

This document has been prepared by the Pastoral Search Committee for prospective pastors of the St. Thomas Reformed Church. It aims with the intent to convey our congregation's appreciation for our rich past, a sense of gratitude for the opportunities to serve our island community in the present and a hopeful vision for a season of continued growth and ministry looking forward.

With Gratitude,

Pastoral Search Committee
St. Thomas Reformed Church

The Enduring Legacy: A History of St. Thomas Reformed Church

The St. Thomas Reformed Church, with its **founding in 1660**, boasts a remarkable and continuous ministry, making it the **oldest congregation on St. Thomas and the twenty-third oldest congregation in the United States**. Its history is a testament to perseverance through periods of prosperity, as well as challenge, reflecting the broader historical currents of the Danish West Indies and eventually, the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Early Centuries: From Dutch Roots to American Jurisdiction (1600s – 1800s)

The Dutch West India Company established a post on St. Thomas in 1657. The oldest congregation in the U.S. Virgin Islands with a ministry which began in 1660 which was associated with the Dutch Reformed Church based in Amsterdam and a member of the oldest denomination with a continuous ministry in the United States. The St. Thomas Protestant Reformed Dutch Church began as a small community, established by Dutch and English traders and settlers. They brought with them a fervent brand of Protestantism, and immediately congregated in worship with the first services being held within Fort Christian in Charlotte Amalie in an area that was shared with the Danish Lutheran Church. The first Dutch Reformed Church was built in the mid 1670's on the savannah east of the Fort in the area known as Barracks Yard and remained in use to at least 1743 when it was destroyed by either fire or hurricane.

The 1700s marked a time of both **expansion and destruction** for the Danish colony, with St. Croix and St. John evolving into important agricultural centers, while St. Thomas became a hub of commerce and trade. However, this period also witnessed challenges, such as the Danish government's ordinance in 1707 that forbade all denominations other than the Lutheran and the Dutch Reformed to hold worship in buildings consecrated as houses of worship and required all taxpayers to contribute an annual payment to either of the churches.

The church faced significant transitions, including the **death of Dominie Johannes Borm in 1736**. Pastor Borm's ministry itself was not without controversy, with problems regarding marriages, baptisms and the treatment of the enslaved. In 1744, the arrival of Johannes Paldamus led to the dispersion of 142 communicants to St. Croix and St. John, which both had Dutch Reformed Church congregations, and elsewhere. The old church building was abandoned and a new structure was built in the 1740's on Snegle Gade in Charlotte Amalie not far from the current church, near where the Masonic Lodge now stands. The church was supported by the DeWindt family, who were both wealthy and influential. Jamannes Jahnsen DeWindt willed his properties which included Estate Catherineberg and Skytsborg (Blackbeards Hill) to the Dutch

Reformed Church. In 1764, St. Thomas was recognized as a free port which significantly increased commerce on the island.

The early 1800s were a tumultuous time of transformation for the STRC as Pastor Francis Verboom sold much of church's properties which had been transferred as a bequest from DeWindt and left St. Thomas with the monies. The Danish West Indies also experienced difficult economic circumstances due to the abolition of slavery in 1848 and the subsequent economic and social impacts. There were also droughts, hurricanes, fires, a decline in trade and two (2) British occupations in 1801-1802 and 1807-1815.

The Reformed Church itself faced tragedy when the church building on Snegle Gade was destroyed by fire twice, in 1804 when a new church was immediately erected only to be impacted by fire once again in 1806. Despite these hardships, the Dutch Reformed Church was not disbanded. By 1820, St. Thomas had become an important provisioning center for steamship lines.

A major shift for the congregation in the early 1800s was the debate concerning its independence from the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, particularly as the new American nation gained status. In 1828 the first American minister, Abraham Labagh came to St. Thomas and held services in English for the first time. He also started the first Sunday School and improved the finances of the church. The debate associated with the church being affiliated with the Reformed Church in America prevailed in 1827 with the **transfer of the church from the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.**

Notable pastors during this era included Reverend John P. Knox, who served the STRC pulpit 1854-1855. Knox educated and mentored Edward Wilmot Blyden, who he recognized for his talents and drive. Having fulfilled his mission, he returned to the United States to minister to another church. Knox encouraged Blyden to continue his education in the United States. When Blyden was refused admission to three (3) theological seminaries in the northeast because of his race, Knox encouraged him to go to Liberia which Blyden did and subsequently was appointed Secretary of State and Secretary of Interior for Liberia. In 1852, Knox wrote the history of the Danish West Indies entitled, *"A Historical Account of St. Thomas, Danish West Indies Islands."*

Due to membership growth and improved finances, the cornerstone of the present church was laid September 18, 1844 and completed and consecrated on February 8, 1846. In 1854, the congregation grew to 711 members.

