

Reflections on the Synod of 1969

Carl M. Kleis

As I reflect upon the synod of 1969 from the perspective of the present time, it seems to me that the issues confronting the synod were simply very intense expressions of a perennial basic issue that confronts every denomination to varying degrees. That is the issue of inclusion vs. exclusion. While all traditions have to deal with this issue, this issue is exacerbated in the Reformed Church by the theology and size of our denomination. Thirty-five years ago we were still dealing with the race issue, which afflicted our nation from its very beginning. We were and to some degree still are dealing with to what extent women will be included in the ministries of the church. We were dealing with the challenge of offering support, affirmation, and comfort to those who for reasons of conscience or out of profound sense of injustice dissented from national political policy. The inclusion/exclusion issue is particularly alive today in our denomination and others in the area of sexual identity. Then, as now, the reactions and relationships of contemporary church and society at times seemed to be driven more by fear than by faith.

My most vivid memories of the synod of 1969 center more upon persons than upon positions. Who, as Carol Hageman observed, will ever forget the formidable vision of Mrs. Beardslee parading down the aisles? Of Glenn Pontier and his colleagues trying to enlist the church in a clear and strong support of those who dissented from the tragic national policy of that era? Of Mert de Velder putting his job on the line in support of our continuing membership in the NCCC.? As for James Foreman—I suspect that many of us would have been somewhat disappointed had he not confronted the RCA, and in a sense he did us honor by doing so.

For me there are three people that always come powerfully to mind when I think of that synod.

The first is the late Harold Schut, who enriched my life and ministry profoundly as a mentor, esteemed colleague, and the very dearest of friends. Harold had a strong commitment to the witness, ministry, and mission of the Reformed Church. He had served on a number of its boards and agencies and was past president of both the Particular Synod of New Jersey and the General Synod. He was a graduate of Central College and Western Theological Seminary. He had served several congregations in New York and Pennsylvania. His loyalty and commitment to the denomination were beyond question. Yet the

divisiveness and rancor of the 163rd Session of the General Synod compelled him to state on the floor of the synod, "The continued existence of a particular denomination, especially one which is as fractured and fragmented as ours, is not necessarily to the glory of God." Who present at that synod will ever forget the moment when Harold then moved this resolution from the floor:

Be it resolved that the General Synod of 1969 at this session direct the president of General Synod to appoint a joint committee of 24 with 12 representatives of the divergent views within the RCA to be assigned the task of drafting a plan for the dissolution of the RCA to be reported to the General Synod of 1971.

I believe that the force of the words was matched and intensified by the character and strength of the man who more than anything else was a reconciler and a peacemaker. In my experience of him, however, he was never a reconciler at the expense of principle. I think that even after all the dissension and tension of the days leading up to that point, we were all stunned not only by the proposal but by the person who presented it. This was not the frustrated raving of a wild rabble-rouser but the sincere expression of a person who a common acquaintance had accurately characterized as one who was gifted with a sweet reasonableness. The person of Harold Schut gave force to the proposal. In some ways, I think that resolution offered by Harold Schut dissipated some of the tension that had been building up over the course of the previous days.

During a recess, a group of other delegates and I were gathered on a shady spot on the Douglas College campus. In retrospect, I believe that we must have appeared to be giddy and even perhaps a bit indifferent to the seriousness of the proposal. Indeed, I believe after all the strife and disappointment of that week some, if not many of us, would have welcomed the dissolution of the RCA right on the spot. I still recall the sight of Carol Hageman coming across the lawn with as much fire in her eyes as a very gracious lady can ignite to challenge forcefully and effectively what must have seemed to be a superficial and cavalier attitude on our part. Her admonitions to us carried much weight because we knew that nowhere in the denomination were there any two people who had been as dedicated to the theological integrity and heritage of the Reformed Church in America as Carol and Howard Hageman. Very few, if any, labored so diligently for the RCA to be faithful to both its unique identity and its ecumenical calling. Again, the strength of a gentle and gracious personality was a force to be reckoned with.

Last but not least, I remember Norman Vincent Peale. He was the vice president of synod that year. From time to time, the president, Raymond Van Heukelom, I suspect out of fatigue and frustration, would call upon Peale to preside over the deliberations. At times the deliberations would get very contentious to the point of being nasty. It was a situation in which one might say persons were taking themselves far more seriously than their positions. It was amazing to witness how, time after time, Norman Peale could disarm or defuse what appeared to be a very incendiary situation. With a witty or very clever remark he would have us all laughing at ourselves, and once again a civil and somewhat productive atmosphere would resume. Apparently, there were some present whose purposes could not be fulfilled by civil discourse. So a motion was made from the floor that the presiding officer, Norman Peale, was to refrain from all attempts at levity or humor. Peale received that complaint with so much grace that I suspect that in itself had a salutary effect on the atmosphere. At least it kept us all there until we could emerge with a framework at the end of it for trying to deal with the issues that seemed to fracture us at that time in our denominational life.

Thus my thirty-five year old memories of that 1969 synod do indeed recall some of particular expressions of the basic issue that confronted us that year and which confronts us every year. But when all is said and done, it is the strength of calm and reasonable people that dominate those memories for me, and I suspect that it will be the strong and reasonable people who, by God's grace, will continue to enrich and nurture us and keep us moving along the way.

As I listened to the reflections and discussions today, I recalled a story I heard some time ago that I think fits the occasion. It is the story of three French soldiers who formed a strong bond in the bloody trench warfare of the First World War.

In the course of a particularly nasty battle, one of them was killed just before an order to retreat came from the unit commander. For a time they carried their dead comrade with them until, at length, they came to a church. Realizing that they were in ever more danger for their lives, they stopped and asked the priest if they could bury their friend in the church graveyard. The priest asked if their friend was a baptized Catholic. They really did not know so they could not say. The priest reluctantly but firmly informed them that they could not use the church's graveyard. So they picked up the body of their comrade and carried him to the far side of the cemetery and there, just beyond the wall of the cemetery, they buried him. They made a little monument of sorts out of some stones to mark the spot. Then, they rejoined their unit and made their way back to safety.

At the conclusion of the war, the two men returned to give their friend a proper burial. But when they went to the spot they remembered as the final resting place of their friend, they could find no sign of the makeshift monument or the grave. Deeply troubled, they went into the church and found the priest. They said, "Do you remember us?" He said, "Yes." Then they said, "We buried our friend just outside the cemetery wall, and we have returned, but we can't find the grave." The priest replied, "I know, I saw what you had done for your friend. The grave you dug is precisely where you located it. I moved the wall. Now it is inside."

Some walls began to crumble in 1969. There are still barriers that would exclude some of God's children. Some of them are constructed of pride, ignorance, or fear. Dare we maintain walls of our own making that the Lord would breach?

Thank you.