

The True Dutch Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois

Joel R. Beeke

Situated some twenty miles south from the heart of Chicago, South Holland, Illinois, is known as one of the oldest Dutch-American communities in the Midwest. It was settled in the 1840s by a wave of Dutch immigrants. At that time, it was undeveloped, fertile prairie.¹

Today, 160 years later, Chicago's spreading metropolis has reached out to include South Holland as one of its numerous suburbs. Presently, the population of South Holland is 30,000. The price of property is high, traffic is heavy; nevertheless, South Holland remains a pleasant place to live, free for the most part from the congestion and competitiveness of a large inner-city environment. The Dutch flavor of the city is greatly diminished, though not altogether lost. Stores with Dutch goods and restaurants with Dutch menus still fare well. Numerous Reformed denominations with Dutch roots are still represented, including the small, conservative Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC).

The South Holland, Illinois NRC has the unique distinction of being both the oldest and smallest congregation in its denomination. In

¹ For the bulk of the historical material recorded in this article, I am indebted to the research of Rev. Gerrit Bieze of Athens, Ontario, who has been working for several years on compiling a volume detailing the history of the South Holland NRC. The title for his forthcoming work, "A Remnant Remains," is taken from Mrs. Meinders's conviction that the Lord had promised to preserve a remnant in this congregation.

True Dutch Reformed Church

this paper, I will examine its historical roots and organization (1847-65), its early years of crises (1865-74), its only long-term ministry in the person of Rev. E. L. Meinders (1874-1904), and its last century (1904-2003), then conclude with explaining how the congregation has retained its existence for nearly 140 years.

Historical Roots and Organization (1847-1865)

To understand the beginnings of the True Dutch Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois, we must turn to the late 1840s. In 1847, the first group of Dutch immigrants, a dozen in number, settled in South Holland. A year later, their numbers were substantially increased with the arrival of Rev. W. C. Wust, who was accompanied by thirty members of his Old Reformed Congregation. Rev. Wust organized a small Dutch Reformed congregation of fourteen families almost immediately. It was called the *Gereformeerde Kerk onder het Kruis* (Reformed Church under the Cross). In 1849, Rev. Wust organized a second congregation in a neighboring locality called Roseland, which consisted largely of fresh immigrants from the northern part of the Netherlands. Rev. Wust was an able, solidly Reformed preacher, who possessed substantial gifts in exegeting a text and bringing out its experiential truths. His labors were blessed with several conversions and the spiritual growth of believers. Sadly, however, less than twenty months after organizing these congregations, Rev. Wust returned to his former flock in Giessendam.

Shortly after Rev. Wust returned to the Netherlands, the Roseland and South Holland flocks affiliated with Rev. A. Van Raalte's churches of western Michigan and joined the Reformed Church of America (RCA). From 1850-1855, the pulpits remained vacant in these congregations. In 1855, Rev. M. Ypma (1810-1862), minister in the Reformed Church at Graafschap, Michigan, accepted the South Holland/Roseland call. Rev. Ypma had previously served the congregations of Hallum, in the province of Friesland, the Netherlands, and Vriesland, Michigan. Like Rev. Wust, Rev. Ypma upheld the Reformed, experiential doctrines of sovereign grace, but his character was such that he did not promote peace in the congregations he served. In both congregations he had served, as well as South Holland, secessions occurred shortly after his departure.

When Rev. Ypma accepted a pastoral call to Alto, Wisconsin, in 1861, the South Holland and Roseland congregations were in turmoil. In 1862, a

True Dutch Reformed Church

difficult task came to rest on the shoulders of the congregations' third minister, Rev. S. Bolks. Rev. Bolks was converted in 1830 at age sixteen. He began speaking an edifying word at various conventicles (i.e., fellowship gatherings of children of God, popularly called *gezelschappen* in Dutch) when he was twenty. Subsequently, he felt called to the ministry and studied under Rev. Van Raalte for fifteen months before serving a congregation at Hellendoorn, province of Overijssel, for seven years. In 1847, he and the bulk of his congregation immigrated to western Michigan. He served four congregations (Overisel and Grand Haven, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Chicago, Illinois) before he accepted the joint pastoral call from South Holland and Roseland, Illinois.

