

# **The Deaconhood of Believers and the Kuyperian Vision**

**Harry A. Van Belle**

In her book, *Gereformeerden Overzee*, Agnes Amelink's analysis of the history of the Reformed Christian community in Canada is insightful. It echoes much of what I found when I researched the history of this community in 1988 and it updates my analysis of that time considerably. I think it would be good for people to read both of Amelink's books together for comparison, since the history of the Gereformeerden in The Netherlands over the past five decades is quite different from the history of Reformed Christians in Canada.

I suppose I would also call myself one of the erstwhile "young dogs" she refers to, who has now become a senior citizen. This fact prompts me to disagree with her on one point, her conclusion that the "Kuyperian vision, mission and activism...has lost much of its urgency, strength and drive" among Reformed Christians in Canada. I would argue that, on the contrary, this Kuyperian vision, mission and action (*not* activism) has done anything but disappear. Instead, over the past several decades this vision has matured and deepened into an awareness of what I would call *the deaconhood of all believers*. It is about this awareness among Reformed Christian Canadians today as heirs of the Kuyperian vision that I would like to make a few comments.

## **How the Deaconhood of Believers Relates to the Kuyperian Vision**

First of all, Kuyper's own vision was never about constructing "pillars" in Dutch society within which the Gereformeerden could feel safe. Neither was the call for separate Christian organizations by Canadian Kuyperians their way of protecting their young from the negative influences of secular Canada. Rather, these actions were always meant to bring the grace of the gospel to bear on the world of education, labour, politics, the arts, etc. It was always about serving the world at large by means of Christian social action.

One of Kuyper's last speeches before his death dealt with the Social Question (*Het Sociale Vraagstuk*). He aimed his speech at the Gereformeerden, who themselves had been the marginalized (*kleine luyden*) of Holland in the past, but who by now had become established members of society. In this speech he pleads with them from now on to direct their efforts to bringing justice to the poor and the marginalized in society. This call to bring justice, (not charity, justice) to the disadvantaged among us is at the heart of our recent re-awakening to the fact that all of God's children are to be deacons to one another. In that sense the awareness of the deaconhood of believers can lay claim to being heir to the Kuyperian vision. Or so I would argue.

## **Awareness of Deaconhood as the Continuation of the Kuyperian Vision**

It has always been part of the Christian life that the church should take care of its poor, the widows and the orphans. Deacons are elected to serve that purpose. My grandmother

became a widow when my mother and her siblings were still small. For this reason she had to go to work cleaning houses of well-to-do people.

But she also received financial aid from the diaconate of her church. When governments began to enact social welfare policies like widows and old age pensions it became less necessary to give financial support to the poor in the church. In consequence the deacons began to concentrate on providing support to needy people *outside* the boundaries of the church locally, nationally and internationally. Locally they supported all kinds of programs designed to ease the lot of the needy, programs like the food bank, youth emergency shelters, prison ministries, single parent support groups, counseling agencies, teenage pregnancy centres, etc. Probably the best example of current national diaconal work in Canada is *Operation Manna*, which is the concerted effort by a number of Canadian churches to support twenty-two different outreach ministries ([www.diaconalministries.com](http://www.diaconalministries.com)).

Of late the attention of Reformed Christians has shifted more to the developing countries in the Two-third world. Perhaps in response to *The Micah Challenge* ([www.micahchallenge.org](http://www.micahchallenge.org)), helping needy people in Africa, Asia and South/Central America has become a major preoccupation for many Reformed Christian church communities across North America. Christian organizations outside the church also have begun to support like-minded organizations in the non-Western world. To mention only two, the CLAC currently provides financial, administrative and educational aid to fledgling Christian labour associations in Columbia and Cuba. And Worldwide Christian Schools, ([www.wwcs.org](http://www.wwcs.org)) the heart-and-brain child of the Christian School movement in Canada and USA, now is actively supporting the establishment of Christian schools all over the Two-third world.

But by far the most established and effective leader among us in providing aid internationally is the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee ([www.crwrc.org](http://www.crwrc.org)). Its Disaster Relief Service and Community Development work are well known among us and have the support and active participation of many members of the Reformed Christian community. Many retired community members regularly travel to disaster areas to fix roofs or to renovate houses as part of CRWRC's DRS program. It is simply astounding how much CRWRC has been able to do for people hit by natural disasters like the Tsunami and Katrina.

I am more familiar with the community development work of CRWRC than its DRS. My wife Jenny and I traveled through Kenya and Uganda last February to see first hand the work that CRWRC field staff are doing in these places. We saw the way CRWRC helps local church communities teach its members how best to obtain food security, how to generate income and how to come to terms with the dreadful HIV/AIDS pandemic among them.. We also saw how they help local churches to provide adult learning and spiritual guidance to their members. What struck us most was how familiarly Reformed the programs and policies of CRWRC are. In attempting to help local communities to solve their many problems CRWRC field workers demonstrate a great deal of practical realism and expertise. At the same time they also clearly work from out of a vision that is rooted in a Reformed Christian world and life view. They do not just view poverty as a

physical problem, but as a spiritual problem as well and they take time to build relationships with the locals because spiritual needs are best served in interpersonal relationships.

### **Awareness of Deaconhood as Transformation of the Kuyperian Vision**

It seems clear to me that the diaconal efforts I have described so far are all linked to one another in that all of them are motivated by a Reformed Christian vision that inspired Kuyper and his followers in the past and continues to inspire new generations of Reformed Christians in Canada now. At the same time this recent awakening to the deaconhood of all believers also represents a *transformation* of the Kuyperian vision.

There is something new afoot in the Reformed Christian community today. It seems as if the deacon is waking up in all of us. When it comes to charitable giving members of this community are no longer satisfied with putting money in the collection plate for diaconal purposes. Instead they want to become personally involved in the outreach work that the deacons support. And so locally we see many church members volunteering in food banks, or working in soup kitchens, or becoming a big brother or sister, or working a crisis hotline, etc., etc. The list is endless. Nationally they may spend part of their vacation doing disaster relief work or volunteering as counselors at a camp for physically, emotionally or mentally challenged children. Internationally, it has become very popular for teenagers and older people alike in the church to go on short term mission trips to build houses, schools and orphanages, all in an effort to do more than sit in a pew on Sunday. They want to get their hands dirty for the sake of Jesus Christ. They want to walk with the poor, with the down-and-out, the marginalized and the disadvantaged of the world. In the final analysis they don't so much want to *do* something for them as to *be* with them and to get to know them personally.

So, no, Agnes Amelink, the Kuyperian vision and mission has not left the Reformed Christian community. It is alive and well especially among its young people. It has merely changed its dress and has become transformed into an emphasis on the deaconhood of all believers. And this young dog, who is now becoming old, likes that just fine.

\* Harry and Jenny Van Belle have been working as volunteers for CRWRC