OF WEEDS AND WALL FLOWERS:
SMALL DUTCH ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN NORTH AMERICA

Hans Krabbendam and George Harinck


In 1907, at the apex of the European immigration to the United States, Rev. Peter Moerdyke, a leading Reformed Church minister in the Chicago area, spotted the activities of a Dutch cleric who had tried to found a new congregation in the center of Protestant Dutch Americanism in Grand Rapids, but abandoned his efforts soon after. Moerdyke was irritated by the claim of this new religious leader that he provided a service that the other Dutch churches did not, whereas the Chicago minister firmly believed that both the Reformed Church in America (his own church) and the Christian Reformed Church covered the spectrum pretty well, as he explained the situation:

A clerical adventurer from the Netherlands a year ago accepted an invitation to found a new kind of Reformed Church in Grand Rapids upon the representation that many were longing for the new brand. He came and suffered disappointment and gained light and concluded that our Church [the Reformed Church in America] and the Christian Reformed draw and satisfy about all the Dutch population of that city, noted for Dutch churches. Our respect for this “quittee” is great, as he humbly and candidly published in the papers his mistake and his satisfaction with the ecclesiastical and Gospel supplies already provided, without any need whatever or any financial support for what he was asked to undertake there. Grand Rapids has been richly blessed and at the same time often and much and still pestered with just these interlopers and divisive “conventicles,” factions and splits and little organizations. The “richly blessed” applies to the careful and abundant ministrations of the two Reformed churches, which ought to have the entire field. May this good brother’s letter, acknowledging his error, keep all others from further trespass on a well tilled field that yields great harvests.¹

Moerdyke’s article revealed the existence of a clear hierarchy among the Dutch immigrant communities, with the Reformed Church on top as the oldest and strongest community, followed by the Christian Reformed Church, while the other groups were ignored, condemned, or both. A century ago it was difficult to discern the viability of isolated communities outside the larger ones, which did not pay these dissidents much attention. The present volume shows that also outside these two “richly blessed” churches, a wealth of information can be gained on the Dutch from other communities, religious or not. Moerdyke not only underestimated the desire of new immigrants to stay close to their religious roots and decided not to join either the Reformed Church or the Christian Reformed Church, he also overlooked the many non-Protestants of Dutch origin who faced the same issues of assimilation and persistence as the more numerous and visible Protestants. Moerdyke proved wrong in his assessment of the future religious needs of his country men. Fifty years after his diatribe four new Dutch Protestant denominations had been founded in North America, while a variety of other groups tried to keep their own. Some of them flourished, others wilted.

If anyone took Moerdyke’s warning to ignore these “little organizations” to heart, it were future historians who completely overlooked the presence of other Dutch groups, Protestant and otherwise, outside the established Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches.² Moerdyke might have considered those groups to be weeds in the flower beds of the well-established Reformed Church and Christian Reformed Churches. It always takes time before a new group achieves respectability and most of the seedlings matured during the second half of the twentieth century.³ For latter-day researchers these first while wall flowers turned out to be colorful stalks in the bouquet of the Dutch presence. They allow a more sophisticated analysis of the patterns of assimilation and modernization, the role of formal (institutional) and informal (personal) networks in maintaining a group identity, including educational programs, and the subtleties in controlled change.
The purpose of this book is to ascertain why and when new morsels came into existence, how they managed to stay together, and in which format. These formative histories enrich our knowledge of the processes within immigrant communities in general and the larger Dutch Reformed groups in particular. The essays zoom in on connections of these groups with other Dutch Americans or alternative groups in America, and their communication with the Netherlands. All groups faced — confidently or more fearfully — the language shift. Their worldview guided the temporary preservation of the native tongue, because it formulated expectations of the future (of America and of the Netherlands) based on their interpretation of their place in the historical process. The nature of (religious) leadership, the role of the local church in processes of assimilation and preservation of identity, and finally the social and economic adaptation processes and their interaction with religious views all contributed to the prospects of the group.

