

## James Forman's "Liberation" of The Reformed Church in America's Offices at 475 Riverside Drive during the 1969 General Synod

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Thank you, Lynn Japinga and John Coakley, for inviting me to share my personal experiences during James Forman's liberation of the Reformed Church offices during the 1969 General Synod. Although being present for most of Forman's liberation of the RCA offices has certainly been my most unusual experience during my more than forty years as a minister of the Word and sacrament, I have never spoken or written about those experiences.

In preparation for this presentation I have read the few notes I took during the days of the liberation, read the *Minutes* of the 1969 General Synod, read the April through July, 1969, issues of the *Church Herald*, and read the articles on the Black Manifesto in the *New York Times* issues from April through July, 1969.

Let me begin with a few observations to set a background for Forman's liberation of the RCA's offices. In April of 1969 the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) sponsored a National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC) in Detroit. The Rev. Lucius Walker was and, according to IFCO's website, remains its executive director. I mention this because from 1973 to 1978 he was an associate general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCC). Without prior notice, James Forman presented his Black Manifesto to the conference. The three main elements of the manifesto were: a demand for \$500 million – later raised to \$3 billion – in reparations for forcing slavery upon the black people (the money was to be used for a southern land bank, black publishing and TV facilities and a black university); a demand to build a socialist society run by blacks; and a demand to take radical steps against the existing social and economic institutions. Although it was reported that more than eight hundred people attended the conference, the vote on the manifesto was 187 to 69.

Immediately after the conference, Forman and his associates began to present the manifesto to church organizations. On May 1 they gave it to two Episcopal bishops. On May 2 they presented it to the General Board of the NCCC. On May 4 Forman and six associates disrupted a Communion service at Riverside Church by standing throughout the service, and at one point Forman interrupted the service to read the manifesto. The Rev. Ernest Campbell, the senior minister of Riverside Church, in a later sermon entitled, "The Case for Reparations," decried the demands of the manifesto, and also stated: "Rather than begrudge reparations, I should think that we would rejoice that our sin, in part, is reparable."

On May 6 Mayor Lindsay hosted a meeting of more than fifty Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy. He told them: "Any clergyman has the right to call for help. Police aid is available to any church that wants it—uniformed or plain clothes." The clergy were given a special telephone number for seeking police assistance.

On May 10 more than fifty black and white students "liberated" the administration building of Union Theological Seminary. They also posted the manifesto on the entrance doors to Union.

In the middle of May Forman, in the spirit of Martin Luther, taped the manifesto on the doors of the national office of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). He also asked Dr. Robert Marshall, the LCA president, to give a statement to Mayor Lindsay denouncing him for suggesting the use of New York City police against Forman.

Forman and his associates also liberated the offices of the Board of Homeland Missions of the United Church of Christ, the Board of World Ministries of the United Church of Christ at 475, and Presbyterian offices at 475.

On Thursday morning, June 5, I had just arrived at my desk when the receptionist called me and said that James Forman wanted to see a Reformed Church executive. Because General Synod had begun in New Brunswick, John Hiemstra and I were the only RCA executives on the eighteenth floor. I went out and met Forman. As I was escorting Forman and his associates to the conference room, John Hiemstra joined me—I think he had been on the telephone when Forman arrived. Forman presented John and myself with his three specific demands of the Reformed Church: (1) a pledge to implement demands for a major printing plant; (2) a complete listing of denominational investment funds, holdings, pension plans, etc., the percentage to be given to the NBEDC to be negotiated later; and (3) an assurance of good faith to implement the goals of the Black Manifesto. He also announced that the RCA offices had been liberated, and told us to tell all of the staff to leave the eighteenth floor. John started on one side of the floor, and I started on the other side of the floor. We asked the staff to go home until called to return to work. Two people refused to leave and came to work every day during the liberation.

