

## NOT ALONE

### **The History of the Reformed Dutch in Canada (1950-1990)**

*“First of all they left The Netherlands and came over here. They were so much dependent on their faith in God. There was one Cabinet Minister in The Netherlands, he said: the Christian Reformed people are really remarkable, they take the bible in their arms and they leave the country.”*

(interview excerpt)

The material for this immigrant story is based on approximately 90 interviews, which I conducted in 1988 among the Reformed Dutch in Canada and among some of their close relatives in The Netherlands. Out of the material of these individual life histories I constructed six group stories. Three of these stories provide the history of three generations of the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands and three of these stories offer an account of the history of three generations of the Reformed Dutch in Canada.

The primary aim of my research was to explore the impact of immigration on the life style, worldview and religion of the Reformed Dutch in Canada. My strategy was to compare the changes this community had experienced over the four decades after their immigration with the changes that have occurred among the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands during that same time span. Contrary to my expectations immigration appears to have had a conserving effect on the Reformed Dutch in Canada as compared with the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands. That is to say, the lifestyle, worldview, and Reformed religious practices, which form the central focus of this ethic-religious immigrant group, remained essentially the same in 1990 what it was for the Reformed Dutch in Canada in 1950, the time of their immigration. By contrast, during this same period the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands moved from a lifestyle, worldview and religion characterized by Religious Pluralism to one characterized by Religious Ecumenism.

Finally, it should be noted that the differences between the generations which were observed were differences *as they existed in 1988, at the time this research was conducted and do not necessarily reflect the differences between the generations today.*

## **The Elderly Reformed Dutch in the Netherlands**

*The old certainties have disappeared. The way people look at life has changed enormously. Humanly speaking we worry a lot, but God holds the future in His hand.*

(interview excerpt)

The life of these people spans 70-90 years. They have done a great many things and much has happened to them. They were born to large, often poor families. As children they experienced World War I. They learned to cope with the Depression during their youth and young adulthood. They raised young families under the terror of foreign oppression during W.W. II. After the war they worked hard to rebuild their country, ravaged and plundered bare by Nazi occupation, and now they sit quietly, retired from the busyness of a hard and eventful life. Compared to their youth they are now financially far more secure. Yet many of them are bewildered and disturbed by the enormous changes, which have occurred, in postwar Holland. History seems to have left them behind and they view the future of their community and country with some concern.

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Because they were born to Reformed Dutch parents during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Century certain aspects of their life were standard fare. The families into which they were born were large, containing anywhere from 9-14 children. Yet each child was a welcome addition to the family since their parents considered children a gift from God. We may question whether number 14 was as welcome as number 1, but their parents did not. They could not control the number of children they were going to conceive, since contraceptives were not available to them. Children simply came. That's the way it was then and since they believed that God governs the way things are, good or bad; they simply accepted what could not be changed.

Nevertheless, this situation made for rather crowded living conditions. Not only did the children share their bedroom, but often also their bed with their siblings. Three boys, or three girls, to a bed were not uncommon. Moreover, with such a large brood to nurture parents expected their children to obey the rules of the house. Children had little to say and they did not talk back. Misdemeanors were swiftly punished, often corporally by father. It was one of his duties as head of the household, mother's role being that of a buffer between father's ire and the child's pain.

However, it would be a mistake to think that such conditions made for an unhappy childhood. The rules of the family were clear. They were backed up by church, school and state. The children in these families knew the limits of acceptable behavior and within these protective boundaries their parents were loving, which made family life cozy and full of fun.

Since the Reformed of that time were largely a community of "kleine luyden" or people of little means, another predictable factor in the lives of these people was the poverty of their existence. They could count on having a roof over their head, they could expect to be fed and clothed as children, but luxuries were scarce or non-existent. Moreover, while they were cared for in this way during their childhood, they were expected to make their own way in life as soon as they were able to do so. In those days that was thought to be the time a person left grade school.

At the age of 12 or 13 they went to work. Since most of them were children of farm labourers, they hired themselves out to the more affluent farmers as farm hands or servant girls. Because their place of employment was often some distance from their parental home, they usually lived with the family of the farmer for whom they worked. This fact, together with the wages they earned represented considerable financial relief for their parents, because it not only meant that they now had more money to spend but also that they had one fewer mouth to feed. By going out to work their dependent children almost overnight became self-sufficient contributors to the family income. Moreover, in terms of space they made room for the next child which was usually on the way.

At their place of employment they were given responsibilities in line with their age and strength, but the work they did was hard and the days were long. They worked six days per week, dawn to dusk or beyond. On Sunday they were expected to help with the morning and evening milking. One Sunday out of every four they were given the afternoon and evening off to go home, if distance permitted it. This system effectively eliminated any meaningful contact with their family. Certainly, it meant that siblings who were working out did not see one another for months or even years, since it was unlikely that they would all have the same Sunday off.

Thus, in many ways these people were forced to grow up at an early age. Did this make for an unhappy youth? Hardly. Times were tough, their brothers and sisters and friends

were all in the same boat. They did not know any better. That's the way things were. They did not bother about it. They accepted what they could not change.

It would be difficult to overestimate the role the Reformed religion played in the lives of these people. Ever since the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the influence of the Reformation had been pervasive in Dutch daily life. This meant first of all that life was lived around the three biblical principles of the Christian religion, sin, grace, and salvation. But in addition it gave the Reformed Dutch a profound sense of God's providing presence in their lives and an awareness that He called them to a child-like trust in His providential guidance. The Christian life for the Reformed was a life of unconditional surrender and faith.

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the NeoCalvinist Abraham Kuyper further concretized this Reformed vision of life into a communal way of life. The rule of God's providential guidance, he held, does not just apply to the salvation of individuals, but extends to the life of the church, of the family, of politics, labour relations, art and education as well.

In each of these, and in other areas, the Reformed Dutch, under his leadership, developed a uniquely Reformed Christian lifestyle, so that by the turn of the century they had their own denomination, their own Christian day schools, their own Christian university and their own social organizations.

Institutionally the Reformed community in Holland was pretty well complete by the time the elderly Reformed were born. . A standard series of rituals and customs were adhered to in their families. They prayed before and after every meal. They read the bible at mealtimes morning, noon and night. As children they attended a Christian school and as young people they joined the young men's or the young ladies' societies of their church.

These societies were primarily study clubs rather than social gatherings. At their meetings Reformed young people studied and discussed biblical topics and the way these biblical truths could be applied to social problems. By thinking their way through these problems they formed their own Reformed identity.

These study sessions also served to further their education. Every participant was expected to take a turn introducing a topic for discussion. Such an exercise taught them how to read, how to think and how to present their ideas in written and oral form to others. The meetings also taught them how to conduct themselves in accordance with commonly accepted rules. They learned how to listen, how to discuss a topic and how to come to some common understanding.

So, even though they had only a grade school education, these meetings added considerably to their knowledge, particularly about the bible and how to apply its message to the various areas of their life. Small wonder, therefore, that they attended these meetings faithfully. They were held on Sunday night, since most weeknights were taken up by work. Participation in these meetings was considered so important, especially for the boys, that not even courtship was allowed to interfere with it. For that reason girls were publicly admonished that if they loved their guy they were not to keep him from attending the young men's society.

Because of their limited day school education, these people lacked culturally in many areas during their youth. But because they heard bible stories at home and in the Christian school during their childhood, went to church twice faithfully each Sunday, and

especially because they attended these young people's study meetings, they often had an extensive bible knowledge and were theologically quite astute by the time they reached young adulthood. Moreover they had a clear, even if by today's standards rather narrow, vision on how to apply this knowledge profitably to their daily lives. For each area of their lives, family, church, politics, labour relations and social issues they had learned a set of clear Reformed Christian principles. That they knew what to do once they became adults was in no small measure due to their faithful participation, during their youth, in these young people study societies.

These societies were not only for study however. Together with church, choir and catechism they also provided the social context within which Reformed boys and girls met and dated one another. Particularly at annual young people society rallies, choir and band festivals, Reformed young people of both sexes expected to meet one another and with luck to start a relationship. Although billed as religious festivals, the primary function of these annual events proved in practice to be more social than religious.

Another practice that facilitated courtship between Reformed boys and girls were the weekly Saturday and Sunday night walks in the centre of the town or village where one lived. Typically, boys and girls would parade the main street in separate groups and as the occasion arose a boy would separate himself from the group, strike up a conversation with a particular girl he liked and if the feeling was mutual they would henceforth walk and talk together.

These and other practices made it possible for Reformed boys and girls to meet and to start a relationship. One gets the impression that the formation of such relationships was often based on rational considerations. Starting such a relationship forced a boy or a girl to do some pretty hard-nosed thinking. It may be true that the initial contact was based on mutual attraction, but compatibility in religion could readily become the topic of conversation even on the first date. There are several Reformed denominations in Holland and it was commonly accepted then that as a rule you did not marry outside your own church. For instance, doctrinally the Gereformeerde and the Hervormde churches are very similar, but socially the dividing line between the two churches was very clear. So, if a Gereformeerde boy wanted to marry a Hervormde girl, he had to some explaining to do, and so did the girl.

Though less than before, it was also commonly accepted that one did not marry below one's social class. It was possible, for example, for a farmer's son to marry a farm labourer's daughter but then it was understood he was making an exception to the rule. At that time there was not a whole lot of dating as we know it today. Once a boy and a girl had met, they rather quickly began to go steady. By contrast the courting process took a long time. It lasted anywhere from four to five years. While this seems like a long time to us, it should be remembered that the couple normally saw one another only once every two weeks.

But even at that speed the time would come sooner or later when the couple set the wedding date. The decision to marry was difficult to make, for in making it they took a financial risk. As single people they were not rich, but they could always manage to make enough to provide themselves with room and board. Once married the husband had to provide for two adults plus the inevitable children that would come along the way. The idea of having both parents work out to improve the family's standard of living was unthinkable at that time. The wife stayed home and raised children. Her task was to perform miracles of frugality by making what meager income the family had eke out as long as she could. A good husband was one who worked hard, a good wife one who

could make do.

These were the Depression years. Wages were low and work was scarce. Consequently, many of them tried to augment the family income by growing their own food and keeping a few animals for meat and milk. More than a few of these daring souls even started their own businesses: a store, a delivery service, market gardening, growing and selling flowers, etc. The drive to be one's own boss was strong among these people. But since capital was scarce at that time and business was risky, it took courage, long hours of hard work and the ability to live in abject poverty to keep a business going. The wages they could earn working for someone else were meager, but they did at least provide a steady income every week. By working for themselves they lost that security and frequently there were times when they did not know where their next meal was going to come from.

Did this kind of life make these people unhappy? Not really. Their capacity for being thankful with what they had is amazing. Moreover, compared to what they had been used to, they had every reason to be thankful. They were fulfilling an exciting dream. They were on the road toward becoming financially independent and they trusted that sooner or later God would bring their struggles to fruition.

Besides this, they lived in a close knit community of likeminded people. They were embedded in a network of relatives and friends. In church they received status by becoming an elder or deacon or they received status by being the wife of one. Municipally, provincially and federally they elected their own political representatives. At the federal level their political party even formed the government a number of times. Thus, they had acquired considerable power to direct the affairs of the broader community in accordance with the Reformed Christian principles they learned to love earlier in their study clubs.

