PREACHERS, PEWS, AND PUPILS: COMMEMORATING THE PAST IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY DUTCH AMERICA

David Zwart

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A.C. Van Raalte Institute, Hope College
Theil-Nyenhuis Research Center
9 East 10th Street
Holland, MI 49423
www.hope.edu/vri

David Zwart *graduated from Dordt College in 1999 with a BA in history and education and taught middle school social studies for three years at Central Valley Christian School in Visalia, California. He earned a Master of Arts degree in history in 2004 from California State University, Fresno. He then entered the doctoral program at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he has been a TA, a research assistant, and Instructor of Record. He has presented scholarly papers at conferences and symposia in this country and in the Netherlands, including the last three biennial conferences of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch-American Studies. In 2008 David joined the faculty of his alma mater, Dordt College, as Assistant Professor of History.*

David Zwart was the recipient of two consecutive appointments at the Van Raalte Institute as a Visiting Research Fellow: 2007-08 and summer 2008. He presented this public address on 2 October 2008 at Hope College.

Preachers, Pews, and Pupils: Commemorating the past In twentieth-century Dutch America

David Zwart

When the residents of Holland and the surrounding area celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of their colony in 1872, they began a long tradition of commemorating their history. The program of 17 September 1872 included a procession to the appointed grounds followed by music and speeches; the highlight was the main speaker, Rev. A. C. Van Raalte. His speech told the story of the project that had begun just twenty-five years earlier under his leadership.[1] This event helped start a tradition of commemorating important events in the history of Dutch immigration and settlement during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century; it also played an important role in defining the Dutch-American community.[2]

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the telling of the Dutch immigrant and settlement story has taken a number of forms, including both print sources and orations, such as sermons and public speeches. The telling of the story took on greater significance when major anniversaries occurred, such as twenty-five years after the founding of an institution or at centennial celebrations. Leaders of the community had responsibility for interpreting the past for the audience. These official versions of the immigration and settlement story set the context for the many other forms of memory making. For instance, churches held anniversary celebrations with special worship services and banquets, and they published a commemorative "souvenir" book. Schools also commemorated their past with celebrations and special yearbooks to mark the years. Communities remembered their founding at centennial celebrations. Tulip Time festivals also represented a way of commemorating the past.[3] These commemorative events have taken place regularly within the Dutch-American community and continue to the present day. Celebrations which occurred after the 1920s when the community's network of institutions had coalesced provided fertile ground for understanding the community as it developed in the twentieth century.

Commemorations are an important historical phenomenon to better understand Dutch America in the twentieth century. Dutch-Americans constructed, reflected on, and reinforced their group identity at these times. These were times when they told stories about their shared past. This was when certain leaders (Van Raalte and Scholte), events (migration, the start of denominations, the Masonic controversy), and motivations (Calvinistic faith) became central to the cultural identity of Dutch America. These were stories where institutions found their justification for starting and continuing. These commemorations focused on how Dutch Calvinists migrated and settled in a wilderness where they established their churches and schools. Like other immigrant ethnic groups, the Dutch-Americans used these times to tell stories about the

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[1] Henry Lucas, *Ebenezer: Memorial Souvenir of the Centennial Commemoration of Dutch Immigration to the United States* (New York: The Netherlands Information Bureau, 1947).

[2] The scholarship on the importance of commemorations is a growing field in history. Some of the most cited works come from other fields such as Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Wernor Sollors, ed., *Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Other than specifically cited works, I have found Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) particularly important in shaping my thinking.

[3] See also Terence G. Schoone-Jongen, *The Dutch American Identity: Staging Memory and Ethnicity in Community Celebrations* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008) and Lisa Jaarsma Zylstra, "Pella—A Touch of Holland: The Evolution of Ethnicity in an Iowa Town, 1847-1947" (MA thesis, Arizona State University, 2004).

past to strengthen their bonds as a group.[4] By examining these commemorations, we can better understand the construction of Dutch America as an enduring ethnic group.

This research focuses on the stories Dutch-Americans told about themselves, and it does so on the foundation of understanding the community through the lens of migration and settlement. It is vitally important to understand the demographics of who migrated and where they migrated to. It is important to look at family structure, church membership, income levels, and the like. We cannot get a full picture of the community without this vital information. Studying the stories they told about themselves in the form of commemorations, however, tells us something important about these Dutch-Americans as well. Commemorations were one occasion when people articulated beliefs in words and images and made sense of their daily lives and actions. The words of these commemorations tell us something about how people understood what it meant to be Dutch-American and something about how the members of the group viewed their identity. They addressed the similarities and differences which existed between the different denominations and mind sets in the way Dutch America commemorated the past. They examined how the children of immigrants came to understand themselves as Dutch and American as well as the role of commemorations in supporting and strengthening the institutions of Dutch America.

Commemorations also allow us to look beneath what the leaders were saying about the ethnic group identity. While leaders often played a vital role in what Hans Krabbendam called "identity politics,"[5] there were people throughout the Dutch-American community who appropriated these ideas and stories of the leaders. These leaders played an important role in the framing of the story and its dissemination, but the reception and use of that story by those sitting in the stands or pews also helped illuminate the nature of the Dutch-American community in the twentieth century. What similarities and differences existed between the denominations and mentalities in the ways Dutch-Americans commemorated the past? How did the children of immigrants come to understand themselves as Dutch and American? What role did commemorations play in supporting and strengthening the institutions of Dutch America?

