

IF NOT DUTCH, HOW MUCH?
REFORMED CHURCH ETHNICITY YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

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INTRODUCTION .

I. General Comments

The relationship between ethnicity and denominationalism in America has long been studied from a sociological perspective. In his seminal work, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote of the role of the ethnicity of European immigrants in providing them with much-needed identity and social cohesion in the face of many challenges and unknowns.¹ According to Niebuhr, ethnicity was the principal source of social definition for many of these newcomers' churches, and in turn the denominations provided the primary means by which new immigrants preserved their cultural heritage.

More recently, Andrew Greeley described America as "the denominational society," and he attributed the survival of denominations to their ability to play an ethnic role. By ethnic, Greeley refers to

. . . a phenomenon by which the members of a religious denomination are able to obtain from their religion means of defining who they are and where they stand in a large and complex society. In some cases, this self-definition in social location may be the most important thing that religion does for a person. For other individuals, however, self-definition and social location are mixed with the belief system and ethical code according to which the person lives. The important question for the social scientist is not whether a religion stops being "authentically religious" when it becomes permeated by the ethnic phenomenon, but rather what the relationship is between religion as an ethnic phenomenon and religion as faith.²

In essence, for many immigrant groups, religion became more a matter of ethnic identity and social location than of spiritual fervor or commitment.

II. Ethnicity and the RCA

Historically, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) was an excellent example of the immigrant church of which Niebuhr wrote. On the one hand, the RCA was the premier social institution preserving Dutch ethnicity in America, and at the same time the RCA became identified principally by its Dutchness. Thus, the RCA performed the ethnic role described by Greeley in that members used their denominational membership as a means of locating themselves socially in American society. Historically, when someone identified him or herself as Dutch Reformed it communicated a great deal about his or her theological understandings and social beliefs and practices.

Much has occurred in the recent past which casts serious doubt over whether ethnicity continues to play this significant role in the RCA or in any other American mainline denomination. Interdenominational marriages, declining fertility rates, regional migration patterns, the general decline in mainline Protestantism, and a score of other trends suggest that perhaps ethnicity as a measure of church identification has declined, too.³

The tremendous social and demographic changes of recent decades have important implications for understanding the current membership of the RCA. Is the traditional picture painted by Niebuhr and Greeley still accurate in reference to the Reformed Church membership? Does the RCA continue to be primarily a Dutch church? Does ethnicity continue to play an important role in the lives of its members? If so, is it reflected in their beliefs and practices? In an effort to shed some light on these and other questions of denominational identity, we will report some findings from three nationwide denominational surveys we conducted of RCA members and clergy between 1976 and 1991.

A: ETHNIC COMPOSITION AND THE RCA

The Data

In 1976, with the support of the National Staff of the RCA, Luidens undertook a nationwide survey of a representative sample of RCA laity and clergy. Although the prime focus of that study was members' opinions and perceptions of the National Staff, data on members' ethnicity and religious involvement were also collected. The survey represents the first study of its kind of the Reformed Church.

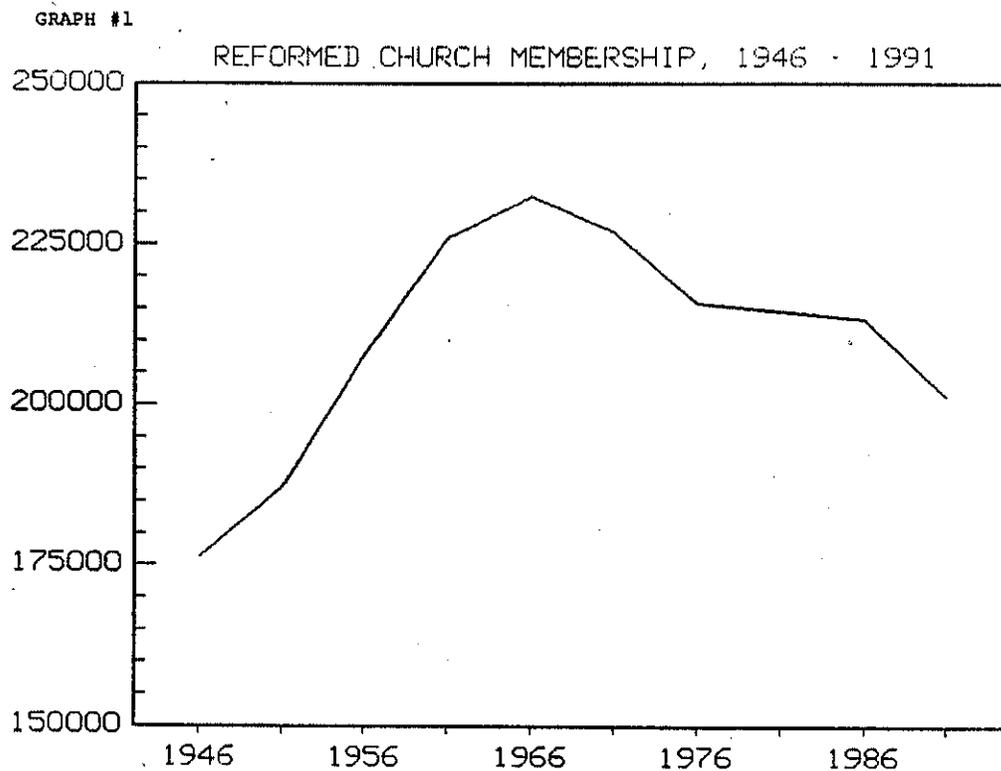
Ten years later, Luidens and Nemeth decided to replicate the earlier study and to expand it into other areas of members' attitudes and behaviors. This effort resulted in a Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) survey of nearly 1800 lay persons and over 570 clergy. Information from this study was used to give direction to The RCA Identity Task Force and other RCA committees concerned with denominational identity.

Currently, we are involved in an expanded follow-up to the 1986 study. The 1991 survey is the largest study ever conducted in the RCA, and it represents one of the largest studies of any Protestant denomination. We have surveyed nearly 4200 lay members and over 600 clergy on a wide range of issues concerning their personal and corporate faith and practice. Although data are still being processed and analyzed, we have gathered information from this survey and from the two earlier studies to share in this study. We want to stress, however, that our work (while accurate within an error margin of 5 to 7 percent), is still in process and should be considered somewhat tentative at this time.

Each of the three studies described above includes questions on members' ethnic heritage and information about other personal background factors, as well as about their beliefs and practices. These surveys allow us to assess the presence of ethnicity in the RCA and the impact ethnicity has on the lives of members over the past 15 years. We will first present data on RCA membership trends and ethnic compositions for laity and clergy. We will then switch our attention to assessing differences between Dutch and NonDutch⁴ members in terms of their denominational identity and commitment.

I. RCA Membership Trends: 1946 - 1991

A backdrop against which one must address issues of ethnicity and faith in the RCA (and mainline Protestantism in general) is the dramatic decline in membership the denomination has experienced since the late 1960s following the record highs of the 1950s and 1960s. The precipitous membership loss during



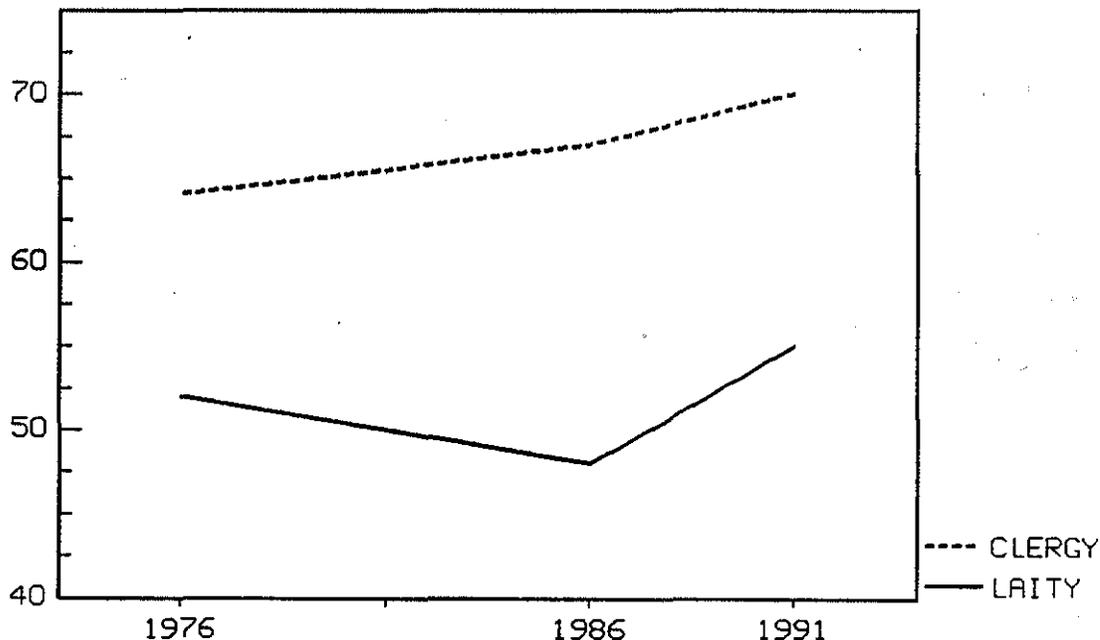
the last twenty years has thrown the RCA into a quandary. What is behind the decline? What are its implications? What does it mean about the future of the denomination? Although comprehensive answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this presentation, the issue of ethnic composition in the RCA is not impervious to this larger pattern of declining memberships. In particular, questions of *denominational identity* are raised in response to the collapse of these membership roles since, invariably, many members answer identity questions in terms of ethnicity.

