

The Christian Reformed Church in Canada. An ex-member's look at the past sixty years

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Introduction

My research into the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Canada was prompted by my own departure from it. This essay is not, therefore, a comprehensive report on the denomination; it will give only a glimpse of what has been happening. As an introduction, I'll begin with a brief summary of my own church history.

I was born in the Netherlands, and baptized into the *Gereformeerde Kerk* in Zuidwolde, Drenthe. My parents took us to Canada in 1950, where we became the sixth family in the CRC at Orangeville, Ontario. Eleven months later we moved to the Acton area, which didn't yet have a CRC. A group was soon formed in Erin, where I later went to high school. Two years later, in 1953, a congregation was organized in Acton, and we became members.

My membership in the Kentville Christian Reformed Church began when I moved to Nova Scotia in 1962. Over the decades I was active in a number of the church's programs. By the end of 2009 it became clear to my family that the Kentville CRC was no longer the place for us. The two sons who worshipped there with their families left in January, 2010, and I left with them. They have become members of the local Presbyterian church. As for me, I don't feel at home there, and now attend mainly the Baptist church in my community.

My reason for detailing my own church history is that this story is not unique. In fact, CRCs all over Canada have been bleeding members to other denominations.

A brief historical background

After World War II, with immigrants flooding into Canada from Holland, “home missionaries” of the American CRC came up to gather them into congregations. In Nova Scotia, Rev. Ralph Bos visited one immigrant family that had settled quite happily into a community church. He told them in no uncertain words that they belonged in the CRC, not in a Canadian church. At a time when the Dominee still held considerable authority, they obediently drove to Kentville from then on, as one of the sons told me.

This was the pattern across much of Canada. New immigrants coming off the train from Halifax were often met by two elders of the church. The CRC worked hard to help newcomers find work or a place to live, or acted as translators. As an institution to help immigrants it was enormously useful. The newcomers had little or no knowledge of the language and customs, but they felt at home on Sunday morning, hearing the familiar liturgies in their own language, and being able to share experiences with other Dutch people.

Moving ahead to the year 1970, we see a church that was doing well. The Canadian CRC at that time had almost 70,000 members. In Kentville, mostly internal growth caused an increase from about 100 people in 1955 to around 400 in 1980.

The pastors of these churches generally had Dutch names. In the 1970 Yearbook of the denomination, I found 189 ministers whose names began with van. And that’s not counting Zondervan.

Within the Canadian congregations, a few non-Dutch names were beginning to creep in. Whereas Brandon, Manitoba, still had mostly Dutch names listed, the Edmonton churches had men by the name of Labots and DuCloux. By far the majority still had names like Ringnalda and Groenendijk.

Worship services in the Dutch language had been phased out in most congregations by the early 1970s.

It wasn’t really until the 1980s that members began drifting away in numbers. They married non-Dutch partners, moved to other denominations, or dropped out of church altogether. The Kentville congregation gave birth to a Neo-Pentecostal church first; it then helped spawn three splinter churches (a Vineyard, a Wesleyan, and an Associate Reformed Presbyterian church), as well as losing members to other local churches. Some congregations have lost members to even more conservative branches of the Reformed body, sometimes based on long-ago doctrinal difference in The Netherlands. But in many cases, I would argue that those who left the CRC had simply become more “Canadianized” than the church they left behind.

Current state of the CRC across the country

Nova Scotia

Beginning with my home province, the CRC congregation in *New Glasgow* was a traditional Dutch immigrant church, but with a well-attended Vacation Bible School program every summer. Many members lived far from the church. The church, by its location, was very much isolated from the CRC mainstream. An effort to establish a Christian school fragmented the small congregation, and by the late 1980s it closed its doors. The *Kentville* CRC has had seemingly intractable problems for a long time. Almost everyone under 65 left in 2010. The current small group of mostly seniors will not likely survive much longer. In contrast to these two, the *CRC at Halifax* is doing well. Although the numbers are never large, the congregation has done much outreach work over the years and has earned its name of All Nations. At *Milford CRC*, numbers have dropped over the past year or so, but it has been attracting people from diverse backgrounds. At *Truro*, the numbers are stable.

