More Reflections on the Synod of 1969

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Before I begin my reflections, I want to make a prefatory comment about the issue of women’s ordination at the synod of 1969. The question was put to me why the one and only demonstration for women’s ordination occurred at this synod. Of course I don't know all the answers that might be made for this question, but I believe it was a natural consequence of time and place. As the minutes of the synod reveal, there were attempts to raise the topic: an overture specifically mentioning ordination of elders and deacons from the Classis of Albany, overtures from the Classis of Mid-Hudson and from the Classis of Philadelphia recommending a change in government pertaining to ordination of elders and deacons to remove the word male; and another from the Classis of Mid-Hudson covering minister of the Word along with elders and deacons. With this background, plus the fact that the synod was being held in New Brunswick, a natural setting for approval of the ordination of women to all offices of the church, it was no accident that such a demonstration was held.

I had the privilege of demonstrating with other women and families urging positive action on these overtures. The leader of our little action was Frances Beardslee, with her daughter-in-law Edith at her side. I shall always cherish one of the very clear memories I have of this week of Frances (affectionately known as Mother Beardslee) with her cane in one hand and a placard in the other at the head of the procession.

Now to wrap up today’s conference: I begin by noting that I attended the synod of 1969 representing the General Program Council with the privilege of the floor without vote—the limit allowed a woman at that time. I was serving the last years of my second term of six years as a member of the council, and I served on the Board of North American Missions before that. I was a member of the Response Committee called to reply to the challenge of James Forman. I believe I was there because I chaired the city committee formerly, and, of course, was one of the people who, due to the foresight and commitment of my husband (not mine), lived and worked in a troubled city—and had learned to love it.

I also have to say something about a family without whose input we would all be impoverished. I speak of the Beardslees. In the course of the synod meetings, the person of Frances Beardslee made a tremendous impression on the proceedings, and, of course, on me. Her zeal for a cause for which she was convinced was formidable, but in its strength, persuasive and winsome. Her son, John, was miles ahead of the rest of us in understanding racial inequality, particularly in the church. He pushed us to think about whether our institutionalized society
reflected God’s will for all people. I, for one, owe their memory a real debt of gratitude.

The trouble spots on the synod’s agenda have been addressed during the progress of this conference. With that background history and knowledge of the events as they unfolded, we can turn our attention to the present and future. It has been said too often, but is true; those who do not learn from history will live to repeat it. So it would be well if we listen carefully to what transpired.

We are living with the results of the actions taken at that synod. I truly believe that it was remarkable for its honesty in listening to the arguments and concerns. The very wording of the Response Committee to James Forman, which resulted in the formation of minority councils, is worth a long look. First, the committee members acknowledged their dependence on God—not earthshaking news of course, but in this instance I think they actually believed and acted upon it (at least for the moment). They credited God for a growing awareness, the ability to listen, and the opportunities before the synod. Today we might use the word “sensitivity,” but I am not sure we credit God as much as we do our own perception of the situations around us. They also confessed that through human pride and blindness we devised “programs” in the name of furthering the church (as if we had anything to do with that). We even changed the much-maligned word “mission” to “program.” The committee was straightforward in asserting its rejection of force and proceeded to attempt some remediation. It is interesting to note that the original name of the first council was the Black Council for the Program of General Synod. Somehow, early on we lost that little word “for” and the councils took on lives of their own. They became institutionalized just as the rest of the church has, with all the strengths and dangers institutionalization brings. It occurs to me that the very proliferation of the councils indicates we were more successful in isolating than in uniting our people. Shot through the entire story are the words “we changed” this or that—which is admirable, but does point to our weakness, doesn’t it? So long as we believe that we change things, they change of course, but the changes are likely to produce a different set of problems. If you hear a weak echo of John Calvin, I have succeeded in my attempt.

The emergence of women in positions of leadership in the church speaks for itself. For too long the church denied itself the special gifts and graces women possess, and we have been playing catch-up now for these thirty-odd years. There is much left to be done. People of color and women are still conspicuously absent from the top levels of our church organization (in the office and in the pulpit). While I firmly believe that the church lives in its pews, among its people, in order to “make Christ present where we live,” I also believe that the church organization should be a portrait of its members.
A word about our acknowledged dependence on God, God’s grace and love, even, as the report says, when we are at our most unlovely. I fear that is a foundation stone of our church which is endangered. New, loose words about separation from the RCA have reached my ears. I feel constrained to say the same thing I said in 1969. Such discussion is ill placed in a Christian setting unless we really lose our foundations and become just another fraternal organization of well-meaning people devoted to doing good.

I am reminded of a meeting I happened to chair years ago for the Newark Board of Education, a meeting recognizing outstanding students and sponsored by the Order of Moose. In chatting with the leader of the Moose, I said that I was not really aware of their organization, how did it start? Oh, he said, it was started by Senator Blank, who was a disgruntled Elk! If we truly believe the church is the body of Christ at work in God’s world, then separation, particularly in anger or self-righteousness, is an impossibility. Honest discussion of differences, true arguments for what we believe is God’s will, are the only route available to us.

All truth does not reside in any one of us. I, for one, welcome the Chicago Invitation, the questions it raises and its invitation for debate—for our human organization needs to be examined from time to time. Our church has become such a reflection of the secular world around us, taking its values, its practices, even its organizational structure, that we need to question it.

I am not sure if our present attitudes can be traced to the ‘69 synod (they probably are all too human), but despite the synod’s best intentions, ultimately it did help confirm our feeling that we can make or break the church ourselves. Somehow, we seem to have traded dreams and visions for goals and quotas. Upon reflection it appears to me that our answer to any new problem (or opportunity) is to react by adding to the organizational structure—as if another committee or department will solve that specific problem. Rather, another route, that of prayer and worship to “discern,” to use the popular word, God’s will may very well teach us to avoid the problem in the first place.

I could wish that the synod could have directed its straightforward words against the use of force, offered in response to the challenge of James Forman, that our nation was then using—the protest of some seminarians was the only evidence of any dissent with our government, although there was a minority vote on the floor. The minutes seem to reveal that the synod was long on counsel for the young men, but short on support. No words are recorded about the waging of war itself. Wrapping of our faith in the American flag has always been a danger to us, and I believe it has reached a critical point in our time. The church needs to speak her conscience.
There was, at one time in my life, a desire of our church to discover its roots, and several books were written about it. Perhaps the time has come again to do just that. It is hard to believe that we Calvinists were once not only considered, but also were, the radical wing of the church. There is a lovely story told to me long years ago about President Lincoln, after a session in his office with a group of Reformed Church people who were pressing him on the abolition question. It is reported that after they left, he sighed and remarked to an aide, “These Calvinists are the devil to deal with, they are all cracked!! But then, they do let the light shine through.”

I covet that description for our church.

ENDNOTES

1 The “Chicago Invitation” is a recent statement by a group of RCA ministers and elders seeking to reassert the Reformed nature of the RCA.