

Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands

They are a relatively small denomination within the churches in the Netherlands. They consider themselves to be part of the conservative right wing of the reformed community. Who are they, and what is their origin? In this article we reflect on the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands (Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland). Please note the suffix “in the Netherlands.” This is the national denomination. The Old Reformed Congregations (without ‘in the Netherlands’) are a few independent congregations. These churches have no official structure and synod. In our case it concerns the national one.

Facts about the ORCiN

Who are the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands (ORCiN)? They consist of sixty congregations.¹ The vast majority are located in the Netherlands. It is a relatively small denomination when compared to the Netherlands Reformed Congregations (NRC), and the Free Reformed Churches (FRCNA). Those denominations in the Netherlands have 151 congregations (NRC) or 180 churches (FRCNA). It is approximately the same size as the Reformed Congregations of North America (RCNA). In addition to the congregations in the Netherlands, it has two congregations abroad. The first can be found in Salford in Canada. The other is in Grand Rapids in the United States of America. From the seventies to the nineties, there was even a congregation in Pretoria in South-Africa.² If we compare it to the churches in the Netherlands, the number of its members is relatively low. How many? Unofficial figures indicate that there are approximately 16,500.³ That is both baptized as well as confessing members. The FRCNA has significantly more with 69.000 members.⁴ Their larger sister, the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, even has 170.000 members.⁵ Thus, the Old Reformed Congregations are relatively small. This denomination has currently nine ministers. All of whom are at this moment ministering in the Netherlands.⁶ Nevertheless, some of them regularly fly across the ocean to serve to the congregations in Canada and America.⁷

Characteristics of the Denomination

What does characterizes the ORCiN? When you enter one of their churches, what do you feel and notice? That is certainly a good question. The first that stands out is a *fairly loose structure*. The better you get to know this denomination, the clearer you will see it. They do not have an overly strict organization. In general, things proceed in a more relaxed manner. You can also notice this in the preaching. Every preacher is free to structure his sermon. This can therefore vary from person to person. One minister follows his text quite closely. He preaches in one service all his point. A good example is Rev. Gerritsen. During each service, he addresses all the points. Other ministers do mention indeed at the beginning of the sermon the theme and points, but they will not always cover everything in one service. For instance, he preaches about the first point in the morning service, but speaks about the other two points during the evening service. One might think in this case of Rev. Zwartbol. Both approaches are possible among the congregations. What do they consider extremely important in preaching? The operation of the Spirit. This is sometimes referred to as the anointing with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, preachers leave room for this. The consequence is that the first point is receives quite an extension. At such a moment it is no problem if the service lasts longer than usual.

¹ <https://oudgereformeerdegemeenteninnederland.nl/gemeenten>

² https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/tag:RD.nl,19930401:newsml_c5fe4263f7b01d07ae5323d75af84bd7

³ Another website talks about 18.000 members in 2005.

⁴ <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/protestant/1169754/dubbel-zoveel-leden-verlies-als-in-2021-christelijke-gereform>

⁵ <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/protestant/1178676/daling-leden-gereformeerde-gemeenten-lijkt-door-te-zetten-het>

⁶ https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oud_Gereformeerde_Gemeenten_in_Nederland; <https://oggin.jouwweb.nl/voorgangers>

⁷ Note that here the names of denominations have been used that are known in North America, the sister churches of those in the Netherlands.

Where else do you notice that they are used to a looser organization? That is visible during church meetings. This differs certainly from, for instance, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. They have a strict structure, agenda, and time allotted for speaking. This is what you would not notice within the ORCiN. This loose character is also visible in their doctrine. They do not have official doctrinal statements. But in, for example, the Reformed Churches of North America they have a conditional offer of grace. The Netherlands Reformed Churches did also give a doctrinal statement in 1931.⁸ They do not have something like that within the Old Reformed Churches. Neither you will find a systematic theology from their ministers. They have no desire for this. This means that different perspectives can coexist within the denomination. This is clearly the case. One group follows the view of Rev. E. du Marchie van Voorthuisen and Rev. A. Kort. They emphasize that a sinner cannot exist before God without the knowledge of Christ. The blood of the Savior must be applied. The essence is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the place where the sinner must come. Rev. Kort even indicates that there is no such thing as unconscious rebirth. At the moment of regeneration, the sinner is forgiven. He writes, “[Regeneration] is an actual and conscious transition or incorporation through faith in Christ.”⁹ This is certainly preceded by the experience of the knowledge of sin. That is necessary. However, Rev. Kort believes this to be as preparation to come to the Savior. For both men, the focus remains on knowing and embracing Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there are also preachers who advocate the view of Rev. J. van der Poel and Rev. T. Klok. True conversion begins with the conviction of sin. Someone already has faith, but does not yet know the Savior. What does he believe then? That a holy God exists and that he himself is a sinner. Only at a later time does he receive the knowledge of Christ and the Father. Nevertheless, they could emphasize that a conscious justification is necessary. At the same time they leave room to speak about the experimental life of a convinced man or woman. Both perspectives could exist in this church denomination. This is not the case within other denominations, such as the Netherlands Reformed Churches. They follow the line of Rev. Kersten. He has the perspective that is comparable to that of Rev. J. van der Poel.