The second half of the 1800's with the end of slavery, the ensuing Industrial Revolution, and various natural disasters, brought decline to the Danish West Indies economy. Many Dutch settlers left St. Thomas.

A Renewed Spirit: The 1900s and Beyond

The 20th century marked a "renewed spirit" within the St. Thomas Reformed Church. The Virgin Islands experienced a period of uncertainty, and the church pulpit was filled sporadically.

Financial concerns and membership issues led to proposals to close the church, but these were averted. Identified by the Danes as the American church, on **February 18, 1917, Reverend Leslie presided over the baccalaureate service commemorating the transfer day service**, marking the official transfer of the Danish West Indies from the Kingdom of Denmark to the U.S.

Virgin Islands, an unincorporated territory of the United States of America.

St. Thomas saw an influx of U.S. Navy and Marines officers, soldiers and personnel under the Naval Administration of the Territory. The church reached out to the new members of the community as they were without a chaplain.

Reverend Bruno Bruns, a Reformed Church of America missionary from Japan, arrived in 1941. Two years later in 1943, Reverend Bruns received a leave of absence to serve in the U.S. armed forces, and the STRC Consistory did not meet during this time.

In 1947, STRC was transferred to the Classis of New York. The congregation faced challenges, including the need to rebuild, but efforts were made to restore the church and secure its future. In 1958, STRC had the first full-time pastor in over 15 years, Reverend Donald Lam. He immediately set about to build a strong youth program with a Sunday School, which drew their parents into the church. The 1960s saw a revival, with the congregation continuing to serve the community, and Reverend Donald Pangburn began his pastorate in 1963. The U.S. Virgin Islands has always had strong women in leadership. In 1971, the STRC Consistory was expanded to include four (4) women and in 1972, it was made legal for women to be elected to the Consistory, the same year that the Caribbean Summer House Program began – the predecessor to the popular St. Thomas Reformed Church Summer Camp which continues unto this day.

For the last thirty (30) years, God faithfully led St. Thomas Reformed Church through Rev. Martin L. Weitz, who faced with ever growing Sunday School, identified space on Crystal Gade for Sunday School Rooms and developed the undercroft below the church sanctuary; Rev. Jeffrey C. Gargano who continued to add to properties within the STRC campus with a Parish Hall, the Retreat Center and a renovated Calvin Hall which is known today as the Kelbert Pavilion and the STRC parking lot; and Rev. Jeffrey A. Neevel, who expanded the Music & Arts Program. As we reflect upon our past, we give thanks for the leadership our Lord has provided and look expectantly to work with the person that we discern God is calling us to partner with as our new pastor of the St. Thomas Reformed Church.

Preserving the Past for the Future

The St. Thomas Reformed Church understands the importance of its extensive history and actively works to preserve it. Former Church Archivist Betty King took the initiative to preserve and protect the STRC records of **thousands of actual pieces of the church's past**. Documents dating back to the 1820s, including baptisms, marriages and deaths are preserved, to which we are eternally grateful.

Contemporary Life: A Community of Faith, Love, and Service

Today, the St. Thomas Reformed Church is a vibrant and active community guided by its core **values of Faith, Hope, Love and Grace**. It is strategically **located in downtown Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, on the corner of Crystal and Nye Gade** just two (2) blocks north of Dronningens Gade (Main Street) and three (3) blocks from the Charlotte Amalie Harbor waterfront.

Worship and Spiritual Life

STRC encourages all to **join its worship services in person** and is available virtually each **Sunday at 10:00 AM (AST)**. Beyond weekly services, the St. Thomas Reformed Church also celebrates special community events such as the **Christmas Eve Candlelight Service, Easter Sunrise Service at Linquist Beach** and **Worship at Magens Bay Beach** at the conclusion of the STRC Summer Camp.