II. Overall Ethnicity among RCA Laity and Clergy

After an initial drop during the 1970s and early 1980s, there now appears to be a rise in the Dutchness of the lay membership of the RCA. In fact, revealed in Graph #2 is a rather dramatic jump during the past five years of the percentage of laity reporting Dutch as their principal ethnic heritage. *Why?*

GRAPH #2

ETHNICITY OF LAITY AND CLERGY,
1976 - 1991
(PERCENT WITH SOME DUTCH BACKGROUND)



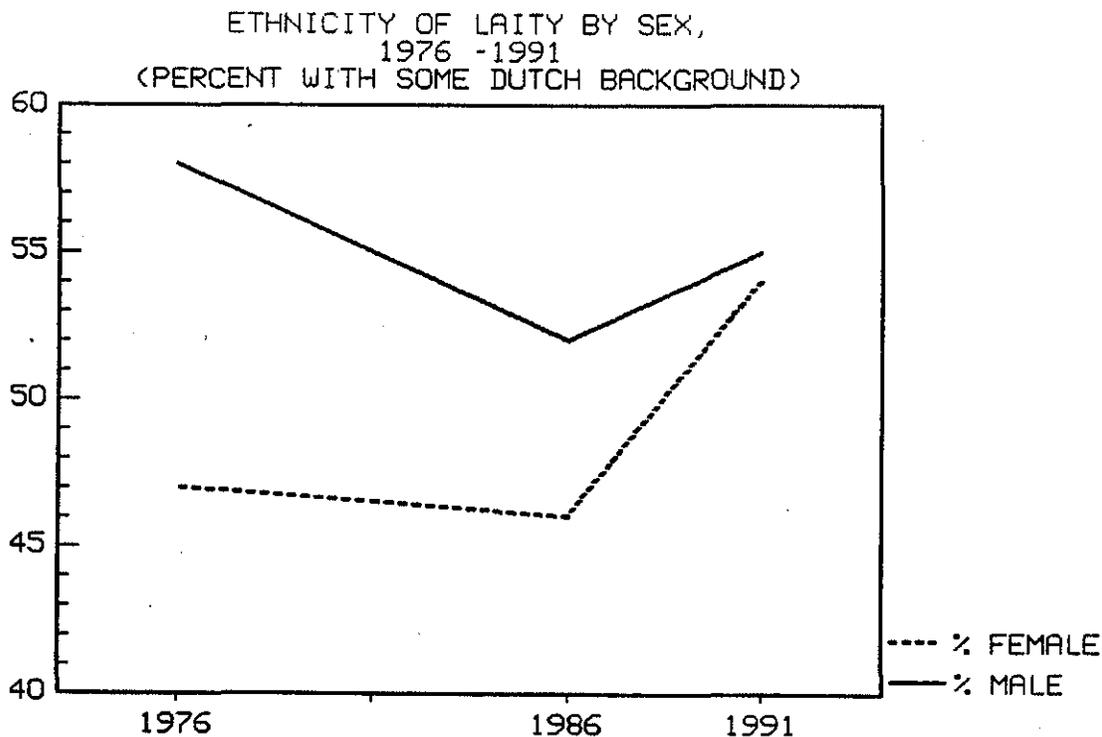
It could be that part of the jump is the result of the incompleteness of our data. As mentioned earlier, we are still receiving some late arriving questionnaires and there is the possibility that these may be disproportionately NonDutch in composition. We seriously doubt, however, that all of the apparent increase can be attributed to incomplete data. At least some (as yet we are uncertain as to how much) of the increase represents a real rise in the proportion of members who are Dutch. This real part of the upsurge in Dutchness can be accounted for either (1) by more Dutch joining, or (2) by more NonDutch leaving, or (3) by a combination of both. We are optimistic that further analysis of the 1991 survey will be able to indicate more definitively which of these factors is primarily responsible. However, given the general downturn in overall membership, we strongly suspect that the second explanation--a gradual homogenizing of the denomination due to the higher rate of departure of NonDutch members--is more likely to be true.

Graph #2 also indicates that among clergy, there continues to be a fairly consistent rise in the proportion claiming Dutch ethnicity. As was the case for the laity, this increase is the result of either more Dutch than NonDutch joining the denomination, or more NonDutch than Dutch leaving it. Which of the two is responsible will be answered by further analysis of the 1991 survey.

III. Ethnicity by Sex

Similar to most denominations, the RCA has in recent history claimed more females than males. Our studies indicate that in 1976, the percentages of males and females in the RCA were 44 percent and 56 percent respectively. In 1986 and again in 1991, the proportion of female had grown to nearly two-thirds. What accounts for this massive "feminization" of the RCA? We suspect at least two trends are largely responsible. Part, and only part, of the increasing presence of women is the result of the aging composition of the RCA. The average age of the denomination and the percent over the age of 60 have both risen slightly since 1976. Since women, on average, outlive men, this trend would tend to favor women more than men. Another factor, and one which we feel is of greater importance, is that women are typically more faithful and active church members; when decline sets in, men have been more likely to leave the denomination. This observation is confirmed in several studies of other mainline Protestant denominations.

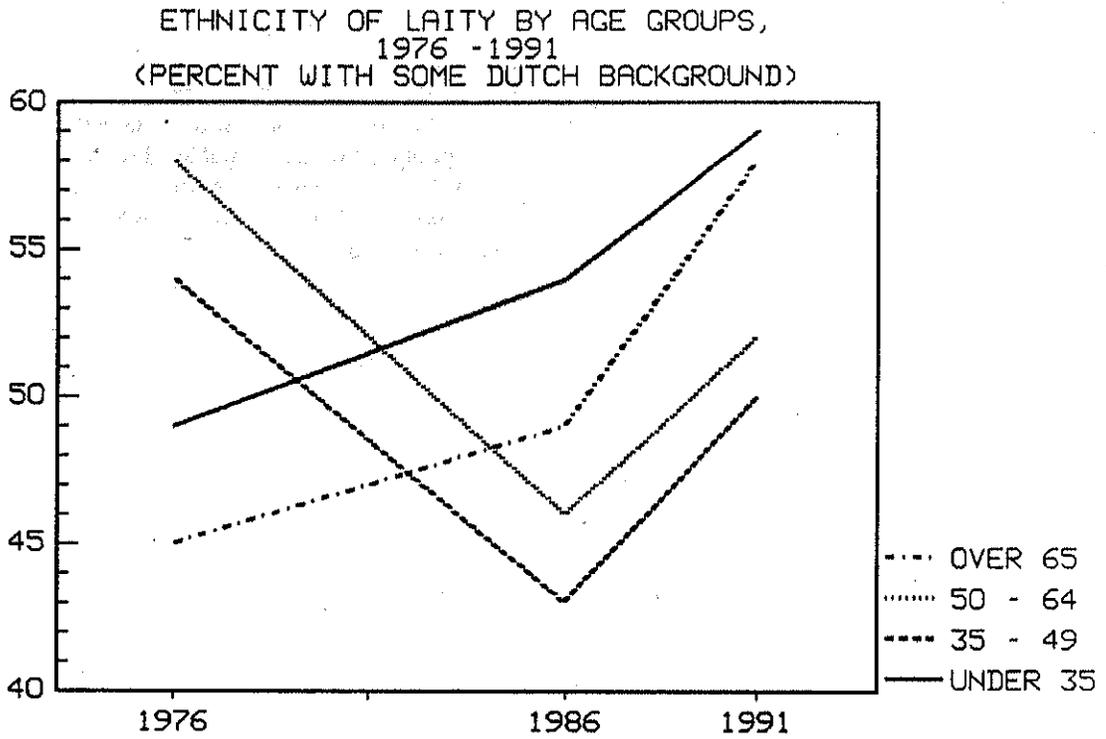
GRAPH #3



What is the relationship between ethnicity and gender in the RCA? Graph #3 indicates the proportion of males and females who are Dutch. In 1976, males were far more likely to be Dutch than were females: 58 percent of the RCA's males and only 47 percent of the females were Dutch. By 1991, however, females had caught-up with their male counterparts: now 54 percent of the females and 55 percent of the males are Dutch. This trend suggests the hypothesis that NonDutch men were among the earliest to leave (prior to the 1976 survey), and that the current decline in membership is happening, in large part, because significant numbers of NonDutch women have departed as well. The recent homogenizing is due, in particular, to the disproportionate departure of NonDutch women, so that their proportion in the denomination has now approached that of the NonDutch males.