Most importantly, they had an almost childlike faith in a benevolent God, Whom they trusted to help them through whatever difficulty they might have to face, and they saw it as their mission in life to serve Him with the whole of their being. This childlike faith was the centre piece of their entire existence. In all their decisions they waited for the guidance of their Lord. Schama<sup>1</sup> has given a beautiful example of this religious attitude in his description of the 'eleventh hour rescue'. It depicts their conviction that God has the tendency to come to the rescue precisely when the need is the greatest and all seems lost. All the evidence points to the fact that they were a people content with their lot. Some might think their lives rather dull and their outlook narrow, but they truly felt socially, politically and religiously secure.

Then came "the" war. All their lives they had been free. The previous war had been fought outside the borders of Holland. At that time many of the Dutch had even been sympathetic to the German cause. Now, suddenly they were invaded by their neighbours. For five days they resisted the aggressor fiercely though ineffectually. Then Holland fell and its Queen and government fled to England. Holland had become part of the Third Reich.

At first it seemed as if nothing had changed. Life went on as usual, except for the presence of some German soldiers. Then gradually the oppression of the war began to assert itself, culminating in sheer terror toward the end of the war. Soon shortages of any kind became noticeable. Everyday staples were rationed and the black market flourished. It became clear that the Nazis considered Holland as a satellite and that they were intent on trucking everything of value to their homeland, including the use of Dutch manpower. Wherever possible the Germans attempted to conscript eligible Dutch males to work in

the war effort in Germany.

By far the majority of the Dutch men declined the offer and went underground. Many of them instead devoted their time to guerilla warfare aimed at sabotaging the war efforts of the Nazis. This meant that a lot of men had to go in hiding for the duration of the war. In addition, many thousands of Dutch Jews were already in hiding, fearing for their lives. To make matters worse, in 1943 the entire work force of the Dutch National Railways went on permanent strike in protest against Nazi occupation. From that time on almost every household, certainly in the countryside harboured one or more fugitive.

A climate of fear pervaded the last two years of the war. Razzias at night that sealed off whole city blocks, during which men were flushed out of their houses like rats out of a sewer, were a common occurrence. During the day, those who ventured on to the streets because they had papers, faked or otherwise, that excused them from service, did so constantly looking over their shoulders for fear of being conscripted anyway. Moreover, not all Dutch people were compatriots. Some were collaborators and you never knew when they would betray you to the enemy. Stories abound about people hiding for days in haystacks, dugouts or in hiding places built behind bedrooms closets.

One such story bears repeating because it epitomizes the agony which people endured during those years. In Northern Holland a farmer's family with several young children had taken in two Jewish boys aged twelve and thirteen from The Hague. They were brothers and it was thought that separation from their parents would be easier for them if they could stay together with the same family. Thinking that they would be relatively safe in the countryside the farmer made no special effort to hide them other than to restrict their movements to the boundaries of the farm. He simply passed the boys off as his sons.

However, when a villager jokingly remarked that it was wondrously strange that the farmer, being married only seven years could have twelve and thirteen year old sons, the farmer became afraid. And he had every reason to be afraid because the Nazis shot entire families without mercy if they were discovered to have illegally harboured fugitives. Accordingly, the farmer went looking for another family to hide the boys. He found a place for the oldest boy, but he was totally unsuccessful in placing the younger boy. Everything was full. In desperation the boy was hidden in a closet in the village church. He stayed there for the duration of the war, alone, except for the occasional visit from someone to bring him food.

Hunger was an ever present reality in wartime Holland, especially in the big cities. But it became particularly acute during the Hunger Winter of 1944. It drove people from the cities into the countryside in search of food. There was no public transportation. Railways no longer operated. Cars and trucks had disappeared long ago. People were forced to bike or to walk long distances throughout Holland pushing baby carriages or carts. They went from farm to farm offering money or if that was lacking, their prized possessions in exchange for food that would keep them from starvation. The Dutch farmers, many of whom were Reformed, were generous. They sold their grain, potatoes, butter or sugar beets to weary travelers at pre-war prices and gave them food and lodging at the end of a day for free.

There was an amazing sense of unity between the people of Holland during the war. People of every race and religion spontaneously joined hands in resisting their common aggressor. They helped and protected one another wherever they could, frequently at the peril of their own lives. Were it not for this spirit of unselfishness and mutual caring, many thousands more would have perished.

Then came the end of the war. The last several months before the end were the worst. Some of the fiercest fighting of the entire war occurred as the liberating Allies pushed to eject the Germans from their fortified strongholds. Many valiant Canadians died fighting. So did many of the Dutch civilians caught in the cross-fire. But the liberators prevailed and on May 5, 1945 all of Holland was free once again.

One has to have experienced five years of foreign occupation to know the intensity of the joy that swept the nation. Liberation festivities went on for weeks! But all this joy could not obviate the fact that post-war Holland was economically in a sorry state. Factories and office buildings were empty shells, their furniture and machinery long ago hauled off to Germany. Harbours were obstructed by sunken vessels, bridges were blown up, public transportation lacked vehicles, trains and railway beds and much of Holland's productive farmland was covered by salt sea water. Clearly the Dutch had to rebuild from scratch. They did so with a vengeance and with the help of American capital. The years following the war were challenging and exciting for the Dutch.

As the years wore on it became apparent that the war had had a major impact on the social fabric of Dutch life. Public life in pre-war Holland had been constructed in terms of religious blocks or communities. There was the Roman Catholic block, surprisingly large for a country considered to be Protestant, and there was the block of neutralists, in essence composed of two opposing sub-blocks, the conservative laissez-faire Liberalen, and the more progressive Socialist-Communist block. In addition there was the Protestant block, which again consisted of two sub-communities, the Gereformeerden and the Hervormden. Each of these (sub)communities had their own unique lifestyle, which came to expression in their own social institutions such as schools, churches, labour unions, newspapers and public broadcasting organizations. Each block voted its own candidates for public office and parliament was elected from these candidates in accordance with the principle of proportional representation.

The important thing to note is that socially the members of a given religious community interacted almost exclusively with one another and hardly ever with members of another religious block. Thus, life in pre-war Holland had been religiously highly diversified and the members of one religious community lived their private and public lives in isolation from the members of another.

After the war this same pattern of living attempted to reassert itself but it soon became apparent that the war had severely disrupted the religiously plural social fabric of pre-war Dutch life and with it the religious isolation of the Reformed Dutch. During the war people of every religious and ideological stripe were thrown together indiscriminately and found themselves forced to work closely together as individuals in the common cause of resisting the Nazis. Jews hid in Christian households. Protestant children were protected by Roman Catholic neighbours. Reformed resistance fighters found they had to trust Communists with their lives. It was a surprise to all of them that this was actually possible. Historically grown and persistent stereotypes tumbled by the dozen. This fact alone already goes a long way toward explaining the breakdown of the traditional pre-war social boundaries in post-war Dutch social life.

It was further facilitated by another event. Soon after the war the Dutch became embroiled in yet another war, this time in Indonesia. Up until then Indonesia had been a Dutch colony for more than three centuries. Now its indigenous people were clamouring for self-rule and Holland sent out its young men to put down what it perceived to be an uprising. In this they were ultimately unsuccessful. Indonesia became somewhat like Holland's Vietnam or Afghanistan. For the duration of this war, however, young Dutch

soldiers were once again in the position of the Dutch resisters during W.W. II. They associated with and relied on their fellow soldiers irrespective of their religious persuasion. When these young men returned to Holland they felt totally alienated from the religiously diversified social system that had reasserted itself after the war, and they actively became involved in changing this system.

The Reformed young men among them began to work towards political rapprochement between the two Reformed parties, the Anti-revolutionaire Partij and the Christelijk Historische Unie and the Roman Catholic party, the Katholieke Volkspartij. They ultimately succeeded in creating one Christian political party called the Christian Democratic Alliance, Christelijk Democratisch Apel, or C.D.A. for short. Ecclesiastically they also worked to reunite Holland's two major Reformed denominations, the Gereformeerden and the Hervormden in an action called "Samen Op Weg" (On The Way Together). This action proceeded much more slowly because it involved a much greater social change than a mere change in voting behaviour. Even so, in many regions of Holland Gereformeerden and Hervormden regularly held church services together. Thus on the whole in both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic denominations the mood became Christianly ecumenical, a marked change from before the war.

Theologically major changes in emphasis also occurred in the Reformed community. The traditional emphasis of Reformed theology had been on the acts of God in the history of mankind. Reformed people understood that God is just but also gracious in the lives of people. In any case they felt His presence and received comfort and a sense of security from it. Because of the unbelievable atrocities of the war, in particular the inhumanity of Auschwitz they experienced a profound crisis of faith. They no longer felt religiously secure and began to question whether, given these events, their earlier basic trust in a providential God was realistic. Next to questioning old certainties, their theology and their preaching also began to stress the Christian's political task to protect the rights and freedoms of the weak and the oppressed. These theological changes augmented the social and political changes toward a more ecumenical form of religion.

Neither did the influence of global counter-culture forces during the late sixties and early seventies leave the Reformed in Holland unaffected. As a result of these influences its youth in particular experienced a change in sexual mores, a crisis in authority, and a susceptibility to the drug scene.

All these, and other changes occurred while Holland was pulling itself out of the war-engendered economic slump and was well on the way toward unprecedented prosperity. The elderly Reformed fully shared in this post-war drive toward prosperity. They continued to work hard, but now they were much more successful, either in establishing their own businesses or in achieving respectable salaried positions in corporations or the civil service. Considering that they spent the most part of their lives just making ends meet, they were now very well off, a blessing from God that never ceased to amaze them.

Yet with a few exceptions, most of them felt ill at ease in their post-war world. Personally they continued to testify to the grace of God in their lives but they were concerned about the direction their church and their country were taking. They felt estranged from the community they grew up in, worked for and loved. They found the church cold and unemotional; they found its preaching too abstract and too theoretical. The sermons they listened to were expositions without application or were preoccupied exclusively with the political dimension of the gospel at the expense of a focus on sin, grace, and personal salvation. They felt that the church no longer supported them in their daily struggle to live Christian lives. They saw a lack of church attendance among their grandchildren.

They worried about their materialistic lifestyle. They feared that in its drive for prosperity, Holland was committing itself to irreversible technological innovations that would have ecologically disastrous consequences for the country's future.

In some ways they appreciated the post-war mood of openness in which everything that was previously taboo could now be discussed. They saw that this allows for much more intimate relationships between today's parents and their children, something which they were never able to achieve. Yet they also wondered whether this process of emancipation had not gone too far in the opposite direction. It often seemed to them as if all the boundaries had disappeared.

Why were these people, who spent their entire life battling poverty, so unhappy at a time when they finally had achieved a measure of financial security? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that, while they worked hard to better their standard of living, it was religion rather than possessions that gave meaning to their lives. The centrepiece of their existence was the Reformed faith. This faith coloured everything they did personally and communally. Now that they saw that in their environment their faith in many ways was being eroded, it felt as if they were thrown back upon themselves without support, like single solitary figures in a landscape, in which earlier they felt so much at home, but which now seemed alien and full of danger.

