

Discussion on Ecumenism

following the presentations by R. Leonard and L. Kalkwarf

The discussion began with comments on the New Jersey “United Synod” episode as remembered by Len Kalkwarf. Carl Kleis remarked that the success of the idea of the united synod owed more to Len than the latter's modesty suggested. Herman Harmelink added the comment that the reason that the Presbyterians themselves finally, in effect, scuttled the synod was that they had begun to go in for “large geographical synods,” which made the cooperative arrangement with the Reformed Church “inappropriately disproportionate.”

On the merger proposal with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), Carl Kleis remembered that some members of the PCUS had been opposed to the merger because they thought it would delay their hoped-for merger with the northern Presbyterians. Herman Harmelink remembered that the PCUS's own action in joining COCU had been motivated at least in part by the desire of some of its members to “kill the proposed merger with us.”

Discussion followed about the role of educational concerns in the merger discussions. Arthur (Bud) Van Eck pointed out that the PCUS had become deeply involved in educational curriculum planning with the RCA: in particular Elsie Stryker and Bud himself had participated in planning the Covenant Life Curriculum. “In some sense we were already merged with them educationally,” he said. Renée House asked Bud why, in view of the existing cooperation with PCUS on educational matters, “the folk from Zeeland” objected to the merger? Bud replied that, in fact, it was in part the Covenant Life Curriculum itself to which people objected; the objection wasn't so much theological as practical, for “it required a lot of preparation,” to teach the curriculum—a difficulty for many. Rett Zabriski commented also that the Covenant Life Curriculum was perceived widely as being too favorable toward Catholicism. Roger Leonard commented that “no matter how good something is, people always seem to want something new.” Renée asked then more broadly: what, from the opposers' point of view, was going to be lost by the merger? In Bud's view, “denominational distinctiveness” was a major concern of theirs; in the ensuing years the RCA published the Heritage and Hope series to address this issue.

Wilbur Washington added a comment about his own reactions to events at the time. “As soon as I knew we were about to connect to the Southern church, I was against it. But then I met people [from that church] who were more aware of what was happening in the world than people in the Reformed

Church were.” He remembered that there was an attempt to make sure that as many black RCA members as possible would be present at the synod, but “I myself was too involved in my own home church at that moment, to come.”

Rett Zabriskie noted that at the time there were more “under the surface” informal relationships between people and between East and West than nowadays. He also noted that there was an organization called the “Eastern Association of Reformed Churches,” which was made up of clergy in eastern churches who felt themselves to hold a minority view there.

Finally, there was discussion of Roger Leonard's perception, in considering his own ministry and that of others, of a shift of focus away from the affairs of the national church and toward those of the local church after the events of the synod – an important shift in perspective. Jack Cherry asked whether such a shift betokened the “creeping congregationalism” that Howard Hageman used to decry. For his part, Roger said no: “We were still committed to our connections. But there is always a tension in people around the issue ‘do we want to do *x* as individuals or as a group?’ Liberty and justice are in tension.” As for “creeping congregationalism,” Lynn Japinga pointed out that it has been present not only in the East but in the West as well, as indicated, for instance, by the notion that delegates at synod vote on behalf of their constituencies.