A second point that the Old Reformed describes is that church members group themselves around a particular minister. In other words, they feel specially connected to one of the ministers within this denomination. If you know about other church denominations, you rather see that the members think the national church denomination is important. For instance its specific doctrine or the organizations that are connected to the denomination. This is not truly the case within the ORCiN. Members tend prefer a certain minister. Especially in the early days of the church denomination, they had men with a strong personality. Each with his own gifts and qualities. Each of them had a clear and distinct message. That attracted therefore various types of listeners. A statement of those days was, “We have fifteen ministers, and therefore we have fifteen branches!”¹⁰ It is quite interesting to think about this. Therefore, the uniqueness of each minister can continue to exist within this church denomination.

A third important characteristic is related to with preaching. The focus is primarily on *the experience of God's people* and not much on the explanation of the text. This does not mean that ministers do not explain the text. Rev. Gerritsen surely this and then makes its application. However, the largest part is generally focused on the experience. That is the heart of preaching. This is what is critical. They would not refuse to hear the background or explanation of a text. However, members prefer to hear their heart explained. That is why they come to church. One of their ministers said, “We cannot miss the experience, otherwise the preaching is dead.”¹¹ You will therefore encounter few ministers within the church denomination who do not preach experimentally. This is comparable to the English counterpart, the Strict Baptists. For them, experience in the sermon is extremely important as well. How does this happen within the ORCiN during reading services? Because not every church has its own minister, they mainly read the old-fathers and Puritans. Think of Andrew Gray, Thomas Boston,

⁸ https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/DeSaambinder_20211104_006_ART_S001_CID001

⁹ A. Kort, *Wedergeboorte of Schijngeboorte*, 34. <https://theologienet.nl/bestanden/kort-ds-a-wedergeboorte-of-schijngeboorte.pdf>

¹⁰ Email of minister Lukas, d.d. 9 januari 2024.

¹¹ https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/tag:Criterium,20010701:newsm1_6af588ca4e58adc84ad241800d3ad2d2

Bernardus Smytegelt or the Heidelberg Catechism sermons of Beukelman. Other elders read sermons from former ministers of their own denomination. What about the offer of grace? To my knowledge, this has never been a debate among them. If the Spirit anoints the minister, you do certainly hear a free offer of grace. I still remember a sermon by one of the ministers. He preached about the prodigal son. With his arms wide open he said, “God the Father is waiting for you to come!” Yes, that is certainly possible within the ORCIN, although at the same time, there is also a warning against false teachings and conversions.

A fourth element is *caution with respect to innovations*. They prefer to stick to the old and familiar. These things have proven themselves over the years. That does not mean that they view every innovation as wrong. However, some caution is required here. How is that noticeable? In the worship service, you will hardly come across a projector, screen, or tablet. Simplicity is the key word when it is about worship. They hardly do or not use of websites and media within their congregations. They only use the bare necessities. Other than that they are adverse to it, with some exceptions. Internet can indeed bring dangers. With hesitation, they use live-streaming.¹² In all cases, this is without video. Why this caution? They want to prevent people from listening at home when they could come to church. Another danger is that outsiders can mock the sermons.¹³ Also, the church denomination is completely opposed to the use of television. This brings the world into one's home. They want to stay away from the world as far as possible. Within the Old Reformed Congregations they also wish to use the old and reliable Dutch Statenvertaling only. They are quite opposed to all modern translations. Sometimes the men of the denomination use sharp words against this. This thought also applies to the Herziene Statenvertaling (HSV). A translation comparable with the New King James Version. The translators of the Statenvertaling were all godly men. Although they were not inspired, they were nevertheless enlightened by the Holy Spirit in their translation work. As a result, they faithfully translated the Word of God into Dutch. In addition, we have the marginal notes available for the difficult passages. They do not consider innovations in the more modern translations to be improvements. I must agree with them in this matter. Every modern translation, including the HSV, uses different translation principles than the translators of the Dutch Statenvertaling or the King James Version. Do you need an example? Think of the mother's promise, “And I will put enmity ... between your seed and her *seed* ... ” (Gen. 3:15). The Herziene Statenvertaling renders this as, “And I will bring enmity ... between your offspring and her *Offspring* ...” (Gen. 3:15, HSV). From a translation perspective, this is possible. Nevertheless, this is certainly a different choice of translation. However, in the Old Reformed Churches you will not encounter the discussion of possibly using other translations in the pulpit. They simply stick to the old Statenvertaling. When it comes to singing the Psalms, most congregations use the 1773 Psalter, and even sixteen congregations still use that of Datheen. Other Psalters are not permitted. Hymns are, of course, completely out of the question. They would like to stick to the old ways, as its name also indicates.

