

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination?**

**Donald A. Luidens**

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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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# National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination?

*Donald A. Luidens*

*Forty years ago we asked, What is the purpose of a denomination? The answer: A structure that carries out our mission, builds up institutions, enforces procedures, and publishes materials. It seemed the purpose of congregations was to support the denomination.*

*Today we ask the same question. But our Mission and Vision Statement, adopted by last year's General Synod, provides a different answer: "Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry." The denomination serves congregations.<sup>1</sup>*

## Prologue

Initial strokes of the death knell of the corporate structure of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) were sounded in the early 1950s. Over the next forty years these peals have grown louder, although they have not rung their last. The lessons of the last half of the twentieth century have been lessons of the growth and rationalization of the corporate model, and then of its decline and transformation in this mainline Protestant church.

1. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "Path to the Twenty-First Century," *Church Herald*, July/August 1998, p. 17.

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## Introduction

In 1992 Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler wrote about the rise and fall of the corporate organizational structure among mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the late nineteenth century and reaching its zenith in the 1960s, the mainline's adoption of the corporate model of organization for its national structures paralleled the rise of modern bureaucracies in business and politics. Large-scale programs and objectives necessitated large-scale, highly formalized organizations to carry them out. Moreover, with the large-scale bureaucratic machinery came grand, outward-looking visions. As was happening in big business, so too in the church. Corporate management techniques, which were regularly upgraded and refined in the secular sphere, were systematically appropriated by church bureaucracies as well.<sup>3</sup>

The corporate denomination "metaphor" (their term) seems to be an apt representation of the organizational formula that saw the establishment and routinization of religious communions throughout the United States. The wide-open "religious marketplace" in the post-World War II era accelerated the development of this corporate model. Like competing businesses occupying a growing market niche, Protestant denominations around the country routinely perfected their production processes and marketing techniques. In these early years the level of competition was minimal and "success" was widespread. However, over time the religious marketplace became a crowded one, competition grew and success became more elusive, which accelerated the transformation of the corporate denomination.

Among the defining characteristics of the corporate denomination was a highly evolved bureaucratic structure, often centralized in a "national office" and undergirded by democratically elected synods and boards.<sup>4</sup> This elaborate matrix provided denominations with the administrative and material resources needed for their collective missions. The corporate entity also served as a visible representation of the denomination's success. If it sported a visible bureau-

2. Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 307ff.

3. Donald A. Luidens, "Organizational Goals, Power, and Effectiveness" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1978), and Donald A. Luidens, "The National Staff in Its Tenth Year," *Church Herald*, October 6, 1978, pp. 13-15.

4. Donald A. Luidens, "Bureaucratic Control in a Protestant Denomination," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (June 1982): 163-75.

cratic structure, a denomination could take its rightful place in the pantheon of established national churches.

Moreover, reflecting the imperialistic optimism of the age, the corporate model ushered in a worldwide vision for Christian ministry (symbolized in the title of the flagship mainline Protestant journal of this era, the *Christian Century*). For many Protestant churches this vision was also the driving force behind an aggressive “global mission” program, ecumenical and activist in style, evangelical and engaging in tone. The corporate model fueled, and was in turn fueled by, a Christianity that was outward looking and expansionist. While often complicitous with Western colonial chauvinism, this American Christian culture was also redolent with concerns about human needs among the world’s most economically and politically disadvantaged.

Thus, in both form (a highly refined growth- and program-oriented bureaucratic structure, complete with centralized authority often residing in “national staffs”) and mission (a global vision which necessitated challenging local congregations to move beyond their own limited environments), the corporate denomination was very much a “modern” institution.

The death of the corporate model, according to Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler, involved both the loss of this outward, expansionist vision and the failure of the large-scale, bureaucratically structured, highly centralized national executive offices. In the wake of this corporate pattern, they suggest, has risen the denomination as “regulatory agency,” one which asserts and enforces appropriate conduct and belief on controversial social issues. Concerned with right thinking or acting rather than with building a global and ecumenical community, the denomination as regulatory agency finds itself mired in interminable crises, precariously straddling moral and ethical divides.

### **The “Corporate Denomination” Comes to the Reformed Church**

The history of the RCA has followed closely the pattern suggested by Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler. As the world mission and Sunday school movements grew during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the RCA developed ad hoc and largely autonomous institutional structures to promote members’ involvement in these enterprises. However, not until after World War II was the full force of the corporate model felt within the RCA. The maturation of a formal bureaucracy — the corporate model — during the 1950s was closely followed by its wane in the 1970s. By the opening of the twenty-first century the corporate structure of the RCA was in uncertain straits, hanging on with a re-

duced staff to a localist agenda that had considerably narrowed the grand scale of earlier visions. As will be seen below, these stages of the metamorphosis of the denomination were not anticipated — or even desired.

The postcorporate regulatory agency Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler write about does not fully describe the current situation in the RCA. While the denomination does have a limited prophetic voice (which Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler associate with “regulator denominations”), this appeal is a vestige of its more prominent, 1960s forerunners. Rather than represent a new departure, taking positions on controversial social policy issues has been routinized as denominational “business as usual,” a role the congregations seldom include under their own aegis. However, in recent years the prophetic voice, too, has lost its cutting edge and has been domesticated as an extension of evangelism (for those on the right) or mission (for the remnant on the left). In these capacities, even the prophetic role has been largely absorbed under the rubric of local activism.

