

TWO HUNDRED YEARS

I N

CENTRAL ATLANTIC TERRITORY

A Report of the Bicentennial Committee of the Parish Services  
Task Force of Central Atlantic Conference - United Church of  
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## OUR COLONIAL BACKGROUND

In 1621, just ten years after the King James Version of the Bible appeared in England, a few score of rugged Protestant Christians held their first religious services in the New World. In the old country they had revolted against formalized worship and government control of churches and envisioned a new colony as a promising place for establishing local civil governments and Christian congregations in accordance with what they thought of as God's design. For four decades various congregations, considering themselves members of one common family of God, accepting only Christ as their head, and rejecting the direction of bishops and presbyters had been known as Congregationalists.

A few months after their landing at Plymouth, the new colonists held a celebration of Thanksgiving and, augmented by thousands around Massachusetts Bay, continued developing what, after a few generations, would be the moral and religious convictions of the majority of those who declared American Independence, in 1776.

In New England towns, usually covering thirty-six square miles, the church was made the geographic and social as well as the spiritual center. Meeting houses were designed to serve the purposes of both civic assembly and worship, with a sturdy table and centered pulpit but no altar. Members paid taxes instead of tithes and only church members could vote in government elections. Religious services, with very long sermons, free prayers and discordantly sung psalms, were held twice every Sunday, and all residents were required to attend.

As more and more settlers came to develop plantations and overseas trade, and the child-population

increased, prayers and Bible readings were held twice daily in their homes, with oft-repeated explanations of the sacraments and catechism so that all could learn to live in obedience to God's law. Congregational ministers were ordained for a lifetime in the same town with responsibility for keeping the faithful in their proper places.

The New England Way worked for a while, but by 1634 several doctrines had been developed and disagreed upon in the Massachusetts Bay Colony; and as a result of the heated disputes as well as the need for more land, clergymen who advocated greater religious freedom, founded Rhode Island.

Ten years before this, an English Congregational minister had established a church with thirty members in Upper Norfolk, Virginia, and army officers were commanded to see that "Almighty God be duly and daily served," with punishment for every man and woman who failed to attend morning and evening prayers. Settlers were allowed to grow tobacco, but not to use it themselves. Other recently organized Congregational churches in Virginia, in 1643, were asking for ministers from New England where Harvard College had been founded to advance the learning of clergy especially; but most of the longer-established colony on the James River belonged to the less rigid Church of England, and felt that commercial projects were important, too.

In 1644, the law of the Virginia colony obliged all non-Anglicans to leave. Many returned to England, but more than a thousand Congregationalists, with no organized association closer than New England, remained in great need of mutual sympathy, counsel and stimulus. More and more of them became aligned with the Presbyterian system of church government.

Colonists from the Connecticut Congregational churches, who were grieved at this drift and feared

that it would lead to their being governed by civil and independent officials, moved first to Long Island and then to New Jersey where they established a church, with Rev. Abraham Pierson as pastor, to maintain the purity of religion as they professed it. (Rev. Pierson learned the language of local Indians, in order to become an active missionary, and his son later became the President of Yale University.) Soon Congregational churches were established in Bloomfield, Morristown, Elizabeth, Orange, Mendham, Piscataway, Shrewsbury, Woodbridge, and possibly elsewhere in New Jersey. All were concerned for education and in 1696 joined with Presbyterians in the establishment of the College of New Jersey which in 1748 changed its name to Princeton. It was only for boys, however, that ministers tried to provide higher education; girls had no opportunity to prepare for a learned career.

Although Congregationalism, with the Cambridge Platform in 1648 summarizing its principles of church government and discipline, was practically the state religion in New England for about a century, the preaching of Jonathan Edwards led to the Great Awakening in 1734 which inspired a series of religious revivals and changes in doctrinal, social and political thought. New England churches were fragmented into "New Lights" and "Old Lights." "New Side" and "Old Side" Presbyterians developed in other colonies. As a result of these schisms a Religious Toleration Act was passed soon after the Revolution.

The Reformed Church component of the United Church of Christ had a briefer colonial history than the Congregationalist churches. Not until after most of Germany had been devastated by the General European War, between Protestant and Roman Catholic rulers, which lasted from 1618-48, was the Reformed Church recognized. By 1700, however, the New World, which had been left pretty much to its own resources during this troubled period, was really in need of the skills

and trade of new settlers; and the English proprietors of the American colonies lured Protestant German immigrants with citizenship, property and a relatively secure life. Because the rulers of the area from which they came were known as "palatines", these migrants and their culture were often referred to as Palatinate. The first German colonists, who came to Virginia through the agency of Governor Spottswood, were experienced miners. They built a furnace, manufactured iron and scrupulously refrained from meddling in secular and ecclesiastical politics.