Being Dutch-American meant not only that one was an immigrant or the descendent of immigrants but that one shared in the story, the cultural identity of the group as reflected and reinforced by commemorations, and participated in ethnic institutions: "ethnicity is . . . a process of construction . . . which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories."[6] Ethnicity was not automatic or static, but was constructed and changed over time, partly at least, through stories that highlighted certain aspects of a shared culture. Commemorations provided an occasion at which a shared identity could be constructed, stories could be told and heard, the institutions could be reinforced, individuals could place their personal story in the context of the community story, and people could be part of an ethnic group.

Commemorative activities answer at least partly the question of what caused so many Protestant Dutch immigrants and their descendents to stay so loyal to the ethnic group institutions since, by most measures, their ethnicity should have faded away. Comparatively, the Dutch have preserved their ethnic institutions longer than other groups in the United States who fit in as "good" immigrants.[7] Clearly social

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[4] Orm Overland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). For specific ethnic groups, see also April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), Steven Hoelscher, *Heritage on Stage: The Invention of Ethnic Place in America's Little Switzerland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

[5] Hans Krabbendam, "Dutch-American Identity Politics: The Use of History by Dutch Immigrants," (Van Raalte Institute, 2003). See also Willem Frijhoff, "Dutchness in Fact and Fiction," in *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America, 1609-2009*, Joyce D. Goodfriend, Benjamin Schmidt, and Annette Stott, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2008): 327-58.

[6] Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta, Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Forum: The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 4-5.

[7] For comparisons, see particularly Jon Gjerde, *Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West: 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For an example of how immigrants were forced

factors and the legacy of the culture in the Netherlands played a role in this kind of institutional completeness and endurance of the Dutch-American community and identity.[8] Social factors and culture, however, could have quickly been lost in the new environment of the United States. They needed to be communicated to and modeled for the next generation and shared in stories that supported, explained, and justified their value system. The tangible manifestations of an ethnic identity—the denominations, churches, colleges, and schools—continued because the next generation recognized their importance.

These commemorations, furthermore, were celebrated in a specific historical period. It is important to think about the purpose they served for the people at the time they were created. For instance, almost all congregational commemorations during World War II mentioned the troops who were serving in the military. Photos of these troops were an important part of the books that recorded these events. Moreover, Christian Reformed Church congregations that produced books in 1957, the centennial year of that denomination, almost universally included the centennial logo of that denomination which tied them to a larger story. Decisions about the content of the commemoration also changed over time. The Reformed Church in America in Coopersville, Michigan, for instance, deleted many of the details of its brief flirtation with the nascent Christian Reformed Church from the story it told about itself between its 1944 and 1954 commemorations.[9] These examples give a glimpse of the way commemorations related to the time and situation in which they were celebrated.

Both the Joint Archives of Holland and Heritage Hall at Calvin College hold impressive collections in this area due to the diligence of their archivists. The congregational souvenir books are some of the most readily kept aspects of these celebrations. These books range from the semi-centennial of the Centreville Reformed Church in St. Joseph County, Michigan in 1891 to the series of commemorative books of the Drenthe, Michigan Christian Reformed Church from 1932, 1957, and 1982.[10] Although books were the most readily preserved aspect of these commemorations, congregations also made a major production, had banquets, and heard from former pastors. I have focused on West Michigan commemorations largely due to the availability of sources, but I have also made some comparisons with Pella and Orange City, Iowa as well as Lynden, Washington.[11]

Archivists have also preserved denominational commemorations. For instance, the Reformed Church in America published a substantial book in 1928 to celebrate its tercentenary year, and the Christian Reformed Church pulled out all the stops in 1957 for its centennial commemoration.[12] Not to be left out, colleges and schools were also involved in commemorations. Colleges have been very good at archiving their commemorative celebrations, including even the minutes of planning meetings for the commemoration and pageant scripts. Yearbooks, catalogs, and official histories were also preserved. Elementary and secondary schools have been less systematic in archiving their records of commemorations, but a number of Christian schools have published commemorative history books.

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to have separate institutions, see John Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[8] Raymond Breton, "Institution Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *The American Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 2 (Sept. 1964): 193-205.

[9] Reformed Church of Coopersville, *Ninetieth Anniversary* and *Centennial* (Coopersville, MI, 1944, 1954). Both are available in the Churches Collection, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan (hereafter JAH).

[10] Centreville Reformed Church, *Semi-Centennial* (Centreville, MI, 1891). Available JAH. Drenthe Christian Reformed Church, *Golden Anniversary Program*, *Diamond Jubilee,* and *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* (Drenthe, MI, 1937, 1975, 1982). All available at Archives, Calvin College and Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI (hereafter ACC).

[11] I have not been able to look at other major ethnic settlements in Chicago or Wisconsin. There may be some variation from the kinds of patterns I found in Michigan and Iowa.

