

## Discussion of Denominational Identity

*following the presentation by Bob Hoeksema*

Al Janssen began the discussion by recalling that the plan to require all seminary students to enroll in the Bi-Level, Multi-Site Program fell apart in 1970.

There was some discussion of the regional seating pattern at the General Synod, still in effect in 1969. Len Kalkwarf expressed the opinion that it was an important factor in events at the synod. Marvin Hoff noted, "During the time I was in charge of operations of the synod, I convened a meeting at Warwick prior to the General Synod of 1971 to make changes such as the seating patterns and to establish that all delegates would be *assigned* to the advisory committees."

Discussion turned to the substance of the issues that lay behind the appointment of the Committee of Eighteen. It is clear that there was a deep-seated aversion to schism. Herman Harmelink quoted approvingly the advice of Fred Anderson, minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian church: "Choose heresy over schism, because the former only affects you, but the latter affects the body of Christ." Some such feeling that schism is a greater evil even than heresy is, Herman thinks, still strong among many in the Reformed Church (as distinct, for instance, from the Christian Reformed Church). In this vein, Bob Hoeksema recalled Justin Vander Kolk at NBTS impressing on students the importance of "not breaking the body of Christ."

There was discussion of what interpretation, finally, to put on the work of the Committee of Eighteen and the ultimate decision not to dissolve the church. Rett Zabriski asked: *has* the denomination held together, or is the synod of '69 simply the event that we see in retrospect as the beginning of the end? Rett has been involved in the nominations process at General Synod for some time now and notes that it is harder and harder to get people to serve as synod officers. Also, he said, it is worth noting that if RCA people move to another place they don't even necessarily *look* for a Reformed church anymore. Marvin Hoff agreed, but observed that these changes are in part a matter of broader changes in the culture, e.g., the "bowling alone" phenomenon. Jack Cherry said that the late Peg Van Doren of the Clover Hill church, who was a member of the Committee of Eighteen, used to say that she thought the committee's process simply deferred the break-up of the denomination. Al Janssen, however, reminded everyone that the three eastern synods did make commitments in the early seventies that have had long-term implications: "A number of us came into ministry at that point, and made decisions to stay

with the church specifically because of the decision of the church to stay together.”

What is the current status of the questions that the Committee of Eighteen was established to deal with? Lynn Japinga wondered “if the RCA has gotten really cautious, because of the synod of 69 – so that we're afraid that someone will leave if we really address issues?” Bob Hoeksema said, “Two things came to me, as I prepared for today: first, my old anger and resentment came back; and, second, I believe, looking back, that I moved my loyalty away from the RCA and toward my local church and classis, and to a lesser extent the particular synod.” Herman Harmelink expressed the view that “the ‘East’ is getting so small, it's not worth fighting.” Dean Wolbrink spoke of the continued difficulty of “knowing who we are,” and Carl Kleis connected the comments of Roger Leonard in the morning session about increased localism in the eastern churches over the last three decades to his experience that “in Pennsylvania, all the congregations were so different, to boot, that people would choose among these rather than feel connected to the whole denomination.” Bud Van Eck speculated that perhaps the increasing regionalizing of the church in recent years, its “localizing” even, had its generation at the synod of '69. “I recall reading in the report of the Committee of Eighteen that, as Elko Stapert put it, regionalism should be the way the church works. And that has continued to be the case.” Continuing on the question of what ties the church together, Chris Van de Bunte said, “I have been told that the Standards make the RCA. But there are too many theologies to make this useful.” To this someone added that the standards are not really an adequate statement of *identity*: they are after all statements that this, *and not more than this*, is what we believe. Mark Kraai pointed to the continuing importance of the difference between the foundational stories of the church in the East and the Midwest.

Some what-ifs were discussed. Marvin Hoff asked, what would have happened if the United Synod of New Jersey *had* continued, and offered, “We might have become a stronger denomination.” Herman Harmelink considered what might have happened if the Reformed Church merged with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). In fact, he said, the PCUS “turned out to be a much more conservative church than any of us thought at the time. Then later they combined with the northern Presbyterians, with difficulty, and it would be very possible that we would be not PCUSA now but rather PCA.”

There were some objections to a sensed pessimism in the room. “We do our best,” Bill Schutter reminded us; and Carol Hageman expressed the opinion

that “the difference between the RCA and other denominations is that we're always taking the spiritual pulse. I wish we'd cut it out.”

Finally, on the subject of possible futures for the denomination, Herman Harmelink pointed out that the Moravian church has two conferences. One is a member of COCU, one is not. Could we consider also a looser federal arrangement for ourselves?