Though pleasant in character, Rev. Bolks reportedly had few gifts for preaching. Moreover, a substantial part of the South Holland congregation could not accept his moderate-Calvinistic preaching. As Rev. Gerrit Bieze notes, "This did not sit well with those favoring a stern Calvinism, such as Rev. Ypma's, or an experiential-style of preaching joined with a stern Calvinism such as Rev. Wust's." For these reasons, combined with a considerable number of unresolved problems left behind by Rev. Ypma, several members broke with the church already in 1862 and began meeting in various homes. Ultimately, this led to contact with several church leaders in Michigan from the True Dutch Reformed Church.² On January 27, 1865, this group was received into the True Dutch Reformed denomination and officially organized. Anthony Van Drunen was elected as elder; Arie Van Drunen and Peter De Jong as deacons. Fourteen families were received as members of the congregation with their baptized children, numbering twenty-eight professing members and thirty-five baptized members. The following Sunday nine children who had not been baptized in the recent years of conflict were baptized; hence, the church began with seventy-two members. Church services were held in the home

²The True Dutch Reformed (TDRC) denomination dates from 1857 when four congregations in western Michigan seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1880, the TDRC changed their denominational name to Holland Christian Reformed Church (HCRC); subsequently, "Holland" was dropped so that this denomination came to be known by its present name, Christian Reformed Church.

True Dutch Reformed Church
of Deacon Van Drunen. Such was the birth of what we know today as the South Holland True Dutch Reformed Church that is now part of the NRC.

In *A Brief Historical Survey*, Rev. J. Van Zweden quotes from old classical minutes the following:

The Classical meeting of the True Dutch Reformed church held on January 12 and 13, 1865 at Zeeland, Michigan has, at the request of a few members residing in Long [should read, "Low"] Prairie, Illinois, appointed and delegated a committee composed of Rev. W. H. Van Leeuwen and Elder T. [should read, "J."] De Jong of a congregation at Grand Rapids, Michigan to go there and, if possible, to organize a congregation. The aforesaid committee put forth efforts to that end on Friday, January 27, 1865 at the home of a member, Arie Van Drunen, after having heard a sermon preached by Rev. Van Leeuwen based on Psalm 89:16a.³

Early Years of Crises (1865-1874)

Two weeks later, on February 13, the small congregation decided to erect their own church building. Prior to the materialization of these plans, however, their small group became considerably smaller. Only a few months after their organization, Rev. H.R. Koopman accepted a call to the Reformed Church in South Holland. Rev. Koopman was an able pastor, experiential preacher, and tender peacemaker. Most of the members of the newly organized True Dutch Reformed congregation returned to their old Reformed Church. Classical minutes for 1867 inform us that church services were no longer being held in the True Dutch Reformed congregation.

With the departure of Rev. Koopman in 1867 to Pella, Iowa, and the arrival of Rev. A. Zwemer in 1868 as pastor of the South Holland Reformed Church, the South Holland True Dutch Reformed Church began to meet again. Immigration and internal growth added to their numbers quite rapidly so that by 1869 they were of sufficient size to be able to support a minister. The first trio presented consisted of Rev. E. L. Meinders of Steamboat Rock, Iowa, Rev. J. Schepers of Chicago, and

³John Van Zweden and G. Henry Kersten, *A Brief Historical Survey*, 83.

True Dutch Reformed Church

Rev. H. R. Koopman of Pella, Iowa. Rev. Koopman received the call but declined.

Great strife prevailed in these early years (1868-1871). Consistory minutes record numerous examples of discipline. Near the end of 1871, the moderator, Rev. F. Hulst, finally persuaded the consistory of two elders and two deacons to lay down their respective offices in order to allow the congregation to elect a new consistory. Remarkably, in a free vote the congregation elected the same four men back into their identical offices! Nevertheless, this proved to grant some return to stability.

In 1872, the congregation called Rev. F. Hulst, Rev. H.R. Koopman, and Rev. H. Fryling, all of whom declined. In 1873, Rev. Fryling declined a second call. The pastorless flock again encountered discipline cases and strife. Under God's blessing, the able assistance of Rev. Hulst preserved the flock from further divisions.