[12] Tercentenary Committee on Research and Publication, *Tercentenary Studies: Reformed Church in America, A Record of Beginnings* (General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 1928). Publication section of the centennial committee, *One Hundred Years in the New World: The Story of the Christian Reformed Church from 1857 to 1957: Its Origin, Growth and Institutional Activities; Together with an Account of the Celebration of its Anniversary in its Centennial Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Centennial Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1957).

Forming an ethnic identity

Themes and patterns about what it meant to be Dutch-American have emerged from the things they chose to commemorate. Although some of these themes may not seem surprising, others might alter our thinking of Dutch-American ethnicity. The essence of the story that was being told about the acculturation of Dutch-Americans included: (1) a Calvinistic faith, (2) the reasons for leaving the Netherlands, (3) the faith of the founders, (4) the importance of leadership, and (5) the progress the group had seen as demonstrated by their buildings.

These commemorations reflected and reinforced primarily a Calvinistic faith. Congregations and schools nearly always began by acknowledging their dependence on God for their accomplishments. They also noted how they were specially blessed by God. It was God who was accomplishing things in their midst. For instance, the commemoration book of First Reformed Church (now called First Church) of Zeeland in 1937 said "He has kept watch over us these ninety years, and we are filled with gratitude for all the rich blessings which the Lord our Covenant God has so abundantly bestowed upon us."[13] The commemoration book of Central Park Reformed Church of Holland from 1947 noted "we cannot help but feel deeply grateful to God for His kindly providence. . . . [Our forefathers] were led by the hand of God."[14] The Graafschap, Michigan, Christian Reformed Church book in 1957 observes that "a short history of our congregation gives abundant evidences of God's goodness to us" and that "the great King of His Church continued to watch over this part of His Zion."[15] Congregations in Iowa and Washington also exhibited these same Calvinistic views. The First Reformed Church of Pella, Iowa, in their 1956 centennial commemorative book reminded its readers that "Jehovah hath been mindful of us; He will bless us."[16] The pastor's message in the 1950 golden jubilee anniversary of Lynden, Washington's First Christian Reformed Church told readers that "God has richly blessed the labors of those who have borne the heat of the day to express and develop the Reformed faith and life in this part of the Lord's vineyard. Truly, God has done great things."[17] A favorite word used in congregational commemorations was *Ebenezer*, meaning "hitherto has the Lord helped/blessed us" (I Samuel 7:12). This word summarized the theological foundations for these commemorations and signaled that they were meant to recount what the Lord had done for them. This acknowledgment, from the outset, put the remembering into a religious context which emphasized the role God played in directing the lives of the ethnic community.

Denominational commemorations also consistently told their story within a Calvinistic framework. The Tercentenary Year of the Reformed Church in America in 1928 saw a pageant sponsored by the Hope College Alumni Association. The emphasis on God's directing hand was clear in this presentation of church history.[18] Not surprisingly, the Christian Reformed Church's centennial commemoration in 1957 clearly acknowledged God's role. From such a small start, to the current size and stature of the denomination, they felt specially blessed by God's providence, as they commemorated their centennial. As J. H. Kromminga wrote in the official commemorative history book, "it is God who has given growth, prosperity, peace, and strength." In fact, the centennial "thrust" of the Christian Reformed Church was "God's favor is our challenge."[19]

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[13] First Reformed Church, *Ninetieth Anniversary* (Zeeland, MI, 1937), 6. Available JAH.

[14] Central Park Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary* (Holland, MI, 1947), 10. Available JAH.

[15] Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary: Faith of Our Fathers-Living Still* (Holland, MI, 1957), 7. Available ACC.

[16] First Reformed Church, *Centennial: 1856-1956* (Pella, IA, 1956), 2. Available JAH.

[17] First Christian Reformed Church, *Golden Jubilee Anniversary* (Lynden, WA, 1950), 4. Personal collection of the author.

[18] "Pageant of the Word," Collection H97-1257. Available JAH.

[19] J. H. Kromminga, "Our First One Hundred Years," in *One Hundred Years in the New World: The Story of the Christian Reformed Church from 1857 to 1957* (Grand Rapids, MI: Centennial Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1957), 11.

Colleges and Christian schools also exhibited a Calvinistic faith, if a bit more muted. Zeeland Christian School's souvenir book in 1965 said that the school "must stand as a monument of gratitude to God for the marvelous blessings to us and our children during the long decades since 1915."[20] Calvin and Hope Colleges, however, did as overtly recognize God's blessings to them as institutions as did congregations and denominations.[21]

Secondly, these commemorations also highlighted the reasons the Dutch emigrated from the Netherlands. This aspect of the story helped create a collective identity. It generally took the form of enumerating the problems of a decrepit Netherlands; migrants could hardly wait to leave the Netherlands because of the persecution they suffered following the secession of 1834 and the problems of the state-supported church. The authors of the 1937 commemorative book of the First Reformed Church of Zeeland wrote that "from 1836 until 1846, the seceders were subjected to active persecution; their meetings broken up; their ministers fined; those who could not pay fines were thrown in prison; the worshippers were abused by slander and disturbances at their home; soldiers were quartered in their home."[22] The 1947 commemorative book of the Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church of Holland says that the Netherlands was "the land of intolerance and persecution of God's faithful servants and its own noblest citizens."[23] The 1947 commemoration of the First Reformed Church of Holland echoes the sentiment that the church in the Netherlands had a secularized "church government and an accompanying denatured religion." Even Germany was accused of being intolerant by the Graafschap Christian Reformed Church's commemoration in 1957: "Secession penetrated the group of churches in [Graafschap, Germany]. As in the Netherlands, persecution was the result."[24] The United States, on the other hand, was considered the land of freedom and refuge. In fact, according to the First Reformed Church of Holland's commemoration in 1947, "The people of this community [Holland] were by ancestry and background excellent material for the making of American patriots."[25]

