

Observations of a Minister Delegate

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Years of work toward uniting the Reformed Church in America with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, commonly known as the Southern Presbyterian Church, had come to an embarrassing and dispiriting end in the view of many in the eastern Reformed churches. It was embarrassing because the Presbyterian Church had voted for merger, and the Reformed Church, because of its provincial view, had voted it down. As a minister in an upstate New York church, I was enthusiastically for uniting. How often I had to explain to visitors to my church what the Reformed Church was! They wondered about a church they had never heard of that called itself "Reformed." Sometimes we had to clarify that we were not the Reformed/Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints – Reformed Mormons. Or they would ask, "Reformed from what?" There was the longer standard answer, but I found that it was easier and clearer to say, "Reformed from the Roman Catholic Church." Growing up in the Northeast, I always assumed, when meeting new people that they were Roman Catholic. It was always a pleasant surprise to learn that someone was Protestant. Then it was necessary to explain that we used to be called "Dutch" Reformed. When pressed, with humility we would say we were "like Presbyterian." We used United Presbyterian church school curriculum and found their Westminster Press valuable for many resources.

As the vote on merger approached, in the winter and spring of 1969, I educated my people on the vote. I kept score on our church bulletin board of the voting classis by classis. Then word came that the proposed merger had failed. I was dispirited. One of my elders came up to me as I was dismantling the bulletin board. He said to me, "This meant a lot to you, didn't it?" Suddenly it occurred to me that it did not mean much of anything to him or to many of my members. From his point of view and others, our church would continue doing what it had been doing, merger or not. And that is what happened. Our church was known in our own community. Although Presbyterian was a more familiar term, it was the local congregation that had reached our members. They did not come because we were Reformed or like Presbyterian, but because of who we were at St. John's Church. So I went to the 1969 meeting of General Synod disappointed by the lost merger but, expecting to return to my ministry back home, no matter what the denomination decided. Several eastern classes, disappointed by the failure of the merger, had already moved on to other issues. The Classes of Mid-Hudson, Albany, and Philadelphia had overtures for the ordination of women as elders and deacons, and Mid-Hudson had an overture for the ordination of women as ministers. All those overtures were adopted by the synod and sent to the

Committee on Revision of the Constitution. But the future of those actions is another story.

I graduated from New Brunswick Seminary in 1960. During my seminary years, one theme had dominated our view of the world we were about to enter as ministers: the hopefulness of the ecumenical movement. We talked daily throughout our three years in seminary of the church of the future being a united one. It was vital to reaching a world in crisis. Mid-way through seminary, the Roman Catholic Church elected a new pope, John XXIII. Immediately he raised hopes for the future thawing of relations between Protestants and Catholics. As though to underscore the importance of ecumenicity, ground was broken for the building of the Interchurch Center in New York City the fall of my freshman year in seminary. The dedication took place the month before my class graduated. The address was 475 Riverside Drive. It was an impressive building of twentieth century design, mocked by many as "The God Box." However, it gave respect to the work of the church in the midst of a secular society in which to be Christian seemed outdated to many. The nineteen-story center became, as its brochure said, "a visible symbol of the oneness of many churches in Christ." It housed the offices of the World and National Councils of Churches, and many denominations, both Protestant and Orthodox. The Reformed Church in America occupied the entire eighteenth floor. I took my communicants' classes there every year to impress upon them that the church was important and vital in the midst of the very secular culture in which they were immersed. The World Council of Churches had grown out of a call for unity by missionaries from all over the world, as long ago as 1910. People from many churches throughout the world were talking about mission, about the life and work of the church, its faith, and its worship. The National Council of Churches was helping the churches work together on Christian education, Christian ministry, and social issues; and it was helping people around the world who were victims of war and natural disasters. Exciting things were happening.¹

Within a year of the opening of the Interchurch Center, the Rev. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church, made the cover of *Time* magazine with a proposal for unity, from the pulpit of Episcopal Bishop James A Pike. Bishop Pike concurred. Blake's plan called for the United Presbyterian Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ to form a union, both catholic and reformed. He added that there would be an open invitation to others to join them. It was immediately named the "Blake-Pike Proposal," and soon became COCU, the Consultation on Church Union which in time became, with the same initials, the Church of Christ Uniting.

The 1960s soon turned in unexpected directions. One day as I was writing letters

to the editors of *Time* and *Newsweek* to persuade them to do a cover story on the National Council of Churches, my phone rang with the news that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. The world changed. The new president, Lyndon Johnson, quickly accomplished passage of the stalled Civil Rights bill and launched a War on Poverty. That became buried as he plunged the nation deeply into a horrible war in Vietnam that polarized the nation. The year 1968 saw escalation of the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the election of Richard Nixon. In the Reformed Church the *Crisis in the Nation* resolution by the National Association of Evangelicals became the focus, because of concern over racial tensions and social injustice in the nation. Enthusiasm over the ecumenical movement waned.

