

Some Post-Traumatic Reflections

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After the Presbyterian merger vote and the stormy General Synod meeting in 1969, the Committee of Eighteen's report to the General Synod in 1970 began a new chapter in the life of the Reformed Church in America. A shared commitment to "unity in diversity" emerged during the years which followed and, though often challenged, continues today. The constructive dissent represented by the current "Chicago Invitation" is a recent example of how sharp differences can be contained within a denomination which genuinely believes in "always reforming," but where schism is regarded as sin.

However, just how much diversity is acceptable continues to be an open question and is closely related to the issue of identity. "Reformed Church in America? What is that?" is not now an easy question to answer, and it may well be that with each embrace of divergent views under an increasingly larger canopy it will become even more difficult to explain just who we are. It is much easier to tell the story of where we came from and how we got here! (Compare the RCA crest to the logo currently used on denominational letterhead.)

How did a decision to maintain our unity thirty-five years ago play out in the life of the denomination, and how did it shape who we are now, for better or worse? Did, as has been suggested, a preoccupation with our differences make the church more cautious and less willing to speak clearly on issues which might be divisive? Or, more positively, did it force us to listen to one another with greater charity, to understand dimensions of "truth" which might lie beyond each side's parochial vision?

An early and significant response to the call for reconciliation was the Festival of Evangelism in 1970, a Mission Festival a year or so later, and a Family Festival in 1973. Evangelism, mission and the family were, of course, three priorities which even a divided church could agree upon. In *Structures for Mission*, Marvin Hoff observes that the Festival of Evangelism provided a "new context for RCA members to explore their differences and points of unity." He notes that such discussions had taken place previously in the decision-making context of the General Synod, which was not always conducive to interpersonal understanding.

While speakers at both the evangelism and mission festivals stretched preconceptions participants may have brought with them, at least as much impact may have resulted from the careful attention the festival planners gave to process. During the late sixties and early seventies the encounter group movement (also called "sensitivity training") was at its height, and techniques

for helping persons in small groups develop intimacy through telling stories and exchanging convictions and feelings honestly were structured into the events. Individuals from different backgrounds and church experiences discovered how much they shared in common and came to appreciate one another. Personal relationships informed and strengthened a shared faith commitment. The group process made it possible to reach beyond differences in vocabulary. The language used to express one's faith was not the same throughout the church. An insistence on pietistic expression in some sectors of the Reformed Church came close to being a test of validity.¹ Those who were uncomfortable with "God-talk" could be dismissed easily. But as people got to know each other at greater depth in the festival's small groups, they were surprised by how deeply they were united in their core beliefs.

Attention to process also affected General Synod meetings. The practice of seating delegates at tables alphabetically took the place of seating by preference and created new interpersonal dynamics that helped bridge other differences. At other church meetings, a self-report on what was going on in the personal life of each participant became almost normative prior to plunging into an agenda. Appreciative understanding of where another was coming from made it easier to center differences on issues rather than persons. Most of the time, people who were engaged in the ongoing business of the church came to respect and even have a genuine love for one another.

Certainly strong interpersonal relationships across the traditional East-West church divide existed prior to this, especially among members of the various church boards. When meetings were held in church settings across the denomination, it was common practice for members of host churches to provide hospitality in their homes. With the advent of the merged boards of the General Program Council, meetings took place in hotels or conference centers near airports, which forfeited the opportunity for strengthening ties with key individual congregations. To what degree did this contribute to an eventual loss of trust and to the continuing trend of directing local church benevolences to other than RCA programs? Certainly, the very name "general" when attached to "program council" did nothing to help. Also, almost perpetual denominational restructuring even after the major restructure of 1968 reflected some basic organizational problems as well as a classic organizational response.² In a relational church such as the RCA, intimate knowledge and trust in both people and programs proved to be essential to both support and unity.

As early as the 1950s there was an effort to decrease the suspicion that prevailed between students at New Brunswick and Western seminaries by exposing them to each other's worlds through an annual conference. While few from New Brunswick found places to serve in the West, a significant number of students

from Western elected to seek and accept calls in eastern churches. Thus, by 1970 there were many who understood from personal experience both streams of RCA tradition. Key staff members in denominational positions in the early seventies almost without exception had life or ministry experience in the sections of the church that had voted for and against merger. With friends and colleagues they were equipped to build bridges across differences.

A minor event that nonetheless exposes the desire to bridge sectional differences through relationships was a denominationally sponsored weekend visit by members of the Dakota Classis to the Classis of Orange. Costs prevented repeating what was a productive experiment.

A still-controversial example that I believe helped maintain unity in diversity was the inclusion of the conscience clause in the *Book of Church Order*. Clearly a compromise which did not please many, it nonetheless provided a window of time for those with strong convictions either to modify their positions or through attrition to become such a minority voice as to no longer pose a threat to the unity of the church. Due credit must be given to those on both sides of this issue who lived with what each considered a misguided solution.

The annual meetings of the General Synod served to renew and maintain relationships, particularly for the clergy present and for lay leaders who for one reason or another were at the synod often. The notion that the General Synod serves as the RCA's "family reunion" is more profound than it might appear, but the need for a substantive agenda in a deliberative assembly to justify its cost and time also reflects who we are and the values we hold.

ENDNOTES

¹ Two personal examples will illustrate this. Many years after the fact, I discovered that as a missionary candidate in 1958 my failure to use the "right" words had raised serious questions about my faith in the minds of a few Board of World Missions members. Specifically, when I was asked, "Do you have a passion for souls?" I had rephrased the question when I answered. Again, in 1970, as newly appointed coordinator of human resources, I visited each regional synod meeting to introduce myself and my goals for the new office. After my appearance in Michigan, my friend Bob Nykamp took me aside to remind me that I hadn't mentioned my faith in Jesus Christ. When I replied that I did not realize I needed to do that, he said, "If you don't say it, they'll think you don't believe it."

² This pattern did not begin then. In the mid-1950s, when I was a seminary student, Henry Bovenkerk (treasurer of the Board of World Missions) observed, "the Reformed Church is always tinkering with the machinery!" Whatever was going on at the time was not at all to his liking.