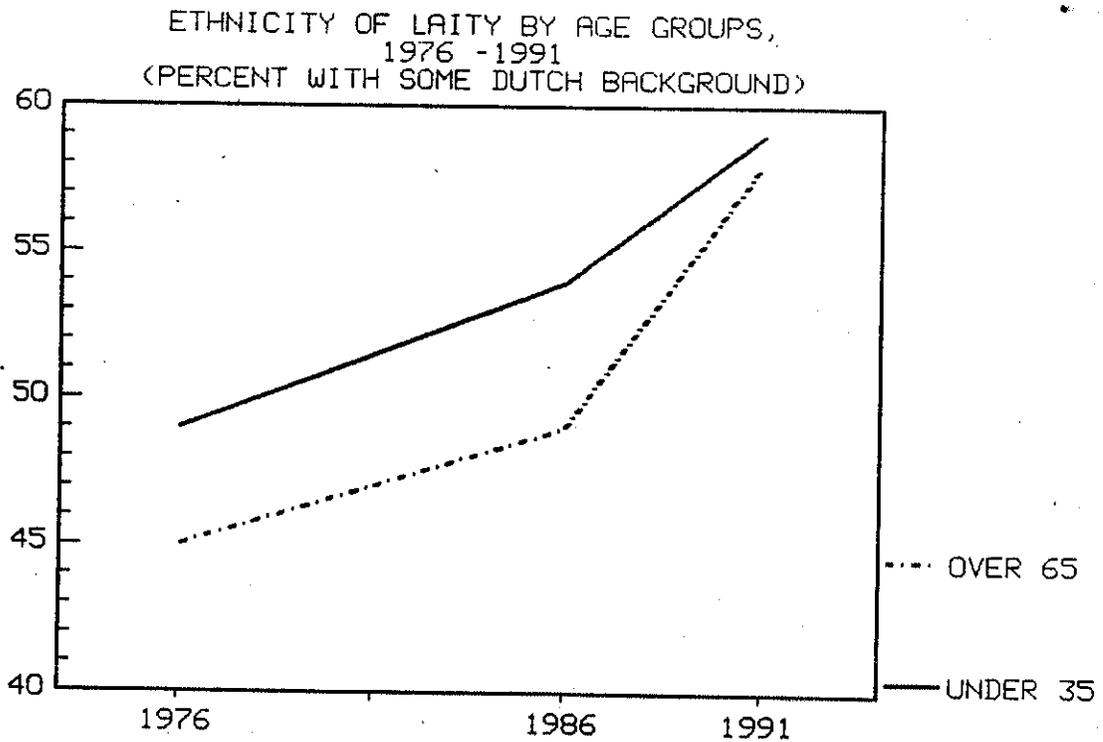
IV. Age and Ethnicity

GRAPH #4



Illustrated in Graph #4 is the percent of members of four age groups claiming at least some Dutch ethnic heritage. An interesting trend gleaned from this graph is that, since 1986 the percent of Dutch in all four groups has been increasing! Although we had expected the oldest age group to have a relatively high percentage of Dutch, we were surprised to find

GRAPH #4a

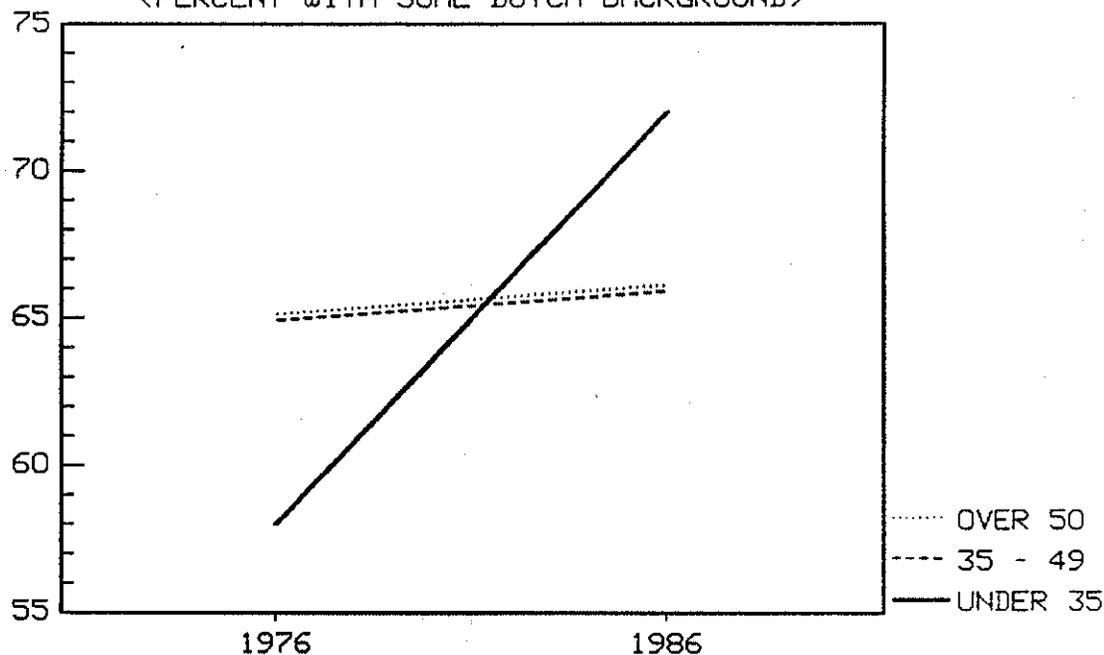


the percentage increasing. Likewise, the increasing Dutchness of the youngest (under age 35) lay members was also unexpected.

What is responsible for these recent and dramatic increases in Dutch members at the extremes of the age pyramid? Data suggest that the answer for the youngest age group is found in the RCA relying even more heavily for its replacement on attracting members from within its own ranks (i.e. replacement through recruitment of offspring) rather than through drawing outsiders to the denomination. The most easily retained are children who have Dutch heritages. Explaining the increase for the oldest group, however, is not as clear. It might be that as older members retire and move, the Dutch are more likely than NonDutch members to seek out other RCA churches. This may be especially true in the areas of the South and Southwest where the RCA is beginning to establish a congregational toe-hold (eg. Arizona and Southern California).

GRAPH #4b

ETHNICITY OF CLERGY BY AGE GROUPS,
1976 - 1986
(PERCENT WITH SOME DUTCH BACKGROUND)

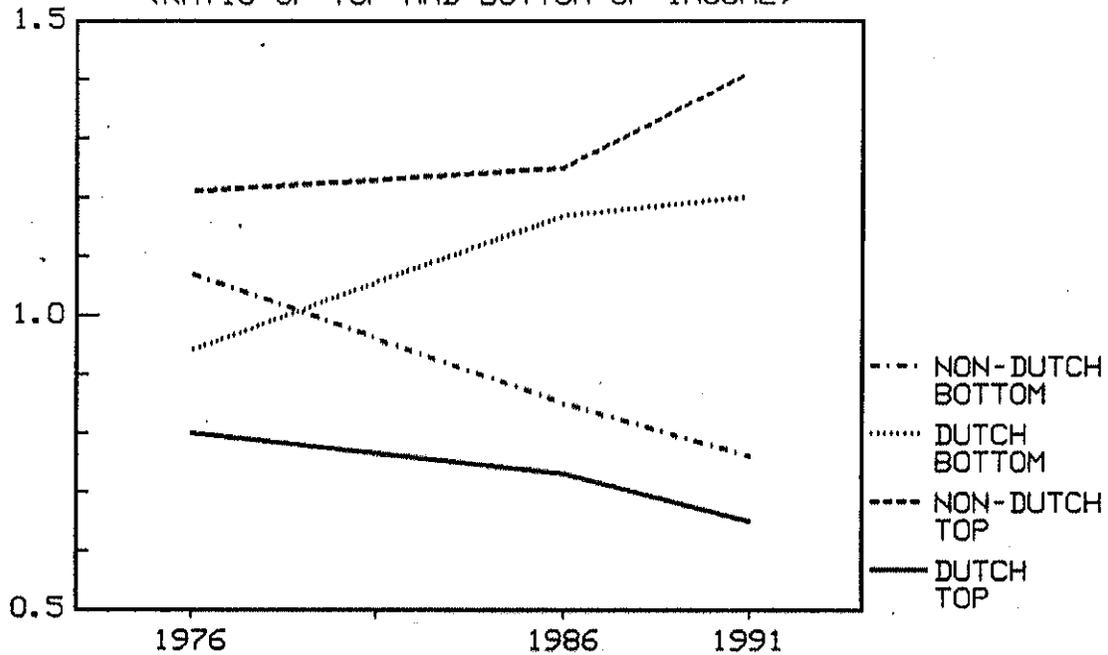


Graph #4b reveals that the proportion of Dutch among the older clergy (35 or older) has remained at the relatively high level of two-thirds. Among the youngest clergy, however, there has been a dramatic upsurge and they are now the most Dutch of any of the age groups. It appears that, similar to lay recruitment, the RCA is now relying even more on replacing clergy with members from within its own ranks. In this case, the most readily recruited are from among those with a Dutch background. Perhaps those who are NonDutch and who are reared in RCA congregations are less likely to be encouraged to seek ordination, or perhaps they are the most likely to feel obstructed in their calling and who therefore become ministers in other denominations.