These essays cover previously unexplored territory and in doing so prepare the way for further research, either in more detail on the exact rates of intermarriage, the position of women in the group, the practices of raising children and the results of negotiating specific liberties with the civil authorities, or on broader comparative studies with other ethnic groups. This overview is broad, but not exhaustive on the Dutch in North America. Separate studies have been written on the Dutch in earlier periods, the history of Dutch Jews, while research on Dutch Mormons is in progress, and fragments exist on the history of Dutch Mennonites.4

This collection is unique in presenting detailed overviews identifying sources, motives, activities and developments of a number of small denominations and settlements. As we will see, the history of these churches is more dynamic than is apparent from statistical overviews; many of them drew from the two larger Dutch-American denominations, shifted their loyalties, and regrouped. They responded to trends in the Netherlands as well as in their host societies. One of the aims of this volume is to structuralize the patterns and assess the options for the future.

**Immigrant Setting**

America was the country of liberty and choice. Immigrants arrived with diverging expectations: some came to preserve their heritage, others to cleanse it from corruption. Roles were reversed: oppressed minorities turned into leading majorities, established churches lost their privileges and had to be competitive. Some immigrants relished in the opportunities America offered, others found America’s freedom boundless and decided to hem it in. The shape and fate of immigrant religion depended on the timing of the immigration and led to a spectrum of options: to desert organized religion, to join an American denomination, to continue the old church, to establish a parallel denomination, or to begin a new religious community. Circumstances in America offered churches and ethnic groups special opportunities: the separation of church and state gave religions equal treatment, though many of them had to assertively claim those rights for themselves; its geographical expansion allowed room to spread out and grow; race and ethnicity were prominent forces in society and led to wide acceptance of pluralism and diversity; its great distances tempered potential conflicts between competing groups; the absence of a strong confessional conservatism allowed innovative experiments.5

In the nineteenth century immigrants from all directions encountered in America the dominant Protestant “religion of the heart” which emphasized free will, democratic means, traditional biblical teaching, and a personal approach. In combination with social activism this concurrence prepared a wholesome climate for sprouting energetic religious enterprises until the Civil War ended the Protestant hegemony over America and fragmented, but did not stop, its influence.

The spectrum of options mentioned above was used by the Dutch immigrants. It is difficult to estimate how many severed their ties with a church, but many did. It was precisely the fear for this secularizing trend which motivated the pastors Albertus van Raalte, Cornelius van der Meulen, and Hendrik P. Scholte to join their flocks on their American adventure. Dutch Catholics joined the American Roman Catholic Church and did not organize a separate denomination. This was also true for Dutch Lutherans and other smaller denominations, such as the Mennonites, who joined their brethren abroad. The Protestant Reformed Dutch Church was a branch of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk till 1772, when it became independent. The Christian Reformed Church, founded in 1857, may count as a parallel denomination to the Christelijk Gereformeerden (de Afgescheidenen) and most other Calvinist denominations which will be discussed in this volume, followed the same pattern. They adopted the same standards as the churches in the Netherlands to which they felt close, although a
number of these churches remained independent. Only the True Dutch Reformed Church and the Protestant Reformed Church have no counterparts in the Netherlands and may count as a typical American phenomena.

Institutions and People
Without formal institutions and informal networks groups can stay together only briefly. Formal (institutional) and informal (personal) networks are crucial in maintaining a group identity, as most essays will show.

Dutch sociologist Peter Ester raises the question of the relative importance of institutions and personal relations for group maintenance in his presentation on the social capital concept. He concludes for the body of Dutch American Protestants that their churches and schools and their distance to the world generated a strong mutual trust in a comprehensive social network which sustained their ethno-religious identity. The working of these mechanisms is tested on a micro level by Hans Krabbendam with the history of the Polder family. Once they and other recent settlers had founded a church in Los Angeles, they could tap into the resources of the denomination and secure its continuity. The old world network proved indispensable for building up a new one in the United States.

