

## **Early Canadian Church History (1)**

By Leen Jousse and Wes Bredenhof

On the European continent scholars are continuously exploring past methods of colonization. These days they are especially interested in researching the relationship of Europeans with aboriginals on the other side of the Atlantic. It is now clear that colonization has never been a one-sided development. Both sides, natives and Europeans alike, have experienced benefits and losses. These investigations have implied a reassessment of what Christian culture was about and what kind of religion had been promoted in the transformation of the Americas.

There has been a surge of interest also in the historic relationships between Europe and what we today call Canada. Europeans identified themselves as colonizers and migrants identified themselves as Christians when they met native inhabitants. There are also the questions of what kind of Christianity was introduced into Canada, how it was introduced, and why. The French Huguenots in Canada had a unique self-understanding with regard to being Calvinists and how they interacted with First Nations during the seventeenth century. This was different from the Reformed Dutch in the new world. Whereas the Dutch focussed on planting churches (for example, in today's New York State), French Calvinists were engaged merely in spreading the gospel in Canada. Consequently, we find no Protestant church buildings from the early period in either the area around the St. Lawrence River or in Nova Scotia. Instead, there are only Roman Catholic buildings. It may be instructive to explore the origin of Christianity in Canada in order to understand the way French Calvinists acted.

### *France and the Americas*

During the sixteenth century, European nations were looking for a new western route to China. This is why the other side of the Atlantic Ocean was explored. French sailors thought they could discover a route to China and to the East Indies by travelling west. They met the St. Lawrence River and the land which is nowadays called Canada. When word of this reached the French king, he urged his people to begin colonizing whatever area could be taken from the indigenous nations.

This situation has to be understood in its Roman Catholic context. The Roman pope deemed the whole world to be under his dominion. Therefore, he thought he could claim all authority to distribute the lands and nations in the name of Christ to the governments of Roman Catholic kings as his papal representatives, whether in Italy, Spain, or Portugal. This he did in the famous Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 – the agreement which divided up the Americas between Spain and Portugal.

The Roman Catholic king of France also acted as one of the owners of the world on the other side of the Atlantic. He did this wherever French fishermen and merchants operated and the peoples in those areas were regarded automatically as his French subjects. He also promoted the expeditions of Jacques Cartier in 1532 and 1541 and Jean-François de La Rocque de Roberval in 1541-1543. They were mandated to gain control over the St. Lawrence Valley and

have it colonized. However, these sixteenth century efforts ultimately failed due to conflicts between the colonists and the Iroquois. The Iroquois did not think that the French behaved as those who owned the land.

During this period, the Wars of Religion were raging in France. Consequently, persecuted Reformed people fled from France. Slightly earlier, John Calvin and Admiral Gaspar de Coligny encouraged Reformed church members to spread the gospel across the Atlantic by means of colonization. Nicolas Durand de Villegaignon gathered about 600 people and started a colony in South America in 1555. He landed in present-day Brazil in the area of Rio de Janeiro. Working together with the native inhabitants, they established a colony and a military fort (Fort Coligny). They clearly showed a desire to be Reformed. Unfortunately, the leader of the colony, Villegaignon, went back to the Roman Catholic Church and then turned on the Reformed colonists, even killing many. This persecution led to the first Protestant martyrs in the new world and the first Reformed confession to be written in the Americas. As they were waiting in prison for their date with the executioner, Reformed pastor Jean du Bordel wrote a confession with the help of his colleagues Matthieu Vermeuil, Pierre Bourdon, and André la Fon. The Guanabara Confession contained sixteen articles and it was meant to be an outward-looking witness both to the Roman Catholics and to the pagan Brazilians.

Much further north, where the royal plans for colonization had come to nothing up till 1598, the French king Henry IV took a different tack. He wanted to stimulate private enterprise. That led to his allowing Huguenots to renew their efforts to build colonies in North America. Let's now turn to the beginnings of New France and consider how Reformed people introduced Calvinism into this new environment.

### *The Early Beginnings*

The period of 1623 to 1629 is often remembered as the time in which the famous Roman Catholic Samuel de Champlain was married to a Calvinist lady. However, this period should really be understood as the era of a fierce struggle between the Huguenots and Jesuits in Canada. They were struggling on several fronts, including and especially with the planting of true Christian religion among colonists and First Nations. What happened?

French, Spanish, and Basque fishermen became familiar with the coastal areas of the east and their peoples, especially in the area of Newfoundland. They did not see any need to live in that area on a permanent basis. They just built temporary settlements for whaling and fishing. Meanwhile, they gradually became better acquainted with the Six Nations of the Iroquois, the Montagnais along the St. Lawrence, and the Huron peoples of the Georgian Bay region. Only once the fur trade began was the need felt for establishing permanent settlements. Colonization really began with economic interests in mind. Colonists needed to ask permission and pay for the documents required from the French crown to settle down overseas.

The hat making industry in Paris led to increased demand for fur. This is why merchants were urged by King Francis I to take control of territories and not just to trade with the natives. He

also endorsed private enterprises among the Huguenots. Merchants were to provide themselves with personnel and materials so as to be able to live in New France. This king also considered all inhabitants of New France to be his subjects whether they were colonists or aboriginals. However, Huguenot merchants did not respond well to this imperialistic notion. Their trade company was mandated to work overseas with the Six Nations in terms of a partnership or alliance, rather than as imperialistic colonizers.

Thereafter several wealthy merchants planted colonies overseas. In 1598, Queen Catherine de Medici (wife of Henry IV and niece of a pope who favoured the Jesuits) granted a fur-trade contract to Troilus de Mesgouez. She then named him lieutenant-general of New France. Then there was an important Huguenot merchant, Pierre de Chauvin de Tonnetuit. He was from Dieppe and he also obtained a royal monopoly for the fur trade and a charter to establish a colony overseas. Having enlisted some 500 colonists and the required material, he sailed across the ocean and landed near Tadoussac, in the mouth of the St. Lawrence. A third man, a renowned Huguenot from Saintonge, Pierre Du Gua de Monts, also started a commercial enterprise with a royal grant in 1603. After his arrival, however, he realized that he did not like the climate of the St. Lawrence Valley. Therefore, he eventually moved to the coastal area of Acadia (present-day Nova Scotia) and settled there.

In our next instalment, we'll look at what happened in the St. Lawrence Valley from 1598 to 1629. Then, later, we'll look further at the developments among Calvinists in Acadia during this same period.