Ontario

In *Ontario*, *Forest CRC* closed its door in 2007 even though, as one former member told me, they “were one of the most contemporary churches in the classis”. *Forest CRC* remained Dutch to the end, with only one non-Dutch person ever marrying into the congregation. I’m told that the membership “couldn’t get a common vision at all, at the end”. The last twenty people drifted into neighbouring CRCs, or joined other denominations.

I’ve already mentioned *Acton*, Ontario. Here, *Bethel CRC* has become part of the local community. As the population of *Acton* grows, so grows the church, which is now the biggest in town. In fact, they’re currently planning an extension. Growth in the *Acton* church began with the women’s Coffee Break program, which now draws 80-90 people, and continued as services became more user-friendly for previously unchurched people. *Acton* has benefited from its excellent, easily accessible location on the main highway through town.

Brampton is home to people of many cultural backgrounds, and the CRC membership reflects that fact. Both *Immanuel CRC* and *CrossPoint CRC* have a racially diverse congregation with people from Pakistan, India, the Phillipines, Congo, Ireland, England, and even Holland. *Immanuel CRC* outgrew its building, so they now have two services. One is traditional and one is contemporary. Predictably, this has divided the congregation somewhat along generational lines. There is also a *Heritage* congregation for residents of *Holland Christian Homes*. This is the largest seniors complex for Dutch-Canadians in the country, with four apartment towers and two nursing homes.

Membership within the four CRCs in *St. Catharines* consists mostly of Dutch immigrant families. This is partly because there simply are a lot of Dutch people in the area. The churches range from the conservative Maranatha CRC, which still has no women in office, to Jubilee. Here, they've discarded pews and gone for artwork, modern music, and sometimes liturgical dance.

In *Oshawa*, a CRC offshoot called Hope Fellowship is so successful that it needs two services every Sunday morning. Over 500 people attend. About one-third of them were previously unchurched, or longterm church dropouts. Sunday morning music and liturgy are done in contemporary format, but the church incorporates time for lament and confession along with the praise and worship approach. This church has given the old traditions a new face while holding on to what has worked well in the past. Hope Fellowship is one-third non-Dutch, with people from Jamaica, the Philippines, and India among its members.

Conflict about worship styles does erupt regularly in many congregations. In the *Drayton* church, for instance, a longtime member told me "some of the younger people are leaving because of the worship wars". Someone in Wyoming said there's quite a lot of resistance to the new music.

Prairies

Winnipeg's three Christian Reformed congregations offer the same diversity of worship styles seen elsewhere, including a blend of traditional and contemporary music.

In *Edmonton*, a CRC stronghold with about 15 churches, worship styles are all over the map. One member told me that people regularly move from one church to another in an effort to find the style that best suits them. Like much of the CRC, the Edmonton churches are struggling to hold on to their young people. Most members of the Edmonton churches are Caucasian, but with a sprinkling of other ethnic backgrounds. One congregation is Korean.

British Columbia

On the west coast, the congregation at *Richmond, B.C.*, gradually faded into oblivion. The members were all Dutch immigrants. By 2008 the last thirty members closed the doors. Northern B.C. has five CRC churches with dwindling membership. Houston, Smithers, Telkwa, Prince George, and Terrace, are hurting from a devastated forestry-based economy. They've been largely unsuccessful in attracting non-Dutch members.

On Vancouver island, the aging congregation at *Victoria CRC* is declining in numbers, with 210 people. The church, mostly Dutch, has never recovered from the emergence during the 1970s of a church plant, known as *Christ Community*. The pastor at Victoria says he "would like to bring back more

theological liturgies”, which could include more use of the historical confessions. He sees a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater in the move to a relevant, modern approach. Christ Community, meanwhile, is doing well.

