
The attempt to unite Scottish, Dutch, and American denominations

*The trilateral relationship between the Free Presbyterian
Church, the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, and the Netherlands
Reformed Congregations in the 1930s*

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Introduction

The history of the Protestant Church since the Reformation has been punctuated by divisions, attempted realignments and rapprochements, sometimes issuing in formal union. This has been the case in all countries, and close cooperation between denominations has usually involved either shared subordinate standards or compromising ‘adjustments’ to blur denominational distinctives.

This paper examines the ambitious plan conceived in the 1930s for a Dutch denomination and its North American sister Church to affiliate or unite with the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This is the only known attempt formally to associate strict Calvinistic denominations from these countries, notwithstanding completely separate ecclesiastical histories and subordinate standards, and with the added complications of different church practices and linguistic backgrounds. Study of this subject is possible because a significant amount of formally published material exists, especially in Dutch and Dutch-American sources, including personal reflections of some of the people most closely associated with the process.¹ However, study of the trilateral process is limited by the

¹ Quotations from ‘official’ English versions of Dutch and Dutch-American material are provided where these exist, retaining North American English orthography in faithfulness to the originals. In the absence of such ‘official’ translations I take responsibility of the accuracy of Dutch material rendered into English, and I have restricted giving *verbatim* Dutch quotations to specific instances.

absence of important primary sources such as personal correspondence² and some of the contemporaneous private records. The present paper is the first attempt to address this interesting episode in Scottish Church history.

Abbreviations

AGSGG	<i>Acta van de Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten, 1907–1959</i>
ANPSGG	<i>Acta Noordelijke Particuliere Synode Gereformeerde Gemeenten</i>
BBW	<i>Bedroefden om der Bijeenkomst Wil</i>
BW	<i>De Banier der Waarheid</i>
FC	Free Church of Scotland
FP / FPC	Free Presbyterian / Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland
FPM	<i>Free Presbyterian Magazine</i>
GG	<i>Gereformeerde Gemeenten</i>
GHK	<i>Rev. G.H. Kersten: Facets of his life and work</i>
GO	<i>Een gedenksteen opgericht</i>
KK	<i>Kersten in Kleur</i>
NRC	Netherlands Reformed Congregations

I. Denominational backgrounds

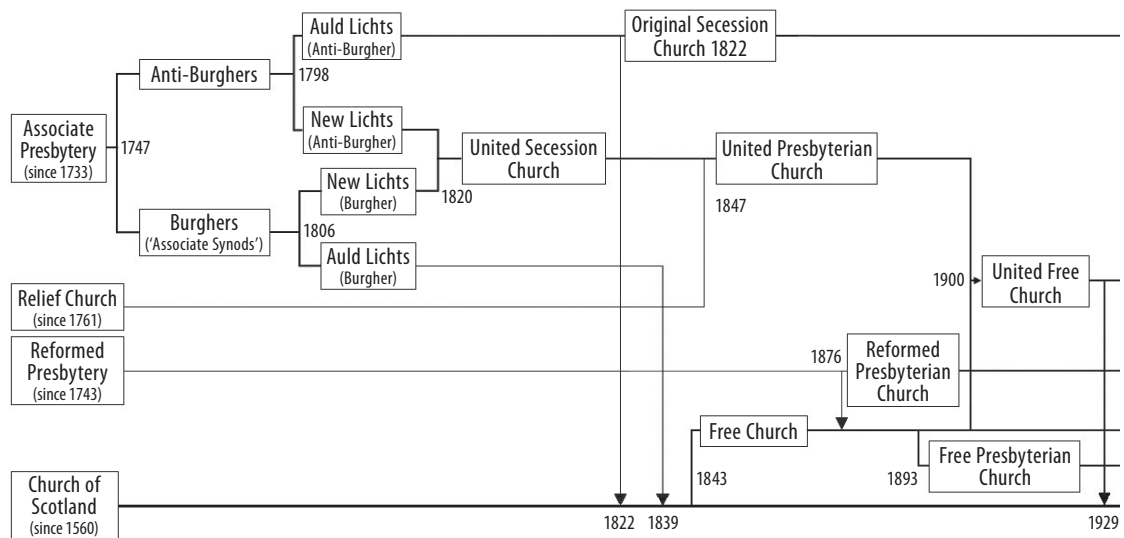
The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed significant upheavals in Churches, both in Scotland and the Netherlands, and it is necessary to set the scene by briefly considering the relevant backgrounds of the denominations under consideration – the Free Presbyterian Church (FPC) and the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* (GG) [English: Reformed Congregations] with its North American sister Church, the Netherlands Reformed Congregations (NRC). Schematic representations of the complex realignments of the Scottish Presbyterian churches and Dutch churches during this period accompany the following accounts: it should be noted that the dates of events are on a non-linear timescale.

1. Scotland and North America

The FPC arose in direct descent from the Church of Scotland and the Disruption Free Church (FC). The Evangelical party withdrew from the

² Two biographers of the Rev. Kersten (Mr B. Bolier and the late Rev. M. Golverdingen) confirmed to the author that no personal correspondence exists on these topics.

Scottish Church Timeline



Established Church of Scotland to form the FC at the Disruption (1843), in protest against the state's interference with and subversion of the spiritual independence of the church in the Non-Intrusionist controversy.

The following decades witnessed unions between the FC and large sections of the Original Secession Church (1852) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church (1876) but negotiations to unite with the United Presbyterian Church failed (1863–1873) because of that denomination's theological liberalism and attachment to Voluntaryism. However, the FC itself drifted considerably from many doctrines and practices over the decades and its relation to the Westminster Confession of Faith became a major issue of contention. The FC General Assembly passed a Declaratory Act in 1892, thereby altering the relationship of the denomination to the Confession of Faith. When the Constitutionalist party was unsuccessful in having the Act rescinded in 1893, the Rev. Donald Macfarlane of Raasay tabled a protest and separated from the FC. He was joined by the Rev. Donald Macdonald of Shieldaig, together with a significant number of office bearers, members and adherents to form the FPC. It has been noted that this division was unique in the history of the Scottish church in that it hinged on a specifically doctrinal issue.³

³ See *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, ed. N. M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), entries for 'Non-Intrusionists', 'Disruption', 'Free Church of Scotland, 1843–1900', 'Voluntaryism', 'United Presbyterian Church', 'Declaratory Acts', and 'Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland'; *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1893–1933)* (n.p.: Glasgow, 1933; reprinted [with a supplement: five lectures on the Declaratory Act (1892) by the late Rev. James S. Sinclair, Glasgow] Dingwall, 1965), chapters VI and VII.

Subsequently the United Presbyterian Church united with the majority of the FC in 1900 to form the United Free Church, and the non-uniting minority continued as a separate body. The FPC found the ecclesiastical position of the post-1900 FC unsatisfactory and repeatedly opposed any moves for cooperation or union with that denomination.⁴ A statement detailing differences between the FPC and other Scottish Presbyterian churches was published in 1933.⁵

As the paper focuses on the attempts by the Rev. Kersten to develop links between the FPC and the NRC in the United States,⁶ it is appropriate to notice here the pre-existing FPC involvement in North America. In 1901 the Synod received a petition from people in the western part of Ontario who were sympathetic to the Church⁷ resulting in the Chesley congregation eventually joining the FPC. Thus began ‘a happy connection between sympathisers with the Church in Ontario and the home Church. Year after year deputies visited the various groups in Ontario.’⁸ Nearly thirty years later (1929–1930) the Ontario Kirk-Session together with its Canadian-born minister (the sole FP minister in Canada) parted company from the FPC but the other Canadian congregations remained loyal to the FPC. Ministerial deputies from Scotland continued to visit on a virtually annual basis, holding services in English and Gaelic from Ontario to the Pacific coast of British Columbia. As well as ministering in congregations served by elders in Vancouver and Winnipeg, they regularly took services

⁴ *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1893–1933)*, chapters VIII, IX and X.

⁵ ‘Synod’s Statement of Differences between the Free Presbyterian Church and the other Presbyterian Churches in Scotland’, *FPM*, Vol. 38 (July 1933), pp. 129–149. (Copies of the *FPM* are available online at www.fpchurch.org.uk).

⁶ This paper follows the practice of the FPC and the NRC (in their English-language written material) of using the honorific title ‘Rev.’ for ministers of the GG and NRC instead of the Dutch honorific abbreviation ‘Ds.’ (pronounced *dominee* – a term derived from the Latin *dominus*, originally meaning master). Notwithstanding its use in print, the NRC people continued to address the minister verbally as ‘*Dominee*.’ See L. Vogelaar, *Een gedenksteen opgericht: Facetten uit de geschiedenis van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Noord-Amerika* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1998), p. 159.

⁷ ‘Meeting of Synod’, *FPM*, Vol. 6 (December 1901), pp. 292–293. The people lived in communities close to the east shore of Lake Huron and were descendants of people who had left Scotland in 1847 or 1849, mainly from the counties of Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Sutherland. See Donald B. Macleod, ‘Extension of Witness Overseas’, in *One Hundred Years of Witness* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1993), p. 141.

⁸ *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1893–1970* (Glasgow: Publications Committee, Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1975), pp. 98–99.

at Toronto, Fort William⁹ and Rodney¹⁰ (all in Ontario), Winnipeg (Manitoba), Saskatoon (Saskatchewan), and Calgary and Red Deer (both in Alberta), along with occasional services at other places where FP expatriates lived. Ministerial deputies to Canada also held occasional services for FP expatriates in the USA cities of New York, Buffalo (New York State) and Detroit (Michigan).

Providing ministerial supply to the widely dispersed Canadian congregations resulted in prolonged absences from Scotland. The FPC addressed this in two ways: firstly, by ordaining young ministers as missionaries to Canada for at least a year, so that a longer period of service could be given than was possible for deputies with charges of their own at home, and secondly by sending divinity students for prolonged periods.¹¹ It appears there was an unspoken assumption that there was no prospect of ministerial accessions from within North America,¹² as proposals for maintaining congregations all involved yet further ministerial absences from Scotland,¹³ with an optimistic aspiration of forming a presbytery with ministers in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Detroit.¹⁴ Given the severe practical difficulties in supplying the existing congregations and groups in Canada, it is interesting to read the comment of the Rev. Finlay MacLeod,¹⁵ Convener of the Canadian and Colonial Mission Committee in 1935, just before the first of two visits by the Rev. Kersten to Scotland: ‘There is a great field ready in the U.S.A. and Canada for the gospel

⁹ In 1970 Fort William was amalgamated with Port Arthur and two other townships to form the new community of Thunder Bay.

¹⁰ A village in southern Ontario, which has undergone several amalgamations with neighbouring communities over the decades: since 1974 it has been part of West Elgin in southern Ontario.

¹¹ *One Hundred Years of Witness*, p. 143.

¹² William Matheson (1882–1957) was born at Lochalsh, Ontario and became a minister there from 1918 until he left the FPC in 1930. He continued to minister in Ontario to his congregation in Chesley and Lochalsh, and to small gatherings in Bruce, Huron and Elgin counties until his death.

¹³ The Deputy reporting in 1930 suggested ‘(1) that two ministers, or one minister and a student, be sent out yearly; (2) that one Deputy be confined to Vancouver, Calgary, and Saskatoon, giving at least nine months there, and (3) that the other Deputy be sent to Detroit and Winnipeg, for three and six months respectively.’ See F. Macleod, ‘Report of Deputy to United States and Canada’, *FPM*, Vol. 35 (August 1930), pp. 137-141.

¹⁴ E. MacQueen, ‘Canadian and American Deputy’s Report’, *FPM*, Vol. 37 (July 1932), pp. 119-124.

¹⁵ Finlay Macleod (1892–1956) was minister of Dornoch and Rogart (his sole charge) from 1926 until his death. D.A. MacFarlane, ‘The late Rev. Finlay MacLeod, Dornoch’, *FPM*, Vol. 62 (November 1957), pp. 209-213.

of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The door is open to us to enter that field with the glad tidings of salvation, and may we be enabled while we have the opportunity to go forward making mention only of His righteousness who has promised, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”¹⁶

2. The Netherlands

The history of Dutch denominations is complex, but for the purpose of this short historical overview, the focus is confined to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, looking at the issues relating to the formation of the various denominations along with allusions to matters which would have a bearing on plans for relations with the FPC.

