

## James Forman Rams' *De Halve Maen*

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In the beginning hours of General Synod of 1969 a handful of Reformed Church staff were gathered in Arie Brouwer's office at 475 Riverside Drive, not for a planning session, but to listen to James Forman hold forth with his demands, as he sat in Arie's chair with his feet on the desk. At one point he looked at the opposite wall, on which hung a metal sculpture of the ship, *De Halve Maen*, and declared, "You Dutchmen brought us over from Africa on [expletive deleted] ships like that."

That incident never reached the floor of synod. Possibly many delegates coming to the synod of 1969 had little awareness of the depth of the racial issues within the denomination. Unless they were black, attended or ministered with a black congregation, lived in urban settings, or served on the few commissions or committees within boards which were struggling with the issues, most delegates came for a "business as usual" synod. They were in for a surprise on more than one issue. The issue around James Forman and the Black Manifesto was dramatic and gut wrenching.

We were all living in the closing years of social upheaval, which we labeled "Crisis in the Nation." Martin Luther King, Jr.'s cry, "We shall overcome," was both a statement of defiance and a confession of faith within a nonviolent context. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he initiated, made a great impact. We read and saw on TV about Rosa Parks, the sit-ins, the voter registrations, the efforts at school integration, and the nonviolent marches. A few RCA folk went south to join the marches. But the frustrations finally boiled over into violence. Riots broke out in big cities. One white Reformed Church pastor in Detroit, a National Guard chaplain, was called to active duty during the 1967 Detroit riots. He chose to resign from the Guards rather than to patrol the streets against his own congregation. "Black Power" became another rallying cry. Theologically, James Cone was engaged in formulating a black theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Some of the delegates who came to the synod of 1969 had all of this sixties turmoil in their guts. They had lived through the urban impact of it and had families in the south with whom they had agonized. But for the most part, the delegates had only media experience of what had gone on. True, the church sang the liberation songs. "We Shall Overcome" was the "in" song at RCYF, work camps, leadership schools, and contemporary worship services (what did we call it back then?). But direct experience of race struggles on a day-to-day basis was rare.

The denomination's Christian Action Commission had for years worked at sensitizing all of us to the issues of race. As a young pastor in Southgate, Michigan, I was moved by the lofty phrases of the 1958 "Credo on Race Relations," four wordy pages long, by the way, and reaffirmed by the synod of 1971.

I don't know if any research was ever done on the impact of the "Credo." For me, serving a white congregation, the words moved beyond the abstract through my involvement with the Detroit Pastors Union and the Detroit Council of Churches, which gave me interaction with many black pastors, their churches, their struggles, and racism. Later I attended the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, an experience that I count as my conversion back into the world, which plunged me into racial settings and struggles. Later, when I came to work with the RCA's Board of Education and the General Program Council, it was working in and with black churches and persons like Joe Nash, Ira Black, David Beale, Nida Thomas, Sara Smith, and Farajah Nkruma that helped me get beyond words. Reflecting on my personal journey, which in no way is complete, I am reminded of the motto at the United States Merchant Marine Academy from which my grandson graduated this summer, "Acta Non Verba": Deeds, not words. The synod of 69 gave delegates opportunity for both.

During the Crisis in the Nation, the Reformed Church had a task force appointed by the general secretary with a program emphasis and an emergency appeal by the same name, "Crisis in the Nation." Howard Schade was the coordinator. The theme was, "Do it now, do it where you are." The education effort was directed at Reformed Church members to encourage them to understand, appreciate, and support each other across the races. Was it effective? Harold Schut reported at the synod of '69 that \$93,701 had been raised. Perhaps, it, along with the "Credo" and many efforts of particular synods (that's what regional synods were called then) prepared the way for what happened at the synod of '69.