## **The Middle-aged Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands**

*Is it not sinful that people who are religiously so close should be separated into separate denominations?*

(interview excerpt)

By and large these middle-aged people were a post-war generation. Some of them experienced the war as young children but they have very few stories to tell about it. None of them knew the Depression from first hand experience. Their story can thus be taken to represent what it was like to grow up immediately after the war in Holland. In comparison with their parents these people were equally hard working but better educated. Occupationally it seems they were far more diverse than their parents. They tended to be more mobile, both economically and geographically, and there was a trend away from self-employment toward salaried positions. Ecclesiastically and theologically they seem to have rejected as too narrow their parents' tendency to think in religious blocks. Their thinking seems to have been more fluid. Nevertheless the majority of them remained Protestant Reformed and in their behaviour they maintained the importance of organization, rules and limits. Many of them it seems were struggling with emotional problems that stemmed from negative family relations during their childhood. They also tended to be burdened by a strong sense of obligation. One could call them a generation of servants.

In post-war Holland there was much work to be done and these people did it as children, teenagers and as adults, just like their parents. Unlike their parents most of them continued on in school during their teenage years in pursuit of a secondary education. About half of them also obtained a more advanced degree in some area of post-secondary education. There was more opportunity to get an education after the war. Post-war Holland had better schools and more of them. Nationally education was valued more than before as well. Life was becoming more complex. One needed more education to get by.

Thus, they were better educated than their parents. But education was serious business for them. To continue one's education beyond grade school was still considered a privilege when they were growing up. They were expected to work hard in school, and after school to help their parents, who were trying to re-establish themselves in one business or another. So there was not a whole lot of free time for these people. They were taught to work hard and they remained hard-working throughout their lives.

Once out of school and married they either started a business of their own or pursued a career. Either way that almost always meant further schooling at night, in order to obtain the diploma necessary to run a business, to practice a trade, or to make career advancements in a company. In post-war Holland bureaucracy was rife. It was simply impossible to start any kind of business venture without a permit or to pursue a career without a diploma. That's the way it was. They had no choice in the matter. If they wanted to advance themselves financially they had to comply, and economic advancement was high on their list.

Occupationally this group was far more diverse than the previous generation of mostly farm labourers. This group also included salespeople, hairdressers, teachers, executives, etc. Unlike their parents, who lived in one place most of their lives, they were geographically also much more mobile. Many of them moved away from their birth place to another part of Holland in their adult years. This increased geographic mobility was almost always dictated by economic opportunity or career advancement. They simply moved their family to wherever work or business opportunities were to be had. That in itself was no small feat since there was an acute housing shortage at the time they were making their move. To obtain a place to live in another locality meant going from one government bureau to another for years in pursuit of a housing permit. Buying an existing business, such as a bakery for example, had an advantage over accepting a job somewhere because such a business usually included living quarters as well.

But there were also disadvantages to owning or operating a business in post-war Holland. By and large there was a gradual trend away from being self-employed toward holding down a salaried position with a larger company. The overriding reason for this trend was that in Holland business was over-regulated and over-taxed. Thus small business people found it exceedingly hard to make a living. This held even for the traditional independent small businessman, the farmer.

The other reason for this trend was that the incentive for owning and operating a small business seems to have disappeared. The flip side of heavy taxation was that in post-war Holland the social support network was superb. It protected its citizens financially against mishaps such as unemployment, disability or sickness all their lives, and provided them with a decent pension during old age. Since this system favours employees over self-employed people there was really no need to operate a business to obtain financial security for oneself and one's family.

The occupational and geographic diversity of this group had an impact on their lifestyle as

well. In terms of the way they lived the middle-aged Reformed in the Netherlands were a much less homogeneous group than the generation preceding. While they showed some common characteristics there were also many noticeable exceptions. For that reason it is much more difficult to type them.

One factor they did share and which differentiated them from the previous generation was their changed outlook on religion. As we saw earlier, the previous generation of Reformed Dutch men and women had been raised to live their lives in terms of religious blocks or communities, each with their own distinct lifestyle and institutions. Even within the Reformed community there had been two distinct blocks: the “Hervormden” and the “Gereformeerden” who had ecclesiastically seceded from the “Hervormden” during the first half of the previous century and who at that time were considered to be the more orthodox of the two Reformed groups. In addition, within the Gereformeerde community itself another secession occurred in 1944, when, right in the middle of the worst of the war, they ousted a group of their own people because they would not agree with the interpretation of the majority on a point of doctrine. Thus, traditionally the Reformed in the Netherlands harboured an unfortunate tendency to fragment themselves into ever smaller religious blocks.

This division into separate religious communities had other unfortunate side effects as well. At the local level, in their daily lives, where these people had to interact personally with one another this division led to frequent frictions between the various factions. The older Reformed Dutch readily recall the many slights they received from one another over the years, the hurts of which were still felt among them. They learned to live with this division because it offered them some measure of religious, social and political stability and relative freedom of choice for the people at the same time. But the situation was far from ideal.

Considering all this it is not so strange that the generation that grew up after the war chose to reject the block thinking of their forebears. They characterized it as too narrow. As one of them expressed it: “Is it not sinful that people who religiously are so close should be separated into separate denominations?” They felt very strongly that the Gereformeerden and the Hervormden ought to reunite. For that reason nearly all of them endorsed the joint action by the two denominations called “On the Road Together.” It called for frequent pulpit exchanges, joint church services and the eventual merger of the Gereformeerde and Hervormde churches.

In some areas of Holland this merger was already well on the way. In other areas it did not seem to be working. In those areas the Hervormden, in particular their more conservative wing seemed to be resisting a merger with the Gereformeerden. They generally did not consider the Gereformeerden orthodox enough. This is all the more surprising since traditionally speaking the Gereformeerden had always been the more orthodox of the two denominations, as well as the more schismatic.

Some of these middle aged people left the church altogether but the majority of them still considered themselves Reformed, albeit with a more ecumenical slant. They loved to talk about matters of religion even if only in an emotionally distant manner. Unlike their parents they were also more inclined to discuss than to debate, allowing more for the fact that there are other Christian viewpoints which must also be respected. It is difficult to gauge how deep their faith went because on the whole they did not talk about their personal relationship to God. Yet they continued to stress the importance of Christian organizations. Politically they remained active, albeit now as members of a Christian Democratic Alliance rather than as advocates of the two traditional Reformed parties.

Ecclesiastically, while they worked hard to unite the two major Reformed denominations of the Netherlands they did not see that a merger of the Protestants and the Roman Catholics was imminent. They also made a clear distinction between the Christian religion and all other religions. Finally, they continued to stress the importance of rules and limits. Typically they said: “When we were young nothing was allowed. That was not very good. But today everything is allowed. That is not good either.”

Thus, in many ways their lifestyle continued to show typically Reformed characteristics, but it was also quite clear that with respect to the heart of the matter a major shift in their thinking had taken place. They were quite aware that their outlook on life was different from that of their parents. As one of them put it: “What we fight for, our parents resist and our children take for granted.” With regard to religion this shift entails a change from pluralism to ecumenism. Whereas their parents laboured to preserve unity within faith communities, they sought to increase unity between faith communities.

How could these middle-aged Reformed Dutch people make a change in their religious outlook so radical that they valued negatively what their parents held so dear? A number of explanations have already been given. As an example we mentioned the war and its impact on the social fabric of Dutch life. We also mentioned the reaction of these middle-aged Reformed people to the penchant of the Reformed for schism and the negative side effects of this factionalism. These are historical reasons. Increased education may also have been a factor because it exposes one to viewpoints other than one’s own. Economic and geographic mobility tend to change one’s outlook on life as well. Then there are the media, radio and television, which brought the outside world into Reformed homes. Finally as prosperity increased, people could afford to travel outside their own country and thus be exposed to ways of living that were foreign to their own. Undoubtedly all these and other factors influenced the cultural and perspectival change that occurred in Reformed Holland and also their religious outlook

One other reason is noteworthy because the middle-aged Reformed Dutch themselves referred to it quite frequently. This reason is also important because it underscores that the differences in religious outlook between these people and their parents went deeper than a difference about theology or a difference about the institutional expression of religion. This reason has to do with the emotional side of their religion. Not only did they think differently about their religion, they also felt differently about it.

Quite a number of them reported that they were struggling with emotional problems that they felt stemmed from negative experiences during their childhood. First of all, throughout their childhood and especially during their teenage years some of them had to struggle with a rather rigid application of parental authority. Fathers, and in some cases mothers, made it crystal clear that there was only one way to think, one way to behave and one way to live. That way was their way, which they readily identified as God’s way. The rules they set were beyond discussion, they tolerated no deviation from them and eliminated any form of experimentation. As children these people followed these rules more or less obediently but during middle-age they found themselves wanting to rebel against that rigidity and yet they also felt powerless to do so. Throughout their youth, they felt, the development of their individual identity had been short-changed. Now, at forty or fifty it was time for them to be themselves and yet in every situation they found that they were fearful to assert themselves. Thus, they struggled with a love-hate relationship towards their parents and what they stood for. As one woman put it: “Ideologically I know I should rebel, but it is in my nature to be compliant.” By all accounts the previous generation had experienced parental authority as a protective context within which they could safely live out their childhood. Their children however

rebelled against it and found it oppressive. Why this change?

Part of the reason seems to be that they experienced the parent-child relation in their families as less positive than did the generation before. It would be too strong to say that they experienced emotional neglect, but many of them did not feel accepted by their parents. They felt that their parents were preoccupied with their own problems and that their parents' love for them as children was highly conditional. They experienced a pronounced emotional distance between themselves as children and their parents. As a result they themselves had become emotionally somewhat distant from others as well. They quickly feared that they were a bother to others if they voiced some of their feelings. They withdrew into themselves and became independent, self-sufficient characters. But in their heart of hearts they would like to be someone's child again, at least once in a while.

Because of their emotional distance from their parents they also appear to have little sense theologically of God as a caring Father, something which lay at the heart of their parents' religion. The sense of surrender to a benevolent Deity that was so characteristic of the previous generation did not seem to have been transmitted to this generation. I hasten to add that this loss of religious security was by no means present in all of the people we interviewed. But those people who felt religiously secure invariably told stories that indicate that they had had a warm and accepting family life during childhood. We should also note that these people were conceived and born during the Depression, and raised during the war and the years immediately following the war. These years were full of anxiety for their parents; they were times when mere survival was often uppermost in their parents' minds.

Nevertheless, these conditions seem to have left their mark on the succeeding generation, on the middle-aged. It seems to have left them with a religion that is without romanticism, with an obedience without comfort and with a faith without grace. All their lives they worked hard. They learned that in this world one must conscientiously pull one's own weight. Their lives were serious. One could hardly call them altruistic. Some of them actually seem to have been quite materialistic and self-serving. At the same time they seem to have been burdened by a strong sense of obligation. Perhaps we should call them a generation of unwilling servants.