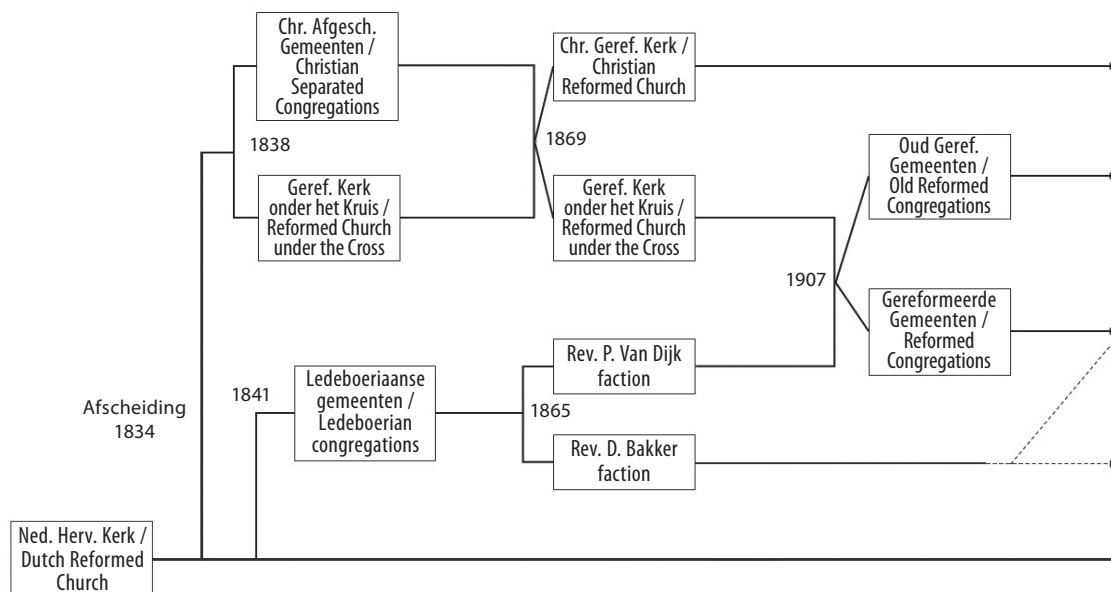
Ecclesiastical developments in the first half of the nineteenth century were shaped by national and international politics. Prussian and Russian troops liberated the Netherlands from French occupation in 1813. Prince Willem Frederik of Orange (1772–1843) proclaimed himself King of the Netherlands in 1815 and reigned as Willem I [William I] until his abdication in 1840. Before the demise of the Dutch Republic in 1795, the Dutch Reformed Church had enjoyed the status of a ‘public’ or ‘privileged’ denomination. Though it was never formally adopted as the state religion, the law demanded that every public official should be a communicant member and consequently the Church had close relations with the Dutch government. Willem I wished to unite Roman Catholics and Protestants in one national denomination, but this was unrealistic and he was compelled to adopt a different approach. The *Gereformeerde Kerk* (Reformed Church) lost its ‘privileged’ position and was renamed as the *Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk* (NHK) [Netherlands Reformed Church] in 1816, and the State imposed ‘General Regulations’¹⁷ by which (*inter alia*) the Crown selected the commissioners to the National Synod and the regional administrations. The State decreed a doctrine for ‘the promotion of Christian morals, the preservation of order and concord, and the cultivation of love for King and Fatherland’, and these impositions were accepted almost without protest by the NHK.¹⁸ In practice, the

¹⁶ ‘Report of Canadian and Colonial Mission Committee’, *FPM*, Vol. 40 (July 1935), pp. 121-122.

¹⁷ *Algemeen Reglement voor het bestuur der Hervormde Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* (’s Gravenhage: Algemeen ’s Lands Drukkery, 1816).

¹⁸ George Harinck and Lodewijk Winkeler, ‘The Nineteenth Century’, in Herman J. Selderhuis (ed.), *Handbook of Dutch Church History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht [2015]), pp. 435-445.

Dutch Church Timeline



Three Forms of Unity¹⁹ and the Church Order of Dordt [Dordrecht] had been abolished. These developments represented the outworkings of Renaissance humanism that had eventually resulted in the so-called ‘Age of Enlightenment’, which impacted many aspects of European society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Discontent with Enlightenment thought grew within the *NHK*. A revival of religion occurred following the crises of the Belgian Revolution of 1830 (resulting in Belgian independence from Holland) and the Second Cholera Pandemic (1832) in which over 10,000 Dutch citizens perished. This was part of a wider revival in various countries known as the *Réveil* (French for ‘revival’ or ‘awakening’) which began in 1814 in Switzerland and France and occurred in the Netherlands between 1820 and 1870.²⁰ Vital religion flourished and dissatisfaction with the degraded character of the *NHK* eventually came to a head over the issue of a hymn book. The Rev. Hendrik de Cock (1801–1842) of Ulrum²¹ protested against the book and in consequence was suspended and dismissed. This led to the *Afscheiding*

¹⁹ In Dutch, *De Drie Formulieren van Enigheid* – the collective name for the Belgic Confession (1561), the Canons of Dordt (1618–1619), and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563).

²⁰ *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, pp. 457–460. The Scottish theologian Robert Haldane (1764–1842) and the English banker and politician Henry Drummond (1786–1860) were closely associated with the *Réveil*, whose Continental leaders included the Swiss divines César Malan (1787–1864) and Louis Gausson (1790–1863) and the French ministers Frédéric Monod (1794–1863) and Adolphe Monod (1802–1856).

²¹ A small town in the northern province of Groningen, now part of the municipality of De Marne.

[Secession] of 1834, in which the seceding churches cast off the yoke of the State Church. He was followed by other ministers and the secession spread rapidly, especially in rural areas. Four years later, the movement divided into two groupings – the *Christelijke Afgescheiden Gemeenten* [Christian Separated Congregations] which were recognised by the government, and the *Gereformeerde Kerken onder het Kruis* [Reformed Churches under the Cross] which had a negative attitude towards the government.²² In 1869, these two groupings merged to form the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk* [Christian Reformed Church],²³ and a small continuing group retained the name of *Gereformeerde Kerken onder het Kruis*.

A further separation from the *NHK* occurred in 1841 when the Rev. Lambertus G.C. Ledebouer (1808–1863) of Benthuisen was deposed after his opposition to the ‘General Regulations’ came to a head with his symbolic burial of the despised hymnal. The congregations which followed him were called the *Ledeboeriaanse gemeenten* [Ledebouerian congregations]. They were known for their austerity and shunning of the world. After Ledebouer’s death, the congregations divided into two factions following slightly different emphases: these were named after the leaders, Rev. Pieter van Dijke (1812–1883) who led the larger faction, and Rev. Daniël Bakker (1821–1885).

The Secession of 1834 therefore had the result that ‘thousands of people returned to a truly Reformed church, such as flourished in the Netherlands during the Synod of Dordt of 1618–1619 and thereafter. Indeed ... it is a wonder that churches again came into existence out of many incoherent groups. Instead of one church perpetuating the doctrine and church order of the Church of the Reformation, many churches came into existence. In spite of the coalescence in 1869 of two relatively large seceded ecclesiastical groups ... this church did not to any extent encompass all who had left the Reformed Church.’²⁴

²² *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, pp. 460-462.

²³ A descendant denomination has been known as *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* [Christian Reformed Churches] since 1947. It is affiliated with the Free Reformed Churches of North America, and has no relation to the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

²⁴ M. Golverdingen, *Rev. G. H. Kersten: Facets of his life and work*, trans. B. Elshout (Grand Rapids, MI: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 2007), pp. 9-10. This is an edited translation of *Ds. G.H. Kersten: Facetten van zijn leven en werk* (3^e druk - herziene en uitgebreide druk) (Houten: Den Hertog, 1993). The foreword to the English version states that passages specifically of Dutch character were revised as they were less pertinent for American readers: the content of the sections on contacts with the FPC are fairly similar in both versions.

In 1907 most of the *Gereformeerde Kerken onder het Kruis* and the Van Dijke faction of the Ledeboerian congregations were brought together to form the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* [Reformed Congregations]. The process by which this was achieved introduces us to the Rev. Gerrit Hendrik Kersten (1882–1948), who would be central to the attempt to unite the Dutch denomination with the Scottish Church nearly 30 years later.

At the end of 1901 Mr Kersten went to the southwestern province of Zeeland as an *oefenaar* [exhorter or teaching elder] in the *Kruisgemeente* [Congregation under the Cross] at Meliskerke, after having spent several months discharging the same office in Rijssen, a town in the east of the country. He was formally installed in Meliskerke in March 1902 at the age of nineteen, and within a short period of time a revival of religion took place in his congregation, which was the only one of that denomination in Zeeland. He was allowed to minister to the neighbouring Ledeboerian congregations, and a closer relationship developed between the two denominations.

Discussions about formal union between the two denominations began in 1904 but foundered on matters such as ministerial dress,²⁵ the legitimacy of ordination,²⁶ and especially over the version of Psalms to be sung.²⁷ Despite rather acrimonious meetings, Mr Kersten continued to press for rapprochement and union was eventually achieved in 1907, with only a few dissenters remaining outside the new denomination. Differences about conspicuously outdated ministerial dress and the line of Ledeboerian ministerial succession were overcome with comparative ease, and eventually the sensitive issue of the Psalter version was resolved by Kersten's compromise proposal that each congregation could choose its own version. By this stage Kersten had been appointed as a minister in 1905 and had accepted a call to the congregation at Boezemsingel in Rotterdam

²⁵ Ledeboerian ministerial dress was that of the eighteenth century elite: a tricorne (three-cornered) hat and short trousers with black stockings.

²⁶ The Ledeboerians accepted ordination as valid only if it had been undertaken by their founder minister or his successors.

²⁷ The metrical version by the Dutch Reformer Petrus Datheen (c. 1531–1588) was used in many Ledeboerian congregations, as they disdained the metrical version of 1773, which contained some terminology from the Enlightenment. Both versions use identical Genevan melodies; Datheen's Psalter remains in use, predominantly in Zeeland. It should be noted that the Church Order of Dordt also permits metrical versions of the following to be sung in public worship: the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith (the 'Apostles' Creed'), the Song of Mary, the Song of Zacharias, and the Song of Simeon.

in 1906. The union of 1907, effected when he was aged twenty-five, was a major step forward.²⁸

The formation of the GG brought together congregations where church order had been poorly understood, and ‘the great esteem in which office-bearers and the few ministers were held quite frequently led to an incorrect overvaluation of the personal opinion of such men’. From the outset, ‘it was emphatically stated that the congregations would accept and also maintain the Church Order of Dordt as the charter for ecclesiastical fellowship’.²⁹ In common with other churches originating from the *NHK*, the subordinate standards of the GG were the Three Forms of Unity. As well as being the driving force behind the formation and development of the new denomination and its Theological School, the Rev. Kersten was also instrumental in shaping Reformed religious life in the Netherlands, particularly in politics and education.³⁰ Furthermore, he was a prolific writer, with many theological writings featuring among his numerous published works.³¹

3. North America

Dutch emigration to North America began in the early seventeenth century, and a large wave of settlement took place from the middle of the nineteenth century, including many who suffered after the *Afscheiding* of 1834. For the purpose of this paper, the history of Dutch denominations in the USA will be omitted,³² as the focus is on the sister church of the Dutch GG, the NRC

²⁸ *GHK*, pp. 31-42 (*passim*).

²⁹ *GHK*, p. 45.

³⁰ He founded the non-denominational *SGP* – the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* [Reformed Political Party] – in 1918; was instrumental in founding and editing its newspaper (*De Banier*) in 1921; and served as an elected member of the *Tweede Kamer* [the lower house of the Dutch bicameral parliament] from 1922 until 1945. He was also heavily involved in establishing Reformed school education and was appointed as the chairman of the *Scholenbond* [School Alliance].

³¹ The ‘Selective Biography’ in *GHK* lists 152 items, some of which were published posthumously. He wrote on many subjects, principally Church life, theology, politics, and prefaces to works of old authors republished at his initiative. His major theological writings included *De Heidelbergse Catechismus* (2 vols., Utrecht: De Banier, 1948–49) and *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Utrecht: De Banier, 1950). Both books were translated into English: *The Heidelberg Catechism, in Fifty-two Sermons* (2 vols., Sioux Center, Iowa: NRC Book and Publishing Committee, 1968) and *Reformed Dogmatics: A systematic treatment of Reformed doctrine*, trans. J.R. Beeke (2 vols., Sioux Center, Iowa: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1980–1983).

³² Mass Dutch emigration to Canada (and consequent establishment of Canadian NRC congregations) did not take place until after the Second World War.

as it existed in the 1930s. The congregations were then in three discrete geographical localities – near New York (West Sayville on Long Island, and the three New Jersey congregations of Clifton-Passaic, Paterson-Haledon Avenue and Paterson-Peoples Park), around Lake Michigan (South Holland in Illinois; Sheboygan in Wisconsin; Kalamazoo and three congregations in Grand Rapids in Michigan), and a tightly located cluster further west straddling the boundary of Iowa with South Dakota (Sioux Center, Rock Valley and Corsica).³³ The congregations belonged to two *Classes* [presbyteries],³⁴ Classis East and Classis West.

Dutch immigrants eventually had to address the difficult issue of whether and when to adopt English. This was a particularly sensitive issue in relation to worship. By 1800 there were 250,000 Americans of Dutch extraction in the United States: the last Dutch-language church services in New York took place in 1803, a transition followed later in other parts of the country.

History repeated itself in the Dutch-speaking communities who had immigrated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The NRC churches eventually transitioned gradually to English services, a process not without difficulties.³⁵ Hundreds had left Grand Rapids when services were solely in Dutch: an English service was instituted there in 1922 and this was followed by the formation of an English-speaking congregation the next year.³⁶ English translations of Dutch authors were published around 1928, and the following year saw publication of material in English for catechism classes.³⁷ The issue of English services caused congregational disunity in Corsica around 1930 and rather later would lead to the extinction of the Long Island congregation at West Sayville.³⁸ In his address to the *Particuliere Synode Noord* [North Particular³⁹ (or Regional)

³³ *GO*, p. 23; *GHK*, p. 190.