First CRC of Vancouver decided to make serious changes about fifteen years ago. Previously stagnant, they began welcoming people not traditionally associated with the CRC. At present, well over a quarter of the membership is of non-Dutch background. A strong music program has helped. The dress code is casual, as befits the west coast lifestyle.

Other Church Activities

A comprehensive study of the CRC would show that the denomination has been active in many areas of life. Perhaps foremost among these is the field of Christian education. Many graduates of CRC-led schools now hold leadership positions within the larger church. The CRC is active in promoting restorative justice, and has three ministry centres in Canada’s west that reach out to Canada’s aboriginal community. In Winnipeg, the CRC supports Hope Centre, a service for mentally challenged adults, with a full-time Director of Spiritual Care.

CRC members are involved in a variety of service projects. These range from food banks to working with single mothers. Considerable effort is spent on projects elsewhere, such as repairing homes after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

There’s work being done in the field of mental health, and housing for seniors. Many of these efforts will survive even if some of the congregations do not.

Questions

Delving into the history of the CRC, I found myself with at least three questions:

1. Having been successful as a Dutch immigrant church, does the CRC still have a function outside of the immediate immigrant experience?
2. To what extent has the CRC integrated into the broader Canadian society?
3. Does the Canadian CRC have a future?

Does the CRC still meet a real need in Canada?

Sixty years ago the CRC offered not only practical help for Dutch immigrants, but also the comfort of tradition, for people who had been thrown into a completely changed environment. Sunday morning was the only time when people could find familiar music, liturgy, and language. Religious tradition was the straw to

which immigrants clung, half drowning as they were in the trauma of adapting to Canadian society.

The problem arose when aging, largely Dutch congregations across the country continued to cling to that same life raft. The world has changed radically over sixty years, and the church has needed to change with it; but those who try to make Christian faith relevant within today's world too often run into solid resistance from the older generation.

Here I must refer to a characteristic mentioned in *Uprooted*, my book on Dutch immigration (van Arragon Hutten 2001). My generation grew up accustomed to parents who were in control, and who were always right. Even married children were expected to heed their parents' wishes. This mindset has unfortunately been passed down to some of their children, who similarly are unable to connect with any other mindset or world view.

In too many congregations there has been a group, perhaps small, but vocally determined to hold on to their own standards for what they perceive as Christian behaviour. This can lead to judgemental attitudes, harsh criticism, and a non-welcoming attitude. From what I heard during my research for this essay, such conservative, unbending groups are still causing problems in various places. One pastor described it thus, "They make the change from the horse and buggy days to two or three bathrooms in the house. Everywhere but in the church."

Where change is held back by a vocal minority, it has often led to an outflow of younger members. Here it would be useful to look at new church plants that have emerged within the past decade or so. Being new, they can literally start from scratch. They're not burdened with the expectations of an older generation. Those who start church plants see the need for a new approach to worship and community. It's noteworthy that these new congregations no longer identify themselves as CRC. They're choosing names like River City, the Journey, the River, and Hope Fellowship; names that provide no clue to the group's identity. This could indicate a wish to get away from the Calvinistic heritage, or maybe a desire to get away from certain cultural expectations.

In Richmond, BC, the old way of doing things ended when the church closed. However, a revival project was already underway. A few people had been meeting in the church's fellowship room, with a pastor of their own. The Rev. Al Chu, second generation Chinese-Canadian, was able to build up this small group with his co-workers. They were ready to take over the church building when the original congregation died. In effect, a new church plant emerged from the old congregation, having shaken off the traditions of the past. Today, *The Tapestry* has around 300 members. As in the town of Richmond, members are mostly of Asian extraction, whether from Taiwan, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, or Hong

Kong. A handful of couples are of Dutch background. The goal is to have people of all ethnicities feel welcome and involved. There are now 100 children in the Sunday School, indicating there are a lot of young families. Music is contemporary, partly because no one knows how to play the existing pipe organ.

