

Christian Reformed Denominational Structures

Introduction

This file contains two articles written separately but dealing with a single and somewhat overlapping topic: reorganization within the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Both of these articles constitute my reaction to an article on denominational reorganization in the CC of November 28, 2011, as well as to the experience we CRC Nigeria missionaries suffered with respect to constant reorganization campaigns. These are blunt articles that have, unfortunately, never seen the daylight till now. But here they are in all their political incorrectness. Let the chips fall where they may: I am retired and so are most of the bureaucrats mentioned. But it still needs to be said.

Perhaps, one of these days I will write a gentler version of this reorganization history, but it would require my heart to slow down, my blood pressure to be reduced and my annoyance replaced by patience. Readers are invited to contact me with advice in this matter.

Article 1 CRC Structural Wranglings

Holy kadoodles! Another round of structure changes?! Can CRC denominational bureaucrats think of nothing else? Do they still have nothing else to do? The world is burning around us and they keep spending time and energy on these in-house matters. That was my first reaction to the CC article.

Let me explain the reason for this initial reaction. I was a CRC Nigeria missionary from 1966-1996--- a full 30 years. I don't believe I exaggerate when I claim that during that entire period we spent more time on re-organization than any other subject. Forever re-organizing at every denominational level, in Nigeria, in the Grand Rapids (GR) offices of both Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM) and in overall denominational supervisory structure. A change in the latter would trigger change in CRWM and on the field. And then I have not yet mentioned the contortions we would have to go through to constantly re-align our relationship with Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC). I can't tell you how many committees we were forced to form to figure out one structure or protocol or another. Just on and on and on. If we had a record of the time

spent, you would be scandalized. We would sometimes be exhausted. At other times cynicism set in and a sense of helplessness.

When I started with CRWM, missionaries on the field would take the initiatives, which would then have to be approved by CRWM in GR. By the time I left Nigeria, missionaries had become the pawns of GR bureaucrats, some of whom knew little about Missiology or mission practice. When referring to their offices, we used the benign, endearing even, short-hand term of “2850,” which was the street number. By the time I left, this had changed to “Pentagon.” As centralization of power proceeded at the Pentagon, we began to refer to the person cooking up all these schemes as “the Pope.” These were not mere humorous changes; these were reflections of changed missionary reactions towards that crowd.

In my own case, I was acutely aware of the Reformed system of church government that has at its core a deep distrust of power concentration in a few hands, but that is what developed over the decades. Of course, there are boards and committees supposedly supervising these bureaucrats, but they can only act on information they are fed by the very people they supervise! At every level, the process of centralization and power concentration bulldozed its way into the CRC culture. I revolted against this development, since it went totally contrary to all the Seminary had taught me, to what I saw in the Church Order and to what I had imbibed from the CRC culture since childhood. It went totally against my CRC-shaped grain. One time the Mission Director in Nigeria, a good friend of mine till this day, had to go many motorcycle kilometers out of his way to ask why I rejected authority. Years later, he himself resigned in reaction to the same issues! At one time, in GR on Home Service, I was called in by the Board for a warning. An insider told me I came close to being fired!

Now, I trust you can understand my reaction to still more re-organization. My reaction becomes even stronger when I think of the short deadline Synod has given the taskforce. It was given only one year to report. Given its short mandate, the Taskforce itself is forced to allow the public only a few weeks to give input, at least, if I understand the CC article correctly. I wonder why this extreme rush? It looks to me like a railroading exercise in which the major input will once again come from the bureaucrats.

Article 2

CRC Structures

Power Concentration

The CRC has been pre-occupied with re-organization ever since I became a CRC Nigeria missionary. I was there for 30 years and without exaggeration can say that as a group of missionaries we spent more time together on organizational questions than anything else. This was usually forced on us by those who occupy the CRC “Pentagon,” This terminology, along with reference to a “Pope,” was indicative of the cynicism of the missionaries. It always seemed to us that a few chief haunchos at 2850 were so preoccupied with their own little administrative world, that they sacrificed the time and energy of “field staff” for the sake of their games. A matter of the tail wagging the dog. For thirty years!

And now we start again? Did this come up from the dog (churches) or from the tail at 2850? If things are not working properly at 2850, it is more likely due to personality problems and power complexes than structures. The sudden secretive and unceremonious disappearance of chief hauncho Dykstra feeds this suspicion. Perhaps there is need for a clean sweep and start over with servant leaders. The traditional CRC structure works only when operated by servant leaders. It makes no allowance for power. In fact, its very genius over the centuries has been to distribute power and prevent its concentration.

The trend of these decades of re-organization has been towards centralization and the use of so-called “*market forces*” in determining, for example, salaries of those central haunchos, while the pions in the field were paid by *ministry standards*. This has been a trend away from our historical focus with no one apparently capable or courageous enough to call for a halt to the process.

If we are going to talk of restructuring, the congregations should be made aware of what is not working and why. This is no time for political correctness but for honesty and forthrightness. *Who needs power and why? There is already so much going on at the Pentagon of which the membership has little or no knowledge, that these basic questions need to be dealt with first.*

Invigorating CRC Classes (Districts)

At the same time, I do recognize the need for an important change at the classical level. When I was doing deputation, I would frequently spend extended time in the Edmonton churches and found that congregationalism was so strong that the churches lacked a united voice with which to witness to the city. It was every congregation for itself without the city being blessed with a strong united CRC voice. I have retired in BC and find a similar lack of a united CRC witness in this province. We are so divided that the province probably would not notice if we all disbanded—and that in a province with a small population and two CRC classes! When provincial issues do arise, even if the CRC would *want* to influence the situation, our classical structure is so awkward and riddled with protocol that we have disemboweled ourselves. By the time we have considered an issue, it is already history.

Recently family law has undergone profound revision in BC, but the congregationalist nature of the CRC has prevented the classes from developing a provincial perspective and thus from keeping a watchful eye. That most important redefinition of the family just went by us without our blinking an eye. And then we complain about new secular definitions of the family!

We need a mechanism where all CRC churches within a given jurisdiction, whether on city or provincial/state basis, can take quick action to have an input. If there is more than one classis in a jurisdiction, they should design a mechanism that allows them to take quick action together. Things are moving too fast these days. The traditional classical avenues are too ponderous to respond in time. However, I believe the classes can make the necessary changes themselves. They don't need denominational taskforces to accomplish the necessary changes.

Sometimes the issue may not be one into which the CRC would traditionally wade, but if that leads to failure to act when witness to Christ is sorely needed, then our traditional scruples may need to give way. I prefer a restricted church voice while Christian organizations address these social issues, but since we don't have such organizations, the church should either take action or foster the development of relevant Christian organizations, but this time in the spirit of networking with other denominations and social organizations.