³⁴ *Classes* is the plural form of *classis*, a word of Latin derivation equivalent to ‘presbytery’. It is predominantly used in Dutch denominations and in English-speaking churches of Dutch origin. A derivative of the word features in the Westminster Assembly’s *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government and of Ordination of Ministers* (1645), where the section on presbyteries is entitled ‘Of Classical Assemblies’. See *Westminster Confession of Faith* (repr. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), pp. 406-409.

³⁵ *GO*, p. 293.

³⁶ *GO*, p. 154.

³⁷ *GO*, p. 152.

³⁸ *GO*, pp. 157, 160.

³⁹ This is an obsolete use of the word (derived from the noun ‘particle’), signifying a part of a larger object. I have opted to use the word ‘Regional’ in translating ‘*Particuliere*’, in line

Synod] of the GG in 1936, the Rev. Kersten noted ‘the increasing need for English-speaking ministers [in America] as the Dutch sermons are almost no longer understood by the rising generations’.⁴⁰ At that point there were three ministers serving the NRC churches; all three were native Dutch speakers who had immigrated to the USA and had learned English as a second language. In his journal Mr Kersten gave as his opinion that it was of the greatest importance to preach and catechize in English in order to keep the young people. ‘Only the young people in the far West still spoke Dutch. In the other two regions [congregations in the east and beside the Great Lakes] many no longer could understand a word of Dutch, let alone speak it. Children from families of Dutch descent had told him that they did not understand a word of the Dutch sermon. Even knowing a little Dutch is not enough to follow an entire sermon.’ He concluded, ‘Therefore, having an English congregation, as in Grand Rapids and Paterson and Passaic, and having English preached is good for the young people.’⁴¹

II. The quest for union

In 1922, some fifteen years after the formation of the GG, Mr Kersten reflected: ‘I wish to strive for the goal of a Reformed, ecclesiastical existence that demands in the first place the preaching of the Word according to the heart of Jerusalem. I eagerly anticipate any movement in the direction of the institutional unity of the church.’⁴²

Mr Kersten’s concern to have ministers whose first language was English, coupled with a concern about unfaithful denominations in the USA, constituted the prime motives for approaching the FPC. In the absence of primary sources, it is not clear what formal discussions within the NRC or GG preceded his course of action. A comment by the Rev. William Grant in 1931 may hint at an early, tentative contact between the NRC and the FPC: ‘I understand that some Dutch people near Chicago have expressed a genuine interest in our church. They deserve sympathetic consideration in their felt isolation.’⁴³ Published FPC Synod minutes and deputies’ reports do not indicate developments on this front, however, and therefore Mr Grant’s

with some English-language reports in *BW*, whereas other English texts, such as *GHK*, use ‘Particular’.

⁴⁰ ‘Deputaten Buitenlandsche Kerken’, *ANPSGG 30 januari 1936 te Rotterdam-Zuid*, Art. 8.

⁴¹ *GHK*, p. 195.

⁴² *GHK*, p. 42.

⁴³ ‘Report of Deputy to Canadian Mission’, *FPM*, Vol. 36 (July 1931), p. 134.

comment is simply of interest as a possible preliminary to later events. What is beyond doubt, however, is that Mr Kersten played a central role in initiating approaches to the FPC, beginning with his visit to Scotland in 1935. The timetable of significant events is detailed below, and these are considered in their chronological order.

Informal and formal contacts

1935 29th July: Rev. Kersten starts a one-week visit to Scotland.

13th August: Mr K. Winters starts a two-week visit to Scotland.



Rev. G.H. Kersten.

1936 28th January: meeting of South Regional Synod (GG) at Krabbendijke (Zeeland).

30th January: meeting of North Regional Synod (GG) at Rotterdam.

18th March: meeting of Classis West (NRC) at Grand Rapids, Michigan.

24th March: meeting of Classis East (NRC) at Paterson, New Jersey.

14th May: meeting of Synod (NRC) at Paterson, New Jersey.

19th-22nd and 26th-27th May: meetings of FP Synod at Glasgow.

14th October: meeting of the Rev. Kersten and Mr P. Verblaauw with FP Synod committee.

18th November: meeting of FP Synod at Inverness.

1937 3rd February: meeting of North Regional Synod (GG) at Utrecht.

12th and 13th May: meeting of General Synod (GG) at Rotterdam.

II(a). Exploratory visits

Two exploratory visits to Scotland took place in 1935, the first being the Kersten family's visit beginning on 29th July, with return to Rotterdam the following week. Mr K. Winters (at that time a member of Kersten's congregation) almost immediately thereafter undertook a two-week visit, beginning on 13th August. Both men published accounts of their visits – Mr Kersten for the Dutch church and Mr Winters for the North American

church – which highlighted not only what appealed to them but also hinted at areas which would later become sticking-points in the attempts to develop a formal relationship.

1. Visit by the Rev. G.H. Kersten

Accompanied by his wife and some family members, the Rev. Kersten paid his first brief visit to Scotland in July and early August 1935. This brief visit allowed him to meet several prominent figures in the denomination and to gain first-hand impressions, including by means of attendance at most of the Dingwall Communion season services. At the request of a number of Dutch people he described his experiences in a series of four articles in the fortnightly denominational magazine (*De Saambinder*) later that year⁴⁴ and followed this immediately with a further article, a historical sketch of the Scottish denomination.⁴⁵

The articles recounted the Kerstens' trip from leaving the Zeeland port of Vlissingen (historically known in English as Flushing) on Monday 29th July until departing on the homeward leg the following Monday. His account combined details of the rail journey by the *Flying Scotsman* from London to Edinburgh, and his impressions of the religious and historical sights of Edinburgh, together with approving remarks about the way in which the Lord's Day was then generally observed there. As an admirer of Scottish First and Second Reformation worthies, it is unsurprising that his journey northwards was also punctuated by brief visits to Dunfermline, the location of Ralph Erskine's church and grave, and to Perth for its associations with John Knox and the Scottish-born Dutch divine, Alexander Comrie.⁴⁶ He included some biographical and historical

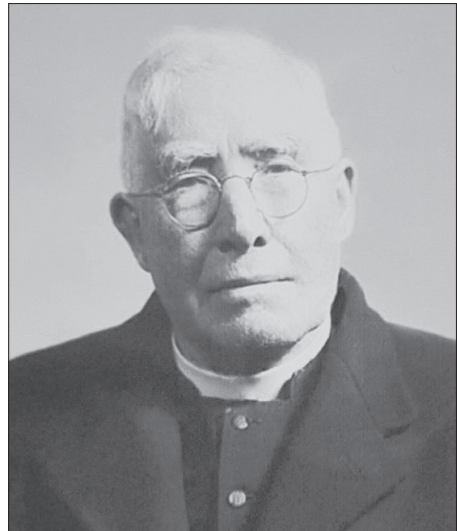
⁴⁴ G.H. Kersten, 'Van onze reis naar Schotland', *De Saambinder*, issues of 26th September, 10th and 24th October, and 14th November 1935. (Copies of *De Saambinder*, the North American magazine *De Banier der Waarheid*, and the non-denominational Reformed magazine *Terdege* are available online at www.digibron.nl). The articles were later reprinted as 'De reis naar Schotland' in G.H. Kersten, *Bedroefden om der Bijeenkomst Wil*, ed. A. Ros (Utrecht: De Banier, 1985), pp. 295-302.

⁴⁵ G.H. Kersten, 'Iets uit de geschiedenis van de Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland', *De Saambinder*, 28th November 1935, pp. 2-3; reprinted in *BBW*, pp. 303-305.

⁴⁶ Alexander Comrie (1706–1774) was born in Perth. After migrating at the age of twenty for commerce-related work in Rotterdam, he studied in Groningen and Leiden, and became a minister in Woubrugge near Gouda, where he ministered from 1735 to 1773. He is reckoned as one of the last ministers of the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* [Further Reformation]. Comrie authored 29 works and remains highly esteemed in the Netherlands, but he is known to English-speaking readers solely for *The ABC of Faith*, trans. J.M. Banfield (Ossett: Zoar Publications, 1978 and 2011). See Jan H.R. Verboom,

details about the Erskines and Knox, omitting information about Comrie, likely as his life was sufficiently well known to the Dutch readership.

The third and fourth articles in *De Saambinder* recounted Kersten's experiences in the north of Scotland, clearly conveying his spiritual relish for what he experienced. His intention was to meet a number of ministers, including the Rev. Ewen MacQueen (1866–1949), who had been a minister since 1901, serving in Inverness since 1919. The Kerstens stayed



Rev. Ewen MacQueen.

overnight in the Inverness manse before proceeding to Dingwall to stay as guests of the Rev. Donald A. Macfarlane (1889–1979), minister of Dingwall from 1930 to 1973.⁴⁷

In an engaging way, Kersten's described features of Scottish church life unfamiliar to Dutch readers – worship and practice in general, together with the distinctive features of the Communion season in particular. Aspects he highlighted included the conduct of family worship, people gathering from far and wide (and being accommodated in local homes) at the Communion season, and visiting homes for Christian fellowship. He was impressed by people attending morning prayer meetings at the Communion season, and the way in which these were conducted. He went on to describe approvingly the reverent silence before services and commented that he found it far from edifying that in some [Dutch] churches the liveliest conversations took place before services. He described *a capella* singing, including the custom of the precentor 'giving out the line', and remarked that 'the singing ... was solemn and good, and in the meetings I attended, better than I heard in many of our congregations, although I have heard that in Scottish churches the singing is not always so good.' It should be noted that some congregations in the Netherlands still had a precentor [Dutch: *voorzanger*] at that time.⁴⁸

Dr Alexander Comrie: predikant te Woubrugge: zijn leven en werken, alsmede de historie van zijn gemeente (2nd edn., Utrecht: De Banier, 1985).

⁴⁷ See J. Tallach, *I Shall Arise: The life and ministry of Donald A. Macfarlane* (Aberdeen: Faro Publishing, 1984).

⁴⁸ It is understood that precenting still occurred in at least one GG congregation in Zeeland until the 1970s.

Mr Kersten was impressed by the ‘Question meeting’ at which the Rev. Malcolm Gillies (1885–1945) of Stornoway presided. The text given out was 1 Peter 2:7 and he wrote that an elder ‘spoke a little on these words, to the edification of the many who had come’. Due to the Dutch visitors being unable to understand Gaelic, Mr Gillies asked the men not to speak in that language, ‘and people were kind enough to comply. I will not easily forget that first meeting. There I felt bound to the people of Scotland by ties unknown to nature. Two elders in particular gave testimony of the grace of God glorified in poor sinners.’ He provided extensive notes of the meeting, noting that ‘with tears, the elder shared his experiences, and they made a deep impression on us and on many others’.

He also wrote approvingly of the preparatory sermons as ‘two scriptural and experiential sermons’ [*twee Schriftuurlijke en bevindelijke preken*]. He further described fencing the Lord’s Table, the Table addresses to communicants, and the mode of administering the Lord’s Supper. The sermons on the Lord’s Day pleased the Dutch minister and he gave his readers notes of both sermons, the ‘action sermon’ (John 19:29) and the evening sermon (Psalm 105:8) which he ‘heard with great pleasure’. He summarised the content of the evening sermon as follows: ‘With great earnestness and fervour the preacher spoke of the objects, benefits and guarantees of the covenant of grace. ... It was a different language from the gibberish [*geleuter*] about the covenant that is heard from some in this country [i.e. the Netherlands].’

Before leaving Dingwall, ‘we said goodbye to our friends, in the hope that we might meet again soon and be able to establish some connection between the churches in the Netherlands and America and Scotland’. In the space of a very short visit he had made many new and genial contacts.⁴⁹

2. Visit by Mr K. Winters

The Kersten family left Dingwall on 5th August 1935 and returned to the Netherlands bearing ‘very favorable reports regarding the denomination’. The following week, a member of Mr Kersten’s congregation, Mr K. Winters,⁵⁰

⁴⁹ B. Bolier, *Kersten in Kleur: Voorganger, verbinder, vernieuwer* (7^e druk) (Apeldoorn: De Banier, 2019), p. 178.

⁵⁰ Mr Winters was elected as an *ouderling* [elder] of the large Rotterdam (Boezemsingel) congregation in 1936 and became *scriba* [clerk] of the *kerkenraad* [equivalent to Kirk Session]: he emigrated to Grand Rapids in December 1936, where he became the first principal of the Hastings Street Christian School (now Plymouth Christian Elementary

sailed from Rotterdam to Gravesend to begin a two-week trip to the United Kingdom. About five months later he published two articles entitled 'News from across the Atlantic' in *De Banier der Waarheid*, the bilingual monthly magazine of the NRC.⁵¹ 'On the strength of these [Kersten's] reports the writer arranged to visit as many of these congregations as possible, in order to secure more definite information regarding this denomination, such as: their doctrine, manner of worship, mission activities, theological instruction, etc. Naturally this information could best be obtained by attending their church services, and contacting as many ministers as possible.'

