Audacious Immigrants: Bringing Dutch Reformed Reforms to Canada
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The ideas of Abraham Kuyper have been in the news in 2021. In January a New York Times article described Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri as a Christian Nationalist and a follower of Kuyper, after he quoted the Dutch preacher, journalist, and prime minister in a speech at The King's College in New York. People unfamiliar with Kuyper might wonder who this dangerous man was. People who know Kuyper's ideas well might wonder how a right-wing Christian nationalist found inspiration in them. This essay does not answer such questions. Instead it examines how Dutch immigrants tried to implement Kuyper's vision in Canada in the decades after World War II.

Dutch Reformed Canadians inspired by Kuyper have made radical statements about North American culture. In 1970, faculty members in the new Institute for Christian Studies said things like, “I believe the Christian Community is desperately ill... and that the Christian Community in North America is on the verge of collapse and will die unless we begin to nurse it back to health again.” Similarly, the magazine Vanguard published a series of articles on “The Struggle by Radical Christians to Dismantle the Humanist Educational Monopoly in Ontario.” While this radical view was a minority opinion among Reformed folk in Canada, it underscores the need to take the Reformed social reform ideas seriously. One thing moderates and radicals in Canada agreed on was that Kuyper’s public theology was central to their view of political solutions.

Let us consider what a group of Kuyper’s followers actually did. The ordinary folks who believed his pluralistic social vision did what their Reformed faith and tradition led them to do, namely, set up Christian organizations everywhere, in all areas of life, all across Canada. Reform, not revolution, was the slogan they inherited from Abraham Kuyper. What follows here are some vignettes detailing how social reforms were achieved in several areas as the audacious immigrants challenged the imperial British status quo on the basis of their Dutch and Reformed worldview.

Granum Reformed Church in Alberta during the 1930s. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.
Hidden Roots
Since Kuyper had an organic view of social institutions, I like to compare the development of a subculture to the growth of a tree. The Dutch Reformed subculture in Canada began as a small sapling in Alberta and was initially fed by the settlers in Montana. Growing a tree is more Reformed than chopping it down, my father, a nurseryman, would say. In the 1940s in the Netherlands, he was an activist in the Anti-Revolutionary Party, founded by Kuyper in 1876. I spent my own youth planting a lot of real trees, and I was privileged to spend my adult life nurturing symbolic trees in God's kingdom.

The Dutch Reformed subculture started in Canada in 1905. Families living near Lethbridge, Alberta, had forty-five persons in the house of Jan Postman, conducted the service, and administered the sacrament to Jana Postman and Jan Ter Telgte.

During his two-week stay, Rev. Holwerda helped this small group of settlers petition Classis Orange City for a home missionary. On 26 November 1905, Rev. Bothjil formally organized the Nijverdal CRC. In 1906 this congregation divided into the Menarch (now Nobleford) and Granum churches. Both rural congregations are still there, and both support The King's College in Edmonton, Alberta.

Today, some of their CRC congregational members agree with Hawley's Trumpian views!

That same year, the first Reformed congregation tied to the older and bigger Reformed Church in America a RCA pastor from Chicago associated with the Presbyterian Church's Holland Mission, organized a congregation in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It had a minister only briefly, and in 1908 it joined the CRC and became the first CRC in Winnipeg. Then Dutch folks trekked to Edmonton on the new transcontinental railroad and petitioned the recently created Cassis Pacific of the CRC to start a congregation. It was organized in 1910. A year later, a significant number of Dutch families moved to the Edmonton area from Whitinsville, Massachusetts, and increased the size of the congregation considerably. Then a group decided to leave and take up homesteading in northern Alberta in 1912, taking advantage of provincial land grants for farmers willing to break their backs in the bush. In keeping with their intent to stay Dutch, they called their settlement Neerlandia. Settlements in Cramersburg and Edam, Saskatchewan, failed, as these settlers were unable to cope with the harsh Canadian climate.

In 1914 the start of World War I ended the wave of immigration begun in the 1890s. This left six struggling congregations in the West dependent on assistance from their neighbors to the south. There is no record of any of the men enlisting in the Canadian Army for WWI. Rumor had it that most were still anti-British because of the recent Boer War Britain had fought against Dutch settled in South Africa. Besides, Holland had remained neutral in the "War to End All Wars."