For congregations like The Tapestry that have embraced modern versions of worship and neighbours of varying skin colours, survival seems likely. Longterm success will depend on whether they can offer enough real meaning and content along with the modern trappings.

In many cases, then, we're no longer talking about a group of Dutch Calvinists doing their thing. John Calvin is no longer mentioned; the Calvinette girls' groups are now GEMS, ('Girls Everywhere Meeting the Saviour'), and the Young Calvinist Federation became Youth Unlimited. These are not mere name changes. Many congregations now downplay any talk of church doctrine. The emphasis is on having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and on being active in service projects. As in the rest of society, the church has modernized and updated its beliefs and practices.

What is it, then, that we see surviving into the future, and *is* this, in fact, still the Christian Reformed Church? The CRC is increasingly diverse and fragmented. In practice, it has become almost congregationalist, with every congregation doing what seems right in their own eyes. In Canadian society at large, individuality has replaced conformity, and that has clearly influenced the church.

To what extent has the CRC integrated into Canadian society?

I have identified six factors that might suggest whether the Christian Reformed church is becoming part of Canadian society. Any of these factors could be considered superficial as a yardstick of integration, but taken together, they do provide some clues.

Names

The most obvious way to answer the integration question would be to look at the names of people within the church. If everyone is of Dutch background, can we speak of a Canadian church? Using the churches at Brampton as an example, all the pastors at Emmanuel CRC and CrossPoint CRC have Dutch surnames. Three-quarters of their members do as well.

Not everyone buys the theory that names indicate Dutchness. When I posed the question to one woman she responded emphatically, "We're all Canadians!" In terms of citizenship this is probably true, but she did still have a hint of Dutch accent.

Worship styles

Another measuring stick would be the extent to which worship styles, especially the music, reflect the Canadian music scene. Churches with all contemporary music would seem to fit in. Many churches are turning to their music program as a necessary survival tool, with more emphasis at times on entertainment than on worship. Surely it would be the Canadian way, when teenagers holding microphones, pants hanging barely above the pubic bone, sway to the beat of a drum.

Women in office

A third indication of fitting into Canadian society would be the number of women holding office in the church. Since 1973, the “women in office” battle has been hard-fought, but the church is beginning to fully accept women. As in other segments of society, female pastors still find themselves relegated at times to secondary positions, with a man heading the pastoral team. Progress is apparent at Calvin Seminary, where women now form 25% of the student body.

Gay rights

There’s a fourth topic that is beginning to shake the church, and that’s the ordination of gay people to church office. Some years ago, one Toronto area church attempted to defy the church’s rules about using gay people in leadership roles, but was forced to back down. The issue has been raised in the Banner, the church’s monthly, more than once. In Canada, meanwhile, it is illegal to discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation, and Canada now permits same sex marriage. One could argue that the CRC is out of touch with Canadian values on this one.

Evolution

A fifth question concerns evolution, widely accepted as fact in western societies, but denied by the CRC. According to official church doctrine, Adam and Eve were real persons, who fell into sin after being tempted by Satan in snake form. Two professors at Calvin College (Grand Rapids, Michigan) have recently published a

paper challenging this CRC doctrine.¹ This could lead to considerable discussion within the church. On the other hand, CRC members may be relieved they can finally admit to believing in evolution.

Outreach

Perhaps the single most important factor in the CRC's integration into Canadian society would be the extent to which it welcomes and includes non-Dutch people. We see that some congregations are opening their doors to anyone willing to come. Other churches are content to provide ministry to their "own" people.

