May 2014


Western Theological Seminary

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**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. Stobbelaar, 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. Stobbelaar 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
  Correspondence, 1980-1988, n.d.
  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)
First Reformed Church, Zeeland, Michigan
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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 Peursem, 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)
   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