The second tree root began in Ontario, imported directly from Holland. After 1920, the Canadian Pacific Railway sponsored programs to entice European immigrants to come to the Prairies. They succeeded in bringing in many nationalities, but most Dutch immigrants went no further than Ontario. Home Missionary J. R.
Brink was dispatched from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to organize them. In 1925, Chatham became the first CRC congregation as part of Classis Grand Rapids East.

That same year, John Snor, the fieldman for the Netherlands Immigration Foundation, was appointed to assist Dutch immigrants in the Hamilton, Ontario, area. Soon a congregation was organized under the auspices of Classis Holland and served by home missionary Rev. J. S. Balt. That was in 1929, only months before the Great Depression hit Canada. Snor began organizing a group of families to move to the Holland Marsh north of Toronto. Land and modest grants were available, but they had to drain the marshy lands. The clever Dutchmen succeeded in putting in a canal and draining the swamp. The Holland CRC was formally organized in 1935, and cash crop blessings soon followed.

The third tree root began across the continent, in Vancouver, British Columbia. A group of Dutchmen of various backgrounds was organized as a CRC as part of Classis Pacific; in 1926. An enterprising farmer, Jacob Prins, began working with the Colonization Department of the Canadian National Railway to attract settlers to the northcentral part of British Columbia. In 1939, twelve families got together to set up a “good reformed church” in Houston, British Columbia.

By the beginning of World War II, there were 14 congregations, 8 ministers, and 2,274 souls comprising the CRC in Canada. The Canadian total was about the size of the biggest single congregation, Grandville Avenue, in Grand Rapids. At this point, the “kingdom” was still hidden under a bushel. No one in those churches was thinking about reforming anything in Canada. Survival was the order of the day. But the key settlements were alive, and in Hamilton, Ontario, the first Christian School Society had been set up in 1937. The roots “were taking,” as we nurserymen say.

**Growth**

The big wave of post World War II immigration changed the dynamics of the CRC in Canada. The precarious “reformed” sapling with three main roots quickly became a tree. Between 1947 and 1957, 150,000 Dutch emigrants left their ruined country, looking for better opportunities in Canada. Not all of them were Reformed, as half were Roman Catholic. The main Reformed group was Gereformeerde and joined the existing 14 CRC congregations. That “joining” action was not a foregone conclusion, as in 1944 there had been another acrimonious church split in Holland. Those animosities came to Canada with the newcomers on converted troop-carrier ships such as the Wimmerian and the Groote Beer.

The growth of the CRC tree was critical for development of the kingdom vision imported from Holland. Both Pope Leo XIII and Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper had written about important social questions in the 1890s. The key idea was that economic and class problems—exploitation and poverty—must be addressed directly through political action. Being charitable or sympathetic on the sidelines was not enough to alleviate obvious human suffering. As a result, both the Reformed and the Catholic communities in Holland had organized labor unions and political parties. Reformed Christians referred to such efforts as contributing to God’s “kingdom.”

The new immigrants all were familiar with witnessing through social action, but in Canada this “kingdom vision” was developed only in the CRC. The other Reformed denominations stuck with a narrow version of Calvinism as their view on social issues. Consequently, although there were periodic overtures to work together on a common cause, the Canadian Reformed Church, the Netherlands Reformed Church, and the Reformed Church in America in Canada did not join the CRC-designed initiatives. These smaller denominations provided lots of criticism but little support for the growing Christian organizations. By 1960, the Dutch immigration wave had subsided, and there were now seven new classes across the country with 100 congregations from Nova Scotia to Vancouver Island. (There would be over 200 eventually.) Canada was covered from coast to coast.

However, a young tree does not a reform make. Before 1960, the arrival of another denomination did not cause a stir with the Anglo-Canadian establishment. After all, many immigrant groups had started their own ethnic churches for decades. If only the Dutch Reformed people had remained normal; but no, they became audacious and started Christian organizations!

Christian school societies began cropping up and becoming visible by 1960. Societies, the legal entities owning the schools, were a necessary part of the Kuyperian emphasis on family and community. The schools were not church owned (parochial).
schools. The school board ran the school, while the consistory ran the church. This was in line with Kuyper’s doctrine of sphere sovereignty. Each sector of society is a sovereign sphere. The immigrants were at pains to point out that the schools were not Dutch or Reformed but Christian and Protestant. The mostly Anglican (English), Scottish Presbyterian, and Irish Catholic population in Canada was not keen on this strange social philosophy. It reminded them of the Puritans, those ill-humored dissenters. But the Dutch Reformed folks soldiered on, lustily singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” on Sunday mornings and praying “Abide with Me” in the evenings. They meant it, wholeheartedly.