Pennsylvania, however, was the best advertised of the colonies. By 1730, about thirty thousand new settlers had come there and more than half were of the Reformed faith. A few wealthy ones had gone to the north; the majority, lower middle class farmers, small merchants, artisans and white indentured servants, to the south. It was estimated that three quarters of the males were able to write, an unusually high number among Europeans of the time. Though many of them belonged to small sects, there was no record of unbelieving German immigrants: religious convictions sustained even indentured servants through their hardships. The low taxes, plentiful land, complete religious freedom and no danger of enemy attack helped the Pennsylvania Colony to flourish.

In the old country schoolmasters were allowed to serve as ministers; and the foundation of the German Reformed Church in the New World was laid at Faulkner Swamp in 1725 by traveling schoolmaster John Phillip Boehm who "maintained the ministry of the Word," baptized children and administered the Lord's Supper for five years without any compensation, and later served thirteen widely scattered congregations.

For the German Reformed, the Lord's Supper was an act in memory of the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ; laymen were encouraged to think for themselves and claim rights in church government; the significance

of liturgical forms was toned down and predestination highlighted. Discipline was important for both clergy and laity. On the congregational level, pastors, teachers, elders and deacons were organized into a consistorium, and, on the regional level, into a jurisdictional body known as a classis - or synod. As they came to America, however, pastors, teachers and devout and knowing laity kept away from rigid rationalizing and the tendency to reduce Christian faith to a series of theological propositions, emphasizing instead the individual's experience of God in Christ, and letting each worship according to his own lights. Ministers were considered priests rather than prophets.

In the many new settlements of the early 18th century, even schoolmasters, "readers" or "traveling ministers" were few in number. People were in great confusion and dissension; and religion was discredited by the preaching of irresponsible pietists and vagrants of the Great Awakening. Of forty-six Reformed Church congregations, united into sixteen charges, which the Palatinate had recommended to the care of the North Holland Synod, thirty-two had no regular ministry. At first, union with the Presbyterians was suggested to these congregations, but in 1741 they were put on a "list of needy churches." Men "of tried piety and correct views" were sought in Germany and Switzerland and when five or six were found, examined and ordained, they were commissioned for "work in the forsaken vineyard of Pennsylvania."

In 1746, a general superintendent of the settlements was appointed by the Synod of Holland to visit the area, report on conditions, bring into existence an annual Synod of its new pastors and elders, and establish Charity Schools with Reformed minister-catechists to instill the Church's principles into the youthful minds of the Germans there.

Bilingual communities were a problem. Parents

did not want their children to speak English nor did they like the idea of education as a public charity. Battling with the French at sea, and with Indians pillaging and tomahawking on land also played havoc with the churches of Eastern Pennsylvania, but in Philadelphia in 1747, still bound to the Coetus in Amsterdam, German (not Dutch) Reformed settlers formally organized the Coetus of the Reformed Ministerium of the Congregations of Pennsylvania. They often cooperated with Presbyterians and Lutherans in the temporal sphere and identified with the colonies in the political struggle and war against Great Britain. They counseled with Benjamin Franklin about their Charity Schools and closed them all before 1764, while increasing the number of church schools.

It is reported that in 1776 Sabbath observances were no longer kept and people thought more of arms than of God's Word. At Lancaster in 1793, the German Reformed churches in Pennsylvania and adjacent states severed their bonds with Amsterdam and transformed their Coetus into the Synod of the Reformed Church in the U. S. A. - a union of free churches in a free country with a new hymnbook and a new catechism.

## II

### CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE CHURCHES AND THE REVOLUTION

In 1775 after Concord and Lexington, the call went out for volunteers to form a Continental army for the relief of Boston. Two companies of German Riflemen were formed in the Frederick, Maryland area, including many members of our Maryland and Virginia churches. They made the march to Cambridge in the amazingly short time of twenty-two days.

Rev. Abel Morgan, pastor of Old First Church in Middletown, New Jersey, prevented by the British from holding services in its House of Worship, preached in a barn.

The members of the church at Fairton, New Jersey, are said to have dug clams in Delaware Bay, dried them and sent them to Washington's army in Valley Forge.

John Ignatius Effinger, one of Washington's bodyguards lies buried in the churchyard of St. Paul's Church, Woodstock, Virginia.