V. Income and Ethnicity

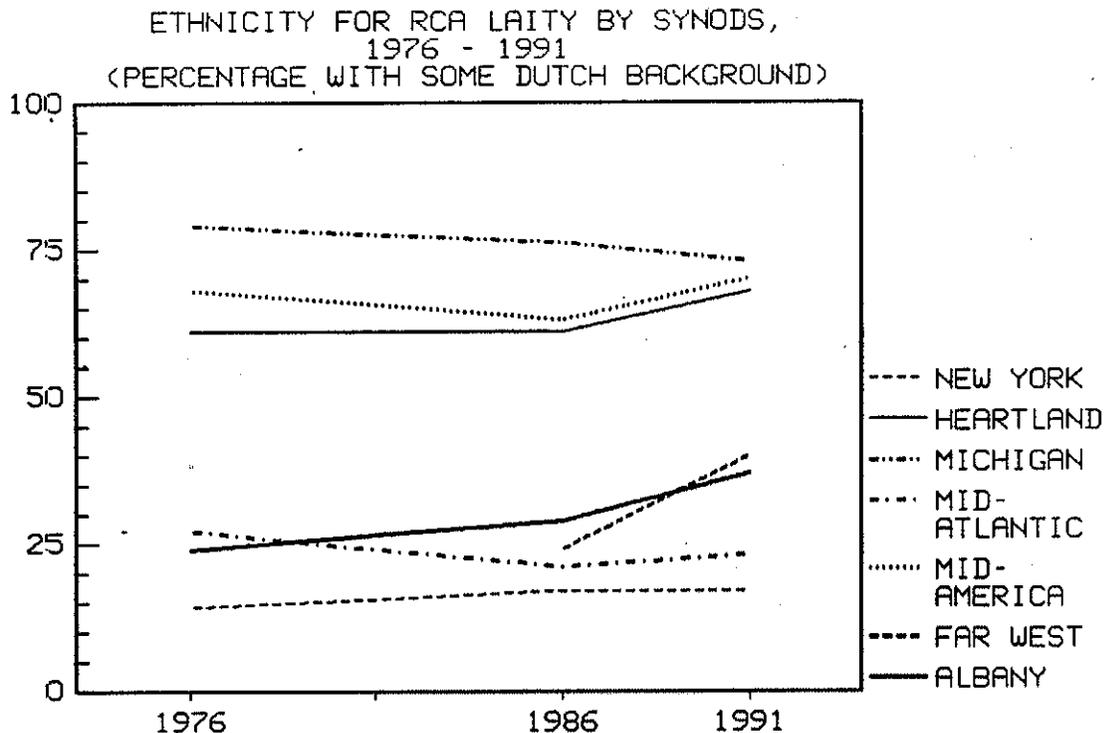
GRAPH #5

LAITY INCOME BY ETHNICITY,
1976-1991
(RATIO OF TOP AND BOTTOM OF INCOME)

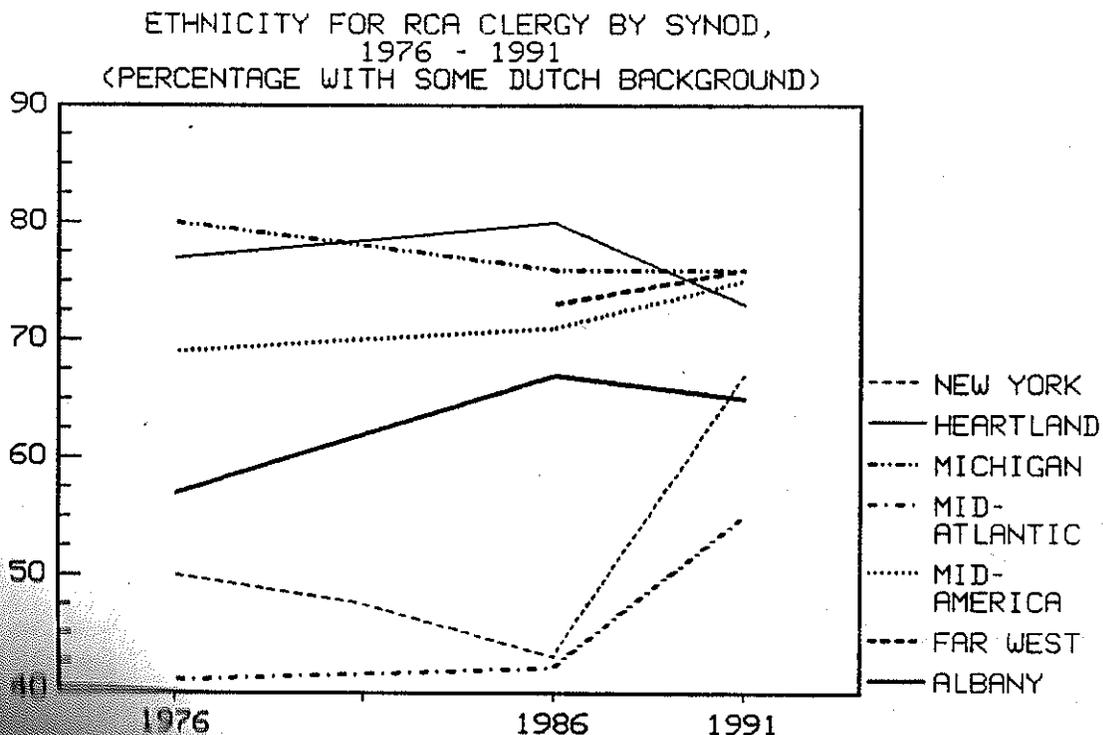


Presented in Graph #5 is a measure of the relative ethnicity of the wealthiest and poorest groups in the RCA over the past 15 years; these data are standardized for each reporting year. By examining the ratio of the top and bottom income groups for each year, we can see that the Dutch are over-represented among the poorest groups and are under-represented among the wealthiest. Moreover, the graph reveals that the proportion of Dutch in the highest income group is decreasing while the proportion of Dutch in the bottom income group is increasing. Since there are no significant age differences among the ethnic groups, the relationship between income and ethnicity cannot be explained away by age differences. We believe the differences in income levels between the Dutch and NonDutch is real and is likely to continue increasing in the future.

VI. Regional Variations



Graph 6 reveals that among the laity, there are two patterns of relationships between ethnicity and region: one for the Mid-West and the other for the East and West. The Michigan, Mid- America, and Heartlands Synods are consistently the most Dutch (between 75 and 80 percent). The New York, Mid-Atlantic, and Albany Synods are consistently the least Dutch, although they are more Dutch today than they were in 1976. The Synod of the Far West, while similar to the Eastern synods in Dutch composition, is rapidly becoming more Dutch. The growth in the Dutchness of the Far West is most likely the result of two factors: 1) recent growth of Canadian churches which are especially Dutch in their composition, and 2) the migration (such as after retirement) of Dutch members from the Mid-West to the West. As mentioned earlier, it appears that Dutch members (especially the older members) are more likely to seek out an RCA church at their new residence.



Graph 6a indicates that the relationship between ethnicity and region for clergy is not as clean-cut as it is for the laity. Although the Mid-West synods are consistently the most Dutch, the Far West is now in the midst of that group. Moreover, since 1976, there has been a steady rise in the Dutchness of all three Eastern synods. Especially dramatic has been the rise in Dutchness in New York Synod. Again, the ethnic homogenizing of the RCA is widespread and extends throughout the denomination.

Some Conclusions about the Ethnic Composition of the RCA

The picture that emerges from these background data indicates that the proportion of Dutchness has generally increased in the RCA over the past 15 years. This increase has taken place during a time of decline in the overall membership of the denomination. The increase in the proportion of Dutch is found at every age level and in every region of the country, and among the clergy as well as among the laity. The homogenizing of the RCA--in contrast to our expectations about greater ethnic diffuseness--continues apace.

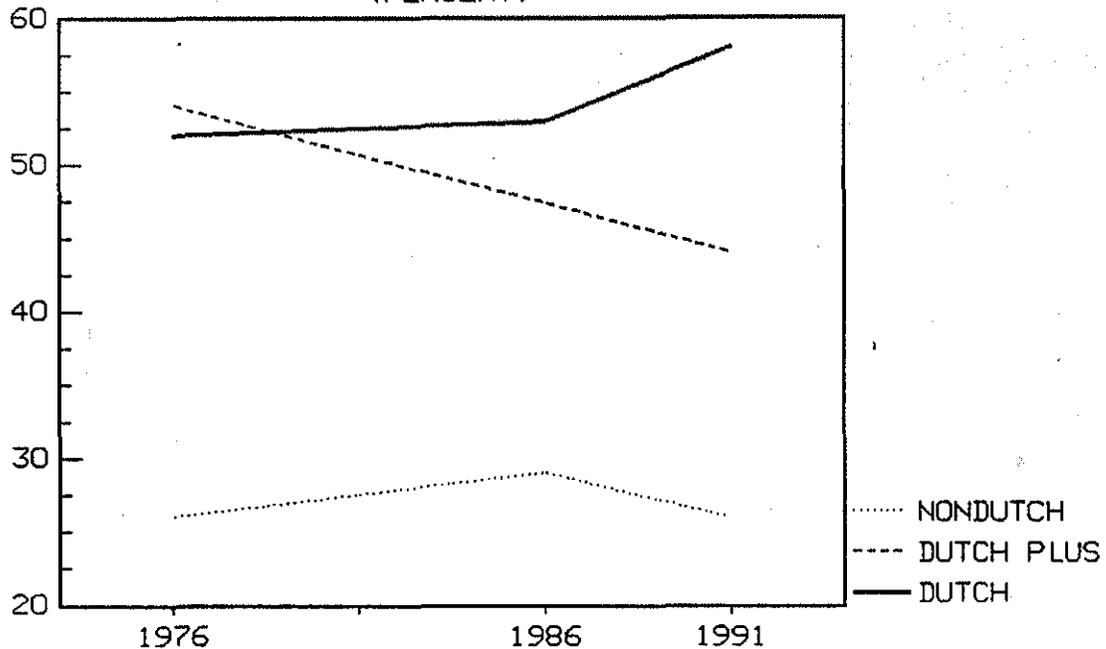
B: BELIEFS, BEHAVIORS AND ETHNICITY

Given that people of Dutch background continue to play a major role in the RCA, these questions need to be addressed: Does their ethnicity have any discernible consequences on the beliefs and practices of members of the RCA? Can we say anything about RCA members' religious commitments and church involvements if we know their ethnic heritage? We will answer these questions by examining the responses of Dutch and NonDutch members to several measures of denominational involvement, identity, and commitment.