The controlling image of a decrepit Netherlands particularly shaped the commemorations of the congregations that traced their founding to the early years of immigration. Congregations that started later might also have included this theme, but usually it was not as pronounced or consistent. For instance, the churches in Orange City, Iowa hardly mentioned the broader immigrant context until 1996 when Bill and Nella Kennedy wrote the 125th Anniversary book on First Reformed Church. Prior to that, the commemoration books began their story with the settlers coming from Pella.[26] This was also the case for churches that started later in West Michigan as well.

The congregations in West Michigan valorized the experience of Van Raalte and his followers, whereas those in Pella naturally admired Scholte and his group. The immigrant experience of these pioneers became the shared story for later immigrants and their descendents even as the reasons for emigration changed. The stories of Van Raalte and Scholte provided a collective memory, which was an important aspect of ethnic identity. The explicit appeal to the early immigration experience was not always in an early commemoration but, quite often, added in a later one. For instance, the 1958 commemorative book of the Overisel Christian Reformed Church barely mentions the immigration experience; the story of its history

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[20] *Zeeland Christian Schools: 1915-1965* (Zeeland, MI, 1965), 4. Available ACC.

[21] See for instance, the "History" section of the catalogs of Hope College and Calvin College.

[22] First Reformed Church, *Ninetieth Anniversary* (Zeeland, MI, 1937), 8. Available JAH.

[23] Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church, *Faith of Our Fathers—Living Still* (Holland, MI, 1947), 5. Available JAH.

[24] Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary: Faith of Our Fathers—Living Still* (Holland, MI, 1957), 7. Available ACC.

[25] First Reformed Church, *Historical Booklet* (Holland, MI, 1947), 11. Available JAH.

[26] *God, Our Help and Hope,* First Reformed Church (Orange City, Iowa, 1996). Available JAH. For other anniversary books, see the First Reformed Church file at the JAH.

starts with the Free Masonry controversy of the early 1880s. In the 1983 centennial commemorative book, however, the familiar story of leaving a decrepit Netherlands for the freedom in America is well told.[27]

Denominations commemorated their history in the same pattern. For the Christian Reformed Church, the Netherlands was decrepit and the United States provided opportunity and freedom. A different tone, however, guided the Reformed Church commemoration because of the age of the denomination and the eastern section which controlled the denomination. In the RCA denominational commemorations, there was less focus on the Netherlands and the immigration experience. The reasons for emigration did not play as large of a role in the commemorations of schools—Christian schools hardly mentioned it at all. Hope College's commemorations note the importance of the immigration experience, but the ties to the eastern section of the church helped mute this theme.[28]

Closely related to the second commemoration theme, namely leaving the Netherlands, was the importance of the faith of the founders. This third theme emphasized how men (and it was usually men) stepped out into unknown territory to establish the community against great odds. This valorization of the faith of the founding men laid the foundation for the institutions of the community. The story interpreted the origins of these institutions as rooted in the great faith of their founders. The commemorative book of the First Reformed Church of Zeeland in 1937 waxes poetically that "In faith they braved the ocean. By faith they were led to Zeeland's wooded soil. With faith they felled the trees and prepared themselves a habitation. Homes were built, but first a church of logs. . . . Our noble fore bearers [*sic*] sowed their scanty seed generously; we reap the harvest." This commemorative book emphasizes the faith of the forefathers also in the foreword: "to retrace the steps of our fathers, to rekindle the fires of their hopes, and to catch inspiration from their sacrificial living is the object of this book." In 1947, commemorations of this same Zeeland congregation again said the book was dedicated "to the faith of our fathers" who "braved persecution in the Netherlands and faced perils on sea and land in the arduous journey to America and on to Michigan, their promised land."[29] The North Street Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland in 1957 commemorated their forefathers by saying that the history of the congregation "is filled with many struggles, sacrifices, and prayers of our forefathers for the cause of God's kingdom."[30] The First Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland also noted the faith of the founding fathers in its 1962 centennial commemoration: "Just one hundred years ago a small band of men and women [one of the few times when women were included] whose hearts were filled with love for God's truth and for His Kingdom united themselves together as a new congregation of Christ's church and thus brought the First CRC of Zeeland into existence."[31]

This theme clearly shows itself in the way Zeelanders commemorated their history, but it also existed in other places. The 1971 centennial commemorative book of First Reformed Church of Orange City, Iowa noted that "religion was a very meaningful experience among the Dutch who founded Orange City about a century ago."[32] Orange City's First Christian Reformed Church in 1971 commemorated the same faith of the forefathers by noting that they had endured the "grasshopper years" of 1874-1876. The authors opined that "those hardy pioneers, who fully believe that by such means God often proves his people and reminds them of the transitory nature of the things of this world, persevered."[33] Congregations clearly

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[27] Overisel Christian Reformed Church, *Diamond Jubilee* and *Centennial Edition* (Overisel, MI, 1958, 1983). Available ACC.