Mr Winters accomplished this by a fortnight of intensive meetings with FPs, successively in London, Edinburgh, Bonar Bridge, Dingwall, Oban, Kames and Glasgow. Like his minister, he arranged to attend a Communion season (Bonar Bridge) and his account noted that his first week in Scotland thereby included 'six church services and four prayer meetings'. His journey was by train, car and steamer (on the Caledonian Canal, en route from Inverness to Oban) and noted that such travel was 'slow and often tiresome'. His plan to visit the Rev. William Grant in Halkirk (1886–1976), minister of Halkirk and Helmsdale from 1926 to 1964, was abandoned due to the constraints of time and distance, and the Rev. D.A. Macfarlane of Dingwall was away from home when he called there. Notwithstanding, his brief visit allowed him to meet seven ministers,⁵² including the Church's missionary to the Jews,⁵³ as well as a divinity student.⁵⁴

School), in addition to teaching various subjects there in Dutch. See J. Mastenbroek, *Zijn Vuur- en Haardstede: Ontstaan en voortbestaan van de Gereformeerde Gemeente Rotterdam-Centrum, Deel 2 (1914–1994)* (Nieuw-Lekkerland: Kerkenraad Gereformeerde Gemeente te Rotterdam-Centrum, 1998), pp. 172, 179, 180; GO, p. 131; www.plymouthchristianschools.org/elementary-school/elementary-school-handbook; Rev. Donald Beaton, 'Report on visit to Grand Rapids', *Proceedings of Synod* (Glasgow, 1940), pp. 41-42.

⁵¹ Issues dated 1st January and 1st February 1936. The magazine was first published in April 1934, with the subtitle *Blad der Nederlandsche Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Amerika* [Magazine of the Dutch Reformed Congregations in America]. The running head of the English section was *The Banner of Truth* and in September 1952 the entire publication was renamed as such. Nowadays the content is virtually all in English.

⁵² The Revs. Neil MacIntyre (1867–1953), Edinburgh; Donald John Matheson (1890–1962), Bonar; Ewen MacQueen of Inverness (assisting at Bonar Communion); Donald Beaton (1872–1953), Oban; James A. Tallach (1896–1960), Kames; and Roderick Mackenzie (1893–1972), Glasgow.

⁵³ Donald Urquhart (1900–1943), missionary to Jews in Palestine (1928–1943), at that time on furlough in Glasgow.

⁵⁴ Wallace B. Nicholson (1903–1984). He became the minister of North Uist from 1939 to 1945 and joined the Free Church of Scotland in 1946.

Just as Mr Kersten had done for the Dutch readership of *De Saambinder*, Mr Winters' English-language articles informed American readers about unfamiliar aspects of worship and practice.⁵⁵ He approvingly echoed his minister's estimate of the sermons: 'I was very favorably impressed by the sermons I heard preached by these ministers. ... I heard several speakers, some of them two or three times. It is only natural to expect that there is a diversity of gifts, of personality, and of delivering the sermon. None of the ministers read their sermons, and I consider all of them to be doctrinally sound; but there is more depth to the preaching of the one than there is in that of the other.'

Mr Winters concluded, 'I can say that the impressions I brought home with me correspond in practically every respect to the Rev. Kersten's opinion about the Free Presbyterian Church. I am confident that in Scotland there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Although their customs and usages are not identical with ours, yet there is no difference in their religious experiences. It is conclusive proof of the unity of the Lord's people wherever they are found on the face of the earth, that there is no difference when it comes to the work of the Holy Ghost in the heart. The same conviction of sin, the same acknowledgement of their lost state and condition; the same inability to believe, and the same dependence on the influences of the Holy Spirit; the same discoveries of the only way of salvation; the same hope as a result of the drawings of the Spirit, and the promises when applied to the heart; the same desires and longings of the destitute to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ, after it has pleased the Lord to reveal to the eye of faith the fulness, the riches, and the suitableness of the Mediator.'

Mr Winters nuanced his account as follows: 'It is of course incorrect to regard the Free Presbyterian Church as a denomination without defects, any more than this can be said of our denomination. However, their doctrinal standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms) are similar to ours. In fact, they are the same standards to which Thomas Boston, Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, and other Scotch [*sic*] Divines subscribed.' This provided a reference point by likening their preaching to that of Scottish divines long appreciated by

⁵⁵ His remarks incidentally alluded to what nowadays are vanished features of Highland church life: 'Many of the church-members are shepherds, and live so far away from the church that they must travel long distances in order to be able to attend church-services. One morning as I was leaving for the prayer-meeting which was to precede the regular service I met two men who were also going to church. They were on bicycles, and had left their homes at two o'clock in the morning in order to be at the prayer-meeting in time.'

serious Dutch readers in translation.⁵⁶ He continued, ‘The Free Presbyterian Church also agrees with us in such matters as denying membership to those who perform Sunday labor, are members of secret societies, or are fugitives from the discipline of other denominations.’

II(b). Formal meetings

Mr Kersten had written to Dutch readers about hoping ‘to establish some connection between the churches in the Netherlands and America and Scotland’. Mr Winters’ English-language report to the North American church concluded by showing more definite plans were in progress: ‘I am confident that the steps which are now being taken toward the establishment of relations between the Free Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Congregations in The Netherlands and America may under the blessing of the Lord become of mutual benefit to all. More definite information regarding the progress which is being made will no doubt be forthcoming after the Regional Synods in January and February in the Netherlands,⁵⁷ and the Synod of the FPC in May 1936.’⁵⁸ The formal contacts between the three denominations will now be considered in chronological order.

1. GG Synods – January 1936

Mr Winters’ two articles in *De Banier der Waarheid* were published on 1st January and 1st February 1936, which bracketed the final week of January when Mr Kersten addressed both the Regional Synods of the GG.⁵⁹ At the South Synod meeting in in the Zeeland town of Krabbendijke on Tuesday 28th January, consideration was given to the Confessional position, church organisation, the history and the life of the FPC, and ‘it decided in principle to try and enter into correspondence’.⁶⁰ Two days

⁵⁶ Thomas Boston’s work on the Covenant of Grace was issued in translation in Leiden and Amsterdam by Alexander Comrie in 1739, seven years after Boston’s death, and translated works of the Erskines were first issued in 1766. The writings of these ministers remain popular to the present day.

⁵⁷ At that time there were two Regional Synods (*Particuliere Synoden*) in the GG, with a triennial General Synod as the superior church court.

⁵⁸ K. Winters, ‘News from across the Atlantic II’, *BW*, 1st February 1936, p. 5.

⁵⁹ ‘Twee Synoden in één week’, *De Saambinder*, 13th February 1936.

⁶⁰ ‘Correspondence’ is a term which is unfamiliar in Scottish church relations but was commonly used in North America, including by the NRC. The word was also used in an approach to the FPC by the Associate Presbyterian Synod of North America in 1899, an approach which foundered because the North American denomination did not share the FPC’s stance on Church-State relations. (See ‘Meeting of Synod’, *FPM*, Vol.

later, on 30th January, the meeting of the North Synod at Rotterdam also heard his proposal.⁶¹ The Minute noted: ‘With joy it was heard that in Scotland there is still a people that holds the old tried and tested truth in honour. If a link can be made between this Free Presbyterian Church and the Reformed congregations in the Netherlands, perhaps by a legitimate way [*langs wettigen weg*] the churches in America can also be taken care of. However, entering into affiliation must find its basis in complete unity of confession.’ The North Synod also spoke of a flexible position: ‘Furthermore, freedom can be given in church organisation and practice within the boundaries of the Confession.’⁶² The Synod ‘having heard the announcements, declares that in principle it wishes to enter into closer relationship with the aforementioned Scottish churches [*sic*], as the Westminster Confession is fully embraced by those churches’. It mandated the Rev. Kersten ‘to visit the Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland ... to have a further discussion and to report to the next meeting to what extent there is a possibility of entering into affiliation with the said churches’. Whilst the North Synod initiated this further action, it concluded that a final decision on affiliation should be made at the General Synod meeting.

The requirement for confessional unity is a reminder of the different Confessional backgrounds of the two denominations. Mr Kersten had already taken steps to comprehensively familiarise his Dutch readership with the Westminster documents by articles in *De Saambinder* on the Confession of Faith,⁶³ and went on to publish his translations of the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.⁶⁴ The articles on the Confession started a few

7 (August 1902), p. 123). The Dutch term [*correspondentie*] remains in use to this day, both in describing the relationship between the GG and the NRC, and the relationship of other Dutch denominations to churches overseas. The word denotes ‘a religious or ecclesiastical connection’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), perhaps best described as an affiliation or fraternal relations.

⁶¹ ‘Deputaten Buitenlandsche Kerken’, ANPSGG, 30 januari 1936 te Rotterdam-Zuid, Art. 8.

⁶² Dutch: *Voorts kan in kerkelijke inrichting en gebruik binnen de grenzen der belijdenis vrijheid gelaten worden.*

⁶³ After an introductory article, ‘Uit de Westminsterse Geloofsbelijdenis’, in *De Saambinder* of 11th July 1935, there followed a serialised translation of the Confession as ‘Belijdenis des Geloofs. Opgesteld door de Westminsterse Synode, gehouden van 1643–1649’ in every issue of *De Saambinder* from 25th July 1935 to 27th February 1936. This was later published in book form (Alblasserdam: H. Bas, 1945).

⁶⁴ Articles entitled ‘Westminster Catechismus’ ran in every issue from 12th March to 10th September 1936, followed by ‘Kleine Westminsterse Catechismus’ from 24th September to 24th December 1936.

weeks before the Scottish trip in July 1935. He counselled readers to retain these issues of *De Saambinder* since, as far as he knew, ‘no [previous] Dutch translation of these precious writings exist’. He was mistaken on this point, however, as the translated catechisms had first been published in 1732⁶⁵ and on a few occasions thereafter.

It is likely that Dutch interest in the FPC was also stimulated by serialised publication of the memoirs of Rev. Neil Cameron in Dutch translation in the daily religious newspaper *De Banier*, attracting highly favourable comment in the *FPM*: ‘The sterling personality of Mr Cameron evidently appeals to many of our friends in Holland and it is gratifying for us to know that there is in that land which showed so much kindness to our Covenanting forefathers in the day of their sore trial a people still who appreciate vital godliness. Mr Cameron’s faithfulness as a fearless exponent of God’s everlasting truth and well-balanced declaration of the gospel of the grace of God we are sure will be relished by many in Holland as they are elsewhere.’⁶⁶

Further scene-setting took place in *De Saambinder* from the pen of the Rev. J.D. Barth,⁶⁷ in a series of fifty articles about Scottish church history, published almost every fortnight from July 1936 to September 1938.⁶⁸ The preface to the first article specifically alluded to ‘Scotland, ... to which one of our brethren went some time ago, to establish by the Lord’s grace a closer link between God’s Church there and the Reformed Congregations here and in America’.⁶⁹

2. NRC meetings – March and May 1936

Mr Winters’ articles in January and February 1936 had set the scene for three formal meetings in America. There were two NRC *Classes* and

⁶⁵ *Groote en kleyne catechismus der kerken Christi in Engeland, Schotland, en Yrland* (Groningen: Harmannus Spoormaker en Laurens Groenewout, 1732).

⁶⁶ Notes and Comments: ‘Rev. N. Cameron’s Memoirs Translated into Dutch’, *FPM*, Vol. 40 (October 1935), p.274. A new translation was published in 1979: D. Beaton, *Levensbeschrijving, brieven en preken van wijlen Ds. Neil Cameron: Verdediger van de waarheid*, trans. Johannes Kooistra (Rotterdam: Van den Berg, 1979).

⁶⁷ Jacobus Dirk Barth (1871–1942) was at that time minister of the Dordrecht GG congregation and taught at the denomination’s Theological School in Rotterdam.

⁶⁸ The articles about Scotland were edited and re-issued in book form over 50 years later: Jacobus D. Barth, *Uit de historie van Gods kerk in Schotland*, ed. Jan M.F. van Beek (Zwijndrecht: Van den Berg, 1989). The Rev. Barth contributed regular articles about Church history, the series about Scotland coming between series on the Swiss Reformer William Farel and the Church in Hungary.

⁶⁹ *De Saambinder*, 9th July 1936, p.2. This series began before Mr Kersten’s fortnightly translations of the Shorter Catechism concluded.

formal meetings of both bodies took place in March, followed by the denomination's Synod in May.

Classis West met in Grand Rapids on 18th March. 'After the Rev. Wielhouwer⁷⁰ had explained the anticipated union with the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, it was decided to authorize the delegates to discuss this matter at the [American] Synod.'⁷¹ Six days later, on 24th March, Classis East convened at Paterson-Haledon Avenue, a meeting chaired by the Rev. J. Van Zweden.⁷² 'The cooperation and union with the Free Presbyterian church of Scotland was discussed, and the chairman gave some information about this. The classis was well pleased therewith and desires to discuss this matter at the next [American] Synod.'⁷³

Two months later the Synod met on 14th May at Paterson-Haledon Avenue church. The Rev. Kersten attended that meeting and it was reported that he '... gave an account of his visit to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland and expressed his satisfaction about what he had heard and seen there. As to the fundamental doctrines they agree with us, only in certain ceremonies do they differ from us, and which would necessarily have to be mutually discussed before a union could be affected [*sic*]. At the same time Rev. Kersten revealed that it had been his plan to attend the Synod of those churches but his trip to America prevented this. However he had sent them a brief history as to the origin and foundation of our churches, expressing the desireableness of our eventual union. With the approval of the assembly, Rev. Kersten was thanked heartily for his labor in this matter. Rev. Wielhouwer, Rev. Van de Hoef,⁷⁴ and

⁷⁰ Jacob Cornelis Wielhouwer (1875–1956) was born on the island of Flakkee, South Holland. He was an evangelist in nearby Ooltgensplaat from 1901 to 1906, and then emigrated to America after receiving a call to the then independent New Jersey congregation at Paterson-People's Park. He was translated to the independent congregation of Grand Rapids-Turner Avenue in 1915. In 1918 he and his congregation joined the NRC.