## The Young Reformed in the Netherlands

*Of course we still believe! But our views have changed. In the past people did not doubt. What was written was true. We think more. We have more questions and we want an answer. We won't be put off. Believe in God and love your neighbour, that's the heart of it. But each person does it in his or her own way.*

(interview excerpt)

This young adult group was the first generation to grow up in a period free from any major cultural-historical upheavals. Generally, they had a rather secure childhood. They were allowed to be children and to play. Their teenage years were mostly centered on their schooling. In early adolescence school was as much a social, as an educational experience for them. During late adolescence it became more focused on improving their chances in the job market. They had their usual conflicts of authority with their parents, but these were not so severe that they needed to rebel overly much. Their courtships lasted anywhere from three to four years. As a rule they married late and preferred the more experimental, less committed cohabiting style of relating for the first few years of their adult life together.

By far the majority of these young adults completed some kind of post-secondary education program. Rather than start a family soon after they married, both partners preferred to work for a number of years and to have some fun spending the money they made on luxuries. On the whole this group was less career oriented and less focused on financial security than their parents. They lived their lives in terms of short-term goals. They tended to be privatistic in their lifestyle. They seem to have had little faith in organizations of any kind, including the church. A number of them left the church of their parents. Those who continued to attend were decidedly ecumenical in their outlook. They evaluated churches in terms of the amount of support they offered to their personal faith.

For them faith was more an experience than an adherence to a set of doctrines and rules. They were inclined to question what they should believe and how they should live. They were also much more tolerant of views and lifestyles which differed from their own than their parents were. They were an eminently reasonable group of people. They were not an aggressive lot. Nevertheless, in their quiet way they demand respect for their own person. Their ideal world seems to have been one where in harmony with one another each may live by the dictates of his or her own individual conscience.

By all accounts these people experienced a normal, carefree childhood. Of course, their stories testify to painful, as well as joyous events in their lives. But these experiences, though no less heart felt, were nothing like the cataclysmic events of war and poverty their parents and grand-parents suffered. Theirs were the usual experiences of growing children at play or going to school: a ride on the back of dad's bike, a visit to grandma and grandpa's farm, triumph or defeat at school work, rejection by their class mates, or meeting new friends. Those are the kind of events children encounter anywhere.

This easy-going, worry-free existence extended for them into their early adolescence. Their lives continued to centre mostly on friends and school. At about twelve years of age they graduated from elementary school and were enrolled in one of the high schools in a neighbouring town, which was often as much as fifteen kilometres away. They had to bike this distance everyday, but they did not mind it, since they usually travelled in groups and rather enjoyed the trip as another opportunity to socialize with their peers. Depending on the type of high school they attended their education was either more practically or more academically oriented. But in all their schools the standards of excellence were high and the workload rather stiff. Since they usually saw high school as a chance to socialize as much as an opportunity to get an education, quite a number of them had to repeat at least one of their grades. But, because this was such a common occurrence there did not seem to be a stigma attached to failing. It simply meant to them, and to their parents as well, that they had not worked hard enough that year to pass.

Thus, while their high school years involved work, they were not focused exclusively on school work. There was also time to enjoy sports, weekend outings, class trips and vacations to other countries, as well as time to spend just being with friends. Things became a bit more serious when, as nearly all of them did, they enrolled in a post-secondary program of study or training at age seventeen. With the prospect of having to work for a living soon, they applied themselves more conscientiously to their studies. In the Dutch system this meant that a considerable part of their time was taken up by school work. Cramming for exams became a major part of their lives. If there was one cause for worry in their otherwise quite contented lives during those years, it was their concern about passing the next exam or making it through the next school year. Life centered on completing their training or education.

During this time also they began to formulate their own approach to life. In this process

of experimentation with lifestyle questions, they took their first hesitant steps away from the lifestyle of their parents. This process of distanciation manifested itself in their dress, their behaviour and the position they took on public issues of the day. One gets the impression that they received very little guidance in this process from their parents, their school or their church.

Their parents appear to have been too busy with other things. The schools were too intent on transmitting factual information to be pre-occupied with forming character. In earlier times youth work used to be the mainstay of the church's attempt to nurture young people in the faith. But with the diminished importance, if not the demise of such work, in post-war Reformed Holland, churches seem to have restricted themselves almost exclusively to preaching at its young people. These youngsters were told often enough how to live, what to do, and what to believe. But it seems that they received little help in learning to think their own thoughts about these matters.

Given these conditions it was to be expected that rifts would appear between young and old. These rifts manifested themselves primarily in the home as power struggles between parents and children. What is amazing is that these conflicts about lifestyle did not lead to more violent clashes in the parent-child relationship. Even if they did not always like one another, these young people and their parents managed to tolerate one another and to maintain a rather good relationship.

In this they were so unlike the young people of two decades ago who, under the influence of the counter-culture revolution of the late sixties turned rebelling against their elders into an art. The people of the generation we are now describing lived their adolescence *after* the turbulent sixties and early seventies. This post-counter culture generation was far too reasonable and far too uncertain about their own tentative views to have turned anger toward parents into a cause. Even if at times they felt somewhat abandoned by their elders in their struggle to find their own definition of life, they did not feel any resentment toward them.

However, because they had to go it alone in their search for the meaning of life, they were more cautious in their approach to life. They were cautious in their judgment of others. They were cautious in their approach to work and in their approach to marriage. They were not in a hurry to commit themselves to another person. After a period of going together in late adolescence, which appears to have been a leisurely protracted affair lasting as much as three years, many of them preferred to live together with their partner before taking on the vows of marriage. This kind of cohabitation was not a form of sleeping around. It had all the trappings of marriage, except that it was less committed, more of a trial period and entirely in line with their cautious approach to life.

They took pains to stress that by living together they, unlike young people of a decade ago, were not trying to make some kind of statement as if they had something against being married. It was not an expression of their rebellion against an outdated system. On the contrary, in their behaviour to one another they differed very little from the way their parents related to one another in their marriage. Rather, what with the burgeoning divorce rate, they considered marriage such serious business that they wanted to be absolutely certain of their commitment before they stepped into it. Those who married young, which for them was at about age twenty, did so for ulterior reasons, because of pressure from their parents, for economic reasons or to keep their boyfriend out of the army. But even they tended to postpone the decision to have children and to start a family for as much as five to eight years after they married.

During the first years of their marriage or cohabitation both partners worked, so that they could obtain maximal financial profit from the training they received. They traveled a lot and in general spent their time getting used to one another. In this they differed markedly from their parents. As one of them put it:

Courtship, marriage and starting a family used to follow one another in succession as a matter of course. Under that system you could be knee-deep in children and tied down to a job you did not like before you were twenty-five. For our parents it was work first and then, when the children were grown up and out of the house you could perhaps have some fun. Our generation tends to turn it around. We want to enjoy ourselves a bit before we settle down to the serious business of life.

This approach to life was also reflected in their attitude toward work and wage earning. Unlike their parents they were not willing to go anywhere to find work, nor willing to do anything to make a living. Most of them were not very career-minded or focused on financial security. After graduation some of them would wait up to several years to find a job that suited their qualifications. They could afford to do this, since the Dutch government paid them a grant to live on while they were looking for work. This grant was sufficient for them to make ends meet, and more than enough if two of them lived together. Moreover, though they liked the luxuries they had come to take for granted as they grew up in their parental homes, they were not stuck on such gadgets as cars, dishwashers, fancy clothes and furniture. Money and the things that money can buy meant very little to them. With such a simple lifestyle and a social support system to back them it could take years before they settled into a lifetime career. The economic recession, combined with cutbacks in government programs that followed was to short circuit their leisurely approach to finding their economic niche in life. But at the time of this study they tended to live their lives in terms of relatively short-term goals and their concerns did not extend beyond thinking about how to live the present moment.

The concerns they had tended to centre on their private lives rather than on public issues. They indeed protested occasionally when major issues such as the presence of nuclear weapons on Dutch soil arose. But this was nothing compared to the political protest actions of students some two decades ago during the late sixties. On the whole this generation of young adult Reformed people was an apolitical group that was unlikely to espouse a cause which extended beyond their personal concerns.

It is not as if they ceased to care about such issues as poverty, injustice or war and peace. On the contrary, they seem to have been keenly aware of their personal responsibility with regard to these issues. On an historical event such as the Holocaust, for example, they marveled at how so many people could blindly follow the party line and commit such hideous atrocities against so many people. But for them the lesson in this event was not that one must join hands with others in a common action to combat such behavior. Rather, the lesson was that one must think and decide for oneself regardless of what the system may say about it.

These young adults seem to have lost faith in the political process and in organized action of any kind. Within their own Reformed circles they watched the Anti-Revolutionaire party flounder and come to naught. As children they experienced the heady atmosphere of the student protest movements in favour of a more democratized Holland and they watched it peter out. They have tabulated its meager results and have concluded that there is no salvation to be had in organizations.

For that reason also, organized religion meant little to them. Some of them left the

churches of their parents altogether. Church attendance and church participation no longer played a significant role in their lives. Of those who continued to attend most of them did so irregularly and only whenever they felt the need for it.

With respect to church life, as with so many other factors, it is important to distinguish between regions in Holland. In some areas the old patterns were still very much in vogue also among the younger generations. Yet the self-evidence with which previous generations maintained their religious customs of church attendance, prayer and bible reading was questioned everywhere by these Reformed young people. They saw how these habits functioned in the lives of their parents and they concluded that their parents' lives were largely governed by custom rather than faith. They think that the personal faith of people is the most important factor in religion. Personal faith for them is not there for the church but rather, the church, if it is to have any value at all is there to serve the personal faith of people. Furthermore, it was beyond question for them that in order to serve this function, churches ought to be as broadly ecumenical as possible. On that score they have moved about as far away as one can imagine from the distinction their forefathers and mothers made between kinds of Reformed denominations.

In spite of all their critique of organized religion the personal faith in God of these young people was surprisingly deep. While it is hard to determine what the content of their faith might have been, they insisted that it is real in their lives. They found it difficult to talk about their relationship to God, partly because for them faith is an experience rather than an adherence to a set of doctrines. They were inclined to constantly question what they should believe and how they should live their faith, under the conviction that faith is not really real unless you have personally made it your own. If anywhere, it is on this point that they experienced a communication gap between them and their parents. When their parents insisted that they should imitate their lifestyle without question they felt this rather deeply as an unwarranted and even unloving encroachment on their personal faith.

These young adults were not an aggressive lot. Without exception they were a nice, eminently reasonable group of people. One gets the impression that on the whole they would much rather give in than fight. But on one point they were immovable. In their quiet, soft-spoken way they demand respect for their own person. By the same token, they were keenly sensitive to the feelings of others and exceptionally tolerant of views and lifestyles which differed from their own. For them an ideal world would seem to be one, where, in harmony with others, each person might live by the dictates of his or her own individual conscience.

## The Elderly Reformed Dutch in Canada

*I can't do it by myself, I depend on the Lord, if you believe this, the Lord will make it, even in difficulties.*

(interview excerpt)

People seem to live their lives in reference to major historical events, mainly because individually they have little control over them. They happen to them. For the elderly Reformed Dutch in Canada as well as in the Netherlands these events were the Depression and World War II, *the* war. In terms of these two events they also tell the story of the first half of their lives. The early lives of the elderly Reformed Dutch in both Canada and the Netherlands run virtually parallel. Both were born to large, poor (farm)labourer families and both belonged to the Reformed Dutch community. Both left school and home at an early age to work, married during the Depression and bore the onslaught of the war on their young adult lives.

