
1952-1959 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)
1962-1963 (Dutch/English) (bound volume)

Consistory and Elders Meeting
Minutes
1964-1970 (bound volume)
1973-1975 (bound volume)
1975-1977 (bound volume)
1977-1979 (bound volume)
1979-1983 (bound volume)

Box 4

Consistory and Elders Meeting (cont.)
Minutes (cont.)
1983-1990 (bound volume)

Consistory, Deacon’s Meeting
Minutes
1882-1915 (D/E) (bound volume)
1916-1942 (bound volume)
1942-1957 (bound volume)
1958-1977 (bound volume)

Dedication Building Addition and Renovation, January 30, 1983
New Sanctuary, September 9, 2001
Service for the Church House, June 28, 1955
Elder and Deacon Nominees, 2009, 2010

Finances
Annual Reports
December 1950
1910-1972

Benevolent, Helping Hands and Building Funds, 1960-1962 (bound volume)
Disbursements, 1924-1930
Disbursements and Receipts
1931-1938 (bound volume) (Oversized)
1939-1945 (bound volume) (Oversized)
1946-1950 (bound volume) (Oversized)
1950-1956 (bound volume) (Oversized)
1956-1961 (bound volume) (Oversized)
Records, 1964, 1968

First Church Family Letters, 2008-2010
Floor Plan, 1972
Genealogy Requests answered for First Reformed Church, 1980-1991

Guild for Christian Service
- Account Book, 1960-1975
- Annual Reports, 1962-1973
- General Fund, 1990
- Minutes, 1960-1990 (3 bound volumes)

Box 5

Guild for Christian Service
- Program Booklets, 1972-1984
- Secretary duties, 1983, n.d.
- Special programs, 1978-1986
- Handbook for Women’s Organizations, 1962
- History, Luctor et Emergo, n.d.
- Insurance Coverage, November 16, 1973

Ladies Aid Society
- Correspondence, 1931
- Records
  - 1881-1892 (Dutch) (bound volume)
  - 1918-1920, 1921-1924 (bound volumes)
  - 1925-1929, 1929-1946 (bound volumes)
  - 1946-1957 (bound volume)
- Treasurer’s Records, 1911-1928 (bound volume)

Ladies Missionary Society
- Member Records, 1906-1930 (two bound volumes)
- Minutes
  - 1893 (Dutch) (bound volume)
  - 1895-1903 (Dutch) (bound volume)
  - 1898-1899 (Dutch) (bound volume)
  - 1903-1920 (Dutch) (bound volume)
  - 1921-1931 (Dutch) (bound volume)
- Secretary’s Report, 1906

Lay Shepherd Ministry, 1994
- Leadership Training, 1981
- Lydia Circle Minutes, Books 1-3, 1991-2011
- Member Directories, 1937-1997 (4 Folders)

Box 6

Membership Records
- 1811-1850 (fragile) (bound volume) (Oversized)
- 1847-1902 (fragile) (bound volume) (Oversized)
- 1850-1950 (bound volume) (Oversized)
- 1900s-1970s (bound volume) (Oversized)
- #1 Ledger, 1868-1881
#1, 1836 (transcribed)
1849-1905 (translated, 1977)

1876-1904 (transcribed)
#1, Marriage Records, 1836-? (Dutch)

Membership Card, Dept. of Women’s Work, R.C.A., n.d.
Membership Statistics, 2009

Men’s Brotherhood
  Correspondence, n.d., 1977
  Minutes, 1943-1978 (2 folders)

Microfiche, 1849-1944

Ministers
  De Jonge, Jacob P, pastor record book, 1892-1909
  den Ouden, John, 1950
  Geschwendt, Ronald, 1971
  Newhouse, Adrian J., 1960
  Nieuwsma, John, 1976
  Poest, Donald J., 1978
  Rynbrandt, Abraham, 1943
  Van Bronkhorst, Douglas, 1972
  Van Peurse, John, Silver Anniversary of Gospel Ministry, 1930

Mission Circle Constitution, 1937
Mission Circle, Minutes 1919-1962 (4 bound volumes, no. 1 fragile)

Mission Guild
  History 1932-1941
  Minutes 1932-1959 (4 bound volumes)

Missionaries, Van Es, Rowland and Judy, Commissioning Service, 1966

Newsletters
  “First Glance,” 2010

Box 7

Obituaries
  Van Doorn, Arnold, 1970
  Vruggink, John H, 1978

Officers and Standing Committees, n.d.

Ordination
  Johnson, Erwin, Jr., 1975
  Looman, Gary J., 1963
  Zwyghuizen, John E., 1962

Personnel and Administration Committee Report, 1998

Pipe Organ
  Blueprints, January 1947
  Correspondence, October 1945-February 1947
  Dedication, September 14, 1947
  Memorandum of Agreement, August 1946
Recital, Henry Beard, September 19, 1947
Specifications, July 1946

Photographs
Celebration, n.d. (1 image)
Consistory, n.d. (1 image)
Dedication of Historical Marker, n.d. (12 images)
De Jonge, Rev. Jacob P., n.d. (1 image)
Graduation Class, n.d. (1 image)
Sunday School Class, n.d. (1 image)
Photograph Album, n.d.
Postcard, Photo of First Reformed Church, n.d.
Purpose Statements, 2009(?)
The Reformed Church Brotherhood Manual, 1956-1962
Sale of Promissory Notes, 2009
Service Chain, Minutes, 1942-1958
Society of Christian Endeavor, Minutes ledger, 1891-1894
Stained Glass Window, Layout, 1866

Box 7.5

Sunday School
Attendance Records and Minutes, 1876-1897 (Dutch) (bound volume)
Bulletin, 1933, 1934, 1948, 1950
Men’s Bible Class
Correspondence, n.d., 1975-1982
Minutes, 1935-1983 (bound volume)
Newspaper article, n.d.
Treasurer’s Records
1947-1983 (bound volume)
Bank Statement 1983
Record Attendance, 1951-1954
Sunday School Teacher’s Meeting Minutes
1901-1910 (Dutch 1901-1903) (bound volume)
1910-1914 (bound volume)
1915-1921 (bound volume)
1921-1938 (bound volume)
Teachers and Officers Meeting, Minutes, 1948-1981 (bound volume)
Young Men’s Bible Class
Correspondence, 1937
Minutes, 1923-1929, 1935

Box 8

Transfer of Membership, prior to 1900 (2 Folders)
1904
1900-1909 (Dutch/English)
1910-1919 (Dutch/English)
1920s-1940s (3 folders)
Certificate stubs, 1939-1942, 1944-1947
Transfer of Membership to New Reformed Church Project of Zeeland, n.d.
The Women’s League of Hope College, Zeeland Chapter, Constitution, n.d.
Zeeland Classis Women’s Societies, Annual Reports, 1963, n.d.
Zeeland Community Service in Memory of Reverend Cornelius Van Der Meulen,
September 19, 1976