I. Length of RCA Membership and Ethnicity

GRAPH #7

LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP IN RCA BY ETHNICITY
1976 - 1986
(PERCENT)



One important indicator of denominational identity is length of membership in the RCA. The longer one is a member of a denomination, the more likely that person is to feel an identity with that denomination. Presented in Graph 7 are the percentages of Dutch, partly Dutch (Dutch Plus), and NonDutch respondents with 30 or more

years of membership in the RCA. Not surprisingly, the Dutch and Dutch Plus are the groups with the largest percentages of long-time RCA members. On the other hand, relatively few (about one-fourth) of the NonDutch have been RCA members for more than 30 years.

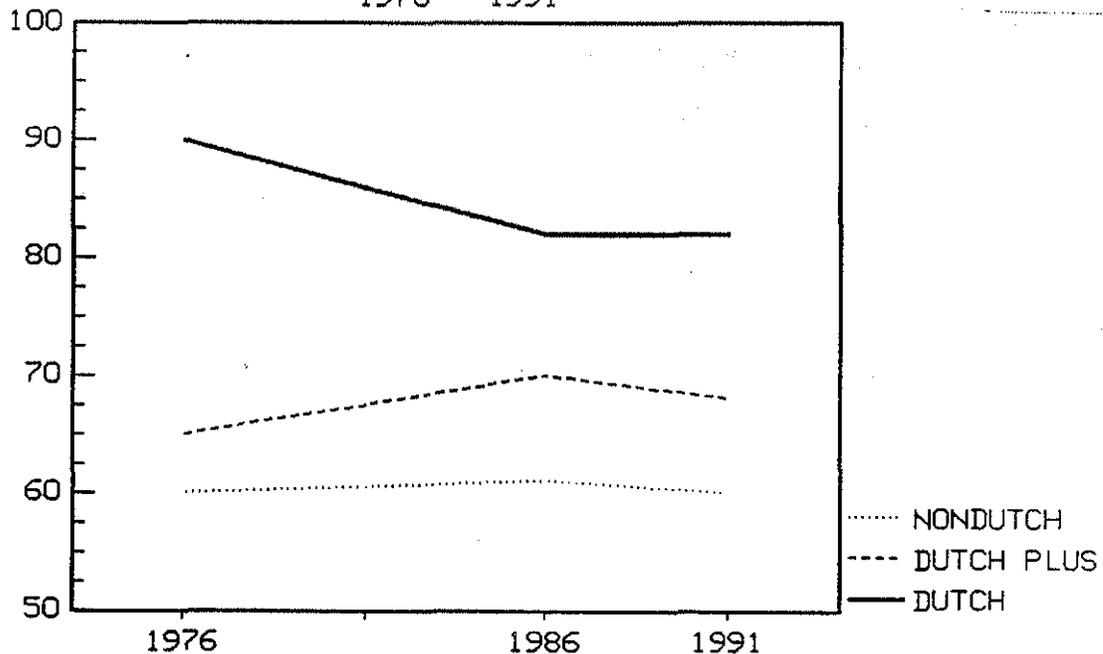
We had expected that between 1976 and 1991 we would find a narrowing in the ratio of Dutch to NonDutch in this long-time member group. However, the ratio has remained fairly constant at about 2 to 1. Indeed, in 1991 the gap actually widened to more than 2 to 1 (59 percent and 26 percent, respectively). It appears that the Dutch have consistently been less likely to leave the RCA than the NonDutch, and a substantial majority of the Dutch continue to be long-time members. This finding will undoubtedly have significant implications for the future lay leadership of the denomination.

II. Worship Attendance and Ethnicity

A second indicator of church identity and commitment is active worship attendance. Presented in Graph 8 is the percent

GRAPH #8

RCA LAY CHURCH ATTENDANCE, PERCENT
ATTENDING FOUR OR MORE TIMES PER MONTH;
1976 - 1991



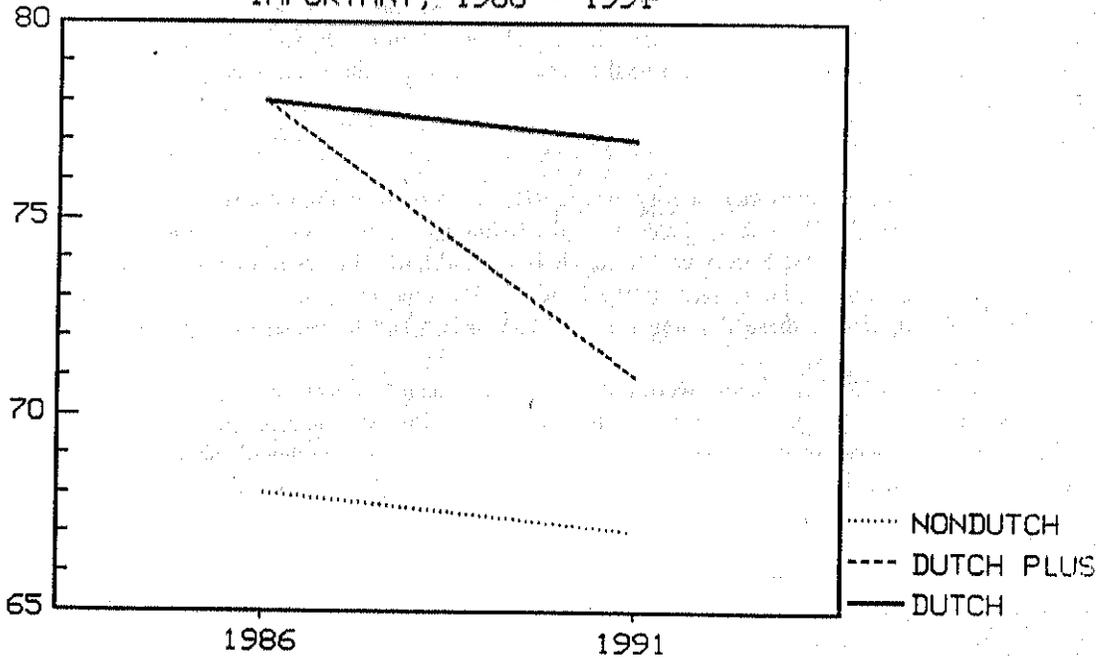
in each of the three ethnic groups of respondents who attend Sunday worship four or more times per month. In 1976, the Dutch had an extremely high 90 percent weekly church attendance rate, compared to about 60 percent for the NonDutch; the Dutch Plus fell between the two. Although the percentage of Dutch weekly attenders slips slightly by 1991, the percentage of Dutch Plus and NonDutch remained even lower. Thus, the gap between the Dutch and NonDutch is still about 20 to 25 percent. It should be noted that the overall percent attending worship four or more times a month in the RCA is very high relative to other denominations.

III. Importance of Membership and Ethnicity

Presented in Graphs 9 and 10 are the percentages of each ethnic group reporting that they feel their congregational and

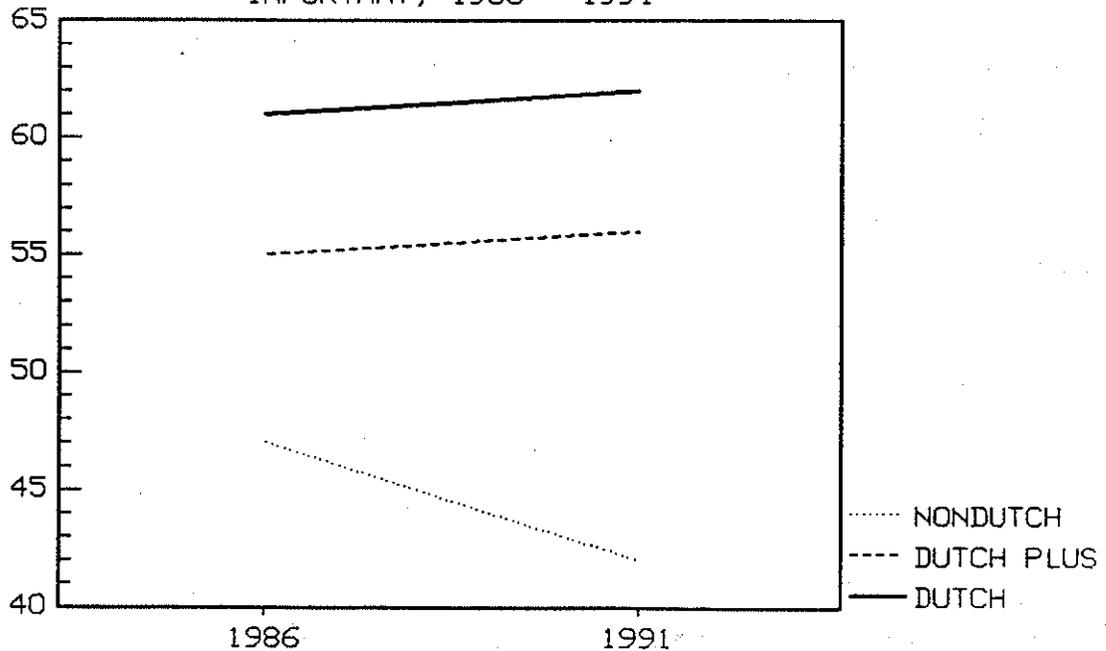
GRAPH #9

IMPORTANCE OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP
BY ETHNICITY; PERCENT EXTREMELY OR QUITE
IMPORTANT, 1986 - 1991



GRAPH #10

IMPORTANCE OF DENOMINATIONAL MEMBERSHIP
BY ETHNICITY; PERCENT EXTREMELY OR QUITE
IMPORTANT, 1986 - 1991



denominational memberships are extremely or quite important to them. In both cases, membership is more important to the Dutch and the Dutch Plus than to the NonDutch. Of particular interest is the finding that, while the importance of denominational membership for the Dutch and Dutch Plus groups has remained solid--and even increased slightly--over the past five years, it has slipped sharply for the NonDutch. This suggests feelings of marginality--both in their congregations and in the denomination as a whole--among NonDutch members of the RCA.

