

## Pluralism and World Mission in the CRC<sup>1</sup>

Recently the Christian Reformed constituency has been treated to at least two independent analyses of their denomination. One consists of a rather lengthy serial discussion by Clarence Boomsma in *The Banner*; the other is that of Nicholas Wolterstorff,<sup>2</sup> likewise found in *The Banner* (January 3, 1975). Boomsma thinks to detect four distinct movements within the CRC: militant orthodoxy, cautious liberalization, modern-day pietism and Neo-Kuyperianism. Thus, at least, they are summarized for us in the *R.E.S. News Exchange* of October 9, 1973. Wolterstorff uncovers three for us: pietism, doctrinalism and Kuyperianism. He also recognizes a liberal tendency, but, rather than positing a separate liberal movement, he finds this movement present within each of his three schools.

It is hardly our purpose to subject these distinctions to scrutiny or even to discuss whether there are not more groupings within this denomination. We wish to emphasize the fact of their existence in the CRC and to consider briefly their significance for the world mission of that church.

It is quite apparent that these and possibly additional groups have been accorded a legitimate, if not official, place in the CRC. Certainly, they often co-exist in tension, but these tensions can freely be released and relieved because of the freedom of each group to express itself in the denominational fora as well as by means of their own respective publications. They are also free to organize themselves for action. It is this freedom of expression and action, I submit, that allows their co-existence within the one denomination.

Whether the situation as described by Boomsma and Wolterstorff is healthy or not, I am not sure at all. There is something to be said for CRC toleration. On the other hand, the lack of a communal mind is a problem of no mean proportion that frequently bedevils official church activities. One result, for example, is that synodical study reports are seldom straightforward and consistent, but are

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<sup>1</sup> CC, 14 Oct/1975. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Boomsma was a long-time pastor of the Calvin CRC in Grand Rapids, MI; Wolterstorff taught philosophy at Calvin College, also in Grand Rapids. In fact, he was my first philosophy teacher. He ended up teaching at Yale.

characterized by compromises that do not always meet the needs of the constituency.

It is, furthermore, inevitable that the co-existence of these schools of thought within the CRC produces practical problems within the various denominational agencies. However, unless one is closely associated with any of these agencies, he will hardly be aware of these problems, for the boards reveal little regarding their internal problems. Differences of opinion within them are mostly kept from the constituency: their communications consist largely of promotional materials, a type of approach that frequently hides more than it reveals.

I am not personally familiar with the internal problems and differences found within the CRC Board of Home Missions, for example, but I have no doubt that they exist. I know also that their missionaries are quite representative of the sending constituency and thus can hardly be said to make a real team with a common goal that is defined more specifically than simply that of "bringing the Gospel." However, the scattered nature of that Board's efforts enables each missionary largely to work out his own particular vision. There is room, geographical room, that enables missionaries of different stripes to work under one organization.

The fact of CRC pluralism takes on a different hue in her mission efforts abroad. Each area may have a different approach due to a combination of local circumstances and missionary theory. However, it is imperative that within each area of endeavour a degree of unanimity should exist with respect to various missionary problems such as the relation of Christ to culture, the relation of church to kingdom and their relative priority in the missionary task, the relation of the so-called secular to the sacred. This need for unanimity becomes especially urgent in the CRC's work in Nigeria, where the effort is comparatively wide in scope and where there are missionaries with a variety of training.

Lack of such unanimity on the part of missionaries in a given field causes a great deal of confusion in the relation of the mission as a whole to that of the local church with which the mission cooperates. Divergence of basic opinions causes wavering and uncertainty on the part of the mission, a stance that is easily

detected by the local church and which reduces the mission's influence, even though it may officially continue to play the role of adviser.

The question is: Who should determine basic mission policy and goals? The CRC synod? I do not believe synod is capable, for mission policy deals with the rudiments of the Christian life and task – the very point at which there is so much division. The same holds true for the Board of World Missions, since it is representative of the entire denomination. I am, in effect, saying that this Board is not suited to perform the very task for which it was created, a conclusion reached not only logically from the situation described, but also borne out in fact: both its minutes and individual members testify to the failure of the Board to come to terms on basic issues that beg for missionary answers. What about the Executive Committee? This body is not called to decide on basic policies, but, rather, to decide how such basic policies should be implemented. As to the Executive Secretary and the three Area Secretaries, their task is to advise as to basic policies and to implement them daily, but they are not authorized to determine such mission philosophy. Furthermore, these officers themselves mirror the divisions within the denomination.