[28] See Preston Stegenga, *Anchor of Hope: The History of an American Denominational Institution*, Hope College (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954) and Wynand Wichers, *A Century of Hope, 1866-1966* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968).

[29] First Reformed Church, *Ninetieth Anniversary* (Zeeland, MI, 1937), 7; First Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary* (Zeeland, MI, 1947), 2. Available JAH.

[30] North Street Christian Reformed Church, *Diamond Jubilee* (Zeeland, MI, 1957), 15. Available ACC.

[31] First Christian Reformed Church, *Centennial, 1862-1962* (Zeeland, MI, 1962), 5. Available ACC.

[32] First Reformed Church, *A Century For Christ* (Orange City, Iowa, 1971), 9. Available JAH.

[33] First Christian Reformed Church, *Centennial Year* (Orange City, IA, 1971), 2. Available ACC.

emphasized the faith of their forefathers in their commemorations. The meaning was clear: the readers of the commemorations needed to recognize and valorize the sacrifices the founders made in the name of their faith. The implication was that these vital institutions, started under such harsh conditions and with so much sacrifice, should be continued.

These first three themes may strike us as expected, but yet they played a vital role in creating a shared past that united a community of migrants and their children around shared institutions. A fourth theme is the importance of leaders in shepherding the group. Whether it was churches who lovingly placed the dominie's photograph in every single book or the college who always listed its previous presidents, leaders received a prominent place in the commemorations. Congregational histories marked eras primarily with the coming and going of the preachers. The success or failure of the congregation was judged in the commemorative retelling by how many people the pastor attracted or lost. The stories usually included sections that noted the heartache and pain of "vacant" years. Some of the earliest church souvenir anniversary books had photos only of the pastors, with their names captioned, such as one from the First Christian Reformed Church of Orange City (see fig. 1).[34]

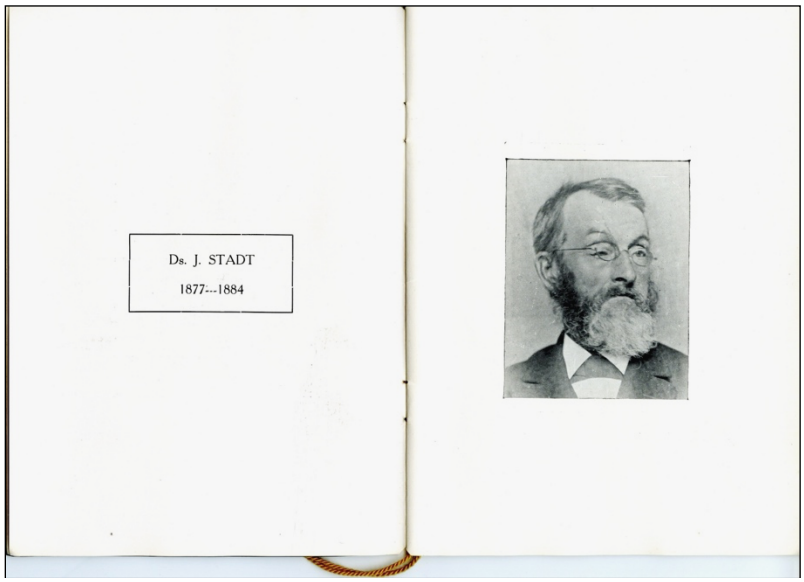

Fig. 1. First Christian Reformed Church, photo of early pastor (*Courtesy Archives, Calvin College*)

Private Christian schools listed principals in a similar fashion. Not quite as prominently as churches, but those in the principal's office often got top billing in the history of the schools. Presidents received much of the same attention at colleges. Lists of presidents were important in commemorating Hope and Calvin Colleges, and the story of the colleges was marked by the succession of their presidents. The successes and failures of the college were often laid at the feet of the president.

But it was also more than just the dominies or presidents. Lists of consistory members, past and present, also found their way into congregational commemorative books. Congregations often listed the first consistory and sometimes would even be able to provide a photograph. Schools usually made some attempt to list faculty members who had served.

This pattern reflects a few interesting aspects of Dutch-American ethnicity construction in the twentieth century. The valorization of leaders shows the important role they played in the institutions. Without a strong preacher and leader, the congregation floundered. Without strong principals or presidents, the schools struggled. The message was clear for those reading the commemorative book: respect and honor

[34] First Christian Reformed Church, *Souvenir* (Orange City, IA, 1921).

the leaders. By including consistory names and photos, the books also show that strong leadership could come from non-ordained leaders.

