

A Historical Sketch of the St. Thomas Reformed Church

By Roland Euwema, 1985

Three hundred twenty five years ago the first services of the St. Thomas Reformed Church were held. That seems like a very long time ago, and it is. To put it into perspective, that was 200 years before the American Civil War and 115 years before the American Revolution. This was the date that King Charles II came to the throne in England after the drab tenure of Oliver Cromwell.

This was a period of colonial expansion in the New World. At this time only Massachusetts, Plymouth, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Virginia and Maryland were colonies of note. New Amsterdam, or New York, was made up of clusters of Dutch planters strung along the Hudson River.

So you can see that our history goes back a long way. The pilgrims were in Plymouth colony only 40 years when our congregation first met.

You may ask why was the Reformed Church established in such a small place, so very early? The answer is rather simple and yet complex. Our origins begin in the Netherlands. (We are still called the Dutch church by some people.) The Dutch traders came to the Caribbean to seek their fortune by trading sugar and molasses. The Dutch were the first to settle in the Virgin Islands and they brought with them a fervent brand of Protestantism, and immediately congregated in worship.

Not too many years before, Europe had undergone a period of intellectual awakening and religious renewal. In the early part of the 1500s European religious life was rocked by the Great Reformation. This was the time of Martin Luther in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland and, of course, John Calvin followed soon after. Calvin did more than any other in this period to set the intellectual patterns of the Reformed Church. The Calvinistic emphasis of the Reformed movement spread rapidly though Europe. In France they were known as Huguenots, in Scotland they became known as Presbyterians. The Reformed movement also spread into Germany and Hungary. In the last part of the 1500s the Netherlands was engaged in a bloody war for independence from Spain. The leader of this struggle was William of Orange. He openly confessed that he was a child of the Reformed movement and when independence was achieved, the Reformed Church became the Established or National Church of the Netherlands. (Because of the struggle and leadership of William of Orange, the color orange became a symbol of Reformed Protestantism.)

Out of this period came three great and historic documents. Even today, these became and remain as Standards of the Reformed Church. The first is the Belgic Confession, which was written by Guido de Bres who was eventually hanged for preaching the Reformed faith. The second is the Heidelberg

Catechism, which was written for the Elector of Heidelberg Frederick III by two ministers, with the improbable names of Ursinus and Olevianus. The third great document is the Cannons of Dort, which are statements of faith from the Synod of Dort, an international conclave of Reformed Theologians. These, along with the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, became the backbone of the confessions, or statements of faith, of the Reformed Churches. Of course these were all well grounded in Holy Scripture, which was and is the foundation of the Reformed movement.

This is the rich history that the early Dutch settlers brought to St. Thomas and led them to congregate in worship.

The early beginnings of our Congregation are sketchy at best, but there was a minister serving the Dutch traders when the Danes arrived in 1667. Early services were held in Fort Christian where both Dutch and Danish Lutheran services were held. In the year 1688 a newly ordained minister by the name of Oliandus arrived from the Netherlands to shepherd the flock. From early times the Dutch congregation was allowed to worship freely even though the Lutheran Church was the state church of the small but flourishing colony. The two congregations had such a fine relationship that when Governor Iverson, a staunch Christian and hard-fisted disciplinarian, instituted a fine of 25 pounds of tobacco on the planters and merchants who stayed in bed on Sundays, the reformed Church was included in the ordinance. The ordinance went so far as to impose additional fines on masters who prevented their servants from also attending. However, there is no known record of how much tobacco or money this law brought into the treasury. In the early 1700s members of our congregation were also allowed to will sums of money to the church rather than leave a prescribed amount to support the poor.

We would not expect a history of a congregation to be complete without a list of ministers. Since none of us know any of them personally, such names as Strumphias, Isaac Gronewald, Arnoldus Van Drummen and John Paldemus have very little meaning. But in the mid 1700s the congregation numbered 142, of which 128 were white and 14 were colored. (Could this be the beginning of the congregation being called the white church?)