Since that story was recounted in detail earlier, we will start the account of the elderly Reformed Dutch in Canada with a discussion of the social climate in the Netherlands immediately following World War II, or with what led them to make the decision to immigrate. For even though they made this decision freely, events occurring after the war also pushed them toward it. Immigration was a major event in the lives of these people. They exchanged countries and cultures when most of them were in their early forties and some even older. They left with very little money and experienced poverty early on in their new country, Canada. But they worked hard and it did not take long before they were able to buy a house and start a small business venture, most often a farm. They also transplanted the Reformed way they were used to living in the Netherlands virtually unchanged on to Canadian soil by establishing their own churches, their own Christian day schools, high schools and even universities. They formed their own Christian organizations and by and large were successful at whatever venture they undertook.

When faced with the question what made them do it, why they immigrated, they were usually at a loss for an answer. After some reflection they gave a variety of answers, all of them valid but none by itself representative for the whole group. In the main four broad reasons were given: room, opportunity, fear and adventure.

The need for room to live motivated them to immigrate. During the war the population of the Netherlands had continued to expand at a normal rate but no new housing projects had been started. In addition to this, the war reduced a large number of the houses that did exist to rubble. All this added up to a huge housing shortage after the war. The government tried to alleviate this problem by erecting temporary dwellings built from bricks and lumber recovered from bombed out houses. But all this took time. As an interim rule the government decreed that each family who did have a house to live in would have to take in one that did not. Needless to say this made for very crowded living conditions. Living space was at a premium everywhere in postwar Holland.

This housing shortage had other negative effects as well. Young people, who had been engaged to be married for some years already, but who had waited with the wedding until after the war were now placed on a long waiting list for housing. It was clear to them that it would take several more years before they would be able to marry. A few couples married anyway and moved back in with one of their parents. At its best this situation was far from ideal, but when the couple began to have children it became impossible. Canada was reported to have plenty of room. Understandably therefore, people in the Netherlands began to contemplate immigrating to that country.

Not only room to live but also space to farm was lacking in the Netherlands and could be had in abundance in Canada. Since farmland was scarce, Dutch farmers were faced with the dilemma either to pass the family farm on to the eldest son, and thus effectively keep the other sons from farming, or to divide the family farm among them, which in effect assured that none of them would be able to make a decent living as a farmer. These people thought of going to Canada, because they saw in it an opportunity to provide their sons with land. People, such as farm labourers who had no farm to start with, saw immigration to Canada as a chance to own one. For them the chief motivation to immigrate was also economic opportunity. Finally, there were many venturesome Dutch people who found it impossible to cost effectively run a business in a country such as postwar Holland where high taxes and bureaucratic red tape stifled any kind of enterprise. They too started to look elsewhere for a chance to advance themselves economically, and found it in Canada. Thus, for many people Canada became the promised land of unlimited possibilities.

Fear also motivated immigration, fear of another Depression first of all. The memory of the Depression of the Thirties was still painfully fresh in the minds of the Dutch, and with this kind of mind set people are often predisposed to think that history will repeat itself. Thus, some people contemplated immigration as a way of escaping another joust with poverty. Secondly, Dutch people were motivated to immigrate by their fear of another war, this time with Communist Russia, which by now had advanced halfway across Germany and seemed to the Dutch to be poised at their doorstep. To understand this fear we must realize that these people had experienced World War I, the war that was to end all wars during their childhood. Then, a mere two decades later there was another war, more terrible than the first. Was it really so strange for them to think that a third war would not be long in coming? The Canadians had liberated them from the previous occupation, so Canada, more than any other country seemed to them to be the land of the free and they wanted to go there.

To understand how adventure could motivate the Reformed Dutch to immigrate we have to sense the atmosphere surrounding immigration in post-war Holland. Immigration was not just an issue that some individuals thought about, it was a communal phenomenon. It was a fad, it was in the air and it was the talk of the town! Immigration was the Dutch government's way of reducing the housing shortage and of solving the unemployment crisis that loomed in post-war Holland. So it encouraged the many Dutch immigration societies that existed to give upbeat and unrealistic "information" evenings about Canada and Australia all over Holland. These countries were "sold" to the people as lands of promise. People who went to these meetings just for something to do at night came away from them convinced that they should immigrate. Moreover, those who decided to go were not strangers. They were one's next door neighbours, one's friends or one's relatives. Anyone could immigrate it seemed and thus every Dutch adult was faced with the question: choose you this day...! This atmosphere naturally appealed to the more adventurous, to those with the urge to go somewhere or to do something different and to those who wanted to be free after five years of being told what to do. For many years many Dutch people had secretly harboured a desire to immigrate, but they had never thought it possible. Now that the opportunity presented itself they seized upon it and made plans to go.

These plans included the completion of a set number of steps. First they had to procure a Canadian sponsor who would guarantee their livelihood for one year. Then they had to have a chest X-ray taken and they had to pass a medical examination in The Hague. If they passed these hurdles, they were eventually notified about the date of their departure.

Passing through these preparatory hoops was no easy matter. Any number of things could go wrong. For one thing, large families with small children were discouraged from going, so were older people. These were considered unfit for immigration. Moreover, since it was the policy of the Canadian government to only import farm labourers, one had to demonstrate competence in farm work to be considered eligible. Finally, until the government started to subsidize the passage of the poorer people only those who had money could afford to immigrate. In the meantime, poor farm labourers, the very people who, given the Canadian criteria were likely to be successful immigrants had to borrow their fare or stay in the Netherlands.

In spite of these obstacles a surprising number of those who initially were rejected ultimately made it to Canada. Those who had decided to immigrate simply persevered in finding ways around these hurdles until they succeeded. This in itself already demonstrated their resilience.

The decision to immigrate often involved a good deal of naive idealism. Such major moves as immigration often have the character of a leap in the dark. What with the unrealistically rosy picture they received one could hardly expect them to be cognizant about the rigours of immigrant life that lay ahead. Even so, one may wonder whether a more accurate description would have dissuaded them from going. Once you have the itch, you have to scratch.

It appears that, as a rule, the wives were less eager to immigrate than their husbands. Perhaps they were less affected by the hype dispensed by the information centres and thus more sensitive to the possible hardships that lay ahead. They were certainly more aware of the emotional toll immigration would take on themselves and on their relatives and friends they left behind.

These immigrants were born and raised as part of a close-knit community of friends and relatives, all of whom mutually depended on one another for social support. When a son, a daughter or a close friend immigrated, this did not just mean that there was one less person in the community. It was rather like tearing a piece out of a seamless cloth. It left a gaping hole in the social fabric of that community or family's life. The pain of that wound was all the more real because they believed that they could never hope to see one another again. This was how it seemed to the people left behind in tiny Holland where distances are short; when their loved ones needed 9-14 day travel by boat and several days by train in addition to reach their destination. As one immigrant woman said: "I did not realize what I was doing to my parents by immigrating until I got children of my own. Until that time I only dwelled on how much I missed them, never thinking about how much they must have missed me!" Immigration not only disrupted the lives of those who left, but also of those who stayed behind.

Once the date of immigration had been determined a flurry of activity ensued for these immigrants. They had to sell whatever property they had, buy whatever clothes they needed and make the necessary goodbye visits. One of the last tasks to complete was packing their remaining belongings into a huge crate under the supervision of a customs official. He closed and sealed the crate when it was full. Thereafter it was sent by freight boat and train to the immigrant's future address to arrive there some 6-8 weeks later.

On the day of departure the first order of business for the immigrants was to make the trip to the harbour of Hoek van Holland if they went by boat or to Schiphol, Amsterdam's airport, if they went by plane. Friends and family members accompanied them to say their last farewells. Then there were those last tear filled goodbyes after which the immigrants boarded the boat or the plane. Departures by boat were more painful than departures by airplane because they were more protracted. Once boarded the immigrants waved and shouted to their loved ones on shore but it took an eternity before the boat left its berth and steamed out of sight.

The first day on the boat was characterized by a mixture of excitement and sadness, but the excitement prevailed. This was a new experience for them; they made new friends, all of whom were going to the same country. There was plenty of talk, most of it about expectations of what lay ahead. The next day the mood changed. Perhaps the irrevocability of what they had done made its impact on the immigrants for the first time. Living conditions on board did not help matters either. The food was good but different from what they were used to. They were billeted dormitory style on berths, three high in the holds of the ship, men and boys in the front hold, women and small children in the aft hold. The boats that ferried them to Canada had previously been used to ferry Dutch troops to and from Indonesia and they had been refitted to carry a maximum number of immigrants. They lay unsteady in the water and as a result each wave of the ocean produced a corresponding wave of sea sickness among the passengers. Thus, from the time they lost sight of land until the time that land was sighted again, especially the aft hold where the women and their young children resided turned into a permanent sick bay.

But all this was forgotten as they entered the Halifax harbour and set foot on the shores of their newly adopted country. After the customary bureaucratic delays that characterize entry into a foreign country, the immigrants moved from the boat to the waiting trains that would carry them to their final destination. Here another unpleasant surprise awaited them. Whether they had to travel two days or five, all of the immigrants remember that the trains were dirty, the seats hard, and the journey arduously long. There was neither food nor water available on the trains and provisions had to be bought during one of the numerous stopovers along the way. But the trip was not dull because as they sat, they

watched the landscape of Canada unfold before their eyes. Different people saw different things. Some were impressed by the vastness of the country. Others, intent on farming noticed with concern how rocky the landscape was in places. Would that type of soil yield a decent crop, they wondered? Still others noted that while the houses were small a car was parked beside each one of them. By Dutch standards that was a sign of affluence, so they reasoned that Canada could not be all that bad.

Then finally they arrived, sometimes in the middle of the night. The farmer who sponsored them and hired them to work for him was waiting for them on the station platform. He said something totally unintelligible to them in English, and for the first time they realized that they were now in a foreign country in which they would be strangers for some time to come.

That was the hard part. It was not the work. By their standards the work was neither heavy nor very unfamiliar, (cows are cows everywhere). It was not their living conditions either, although they had to make do until the crate arrived and in a few instances the house they got to live in was little more than a chicken coop. There was of course the reality of being poor once again. On some it weighed more heavily than on others. The immigrants were allowed to take only a few hundred dollars along from the Netherlands. The standard wage for farm labourers across Canada was \$75.00 per month per family plus free housing. Such a wage allowed them to do little more than make ends meet, even in those days. It certainly did not cover unexpected medical bills and the like. But even that kind of poverty was not the worst. They had long ago learned to conquer poverty with frugality.

No, the hardest part of immigrating was to miss the company of people of their own kind, with whom they could talk and who understood them. And they missed their familiar routine on Sunday of going to church twice with fellow Reformed Christians. To them it almost seemed as if they had left God behind in Holland when they immigrated.

Was it any wonder then, that when a man drove up one day, who introduced himself to them in Dutch as one of the home missionaries of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) of North America that they welcomed him into their house for coffee or tea with arms wide open? Can you believe their joy when he announced that he would take them to a Dutch church serve next Sunday if they so desired? For them it was an answer to prayer.

