

## Ecumenism at the Synod of 1969

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During my fifty plus years in the ministry, I have attended many meetings of the General Synod, once nine consecutive synods. Of all those meetings, except for the time when I was the presiding officer, none stands out as clearly and unmistakably as does the synod of 1969.

In many ways, it was a horrendous synod. I recall very vividly how physically and emotionally spent I was when I returned from that meeting.

As I look back upon it, it was as if all the issues which had frustrated delegates over the years, which had been boiling beneath the surface or near the surface, peaked in 1969. It was a time when the delegates did what they had never before done so forcefully. At that synod the magma, which had been boiling underneath, erupted like a volcano and, as Lynn Japinga has pointed out, it continues to affect us to this day.

Before I concentrate on the issue I have been asked to address, I want to offer some of my still rather vivid memories from that synod:

- The elderly and dignified Mrs. Beardslee, whose esteemed husband for several years tried to teach me Greek, leading the march of women around the Douglas College campus.
- The anti-Viet Nam War feeling that so harshly divided the synod, and several young men seeking to turn over their draft cards to the synod.
- The end of the long road to union with another Reformed body after years of courting the Southern Presbyterians.
- The respected Harold Schut emotionally moving that the Reformed Church in America consider a divorce.
- The depressed mood of the national staff because of the James Foreman takeover of the denominational offices in New York City.
- The long hours I spent as part of a national ad hoc committee preparing a response to the Black Manifesto and the relief the committee felt when the entire document and our twelve recommendations was adopted without a dissenting vote.
- Carl Kleis and I will probably never forget the session we had, along with other concerned clergy, with then seminary president Herman Ridder regarding the BiLevel Multisite program because we feared that in the end New Brunswick Seminary would be dealt a fatal blow.
- Denominational restructuring had just taken place and the Boards of Education, North American Missions and World Mission had been merged

into the General Program Council. Arie Brouwer had become head of the General Program Council. I was assigned to head the review committee, prepare, and present the report on the standing committee of the General Program Council.

While these are the issues I remember, I need hardly point out that all of this happened thirty-five years ago, and my memory on some of the details had become a bit vague.

I have been asked to recall for you an issue that has to do with ecumenism.

I was never directly involved in any of the merger attempts of the Reformed Church, but I had a firsthand view of the process. For a number of years I was Norman Edwin Thomas's associate at the Bellevue Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York. Norm was a member of the merger committee. I saw some of the time and effort that went into courting the Southern Presbyterians and met some of the enthusiastic members of our sister denomination. After all of the personal time and energy spent by these individuals, as well as the time and cost to the denomination, their efforts were rebuffed. I felt sorry for Norm, who had been so optimistic.

While I was never directly involved in any of the merger attempts of the RCA, I became deeply involved in the fallout of this unsuccessful attempt.

In 1969, I was elected president of the Particular Synod of New Jersey, a position I held for two consecutive terms. Probably as an outgrowth of the frustration our particular synod felt regarding our denomination's perennial xenophobia, the particular synod launched an innovative plan that became known as the United Synod. Herman Harmelink was the primary architect of this proposal.

The purpose of this plan of operation, as stated in its preamble: ". . . shall be the furtherance of witness and mission for all churches, presbyteries, and classes within the United Synod. Each participant synod shall continue to be responsible for the fulfillment of the functions and duties of a synod as specified in the constitution of each church." Furthermore, "The participants in this plan shall be the Synod of New Jersey, U.P.C.U.S.A. as defined in its *Standing Rules*, and the Particular Synod of New Jersey, R.C.A. as defined in its *Rules of Order*."

Our synod moved forward and joint meetings with the Presbyterians were held. On October 20-22, 1969, we met with the United Presbyterian Synod in Ocean City, New Jersey. Joint executive committee meetings were held, as were various other committee meetings. One of the committees was charged with the oversight of our older adult facilities.

However, a complaint was filed against the particular synod regarding the United Synod, which went to the 1970 General Synod meeting at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. I recall this experience with mixed emotions. As the synod's president, I was asked to defend our actions.

At the General Synod, meeting in judicial session, I was asked to present our report. I began by comparing the United Synod to the concept of yoked congregations, such as one with which I was very familiar in Iowa, a yoked Reformed and Presbyterian congregation, which was working extremely well. However, much to my chagrin I found that presenting the report meant simply and emphatically only reading the report with no personal comments permitted!

However, not all was lost. The Permanent Judicial Committee of the General Synod recommended that the complaint be dismissed. The recommendation was defeated. A subsequent motion was made that this action be declared unconstitutional, null and void, and of no legal effect. The motion was defeated. Another motion was made supporting the idea of a united synod with the Presbyterian Synod of New Jersey. It was approved.

The General Synod approved our plan. However, other developments took place. A group out of Zeeland, Michigan, calling themselves "the ad hoc committee to assist our eastern Reformed Brethren" began circulating word in the church that we were planning to unite with the New Jersey Presbyterians, and that all of this was being done in secret. They implored their friends, "We must not allow our beloved Reformed Church be lost section by section."

Of course, these charges were not true. We were not uniting with the Presbyterians. Nothing was being done in secret. The irony is, as Donner Atwood has pointed out, that the ad hoc committee was a secret group, since their names were not listed in their mailings. In addition, the group was not accountable to any RCA judicatory.

These communications stirred up members in the RCA. As a result, a complaint was again lodged with the General Synod, this time by four members of the Particular Synod of New Jersey, two of whom were members of my classis. They maintained that this plan was unconstitutional because it had no escape clause for those congregations not wanting to be part of the plan of operation. At its next meeting the General Synod rejected this complaint and approved the United Synod Plan of the Particular Synod of New Jersey.

Now the details, at least for me, become a bit murky. Because of an action taken by the Presbyterian General Assembly and the realignment of the boundaries of the Presbyterian Synod of New Jersey, the plan became moot.

There you have it. An innovative plan hammered out by the Particular Synod of New Jersey successfully weathered two judicial storms only to die an untimely and natural death.