Many movements developed out of the turmoil of the mid sixties, one of which was the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC). A gathering of black persons in Detroit April 25-27, 1969, issued a "Black Manifesto" addressed, "To the White Christian Churches and the Jewish Synagogues in the United States of America and all Other Racist Institutions." The introduction begins "We have come from all over the country, burning with anger and despair not only with the miserable economic plight of our people, but fully aware that the racism on which the Western World was built dominates our lives. There can be no separation of the problems of racism from the problems of

our economic, political, and cultural degradation.” The introduction continues and is followed by a manifesto that calls for reparations of \$500,000,000 to be spent in ten ways. In a later part of the document, a statement is made: “On May 4, 1969 or a date thereafter, depending upon local conditions, we call upon black people to commence the disruption of the racist churches and synagogues throughout the United States.”

On May 4, after having an unsatisfactory meeting with the senior minister, Ernest Campbell, on the previous day, James Forman and others interrupted the Communion service at Riverside Church in New York City and made certain demands of the congregation. On May 6, in Martin Luther fashion, Forman taped his demands on the door of the national headquarters of the Lutheran Church in midtown Manhattan. There were several other interventions which led to the one most personal for the RCA and for me.

James Forman announced that he would “liberate” the Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive and negotiate his demands with the denominations that had offices there. He chose to occupy the eighteenth floor presumably because we had most of our central offices located there all on one floor. Did he also want to make the point about the Dutch ships?

The date of the “internment” was June 5, 1969, through the end of General Synod. I remember spending my forty-fourth birthday, June 6, in the company of colleagues John Hiemstra, Marvin Hoff, and Arie Brouwer, who was there for part of that day. My memory fails me about the presence of others. The rest of the staff had been “liberated,” and we were there with our sleeping bags, prepared to stay as long as necessary. While Arie and others were engaged in negotiation, the rest of us were alert for property damage, tampering with files and equipment. Nothing of that sort happened.

I wouldn’t exactly call it a picnic. The conversations with Forman and his team were sometimes awkward and dead-end. At other times, they had nothing to do with NBEDC demands. When mealtime came, we often took sandwich orders and two persons from each team went out and did the shopping. I did some of my office work during the internment. My memory fails me regarding my tenure at 475 that week. I know that I spent one night at the synod, which was the night when James Forman made his presentation, June 6.

James Forman went to speak to the synod on Friday evening, June 6, at 8:00 p.m. He gave the reasons and justifications for the demands of the National Black Economic Development Conference. He then listed some of the projects that would be established through these funds:

1. Southern land banks to be cooperatively owned.

2. Four major publishing houses inside the United States, to be located in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, and New York City.
3. Three black TV stations.
4. Research skill center.
5. Establishment of a school for community involvement – training in television and radio repair.
6. Ten million dollars to work with welfare recipients' rights.
7. Twenty million dollars for the establishment of a national Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund.
8. Establishment of a United Black Appeal.
9. Establishment of a black university.

Forman said that at the press conference at "475," three demands were made of the Reformed Church:

1. To implement the demands of the "Manifesto," which calls for the creation of four major publishing houses inside the United States.
2. To demonstrate good faith in its intentions to help in the implementation of the demands of the "Manifesto."
3. A list of assets, real estate holdings, unrelated business items, pension funds, and Southern investment policies and we will negotiate what should be donated to the conference.

President Van Heukelom thanked Forman for his presentation. As an aside, recently Ray Van Heukelom informed me that he was too busy presiding to be involved in the interactions with delegates about their response to Forman. But he did note that the late Dr. de Velder "was very concerned about you 'locked up' people and an almost fruitless discussion with Forman."

One black RCA pastor, the Rev. Levin West, denounced James Forman and his demands. Another representative of the black community rose to apologize to Forman for West's remarks.

What to do? The thing the church always does: appoint a committee. On Saturday morning the chair appointed fifteen people to an Ad Hoc Committee on Response to the Black Manifesto, which reported Tuesday afternoon, June 11, 1969. I am not privy to the inner discussions of that committee but Carol Hageman and Leonard Kalkwarf, here today, were both members. I tried to contact the black members of that committee for their reflections, but they are no longer on this side.