These CRC home missionaries were truly amazing people. What they did for these newly arrived Reformed Dutch immigrants was invaluable. It would be an understatement to say that they provided an important ecclesiastical link between what was familiar and what was strange. It is true that they were preachers first of all and that they preached three times a Sunday, often in as many places. But they did much more than that. They opened their homes to stranded families. They found jobs for unemployed immigrants, they functioned as translators and as mediators between them and their employers. They took them to the bank, the store, the hospital. They drove them anywhere if they had no car, they helped them buy one if they had the money and taught them to drive it as well that same afternoon. They did everything they could and more to ease the lot of the newly arrived immigrants. It is largely due to their unstinted generosity that there are now more than 150 Christian Reformed congregations across Canada.

Church life was vitally important for these new immigrant families. Wherever they could they would come together on Sunday afternoon in a rented building to worship God in a Reformed fashion and in Dutch. People would drive as much as 50 miles to get there. Those who had cars made several trips to pick up those that did not, packing 10-12

bodies in an old Model-T that would barely go 35 miles per hour. Everybody wanted everybody to be there. It was the highlight of the week.

Church life was more than Sunday worship for them, although that was the familiar centrepiece of it all. Church was the vital link between people who shared a common lot. They came to church early to exchange stories, and stayed long after the service to talk, to talk and to talk some more. They came to know one another personally; they visited back and forth during the week. They helped one another. There was closeness, there was warmth. Church was their social life, their extended family, a community of likeminded strangers in a foreign land.

Due to a tremendous influx of Reformed Dutch immigrants those tiny congregations experienced a phenomenal growth in a short while. Weekly 5-10 immigrant families were added. Soon they were faced with the task of building their own, bigger church building. Thereafter, groups would split off from the founding mother church to start a congregation elsewhere. Ecclesiastically the Reformed Dutch in Canada grew and multiplied.

Very few of these immigrants seemed to have considered joining an established Canadian church, not even the Presbyterian church, which doctrinally is close to their own Reformed beliefs. Two things mitigated against it. First, the existing churches did very little to bring the immigrants in. Secondly, there was the language barrier. Had the home missionaries not been conversant in Dutch, it is doubtful that they would have been able to gather so many Dutch immigrants into the Christian Reformed Church.

However, when the immigrants began to learn English themselves, language ceased to be a factor uniting them into a religious-ethnic community. English soon replaced Dutch as the language of worship. This even remained the case when the home missionaries left to work in other fields and the congregations called their own ministers from the Netherlands. They expected these Dutch ministers also to preach in English, even if not perfectly for the first while. It may be that Dutch spoken with an American accent was merely exchanged for English with a Dutch accent. But the change was significant none the less. To the Reformed Dutch, language never was a mark of their identity.

By establishing their own churches and by calling Dutch ministers from the Netherlands to their pulpits, the Reformed Dutch had nevertheless transplanted a large part of their familiar Reformed way of life firmly onto Canadian soil. But it did not stop there. Once they had built their churches, they also began to establish their own Christian day schools.

In Holland publicly funded Protestant Christian Day School education had been a fact of their life for over a century. These schools with the bible, as they were called, existed along side parochial schools based on the Roman Catholic religion, and public schools which educated pupils on the basis of religious neutrality. When the Reformed Dutch noticed that such schools with the bible did not exist in Canada they saw it as their calling to establish them and to send their children there, for they were firmly convinced that when it comes to the basics of life the school should teach the same things as the home and the church.

They started small, the quality of education left something to be desired at first, and for these poor immigrants the weekly tuition fees were a heavy financial burden. But they persisted and today the Canadian landscape is dotted with a large number of such elementary and high schools, staffed by highly qualified teachers. Over the years they

even have managed to establish two university colleges which offer a full program of university level undergraduate education and a research institute which offers a graduate education in such disciplines as philosophy and theology.

In addition they have formed a Christian labour union, a Christian farmers association, an association of Reformed businessmen and the beginnings of a Christian political party. To this list could be added several Christian counseling agencies and a large number of Christian homes for the aged. Thus, by the time they were interviewed (1988) the members of this Dutch immigrant subgroup had achieved a high level of institutional completeness, comparable to the level they had in their country of origin, prior to immigration.

Why did they do all this? Would it not have been easier for them to simply absorb themselves into the existing institutions of Canada, as so many other immigrants did? It is highly unlikely that they came to Canada with the intent of establishing these institutions. Looking back they would testify that the Lord has led them to do these things. But their decision to immigrate was not motivated by a desire to bring a Dutch Reformed Christian lifestyle to the North American continent. Their motives for immigrating initially were much more simply those of economic advancement and a desire for safety, as these were related above.

Rather, once they had arrived in Canada they just experienced a need which they proceeded to fill in their accustomed fashion by establishing churches, schools and organizations. Although they accomplished none of this without a good deal of acrimonious debate, the question whether or not to do it was never at issue for the majority of these Reformed Dutch immigrants. One way or another they were determined to continue here in Canada, the lifestyle they were accustomed to in the Netherlands. It never dawned on them to do otherwise.

However, this development toward separate Reformed Christian organizations is not as self-evident as it was just made to appear. Recall that for various historical reasons the climate in Reformed Holland at the time of immigration was quite in the opposite direction. There an ecumenical mood was much more in evidence. So why did the Reformed Dutch in Canada continue the old pattern just at a time when the Reformed in Holland decided to break with it?

Undoubtedly the cultural, social and political isolation that attends any recent immigrant group contributed to this process. Ethnic minorities anywhere must form and maintain some of their own institutions if they are to preserve their cultural identity. But for the Reformed Dutch the establishment of their churches, schools and organizations was never a matter of maintaining their Dutch cultural identity. If it had been, they might have established Dutch social clubs rather than schools, churches and religiously based organizations. If their motivation had been one of ethnic-cultural survival they would also have been far less indifferent about maintaining their Dutch language in Canada than they were.

Finally, they would not have been quite so arduous in seeking to include non-Dutch Canadian Christians into their organizations. As it is, many of the children who attend Christian schools and many of the members of organizations they established are not of Dutch origin. Thus, their efforts to maintain a Reformed Christian lifestyle on this continent after their immigration was not so much culturally, as religiously motivated. In some sense immigration did decisively contribute to this development. Had they remained in the Netherlands they would in all likelihood have followed the mainstream

of current Dutch Reformed action and they might have felt quite as concerned about the future of the Reformed community as the elderly Reformed there felt. As it was, by immigrating they contributed to quite a remarkable growth in Reformed action in the world over the past forty years.

How did a group of immigrants manage to pay for all these accomplishments, since they were poor when they arrived and none of their projects were supported by public funds?

Though it is clear by now that economic prosperity was not the centrally motivating force of their lives their accomplishments toward that end were also quite remarkable. In spite of their low wages the immigrants were intent on saving whatever they could. They lived frugal lives and if they had children these were also expected to contribute to the family pot. As soon as they had enough money for a down payment the family would invest it in some sort of money making enterprise, usually a farm. Then the push was on to make the farm pay for itself. This involved a lot of hard work, anxious moments, initial failings and new beginnings along the way, but eventually the farm would succeed especially if a milk contract could be procured.

Since money makes money, making the farm pay became easier as they went along. Once the parents themselves were firmly established, their attention turned to the children who, as they became of marital age needed their own capital to buy a house or a business and the process of saving, hard work and making it, would repeat itself. Ideally, getting established was a family affair. However, children did not always cooperate with the plans of the parents. Some immigrants also failed repeatedly, either through ignorance or misfortune. But enough of them succeeded that as a group the Reformed Dutch became economically quite successful.

They considered their economic prosperity as a blessing from the Lord. They were also well aware that their success story, though factually correct, covers only the high points of their immigration and ignores the many times when the future looked anything but promising. There are those among them whose immigrant lives were nothing but a string of failures. There are those who were poor when they came, who struggled hard but who remained poor. There were times in the lives of all these immigrants when their parents in the Netherlands took critically ill and they could not attend to them or even bury them because an ocean and lack of money separated them from the ones they loved. There were times when the immigrants themselves took sick, when the medical bills piled up and there was no end in sight. There were times when the crops froze, the cows got sick, the barn burnt down or the bank foreclosed. There were the times when their children rebelled, moved away, or worse, went astray. Of course, these things could have happened in the Netherlands as well but they did not. They happened to them in a foreign land and they felt cut off from the support systems they had come to rely on in their country of origin.

Moreover, at the heart of all their striving lay the concerns of the Reformed Christian community as a whole. These immigrants were not just parents but elders, deacons, or members of some other board or organization as well. Together with others they tried to make a contribution to the welfare of this new fragile immigrant community that was so important to their existence.

The members of this Reformed community hailed from very different regions in the Netherlands. Each of them had their own way of doing things. Being Dutch, each of them was equally headstrong and ready to speak his or her piece. They usually did not differ on the big things. About the goal they were more or less united, but about the means, about

little things they argued long and hard, and these little things sometimes got in the way of what they wanted to do. That too was discouraging.

So, both in their personal and in their communal lives these Reformed Dutch men and women met with numerous obstacles, enough to make anyone lose faith and become bitter. Yet the remarkable thing about these elderly people is that in contrast with their counterpart in the Netherlands they were at peace with themselves, the world and with their God. They kept the faith. Notwithstanding all the hardships they endured in their lives they were a thankful people who had courage for the future. They all felt tremendously blessed by their Lord.

As they themselves would tell you, that kind of mindset does not come overnight. It comes from a lifetime of completely trusting in God's providence. All through their lives their primary aim was to do the will of their Lord, with the firm conviction that He knows what is best for them. And so, typically, when faced with a decision they prayed and waited for the Lord to open a door. When He did, they would get to work.

When faced with unbearable pain and hurt they prayed for endurance and received it. They not only prayed but also praised. When times were hard and the future looked bleak they sang psalms and that would lift their spirits. The central motivating force of their lives was a childlike, to some naive, trust in their God and that infused everything they did and said. This concrete daily relationship with the Lord was not just a private personal thing for them, it was also communal. They prayed, praised and thanked God together, in their families, schools, churches and organizations. That is why they stressed the importance of church worship, Christian schools and Christian organizations so much. Without these, they felt, the fire at the centre of their Reformed lives would flicker and die out.

A personal and communal trust relation with God was the identifying hallmark of these elderly Reformed Dutch in Canada. In terms of it they lived their lives. From it they also received a time tried faith all of us can envy.

## The Middle-aged Reformed Dutch in Canada

*Because my father was the provider of the family, he was the head of our household and therefore he had the authority to ask me to support him.*

(interview excerpt)

With the exception of the war, immigration was the first major event in the lives of these people. It is still vivid in their minds: what led up to it, the trip to Canada, the early years and the later years. For them immigration was a mixed blessing. Most of them were teenagers when they left the Netherlands and they were eager for new experiences. But the country they were to move to was also strange and they had to leave their best friends behind at an age when having best friends is vitally important. So they came to Canada feeling a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Not that they had a whole lot of choice in the matter. Their parents made the decisions and when they were 13 going on to 17 their opinion did not count for much.