Ministries and Outreach

The St. Thomas Reformed Church is deeply committed to various ministries that serve its congregation and our wider island community:

- **Children in Worship Center and Sunday School Program:**
 - The **Children in Worship Center** is a special place for young children to listen to God and hear God's stories, designed to be child-friendly and God-focused. It has been active for over thirty five (35) years for children ages 3 to 5.
 - The **XYG** ("eXamine Your God") program for older youth includes **local mission projects** and an **off-island mission project** that encourages compassion and a desire to help others.
- **Summer Camp Program:**
 - STRC has a **long history of summer programs**, dating back to the **Caribbean Summer House in 1969**. This program provided reading, music, art, crafts, and recreation to over 60 children each year over a four-week period.
 - It evolved from a two-day program in 1973 to a **five-day program in 1975**. The purpose being to provide wholesome activities and learning experiences for island children who might not otherwise afford commercial programs.
 - Funding comes from various government agencies, charitable organizations, and individual donations, making it an affordable option. The program's success is attributed to the dedication of its staff, volunteers and former campers. Its mission is to **provide campers with a loving Christian experience**.
- **The Music Ministry:**
 - The STRC choir led by our Minister of Music & Arts has been **active for over 100 years**, typically consisting of 5-15 singers who rehearse weekly. They provide music for Sunday morning worship, special services, and perform at other churches and the Lucinda Millin Home and the Queen Louise Home for the Aged.
 - The STRC **Children's Choir** is central to worship, helping children develop a

better understanding of praising God through music. It aims to help children internalize biblical truths and shape their lives through song.

- **My Brother's Workshop (MBW)**

- This non-profit organization was founded by STRC in 2007 and is dedicated to providing at-risk and high-risk youth with hope, faith and purpose through mentorship, job training and educational programs. The organization offers vocational training in areas like construction, woodworking, and culinary arts, giving young people practical skills and a positive path forward. Through its various programs and social enterprises, such as the MBW Café, industrial kitchen and catering service, MBW not only helps individuals build a better future, but also contributes to the overall well-being and development of our island community.

- **The Salvation Army St. Thomas Corps Programs**

- STRC members served as members of the St. Thomas Corps Advisory Board, as well as members of The Salvation Army Eastern Territory and National Advisory Boards.
- Since **January 2005**, the St. Thomas Reformed Church has partnered with The Salvation Army to provide a Tuesday lunch to the **homeless and those in need** at The Salvation Army St. Thomas Corps in downtown Charlotte Amalie. This **volunteer-driven program**, initially served 30-40 lunches and now serves up to **120 people**. Over 300 STRC members and friends of the church have volunteered their time, and since 2009, the program has become a **permanent item in the STRC Annual Budget**. It is a testament to STRC's deep commitment to community service.
- STRC participates in The Salvation Army Thanksgiving luncheon and its Christmas Angel Tree Program which provides gifts to children that would not otherwise receive same.
- STRC works with The Salvation Army to connect those in need of alcohol and drug related rehabilitation to connect with TSA's Adult Rehabilitation Centers on the mainland.

Organizational Structure and Digital Presence

The St. Thomas Reformed Church operates within the larger framework of the **Reformed Church in America (RCA)** within the Classis of New York.

STRC maintains a modern digital presence to connect with its members and the wider community:

- Its **website functions as an app** for mobile devices.
- It provides a **Church Directory** for members' contact information.
- Online capabilities include a **"Connect Card"** for newcomers, a weekly **bulletin for the Order of Worship**, Opportunities to Serve and **simple and secure online giving options**.
- An **online calendar and events section** keeps the community informed of current happenings.

A Future of Growth and Continued Service

The St. Thomas Reformed Church, firmly rooted in its **historic faith**, demonstrates **present love** through its extensive ministries and looks forward with **future hope**. The journey of the church has been one of resilience, adapting through periods of change and challenge, including reconstruction after events like Hurricane Marilyn.

With a dedicated pastoral staff and a highly engaged congregation, the St. Thomas Reformed Church is not merely a historical landmark but a **vibrant, active community** that seeks to serve all people. It is grateful for the opportunities to minister to those in need, foster spiritual growth across all ages, and uplift the community through music, education, and social outreach. As it looks to the future, the church is poised to **begin a season of growth**, building upon its strong foundation of faith and service, and continuing its mission to be a beacon of hope and love in the U.S. Virgin Islands.