The General Synod of 1969 opened Thursday, June 5, at Douglas College in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The Rev. Raymond R. Van Heukelom, a minister from Orange City, Iowa, presided. As we came together, one thing seemed clear. The anti-war movement and not church merger, racial crisis, or poverty dominated people's thinking. Still, to many of us preserving church identity from the Netherlands or Scotland was irrelevant. Many of us believed that for the church to speak with authority to the shaking world, it was much more important that we do so in cooperation with other Christian churches of the world or nation. In unity we could work more effectively for peace and the alleviation of poverty and injustice. If we could not merge with any Presbyterians, then perhaps we could become part of the Consultation on Church Union, or at least remain a strong partner in the National and World Councils of Churches.

It was in that context that I volunteered to be on the Interchurch Relations Committee. The committee was chaired by the Rev. Howard C. Schade of Bogota, New Jersey, a large, broad-shouldered man with blond wavy hair and a booming, decidedly eastern voice. The committee dealt with several crucial issues of the ecumenical movement, which included thanking the Committee of Twelve as a result of the merger failure; a document called "The Unity we Seek to Manifest"; the Consultation on Church Union; and the World and National Councils of Churches.

Howard Schade presented the report of our committee Saturday afternoon, June 7. He read the statement, "The Unity We Seek to Manifest," which the General Synod had adopted in 1966, and asked that it be reaffirmed. The recommendation passed easily. The second recommendation was that in the light of that statement, we become full participants in the Consultation on Church Union and begin conversations with the Christian Reformed Church. The hope was that, in the light of the "Unity" statement and linking COCU and conversations with the Christian Reformed Church, both sides would be happy. Not so. The body voted to separate the two recommendations. Tension began to build. Parliamentary

disputes began. The Rev. Bert Van Soest, of Denver, tall, calm, and reassuring, was asked to give the report of the Overtures Committee. That committee was recommending that the RCA become a full participant in COCU without delay. A motion was quickly made to postpone action on this recommendation indefinitely. Howard Schade asked that the Rev. Herman Harmelink III, of North Bergen, New Jersey, chair of the permanent Interchurch Relations Committee, be invited to answer questions, who in turn asked that the United Presbyterian stated clerk, the Rev. Dr. William P. Thompson, speak to these. But to no avail. The synod voted to postpone joining COCU indefinitely. The tally was questioned, but in spite of that, postponement held. The rest of the committee's more routine recommendations floated through, including commending the Committee of Twelve for seeking to promote union with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and a recommendation that churches seek to cooperate with other churches on a local level.

The synod had just closed the door on union talks with the most conservative of two major branches of the Presbyterian Church as well as the Consultation on Church Union. It had voted to open talks with the Christian Reformed Church. Then came a motion from the floor for a contingency plan for an orderly transfer or phasing out of every part of the denominational structure. This was voted down. Anger and disappointment was rumbling. It was time for the report of the special committee that had been formed the previous year to evaluate the relationship of the denomination to the National Council of Churches. The Rev. Bill Babinsky of the New Hackensack Church in Wappingers Falls, New York, gave the report. The committee gave its long and clear explanation of the structure, program, and goals of the National Council and recommended that we continue our affiliation. The recommendation was hotly debated. Motions to postpone or recess were defeated, and the General Synod adopted the recommendation. Wider representation was recommended and adopted. The synod even kept the financial appropriation as an assessment and not merely an asking. The debate continued. The Rev. Dr. Marion de Velder felt compelled to respond. De Velder, the denomination's general secretary, large, dignified, with his shock of white hair, dressed in his dapper white slacks, white shoes, white socks, and pale blue blazer, leaned forward at the head table, slowly pulled the mike toward him, and gave an impassioned talk. His words had been reflected in the report. His voice was calm, but emphatic. He said that it would be extremely difficult to operate effectively in the twentieth century without our relationship with the National Council of Churches. The report echoed his own words. Our program divisions depended on the National Council of Churches. "We do not have the staff nor the funds that would be necessary to keep us working as we ought in the various fields." "The Reformed Church in America has a witness and a contribution to make in the life of the American Christian churches."

That evening the discussion grew intense as it continued. It reflected the division caused by the failure of the merger and of not joining COCU. It became so heated that de Velder finally threatened to resign if our connection with the National Council of Churches were severed. De Velder had the authority and the status to put it that bluntly. He was, in his person, a bridge between the eastern and midwestern wings of the church. He had served churches in both sections. He was beloved and respected by both East and Midwest. It was Saturday evening. The synod would rest on the Sabbath. Delegates would scatter in many directions. Conversations would go on in dorm rooms, over meals, in the churches and homes where delegates would pause and make and renew friendships. But Monday morning was soon to come.