On December 18, 1873, a pastoral call was extended to Rev. E. L. Meinders, who accepted the call and would remain with the South Holland flock for the remainder of his life.

Rev. E. L. Meinders (1874-1904)

Ede L. Meinders (1827-1904) was a German by birth. His God-fearing parents schooled him in the principles of the old Reformed faith. In his youthful days, he read much of Rev. H. De Cock and others who maintained "the old paths" of the Reformers and the *Nadere Reformatie*. He was brought to conversion in 1854 at age twenty-seven.

In 1857, Meinders immigrated to America. He settled among friends and relatives in Ridott, Illinois, during a time of revival in which several persons were remarkably converted—two of whom would later become his wives. He worked for three years as a farm laborer in the area, and experienced much blessing for his own soul. During this period, he experienced personal assurance of faith that Christ was his Savior.

Not long after this, Meinders felt called to the ministry. In 1860, he was given permission by the consistory of the Reformed Church at Ridott to speak an edifying word as "evangelist-exhorter" among Ostfrisians living near Whiterock, Illinois, some thirty miles south of Ridott. The Lord blessed these labors so that two additional churches could be organized in the area after several years. In the meantime, Meinders was called as exhorter to a larger group of Ostfrisians in the area of Forreston, Illinois.

True Dutch Reformed Church

This group, organized in 1861, contained a wide variety of parishioners, including some who favored conventicles over preaching and others who were of a liberal Reformed mentality or who had become Baptists. Within two years, this group split and then split again. Meinders was accused of being a “trouble-maker.” Finally, matters were brought to a Milwaukee classical gathering in 1864, which advised that Meinders leave the Forreton area. One minister in particular accused him of being too Calvinistic and “the boldest man I have ever known”!

Meinders’s supportive group at Forreton, who loved such *oude schrijvers* (“old writers”) as Brakel, Comrie, and Smytegelt, could not accept the decision of the Milwaukee Classis. Hence, they seceded to form a so-called “Old School” Presbyterian Church, then decided to collect sufficient funds to send Meinders to Dubuque Seminary, the theological school of the Old School Presbyterians. Due to the arrival of many students who were not sufficiently prepared for theological studies, Dubuque was organized on a three-tier level: a preparatory division, a college, and the actual theological school. Meinders, however, was admitted directly into the theological school. From 1864-1867, he studied biblical languages and Reformed theology at Dubuque, while speaking an edifying word on Sundays to his supporters in the Forreton area.

During the last summer of his theological studies, Meinders was sent to labor in the area of Steamboat Rock, Iowa. This congregation was officially organized as a Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in November of that year, at which time candidate Meinders was called, despite considerable opposition. He accepted the call and was ordained into the ministry on January 9, 1868.

At that time, the Christian Reformed Church had only sixteen organized congregations and eight ministers; Rev. Meinders was the only one who had formal theological training. Regarded as a highly educated minister (he knew German, Dutch, and English in addition to Hebrew and Greek), it was inevitable that Rev. Meinders would be called to exercise a variety of leadership positions in the young Christian Reformed denomination. Moreover, he also penned numerous articles and several sermons in his early years of ministry.

Rev. Meinders remained in Steamboat Rock for six years. Here he married his first wife in 1868, Hilke Bode, a God-fearing, twenty-nine year old widow who had one child. After only eight weeks of marriage,

True Dutch Reformed Church

his young bride died from injuries sustained in being thrown off a wagon when its driver lost control of his horses. Rev. Meinders conducted his own wife's funeral. Despite battling depression, the Lord enabled him to press forward, and used his affliction to deepen his spiritual exercises. He would later write a series of articles on the life of his late wife for *De Wachter*.

Seventeen months later, he married his second wife, a God-fearing, thirty-seven year old single, Geertje Peterson. This marriage also saw great affliction. One year after their union, Mrs. Meinders had a stillborn daughter. Two years later, she bore a son who lived only a few minutes. Though Mrs. Meinders lived for seventeen more years, her health was permanently broken. Nevertheless, throughout these years she remained a continual support to her husband in spiritual and church matters. Her experiences, penned near the end of her life and published by her husband two years after her death, have been translated into English as *The Memory of the Just: A short description of the life and blessed death of Mrs. Geertje F. Meinders*.