Buildings also served an important role in the construction of ethnicity. This fifth theme demonstrates that progress could be calculated by the size of the building—by the number of pews, if you will. Commemorative books always included pictures of buildings as well as pictures of leaders. Congregational commemorations included pictures of the first, rickety structures before more substantial buildings could be built. And when the congregation grew from a wood frame to a brick church, the pictures clearly showed the progress. The cost of the building was often enumerated in the written history of the commemorative book. Likewise, the parsonage received due attention in commemorative books. Photos showed the parsonage growing from basic structures to impressive manses. The physical manifestation of God's special providence and human faithfulness showed itself in the buildings. Denominations also used commemorative books to show progress, as seen in the 1957 Christian Reformed Church centennial souvenir book (see fig. 2).[35] This book is filled with photos of most of the churches in the denomination at that time, but interestingly does not include photos of nearly as many individual pastors.

Schools and colleges were just as interested in commemorating their buildings. Photos of an "old building" and the new building are ubiquitous for the Christian school commemorative books. Colleges especially liked to highlight their physical plant as they told their story. For instance, at the time of Calvin's centennial, the move to the new campus was completed. New buildings dominate the literature produced by their centennial in 1976 as a way to show progress. Sketches of the buildings of Hope College were heavily used in promotional literature.[36]

These themes demonstrate the way Dutch-Americans thought about themselves as a group. They were a group united by a common story of Calvinism, migration, faithful founders, leaders, and material progress. Most of these examples occurred from the 1930s to the 1950s, but these themes did exist before these years and continued into the 1980s. These themes united the ethnic group by sharing the story from one generation to the next and from community to community. The institutions of the ethnic group liked to pat themselves on the back for their growth and success. They wanted to show the present and future generations the sacrifices required to build and maintain a strong institution.

Controversies

These themes, however, do not tell the whole story about the riches these commemorations hold for us to understand the Dutch-American identity in the twentieth century. There were controversies and schisms in the Dutch-American community, particularly in the churches, that also played a role in the commemorations throughout the twentieth century. The differing stories of these "disputes" show how important commemorations were for justifying the start and continuation of these institutions. Two main disputes were commemorated, particularly in West Michigan. The first was the beginning of the Christian Reformed Church in 1857, and the second was the Masonic controversy of the early 1880s, that Harry Boonstra examined so carefully in a previous visiting research fellow lecture.[37] The causes and results of these disputes were continually remembered, often from opposite sides.

Naturally, the commemoration in 1957 of the formation of the Christian Reformed Church in 1857 highlighted the reasons for separation from the Reformed Church in America. As a denomination, the Christian Reformed Church made a major effort to unite the denomination around a shared story. At the congregational level, where feelings and tensions could still be raw, the commemorations demonstrated how people in the pews felt about the relationship between the two denominations at the local level. In 1937, when the First Christian Reformed Church of Zeeland commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary

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[35] *One Hundred Years in the New World: The Story of the Christian Reformed Church from 1857-1957* (Grand Rapids, MI: Centennial Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1957), 18-19.

[36] See the College Centennial Committee Collection at Heritage Hall and the James M. Ver Meulen Collection at JAH.

[37] Harry Boonstra, "The Dutch Equation in the RCA Freemasonry Controversy, 1865-1885" (Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, 2008).

of its start in 1862, they made sure to highlight the fact that their congregation was a branch of Noordeloos Christian Reformed Church, which was one of the original Christian Reformed Church congregations. The authors of this book pointed out that "From the very beginning there was dissatisfaction on the part of some of the Dutch settlers in West Michigan with the union of their churches with the Dutch Reformed denomination in the East. As soon as they learned that their ministers and elders . . . had decided upon union, they began to grumble. However, this discontent was at first only a smouldering [*sic*] fire."[38] The grumbling may have been a reality, but it is interesting to note that they focus on the church polity aspect of the union. Graafschap Christian Reformed Church commemorated the centennial of the start of the Christian Reformed Church in 1957, and its own beginning. In its commemorative book, the congregation highlighted the local situation more precisely. "On February 4, '57 the Congregation was informed that the consistory was convinced that (a) there were many in the Dutch Reformed Church who tolerated deviations from the sound Doctrines of Predestination and who taught a Universal Atonement, (b) that Free Masons were tolerated in that Church, (c) that Catechism preaching and Catechetical instruction were neglected. . . .At the historic Congregational Meeting held March 16, 1857, under the leadership of Steven Lucas, the decision was made to return to the independent status enjoyed by the group before affiliation with the Dutch Reformed Church." The causes for separation were enumerated and their book even gives the name of the leader in the congregation, Steven Lucas, who was leading the charge.[39] Central Park Reformed Church in Holland also commemorated this split in 1947. This congregation originally organized as Graafschap Reformed Church in 1847 and changed its name to Central Park Reformed Church. Seemingly still bitter about the events that transpired in 1857, its commemorative book opined that "a great disturbance occurred. Several influential members of the church brought false charges and caused suspicion to be aroused against the Holland Reformed Church of America and also against some of the ministers of the Classis of Holland. They were finally successful in disrupting the membership to such an extent that the majority seceded. Only five families remained loyal to the Reformed Church. The seceders also succeeded in instituting a process of law whereby they acquired the church building and all the temporalities of the church so that nothing remained of the Reformed Church of Graafschap except the five families."[40] The story told about the 1857 split depended on which side one was on and who got the building.