The vicissitudes of groups without institutions is shown by historians Cees van der Laan and Marianne Mooijweer. Van der Laan’s description of the Dutch Pentecostal group clearly proves this point. The chances for survival as a group were minimal, since it had neglected to formulate a vision for the group as a whole. A hostile public opinion in the Netherlands and opposition from within the Pentecostal Movement had encouraged the group to embark on this journey. But since they were dispersed after their arrival in America and were cut off from their roots, they quickly disbanded. A strong religious persuasion was not enough for persistence. Dutch Pentecostalism found itself even in a weaker position, since it was an American import, and received a continuous feeding of ideas from abroad. Its main motive for emigration was theologically prepared by the exposure to American religious sources such as Frank Buchman’s Moral Rearmament and Fred Bach’s Gospel Assembly. The projected hope that the immigrants would after some time return to the old country for missionary work proved illusory. The ties with the original source were cut.

More promising was the physical proximity of group of settlers recruited by the socialistic idealist Frederik van Eeden. Marianne Mooijweer’s contribution shows that he had a vision and that his recruits shared his economic interests. These economic bonds, however, proved weak and fleeting. Without a center for experiencing a transcending ethnic loyalty, the Dutchness quickly evaporated. Even the dream of the Van Eeden colonists of being a vanguard of a movement of socialist cooperations, which helped to kick off the colony, was not sufficient to sustain it in difficulties. A major setback was Van Eeden’s decision not to settle in the colony. In the absence of an embracing ideology, trust-at-a-distance melted away and lack of direct leadership undermined the settlement effort.

The strength of leadership is further illustrated in the history of an American-grown denomination such as the Protestant Reformed Church. This denomination has retained its identity for more than 80 years, despite its limited membership, which was further reduced by a significant drain in the 1950s. The origin of this group lies with the versatile and visionary Christian Reformed minister Herman Hoeksema. This charismatic leader guided his sympathizers intellectually, spiritually, and organizationally. One of the church’s main educators, Jon Huisken, explains the power of Hoeksema’s personality and his covenant theology: the resolute rejection of common grace pulled the bridge to civic cooperation. The practical consequence of this covenant theology secured an extraordinary close bonding. The church considers the theological debate very seriously, which encouraged explicit definitions and positions leading to distinct demarcations. Codes of proper behavior separate the faithful from the impure. This mechanism greatly strengthens the group and will continue to do so, as long as the practices and priorities do not shift. A contemporary example of a similar charismatic leader is Joel Beeke who acts as a magnet for various pietist Dutch Reformed and provides them with institutions and inspiration.
Language and Faith

Language is one of the vehicles for identity. No Dutch group has adopted as its ultimate goal the preservation of the Dutch language, but many groups used the native tongue as long as possible, until the process of socialization was jeopardized by the language split. The Dutch linguist Jaap van Marle discovered that even orthodox protestants sacrificed the native tongue to the common English. Whereas the timing of immigration and access to religious sources has encouraged the preservation of the Dutch language for a few decades, this was never as important as the ‘perseverance of the saints’ was.

The story of the Polder family, as recorded by Krabbendam, confirms the importance of the language in the initial stage of an immigrant community. In this case, the history of California challenged national patterns. This first generation of immigrants shopped around to find a church in Los Angeles in which they could speak Dutch. The history of the Dutch churches in California shows how language was very much connected with the phase of settlement and not with orthodoxy. In Los Angeles, the Christian Reformed Church shifted to English much sooner than the Reformed Church, which was late in founding a church in the area. The efforts of the Protestant Reformed Church to establish its presence in California also used the attachment to the Dutch language as a pull to attract supporters.

Dutch church historian Fred van Lieburg created unity in the variety of Dutch-American churches by focusing on their spirituality. A common pietist strand connected European and American protestants. The presence of pietistic enclaves within the established Dutch American churches advanced expectations among immigrants and they changed their loyalties when churches offered not enough consolation and stimulation. This resulted in a number of new denominations, which all wanted to be independent from the Netherlands and caused a circulation of the saints, who joined a congregation which connected best to their tradition. These connections had less to do with ethnicity than with the continuous pull of the puritan tradition. This attachment reduced the role of ethnicity.

