

## A Short History of Peoria Christian Reformed Church

The small Holland settlement of Pella, begun in 1847 by Rev. Scholte, was growing rapidly, and farmland was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Early settlers began purchasing land "over the river." Distance by horse and buggy made travel to Pella prohibitive, which led to a desire among the Dutch settlers to have a place of worship closer to where they were living.

At first, they met in a schoolhouse five miles northeast of Peoria, but a desire to have their own church building prompted a meeting in the town hall in the fall of 1893 for the purpose of organizing a new congregation. Representatives from both the Reformed and Christian Reformed denominations attended. A vote was taken, and it was decided to organize a Christian Reformed Church.

The Holland Christian Reformed Church of Peoria, composed of 17 families and 12 individuals, was officially organized on April 11, 1894, and first met for worship in the town hall. Members were asked to make pledges to provide for the pastor's salary and the purchase of land to build a church and parsonage. Two acres of land were purchased for \$185, the site of our current church property. At a congregational meeting on July 10, 1894, it was decided to construct a church building 36 ft. long and 32 ft. wide, with a seating capacity of 150. It was also decided to build a parsonage for the minister. For the protection of horses which brought people to church, horse stalls were also built and rented for \$4 per year.

A call was extended to Rev. S. Broekstra, a candidate for the ministry who had conducted services during the summer of 1894. He was ordained in October of that year, a year of severe drought resulting in a poor harvest. Many prayer meetings were held asking the Lord to send rain. In December of 1894, the new church building was completed and dedicated to the service of the Lord.

In March of 1897, sadness descended with the death of Rev. Broekstra at age 45. It is believed that he suffered from appendicitis. He was buried in Pella Oakwood Cemetery after only 2½ years of service.

Various pastors followed. (See complete list at the end of this history). During the pastorate of Rev. Jonker, it was decided to enlarge the church building by adding 20 feet to the west side of the church. During Rev. Jonker's tenure, the congregation also celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year of existence, the first of many anniversary celebrations to come. During the pastorate of Rev. A.J. Brink, the church was again enlarged, this time on the north side.

During Rev. Weersing's pastorate, much happened. On December 15, 1916, the new parsonage, which was almost ready for occupancy, caught fire and was completely destroyed. The loss was \$3,500. Within two weeks the congregation provided \$4,100 in collections to build a new parsonage. The big square house on top of the hill that served as the parsonage for 65 years stood until 1982, when it was torn down to build a new parsonage.

On April 7, 1917, our nation became involved in the first World War. Rather unjustly, the Dutch people were identified with the German nation and accused of lacking love for their adopted country. Governor Harding issued a proclamation that no foreign language was to be spoken in a public building. Historians now call this the "Babel Proclamation," and it is often referred to as one of the darkest periods in Iowa's history. Officials would appear in church to determine if the Dutch language was being spoken. This was a real hardship for the congregation as many of the people understood very little English. Feelings ran so high that Rev. Weersing received threats against his life and was forced to leave the community.

On June 14, 1918, a mother up in the night with a sick child spotted flames on the horizon. Sparks from the school, which had been deliberately set on fire, spread to the nearby church building. Both were a complete loss. Older people recalled the frantic ringing of the church bell and the fear which caused all the Dutch people to evacuate the town that night.

It was difficult to obtain proper building materials during the war so it was decided to use one of the horse barns for a meeting place. Throughout the winter of 1918-1919, the congregation met in the horse barn and still experienced the Lord's blessing. A new church was built in 1919. It was decided to have one English service on the third Sunday afternoon of each month.

In July of 1929, a used pipe organ was purchased. The year of 1942 was a time of rejoicing when all debt on the school, church, and parsonage was paid. During that year it was also decided to discontinue the Dutch language entirely in the services. The minister's salary in 1944 was \$2,000.

A new pipe organ was purchased in 1951. Balcony seating on the west side was eliminated as all the organ pipes were placed in the balcony. To make up for some of this seating loss, the stairs and entryway for the balcony were removed and replaced with a few benches, which is where the sound system is now located. In 1956, a Sunday School was organized.

In June of 1962, the congregation decided to add three classrooms on the east side of the church and remodel the southeast entrance to the auditorium. These modifications allowed for increased space for Bible study groups and Sunday School classes. Later on, the west entrance to the church was modified to include a wooden ramp that would allow for wheelchair accessibility.

Further remodeling took place with a \$30,000 project in 1973, when the church building was extended to the west to enclose the outside cement steps that led to the sanctuary. A carport was added so that entry into the church could be done under roof, and the old white decorative Corinthian columns that graced the outside of the church were re-purposed as the support columns for the carport.

In April of 1994, the church celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Three days of activities included a historical pageant, special worship services, and a banquet. In 1995, the church basement underwent a renovation, and new heating and cooling units were installed.

In April of 2000, the Long-Range Planning Committee addressed the need to be more inclusive by improving accessibility. In November, the congregation approved the addition of an elevator on the west side, at a cost of \$75-85,000. Upon entering the elevator at street level, a person could now ride up for access to the sanctuary, or down for access to the basement, with no steps involved at any time.

At that time the church had three roof styles – a peaked roof for the carport on the west, a flat roof on the classroom addition on the east, and a rounded roof in the middle. The flat roof was a source of problems, with a battle to prevent leaking and damage to the interior. A major project costing around \$120,000 took place in 2009 by repairing damaged brick exterior, adding a pitched roof to the east addition, installing new basement windows, and building a canopy over the sidewalk on the east side. This created a new “bonus room” over the east classrooms that will provide additional space should the need arise.

As a sign of changing technology, in December of 2010 the newly elected clerk asked at an Elders'

meeting if it was permissible to type the minutes on a computer instead of writing them by hand. The elders were apparently unsure of this new-fangled process so they deferred the request and asked that it be presented to the full Council. As the next page on the old ledger book is completely blank, this action became the final official hand-written notation in the history of the church's record keeping, and 2011 began with computer-typed minutes.

Peoria CRC has been involved in many outreach programs, both past and present, including helping establish a GEMS group in New Sharon, publishing the *Peoria Partyline* newsletter, an annual Memorial Day community remembrance at the Peoria Cemetery, multiple Bible study groups, GEMS, Cadets, Youth Group, and Vacation Bible School. In October of 2017, Peoria CRC hosted a combined worship service with Taintor Community Church and Lower Grove Community Church to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany, which sparked the Reformation. The message was "Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone." After worship, all shared a fellowship dinner. It was a wonderful time of worship, fellowship, and a morning to experience the communion of saints.

The following pastors have served our congregation:

- Sietse Broekstra, 1894-1897
- Gerrit Westenberg, 1897-1901
- Peter Jonker Sr., 1901-1907
- Abel J. Brink, 1908-1911
- Harke Bultema, 1912-1916
- Jacob J. Weersing, 1916-1918
- Peter Van Dyk, 1919-1921
- Diedrich H. Kromminga, 1922-1926
- Marvin J. Vander Werp, 1928-1932
- John Weidenaar, 1932-1936
- Dewey J. Hoitenga, 1937-1943
- Raymond H. Haan, 1943-1945
- John A. Mulder, 1946-1950
- Henry Verduin, 1953-1959
- Douglas Vander Waal, 1959-1962
- Donald J. Van Beek, 1962-1966
- Donald J. Drost, 1968-1973
- Peter Van Drunen, 1973-1982
- Ronald Bouwkamp, 1983-2000
- John Gorter, 2003-2012
- George Den Oudsten, 2014-

A more detailed recounting of Peoria CRC's early history may be found in the 100th Anniversary booklet available in the church library.