By 1960 these enterprising folks had mastered English, the CRC Church Order, and the details of commercial contracts. They were on their way to implement the other parts of their Dutch Reformed tradition—the other pillars of civil society that needed Reformed Christian influence—notably education, business, labor, health, the arts, and politics.

The obvious first branch needed was a communications network. Christian newspapers are essential for promoting the correct worldview. Kuyper had started several in his day. Many of the folks had been readers of the Dutch daily, Trouw. An Edmonton group started The Canadian Calvinist in 1945. The first editor, Rev. DeKoeke, echoing Kuyper explained its purpose: “to become Canadian citizens so that you can take an active part in the public life of the nation.”

The Dutch community in Chatham, Ontario, started The Contact in 1949 to connect the widely dispersed communities and provide useful information. No one had really expected Canada to be that large. Ordinary news about life in this world, such as birth and death announcements, was important. Being efficient Dutchmen, they quickly realized the benefit of cooperation and merged the two papers to become the Calvinist Contact in 1951. With this national paper in hand, the movement for “kingdom causes” was ready for the next level. Guardian Press in Hamilton was to print the newspaper. Volunteers produced the content. Faith drove the supporters to pay subscriptions and contribute everything from travel ads to inspiring speeches. While the print method succeeded, the attempt to set up a Christian radio station in Niagara Falls failed in 1959. Apparently, the initial programming, called “the Kingdom Hour” — a mix of devotions and news from Holland — did not attract much of an audience or advertisers.

The Tree Grows

Churches were built everywhere to house the pulpit and the “sacred Word,” and the Christian schools were not far behind them in instilling knowledge. The Dutch immigrants were accustomed to fully funded Protestant schools back in Holland. Since the Roman Catholics in Ontario also had a publicly funded “separate schools” system, the idea of setting up a (Protestant) Christian school system seemed common sense. Already in 1952 there were seven school societies in Ontario, two operating schools, and a new organization, the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (OACS). By 1960 there were twenty-three schools in industrialized Ontario, four on the open Prairies and nine in verdant British Columbia.

The 1950s saw the beginning of several other Christian organizations. The Christian Labor Association of Canada (CLAC) was begun in February of 1952 in London, Ontario. It received assistance and advice from European Christian unions and the Christian Labor Association (CLA) in the United States. Compared to the other Dutch Reformed organizations in Canada, it faced the toughest consequences for its principal claims around freedom of association in the workplace. The fight for legal certification as a union was the clearest example, in the eyes of many Dutch Reformed folk, of fighting the “kingdom of darkness.” The big Canadian unions (e.g., the Seafarers) defended their turf fiercely. Some were corrupt. Some were under communist influence, though communists were being purged. The CLAC seemed a foreign and religious upset in an era when labor unions in Canada and the US were consolidating. The key to the future, however, was less the unions themselves than the Ontario Labor Relations Board (OLRB). This authority decided whether a union was legal and approved certification as the sole bargaining agent for employees. That process involved a public assessment of the criteria for union membership.

The first big issue that shook CRC...
churches in Canada was whether a member of the CRC could join the "neutral" (secular) union at his or her workplace. Was such a person a sinner who should be barred from the Lord's Supper? That reminded everyone of the older debates about lodge membership. Further, if Reformed folks were to set up a new Christian union, then what about the non-Christians in the workplace? Could they be members of a (Reformed) Christian union? Can one serve two masters? This kind of debate would be replayed in the other organizations for the next two decades. Soon one group was arguing for providing special "creeds," while another was arguing for a statement of principles, and a third faction threatened to leave if the CRC confessions were not included.

This debate obscured the critical issue for the CLAC, namely, fair representation in an open workplace. Could a "Christian" union be fair to everyone it represented—atheists included? If it gave some members special status based on faith, that would be discrimination. The OLRB thought so, too, and turned down the first applications in 1956. That negative decision heated up the debate even more.

