

Christian Courier

Christian institutions without pillars

It is astonishing how much one generation of Reformed immigrants built. Those of us in the next generation who struggle to live up to the network of Christian organizations they founded are left shaking our heads. How did they manage with far fewer resources?

Posted Apr 25, 2016 / by Robert Sweetman / Apr 25, 2016 in Editorial
Christian institutions without pillars

It is astonishing how much one generation of Reformed immigrants built. Those of us in the next generation who struggle to live up to the network of Christian organizations they founded are left shaking our heads. How did they manage with far fewer resources?

Their institution-building, however complicated, was expressed with great simplicity. "Pro rege" intoned the Latin lovers among them; "building the Kingdom" said the rest. The comprehensiveness of their ambition was framed by the "not one square inch" phrase, which was Abraham Kuyper's play on the Reformed community's spiritual orientation: the God-breathed sanctity of ordinary living.

There was a model, of course. It was the Reformed "pillar" within the culture and society of The Netherlands. This "pillar" was a culture- and society-wide weave of institutions animated by a Reformed understanding of the world. I mean God's fallen and redeemed creation moving toward consummation in and through spiritual struggle between "spirited" institution-building communities.

Growth of pillarization

This "pillar" was beautifully adapted to a period of European history that has been called the Age of Ideology (Weber, Dilthey, Mannheim). The "Age" was itself a response to the fear of revolution that loomed everywhere in Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution (1789-1848). Over the next hundred years quite a number of European societies experimented with "pillarization." The multiple communities of a given country would develop institutionally alongside each other espousing competing total-visions of the social and cultural good, while finding ways to cooperate at the political level. The hope was this would allow Europe to live with internal diversity while avoiding the suppression of communities that carried with it the perennial threat of revolutionary outbreak. Two world wars and a corrosive Cold War put paid to that noble hope, but we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Abraham Kuyper and successors found under the rubric of sphere-sovereignty religious resources they used to mobilize a good portion of the Reformed people of The Netherlands into one such ideological community. It came to exercise an effective and self-consciously Reformed influence on the social, cultural and political evolution of The Netherlands. To the Reformed immigrants coming to Canada in the 1950s and 1960s the question seemed obvious: Aren't we called to build to similar effect in Canada?

A changing world

But even as they were erecting Christian churches, schools, colleges, labour unions, farmers associations, business associations, media initiatives, mental health networks, old peoples' homes, political advocacy groups, political parties, theatre troupes and art galleries across Canada, the world in which such a coherent Reformed

institutional “pillar” seemed an obvious good was fading. It was not only that Canadian society seemed less open to such social and cultural construction. Even in Europe “depillarization” was transforming the late twentieth and early twenty-first century landscape. The comprehensive visions of the good that animated the competing communities and institutions seemed ever less credible. Social commentators noticed the change. They spoke of “an incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard) to name the loss of faith. Reformed Christians have not been immune.

Such changes have led to uneasy questions. Have our institutional start-ups become mere vestiges, sad monuments to our grandparents’ naïveté? Could they continue to support the people of God in their faithful living in a world if they no longer judge themselves called to separate from and compete with others who live and think differently? Could Reformed institutions become points of contact and cooperation, vehicles for the realization of our shared struggle with others for greater justice, greater solidarity, greater peace, more love and trust, less bitter suspicion?

Communal discernment needed

These are questions Reformed Christians must find effective answers for. These answers must seem right to younger generations that have grown up with at best ambivalent attitudes toward institutional life. We must invite them into the communal discernment and listen carefully to how the Spirit speaks through them, for they must come to identify the good of institutional arrangements for their own generational mission if the organizations their grand- and great-grandparents built are to have a future.

There is precedent for such a reversal of the habitual sonic direction from older mouths to younger ears. Think of the transformation of musical and prayer conventions in Reformed worship all over Canada. Such reversals are not easy. It takes humility and sacrifices, kind of like the sacrifices our grandparents made to build Christian cultural and societal institutions in the first place. But what an opportunity to take the experience of the young seriously and so get a bead sooner rather than later on the opportunities for cultural and societal faithfulness of the new era we have entered.

My sense is that in the world our youth inhabit, Christian organizations will have to learn to serve not as strongholds built to support intercommunal competition, but as places of encounter in which Reformed Christians practice hospitality and active listening. I would say that the opportunities for Christ-service our grandparent’s energy made possible are golden. I have happily bet my own adult life on it and have never regretted the sacrifice and effort.

About the Author
Christian institutions without pillars

Robert Sweetman

Robert Sweetman teaches at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.