A fifth characteristic is a *sober theological training* for the ministry. Often they are also simple men who have been carpenters, fishermen, or farmers. If a man feels called to the ministry, he goes to the Committee of Examination. This is comparable to a curatorium. He tells them his conversion and calling. Additionally, he is required to do his first practice preaching. If both matters are deemed acceptable in the eyes of the committee, he is admitted as a student. Thus, they do only accept men based on their extraordinary gifts.¹⁴ These are gifts to speak, to be able to explain the text clearly, and to be able to apply it experimentally. From this moment he does his studies under the supervision of another minister. He goes to the house of this minister each week. For his training, he reads books on his own. If I understand correctly, this is also the book *Lectures to My Students* by Spurgeon. Students do not receive specific subjects, such as the original languages or exegesis. They do not believe this is an issue. After all, do they not have a reliable Dutch translation? Furthermore, they could make use of

¹² For all online church services: <https://oggin.jouwweb.nl/kerkdiensten-luisteren>

¹³ Adriaan van Belzen, *Preken is een liefdesdienst*, 220.

¹⁴ Adriaan van Belzen, *Preken is een liefdesdienst*, 255.

good resources with respect to the original languages. For instance a Bible that has Strong coding. Why do they choose a minimal educational program? The main reason is that God makes someone a preacher. The Spirit has to work in him. The student does receive gifts for it. They are even afraid of a actual training program for ministers. This could become a ‘ministers factory’. Then men (and even women!) are made preachers who are not called by God. The true seminary for the ministry is that of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is a valid point. Sometimes I get the feeling that seminaries train individuals to be preachers without a heavenly calling. They possess gifts of speaking, and a desire to serve, but a true calling is lacking. The perspective of a ministers training of the ORCiN should make us reflect. They agree with the Strict Baptists on this matter. However, there have been men within the denomination of the Old Reformed, who have previously had been graduated from a theological training. One example is Rev. E. du Marchie van Voorthuijsen. He originally came from the Free Reformed Churches and later became a minister in the ORCiN. Their own education, however, remains limited. Furthermore, students go around preaching relatively quickly. They learn from its practice. During these years they continue to study under their own mentor. After two years they become a learning elder. This is a type of two-year internship in one congregation. After this they are made eligible for call. In most cases, the student remains in the congregation of his internship. Thus, we have seen five characteristics of the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands. Let us now look at the origin of this denomination.

Origin of the ORCiN

How did the ORCiN come into being? For this, we must return to the deposition of Rev. L.G.C. Ledeboer. As a young man he studies theology at the university of Leiden. In 1838, he accepts the call to the Reformed Church of Benthuisen. However, he is still unconverted. A man from his congregation tells him that his preaching is Remonstrant. The Lord uses these words to convict him of sin. He begins to cry out for forgiveness. He later may look at the crucified Christ. After this, everything changes. He begins to preach differently. Now he feels burdened by certain matters that are taking place within the Dutch Reformed Church. This includes the regulation of 1816. They allowed the government to have influence in the church. Furthermore, Rev. Ledeboer no longer wishes to sing hymns during the service. He believes that this as a Remonstrant way of thinking.¹⁵ Unfortunately, singing hymns is mandatory for every church service. On a Sunday he throws the hymn book and church regulations from the pulpit. A woman wants to pick them up. But then he orders her to leave them there. After the service he buries them in his backyard. This happens in the presence of the congregation. In doing so, he demonstratively shows that he disagrees with the course of events. Because Ledeboer is no longer willing to adhere to the rules of the church, he is suspended and later deposed. The latter happens in 1841. He desires to return to the truth of the fathers of Dort (1618-1619). He first tries to join the already separated churches. Yet he breaks that bond. He goes around as a traveling preacher. He establishes temporary churches in wooden buildings, barns and stables. In his heart of hearts he does not want to establish congregations. He hopes for a return to the Dutch Reformed Church. But this is not going to happen. Therefore, he does install elders and deacons in the various groups that come together.¹⁶ These are the churches called Lederboerian Congregations. They only sing from the psalter of Datheen. Ministers wear a calf-length pants and a collar as official clothing. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of ministers within these congregations.