⁷¹ 'Extracts – Minutes Classis West', *BW*, May 1936, pp. 4-5. A Dutch version of the report ('Uittreksel – Notulen, Classis West') appeared on p. 3.

⁷² Jan van Zweden (1888–1979) was born on the island of Zuid-Beveland, Zeeland. His parents emigrated to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in 1900.

⁷³ 'Extracts of Minutes Classis East', *BW*, April 1936, p. 5. A Dutch version of the report ('Uittreksel – Notulen, Classis East') appeared on p. 2.

⁷⁴ Jacob van de Hoef (1878–1942) emigrated to America with his siblings and widowed mother in 1910 and they lived at Sioux Center, Iowa. He was ordained as minister of that congregation in 1928, and in 1931 he became minister in nearby Rock Valley. 'Eenige bijzonderheden over het leven, het afsterven en de begrafenis van Ds. J. Van de Hoef', *BW*, May 1942, pp. 2-7; Cornelis Schelling, *In U verheugd: ter nagedachtenis aan Ds. J. van de Hoef* (Barneveld: Gebr. Koster, 1991).

Rev. Van Zweden were appointed as committee to correspond with the committee of ministers in the Netherlands and thus to help promote this cause.⁷⁵ It should be noted that the proposed relationship with the FPC had previously been described as ‘correspondence’ or ‘affiliation’: these meetings marked the first occasions when the word ‘union’ was explicitly used.

3. The Rev. Kersten’s formal letter to the FP Synod

The Rev. Kersten wrote to the forthcoming FP Synod, scheduled for May 1936. An extract of his letter appeared in English in *De Banier der Waarheid*, and included a short history of the GG in the Netherlands together with a summary of the present situation of the denomination there.⁷⁶ He proceeded to suggest possible cooperation with the FPC. ‘Perhaps there is a possibility for the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands and in the United States to support your mission [i.e. Canada], if in one way or another we may come closer together. You notice that there are congregations in the U.S. also (they are 12 in number) that live in correspondence with the Reformed Congregations in Holland. Those congregations are longing for help, especially the English-speaking congregations. For you perhaps an opportunity to open a new field of labor, that the Word of God may be preached among the multitudes, who are like the fields, white already to harvest. The needs of these congregations also urges [*sic*] me to write.’ These words echoed the previously noted remarks of the Rev. F. Macleod in his 1935 report.⁷⁷

Mr Kersten noted the degenerate state of the so-called Reformed churches and contrasted that with the situation in the GG and the FPC. ‘In the Reformed Congregations two kinds of hearers are distinguished, two kinds of branches of the vine. Their aim in the preaching is to set before the hearers life and death, blessing and curse. It is earnestly impressed upon them that only those who have come to know a new life, are entitled to the

⁷⁵ ‘Church News. Excerpts Synod Minutes’, *BW*, July 1936, p. 5. A Dutch version of the report (‘Uittreksel, Synode-notulen’) appeared on pp. 2-3.

⁷⁶ ‘A brief history’, *BW*, May 1936, pp. 5-6. There were 15 ministers, and he described the four-year training of divinity students, then numbering three. ‘These congregations have in the meantime grown in number to well over 100. Moreover, about 30 schools for elementary [primary] education have been established, and a Home for the Aged. By means of a missionary they labor among the Roman Catholics, and besides this they have a fund for foreign missions. For a long time they had a missionary among the Armenians, but at present they have not.’

⁷⁷ ‘Report of Canadian and Colonial Mission Committee’, *FPM*, Vol. 40 (July 1935), pp. 121-122.

Communion table, while those that are strangers to this new life, eat and drink damnation to themselves. I have observed that the same foundations are maintained among you. This consideration prompts me to write the way I do. The Standards of the Westminster Assembly are heartily approved of as being entirely founded on God's Word.' He welcomed an opportunity 'to discuss all these things more extensively', emphasising that 'there is a people here, be it small in number, that has experienced that God hath quickened them being dead in trespasses and sins. That people is found also among you. And that people is ONE people, because they are chosen of the Father, bought by the Son, and effectually called by the Holy Ghost.' These sentiments were an affirmation of his wish 'to strive for the goal of a Reformed, ecclesiastical existence that demands in the first place the preaching of the Word according to the heart of Jerusalem. I eagerly anticipate any movement in the direction of the institutional unity of the church'.⁷⁸

Mr Kersten concluded the letter to the Synod as follows: 'Dear Friends: I wrote these lines on account of the internal ties felt towards the remnant of the Church of Scotland in the Free Presbyterian Church. I hope this writing may meet with a kind reception and be accepted in the same spirit in which it was written. I should be very glad indeed if with you also should be found a desire to strengthen one another, and to that end to exchange views, also about the possibility and the manner in which it may be realized. Dear Friends: I submit these matters for your serious consideration. The Lord grant us to bring them prayerfully before Him; that those that fear Him may be bound together with ties of spiritual fellowship, which His elect obtain by faith. That it may please Him, in the trying times in which we live, to make His church as a teil tree and as an oak whose substance is in them when they cast their leaves.' Notwithstanding the clear intent to pursue union expressed in the American meeting, his formal communication to the Synod mentioned only the possibility of supporting the FP work in Canada in a manner unspecified.

4. NRC Synod – May 1936

A two-part report on Mr Kersten's first visit to the USA (April-May 1936) appeared at the start of 1937.⁷⁹ The February article also included information about the NRC Synod held on 14th May 1936 at Paterson, New Jersey, where

⁷⁸ *GHK*, p. 42.

⁷⁹ 'My visit to the Reformed Congregations in America', *BW*, 1st January (pp. 4-6) and 1st February (pp. 5-6) 1937.

he was asked about the status of the negotiations with the FPC and gave a detailed report. ‘Differences were found to exist in church organizations and other matters, but profession and preaching were found to be very much in agreement. The synod of this Scottish church convenes on the 21st of May. This synod has been requested to appoint a deputation to confer with deputies from the Netherland churches regarding union by correspondence, so that a subsequent synod may come to a decision regarding this matter.’

5. FP Synod – May 1936

The FP Synod met in May 1936, and was duly reported in the July issue of the *FPM*, with no reference to Mr Kersten’s correspondence.⁸⁰ This was standard practice, as the matter would have been considered in a private meeting of the Synod. However, Mr Kersten included a news item about the outcome in a July issue of *De Saambinder*: ‘I can inform them that, with regard to the request of the congregations to enter into correspondence with the Free Presb. Church, a deputation has been appointed which will negotiate with delegates [*deputaten*] for Foreign Churches in the Netherlands. A meeting will take place at the end of the summer.’⁸¹

The FP Synod appointed a committee for this purpose, consisting of the Revs. Donald Beaton (convener), Neil MacIntyre and Roderick Mackenzie, with an Edinburgh elder, Dr John M. Johnston.⁸² This *ad hoc* committee did not include members of the Church’s Canadian and Foreign Mission Committee.⁸³ Mr Beaton was well qualified for the task: he had been present at founding of the FPC and was appointed as a theological tutor in 1899, a post he held until 1952.⁸⁴ ‘His wide and mature knowledge of systematic theology, of the outstanding erroneous beliefs

⁸⁰ *FPM*, Vol. 41 (July 1936), pp. 81-150.

⁸¹ ‘Synode der Free Presbyterian Church in Schotland’, *De Saambinder*, 9th July 1936, pp. 3-4.

⁸² John McQueen Johnston, CBE MD LLD (1901–1987) served as a GP in Torridon from 1925 until 1930. Later he taught *Materia Medica* and *Therapeutics* in Glasgow University, and became a Principal Medical Officer and Pharmacologist at the Scottish Home and Health Department. He had a distinguished medical career which included setting up the Emergency Medical Service throughout Britain during the Second World War. See *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 295 (1987), p. 731.

⁸³ This was a Standing Committee of the Synod, the membership of which was the Revs. Finlay MacLeod (Dornoch and Rogart: Convener), Donald A. MacFarlane (Dingwall), William Grant (Halkirk and Helmsdale), Donald J. Matheson (Lairg) and Robert R. Sinclair (Wick). *FPM*, Vol. 40 (July 1936), p. 103.

⁸⁴ He was minister of Wick (1901–1930) and Oban (1930–1948). Additionally, he was editor of the *FPM* (1921–1949) and the Church’s *Young People’s Magazine* (1936–1949).

and doctrines which the Church of Christ has had to contend with since early centuries, and his scholarly familiarity with all branches of Church History and literature, were well known even beyond the bounds of the Free Presbyterian Church.⁸⁵ In addition to authoring a number of books, he regularly contributed articles on theology and history to the *FPM* and wrote for a variety of learned publications including the *Princeton Theological Review*, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* and *Transactions of the Inverness Gaelic Society*.

6. Formal meeting of Church representatives in Glasgow – October 1936

The only published account of the October meeting is from the pen of Mr Kersten,⁸⁶ who was accompanied by Mr Pieter Verblauw, a deacon from the English-speaking Paterson-Haledon Avenue congregation in New Jersey.⁸⁷ Mr Kersten noted, ‘As the English-speaking churches in America have a special interest in the negotiations with the Scottish Church, it was pleasant that the conference was ordered at such a time that an office bearer of those churches could attend the discussions.’ He outlined the journey to Scotland, including a stormy North Sea passage and the *Flying Scotsman* night train from London to Glasgow via Edinburgh. The men arrived at 9 a.m. in Glasgow, where they were guests of the Rev. R. Mackenzie. The elevated situation of the manse, then at Park Quadrant (not far from the present-day FP church on Woodlands Road), afforded a view over the city that delighted the two men. However, there was little time to settle down as a full day’s itinerary was ahead of them: Mr Mackenzie drove his guests on a sight-seeing trip which included the city, Loch Lomond, and the shipyards of the Clyde, before returning to the manse where the other FP delegates arrived ahead of the formal ‘conference’ the following day. The FP group consisted of the four members of the Synod-appointed committee, together with a ‘Rev. Macdonald’, who may well have been present *ex officio* as he was not a signatory of the committee’s report.⁸⁸

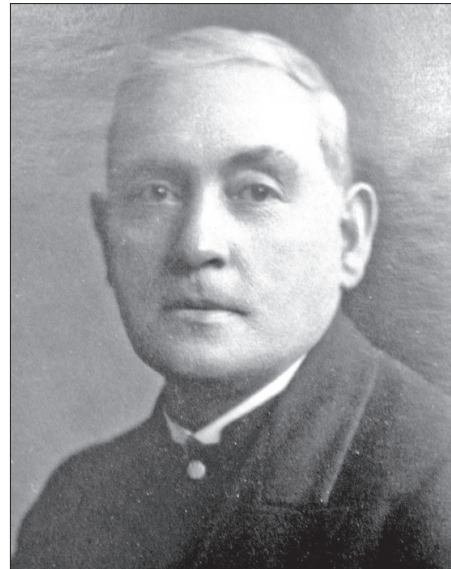
⁸⁵ Robert R. Sinclair, ‘The late Rev. Donald Beaton’, *FPM*, Vol. 58 (March 1954), pp. 319-327.

⁸⁶ ‘Kerknieuws: Conferentie met deputaten Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland’, *De Saambinder*, 22nd October 1936, p. 4. An English translation (‘Conference of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland’) appeared in *BW*, 1st November 1936, p. 6. The Dutch article was reprinted in *BBW*, p. 306.

⁸⁷ Mr Verblauw was the owner of a printing business. *GO*, p. 161. Paterson lies around 20 miles northwest of Downtown New York (Lower Manhattan).

⁸⁸ The identity of this minister has not been established: there were then three ministers of that name. Only two of these were then in Scotland: Rev. Donald Malcolm Macdonald

The formal meetings took place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday 14th October and on his return to Rotterdam Mr Kersten ‘regaled the consistory with a detailed description of the journey and the discussions ... which were heard with great interest’.⁸⁹ In the report in *De Saambinder* he wrote that it would not be appropriate to give details of the discussions in the paper as he would present them to the upcoming [General] Synod, but he sounded a note of caution:



Rev. Donald Beaton.

‘I may only remark that although on the one hand the Confessions of the Churches of Scotland and America and the Netherlands on the other hand are strikingly similar, there are some differences in customs and practices, which in our opinion need not prevent some fellowship between these churches being exercised by correspondence.’

7. FP Synod – November 1936

Mr Beaton read his committee’s report at a public meeting of Synod on 18th November 1936 and an account of the debate was published (along with other public meetings of the Synod) two months later.⁹⁰ It is regrettable that the text of the report was not published. However, the magazine article includes discussion of the report, and this casts some light on the contents.

Firstly, it would appear that the report had not made clear the intentions underlying the Dutch and American approach. When Mr Beaton was asked, ‘Would you explain whether they wanted co-operation or union with our Church?’, he replied, ‘If things were as they (i.e. Mr Kersten and his friends) would like them to be, they would like union.

(1882–1968), minister of Portree, Isle of Skye (who was Convener of the Religion and Morals Committee, had formerly been a missionary to Canada in 1914–1915, and was the Church’s Deputy there in 1934–1935); and Rev. Donald Roderick Macdonald (1887–1963), minister of Tarbert, Isle of Harris (who was born in Shildaig and partly brought up in Toronto and Chesley). The Rev. Dr Roderick Macdonald (1899–1974) can be excluded from consideration as he was serving as a medical missionary in Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe).