It was also during this period that the congregation built its first building. This was located just east of Fort Christian, which was later known as Barracks Yard and most recently as the Parking Lot. This was either destroyed by fire or hurricane. In 1744 a structure was built on Snegle Gade near where the Masonic Lodge now stands. The money for this new church structure was donated by the DeWindt family, who were both wealthy and influential. In fact, they were so influential, a Johannes DeWindt was an elder and Lucas DeWindt was a deacon. However, their influence was stymied when they tried to have another DeWindt – a ne'er-do-well seminary student – become the congregation's minister. The Classis of Amsterdam put its foot down and appointed John Monteneag instead.

This was not the end of the Rewinds. Catherine DeWindt left the large Estate Catherineberg to the church at her death. This Estate now encompasses High Road, the Danish Consulate and all adjoining lots. As you can see, even though they did not get one of their own as a minister, they still supported the church.

Things were to happen to the DeWindt church. It was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1804 and again in 1806. Also, the congregation was served by the Reverend Francis VerBoom. He was a “boom,” all right. Not only did he allow the insurance to expire and the church burn without coverage, but he also got hold of the church property in Catherineberg. He subdivided it and sold lots for 100,000 Rigsdalers. Needless to say, he left St. Thomas a rich man and he left the congregation penniless and without a church home.

In the early 1800s several events changed the course of the congregation’s history. The first major event was, due to the new independent spirit of the young American nation, there was a great groundswell in the Reformed churches to become independent from the church in the Netherlands. The debate raged between the city churches, which for the most part were loyal to the English crown during the War for Independence and the country churches, which gave their allegiance to the Revolutionary cause. The latter prevailed and independent status was granted to the American church. With this independence the American church could train its own minister (New Brunswick Seminary is the oldest in America) and it was able to govern itself. Also, the jurisdiction of the St. Thomas congregation was transferred from the Classis of Amsterdam to the Classis of New York. (We are still a member of that body.) The other important event was the pastorate of the first American minister, Abraham Labagh, beginning in 1828. He not only started the first Sunday School on island, which soon reached proportions of about 500 children but also oversaw the improvement in the finances of the church. The funds had improved the point that his successor, Philip Brett, was able to see the present church building and parsonage erected. The congregation was the strongest during this time, boasting 390 members. An auxiliary building was also built east of the church edifice. In 1876 this was sold to the Danish Government for \$2,000 to be used for educational purposes. We all know what happened to that.

Before we leave the Dutch period altogether, there is an interesting, if not scandalous, aside to mention. One of the pastors from the Netherlands was living quite openly with his mistress and/or housekeeper. However, when he fell on bad times and his health failed, he dignified the liaison by performing the marriage ceremony on his deathbed.

During the late nineteenth century, the congregation was served by John Knox, not of Scottish Presbyterian fame, but he was famous in his own right. He was a historian of note and wrote the first worthy history of the Virgin Islands.

His history is still a standard work. After leaving this parish, he returned to the United States and later published a comprehensive history of the denomination.

The fortunes of the congregation fell in the latter part of the 1800s, as the fortunes of the island. Business declined sharply due to the death of the slave trade and the demand for molasses. Also, the western world was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, which bypassed the Caribbean altogether.

The Dutch made an exodus reminiscent of the Children of Israel fleeing Egypt. However, they did leave behind a legacy of Dutch names. We are all familiar with names such as DeWindt, DeJongh, Boschulte, Brunn, DeGout, Moolenaar, Schulterbrandt, Van Beverhoudt, Van Holten, Vanterpool and Van Putten.

From the turn of the century until the past World War II period, the pulpit was filled very sporadically. Ministers such as Arcularius, Leslie, Folensbee and Bruns served at intervals during this time. The already declining congregation saw further erosion. However, due to the yeoman dedication of the faithful few, the church did not shut its doors. Familiar names such as Bornn, Vance and Lindqvist held the congregation together, providing services each Sunday with local ministers or other churches assisting. This group of laymen provided a vital Sunday School for the children of the community.