When the Monday morning session opened, the Rev. Harold J. Schut stood up. Schut was the minister of the Scotia Reformed Church in upstate New York, immediate past president of the General Synod, and a member of the General Program Council. He took a deep breath. He said it was not easy for him to say what he was about to say, and he did not do so easily. He obviously had given it a great deal of thought. He said, "Fathers and Brethren: (the gender specific address indicated the other issues to come.) Whereas, discussion in the Reformed Church in America at many levels and at General Synod is revealing that division among us appears to be non-negotiable. . ." He presented a resolution for the drafting of a plan for the orderly dissolution of the Reformed Church to be reported to the 1971 General Synod. There was a moment of shocked silence, followed by a wave of talk in every part of the assembly. Order was called. A motion to refer his resolution to the Committee on Reference passed 134 to 98.

That afternoon, weary with the divisiveness of the synod and thinking that my call was to do God's work in my local congregation, I went off to play golf. Ben LeFevre, Bob Geddes, and I got thirteen holes in before we returned to see the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale elected president of the General Synod.

That evening some of us talked with the Rev. Dr. James Cook of Western Seminary at dinner. The New Brunswick alumni met as well and some of us adjourned to the Comer Tavern as though we were patriots in Williamsburg going to the Raleigh Tavern. The question was, should New Brunswick and Western Seminaries merge to bring the church together? Some felt that operating the two seminaries might have resulted in perpetuating division between East and Midwest. However, several of us shuddered at the thought of merging the seminaries.

The next evening the Schut resolution was debated hotly. One midwestern minister stood up and said to Harold that he and others had no idea how deep the feelings for this merger were. Out of the debate came a "Plan for Understanding."

Then a committee of eighteen was formed, even accepting the possibility that if the differences were “irreconcilable and non-negotiable” a plan for dissolution be brought to the synod of 1970.

Wednesday morning we settled back for the final session of the synod, presided over by the new president, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. There were still some final decisions on several things that needed to be completed. Peale, with his gift for self-deprecating humor, brought much needed side-splitting laughter to the delegates as he pretended to or genuinely fumbled through the parliamentary work of presiding over votes. Was that when the Rev. Dr. Lester J. Kuyper explained the difference between “shall, “ and “will,” to Dr. Peale and the delegates? I may be responsible for some redaction here.

Then Peale led us in our closing worship with some much-needed positive thinking. Was it intentional or an example of God working all things for good? I think God was working through Peale in a unique way that day.

What was the legacy of all this? We did not dissolve the church. We have not yet merged with the Christian Reformed Church. We are still members in a much changed and, some feel, weakened World Council and National Council of Churches, and still not in COCU, now the Church of Christ Uniting. The ecumenical movement is not dead, but it is certainly changed. People have cooperated on the local level. Today's ministers do not seem highly interested in mergers on the denominational level. We experimented with merging the two seminaries and then kept them separate. They have come to have very different student bodies and missions. We are in a very different world. We are more a four-section church now instead of a two-section one: East, Midwest, West, Canada. In spite of great efforts, self examination, and new plans, we are a declining denomination seeking new ways to revitalize and multiply.

We have always been a little schizophrenic in our church, with our Coetus-Conferentie controversy, the second immigration of the nineteenth century, and maybe now our Chicago Invitation versus the Ten Year Goal. We reflect in a way the “two Americas” spoken of since the presidential contest of 2000. There has always been a tension in our nation between liberty and justice, republicans and democrats, and in our churches between evangelism and social justice. As one New Jersey minister said to me, “We use the same words, but we mean different things.” However, we may simply polarizations inherent in the human community, the tension between the individual and society, between being an individual Christian and part of the covenant community, between needing time alone and time with other people. The question may not be so much “Can we serve Christ even while disagreeing about some things,” as “Can we serve Christ without needing to agree on everything?”

ENDNOTES

¹ To refresh my memory on these events I referred to my own personal notes taken at the time; *The Acts & Proceedings of the 163rd Regular Session of the General Synod, Reformed Church in America June 6-11, 1969*; Reformed Church brochure, *We Need The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; brochure*, The Interchurch Center; *Time* magazine, May 26, 1961; *Presbyterian Life*, “A Proposal Toward the Reunion of Christ’s Church,” by Eugene Carson Blake, January 1, 1961; *Ecumenism and the Reformed Church*, by Herman Harmelink III.