There are only twenty-seven churches in the Conference which were alive in 1776. Probably each could add many stories of their involvement in the fight for freedom. Most of these churches were in the western part of Maryland and Virginia in what was then virgin territory. The members were still struggling with problems of the frontier, clearing the land, building log houses and churches, and protecting themselves from the Indians, but they did their part in the Revolution notwithstanding.

Most of the contribution of what is now the United

Church was made by the Congregationalists in New England and the Reformed Churches in Pennsylvania. They furnished much of the leadership: ten signers of the Declaration of Independence including John and Samuel Adams and John Hancock, a substantial proportion of the soldiers in the Continental Army; and suffered great losses in their persons and property because of enemy action.

While we join in tribute to their bravery and their sacrifices, we should be most concerned today with the ideals for which they fought. Both the Congregationalists and the Reformed people came to America to establish a life free of the arbitrary actions of kings, and to find a place where they could worship in freedom in accordance with their consciences. They established self-governing churches and self-governing communities. They protested vigorously encroachments by the crown on their right to govern themselves.

Much of the material in the Declaration of Independence had been asserted by the churches for fifty years or more. For example, Rev. John Wise (1682-1725), pastor of Second Church, Ipswich, Massachusetts, proclaimed: "No taxes should be levied on the subjects without consent of an assembly chosen by the freeholders."

"It follows as a Command of the Law of Nature, that every Man Esteem and treat another as one who is naturally his equal, or who is a man as well as he."

"The first humane subject and original of Civil Power is the People. . . . The formal Reason of Government is the Will of a Community."

"The End of all good Government is to cultivate Humanity, and Promote the happiness of all, and the good of every Man in all his Rights, his Life, Liberty, Estate, Honour, etc., without injury or abuse to any."

Although no present churches of Congregational or Reformed background in New Jersey were in existence in the eighteenth century, both played a significant role in the development of the Colony.

The first church to be established in New Jersey after the colony was ceded by Holland to the British, was the First Church of Christ in Newark, a Congregational Church. The colony and the church were organized in Branford, Connecticut.

First Church in Elizabeth was established at almost the same time as Newark and played a leading role in the life of the colony. Congregational Churches were begun also in the towns of Orange, Bloomfield, Morristown, Mendham, Piscataway, Shrewsbury, Woodbridge and Connecticut Farms and possibly a number of other communities.

Concerned also for education, these churches led in establishing the College of New Jersey in 1748, now Princeton University. Its first three presidents were Congregational ministers: Jonathan Dickinson, Aaron Burr, Sr., and Jonathan Edwards, the latter already America's leading theologian.

Prior to the Revolution there were about fifteen congregations or preaching charges in the Reformed Church in New Jersey, located at Alexandria, Amwell, Bethlehem, Fox Hill, German Valley, Greenwich, Hanolden, Hartwick, Hopewell, Knowlton, Maidenhead, Millstone and Newton.

In the eighteenth century a very large number of Presbyterians migrated to New Jersey from Scotland and northern Ireland and most of our churches, both Congregational and Reformed, joined forces with them, together making a major contribution to the founding of our Country.

CHURCHES FOUNDED PRIOR TO 1776

Old First Church, Middletown, N.J.	1688
St. James Church, Lovettsville, Va.	1734
Christ Reformed Church, Middletown, Md.	1740
Centenary Church, Winchester, Va.	1741
Evangelical Church, Frederick, Md. 1745	1745
St. Paul's Church, Clear Spring, Md.	1747
Salem Church, Hagerstown, Md.	1747
St. John's Church, Woodsboro, Md.	1747
Christ Evangelical & Reformed, Shepherdstown, W.Va.	1747
St. Paul's Church, Woodstock, Va.	1748
First and St. Stephens, Baltimore, Md.	1750
Grace Church, Taneytown, Md.	1750
Glade Church, Walkersville, Md.	1750
Trinity Church, Boonsboro, Md.	1750
Trinity Church, Manchester, Md.	1760
Benjamin's Church, Westminster, Md.	1761
Friedens Church, Mt. Crawford, Va.	1762
Brown Memorial Church, McGaheysville, Va.	1763
St. Michael's Church, Bridgewater, Va.	1764
Christ Church, Sharpsburg, Md.	1764
St. Mary's Church, Silver Run, Md.	1764
Trinity Church, Timberville, Va.	1765
Emmanuel (Baust) Church, Westminster, Md.	1765
Grace Church, Mt. Jackson, Va.	1766
Zion Evangelical & Reformed, Hagerstown, Md.	1770
Apples Church, Thurmont, Md.	1770
Christ Church, Martinsburg, W. Va.	1775