Rev. Meinders was installed in the South Holland True Dutch Reformed Church on March 15, 1874. The first year of his ministry in South Holland was one of the most blessed of his life. God's people were fed, peace was finally established in the consistory, the little flock nearly doubled in size, a new parsonage and church building were erected (still used today, 128 years later), he published his first major book (*Het Kongingrijk van Jesus Christ*, based on Genesis 49:10),⁴ and the congregation gave its approval to commence with a Christian school! Since the need for Christian education had been deeply felt, plans were laid, and the membership voted to accept the proposal of constructing a building for \$350 to \$400. In the end, however, the consistory decided that the establishment of a Christian school would be beyond the congregation's financial capabilities. One wonders what might have been if the consistory continued to pursue the congregation's decision regarding Christian education.

The congregation of South Holland experienced its most profitable time numerically, and perhaps also spiritually, during the first twelve years

⁴Holland, Mich.: Hoogesteger & Mulder, 1875.

True Dutch Reformed Church

of Rev. Meinders's ministry there (1874-1886). The congregation grew to its maximum size in 1883 when it numbered 250 members; 1882 and 1883 were also said to be years of special spiritual blessing.

Nevertheless, these years were not without heartaches for Rev. Meinders. Doubts about his own state in grace began to plague him afresh. Signs of departure from Reformed orthodoxy in the Christian Reformed Church deeply troubled him. He took up his pen and engaged in debates with the editor of *De Wachter* for implying universal salvation and with Rev. L. J. Hulst on the subjects of preaching and supralapsarianism. He opposed the admission of Rev. J. I. Fles to the Christian Reformed Church ministry on the grounds that he taught pre-millennialism, and he opposed Rev. W. R. Smidt for advocating the introduction of hymn-singing in the churches.

All of this led to the secession of Rev. Meinders and the South Holland True Dutch Reformed Church from the Christian Reformed Church in 1886. After South Holland voiced six concerns at the Christian Reformed Synod on June 11, 1886, and felt that none of them were satisfactorily answered, Rev. Meinders spoke to Synod: "It grieves me to have to leave; I cannot remain in good conscience; I would have preferred to remain in the church. My prayer is that the Lord of the church may bring you back to the old points of view." His accompanying elder, brother Meeter, agreed with him. After shaking hands with all the delegates, Rev. Meinders and Elder Meeter left Synod and the Christian Reformed Church.

On behalf of the consistory, Rev. Meinders wrote a forty-five page booklet defending their secession, entitled "Apology and Secession" [*Apologie en Afscheiding*], and dialogued with his opponents scores of times throughout the 1880s in the pages of *De Grondwet*.⁵ The secession continued to deeply grieve Rev. Meinders; he had no desire to live in isolation. As an independent minister, Rev. Meinders engaged in many efforts from 1886 to 1891 to establish fellowship with other independent

⁵The full title is *Apologie en Afscheiding door de Ware Hollandsche Gereformeerde Gemeente te South Holland, Ill., van de Holl. Christ. Geref. Kerk in Noord Amerika (De Grondwet)* (Holland, Michigan, 1887). I wish to thank Robert Swierenga for sending me copies of the numerous articles from *De Grondwet* of Meinders's writings and reactions to them.

True Dutch Reformed Church

ministers or congregations, most of which proved to be fruitless at best and disappointing at worst. Moreover, during these years, his own church membership began to decline, most of which returned to the Reformed or Christian Reformed churches. In 1886, the congregation had 226 members; in 1890, 64 members, of which only 21 were professing members. How painful it must have been for him to experience that all three elders who had seceded with him in 1886 returned to the Christian Reformed Church!

In 1891, in the midst of this increasing isolationism, Rev. Meinders's supportive helpmeet was taken to glory. That year marks the commencement of his twilight years. Though his pen was still active, for he published two volumes of sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism (1897), the last fourteen years of his life (1891-1904) were lonely ones. A few parishioners remained faithful and loving to the end, but Rev. Meinders sorely missed fellowship with other ministers and acquaintances from former years. Moreover, due to age and weakened health, he had to lay down his pastoral office in 1900. Before he died, he willed his extensive theological library to Calvin Theological Seminary, where numerous old and valuable volumes with his imprint still grace the shelves. Little did Rev. Meinders realize that God would spare his little flock throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, preserving, as his wife had predicted, a remnant to fear His worthy Name.