Summing up the integration of the CRC, today's church is certainly not the one of my teenage years. The immigrant church placed a heavy emphasis on solid Biblical preaching, and restricted access to the Sacraments. Children, many of them, were to be seen and not heard. A worship service in Alberta would have been much the same as one in Nova Scotia. All used the same traditional greetings and blessings, the same hymns and psalms. Worship was a solemn affair. Sermons warned against sin, including movie attendance, and birth control. Music was reverential. The word "awesome" was reserved for the Almighty. Ministers, elders and deacons were men, and the Church Order permitted no one else. Missions meant collecting money for black people in Africa. Church programs consisted of age-appropriate groups such as the Ladies Society or the Young People's Society, where members wrote essays and discussed topics like predestination. Young People's outings were closely scrutinized by church Councils, and my parents were not the only ones to disapprove of boys and girls swimming together in the same body of water.

That was sixty years ago. The more dynamic, growing congregations today seem to be those who have tossed out the denomination's hymnbooks, singing contemporary praise songs to the beat of a drum. *Everything* is awesome, especially loud and joyful music. Services are accessible to previously unchurched people. Sermons emphasize God's love and grace rather than his judgement. Children are seen *and* heard. My nine-year-old granddaughter in

¹ The September, 2010 issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* included two articles by Dr. Daniel Harlow and Dr. John Schneider, Bible and Theology professors at Calvin College, asserting that strong evidence from both biblical studies and science creates conflicts with parts of the historic Reformed confessions and requires theological explanation. In particular, they question whether Adam and Eve actually existed, whether there was a literal Fall, and whether we need to reinterpret the doctrine of original sin as presented in the Reformed confessions (Van Farowe 2011). After considerable uproar within the CRC community, Dr. Schneider has left his position, while Dr. Harlow went on sabbatical.

Halifax recently made her public profession of faith. That's a natural consequence of a decision to allow children at communion a few years back. In most congregations, elder and deacon duties are shared by men and women. Women are increasingly taking up their share of pastoral duties. As for the music, it must be noted that the move away from organs is often due to the fact that few young people still learn how to play this instrument. Meanwhile, schools have band programs, and young church people will contribute the skills they have, rather than the ones for which older members might wish. Sixty years ago the main symbols within the church were the pulpit, representing sound Biblical preaching, along with the Communion table and baptismal font to represent the Sacraments. Today, the symbols of a successful church are a drum set and an overhead projector.

Does the CRC have a future?

Another way of phrasing this is: Can the CRC survive a historical tendency towards schism that dates back to the 1834 Afscheiding in the Netherlands, when the Gereformeerde Kerk broke away from the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk? Repeatedly, those who held the one and only truth in their back pockets have placed their own insights ahead of the unity of the church as a whole.

I'm appalled to think that in 1944 my parent church in The Netherlands lost many members to the Artikel 31 movement. This schism, which led to the formation of the *Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt)*, was based on a difference of opinion about an obscure point of church order. It occurred in the middle of World War II, while Jews and Gypsies and others were being murdered wholesale, and city people were starving to death. As noted earlier, there are still plenty of reasons for disagreements today. Nor is the CRC immune against a widespread decrease in Christian religious activity. We'll look at just three denominations here.

Although almost 3 million Canadians list the *United Church* as their religion for Census purposes, the church's own website says they have 525,000 members. The over-all picture has been one of decline for a while, and many congregations have shut down in recent years.

The *Presbyterian Church* peaked at over 200,000 members in the early 1960s, but now number 113,000; that's a 45% drop.

The *Anglican Church* has lost many members, from over 1,3 million in 1960 to 641,000 in 2001. That's a more than 50% decline, and that was ten years ago. The Anglican church has suffered badly from both the residential schools scandal, and the homosexual issue.

In contrast to these mainstream denominations, the *North American CRC* has not done too badly. From 1963 on, membership numbers rose steadily to a

peak of more than 316,000 in 1992, but the following decade saw a loss of 48,000 members. Neo-Pentecostalism, also known as the charismatic movement, caused schisms in many denominations including the CRC. The membership of the North American CRC now stands at 255,340, a drop of about 20% since 1992. Looking at the Canadian segment, total memberships stood at 73,000 in 1989. Today it stands at 74,529 members. In other words, membership numbers are stable.