Pietism had been part of the internal tensions that ravaged the Reformed Church in America in the early nineteenth century, in competition with more formalist groups, as Richard Harms describes. When the church in the new republic of the United States began to adopt the recruiting strategies of Methodists and Baptists, a number of New Jersey churches left the denomination in the 1820s to form the True Dutch Reformed Church. A new input came from the Christian Reformed immigrants in the Mid-Atlantic states, who absorbed part of the older True Dutch group in 1890. This history shows the crucial importance of instructing children. In the early twentieth century a number of churches withdrew from the merger. They failed to educate their children and gradually saw their group shrink. This trend was reinforced by the theological emphasis on individual piety.

The continuous importance of pietist feelings is shown by the Dutch participant-observers Laurens Vogelaar and Arie Baars. The denomination of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations portrayed by Vogelaar had its origin in 1877, but was formally founded thirty years later. The founding fathers were Dutch immigrants who were dissatisfied with the lack of religious experiences in the two existing Dutch-American denominations. Initially the church body consisted of a loosely organized and heterogeneous membership rooted in different traditions. The church structure was weak in the first century of its existence. Tiny constituencies, geographical diffusion, irregularities in the church order, and a lack of trained ministers prevented a strong network. The attachment to the Dutch language as the vehicle for carefully expressing religious sentiments prevented rapid growth. The existence of these churches proved to the Post World War II immigrants that it was possible to organize separate churches. They further increased group cohesion by founding denominational schools in the 1970s. Simultaneously they intensified their contacts with the Netherlands through the exchange of ministers, joint activities for schools, and translation programs of Dutch religious literature. The Without the infusion of new members in the recent wave of immigration to Canada, the churches would end up dwindling as the tiny congregation in South Holland, Illinois, kept floating by two families.6

Baars connects to this story with the founding of the Free Reformed Church out of dissenting churches split off from the Netherlands Reformed Congregations. Thanks to connections with the Christelijke Gereformeerden in the Netherlands after World War II a new denomination took shape. The course taken to secure seminary training showed a whimsical pattern. The Free Reformed explored cooperation with a variety of other Dutch groups and ended up in the arms of the Puritan...
Reformed, another split off the Netherlands Reformed. After joining hands with others they secure their future, though only a number of local churches is strong enough to stand on their own feet. Both groups reveal the importance of other supporting elements and new waves of immigrants, something which, for instance, the Van Eeden Colony sorely missed.

Yearning for religious practices of old and traditional teaching prodded new arrivals to found their own church organizations in which strong religious authority protected the boundaries. Though the Dutch language as such was not sacred, it helped to maintain the connections with the Netherlands. Each newly founded denomination imported its clergy from the Netherlands. Vogelaar and Baars document these enduring bonds specifically for the pietist denominations, which only in the past two decades began to fill their pulpits with homegrown candidates. Simultaneously, their theological sources broadened to include English and Scottish Puritan works. The emerging missionary activities, a next phase in the process of maturation, ended the monopoly of the old country, which has to share the attention increasingly with these mission fields. The scarce, but in principle possible, entry of converts of other ethnic background will start a discussion about the exclusive position of the Dutch tradition.

**Education and Vocation**

In all religious groups education offered opportunities for socialization of the next generation. The histories told by Swierenga (Christian Reformed Church), Oosterhoff (Canadian Reformed Church), Huiskens (Protestant Reformed Congregations) and Vogelaar (Netherlands Reformed Congregations) proof this point abundantly. Harms’ reconstruction of the demise of the True Dutch Reformed Church also points to the absence of an educational program as an important cause for its demise. The Dutch researcher Lucas Ligtenberg elucidates the importance of the educational programs in his history of the Dutch Roman Catholic immigrants in Wisconsin. They came in units with large clans, but dispersed in settlements according to their origin in the Netherlands and failed to build one cohesive subculture. Only in a few small rural towns, such as Little Chute, did a Dutch ethnicity have a chance for survival. These settlements received a boost through their parochial schools. When they had to abandon their secondary school, Dutch ethnicity slowly began to evaporate. Dutch Catholic communities thrived ethnically as long as it maintained its schools. The folding of Little Chute’s St. John’s high school in 1972 weakened the Dutch link. In contrast to their Protestant compatriots, however, they maintained their cultural festivals, which remained an important pillar for ethnic identification.