Once they had arrived in Canada their lives changed dramatically. In Holland they had led the relatively carefree life of high school students. In Canada, the older ones among them had to interrupt their schooling and go to work to augment the family income. Even the younger ones, who continued to go to school, had chores to do after school and on weekends, because their parents were poor and gaining a financial foothold in this new country became the first order of business for the entire family. If nothing else, immigration taught these young people to work.

Work was central to their lives and so was worry, especially worry about the family finances. In the beginning the family fortunes were precarious at best, to the point where money for the next week's groceries was often lacking. Later on, when the family started a small business, usually a farm, things improved somewhat. But concern about financial solvency was never far from their minds. In fact, they seem to have worried more about it than their parents did. No doubt because of their strong faith in God their parents, their father in particular, did not seem overly perturbed when times were tough. They trusted that God would somehow provide, as He had done so many times in the past. But to these youngsters that attitude bordered on being irresponsible. They felt obliged to make things happen and so they worried more.

Some of them had reason to worry. The business ventures in which their families involved themselves seemed little more than a string of failures. Whether through bad judgment or bad luck some family farms never seemed to pay for themselves. In those cases it was the wages of these young people which kept the family financially afloat. This was discouraging to these young people. To them the farm, ostensibly bought to gain the family financial independence seemed, as one person put it "a bottomless pit." Happily, not all of these young immigrants had these bad experiences. For many it was exciting to watch the business ventures of their parents succeed. It spurred them on to redouble their efforts in making their family's financial future more secure. Without the support, the work and the worry of these children their parents would not have succeeded as well as they did in Canada.

Whether their families met with success or not, this preoccupation with work and making a living at an age when other young people usually play and study made the teenage years of these people overly serious. The fact of the matter is that, due to immigration they had to grow up too soon. Not only did many of them work when they should have been playing or going to school. Not only did they worry prematurely about economic survival, but they also were made to play adult roles they would not have played in their country of origin. For instance, because they learned the language more quickly than their parents, they were often called upon to function as intermediaries in business deals between their parents and people in the community. Thus, in many ways they assumed adult responsibility much too soon. As one person put it: "I feel that I have missed my adolescence".

This early training in the reality of adult life has also yielded its good fruits for this generation of immigrants. Because they learned to work and to persevere early on in their lives they became quite successful in whatever they did for a living. Many of them prospered beyond their wildest dreams. In terms of their character they became generally reliable and responsible people with a strong sense of obligation. Throughout their lives they were willing to do things that needed doing even if they did not always feel like doing them. For that reason they also contributed generously of their time and money to communal causes.

Yet because their lives were altogether too serious, they found it hard to play, to relax and to spend time and money on themselves even when they could afford to do so. Those of them who had money viewed it as a blessing from God, but to them a blessing is like a sacred trust of which one must be good stewards and so they worried whether they were spending their money wisely. It was hard for them simply to enjoy life.

As a rule these people did not identify with the family business. They felt it was their duty to help their parents get established but also that this put their own future on hold for the time being. This obligation, which some performed gladly, and others reluctantly, took up so much of their time, that they seldom felt free during their youth. They only came to their own when they left home. This usually occurred when they married and some admitted getting married just to get out of the house.

This obligation soured their relationship with their parents somewhat. Yet, some of these people did indeed have a good relationship with their parents. Because these youngsters took on adult responsibility early in life their parents discussed things with them as if they were equals. As one person said, "My father was more a friend than a father". But quite a number of others also confessed that they secretly harboured feelings of resentment and anger toward their parents for putting them through the hardships of immigration.

Yet they found it hard to express these feelings. It was not as if their parents did not care. On the contrary, as elders and deacons in the church they frequently listened to other people's complaints and they showed a remarkable patience in listening to them. But they saw nothing unusual in what they were asking their children to do. Had they themselves not gone out to work at an early age and had they not handed over their wages to their parents until they got married? So they thought it was normal that they expected their children to do the same. But to their children this arrangement seemed more like a paradox. As one person expressed it, "Because my father was the provider of the family, he was the head of our household and therefore he had the authority to ask me to support him."

On top of that, negative feelings of any kind were not discussed in their Reformed families. It was understood that one had to be thankful to the Lord in everything and that therefore complaints were out of place. But these young people did not feel thankful. Instead they struggled with anger, fear, worry and guilt. Since they could not express these feelings anywhere, they internalized them and put on a brave face toward the outside. If they had been able to express and discuss their frustration, it might have been easier for them to handle the pressures of immigrant life which burdened them during their youth. As it was, many of them struggled with these feelings for much of their lives. Because they immigrated to a strange land during their formative years the impact of immigration on their psyche was probably greater than that on their parents. The latter, after all, took their mature convictions and lifestyle with them from Holland and they did not change all that much in Canada.

But whether they went to school or to work, these people constantly found themselves as teenagers in situations that were strange to them. The language was strange. If someone told a joke, they could not laugh along with the others because they did not get the joke. Customs and values were also strange. While others were allowed to go to dances, they could not. Everywhere they went they felt out of place. They felt as if they did not belong anywhere. Not only that, but they were also aware that they appeared strange to the people around them, because they spoke the language poorly and dressed and acted differently than the average Canadian. They often felt discriminated against and in some

cases that discrimination was real.

Socially they withdrew into their familiar Reformed Christian community. At least there they could associate with their own kind and be more at ease with themselves. But their membership in this immigrant community aggravated their problem because it accentuated their difference from other Canadians, something they desperately wanted to avoid. They did not like being an immigrant nor did they like being Dutch.

They literally began to live in two quite dissimilar worlds. They became actively involved in the life of the Christian Reformed Church or in some other Reformed denomination. This involvement was more than a religious rite to them. Church was not just the place where they worshipped. Their entire social life revolved around the church and the organizations related to it. They would not dream of dating a boy or a girl from the outside. They associated almost exclusively with, and eventually married the other young people of their church. Especially in the early days of their stay in Canada they were accustomed to distinguishing between Christians and Canadians, with the clear implication that if one were a Canadian one could not possibly be a Christian, and vice versa. The church and its related organizations became their substitute for the extended family and the familiar community setting they had lost when they immigrated. Later on they also lost contact with the culture and the customs of their country of origin. Because they noticed when they visited it that it also had changed during their absence. As a result, church became even more a home away from home.

Yet there was also the other world of the larger Canadian community, as they were well aware when they went to school or to work and later on when they did business with the other Canadians. For all the mutual support they gained from the church, their almost exclusive personal identification with it did little to help them relate to that larger world. By and large they kept their distance from the non-Reformed people they worked with, went to school with, or did business with. At the same time and true to their character, they also felt a responsibility to participate in that larger Canadian community. As one of them put it, "We have worked hard in business, in the church and for the Christian education. But this is too narrow. We must also contribute to the political life of the Canadian community. We can't just continue to use the excuse of the language barrier forever." But then he added wistfully, "Perhaps we have to leave that task to the next generation."

Later on in their lives the attitude of these people toward other Canadians began to change. They also became more critical of their own Reformed Dutch community and of its institutions. Some, who felt that their church was majoring in minors left it and joined one of the Evangelical churches. Other, who chose to remain Christian Reformed established close personal friendships with non-Reformed Canadian Christians. What they particularly appreciated about these other Christians was their joy and exuberance, things which they felt were often missing in their own life.

In addition, more and more non-Reformed Canadians started sending their children to the Christian schools these Reformed Dutch immigrants helped to establish. Both the Reformed and the non-Reformed also worked side by side in other Christian organizations. All these joint ventures provided avenues for increased personal contact which allowed these immigrants more and more to come out of their ethnic isolation. Yet it is doubtful that they will ever feel fully at home in Canada. Perhaps this generation of immigrants is destined to live their lives in two worlds, neither of which has their full allegiance.



## **The Young Reformed Dutch in Canada**

*There is an eternal part of you, to which you return  
like a compass, that incredible sense of no matter how  
bad things get, you're not alone!"*

(interview excerpt)

This group of young adults is the first generation of native born Reformed Dutch Canadians. They are not immigrants but the children of immigrants. Unlike immigrants they grew up in the country in which they were born, surrounded by the relatives of their extended families. They were members of an established Christian Reformed Church. Most of them attended Christian day schools and quite a number of them graduated from a Christian college as well. Even though they are the children of hyphenated Canadians they grew up in a stable ethnic Canadian community.

Religion predominated in that community, specifically the Christian religion, more specifically the Reformed way of life. Its rituals were everywhere. It permeated the home, which for most of these young adults was a safe haven, a caring context, with its daily prayers and bible reading at meals. It naturally emanated from the church they attended twice on Sunday. The sermons, the Sunday school and catechism lessons as well as the young people society discussions all centered on the bible as the guide for daily living. In the Christian schools religion did not consist merely of devotional exercises at the beginning or the end of the day. Christianity was always related to every subject taught, at times inappropriately.

With that kind of total rearing these young people, not surprisingly, developed a penchant if not always a love for all things Reformed. The discovery of this Reformed way of life brought excitement and a sense of mission to the lives of some. As one college student stated: "Every class here is related to some important question in life." For others being Reformed meant a kind of supportive basis, a kind of stabilizing moral set coupled with a sense of awe for God. One young person put it this way: "There is an eternal part of you, to which you return like a compass, that incredible sense of: no matter how bad things get, you're not alone!" This Reformed upbringing seems to have left all of these young people with a strong, productive sense of direction.

However, in many other respects they are far less appreciative of their upbringing. Surprisingly their displeasure does not focus on the home. There were of course the usual struggles, but on the whole these young adults were not at odds with their parents when they were teenagers. They experienced their home as a supportive caring context. Some of them indeed felt abandoned and misunderstood by their parents at crucial moments in their lives, as for example, when they had been badly hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend. But they attribute this to their parents' inability to deal with such negative situations, not to their unwillingness. Their parents had had a childhood and an adolescence which, because they were immigrants was quite different from their own. But within the limits of their experience they bent over backwards to make the youth of their children as fruitful as possible. This caring effort included making huge financial sacrifices in order to send their children to a Christian day school and high school.

With all this attention lavished upon them one would think that these young people would have fond memories of their childhood and teenage years. In fact they do not. The problems they experienced centered primarily on their school life. It was not that the curriculum was boring or that the teachers were mean, although some of them were nicer than others. Rather, it was the behaviour of their fellow students which troubled them. It appears that the students in the Christian schools they attended tended to group themselves rather rigidly into an "in" and an "out" group. Popularity was thus a major concern. To be accepted, to belong, to fit into the "in" group one had to exhibit certain characteristics. In their absence, unpopularity, rejection and outright persecution could be one's lot. Therefore one had to adapt, to play a role, to hide one's true self if one was to survive socially.

In elementary school it was particularly the more timid, less gifted pupils who had a hard time. Already struggling just to do the school tasks assigned to them, they had to cope with the added burden of being social outcasts. It seems one had to be tough, bold and able to make it in those schools. School organization influenced the extent to which such students experienced difficulties. Generally the more structured the school the harder it was for the weaker ones to survive socially. The teacher's attitude also had quite an effect on the behaviour of the students toward one another. Those teachers who "made sure you understood what you had to learn," who "treated everyone the same", who had no

“favorites”, no “in or out groups” and who maintained class discipline are remembered with fondness. On the other side, one teacher who publicly ranked the students according to their scholastic ability had a devastating effect on the weakest student’s social standing in class and on his sense of self worth.