⁸⁹ Mastenbroek, *Zijn Vuur- en Haardstede*, p. 179.

⁹⁰ ‘Report of Committee on Netherlands Correspondence’, *FPM*, Vol. 41 (January 1937), pp. 362–364.

Then they said, supposing there are some differences standing in the way they asked would they be allowed to co-operate?’

Secondly, once that clarity was given, the committee’s report appears to have covered the salient points of discussion and highlighted the contentious issues. Dr Johnston stated, ‘The Report puts the whole thing in a nutshell. I must say I was greatly impressed with Mr Kersten as a man and a Christian, but I saw clearly that the question of Union is not quite so easy. I gathered also that there were some points from which they would



Rev. Roderick MacKenzie.

not depart and likewise that we had some from which we would not move.’ His esteem for the Dutch minister was echoed by the Rev. E. MacQueen, who ‘stated that he had met Mr Kersten and some of his family and had to confess that he admired Mr Kersten as a most earnest Christian man’. The Scots’ esteem of the Dutch minister was clearly enunciated and was without reservation.

The issues of musical instruments in the public worship of God and other practices were inevitably points of disagreement. Rev. R. Mac-

Kenzie said, ‘Mr Kersten made it clear to the Committee, that supposing a minister from our Church went to preach in one of their congregations in America he would have to accommodate himself to their form of worship. For example he would have to put up with the organ. I felt that Mr Kersten himself appeared to be less insistent on instrumental music than his companion and that in America the English-speaking congregations would not consider doing without music. And I pointed out that if they were not prepared to sacrifice form they could not expect us to sacrifice principle, as we regard instrumental music as a principle not as a mere form.’ Further reference to these issues was made by an elder, Mr James Fraser: ‘On account of what we have heard from the Report about musical instruments and other forms, I think, on account of the great difference between them and us, it would be very inconsistent for our Church to consider co-operation or union with these people when we look back upon our relation to other Churches in Scotland.’ The ‘forms’ causing difficulty were not defined, but they would become clear in Mr Kersten’s

subsequent reports to the Dutch and American church courts, and these will be detailed later.

The Synod discussed the way ahead and the Rev. D.M. MacDonald moved ‘that the Committee be re-appointed and that they draft out a letter in reply, forward it to the Presbyteries for suggestions, and forward completed letter.’

8. GG North Regional Synod – February 1937

Mr Kersten reported on the Glasgow manse conference to a session of the North Regional Synod in Utrecht on 3rd February 1937.⁹¹ He summarised the discussion as being ‘more in the nature of an acquaintance with each other’s church life, rather than a search for agreement, although on our part serious objections were made to some customs’. Whilst not alluding to any FP objections against Dutch practices, he highlighted some of the notable differences: ‘The emphasis was on the agreement between the Confessional writings [*Belijdenisschriften*], being the Westminster Confession and the Large and Small [*sic*] Catechisms on the one hand, and the Three Forms on the other. The discussion further focused on various customs and practices concerning church life. While there is similarity in the observance of the Lord’s Day, there is difference in many respects.’

He listed the distinctions as follows: ‘The recognition of adult membership ... is based on a declaration of conversion, upon which the Kirk Session [*kerkeraad*] issues a token giving access to the Lord’s Supper [*Heilig Avondmaal*]. The Scottish Church gives women the right to vote and the elders the right to speak an edifying word in the congregations where there is no preacher [*leeraar*], instead of reading a sermon. It does not use formulas [*formulieren*] and rejects formulary prayers [*formuliergebeden*] and wants absolutely nothing to do with religious feast days [*kerkelijke feestdagen*], not even with preaching about the facts of salvation at specific times. ... The Scottish Church condemns the use of organs to such an extent that its ministers are not allowed to preach in church where an organ is played. There are some rules for the exercise of discipline, which can be found in Moncreiff’s *Practice of the Free Church of Scotland*. Insurance, on the other hand, is not considered to be an evil thing [*kwaad*] by the said church. It has a fairly extensive mission field in Africa and also worked in Palestine until before the recent troubles. On the other hand, there

⁹¹ ‘Rapport inzake conferentie met Deputaten der Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, gehouden te Glasgow 14 October 1936’, ANPSGG, Bijlage I.

are no catechism classes [*catechisatiën*], which does not fail to exert its disadvantageous influence on the young people.’

After these remarks, which indicated that Rev. Kersten had misgivings about the way ahead, his report ended: ‘The chairman of the Scottish deputies promised an account of the discussions at the Synod, which was held last November. This Synod, as it was announced later, decided to ask the opinion of the various presbyteries about the possibility of entering into correspondence. The undersigned may advise your Synod to leave the decision to the General Synod, as to whether and to what extent the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and America can enter into correspondence with Free Presbyt. Church of Scotland, meanwhile placing this matter in the hands of delegates for Foreign Churches.’

9. GG General Synod – May 1937

The triennial General Synod of the GG took place at Rotterdam on 12th and 13th May 1937. The three delegates for foreign churches (the Revs. M. Heikoop,⁹² G.H. Kersten and W.C. Lamain⁹³) reported on the negotiations with the FPC.⁹⁴ The printed report is particularly valuable as it contains the full text of the FP Synod committee’s letter in English, as well as in Dutch translation. Mr Beaton and his co-signatories acknowledged ‘the many expressions of goodwill contained in your letters, which expressions we cordially reciprocate’, and the salient points are as follows.

The Scottish letter first appreciated the historic religious relationship between the countries, in particular the kindness the Dutch had shown to Scottish reformers and divines, and then commended the ‘sound doctrinal position which your Church occupies relative to Reformation attainments and the of the faithful contendings which, by God’s blessing have secured this position to you. The consideration of these and of other evidences of devotedness to the cause of evangelical truth on the part of your Church has evoked among us a feeling of genuine gratefulness.’

⁹² Martinus Heikoop (1890–1944), minister of Utrecht from 1929.

⁹³ Willem C. Lamain (1904–1984) served in three congregations in the Netherlands from 1929 before becoming minister of Grand Rapids (Beckwith Avenue) in 1947.

⁹⁴ ‘Handelingen der Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland, gehouden te Rotterdam, 12 en 13 Mei 1937’, *Acta van de Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten, 1907–1959* (Woerden: Kerkelijk Bureau van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten, 2007), pp. 415–421, Bijlage I (authors Ds. M. Heikoop, Ds. G.H. Kersten, Ds. W.C. Lamain). The report (excluding the English original), together with Mr Kersten’s reflections, was reprinted in *BBW*, pp. 307–309.

The letter then addressed the difficulty which, from the FPC standpoint, precluded them from entertaining ‘the proposal for closer ecclesiastical relationship’. ‘This difficulty is owing, *inter alia*, to your Church’s attitude on the questions of (1) the use of instrumental music in worship, and (2) the observance of so-called holydays.’ It was explained that the FPC ‘regards them as having not merely a formal but a constitutional bearing and as involving our testimony. In view of this fact, therefore, and having regard to your stipulation that any form of ecclesiastical relationship agreed upon must accommodate existing differences, the Synod have felt that, in present circumstances, to continue negotiations along the lines of your proposal would serve no useful purpose.’

The concluding paragraphs stated that ‘the Synod have arrived at their decision in this matter with considerable regret’. Furthermore, ‘being ... in a position to understand your anxiety for some such measure of fellowship and cooperation as has been proposed, we have found ourselves in a strait between feelings of sympathy on the one hand and the requirements of loyalty and consistency on the other.’

A report of the Rev. Kersten’s address appeared in *De Saambinder* on 13th May and an English-language summary appeared in *De Banier der Waarheid* in June:⁹⁵ ‘The [GG] Synod deplores the exaggeration of things formal, though it can understand from what has been experienced in its own churches, that certain forms and customs in use in a certain church group are so highly valued by the people as if the very existence of the church was depending upon it. However there is danger of being smothered in forms. The Synod instructs the deputies⁹⁶ to reply to the Free Presbyterian Church.’

The text of the Synod’s reply to the FPC does not appear in Dutch or American published material, however, and equally there is no public record of its reception (or reaction to it) in Scotland. The report from the Rotterdam Synod closes with some reflections on the outcome and provides an insight into the way the Dutch denomination viewed the breakdown of negotiations. In interpreting the letter received from Mr Beaton’s committee, Mr Kersten said they would ‘have to consider the struggle of the churches in Scotland since the founding of the FPC. That struggle has greatly encouraged a clinging to these forms. This is not entirely inexplicable. Also in the unification of the congregations in 1907,

⁹⁵ ‘Excerpts General Synod’, *BW* (June 1937), pp. 4-5.

⁹⁶ This is one possible translation of *deputaten*. It is rendered ‘delegates’ in other *BW* articles.

clinging to once accepted customs caused great difficulties.’ It is clear that the Dutch regarded the Scottish standpoint on musical instruments and holydays as being mere custom and form, rather than scripturally based positions. Frustration was evident: ‘This threatens to become a danger for the church, if the value of the truth does not transcend all forms. The danger of suffocating in forms then becomes very great indeed. It is for its own sake in the first place regrettable that the Scottish Church in question stands so much on customs that are even partly to be condemned, that it lacks the calling to reveal unity with those congregations that are united with it in Confession.’ Nevertheless, sadness rather than anger seemed to characterise the Dutch position, as Mr Kersten went on to commend the FPC for its adherence to the Confession, for the work of God’s grace in her midst, for her extensive missionary work and for the serious preaching that is still going on in her midst. He and the other two ministers, whilst ‘condemning and regretting the position taken by the Scottish Church, have to propose to your Synod to resign itself to the decision taken by her, however much it may grieve them, especially for the English speaking congregations in America.’

III. Reflections on the proposed union

The proposal to unite these three denominations was unprecedented in either Scottish or Dutch church history. It is appropriate to consider the likely benefits and disadvantages of the proposed union, and then to examine the areas of common ground and finally the issues which prevented union.

1. The advantages and disadvantages of union

The impetus for union arose from the Rev. Kersten’s concern for the welfare of his denomination’s sister church in America, specifically in relation to the need for English-language preaching. The potential advantages and disadvantages of union will be considered from the standpoint of all three denominations.

By 1935 all three ministers of the NRC spoke English as a second language, and both preaching and catechising took place in Dutch and English. Providentially, one minister was located in each of the three geographical areas where the denomination existed.⁹⁷ However, the field of their labours was great and there were no native English speakers studying

⁹⁷ Revs. J. van Zweden (Passaic, New Jersey), C. Wielhouwer (Grand Rapids, Michigan) and J. van de Hoef (Rock Valley, Iowa).

for the ministry.⁹⁸ The Rev. Kersten's wish was related to the increasing need for anglophone ministers and for this reason he sought union with the FPC.⁹⁹ It is clear that the wish for union was wholeheartedly supported by the NRC but the close relation with the 'home church' resulted in the decision for union being decided by the General Synod of the GG rather than the NRC.

The published records of the GG do not indicate any hesitation in principle to entering discussions with a Scottish denomination, other than referring the need to ensure 'complete unity of confession'. Whilst diversity of practice would arise as a practical issue in dealing with a denomination from a different background, it was acknowledged that 'freedom can be given in church organization and practice within the boundaries of the Confession'.¹⁰⁰ Altruistic support to the sister denomination in America was the basis of GG involvement. No direct benefits to the Dutch denomination were adduced in the meetings of Regional Synods or the General Synod and it is difficult to identify any specific advantages to the Dutch denomination of union with the FPC beyond furthering 'any movement in the direction of the institutional unity of the church'.¹⁰¹

The location of FP emigrants lay virtually entirely within Canada, with Detroit as the only place where there were significant numbers of FPs in the USA. An FP minister had written in 1935 of 'a great field ready in the U.S.A. and Canada for the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The door is open to us to enter that field with the glad tidings of salvation, and may we be enabled while we have the opportunity to go forward.'¹⁰² Mr Kersten's letter to the FP Synod alluded to the possibility of helping the FP mission but the nature of this assistance was unspecified. As noted previously, the capacity of the FPC was already stretched to supply its Canadian diaspora and realising the aspiration to extend into America would have entailed great practical and financial difficulties,

⁹⁸ By comparing the list of NRC ministers in *GO* (Bijlage 2: 'Voorgangers van de Netherlands Reformed Congregations', pp. 299-300) with the listings of ministers on the GG denominational website (www.gergeminfo.nl/voorgangers/necrologie) it can be seen that many years would elapse before the American denomination had a minister born in North America.

⁹⁹ 'Deputaten Buitenlandsche Kerken', *ANPSGG*, 30 januari 1936 te Rotterdam-Zuid, Art. 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *GHK*, p. 42.

¹⁰² 'Report of Canadian and Colonial Mission Committee', *FPM*, Vol. 40 (July 1935), pp. 121-122.

particularly as there was no territorial overlap between the territories of the denominations. A further theoretical disadvantage could have been the reverse of the NRC linguistic problem of engaging with English-speaking members: in the absence of Dutch-speaking FP ministers, difficulty could potentially arise in engaging with the sizeable Dutch-speaking base in the NRC. Such linguistic issues did not feature in discussions, however.