Canadian philosopher Frederika Oosterhoff describes the Canadian Reformed who live still very much within their educational network and their ecclesiastical walls. From the beginning of their existence in 1950, their desire to have an exclusive affiliation with the Vrijgemaakten, a 1944 split off of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, frustrated joining existing groups, each of them emphasizing an element from their church history as crucial. One of her most remarkable conclusions is based on the educational training which prepared the loss of members to other Reformed churches, but limited the transfer to evangelical churches in Canada. The strong Dutch identity of the Canadian Reformed, nurtured by church and school, and adherence to the customs in the Dutch mother church of the 1950s prove to be the main obstacle for new converts. The Canadian Reformed experience has similar tensions as other Dutch denominations in North America. The outgoing impetus will certainly change the character of this denomination by its bridge-building efforts.

Most Dutch immigrants highly valued education so that their children would gain good jobs. The labor market assimilates, as the past has shown. The American historian Trudy Selleck shows the working of the (thinner) bonds of social capital, the economic ties, through an analysis of the Dutch dairy farmers in California. Since business ties were less intense than religious ones and could be maintained across state borders, the farmers could resettle in another Dutch religious community when the national economic situation demanded a move. Their concentration in one segment of the economy gave them sufficient leverage to negotiate their interests. On a micro level the Polder family farm reveals the cohesive force of working arrangements, while the need to find employment outside of the ethnic group advanced assimilation.

The ban of Dutch Reformed churches on union membership opened up the opportunity to transplant the Dutch concept of a Christian labor union to North America. The Dutch labor historian Paul Werkman offers an example of a failed effort to export a Dutch. This was a result of the dual
wish to seek support in a small circle of ethnic Christian Reformed Church and the desire to be a fully acceptable in Canadian society. The authorities in Canada required the unions to be inclusive. This demand threatened to annul the explicit Christian identity of the union. This dilemma proved insurmountable, especially when the new generation of committed members fended off interference from the old country. This attitude prevented this morsel to grow. This history provides a clear example of the complications

A contribution by Robert P. Swierenga brilliantly illustrates the strength of trust in the members of a subculture and the impact of institutions in his reconstruction of an investment debacle in California in the 1990s. A tax deduction regulation encouraged Calvinist Dutch-Americans to invest in an enterprise which was endorsed by their leaders and exploited by the Dutch-American institutions. When a change in the tax code depressed the value of their investment, the revenues dwindled and caused a crisis of confidence. Since the company was private it needed to open up its books for its clients. When the company treated its creditors unequally this caused an upheaval in especially the Christian Reformed Church. Despite the apparent debacle, this event revealed the vitality of the Dutch-American subculture: The interlocking relations speeded up the pulling out of this financial construction. Informal networks operative in the denominations issued warnings. The institutions that had invested heavily in this project managed to reclaim the value of their investments and in doing so continued to support the Dutch-American network.

Metaphors and Patterns

An overarching view depends for its direction on the choice of metaphors. The American historian Jon Gjerde found several dominant examples of figurative speech in immigration research. Researchers standardized their images mainly in terms as streams, chains, waves, and especially botanical metaphors: transplantation and uprootedness indicated the direction of continuity/adaptation or discontinuity/culture shock. Sociologists, mainly from the Chicago School, focused on linear processes of assimilation after initial periods of tension, which resulted in modernization of the immigrant subcultures and eventual absorption in the American melting pot. The historians following the lead of Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) continued the concentrated on the history from the bottom up and emphasized the variety among ethnic groups and the uniqueness of ethnic subcultures, resulting from their original culture. This later perspective opens up a transnational perspective.

