

THE FREE REFORMED COMMUNITY IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Aart Plug

My name is Aart Plug, and I am 66 years old. I was born in Australia, of Dutch parents and grew up bilingual; I am still fluent in Dutch as well as English. I married a Friesian girl named Idske Broersma, and we have four children and seven grandchildren. We live in Armadale, and belong to the Free Reformed Church. I am a curriculum development officer at the John Calvin School, also in Armadale. My contribution will focus on the story of the Free Reformed community in WA, and especially on the story of the John Calvin Schools, and the people who were directly involved in establishing them.

My family came to Western Australia in August 1950 and settled in Albany. I was born almost exactly nine months later. In fact, if I've done my sums right, my personal story probably starts on board the *M/S Sibajak*, somewhere in the Red Sea, between Port Said and Aden!

When I arrived, our family was not living in a tent anymore (we had been, for the first few months), but the house we lived in was a makeshift shack in the middle of a paddock along the Perth Road, and it still had the tent as a roof. There was no room – and no money – for a cradle, so for the first few months of my life I was put to sleep in the top drawer of the chest of drawers next to my parents' bed.

The Plugs came as an extended family, consisting of my father, Jan Plug, with his wife and children, along with three of his brothers and two sisters (some with families, some not), and my widowed grandmother, a total of 27 people.

The Plugs came from Katwijk, on the North Sea coast of Holland, and had been fishermen for generations. My father and his brother Dirk intended to start up a fishing business along the south coast of WA. They brought along boats, a truck and other equipment. As things turned out, the venture never got off the ground; my father went into business in Albany, and my uncle Dirk moved to the Perth area. Together with his boys, he went fishing off the west and north-west coast of WA. Right up to the present, the name Plug is still quite well known in the WA fishing and marine industries.

In the Netherlands, our families had belonged to a branch of the Reformed Churches, and we took a strong faith, and a strong sense of faith community with us. This was reinforced by the fact that we had been involved in a fairly traumatic split within the Reformed Churches in the old country in the mid-1940s. Rather than joining existing churches within the Australian community, immigrant families that shared our religious tradition tended to draw together, and it wasn't long before the Free Reformed Churches were formed. These churches have grown in the past sixty years. From two small

congregations in the early 1950s, one in Albany and one in Armadale, there are now 14 congregations with some 3500 members spread throughout the South-West of the state. We see ourselves as fully Australian, but with a Dutch flavour.

The Reformed tradition has a very distinctive view on education. To begin with, it strongly believes that it is parents, first and foremost, who are responsible for the education of their children. In addition, there is a conviction that education at school and upbringing at home needs to be consistent with the shared faith of the church community. It did not take very long for associations of parents – Free Reformed School Associations – to be set up, and schools to be established. I myself was a student at the John Calvin School in Albany when it opened in 1962.

At first, the John Calvin Schools were small and spartan. They were completely paid for by the Church communities – there was no Government funding. It is a measure of how important Christian education was to these parents that they were willing to make very substantial sacrifices to help make it happen. At the time, there were no other parent-controlled schools anywhere in WA, and the broader community tended to view those “Dutchies” with bemusement and sometimes a degree of irritation or suspicion.

In the meantime, of course, attitudes have changed. There are any number of Christian and other independent schools in the state, largely funded by the State and Commonwealth, and we ourselves have grown too. Right up to the present, most children of Free Reformed families attend the John Calvin Schools, and most members of the Free Reformed community – even those who do not or no longer have school-age children – support the school associations. I myself have spent most of my adult life as a teacher – and a number of years as Principal – at various John Calvin Schools. Speaking as a Christian, and as a member of the Free Reformed community, I recognize God’s blessings in what we have experienced and have been able to do, and I am thankful for that.

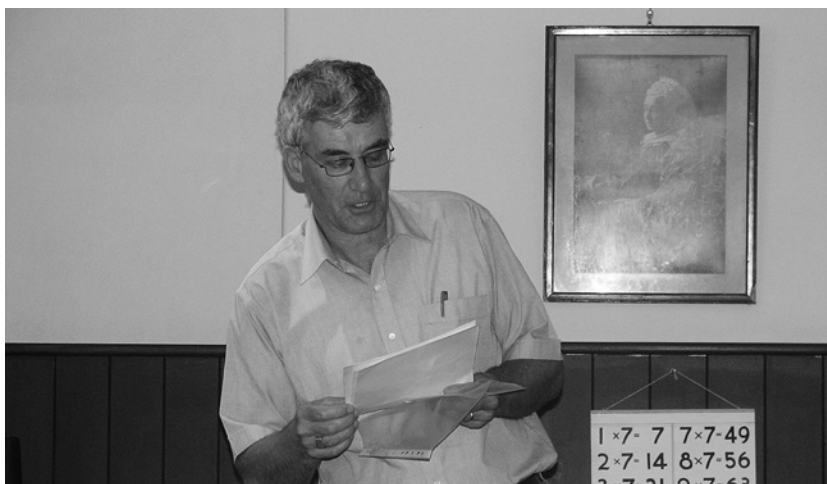


Figure 1
Aart Plug - Calvin School Armadale.
Courtesy: Aart Plug.