The Last Century (1904-present)

After Rev. Meinders's death, the congregation received only occasional preaching services. Preaching services increased slightly when the congregation united itself with the newly-organized Netherlands Reformed denomination in 1909. Ministers who regularly served the South Holland congregation during their first decade of belonging to the NRC included Rev. G. J. Wolbers, Rev. C. Densel, Rev. C. Van Adrichem, Rev. H. A. Minderman, Rev. A. Van Dyke, and Rev. J. C. Wielhouwer.

Leadership from 1904 to 1960, however, rested largely in the hands of capable elders who conducted reading services. K. R. De Jong served as leading elder from 1909-1928; F. R. Boerhave, from 1928-1936; A. De Groot, from 1937-1949; J. Schaap, from 1950-1958; H. Lanting, from 1959-1960. Consistory minutes reveal that a total of sixteen men have

True Dutch Reformed Church

served in the office of elder, and seventeen in the office of deacon, throughout the congregation's history.

Since 1960, the church has had no office-bearers, but has come under the supervision of the Grand Rapids NRC. Assistance has been provided throughout those years by informal leaders in the group, including A. De Young (1960-1972); C. Kikkert (1972-1980); J. Witvoet, Sr. (1972-1987), and J. Witvoet, Jr. (1987-).

Rev. W. C. Lamain of Grand Rapids served the church regularly, often once a month, from 1947 to 1984. During many of these years, taped sermons of NRC ministers were listened to on Sundays as no one could be found who was willing to lead the worship services. Though this still transpires during winter months, elders from the Grand Rapids congregation take turns serving the South Holland group for approximately eight months each year with reading services and catechism instruction each Sunday. Since the death of Rev. Lamain, Rev. H. Hofman (1984-1986), Dr. J. R. Beeke (1986-1993), and Rev. C. Vogelaar (1996-), have served as moderators.

Presently, NRC ministers and theological students serve the South Holland group on weekday evenings several times each year. Preaching services on Sunday remain rare—at most, one or two times a year.

Despite the miles and time involved in each trip, elders and ministers still do these labors with love. Something of this love is evident in the words of Rev. Lamain:

During the years that I have been in Grand Rapids, I often made the 180-mile trip to South Holland. Once while preaching to only about twenty people there, and having just heard that at that time Billy Graham was preaching to crowds as large as 60,000 in Rotterdam, I felt so discouraged and sorry for myself. But as I stood there behind the lectern, the Lord came over powerfully with the words: "Thou hast been faithful over a few, I will make thee ruler over many" (Matt. 25:21). Then the fact that there were so few people simply fell away, and the Lord gave an opening to speak His Word.

On December 17, 1989, the South Holland congregation was humbled to witness the confession of faith of five persons, and the baptism of two adults and two children. Attendance at church services remains small at

True Dutch Reformed Church

present, usually between twenty-five and thirty. Present membership figures include seventeen professing members and twelve baptized members.

Conclusion

The South Holland NRC has managed to retain its existence through a strong isolationist approach. Though the Dutch language has long been extinct among the people, Dutch customs and clannish family roots run deep. Two families, the Witvoets and the De Jongs, have made up the core group for several generations. They are very proud of the fact that they still worship in their 128-year-old building, which is now a historical site, and that the visiting ministers still make use of the equally old parsonage. There is an incredibly strong sense of nostalgia among the attendees, and an even deeper conviction that they are among the few that still have “the truth.” Unfortunately, little evangelistic work, if any, is engaged in. Even the transition of the community from a rural to an urban setting has not managed to dislodge these convictions which enable them to resist Americanization more effectively than many other Reformed churches in the area.

From 1865 until the present day, God has kept a remnant in South Holland’s rather unique NRC church. God preserves His church, despite its spots and wrinkles; He shall not forsake the work of His own hands. The church is always unworthy, but God in Christ is always worthy to receive all honor and glory. This is the exclusive hope and expectation for the future of the South Holland NRC.⁶

⁶The South Holland NRC is located at 310 East 162nd St., South Holland, Illinois 60475. Services are held at 9:15 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. each Sunday.