Perhaps the missionaries in each specific field should be empowered to set their own policies. After all, they are on the spot and know the situation. Yes, but a global mission policy must not be determined primarily on basis of immediate situation, though an existential awareness of that situation is a *sine qua non* for determining basic policy. However, the denominational situation is faithfully reflected in the composition of this missionary team, especially in Nigeria. Though all missionaries have as their personal and corporate aim the promotion of the Name of Christ, there is a great deal of difference of opinion as to how that aim is to be implemented, differences that are usually based on assumed but unexamined and even unconsciously-held notions. We find amongst these Nigerian missionaries every possible variety ranging from that of higher critic to Navigator. The present General Secretary there is an adherent of the McGavran school of thought, a pietistic movement. His predecessor described himself as a pragmatist. This author would classify himself as a Kuyperian.

The problematic situation just described is unavoidable under the denominational circumstances. Those in charge of recruiting missionaries have not been provided with an official mission approach and they thus are not authorized to reject a candidate on basis of his particular missionary theories. If recruiting officers do reject missionaries on that basis, they do so merely on basis of their own preferences. As long as a candidate is a member in good standing and is both physically and psychologically fit, he is eligible for appointment.

The aim of this article is not to point accusing fingers of failure to CRC missionary executives and their missionaries. The denominational circumstance almost seems to demand the described situation. If there is to be blame, it attaches to the entire denomination and that means to no one in particular.

During my nine years in Nigeria, the question occurs to me with increasing frequency: is the CRC missionary effort abroad doomed to uncertainty? Is there no solution? Only one answer has occurred to me, but it is an answer I myself do not particularly favour and neither do my colleagues with whom I have discussed the matter. Yet the answer impresses itself upon me with inescapable force as probably the only one that will solve the problem. It is, moreover, an answer that will probably go against the traditional American instinct of preferring the melting-pot approach to that of acknowledging pluralism. However, recent increased awareness of the pluralistic composition of American society and insistence on having this recognized may make my proposed solution more palatable. I expect that the Canadian segment of the CRC will find the solution about to be offered less repugnant, since both nationally and religiously they live in a society that has given much more official room for pluralism.

The approach I have in mind involves first of all a frank and *official* recognition of the fact of pluralism within the CRC. Every member of the denomination knows it exists, but the fact has never been allowed to play an *open* part in determining denominational policies. As a result, much backstage politicking goes on around matters of synodical studies and appointments of various board executives.

Having once recognized officially the fact of pluralism, I suggest the second step of implementing this fact be dividing the various mission areas among the main

traditions within the denomination. This idea would become a goal that could be implemented only gradually on the existing fields. Eventually this approach would make it possible for each individual mission effort abroad to develop coherently and thus be of greater service to the host countries and the new churches.

It needs to be stressed that this proposal does not arise out of a relativistic soul, for I myself am definitely a Kuyperian and frequently find it difficult to appreciate my pietistic and other colleagues in our efforts to set policies. The proposal is an effort to overcome the denominational divisions in the CRC mission program for the sake of consistency, coherence and depth.

The objection might be raised that such an approach would make for a number of narrow-minded mission approaches. To be sure, the proposed solution could degenerate to such a level, but it is by no means inherent in the idea. Each main school of thought has ample room for varieties within its basic framework. Furthermore, one must not identify definiteness with narrow-mindedness. Finally, were the choice to be between indefiniteness and narrow-mindedness, a study of their respective effectiveness throughout history would probably result in favour of the latter. Indefiniteness may be suitable for debating societies or even for organizations such as publish the *Reformed Journal*, but it works havoc in an effort geared to *action*.

I must hasten to add that I do not expect automatic formulae that will easily solve every problem missionaries face under the proposed scheme, but I do suggest that the proposal would set the stage for making missionary coherence *possible*.

The time is ripe for re-thinking of CRC missionary commitment and philosophy. The Executive Committee of the Board has just decided to do such re-thinking. I, for one, was greatly encouraged by their recognition of the need for such a decision. On the other hand, I also feel that it will not result in anything definite and coherent as long as CRC pluralism is officially ignored. The fact a new general director – who is, incidentally, a Kuyperian, judging from his doctoral dissertation – has been appointed recently also makes the present propitious for a new and realistic approach, for Kuyperians are by definition proponents of radical pluralism.