Church *attendance* is decreasing everywhere. Sixty years ago CRC people went to church twice a Sunday. Now, attending three out of four Sundays is considered normal. Even when membership numbers hold up, attendance does not.

In conclusion, my research indicates that the CRC in Canada has better numbers than those of most other denominations. Numerous members have left, but an influx of new people has replaced them. Despite some stagnant congregations, the CRC has become part of the local scene in many places. Considering the massive decrease in Christian practice within the entire western world, it has done well to keep its membership levels at a certain plateau.

However, I was confronted with the fact that the church is not a business. It's just not possible to judge its success using a secular yardstick. We're not dealing with stock prices here, or five-year business plans. Churches operate on a wholly different plane. Or they ought to. Yes, churches do measure success by numbers: if the church is full, it is doing well. However, I'm hearing reservations over this criterion for success. At what point does worship of God become entertainment for the masses? More than one source worried that basic Christian teaching and practice were being abandoned in the quest for good attendance numbers.

I spoke with Bert Witvoet, who plays a leading role within the Canadian CRC. He pointed out that "integration is not going to save the church". If integration means becoming just like all the other churches, just look at their rapidly dwindling numbers, he said. According to Bert, the CRC *has* integrated; you can't avoid that when you live here. All of us watch the same TV and internet productions and are exposed to the same cultural forces as the rest of the population. What will ensure a future for the CRC, according to Bert, are the old spiritual truths and practices. Here's his quote:

Spiritual depth, and faithfulness to scripture. You need to be intentional about your faith, and you need to live it. Prayer, and helping others. In the Reformed faith, believers are meant to be citizens of the world, and to take care of creation. If that is practiced and lived, there will be a vital church.

Bert adds that “Focusing on praise, being upbeat, it’s not enough. You need it, but there’s so much more to living a Christian life. There’s a time to lament, a time for confession”.

Bert was not advocating old traditions per se, and in fact belongs to a church where the liturgy is innovative and modern. Rather, he’s saying that a two-thousand-year-old faith needs to remember its basic *raison d’être*, instead of worrying about numbers.

Julia Vanderveen, who pastors First CRC in Vancouver with her husband, Trevor, agrees. She said the Vancouver church has not “compromised on their Reformed thinking”. She fully supports reaching out to the community around them, but not at the expense of discarding all sense of tradition or history. She points out that eight students at the non-denominational Regent College, who had been attending the CRC during their studies, will be going on to Calvin Seminary this fall because they love the distinctive Reformed tradition.

When I asked one pastor if he thought the CRC would survive, his response was: “Who cares?” Like Bert and Julia, he seemed to suggest that the survival of a denomination does not matter per se, so long as the faith on which it was based does survive.

In my opinion, the Christian Reformed Church needs to heed the words of Dr. James Smith, a professor at Calvin College, who addressed the heads of CRC agencies last year on the topic of “Buried Treasure”. In discussing current CRC worship practices, he uses the analogy of someone who buys a gorgeous Arts & Crafts house and then covers it with vinyl siding in an effort to go with the times. The CRC, he says, needs to recognize its historical and “unique nexus of practices, including worship, that represent the accrued wisdom of the church, led by the Spirit”. Instead, he says, “we spend too much energy trying to be like others”. In trying to shed its image as a Dutch church, he says, the CRC has discarded many of the characteristics that made it uniquely appealing.² My study of worship practices across the denomination easily confirms that Smith’s analysis is on target.

² An audio recording of Dr. Smith’s speech can be accessed via <http://network.crcna.org/content/pastors/james-smith-buried-treasure-reformed-tradition-and-future-crc> (accessed Jan. 25, 2012).

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