The "Report on the Response to the Black Manifesto" is best read in its entirety in the *Minutes of the General Synod, 1969*, pages 98-105. In my judgment, it is a watershed action in the history of the Reformed Church, a result of James

Forman ramming and shaking up the old ship, *De Halve Maen*. Basically, the report begins with the language of confession: "While the confrontation has made us angry, God has not allowed us to turn a deaf ear"; "God has made us aware through a devastating word of judgment"; "through confrontation, God changes us," and other statements of confession: "We have a false pride in our vertical relationship with God without being concerned sufficiently with our horizontal relationships with our brothers," and others. (I noted in reading various reports that gender inclusive language had not yet arrived.)

Then followed a rejection of "Forman's ideology, plans and tactics with the projected use of force, treading on the rights of other peoples. . . ." But with the rejection, the report acknowledged an awareness of the injustices to which Foreman pointed and went on to state: "Within the church, decision-making structures are so dominated by the presence, attitudes, values, and traditions of the white people, that only by a planned restructure can minority groups have the ability to make decisions vital to their own communities, and the congregations to which they belong."

Twelve recommendations were presented and adopted without a dissenting vote. The thrust of the recommendations was the calling of a caucus of black RCA leaders to form a Black Council for the Program of General Synod, with funding suggestions including the creation of a special fund of \$100,000.

At this same General Synod, the Commission on Race, formerly a part of the Board of North American Missions, now a part of the General Program Council, made a report, with the chair noting that the authorization for the commission was to expire at the 1970 synod. This commission pointed mildly to some of the same concerns as did James Forman but without Forman's impact. Also, the report came largely from the white power structure of the church. This to me is the significant kairos change regarding race at the synod of '69. Until this date, the white church with some black involvement was trying to do something for black persons and churches and, in some cases, with them.

The James Forman intervention with the subsequent RCA response moved the authority from a largely white commission and lodged the determination with the black persons and churches of the RCA. In the president's reports at the three subsequent synods, no mention is made of James Forman or even of the Black Council. By that time, the denomination had moved on to the structural issues of keeping itself together and regionalization. But the synod minutes and the *Church Herald's* reports have a great deal of information about the formation, the working proposals, and the budget of the Black Council, including the rejection of the \$100,000 by the Black Council because the council wanted to be a part of the decision-making structures of the RCA. There was struggle and pain.

Some of the irenic commitment of the synod of '69 floundered when negotiations over staff, money, white pastors in black churches, Sunday school curriculum, and representations on denominational agencies were taking place. As secretary for church life and mission, I was involved in some of those struggles.

For me as an educator, the emerging direction from that synod experience was partnership: working with black persons and churches, listening, respecting, and not imposing white patterns. Later I was the chairperson of Joint Education Development, a partnership of twelve denominations, and still later the chair of *Christian Education: Shared Approaches*, a curriculum of Joint Educational Development. We developed and implemented guidelines for racially and gender inclusive language, graphics, writers, editors, and representatives in the development of the curriculum and training. While the ramming of *De Halve Maen* was not the only nudge in my life as an educator, it was a major one.

Meanwhile, back at 475, the "lock-in" continued. All of the personnel of the Interchurch Center, about two thousand, were off work for a week, except for the few of us who were "interned." The General Secretary, Marion de Velder sent a news release in a letter to the RCA congregations dated June 18, which stated that "James Forman and his representative had vacated the Reformed Church conference room on Friday, June 13, 1969 at the request of church leaders." Also, a court order had been obtained. The release indicated that "when Mr. Forman learned of the church's failure to meet his demands, he was reported to be 'very disappointed.'" Reformed Church staff returned to work June 11 to find that Forman's representatives had cleaned the offices they had used and that no damage had occurred.

Forman's ramming of the RCA ship did not sink it, but his actions brought about structural changes that do not in themselves change attitudes. These changes did bring people together in different relationships of respect, cooperation, and accountability, which I believe often led to deeper understanding, appreciation, and more effective mission. *De Halve Maen* sails on. White folk are no longer the only members of the crew. While there may still be struggle within the crew, the church made a good decision in 1969. Without James Foreman's intervention, I think it would have taken several more years, if not a decade, for this change to have happened. So, to the late James Forman and to the RCA's response, let's run up the signal flag: "Underway!" Not "Arrived," but "Underway!"