The major showdown between the two factions in the CLAC occurred in 1957. After many efforts at compromises, a new union, the Christian Trade Union of Canada (CTUC), was begun in 1958. The CTUC removed the exclusive faith clause from its constitution and was certified by the OLRB in 1959. The CLAC soldiered on with its radical position and tried to find ways to meet the reality of Canadian unionism. Both unions survived and finally merged in 1979. They contributed a major reform for the working class by making competition among unions possible in several economic fields. Freedom improved in the workplace.

The Committee for Justice and Liberty (CJL) was formed in 1961 by some CLAC supporters who wanted a more political organization to reform the closed shop Ontario Labor legislation. One of their early projects was to give legal advice to employees who refused to join the "neutral" union at their place of employment for religious reasons. It expanded its social justice scope greatly in 1972, when full-time staff was appointed. Later, it was renamed Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) and moved on to deal with bigger national problems like aboriginal issues, dirty pipelines, and urban poverty.

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (FFFO) began in 1954, organized by twelve farmers in London, Ontario. As the number of prosperous farms increased, so did the membership. Due to the nature of the agricultural sector, much of the work of the CFFO was in relation to government policies for this "supply-managed" sector. The CFFO became effective for its members and stayed out of the news after full-time staff took over in 1968.

As part of the pressure to finance many new organizations, the Dutch immigrants, both the Reformed and the Catholic sections, soon organized credit unions. The Dutch Canadian Credit Union was begun in Toronto in 1954 as a financial cooperative. The St. Willibrord Credit Union in London, Ontario, was begun in 1955. Both are still alive and well. No reform was possible here. Canadian banking regulations are tight and identical for all religions.

Reformed folks knew that mental health issues were closely related to spiritual well-being. In 1958, a group started the Salem Christian Sanatorium Inc. In 1965 the organization received government permission to operate a 30-bed psychiatric hospital. Unfortunately, the board could not find the right qualified staff required for this kind of project. In 1972 a new organization formed with a more limited scope; it was called the Salem Christian Mental Health Association. It began operating many counselling clinics across Ontario. Most of them shut down in the 1980s, during the era of the abortion battles. The board realized that there was also something wrong with the name. While the biblical word "salem" means peace, the North American connotation was the place for witchcraft and Puritans. Neither was a term of endearment. In 2006 the organization reemerged as the Shalom Mental Health Network.

Before the failure at Salem became obvious, others began working on a related health care program, the needs of the elderly. In March 1966, the Classis Hamilton Home for the Aged was incorporated. It now exists as Shalom Manor in Grimsby. In 1969, Holland Christian Homes was incorporated to set up several types of senior and long-term care facilities in Brampton. These operations grew into a model concept for the other ten thriving retirement and care facilities.
serving the Dutch Reformed retirees around Ontario. All of them receive government funding and have retained a Reformed and Dutch identity, despite having to comply with “neutral” legislation. Their reform was to provide exemplary care for the elderly, which has been a major contribution to the province. Similar fine facilities exist in Canada’s West.

A Big Branch
By 1960, the tree was sprouting Christian education branches but was facing some headwinds. When immigrants come to a new country, they are faced with the challenge of how much to assimilate in their new environment. Anglo-Canadians were in an imperial mood right after World War II, and Ontario had a long history of church versus state battles over schools. The Dutch had stepped into a hornets nest when they announced that they were starting “real” Christian schools. Didn’t the Canadian Army just liberate Holland in 1945? Did they think Canadians were fake Christians? The locals wondered.

Many of the immigrants had been members of the underground resistance in the Netherlands during World War II and had little respect for political leaders who pursued unjust policies. The idea of fighting an unjust situation was not only a biblical mandate but an exciting challenge for these idealistic and enterprising folks. Thus, the Hamilton Christian School Society Board took the Hamilton Public School Board to court in 1962. Ontario funded both a historically Protestant, but now secular public school system and a Roman Catholic “separate school” system. The lawsuit petitioned the courts to interpret the “separate school” legislation so that HCSSB could become a separate Protestant board and qualify for government funding. Unfortunately, the judge cited a number of technical obstacles in the legislation and concluded that HCSSB was not a school in the legal sense required. That skirting of the justice norm was hard to appeal. The OACS membership agreed to pay HCSSB’s legal costs and began working on lobbying the politicians.