Drenthe Christian Reformed Church demonstrated the complexity of telling the story when it celebrated its centennial in 1982. The church was started as an RCA church in 1847; the congregation remained Reformed following an 1853 schism when only one-third of its members remained, who, according to the commemoration, "carried on bravely" while the rest joined Christian Reformed Church congregations. The 1882 decision to join the Christian Reformed Church following the Masonic controversy was said to have happened "without dissension, conflict, or trouble."[41] The commemoration of the Drenthe Christian Reformed Church does not seem as harsh as the others; the writers may even have been a bit unsure of how they should record their own history. They commemorated their founding from the time they decided to join the Christian Reformed Church in 1882, not from the time they became a congregation in 1847.

Commemorating the 1857 split by congregations was more prevalent in West Michigan. It became an issue only in Pella, which had its own unique ecclesiastical issues with Scholte when the First Reformed Church was vacant and some leaders wanted to ask a Christian Reformed Church pastor to preach in 1866. According to the 1931 commemorative book of the First Reformed Church, the consistory did not allow it, but a group still invited the pastor and formed a Christian Reformed Church congregation. Some of the bitterness that crept into the commemorations in West Michigan did not seem to exist in the Pella commemorations. In fact, the First Reformed Church had nice things to say about the First Christian

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[38] First Christian Reformed Church, *Anniversary Souvenir* (Zeeland, MI, 1937), 8. Available ACC.

[39] Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary: Faith of Our Fathers—Living Still* (Holland, MI, 1957), 9. Available ACC.

[40] Central Park Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary* (Holland, MI, 1947), 10. Available JAH.

[41] Drenthe Christian Reformed Church, *Diamond Jubilee* (Drenthe, MI, 1957), 9, 11. Available ACC.

Reformed Church in 1931, acknowledging that it "has flourished, and under the present leadership of Rev. R. J. Danhof . . . [and] is a blessing to the community."[42] These issues were barely mentioned in Orange City or Lynden, Washington, seemingly noting that the split of 1857 had happened, and they simply accepted the results.

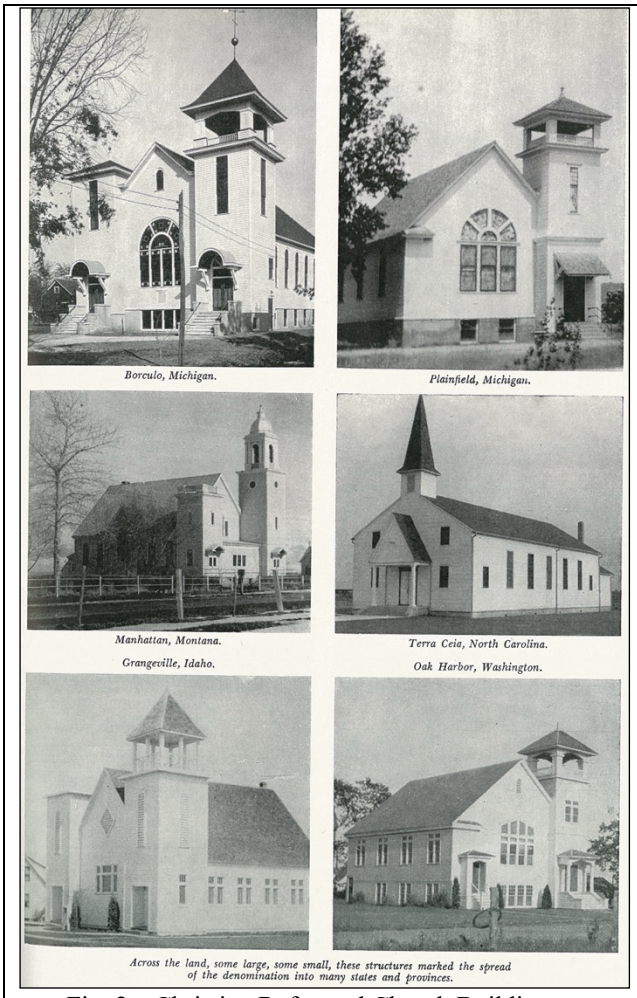

Fig. 2a. Christian Reformed Church Buildings

Fig. 2b. Christian Reformed Church Buildings

The second major schism was the Masonic controversy that ripped through West Michigan in the early 1880s and would continue to be a fly in the ointment for congregations on both sides of the issue. For example, Holland's Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church claimed to be the real heir of the start of the congregation in 1847, although it didn't join the Christian Reformed Church denomination until 1882. They celebrated their centennial in 1947 with only a passing reference to the major denominational shift which occurred in 1882 in what had been Van Raalte's church. It noted that, as a result of the Reformed Church in America's General Synod not taking action, "A break with the Reformed Dutch church by some congregations followed consequently. One of the congregations that severed her connection was the Ninth Street Church at Holland."[43] Holland's First Reformed Church had more to say about this change in its

[42] *Seventy-Fifth Anniversary,* First Reformed Church (Pella, IA, 1931), 14. Available JAH.

[43] Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church, *Faith of Our Fathers—Living Still, 1847-1947* (Holland, MI, 1947), 11. Available JAH.