During the time the congregation was without a pastor, there were proposals by the denomination to close the church. Being notified of these proposals, members of the consistory reached into their pockets, made a hasty trip to New York, closed a lingering debt, pleaded the cause of the congregation and received a stay of execution, if you will.

At mid-century the congregation was again pastorless. But something happened to change the course of our recent past. A young seminarian, Charles Ausherman, was sent by the Classis of New York to our congregation. He worked with the congregation for two summers, married a daughter of the church and gave a glowing, if not romantic, account, stateside, of the church and the islands. With interest rekindled in the denomination and congregation alike, the first pastor in over 15 years was called.

As you can see, the history of our church has been cyclical. It would prosper and then fall onto bad times. This pattern has slowly repeated itself over the past three and a half centuries.

This first minister of our present revival period was Reverend Donald Lam. He came as pastor in 1958 after the new enthusiasm generated by the Seminarian Ausherman. It was during his pastorate that Calvin Hall was built. The structure replaced a garage or storage shed that washed away with the great Mother's Day Flood of 1961.

In succession, he was followed by Reverend Donald Pangburn in 1964. His pastorate saw the membership of the congregation grow in numbers and strength. Also, extensive repairs were made both to the parsonage and the church building. Reverend Ronald Lockharst followed Pangburn, continuing to build upon the foundation laid by his predecessors. The fortunes of the congregation prospered and started to reach out into the community. Our Summer Program was started at this time as were other community-minded programs. The next minister, Reverend Herman Luben, served the congregation for a brief period, but continued the programs of those before him. Reverend Jack White succeeded Luben and the congregation once again made gains in membership. His tenure was followed by Reverend William Hoffman, who continued to serve the congregation until 1985.

Even though we have traced the history of one congregation, it did not, nor does it now operate independently. A brief outline will suffice as to the historical organization, of not only the Reformed Church in America, but also this organizational pattern prevails throughout all Reformed Churches.

Starting with the local congregation, this body of the faithful elected their own governing body, which we call the Consistory. The word comes from the Latin, which means "tribunal." The minister is always the president of the Consistory, which consists of Elders, who are "the hands and eyes of the minister," as an old Reformed document refers to them, and Deacons, which traditionally tend to the finances and other physical matters of the congregation. This threefold ministry of Minister, Elders and Deacons is based on Scripture and mirrors the organization of the early church.

The district organization of the Reformed Church is called the Classis, which is also of Latin origin meaning "fleet." Each congregation in the "fleet," (we are members of the New York Classis) is represented by the minister and an elder, who have an equal voice and an equal vote. The Classis acts as a collective "Bishop," looking after the welfare and work of the congregations within its district, and is concerned with the supervision of each church.

The next jurisdiction is the regional body called the Particular Synod. Synod is a traditional term for an ecclesiastical conclave and the term Particular refers to the fact that it is an organization of a particular region. Its delegates are chosen by each member classis and are equally divided between ministers and elders. This body contemplates the planning and program of the church within its region and does not involve itself with matters of individual congregations. It does, however, act as an Appeals Court in a dispute between the Classis and a member congregation. Our congregation is a member of the Particular Synod of New York.

General Synod is the highest body in the Reformed organization. It meets once a year and concerns itself with matters of the whole church. Each year the delegate of minister and elders are chosen equally from each Classis. At these session the business, program and mission of the church are discussed and matters are determined that have far reaching implications, not only for the denomination, but also for each congregation.

Historically, we belong to a rich tradition. Not only is our congregation the oldest in the Virgin Islands, but our denomination is the oldest with a continuous ministry in the United States.

We of the St. Thomas Reformed Church can be proud of our long and rich history, while we take note of our present existence. However, we can look to the future with the faith that our work is not done and that we have the courage to build upon our past.