2. Common ground

Interaction between Reformed Scottish and Dutch churches extended back for many centuries. Not only did seventeenth-century Covenanters find refuge among a sympathetic Calvinistic populace in the Dutch Republic, but a sizeable number of Scots either worked in the country or undertook military service in the Scots Brigade in the Netherlands.¹⁰³ Writings of Second Reformation Scots divines were popular in the Netherlands and influenced the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* [Further Reformation].¹⁰⁴ Moving closer to the period under consideration, the revival of piety in the nineteenth century had led to new translations of Scottish authors. Of particular interest is the translation work of Cornelis Bernardus van Woerden, senior (1860–1932),¹⁰⁵ a businessman who became a renowned translator of religious works after acquiring books during a business trip to Scotland. He corresponded with the Rev. Alexander Macrae¹⁰⁶ after an incidental meeting on a Clyde steamer in 1897 and he supported the FPC's position. The Dutch family became close personal friends of the Rev. William Grant, Halkirk, and attended a Communion season there.¹⁰⁷ In addition to the work of C.B. van Woerden (senior), the Rev. Kersten was also responsible for issuing translations of Scottish works, often writing the preface for these. The FPs did not have a similar familiarity with Dutch

¹⁰³ William Steven, *The History of the Scottish Church, Rotterdam* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1833); J. Ferguson (ed.), *Papers illustrating the History of the Scots Brigade in the Service of the United Netherlands* (3 vols., Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1899–1901); Ginny Gardner, *The Scottish Exile Community in The Netherlands, 1660–1690* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Leen J. van Valen, *In God verbonden* (Apeldoorn: Labarum Academic, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ 'Interesting Letter from Holland', *FPM*, Vol. 2 (August 1897), pp. 156–158.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Macrae (1867–1919) was then minister of Kames. He joined the FC in 1918. James S. Sinclair, 'The late Rev. Alexander Macrae, Maryburgh, Ross-shire', *FPM*, Vol. 24 (January 1920), pp. 280–2.

¹⁰⁷ M. Dankers, 'De Van Woerdens, vertalers van naam', *Terdege* (4th August 1999), pp. 24–27. C.B. van Woerden (junior) (1888–1967) followed in his father's footsteps as a translator.

religious material, however, simply because these books did not exist in English, with the exception of a few works such as Herman Witsius (1636–1708) on the Covenants.

The Confessional background of the churches was different, but the Rev. Kersten repeatedly stated that there was agreement between the Dutch documents and those of the Westminster Assembly. He had taken pains to familiarise the Dutch church with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms in preparation for contact with the FPC. It may be noted in passing that no reciprocal steps had been taken to familiarise the FPs with the Confessional teachings of the Dutch denomination, however. Further common ground between the churches existed in preaching the doctrines of grace and in experimental religion. This was stated on a number of occasions by the Rev. Kersten and Mr Winters, and was explicitly stated in the formal letter addressed to the FP Synod in 1936.¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that an allegation in 1965 by the minister of Sioux Center, Rev. Cornelis Hegeman (1914–1981) that the FPC were opposed to union on the basis of ‘Hypercalvinism’ in GG teaching about election and the covenant of grace were based on conversation with an unnamed source in England.¹⁰⁹ It is clear that concerns about Hypercalvinism were never raised within the FPC at any stage and it is regrettable that this allegation has not yet been laid to rest.¹¹⁰ Certain standards of personal conduct were also similar between the denominations, such as agreement on ‘denying membership to those who perform Sunday labor, are members of secret societies, or are fugitives from the discipline of other denominations’.¹¹¹

This paper has already alluded to the good relationship between the parties involved in discussions. The informal visits of the Dutch and American visitors had been facilitated by FP ministers, including organisation of travel and accommodation for the Rev. Kersten and Mr Winters by the Revs. Neil MacIntyre and Ewen MacQueen in 1935. Warmth was apparent in formal correspondence, where the language exceeded expressions of polite formality, and high regard for Mr Kersten was expressed publicly at the FP Synod meetings. Given the continued warm mutual respect it is clear that interpersonal issues were not a factor

¹⁰⁸ ‘A brief history’, *BW*, May 1936, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁹ Cornelis Hegeman, ‘In memoriam Ds. G.H. Kersten 1882–1948’, *De Saambinder*, 9th December 1965, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *KK*, p. 179.

¹¹¹ ‘News from across the Atlantic II’, *BW*, 1st February 1936, p. 5.



Rev. Neil MacIntyre.

in the impasse, and unresolvable theological and practical issues were the sole reasons for discussions ending.

3. The issues preventing union

Both parties to the discussions identified differences at an early stage. Winters and Kersten initially described them as ‘customs and usages ... not identical with ours’¹¹² and ‘certain ceremonies ... which would necessarily have to be mutually discussed before a union’.¹¹³ Such differences were perhaps unsurprising as

the Scottish and Dutch lines of Reformed churches had developed entirely separately from each other, despite a shared adherence to Calvinistic theology and the similarities of experiential religion developed during the Scottish Second Reformation and the Dutch ‘Further Reformation’. However, as the informal and formal contacts between the parties developed, it became possible to specify more clearly the dissimilarities until it became apparent that there were differences which prevented further moves towards union and led to negotiations being discontinued. Viewed in broad terms, these differences related to personal conduct, ecclesiastical practice, and matters relating to public worship.¹¹⁴

Kersten first stated that ‘the Scottish Churches consider permissible, even favour, some things which we should consider contrary to God’s Word’, and gave as an example the right of women to vote in the church, which was abominated as representing the influence of Enlightenment thought on the Christian Church. This practice had begun in the Scottish Churches nearly two centuries previously, however, and was universal long before the 1930s. It might well have come as a surprise to the Dutch that women’s suffrage in church had its roots in the Associate Presbytery formed by Ebenezer Erskine and others in 1733. Acts passed in 1733 and 1736 dealt with calls to ministers, and following the division of the Associate Presbytery into the Burghers and Anti-burghers in 1747, the

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ ‘Excerpts Synod Minutes’, *BW*, 1st July 1936, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ M. Heikoop, G.H. Kersten and W.C. Lamain ‘Handelingen der Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland, gehouden te Rotterdam, 12 en 13 Mei 1937’; ‘Rapport inzake conferentie’, *ANPSGG*, Bijlage I.

Burghers allowed women to vote. At its formation in 1843, the Free Church of Scotland addressed the issue and conceded the right to vote to women, by which stage the United Secession Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Relief Church all allowed women's votes.¹¹⁵

The next issue causing concern as being 'contrary to God's Word ... and to faith in God's providence' was insurance. Kersten had described insurance as an evil,¹¹⁶ and numerous articles and comments in sermons testify to the Dutch abhorrence of insurance. For example, one of the NRC ministers would later issue forthright condemnation based on answers to the Heidelberg Catechism questions 26 ('What believest thou when thou sayest, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?")', 27 ('What dost thou mean by the providence of God?') and 28 ('What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?').¹¹⁷

Turning to other Scottish practices causing concern, Kersten noted that 'the Baptist view is more or less expressed (as, for instance, the failure to educate the young and the church investigation of conversion before full membership rights are granted)'. It should be noted that the allusion was to the church practices of Baptist denominations and not an insinuation that there were antipaedobaptist views in the FPC. In America, Kersten had come 'face to face with a typical American problem: the appreciation for Baptists who have scriptural, experiential preaching. The Baptist influence was so great that a number of adults no longer made confession of faith and left their children unbaptized.' His concern was such that he more than once issued serious warnings to the NRC against erroneous Baptist views and against elders using Strict Baptist sermons in church 'reading services'.¹¹⁸ He had been at the forefront of developing Reformed school education

¹¹⁵ *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, Tuesday 24th October 1843*: 'Report on Election of Office-Bearers', pp. 136-144. It is interesting to note that 'conservative' members of the Assembly were divided on the issue: James Begg (Edinburgh) spoke in support of women being allowed to vote, whereas James Gibson (Glasgow) and Ross-shire ministers David Carment (Rosskeen) and John Macalister (Nigg) opposed. Not only had all Presbyterian Churches given the right to women to vote in church, they were also to the fore in achieving suffrage in secular politics as well. Eun Soo Choi, 'The religious dimension of the women's suffrage movement: the role of the Scottish Presbyterian churches, 1867-1918' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1996).

¹¹⁶ 'Rapport inzake conferentie', *ANPSGG*, Bijlage I.

¹¹⁷ J. van Zweden, 'A sign of the times', *BW*, 1st June 1953, pp. 4-6.

¹¹⁸ *GHK*, pp. 192-193; 'My visit to the Reformed Congregations in America', *BW*, 1st January 1937, pp. 4-6; *BBW*, p. 332.

but the reference here is to formal catechising of the young (as opposed to informal teaching by parents or at Sabbath schools). At a Regional Synod, as mentioned, he had passed this more specific criticism of the FPC: ‘... there are no catechism classes, which does not fail to exert its disadvantageous influence on the young people.’¹¹⁹ The second part of this particular criticism related to granting access to the Lord’s Table. ‘The recognition of adult membership ... is based on a declaration of conversion, upon which the Kirk Session issues a token giving access to the Lord’s Supper.’¹²⁰ This contrasted with the Dutch practice of *belijdenis doen* [making a (public) confession of faith] after completing years of catechism classes in early adulthood, a step distinct from the confessor partaking of the Lord’s Supper, which did not require examination by the minister and elders.¹²¹

Points of significant differences of practice also concerned the conduct of public worship. Firstly, ‘The said Scottish Church gives ... elders the right to speak an edifying word in the congregations where there is no preacher, instead of reading a sermon.’ The Church of Scotland made use of ‘exhorters’ for several years after the Reformation in 1560 and the later practice of elders ‘speaking’ was widespread, particularly in remote parts of the country with few ministers. The FP Synod meeting of November 1912 had ruled in favour of the practice of asking elders to address to hold and address meetings in the absence of an ordained minister,¹²² whereas GG and NRC practice was to restrict elders to reading sermons to the congregations on such occasions. Secondly, ‘It does not use formulas and rejects formulary prayers.’ The law of the Reformation Church of Scotland about worship was embodied in the *Book of Common Order* (1564) which provided a common order for worship rather than obligatory common prayers. However, it could be used as a liturgy and for this reason was commonly known as ‘John Knox’s Liturgy’. It was replaced by the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory of Public Worship* in 1645, which was never intended as a liturgy. Scottish Presbyterian opposition to set forms and formulary prayer was entrenched over the centuries as these were associated with Episcopalian and Roman Catholic usage. Liturgical prayers were reintroduced to a ritualistic congregation in the Church of Scotland

¹¹⁹ ‘Rapport inzake conferentie’, ANPSGG, Bijlage I.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Arie Vergunst, ‘Public confession and Lord’s Supper’, *BW*, 1st July 1985, p. 8.

¹²² ‘Meeting of Synod’, *FPM*, Vol. 17 (December 1912), pp. 288-291; ‘The Southern Presbytery and the Student Case’, *FPM*, Vol. 18 (May 1913), pp. 26-33; *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1893-1933)*, pp. 152-155.

in 1857 against great opposition.¹²³ In contrast, the Dutch subordinate standards contained several formulas and formulary prayers.¹²⁴ Jacobus Koelman (1632–1695), a minister from Flanders (who greatly admired the Scots), had been a lone voice in preaching two sermons against them and then publishing the sermons with additional material.¹²⁵

In his address to the General Synod in 1937, Kersten stated that the FPC ‘wants absolutely nothing to do with religious feast days, not even with preaching about the facts of salvation at specific times. ... The Scottish Church condemns the use of organs to such an extent that its ministers are not allowed to preach in church where an organ is played’. These points were at the heart of the differences between the denominations and were reflected in the prominence assigned them in the letter sent by the Synod committee,¹²⁶ which stated, ‘The Synod ... became immediately aware of a difficulty which they have found precludes them from entertaining the proposal [‘for closer ecclesiastical relationship’] referred to. This difficulty is owing, *inter alia*, to your Church’s attitude on the questions of (1) the use of instrumental music in worship, and (2) the observance of so-called holydays.’ To the likely surprise of the GG, the letter continued, ‘... we think it due by way of explanation to inform you that our Church regards them as having not merely a formal but a constitutional bearing, and as involving our testimony.’

From the outset, the Scottish Reformers immediately abandoned instrumental music in public worship and Psalms were sung unaccompanied, ‘Genevan style’.¹²⁷ Demand for organs arose in the early nineteenth century once liberal Scottish churches abandoned exclusive Psalmody and yielded to pressure for other changes in worship.¹²⁸ Discussion about musical instruments and other innovations agitated the Scottish churches in the nineteenth century.¹²⁹ The scriptural basis for opposition to musical

¹²³ A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland, 1843–1874* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), p. 193.

¹²⁴ *Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy and Church Order* (Sioux Center, Iowa: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1991).

¹²⁵ Jacobus Koelman, *Reformatie noodig ontrent het gebruyk der formulieren, betoogt in twee predicatien, en daar na uytgebreydt* (Vlissingen: Abraham van Laren, 1673).

¹²⁶ AGSGG, pp. 416–417.

¹²⁷ M. Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 71, 196.

¹²⁸ Drummond and Bulloch, *Church in Victorian Scotland, 1843–1874*, pp. 187–193, 200.