Among the historians in this volume the American immigration specialist Robert P. Swierenga introduces the assimilation issues in physical terms of building walls and bridges. To this pair of terms, the Dutch sociologist Gerard Dekker adds the draw bridge to create a middle ground. The difference with earlier metaphors is striking: streams, waves, and transplantations “happen”, walls and bridges are built as a result of decisions. The rational character of Dutch immigration is clearly visible in this terminology. Most Dutch immigrants made a calculated choice for America and came to value the various options that the country offered, even in the choice of (Dutch Protestant) churches. The members belonging to groups such as the Socialist, the Pentecostals and the Roman Catholics developed no policies to fend off ethnic entanglements, as the various Protestant groups did.

Swierenga colors the main differences of these churches. In the Reformed Church, a “bridge” mentality prevailed in which the church opened itself to the culture and allied with the mainline Protestant denominations. The Christian Reformed Church had an isolationist or “wall” mentality that stressed separation from the culture and American churches. Only after the Second World War did new intellectual leaders open the Christian Reformed Church to the culture. Today the western part of the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church are hardly distinguishable in polity and practice. The only obstacle for a union is the issue of Christian day schools. The process of assimilation has run its course and both churches are truly mainline American denominations in style and practice. The “wall” mentality is strongest in the Netherlands and Puritan Reformed Churches, followed by the Canadian Reformed Church, Free Reformed Church, and the split-off branches of the Christian Reformed Church, namely, the Protestant Reformed Church, the Associate Reformed Church, and the Independent Reformed Church (the latter two are products of the 1980s and 1990s).

This is the fate of all groups who want to maintain their relevance for members in the host society, as Dekker claims. He therefore adds the draw bridge image to Swierenga’s bipolar imagery. This metaphor sees groups as selectively allowing cultural change to enter while blocking other influences. According to this Dutch sociologist this approach offers the best chance for cultural
survival because it preserves the key elements of the group. This outcome will only work if the group can reflect on itself as part of a historical process, which is a strenuous exercise for coherent groups who prefer to define their identities in absolute terms, as the true church against the false. These groups rather invest in institutional support to pass on their heritage to the next generation than openly mediate with the surrounding cultural forces.

**Prospects**

Will the Dutch morsels remain identifiable in the North American melting pot? For the time being they will, albeit barely visible for the outside world. While religious ethnics have the best prospects for persistence, this does not mean that these morsels will remain unchanged. Some adaptations seem inevitable, as history shows: changed circumstances demand new positions and organized outreach leads to reflective change. Dekker encourages reflection among the tightly-knit ethnic groups of Dutch lineage in order to secure continuity of their identities. If that is a concern for these groups, it is wise to take note of the experiences and developments in related groups. He also asserts that bridging is essential for a group’s well-being. Swierenga takes a historical perspective and distinguishes a historical trend to trade in walls for bridges. This is what the Reformed Church did and the Christian Reformed Church repeated a generation later. The Protestant and Canadian Reformed Churches show little change, but will stumble on the necessity when they seriously intensify their mission efforts. The Free and some Netherlands Reformed already began to lean on Anglosaxon counterparts to the Dutch pietist tradition. This will bring them closer with their North American sub stream.

While groups with weak or no institutional support for their identity sooner or later dissolved, as Mooijweer, Van der Laan, and Ligtenberg show, the American historian Mark Noll also foresees the end of the influence of European traditions in North America. The main streams of Calvinist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches all survived long thanks to their relative isolation which produced significant intellectual contributions. However, eventually they could not keep the forces of assimilation at bay. After they embraced the mainline liberal tradition of immediacy, popular practices, and idealism, community values replaced theological reflection as the moral basis for American society. This development will pressure the morsels into melting till a new unforeseen sowing of immigrant seed might germinate in an ethnic flower bed.

**Notes**

1 The Christian Intelligencer, dated 19 January [1907].
9 Noll, Old Religion in a New World, 235-252.