Furthermore, when findings from both graphs are compared it is evident that for each ethnic group, congregational membership is more important than denominational membership (about 20 percent more important, on average). This is the case, regardless of the ethnic background of the respondents. It highlights the localized measures of identity which operate in most RCA members' religious sensibilities. They are more likely to assess their memberships in terms of congregational issues than of denominational ones.

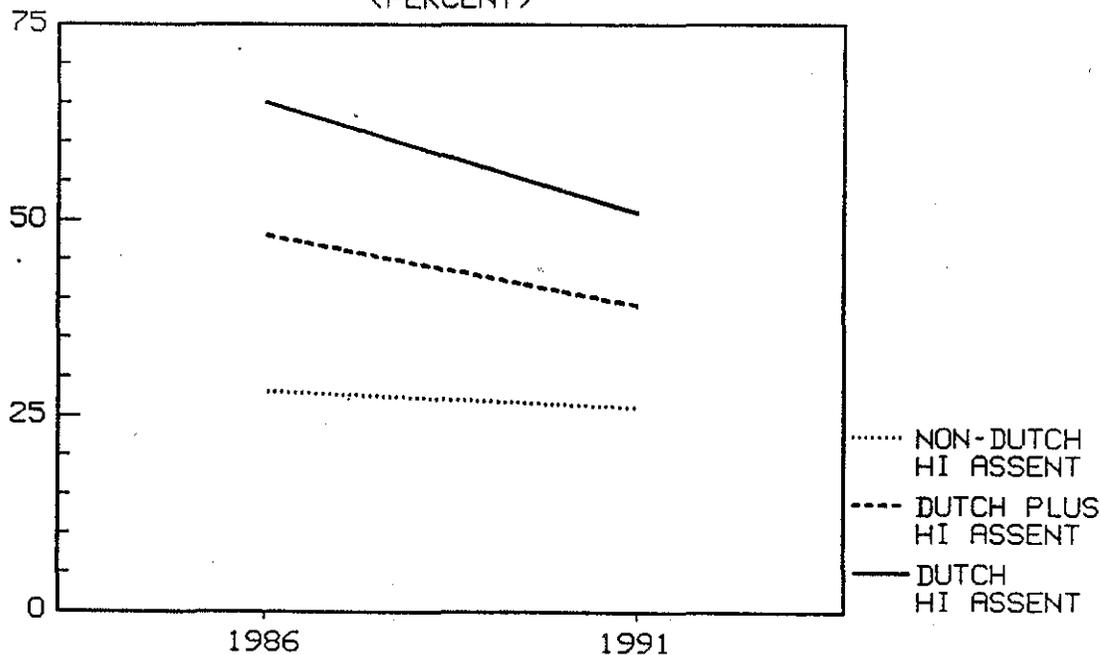
IV. Creeds and Ethnicity

A pillar of denominational identity for the RCA has long been the importance of certain creedal statements of faith. In particular the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort have played central roles in shaping Reformed Church theology and faith. For centuries, newcomers to the denomination were expected to memorize the answers to the Heidelberg's catechetical questions. Also, new members continue to affirm their support for these denominational "Standards," and clergy regularly pledge their commitment to "uphold" them.

In 1986 and 1991, members were asked if they had heard of each of these creeds. Only if they answered "Yes" were they also asked how important each was to their faith. Between one-third and one-half of the members had never heard of these creeds. This factor alone is astounding, and it bodes ill for the denomination's theological continuity. Data presented in Graph 11 are the percentages of each group which had heard of the

GRAPH #11

HIGH CREDAL ASSENT OF LAITY BY ETHNICITY
(HEID. CHA./BELGIC/DORT), 1986 - 1991
(PERCENT)



creeds and had reported that the creeds were important to their faith. Once again, the Dutch are the most supportive of these historic pillars of RCA faith; the NonDutch are the least supportive, and the Dutch Plus fall between the two.

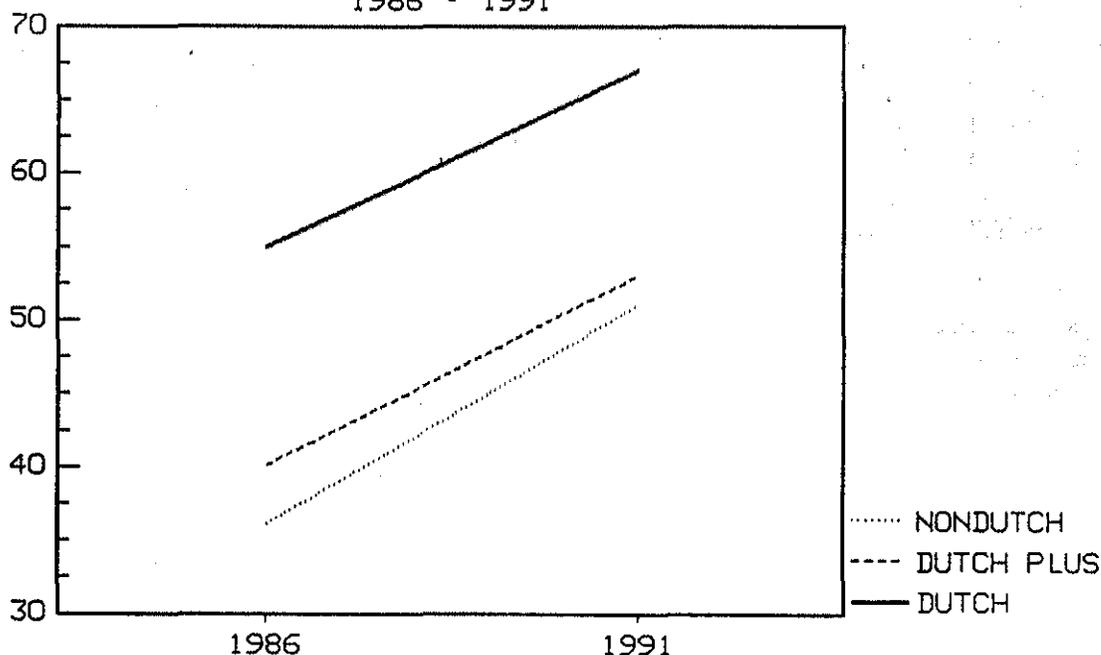
Despite this apparent support, however, there has been a decline over the past five years in the support for the creeds exhibited by the Dutch. Indeed, the gap between the Dutch and the NonDutch continues to be nearly 2 to 1. The fact that these creeds are not important to the majority of RCA members (and that they will probably be even less important in the future) draws into question whether creedal assent will continue to be (or again be) a vital component of denominational identity. In sum, Dutch ethnicity tends to mitigate the downward spiral in support for traditional RCA creeds, but its influence is only slight. The long-term prognosis is bleak.

V. Giving and Ethnicity

The financial support of church members has always been recognized as a bellwether indicator of their levels of personal commitment. But contributions are not only a matter of members' commitment; the amount members are able to give is partially a function of their income levels. Earlier in this study, we presented income data which indicated that the Dutch were over-represented in the bottom income groups and under-represented in the top income groups. Any analysis of RCA members' financial giving must be viewed in light of our findings on income levels.