¹²⁹ Robert S. Candlish (ed.), *The Organ Question: Statements by Dr Ritchie and Dr Porteous, for and against the use of the organ in public worship, in the proceedings of the Presbytery of Glasgow, 1807–8* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1856); Thomas Smith, *Memoirs*

instruments was well known and tenaciously followed by the FPC.¹³⁰ In contrast, principled opposition to musical instruments was virtually unknown in the Netherlands, although some Dutch historically opposed organs ‘because they reminded them too much of Rome or because they were thought to take away the impression of the sermon’.¹³¹

The Regulative Principle was also the basis of FPC opposition to ‘so-called holydays’. Like the matter of musical instruments, opposition to these dated back to the Reformation. ‘From the 1560s on, the authorities of the kirk from session to General Assembly waged a stern and unremitting campaign against the celebration of Yule, Easter, and celebrations on pagan days’,¹³² and the *FPM* regularly contained articles opposing ‘Christmas’ and ‘Easter’.¹³³ This contrasted with the Dutch practice of holding services on ‘1st and 2nd Easter Day’, ‘Whit Sunday’, ‘Whit Monday’ and ‘1st and 2nd Christmas Day’, together with themed preaching in ‘Advent’. Dutch opposition to ‘religious feast days’ was extremely limited: Jacobus Koelman had written against them, urging the Scots’ example of their abolition.¹³⁴

As already mentioned, discussion at the Synod of November 1936 had focused on the great difference between the Dutch and American churches on one hand, and the FPC on the other hand, and the situation had been summarised as being ‘very inconsistent for our Church to consider co-operation or union with these people when we look back upon our relation to other Churches in Scotland’. The inevitable conclusion in the letter to the GG Synod had been that ‘having regard to your stipulation that any form of ecclesiastical relationship agreed upon must accommodate existing differences, the Synod have felt that, in present circumstances, to continue negotiations along the lines of your proposal would serve no useful purpose.’

of James Begg, D.D. (2 vols., Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1885), Vol. 1, pp. 10, 117-119; Anon., *The Organ Question Critically Examined by a Disruption Elder* (2nd ed., London, Ontario: Free Press Printing Co., 1884).

¹³⁰ ‘Synod’s Statement of Differences between the Free Presbyterian Church and the other Presbyterian Churches in Scotland’, *FPM*, Vol. 38 (July 1933), pp. 129-149.

¹³¹ Willem Westerbeke, *Westkapelle: Met een vuurbaken voor de zee en met een vuurbaken aan land* (Middelburg: Stichting De Gihonbron, 2017), p. 35.

¹³² Todd, *Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, pp. 183-189.

¹³³ ‘Christmas Keeping’, *FPM*, Vol. 37 (December 1932), pp. 331-333; D. Beaton, ‘The increasing Observance of Christmas in Scotland’, *FPM* Vol. 40 (December 1935), pp. 325-329; ‘Synod’s Statement of Differences’, *FPM*, Vol. 38 (July 1933), pp. 129-149.

¹³⁴ J. Koelman, *Reformatie nodigh ontrent de feest-dagen: naaktelijk vertoont ende bewezen* (Rotterdam: Henricus Goddaeus, 1675).

IV. Aftermath

There was disappointment on all sides at the failure of negotiations. It is probably a testimony to the strong fraternal bonds between the representatives of the Dutch and Scottish churches that friendly contacts continued despite the firm tone of the final letter from the FPC and the mixture of condemnation and regret voiced at the Rotterdam Synod. It has been noted that ‘the personal and spiritual ties with the brethren, however, always remained good, especially with Rev. E. MacQueen’.¹³⁵ Incidentally, at a human level the bonds between the families were later strengthened by the marriage on 30th December 1939 of Samuel Kersten (1907–1998), eldest son of Mr Kersten, to Catherine Mackintosh MacQueen (1910–1950), third daughter of Mr MacQueen.¹³⁶

The final section of this paper will look at the ongoing interactions between the churches until 1941 when the unconnected events of church discipline and wartime led to the end of close contacts.

It appears that Mr Beaton’s *ad hoc* committee for dealing with the Netherlands continued for a couple of years but no publicly circulated reports were issued at any stage of its existence. The *Proceedings of Synod* in 1939 contained a section entitled ‘Report of Committee re Mr Kersten’s Letter’. It is not clear whether this was a separate committee from the one established to meet with Mr Kersten and Mr Verblaauw. The Church’s mission work in Rhodesia was of great interest to the GG and Mr Kersten had sent a letter promising money for the Foreign Mission Fund. At the time of the Synod, Mr Beaton was awaiting a reply from Holland to establish whether there were conditions attached to that help.¹³⁷ Published Synod Proceedings in the succeeding years made no further reference to this but, of course, by then war had broken out.

At the same Synod Mr Grant intimated ‘a memorial to this court from the Netherlands Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan – a congregation of about 400 people – earnestly desiring that messengers of the gospel be sent to them from the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland’.¹³⁸ Mr Beaton was due to go to Canada as deputy in 1939 and

¹³⁵ *KK*, pp. 178-179.

¹³⁶ It is understood that they struck up a friendship when the Kersten family visited Scotland in 1935. The marriage took place in Inverness.

¹³⁷ *Proceedings of Synod* (1939), p. 17.

¹³⁸ W. Grant, ‘Report of Canadian and Colonial Mission Committee’, in *Synod Proceedings* (1939), pp. 80-81. This is the sole episode from the years of the trilateral relationship with the GG or NRC to feature in either of the official histories of the FPC covering that

as an individual he was ideally placed to fulfil the NRC congregation's wish. Not only had he been closely involved in negotiations with Messrs Kersten and Verblaauw (and therefore aware of the issues which prevented union), but he was a long-serving minister and theological tutor with a comprehensive grasp of Systematic and Historical Theology. He was well acquainted with the FPC situation in Canada, having been a deputy on three previous occasions. Additionally, he had shown himself capable of maintaining faithful adherence to FPC standards whilst preaching outside the denomination. He had taken a service at Galeed Strict Baptist Chapel, Brighton, on 16th June 1930 at the request of his longstanding friend, Pastor James K. Popham, who sat in the pulpit with him.¹³⁹ Unaccompanied Scottish metrical psalms were sung on that occasion, a departure from customary Strict Baptist usage of Gadsby's Hymns.¹⁴⁰ He also carefully adhered to FPC practice in conducting a service for people of many church backgrounds on board a transatlantic liner in 1940, and a few months later preached in Toronto in a Ukrainian Presbyterian Church at the request of the ill Ukrainian pastor.¹⁴¹

Due to the outbreak of the Second World War, Mr Beaton's sailing in September 1939 was cancelled but he was able to travel the following year. In informing the Synod in May 1940 of the Rev. D. Beaton's safe arrival in New York and intention to visit (*inter alia*) the NRC congregation in Grand Rapids, the Rev. W. Grant made poignant allusion to the German invasion of Holland which had taken place that month. He continued, 'Among these Dutch people – and we have all had the pleasure of meeting several of them from Holland for several years, there are those who are outstanding Christians and who, we believe, are wrestling with the Most

period; see 'Grand Rapids Dutch Church request visit of deputy', *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1893–1970*, pp. 177-178.

¹³⁹ 'Mr Popham's Scottish Connection' in M. Hyde (ed.), *According to Mine Heart: The collected letters of James Kidwell Popham* (Harpending: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2010), Appendix 7, pp. 415-417. Their fraternal relationship went back a long time: Popham's personal diary showed he had previously preached in the Halkirk FPC at Beaton's request on Sabbath 19th July 1908.

¹⁴⁰ Mr Popham was criticised within Strict Baptist circles for permitting a Presbyterian to conduct public worship, particularly as there were well-known differences with the FPC on the free offer of the Gospel. See *The Christian's Pathway Supplement* (July 1930), pp. 156-157.

¹⁴¹ He described this service for Ukrainian converts from Roman Catholicism as 'quite a new experience'. See 'Report of Deputy to United States and Canada', in *Proceedings of Synod* (1941), pp. 35-36.

High for an outpouring of His Spirit. We know not whether these friends have come through this terrible catastrophe or not. We know not if they are still alive, but our sympathy goes out, not only to those who have been driven from their homes but to the many overseas who are broken-hearted by the cruelty of the oppressor.¹⁴²

Mr Beaton wrote a long and warm report about his visit to Grand Rapids where he stayed as a guest of one of the elders. To his pleasant surprise, 'the first person I met on stepping out of the car was Mr Winters, headmaster, whom some of my brethren and I had met in Scotland a number of years ago.'¹⁴³

He preached three times every Sabbath to an overflowing church, held a weekly prayer meeting, and gave lectures to the young people about the FPC. He sent back to Scotland 'a copy of their Creed, Catechism, and Psalter'. In contrast to the Rev. Kersten's methodical serialised publication of Westminster documents in *De Saambinder* before formal negotiations, this was probably the first time that equivalent Dutch documents were circulated to people within the Scottish Church. The Consistory [equivalent to Kirk Session] of the Grand Rapids congregation met his expenses 'in a handsome way' and organised a collection for the FPC mission in 'South Africa' (Rhodesia). Time constraints prevented him from acceding to a request by Kalamazoo elders to preach there for a Sabbath but he was able to hold a week-night meeting to the well-filled church on his way from Grand Rapids to Chicago.¹⁴⁴

From the concluding section of Mr Beaton's report there is a reference to otherwise unrecorded correspondence between the Grand Rapids congregation and the FPC. 'I have now presented as well as I can all the facts necessary for you to come to a decision on the request this congregation sent to you a few years ago. I regret I will not be home in time for the Synod when I would be willing to answer any questions on points I have not made clear. It is for you, fathers and brethren, to say what you will do

¹⁴² 'Canadian and Colonial Report', *FPM*, (1940), pp. 113-114. Germany invaded the Netherlands on 10th May 1940 and the centre of Rotterdam was largely destroyed by aerial bombardment. The Kersten family was unscathed, although there was extensive damage nearby (*GHK*, p. 202). The Battle of the Netherlands lasted until the surrender of the main Dutch forces four days later. At the end of the war, the Synod appointed a Dutch Relief Fund and hundreds of FPs responded by liberally providing clothing and generous financial support for 'the Lord's needy people in that land'. See *FPM*, Vol. 51 (October 1946), p. 117.

¹⁴³ 'Report on Visit to Grand Rapids', in *Proceedings of Synod* (1941), pp. 39-42.

¹⁴⁴ 'Report of Deputy to United States and Canada', in *Proceedings of Synod* (1941), p. 36.

with the request sent you by the English-speaking congregation of the Netherlands Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. One of the last things Mr Winters said to me was, “Tell the Synod we have been 17 years without an English-speaking minister.” I pass on his words to you.’ This would seem to indicate a prospect of some formal link being developed, with the apparent encouragement of Mr Beaton. Like many other aspects of the interactions between the parties, the absence of private correspondence and private reports impedes a full understanding of events.

The Synod discussed Mr Beaton’s report and the Rev. D.A. MacFarlane commented, ‘So far as we can see, the main difference between ourselves as a denomination and that congregation in the Grand Rapids [*sic*] is not so much in the department of doctrine. I think, to a very great extent, we see eye to eye on the great articles of the faith. It seems to be along the lines of worship and of church government that the main differences exist, but perhaps something can be done, and with the blessing of the Lord, we may gradually see more and more eye to eye and perhaps be a blessing to one another. The Lord has evidently cheered Mr Beaton himself in his soul in visiting that place, and we believe that he cheered them also.’¹⁴⁵

After Mr Beaton’s eventual return to Scotland, further deputies’ visits to Canada were suspended for the remainder of the war due to the threat to shipping from submarines and mines, thus preventing repetition of his preaching and teaching activities in the NRC.¹⁴⁶ However, his engagement to preach in Michigan had repercussions as the consistories in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo were censured at a meeting of Classis West on 4th June 1941. ‘The request to have a Scotch minister preach in one of the Churches, was referred by the Classis to the ruling of the Synod which does not permit it.’¹⁴⁷ The consistories which acted not in accord [*sic*] with this ruling, admitted their wrong and promised to adhere to this ruling in the future.¹⁴⁸ This censure is the only (oblique) reference to the FPC in a comprehensive history of the NRC in the course of a comment on the attempts of some consistories to solve the problem of

¹⁴⁵ *Proceedings of Synod* (1941), pp. 11-13.

¹⁴⁶ *One Hundred Years of Witness*, p. 144.

¹⁴⁷ The first GG Synod of 1907 had stipulated that a consistory could not permit a minister from outside of the denomination to preach, and this was reiterated in the following years. See *GHK*, pp. 55-60.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Excerpts Classis West’, *BW* (September 1941) pp. 10-11. A Dutch version of the report (‘Uittreksel – Notulen Classis West’) appeared on pp. 6-7.

the lack of ministers: the book is silent on the previous years of trilateral interactions.¹⁴⁹

War had ended contact with Mr Kersten and the GG in Holland, and now a combination of war and church censure put an end to the contacts between the FPC and the NRC in America.

This paper is the first systematic description and evaluation of attempts to forge a working relationship between the GG, the NRC and the FPC in the 1930s. Study of this interesting process of informal and formal contacts has been possible by drawing on a wide range of published material in Dutch and English. To date it has proved impossible to identify any unpublished material relating to these events, despite the virtual certainty that such material must have existed. If such personal correspondence or contemporaneous private records come to light, they may yield further details for evaluation of this unprecedented plan to associate and eventually unite the three denominations.

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¹⁴⁹ GO, p. 195.