Next out of the gate was the Christian Action Foundation (CAF) in Alberta. One of its early mottos was “serve God, advance justice, transform society.” Beginning a lobbying campaign in 1964, CAF succeeded in 1967 in getting the Alberta government to approve a 35 percent tuition grant to private schools. In 1970 there were ten schools with 1,931 students and 73 teachers. They constituted about one-third of the private schools in Alberta. In the 1980s, the group would be formally organized as the Prairie Association of Christian Schools (PACS), with offices in Calgary. This was the core group of the Association of Independent and Alternative Schools in Alberta (AISCA). This broader organization continued to lobby for improved status for the independent schools, and by 1998 it was instrumental in achieving an innovative funding arrangement with the province. It now was possible for an independent school to remain separate and yet receive funding on par with the public boards. By 2013, this unique arrangement was adopted by most of the schools. Unfortunately, this model seems to have worked only in Alberta.

Then came the British Columbia effort, organized as the Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia. In 1970 there were fifteen schools, 2,100 students, and eighty teachers in this group. It was part of a larger group, the Federation of Independent School Associations (FISA). This much larger group also included Catholic and elite private schools, so the Dutch immigrants were a minority in FISA. This Federation hired a lobbyist in 1967 and succeeded in obtaining government funding for 35 percent of the tuition grant by 1977. The best part of their solution was that the British Columbia government passed the Independent School Act, thus creating a clear model for other provinces. This arrangement was more visible and standardized than the Alberta solution, which depended a lot on local agreements. The money was a big relief for the financially stressed parents. Inflation had become a big problem for school boards in the late 1970s.

In Ontario in 1984, the progressive conservative government extended funding all the way to Grede

Cartoon from the Man in Society curriculum used in Christian high schools in Canada in the 1980s. It depicts the ideas of Abraham Kuyper that all knowledge comes with a point of view. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.
funding. As a consolation prize, the Supreme Court ruled that there were no constitutional barriers to any such funding but that this would have to be a provincial act. Several judges did note that the provision of health services should be mandated. In 1999, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations ruled that Ontario was violating several of its Human Rights Covenants. In 1999, the Progressive Conservative government did indeed provide funding for health services in private schools in Ontario. At last, a small victory!

Given that limited success, the OACS and the CJC redoubled their efforts in 1999 in the Ontario provincial election to elect Progressive Conservative members of parliament as the party had indicated it would be willing to consider a voucher system. In 2000, both organizations expanded their lobbying staff and did all the things that lobbyists do—newspaper ads, radio interviews, TV talk shows, and lots of visits and meetings with officials.

On 9 May 2001, the Progressive Conservative government introduced the 2001 provincial budget. In it was a provision for the Equity in Education Tax Credit (EETC) for parents with children in private schools. The public school teachers’ unions went ballistic, and the newspaper editorialists were savage. Some were supportive of school choice, but most lamented the sky was falling. However, the government held firm, and by fall the budget had passed; the EETC would be in effect for the 2002 tax year. The schools celebrated in November 2002 with a fiftieth-anniversary gala for the OACS. The political events of the next decade were not positive, but that is another topic for later essays.

Conclusions—A Modest Lesson
By 2020, the Dutch Reformed subculture tree had several strong branches with leaves. One of the principles in the Kuyperian tradition is that reforming society means increasing the structural (i.e., religious or worldview) diversity of its institutions. This is a public good because ordinary folks then can freely exercise their personal responsibilities, like choosing schools or jobs, in ways that reflect their deepest commitments. Monopolies in any area restrict freedom and distort development. Did the “Reformed reforms” improve diversity and freedom for the average citizen? Yes—in education, the basics for a Reformed Christian education system are in place, from kindergarten to university. The C.A.C. is active across Canada, but in business and banking the prospect is dim. In elder care, reform worked, but in health, it clearly did not. The Catholic and Jewish hospitals offer similar solutions.

The Reformed institutional witness has been around in Canada for seventy-five years. Time will tell just what cultural impact the Reformed subculture will have in this country, especially as its ethnic character fades. A detailed celebration and current assessment of the Christian education story in Canada is found in my new book, Creating the Third Way. This detailed story provides clearer answers to the value question that should now be asked of the whole reform effort. These audacious Dutch immigrants brought a new Reformed “kingdom” vision to Canada, and they did so not through marching for revolution but through new kinds of organizations that pushed for social reform. Reformata Reformandum Est! To be Reformed is to be reforming.®