GRAPH #12

AVERAGE WEEKLY GIVING BY ETHNICITY,
PERCENT GIVING \$20 OR MORE WEEKLY;
1986 - 1991

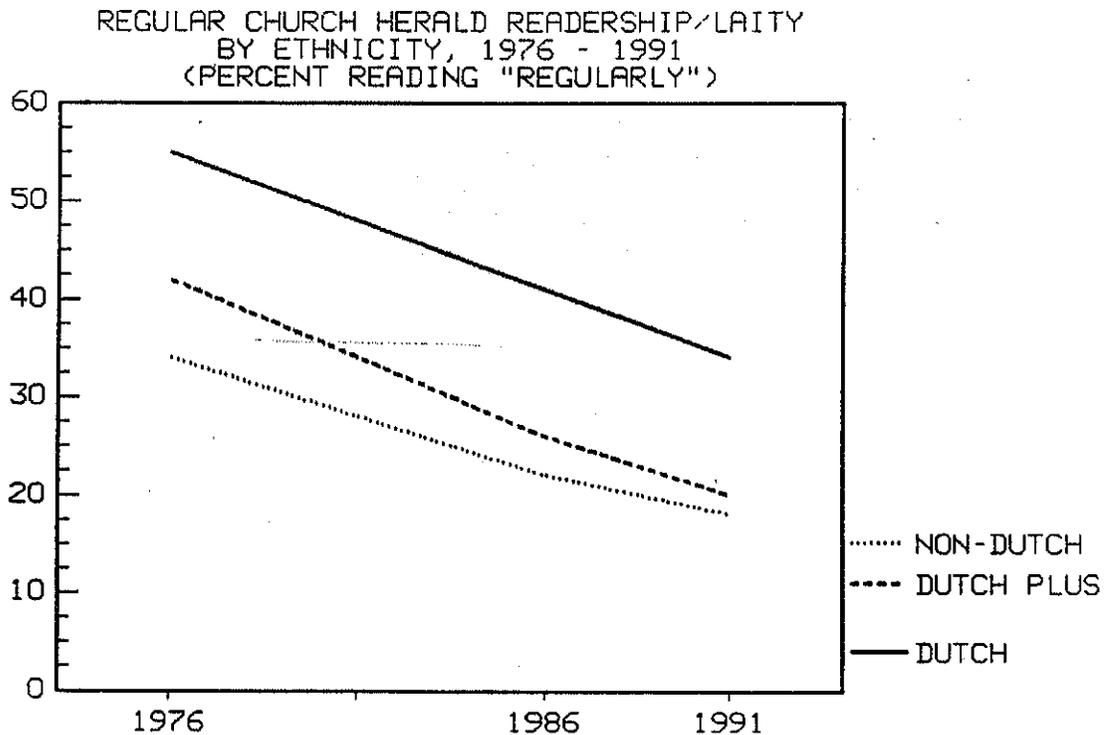


The data presented in Graph 12 are both expected and surprising. The fact that the percent of members giving an average of \$20 or more weekly rose for all groups was expected because of inflation and the general rise in wages and earnings over the past five years. We were quite surprised, however, to find that the Dutch (the disproportionately poorer group) give substantially more than the Dutch Plus and the NonDutch (the wealthier group). Moreover, the differences between Dutch and NonDutch do not appear to be narrowing appreciably. These findings pose serious questions about the future sources of support of the denomination; as the denomination continues to depend on its poorest constituents (the Dutch) for its principal sources of income, a point of diminishing returns can be expected.

VI. Church Herald Readership and Ethnicity

The official publication of the RCA is the *Church Herald*, a monthly periodical. Unlike some denominational publications, subscription to the *Church Herald* is not underwritten by the denomination on an every-member basis. Thus, members' subscriptions can be viewed as indicators of their identity with, and commitment to, the RCA: the higher the readership, the greater the level of commitment. Found in Graph 13 are data on regular lay readership of the *Church Herald*.

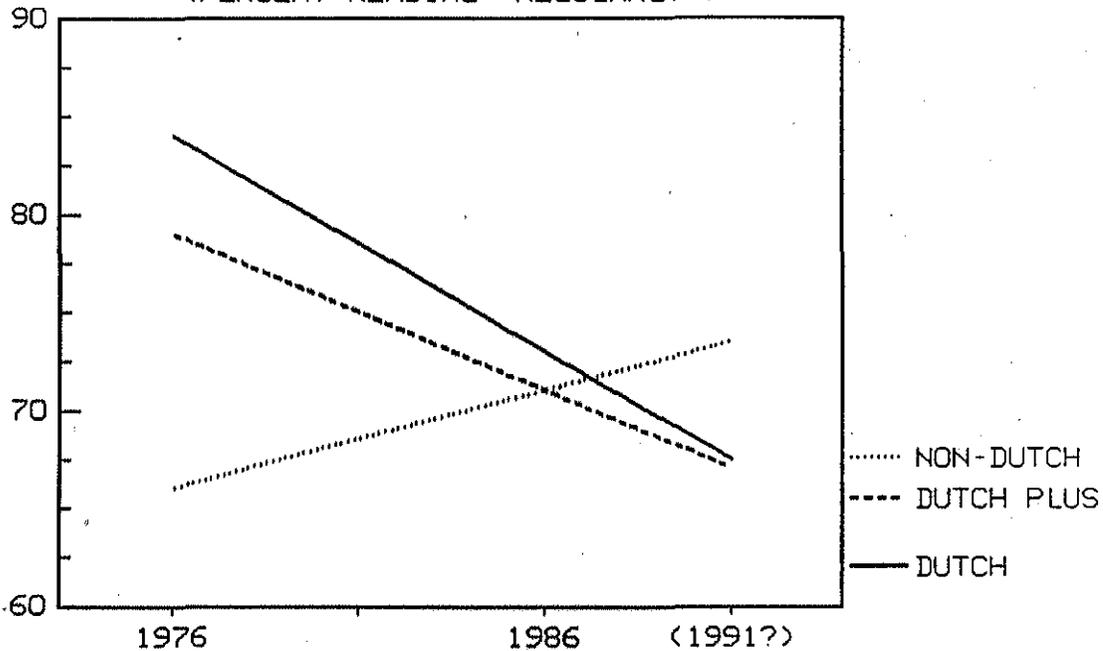
GRAPH #13



The most evident finding is that regular readership has declined for all groups. However, within this generally negative picture, the Dutch continue to be the most avid readers, and the margin of difference between them and the NonDutch remains around 15 to 20 percent. Once again the Dutch Plus group falls between the others. These findings are consistent with earlier graphs indicating a clear pattern of stronger Dutch support for the RCA.

GRAPH #14

REGULAR CHURCH HERALD READERSHIP/CLERGY
BY ETHNICITY, 1976 - 1991
(PERCENT READING "REGULARLY")



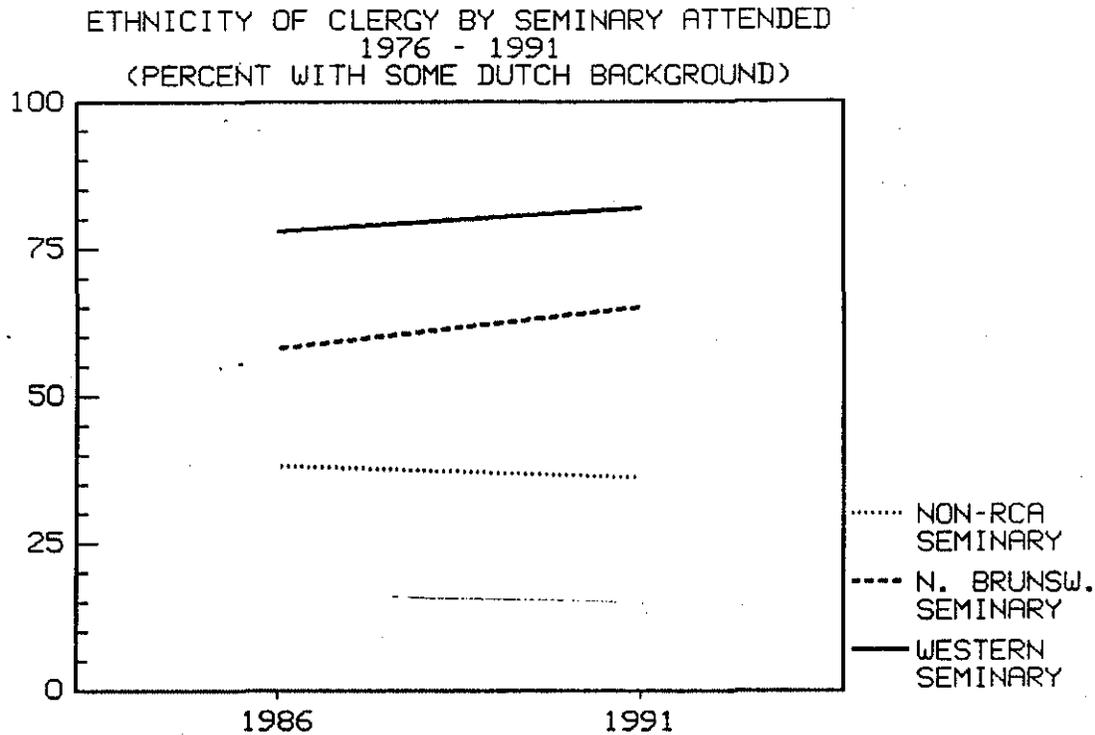
Graph 14 presents data on regular *Church Herald* readership among clergy. Unlike the data for laity, this graph does not indicate consistently stronger support among the Dutch. In 1976, Dutch clergy were substantially more likely to be regular readers than NonDutch clergy. Between 1976 and 1986, however, the percent of regular readers among the Dutch and Dutch Plus dropped sharply while the percentages for NonDutch rose slightly. By 1986 we find no significant differences between the readership levels of the three groups. Unfortunately, we have not had a chance to examine data for 1991. Presented in Graph 14 are projections for 1991 based on the trends found between 1976 and 1986. If these trends continue, our projections indicate that the NonDutch clergy will surpass the Dutch and the Dutch Plus in readership.