1947 commemoration. It laid the blame for the troubles in the church on not having a preacher and the consistory which was "unwilling to receive aid and guidance from their natural consellors [*sic*], the ministers and elders of the Classis of Holland." Later the authors recounted how, after voting to withdraw on 17 February 1882, "the minority . . . attempted to hold a meeting to organize, but were prevented from doing so. They had a meeting the next day, and sent communication to Classes . . . and immediately cited the members of the consistory to appear before it on a charge of schism . . . The elders and deacons were formally deposed from office [in abstentia] and the First Reformed Church (which was, of course, the dissenting minority) was instructed to elect a new consistory."[44] First Reformed Church seemed more interested in retelling the details of these unpleasant years than did the Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church. The commemoration of Holland's Central Park Reformed Church in 1947 explained the situation as "the most unpleasant agitation . . . causing a general revolt against the Classis of Holland and the General Synod." But in this congregation, "A few families were lost, including two influential members of the Consistory. On the whole, the church survived the storm."[45] The retelling of the story on both sides justified the actions of their predecessors.

The way churches in Zeeland commemorated these problems shows how these intra-group issues played a role in setting the ethnic group apart.[46] The 1947 commemorative book of the First Reformed Church of Zeeland clearly stood behind the decision of its consistory to stay in the denomination "as long as matters of our congregation were not interfered with, and they retained the right to determine who was to hold membership in this church." The book, however, continued, "because of this decision, many members left . . . this was a great loss for the church for among the sixty-four persons leaving were four elders and three deacons, more than half of the consistory! Since that time a number of those families have reaffiliated themselves with the RCA."[47] The commemorations by the Christian Reformed Churches in Zeeland proved to be a bit more complicated. Those who left the First Reformed Church in 1882 originally went to the consistory of the First Christian Reformed Church and stated their desire to affiliate with that congregation. According to the 1937 commemorative book of the First Christian Reformed Church, the group "wished to affiliate themselves with our congregation (as they put it) 'without any formality.'" The book goes on to defend the consistory's right to demand a public profession of faith. Again according to the First Christian Reformed Church commemoration: "The brethern [*sic*] refused to do this. The result was that only fourteen families affiliated themselves with the congregation. The others organized a congregation which today is the congregation on North Street."[48] So what did North Street Christian Reformed Church have to say about this incident when they commemorated their history? According to their 1957 commemorative book, those who refused to make another profession of faith were correct. Siding with their own founders, who "deemed this condition for membership to be unjust" the congregation stood by its original need for founding.[49] This story demonstrates that even churches within a denomination might view a schismatic incident from different angles. Their ability, however, to know the issues and why they mattered helped create a sense that church and doctrine played essential roles in creating an ethnic identity.[50]

Conclusion

Commemorating can be tricky business. What the commemorators say and how they say it reflects and reinforces what it means to be part of the community and have an ethnic identity. These commemorations highlight a Calvinistic faith, the immigrant experience, the faith of the founders, the preachers who served, and the physical growth of their institutions. These were the important things to

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[44] First Reformed Church*, Historical Booklet* (Holland, MI, 1947), 11-14. Available JAH.

[45] Central Park Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary* (Holland, MI, 1947), 12. Available JAH.

[46] Rob Kroes made a similar argument in *The Persistence of Ethnicity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

[47] First Reformed Church, *One Hundredth Anniversary* (Zeeland, MI, 1947), 15. Available JAH.

[48] *Centennial, 1862-1962,* First Christian Reformed Church (Zeeland, MI, 1962), 12. Available ACC.

[49] *Diamond Jubilee,* North Street Christian Reformed Church (Zeeland, MI, 1957), 15. Available ACC.

[50] This Masonic controversy barely made a ripple in the commemorations in Iowa or Washington.

remember for an ethnic group that seemingly fit into the American ideal for immigrants but yet set themselves apart in particularistic institutions.

These commemorations also point to the importance of looking at the local level to see how broader trends play out and reveal the differences that gave the community its unique characteristics. They reinforce what we generally think of as the keys to understanding Dutch America: their Calvinism and their institutions. Since the 1920s, the commemorations have mainly taken place in English so the leaders could direct them at the next generation to convince them of the need for strong, separate institutions.

Finally, these commemorations serve to encourage the next generation to remain faithful to the institutions of the ethnic group. The institutions that commemorated themselves needed to convince the next generation that they continued to serve a purpose in spite of language and cultural shifts. The lessons taught seemed to matter particularly as the importance of the institutions waned in the post-World War II era. This turn inward has been a hallmark of the Dutch-American community. For instance, the Christian Reformed Church during World War II worked hard to keep their service members loyal through camp pastors and service member homes. These commemorations serve to reinforce the community institutions, to keep the next generation loyal to the cause. One of the driving forces behind the commemorations was to celebrate as well as indoctrinate the next generation into the ethnic story.

These were the stories of faithful people, faithfully remembering their past and using it to preserve the institutions they felt needed to be preserved and protected. The faith of Dutch-American Protestants is usually cited as the reason they are an anomalous ethnic group. This study supports that assertion by saying that their commemorations reflect this faith and enhance the institutions which are responsible for and the recipients of this faith. Faithful remembering is an important way to think about how Dutch-Americans constructed an ethnic group identity through the institutions they built. The commemorations reflect and reinforce the purpose of these institutions and help perpetuate the reasons for their existence.