

Denominational Identity and the 'Committee of Eighteen'

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I thank Lynn Japinga and John Coakley for the invitation to participate in today's event and am indebted to Russ Gasero, RCA archivist, who made available to me the papers on the committee's work sent to him by Donner Atwood. A few hours spent at Gardner Sage Library with materials from the archives enables me to share this information with you. I'll talk first about people, then about our process, and conclude with the resulting product, our recommendations.

The leader of the Albany Synod delegation was John Hintermaier, an elder in the Wynantskill Reformed Church and a research scientist. I greatly admired his even disposition, his keen insights, and his desire to understand all points of view. He carried no baggage with him relating to the controversies in the denomination. Frequently he calmed troubled waters. I can only attribute his leadership as vice-chairman of the committee to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He is one of those unheralded heroes and an example of how essential the office of elder is to the Reformed Church. Had he not been a member of the committee, our work would have been impoverished; with his presence it was much improved. Another member from Albany Synod was Mrs. Rudy Snyder, who brought grace and intelligence to our deliberations. I was the minister delegate.

The delegates from the Synod of New York were Franklyn Hinkamp, Ruth Dickson, and Robert Williams. Frank Hinkamp had grown up in Wisconsin, graduated from Western, and served his entire ministry in New York State. He knew the history of the divisions in the church, understood the cultures, and his knowledge helped us address our differences.

Ruth Dickson was elected secretary and served very ably in that capacity. She forcefully and capably represented the liberal positions held by the vast majority of disappointed, frustrated, and resentful people in the three eastern synods.

The delegates from the Synod of Chicago were Fred Dolfen, Ralph De Kock, and Chester Evers. Women must have been such a dangerous species in the late 1960s in the Chicago area that their executive committee dared not appoint one to the Committee of Eighteen (C-18), even though such a request had been made by the General Synod. These men ably represented the conservative theological and suspicious-of-ecumenical-entanglements views of their region.

The Synod of Michigan appointed Ray Reewerts, Elko Stapert, and Richard Machiele. What a loss to the committee and church that Michigan Synod's leadership did not possess the wisdom or courage to appoint one of the many

outstanding women in that synod. Like the delegates from Chicago, their views were more conservative than those from the eastern section of the denomination.

I had already formed a relationship with Ray that our differing points of view did not destroy. The elder from Zeeland, Dick Machiele, was a positive and optimistic man, not strident in his views, and he won my friendship and respect. Elko Stapert was elected our chair, but that story comes later.

Donner Atwood led the delegation from the Synod of New Jersey. I had the good fortune of being assigned to room with Donner at many of our meetings. His friendship became for me one of the greatest blessings derived from serving on the committee. He was the originator of several of our best ideas and clarified my efforts to draw together our final recommendations. Also representing the more liberal views of their synod and the eastern section of the denomination were Merhl Shoemaker and Mrs. Fred Van Doren.

The Synod of the West sent Bill Miller, Willard June, and Henrietta Van Wyhe. After thirty-five years I remember that Mrs. Van Wyhe represented her synod with courteous wisdom and insight. Bill Miller asked theological questions, probed, inquired, stimulated discussion, and gave positive input. Their views tended to be somewhere between those represented by delegates from the East and the six men from Chicago and Michigan. The fact that their number included a woman indicates this more central position.

Now about our process. We got off to a bad start. The three eastern synods, as a result of the failure of the merger, had sent four delegates each to a meeting at Warwick to discuss whether those three particular synods should leave the Reformed Church and go into the Presbyterian Church. News of that meeting caused consternation among some in the Midwest who perceived eastern representatives as seeking to manipulate or undermine the reconciliation process. The delegates to the committee from the three western synods met before our first C-18 meeting and elected Elko Stapert our chair.

When we came together for our first meeting at La Guardia Airport, the first order of business was to clear up these misunderstandings. As I recall, our first few meetings dealt with our suspicions and differences and were sometimes heated. Reconciliation needed to take place within the committee before we could be any help to the denomination, and we held divergent points of view. Progress was very slow.

The '69 Synod had given us this mandate:

Because it is recognized . . . that a wide gap exists between the divergent views of many in various areas of our church, and

Because this meeting of the General Synod has demonstrated how radically opposite these divergent views are: Therefore:
Be it resolved that the President of the General Synod constitute and convene a Committee of 18. . . .
Be it further resolved that this Committee of 18 shall be charged with the responsibility for: (1) meeting as often as necessary to explore every possibility for understanding and reconciliation within the RCA and (2) meeting in simultaneous session with the GSEC in January 1970 for the sharing of insights and the communication of direction.

The Synod also resolved that if the C-18 found our differences too great to be overcome, our positions irreconcilable, and, therefore, reconciliation was not possible, another committee would be formed by the synod of 1970 to draft a plan for the orderly dissolution of the RCA.

The church was ordered to pray for us. Money was set aside to pay for us. We needed both.

We met several times during the fall and winter and made little progress. At our March 3, 1970, meeting John Hintermaier set out the issues before us: trust, acceptance, mission, ecumenicity, communications (this dealt in part with differing views on the value of the *Church Herald*), and sensitiveness. He concluded with these words, and I quote: "Either we individually modify our pet peeves, distrusts, and dislikes over what someone else is doing in good faith, that is, reconcile ourselves to other's rights, or we report to General Synod there are not enough grounds for hope of significant reconciliation. It is time someone tells our denomination where its present practices are leading it collectively. C-18 is the instrument to do this."

John's paper was a turning point. From that day we worked in earnest to set forth what needed to be done to bridge the vast chasm between us. All eighteen of us seemed to take renewed energy in seeking to describe those actions necessary to bring unity to a fractured denomination. We divided into sub-groups on theology, mission, and ecumenicity.

At this point I want to make one other observation. We worked alone. The powers at 475 did not seek to intervene in our discussions. That does not mean they did not receive reports and give their opinions to individual members, but they never attended our sessions. That lack of interference helped us.

The product resulting from this process was our two-part report to the 1970 General Synod. We noted in part one the main areas of tension: theology,

mission, ecumenicity, polity, and attitudes.

In part 2 we set forth specific recommendations. I give them to you in abbreviated form:

1. The GPC's "Goals for Mission" be adopted as a blueprint for the church.
2. General Synod prepare a new statement of faith to augment the Standards. I believe *Our Song of Hope* was the result.
3. General Synod affirm an open position on interchurch cooperation.
4. General Synod provide dialogue among delegates before each meeting of synod. That has been implemented.
5. General Synod make provision for face-to-face communication among those whose views differ. The festivals of the seventies helped do this.
6. General Synod make provision for youth, pulpit, and other exchanges. Our denominational youth program during the 1960s had been exceptional.
7. General Synod remind members that we are brothers in Christ. Sisters were still not recognized.
8. General Program Council initiate a program of lay instruction in witnessing and responsible leadership.
9. General Synod take the view that regionalism is the best way for our denomination to work. Subsequently, leaders were dispersed from 475 to several sections of the country.

The tenth recommendation, then, was that the committee be dissolved. . . . And we were.