This graph poses the question: Why are the findings for this indicator of church identity so different from all the previous ones? Without examining a great deal more data, we cannot be confident of the reason or reasons. From Graph 14 we can see that the explanation is to be found primarily in accounting for the rather sharp drop in Dutch and Dutch Plus readerships and not in the modest increase in NonDutch readers. The specific question that needs answering is: Why are Dutch clergy not reading the *Church Herald* as faithfully as they did 15 years ago? Further analysis of the 1991 data may shed some light on this anomaly.

VII. Seminary Training and Ethnicity

Our final indicator of denominational identity is limited to the clergy. In recent years there has been a growing concern in the RCA about where seminarians receive their theological education. Specifically, the concern is with the growing number of students choosing non-RCA seminaries over Western and New Brunswick Theological Seminaries. Is this trend influenced by ethnicity? Are Dutch seminarians as likely to choose one of the two RCA seminaries over a non-RCA seminary? What differences might result?

The evidence in Graph 15 is based on Western, New Brunswick, and non-RCA seminary graduates among the clergy of the Reformed Church. These data represent the percents of graduates who have



some Dutch heritage in their backgrounds. The graph suggests that RCA seminary graduates are significantly more likely to be Dutch than are non-RCA seminary graduates, and that Western graduates are the most likely to be Dutch. Furthermore, among the graduates of RCA seminaries, the proportion of Dutchness has risen slightly during the five years between 1986 and 1991; by contrast, the Dutch composition of non-RCA seminary graduates has dropped slightly. It would appear that the RCA's seminaries are important sorters along ethnic lines.

CONCLUSIONS

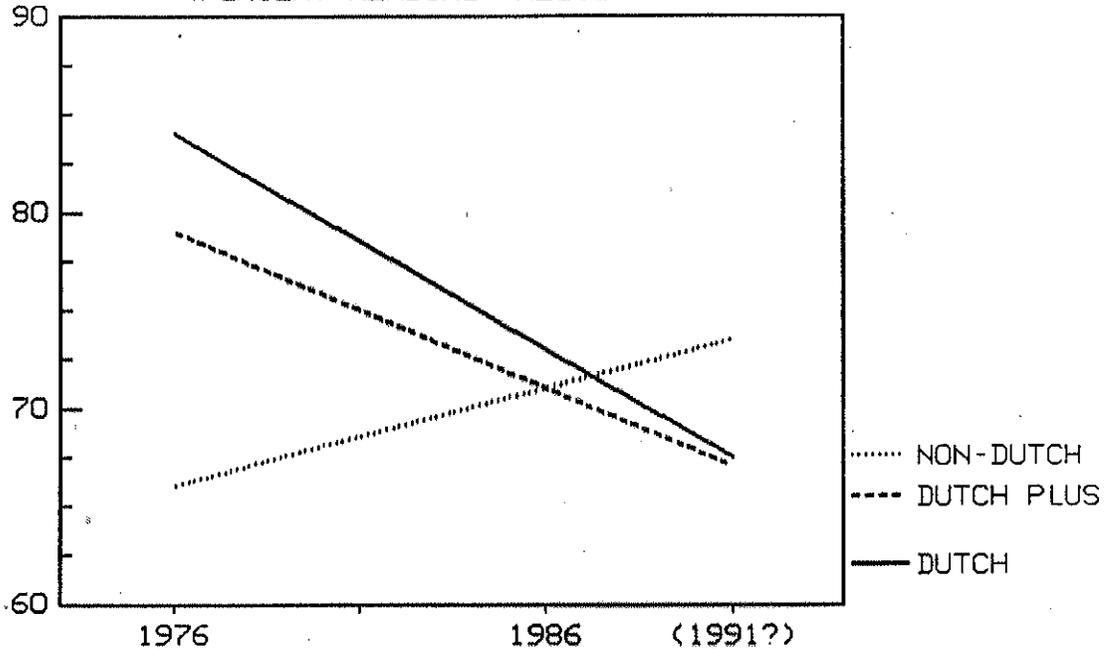
What are the implications for the future of the Reformed Church given the data presented in this paper? With the denomination having lost large numbers of its membership in recent years, what can we say about those who have chosen to stay and those who have recently chosen to join? When viewed collectively, our data indicate that the Dutch continue to comprise the "ethnic bedrock" of the RCA. Given all the social and demographic changes actively eroding denominational membership, Dutch ethnicity continues to be a strong (perhaps the strongest) source of cohesion at work in the RCA today. This finding is clearly not what we expected. Indeed, we fully anticipated that the 1991 survey would indicate a further decline in the Dutchness of the denomination (as had been the case between 1976 and 1981), and that ethnicity would play less and less of a role in the beliefs and practices of RCA members. We must confess that, while we are fascinated by the enduring influence of ethnicity in the RCA, we are also apprehensive.

What does it mean that the Dutch "ethnic bedrock" is now being exposed to the full brunt of social forces sweeping the RCA and other mainline Protestant denominations? While we are not able to definitively answer this question in this paper, we offer the following speculations.

1. Increasingly the RCA is in competition with other mainline churches in a myriad of local markets. Congregational affiliations are the dominant issue in local church growth, and they have largely to do with program and leadership in individual churches. The RCA appears to have only one "advantage" over its competition in that marketplace: It has a special appeal to people of Dutch background (either to draw them in or to keep them in). On the other hand, this "advantage" is also a significant disadvantage, for there are fewer and fewer eligible recruits

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(PERCENT READING "REGULARLY")



Graph 14 presents data on regular *Church Herald* readership among clergy. Unlike the data for laity, this graph does not indicate consistently stronger support among the Dutch. In 1976, Dutch clergy were substantially more likely to be regular readers than NonDutch clergy. Between 1976 and 1986, however, the percent of regular readers among the Dutch and Dutch Plus dropped sharply while the percentages for NonDutch rose slightly. By 1986 we find no significant differences between the readership levels of the three groups. Unfortunately, we have not had a chance to examine data for 1991. Presented in Graph 14 are projections for 1991 based on the trends found between 1976 and 1986. If these trends continue, our projections indicate that the NonDutch clergy will surpass the Dutch and the Dutch Plus in readership.

This graph poses the question: Why are the findings for this indicator of church identity so different from all the previous ones? Without examining a great deal more data, we cannot be confident of the reason or reasons. From Graph 14 we can see that the explanation is to be found primarily in accounting for the rather sharp drop in Dutch and Dutch Plus readerships and not in the modest increase in NonDutch readers. The specific question that needs answering is: Why are Dutch clergy not reading the *Church Herald* as faithfully as they did 15 years ago? Further analysis of the 1991 data may shed some light on this anomaly.

VII. Seminary Training and Ethnicity

Our final indicator of denominational identity is limited to the clergy. In recent years there has been a growing concern in the RCA about where seminarians receive their theological education. Specifically, the concern is with the growing number of students choosing non-RCA seminaries over Western and New Brunswick Theological Seminaries. Is this trend influenced by ethnicity? Are Dutch seminarians as likely to choose one of the two RCA seminaries over a non-RCA seminary? What differences might result?

The evidence in Graph 15 is based on Western, New Brunswick, and non-RCA seminary graduates among the clergy of the Reformed Church. These data represent the percents of graduates who have

from that pool of people. Evidence presented in this study suggests that, even a modicum of "NonDutchness" in one's veins is sufficient to lower one's involvement, commitment, and loyalty to the RCA. One possible factor that could mitigate against this trend is the large number of potential Dutch recruits in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). To the extent that the RCA can (continue to) serve as a refuge for disaffected CRC members, this could act to ameliorate matters in the short term. We do not recommend this tactic! We simply note that the CRC represents the only viable source for significant numbers of new Dutch members.

2. While "going for the Dutch, all the Dutch, and nothing but the Dutch" is not a particularly attractive recruiting technique, the alternative is not so enticing either. The NonDutch are the hardest to recruit, the least involved and loyal once they are members, and the most likely to depart. Switchers from other Mainline Denominations are generally "passing through" the RCA, and they are not likely to build up the kind of denominational loyalty that is essential to maintain the RCA long into the future.

3. The RCA's clergy are the principal carriers of the denomination's Dutchness. Regardless of their RCA seminary of origin, they are generally Dutch. The exception is among non-RCA seminary graduates (a fraction of the whole), who are only 40 percent Dutch. Furthermore, among the fastest growing Dutch contingents in the RCA are the youngest clergy. This suggests a long-term homogenizing trend which will further isolate the RCA in its own ethnic enclave.

In sum, ethnicity is a vital ingredient in the life of the RCA. It sorts members into varying levels of involvement in the institutions of the RCA and of commitment to the beliefs and traditions which make up its heritage. This "bedrock" quality is both a boon and a bane: While it can expect intense loyalty from some members, it is a source of frustration for others. Barring a massive flood of newcomers from the old country, the very Dutch legacy which has sustained so many generations of immigrants and immigrant descendants may prove to be too intractable for the long-term viability of the Reformed Church in America.

Endnotes

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1929).
2. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society: A Sociological Approach to Religion in America* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), p. 108.
3. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Protestantism: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and Robert Wuthnow, *Restructuring American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) talk about these larger trends.
4. Respondents were asked in the three surveys to indicate their "principal ethnic heritage." Those who listed only Dutch were included as the "Dutch" group; those who listed Dutch and another ethnic heritage were called "Dutch Plus." At times in the following analysis, the responses from members of these two groups were so similar that they were combined to form a group of "Some Dutch." All other respondents were classified as "NonDutch" for the purposes of this study.