

Centennial History of PEORIA CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

The doors of Peoria Christian School were opened to forty children in September, 1907, though progress towards such a school began as early as 1904. Meeting in the council room of the Peoria Christian Reformed Church, the newly organized school was a continuation of two summer schools intended to teach children of Peoria in a Christian manner. Children attending the summer school were instructed in prayer, Bible lessons, and reading and writing Dutch.

The newly formed Christian School met daily, with Dutch being taught on Fridays. Douwe Veltman took the opportunity to travel west from New Jersey to become the first teacher at a salary of \$450 for his first nine months of teaching. At the end of the year, Veltman returned to New Jersey and a Mr. Gouda was hired, but later fired because his teaching was judged to be in conflict with Christian Reformed doctrine. Miss Elizabeth Kempkes stepped in to finish the year.

Though weather and road conditions often hindered attendance, Peoria Christian School progressed. A school building was planned for in 1908, and a plot of land was purchased from J.G. Van Gorp north of the church. A one-room schoolhouse was built and ready for occupancy by September of 1910.

John Dylhoff of Patterson, New Jersey was the first teacher in the new building. In 1911, Mr. Richard Drost became principal and at the end of his first year, the teaching of Dutch was discontinued.

By 1912 the number of children attending had risen to 84 and the one-room school was divided into two rooms. Mr. Frank Kuiper was hired as a second teacher, becoming principal in 1915. He was succeeded by James Heitbrink in 1917.

World War I had a great impact on the school. Americans in the community felt that the Dutch-speaking Hollanders were not patriotic enough. Their separate language, separate church and separate school placed them in an unfavorable light. Their Dutch always seemed more German than American.

Because of the tensions and threats of violence, after which Principal Heitbrink was accosted and beaten, the school did shut its doors. Threats of violence and arson continued and on the evening of June 13, 1918 the threat was carried out. The school and the church were burned to the ground.

For two years Peoria was without a Christian School, but funds were collected for the school throughout that time. On January 13, 1920, a unanimous decision was made to rebuild. A four-room school costing approximately \$12,000 was planned for and built, opening on September 20, 1920. The following year a ninth grade was added and three additional teachers were hired. In 1922, a tenth grade was added, but at the end of the year both 9th and 10th were discontinued, because of the small number of students.

The next great challenge confronting Peoria Christian School was of a financial nature: the Depression of the 1930s. From 1931 through 1938 Mr. George J. Deur served as principal, with Miss Martha Vos as teacher. The salaries of \$90 and \$40 per month respectively were not always met.

Electricity came to the school in 1936, and bus transportation was added in 1943. By now enrollment was up to approximately 90 students. During the 1950-51 school year 105 pupils were enrolled. During the summer of '52 the school building was extended ten feet to the north to relieve crowded rooms. In 1957 the School celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary with 106 pupils.

Enrollment reached its peak of 131 pupils in the 1962-63 school year. In 1960 a band program was begun and the school purchased 2.84 acres of land for a playground and athletic field.

The 1970's brought a decline in enrollment. To compensate for fewer students, grades were combined. A variety of combinations were used during the years to follow until the current class structure came to be. In 1967, a Recreation Center was built which houses a basketball court and kitchen.

In 1983 plans for a new school were set in motion. Volunteers tore down the old building during the summer break and a new building was ready for occupancy by Thanksgiving. Classes were held temporarily in the church and recreation center while work on the new building was completed.

In addition to the regular staff, there is one part time teacher, and one aid for a disability student and a librarian for Grades K-8. A counselor meets regularly with the students. Computer training as well as sports, art, and music are taught along with the emphasis on the basics.

In 1993 Peoria Christian Grade School won seven of nine media awards presented statewide from the Iowa Educational Media Association.

The purpose of Peoria Christian School is to seek out and nurture each child's unique potential as an image-bearer of God so that he/she can meaningfully serve God and others. It endeavors to develop the student's capacity for the enjoyment of the created world in all its cultural richness and diversity. It attempts to educate the total person in his/her emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, decisional, and creative development.

The Peoria Christian Grade School celebrated its 100 year anniversary on July 6, 7, & 8, 2007. There were three days of festivities remembering God's faithfulness to the school. It has provided quality education for hundreds of children and looks forward to serving God and society for years to come.

Submitted by Lois Klyn