

Origination of the African American Council (formerly the Black Council)

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In the summer of 1969, I remember that when I went to my home in Guilderland Center, New York, my minister, the Rev. Boonstra, (Minister of Helderberg Reformed Church), told me that something historic had happened at the annual General Synod meeting. He said that as a result of what one of the speakers said, a committee composed of black Reformed church members was being formed. He indicated that the group would meet soon, and that I should represent the Helderberg Church.

James Forman, a well-known civil rights activist, spoke at the annual meeting and presented startling and enlightening information concerning the disfranchisement of black people in and out of the Christian arena. He also asked the General Synod for funds to support his organization's (National Black Economic Development Conference) projects. The synod believed his organization to be too "radical" to fund, but his message too poignant to ignore. As a result, it was decided by the General Synod that it would appropriate \$100,000 to develop a council. A short time after, an ad hoc committee was appointed to draft a response to the Black Manifesto, and one of the recommendations was the organization of a council consisting of black members.

The General Synod accepted this recommendation and agreed that there was a need for such a council to advise the Reformed Church in America on those matters of special concern to its black members. The synod decided to provide \$100,000 to be given to a council in support of this effort. In addition, it was suggested that a space be made for a black member on the General Synod.

A decision was made that there should be a meeting of black members to develop a platform and an agenda. Three of the black members present at the initial meeting agreed to be responsible for this task. They were John Ashley, Edgar Dillard, and Clyde Watts. Black members who would be invited had to be selected by black members in the church which they attended. RCA staff would be invited to observe and listen but not be active participants in discussions.

Our meeting was held at the Taft Hotel in New York City over a weekend. Clyde Watts conducted the meeting. About thirty black members from across the country gathered for this historic event. The group initially raised questions about the availability of funds that the synod had promised, how long they would last, and how much autonomy the group would have. Additionally, a name for the organization had to be agreed upon. In the end, the group decided

to be called the Black Council and agreed not to accept the grant. Instead, it suggested strongly that the RCA work for the inclusion of black persons on selected policy-making committees of the church, where they would have a role in shaping the life of the whole church and not just an isolated part of it.

Before an executive was hired, council members developed and implemented programs. Clyde Watts served as chair at the early meetings and I as secretary. The first executive director was Mr. Harris, who served a short time but due to ill health had to resign. William Howard, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, became the next director and served in that capacity for twenty years. The council was raised to new heights under his leadership. The Rev. Moses James was the first elected chair of the Black Council.

One of the important goals of the Black Council is stated in its constitution. It reads, "We the members of the Black Council, as peers of all other members of the church, shall seek to reconcile the church to all of God's people by leading the church in a ministry to the holistic needs of black people both within the church family and beyond." To reach this goal, the council emphasized black leadership development, self-reliance, and church growth in its local and regional assemblies.

Four geographical regions are represented among the council membership – West, Midwest, South, and East. Each region conducts meetings to set up program goals for its area and to select people who will be delegates to Black Council meetings. At the annual meeting, the regional delegates give reports on programs conducted during the year and make recommendations to be considered by the group. The recommendations are compiled and submitted to the General Synod by the executive director of the council. The Black Council is funded from the General Synod assessment budget, which goes to cover the expenses incurred in association with meetings and other organizational expenses. An annual report is always presented to the General Synod.

The Councils' executives have worked with other members of the RCA by advising them on what program emphasis the council deems important. At the time of the first meeting of the council, I was a delegate representing the Helderberg Reformed Church and churches with black members in the Schenectady Classis. Before then I was a "pew sitter" and did not understand how the RCA functions at the policy level. I was able to learn more about its functions by serving on the Board of Theology, the General Program Council, the Reformed Church Women, and the National Council of Churches. At the National Council of Churches, I was appointed to the Education Committee. Committee members traveled to other parts of the United States to observe how

ethnic groups were treated and how they implemented their church educational programs.

What does all of this mean now? To me it means that Reformed Church made the right decision in setting up and supporting the Black Council. The following are some of the results:

- The council has followed through on advising the RCA staff on those matters of special concern to black members.
- Black members served on a variety of RCA committees.
- The council continues to hold annual caucuses and regional meetings that focus on black leadership development, self-reliance, church growth, and youth training.
- The RCA leadership continues to support African American programs by financing attendance at caucus meetings.
- The Rev. Moses James, the first elected president of the council, recommended that members be an integral part of the RCA in all aspects. This has been achieved.
- Training members for leadership within their churches is strongly advocated during council meetings.
- Several members have enrolled in theological seminars to become lay leaders and ministers.
- Annual caucus meeting attendance has increased.
- The Rev. William Howard, who served as an executive for twenty years, acted as an advisor to the RCA on matters of racial concern.
- Three other ethnic councils have been organized and continue to recommend issues important to their constituencies.

The African American Council, through its programs, has been able to attract outstanding theologians from colleges and churches in America and Africa. The council has a long way to go as long as there is racism in America. Race is an important issue that requires attention. Progress has been made and the RCA is better for it.