Shortly after Forman arrived, Marion (Mert) de Velder, then the RCA's general secretary, called us from the General Synod. Both John and I talked with him. Before Mert called the director of the building came and asked if we needed any help. We said no but began to suspect that representatives of the building might call the police. John and I agreed that it would be very bad for the police to challenge Forman's presence on the eighteenth floor. So, I told Mert that John and I were prepared to tell the police that they could not enter the offices. Mert hesitated a bit and asked a few questions, but then agreed that, if the police came, John and I should tell them that they could not enter the RCA space on the eighteenth floor. He also said that he would discuss this

with the General Synod Executive Committee and call us if they had any other instructions for us.

Before I became the General Program Council's secretary for Asian ministries in early 1969, I had been a member of the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) for several years. During the liberation, GSEC members called to discuss the liberation with me. From our telephone conversations I deduced that the members of the GSEC had very different responses to the liberation. Some seemed to favor doing nothing until the synod adjourned. Some favored calling the police to evict Forman.

With the exception of the arrival of H. Rap Brown (who had been indicted for murder during the Detroit riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.), which raised our anxiety level, our relationships during the days of the liberation were cordial and uneventful. Forman and his associates used the conference room as their headquarters. There was a phone for them to use, and we turned on a copy machine for them. We spent most of our time in our offices, including sleeping in them at night.

Sometime after Forman arrived, Bud Van Eck came from General Synod and joined us – neither he nor I remember when – no doubt to add *gravitas* to the RCA presence on the eighteenth floor.

On Friday evening arrangements were made for Forman to address the General Synod. John stayed on the eighteenth floor. Joan, my wife, picked me up and drove me to New Brunswick. She also brought me a radio, a sleeping bag, and some clean clothes. After Forman spoke to the synod, Len De Beer drove Forman, Arie Brouwer, and me to 475. Forman was very disappointed with the General Synod's response to his three demands upon the RCA. I will leave it to others to outline that response.

The General Synod adjourned Tuesday, June 10. Before adjourning, it voted to "refer to the GSEC the question of the occupation of the RCA offices at 475 and to empower it to take whatever action it judged best." Sometime on late Tuesday or early Wednesday Forman and his associates left the eighteenth floor. If my memory is correct, but I have not been able to confirm it from any written source, the RCA staff returned to their offices Wednesday, June 11, or certainly by Thursday, June 12.

In the weeks following the liberation of the RCA offices, Dr. Edwin Espey, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches, called meetings of the heads of the agencies at 475 Riverside. Because I had been on the eighteenth floor throughout Forman's liberation, Mert asked me to go with him to these meetings. They were very interesting, to say the least. At several of them Leroy Briening, the NCCC associate general secretary for administration, told the group that they had to work more quickly to approve their press statement because he had a reporter from the *New York Times* waiting on the telephone for the statement. If they delayed too long, the press release

would not be on the front page of the next day's *Times*. Throughout these meetings, Dr. Alfred Carlton, the president of the United Board for World Ministries, was the strongest advocate for seeking a court restraining order prohibiting Forman from being present at 475. He also stated that the United Board was an independent corporation and did not have to implement any of the actions of the UCC General Synod.

By June 12 or 13, Forman had liberated the offices of the United Board for World Ministries. After a few days, the liberation was limited to the one office in which Forman worked.

On June 17, 475 and the major tenants in the building sought a restraining order from the New York State Supreme Court ordering Forman to leave 475. It was served on him at 9:30 a.m., but he refused to leave. On June 20 the plaintiffs agreed to postpone a hearing on making the restraining order permanent.

On June 25 and 26 the center of activity moved to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Boston. After a great deal of parliamentary maneuvering, the delegates to that synod refused to come to order unless the Forman matter was addressed. In desperation, the officers of the synod postponed the scheduled report of the UCC president, and the delegates discussed Forman's demands. By a large majority, the synod demanded that the United Church Board for World Ministries withdraw from the legal action against Forman. A day or two later, the *New York Times* reported that the leadership of the United Church Board for World Ministries was urging the other participants in the law suit to drop it.

On July 12 the suit was dropped as negotiations with Forman continued. He promised that there would be no demonstrations at 475 during the negotiation for reparations.