Paradoxically, the scholastically more gifted student also seems to have had difficulty being socially accepted, especially in high school. If a student was good at school work, did her work well and received high marks she was quickly in danger of being labeled a “browner”. The reasoning seems to have been that if you get high marks you must be serious and that if you are serious you can’t be any fun. One student recalls a remark by another student in high school about her with pleasure. He said: “you’re a browner,” (read: high marks) “but you don’t act like one” (read: you’re still fun). Another student commented that she did not realize that “a guy could be serious and also fun” until she entered college. In high school it was thought the two could not co-exist in one person. So as a matter of social survival serious students hid their achievements wherever possible and were mortified if their grades became public knowledge. Even today they cannot revel in their gifts or achievements because, as one of them said, “I’ve never been liked for being good” (at things).

So if academic excellence was not a mark of popularity in those high schools, what was? Being athletic counted for a lot. Being a smoker, drinking and partying, in short being a rebel was another. There was considerable pressure at least in the lower grades of high school to be a rowdy. In the higher grades the pressure abated somewhat because most of the instigators had either dropped out or been expelled. But while they were there, as one person put it, “my school was a violent place”.

Some students devised ingenious ways of combating this peer pressure. They banded together to become eccentrics, i.e., they formed their group identity around not doing any of these things, around not rebelling. But they too had to pay a price, because the pressure to conform was strong. They had to be eccentrics to the extreme, for example by over stressing academic pursuits, or by being extra good, whereas they might have wanted to cut loose once in a while. Thus by negatively reacting to the dominant anti- intellectual ethos they still were not free just to be themselves.

We should not lose sight of the intense emotions this situation evoked in these young people. The rowdies with whom they attended high school were not monsters from outer space. They were not kids from “outside” the church or from “difficult families”. They were the friends, the brothers and the sisters they grew up with. They saw the agony which the behaviour of these rowdies aroused in their parents and they wondered what, coming from the same background, the same family as they themselves, made them so rebellious. Was it their personality? Was it the pull of the world? Were their parents too busy making a living or paying for Christian schools, to be able to pay attention to them? Did their parents not talk enough with them about the dangers of modern life? Then how come that they themselves, coming from the same background, the same family did not indulge in this rowdiness? Was it simply that these rowdies were more daring than they? They tried to love them without joining them, but that was hard when they did not know what made them tick.

What made Christian school kids so mean toward one another and so rebellious toward their elders and how on earth could this happen in a *Christian* school? Some of them still struggle with those questions today. Others have found a partially satisfying explanation,

but partially satisfying only, because answers to such questions are complex.

By way of explaining the cruelty which children inflict on one another in Christian day school they compare attending such schools to living in a family. Christian school children do not just attend school together. Their lives are intertwined in many more ways, much as the lives of brothers and sisters are in a family. In addition to attending the same school they are also likely to attend the same church and the same public functions indigenous to the Reformed Dutch community. Their families visit back and forth. Away from school they play with one another. They are with one another almost all the time and into each other's lives. Thus, the skirmishes in the classroom and on the playground are designed to create distance between children who are just too much on top of one another.

The reason these young adults give for the rowdy behaviour of their fellow students during their high school days is that many of them are members of an immigrant community. To maintain its minority culture in the face of a much more powerful majority culture, an immigrant group is often intolerant of diversity within its ranks. The emphasis is on conforming to a central ethos and any deviation from it is frowned upon. When the official ethos of a Reformed way of life is stressed to the extent that it is in the Reformed Dutch Canadian community it is virtually assured that this will call forth its opposite in the teenage members of the community. The rowdiness of those teenagers was thus explained as a rebellious reaction against an ethos which overemphasized uniformity of thought and behaviour. For young people who were still experimenting with life style questions that prospect was experienced as stifling to the extreme.

That the rowdiness of these young people was a reaction also seems clear from the fact that once they had adopted it as an alternative behaviour pattern, they were equally stringent in enforcing adherence to it. We might say that they were as single-minded in their rebellion as the Reformed Dutch in general were about enforcing the main ethos.

It should be noted that we are not now discussing the content of either of the two lifestyles, but the single-mindedness with which they were enforced and the group dynamics which resulted from this practice. The problems these young people encountered as they entered high school had to do with the demand to conform to the lifestyle of the "in" group or be ostracized. Consequently one had to constantly be on guard to "look good". "Looking good" entailed conforming to a certain type of dress, language and behaviour, frowned upon by the main ethos. One either had the option to be bad and be popular, liked and accepted or to be good and be relegated to the fringe of the group with all the consequences for one's self esteem which this entailed.

That there were these two principles operative in their lives was even recognized by the rowdies themselves. As one of them said, "becoming a man and becoming a Christian were two very different things during my youth and both were part of my life". Or as another one, a girl, related, "to defend one's own person one had to become a bitch, which is neither feminine nor indicative of the fruits of the Spirit. But it was either that, or to be hurting all the time."

Bad as this situation was at the time for these young people, on the whole it does not seem to have left them with lasting negative effects. All of those interviewed, including the former rowdies, went on to live individually productive lives. As one of them said, "Christian school graduates cut up a lot when they are young, but when they are done growing up they are a lot more stable than public school graduates". However, there is one negative effect that did not go away. The atmosphere in school seems to have left

many of these young adults with a profound sense of interpersonal alienation.

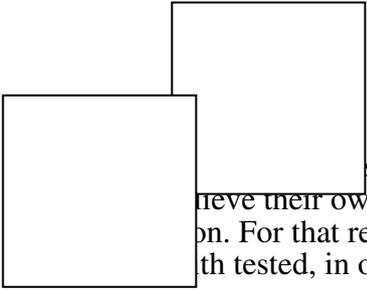
One of the problems with maintaining a set code of conduct as the criterion for whether one belongs to a group or not is that the members of the group exercise mutual social control over one another. This means that your friends and your playmates may be your potential enemies when it comes to being accepted or rejected. Anyone of them can at any time tell you, that what you do, or worse, what you *are*, is not acceptable and that therefore you do not belong. In such situations you cannot possibly be yourself with others. You develop a radar for what is acceptable, you hide your true self and you play a role. You avoid lasting relationships, you flit from one person to another, you keep your distance, all in fear of being found out and ultimately rejected. You become preoccupied with image, with looking good, and live your life alienated from those who are potentially your closest friends.

One gets the impression that these young adults have learned to become independent people. By now they are so well defended in their person that the remarks of others are not likely to adversely affect their sense of self worth. But while they readily testify to having a close, personal relationship with God, they keep their distance from their fellow human beings. It appears that they have difficulty trusting another person deeply. When it comes to the Christian Reformed Church these young adults are grateful for what they received. Like the home and the school it played its part in providing them with a set of principles that guide their lives even today. It also instilled in them a deep trust in God, a love for His Word, and a sense of awe that Someone so mighty as He would stoop down to bother about people like themselves.

However, they also detect the image consciousness that they encountered in their school, in the church and they are not appreciative of that aspect of their church community. The words they use to describe the church are not flattering. In church too, they say, it is important to “look good”. The church is “intolerant of diversity”, its people are often “judgmental” about the views and conduct of others inside and outside the church. They say that this is because the Christian Reformed Church is “too much into its own world”, for its own good. This “club-mindedness” puts it in perpetual danger of “splitting over a phrase”. It often assumes the role of being the only true church, but it fails to examine whether that label covers the life of the church as well as its doctrine. They hasten to add that this mentality is not unique to their community. These problems arise anytime and anywhere people spend so much of their lives together. They are essentially the problems of small town existence.

But many of these young adults find this atmosphere stifling. There are so many things that are “not done”. Sooner or later they want to escape the community they grew up in. They sometimes travel, as one of them put it, “to get an overdose of CRC out of my system.”

Some characterize the Reformed faith as an “unreflective faith”. It is a faith in God “up there” Whom you do not question. For their Reformed parents and grandparents faith was either self-evident or it was not faith at all. Such a faith is taught and accepted, but not discussed. With this sentiment these young adults essentially agree, provided that this self-evidence is restricted to faith in God only. They object however, when this attitude of self-evidence is extended to life style questions. They object, because they say that this will teach children the comfortable but dangerous routine of church attendance, prayer and bible reading without them giving the matter a thought of their own. In this atmosphere of self-evidence children learn to play the religion game. They acquire an unthinking habit that goes unchallenged as long as they continue to live their lives inside the Reformed community. Only when their faith and their style of life are challenged by



Members of other denominations do they stop to think and make what believe their own. For these young people a living, committed faith entails self-  
on. For that reason many of them seek contact with outsiders. They want to have  
th tested, in order to gain assurance of its reality.

While many of these young adults will readily call themselves Christian and also Reformed their identification with the Reformed Christian community is less than total. In contrast to this their reaction to being ethnically Dutch is overwhelmingly positive. This is surprising since it differs so radically from the response of their immigrant parents to their Dutch ethnicity. The latter experienced their ethnic background mostly as a stigma. It is not that these young adults are unaware that they are born Canadians. But, as one of them said, "Canada is such an international country that it's hard to get excited about it." These young people identify with being Dutch because it makes them unique in Canada. Neither are they unaware of the alleged negative qualities in the Dutch national character, its brashness, its crudeness and its stubbornness. But in the main they think of their Dutch ethnicity with pride. They speak of it as their roots, their heritage.

They admire the way the Dutch faced the horrors of the war, the way they hid the Jews, the fact that they refused to collaborate with the Nazis, the way Dutch farmers helped the hungry when they came to them for food. They enjoy the stories about the liberation of Holland. They admire the way the Dutch pulled together to help one another, and they cite the work of the Mennonites as evidence. They appreciate the concrete care the Dutch give to people in need. They admire the way the Dutch made it big as immigrants to Canada and elsewhere.

Beyond this they relate positively to what some have called their "symbolic ethnicity": the cozy atmosphere of Dutch households, soup on Sunday, wooden shoes, St. Nikolaas celebrations, "poffertjes, oliebollen, hempies and doekjes" - all things so familiar to them, and yet so strange to other Canadians. When they visit Holland they are reinforced in their appreciation of these things because they find them indigenous to an entire nation. As one of them said, "You find that what is strange in this country is normal over there."

Thus, it appears ironically that the members of the first generation of Dutch-Canadians to be born and raised in Canada and therefore free to embrace this nation into their identity, are in fact returning to their Dutch cultural roots for their self-definition. Actually, these young adults seem to have a dual identity, one religious and the other ethnic. Their religious identity tells them who they are. They identify themselves as Reformed Christians, which is neither Dutch nor Canadian, because for them religion transcends cultures and national boundaries. But their ethnic identity tells them where they are from. In a country where almost everyone is ethnic, in the sense that all came from somewhere, they are proud to call themselves Canadians with a Dutch background.

## NOTES

1. Schema, S. 1988 *The Embarrassment of Riches*, New York: Fontana Press, 26.