It is years later. It is the beginning of the twentieth century. Rev. Kersten wants to unite two church groups together. These are the Ledeboerian Congregations and the Reformed Congregations under the Cross. The latter descend from the secession of 1834. The minister sees important spiritual similarities between the two parties. This is both in preaching and lifestyle. He thinks it would be a great idea if these two are united into one denomination. The vast majority become the Netherlands Reformed Congregations in 1907. But one of the ministers of the Ledeboerian Congregations cannot join the denomination. This is Rev. L. Boone from Sint-Philipsland. At first, he seems to be positive about the

¹⁵ https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/tag:Criterium,20130701:newsml_8bd4a57ba24de93df9acb864e7077195

¹⁶ https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/MIVOMIN12_19910901_003_ART_S001_CID001

denomination. Later he comes to a different conclusion. What objections does he have? In one sentence: He wants to continue in the line of Rev. Ledeboer. How does that look like in practical terms? First of all, he only wants to *sing from the psalter of Datheen*. A large part of the Reformed Churches under the Cross sing the one from 1773. This psalter contains elements of the enlightenment. His view has also a historical reason. The Ledeboeriaanse Churches had two ministers. They were Rev. Bakker and Rev. Van Dijke. Both believed that the psalter of 1773 was the main reason for the decline in the national church. It had even been imposed by the government. But the Psalms of Datheen were born out of necessity.¹⁷ For Rev. Boone, the return to the psalter of Datheen is therefore also a return to the ancient church from the previous centuries.¹⁸ Did Rev. Boone already see that allowing the 1773 psalter would displace that of Datheen? Secondly, Rev. Boone was in favor of the *use of the usual ministerial clothing*. This is a calf-length pants, a collar and a hat. Why? Many seceded ministers began to wear a long coat. In this they followed the French fashion.¹⁹ That is what Rev. Boone does not want. The third reason is that the minister wants to keep the idea of a ‘temporary church.’ To unite into an official church denomination starts a church next to the Dutch Reformed Church. He wants to maintain the idea that they should return to the Dutch Reformed Church when possible. In the period just before the union, two texts presses on the heart of Rev. Boone. The first is, “My son, fear thou the LORD and the King, and meddle not with them that are given to change” (Prov. 24:21). The other text in particular appeals to him. This one is from Revelation, “See thou do it not” (Rev. 22:9).²⁰ He cannot have peace in his heart to unite. This causes a part of the Ledeboerian Congregations to follow this minister. They therefore remain outside the new denomination. On 3 December 1907, the name of this group becomes the Old Reformed Congregations (ORC).

We move on decades in time. It is 1948. Now two groups come together to discuss becoming a denomination. These are the ORC and the Federation of Old Reformed Congregations. Who were the latter? In 1922, Rev. C. de Jongste from The Hague had managed to bring a few groups together. These consisted of a number of continued Reformed Churches under the Cross, the United Churches and Friends of Truth. Together they form the Federation of Old Reformed Congregations. In 1948, the ORC and the Federation of Old Reformed Congregations merge into the Old Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands. This is the church denomination as we still know it today. Their church order is the Church Order of Dort 1618-1619.²¹ You do see that the history and the views of Rev. Boone had an influence on the current church denomination. The desire for the old and a ‘temporal church’ idea remains visible. They want as few innovations as possible and not too strict rules. If you ever visit an ORCiN congregation, you will experience their characteristics and history.

¹⁷ https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/id/tag:Terdege,19880316:newsm1_961da3b80e76d698b5b27f2ff5a31811

¹⁸ <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/653266/ds-boone-kon-in-gemoede-niet-mee>

¹⁹ <https://www.refoweb.nl/vragenrubriek/22521/ambtskleding-op-de-kansel/>

²⁰ <https://www.nd.nl/geloof/geloof/653266/ds-boone-kon-in-gemoede-niet-mee>

²¹ <https://oudgereformeerdegemeentenin nederland.nl/system/files/anbi-beleidsplan-tbv-website.pdf>