It has not been to regulatory responsibilities that the corporate denomination has been yielding its centrality in the RCA. Rather, the shrinking corporate denomination is being overtaken by a hyper-localism characterized by the axial role played throughout the church by individual congregations. In an unprecedented fashion, congregations are coming to see themselves as autonomous actors within the historically “connectional” Reformed Church.

Symptoms of this quest for autonomy include the growing number of congregations that have tried to unilaterally discharge their pastors, a function constitutionally reserved for the classis (the regional judicatory of ministers and selected elders), which “constitutes” the congregations and their relationship with pastors. Moreover, congregations exercise considerable choice in the religious material they purchase, the forms of worship they use, and their contributions to the activities of the denomination’s branches. Reformed Church publications, lectionary, and programs are finding a diminishing audience as parachurch groups compete for congregational dollars. Finally, a handful of congregations have in recent years elected to withdraw from membership in the RCA — negotiating separation agreements that entail compensation for property, consideration for ministers’ pensions, and other matters. Significantly, churches from both liberal and conservative communities have been involved in this severance. In each case the departing church found the congregationalist pattern of self-governance more to its liking, and has affiliated with Baptist, nondenominational, or United Church of Christ associations. While the number of disaffiliating congregations remains small, each severance creates ripples of discontent and disillusionment. As ideological battles become more frequent, these departures may become more common.



As congregations continue to assert their centrality in the Reformed Church, the corporate denomination finds itself left increasingly out in the cold. In a noble effort to find a productive role in the church, the executives who currently embody the corporate structure have turned to greater engagement with localism as their calling. This appears to be a cause with diminishing prospects, and may prove to be the final gasp of an institutional model that has succumbed to external structural and cultural changes beyond its control and to internal institutional decisions which, often unintentionally, place the corporate denomination in the cross hairs of localism.

### *Undermining, External Forces*

Amidst the euphoria of the post-World War II years, the growth of the institutional church was taken for granted throughout middle- and upper-middle-class America. As Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens have written: "In 1955 *Time* magazine rhapsodized: 'Everybody knows that church life is booming in the U.S., and there are plenty of statistics to prove it.' *Newsweek* dedicated its March 28, 1955 cover story to 'Resurgent Protestantism.' It pointed to 'the vast resurgence of Protestantism' experienced in Sunday schools, lay groups, and seminaries."<sup>5</sup>

The RCA was party to these rollicking good times. Its active communicant membership grew by a third from 168,000 in 1946 to an all-time high of 225,000 in 1967. New congregations proliferated throughout the country, and a variety of levels of the church structure were bent to the task of creating new parishes. Individual congregations "gave birth" to "daughter" spin-offs, classes expanded their boundaries to include new congregations in the West and South, and the denomination engendered many "new church starts" through various funding programs. Particularly energetic in this process were several particular synod (regional) executives. They actively promoted new church starts, working to capitalize on the upward economic mobility and nascent suburbanization transforming the United States (and, to a lesser degree, Canada). In the words of one former staffer, "New churches were cropping up everywhere; we could hardly fund the new churches or find pastors for their pulpits!"<sup>6</sup>

But there were significant, hidden costs to these aggressive thrusts into congregation building, and some of them became apparent only during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The principal cost to the RCA was the advancement of a

5. Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 1.

6. Rev. Dr. Bert Van Soest, private conversation.

congregationalist subculture throughout the church. As a denomination with a “presbyterial” form of polity, the RCA traditionally based its governance on the collective wisdom of its ministers and elders. Individual congregations are instituted by classes, and they must seek classis approval for the disposition of their property. Ministers are called to local congregations by the classes, whose ranks they then join. In these and other ways the RCA has been a decidedly “connectionalist” denomination, carefully distinguishing itself from churches with congregational or episcopal structures.

In contrast, the newly developing congregationalist subculture was distinguished by its absorption with the local church and its autonomy. Moreover, eschewing historical RCA patterns of growth from within (an approach that became virtually impossible to sustain as birth/baptism rates plummeted during the twentieth century), the new congregations found themselves increasingly seeking new members through “market-driven” recruitment strategies and programmatic offerings to targeted groups (especially young suburban white families). The external focus that had fueled the corporate bureaucracy for over a century, a focus that had been expressed in world mission appeals as well as in urban and social justice ministries, gradually yielded to a form of religious localism and isolationism reminiscent of the “New Federalism” looming on the secular political horizon.

Such a profound change to the course of its history was not new to the RCA. From inward-looking, Dutch-language congregations of the colonial era, dependent upon imported leadership and expanding immigrant membership, the RCA joined the American Protestant mainstream during the nineteenth century. In the process, the prevailing notions of cultural expansionism and structural rationalism — that is, the ideological and organizational foundations for the subsequent corporate denomination — became part of the fabric of the RCA. The introduction in the nineteenth century of these external foci began to undermine the RCA’s historic, organic, Dutch ethnic culture (including the Dutch language that was widely used throughout the RCA long beyond midcentury). By the twentieth century, while retaining its Dutch accents, the RCA reflected other mainline denominations with its women’s mission board, its burgeoning empire of missionaries, its colleges and seminaries, and its ecumenical commitments (the RCA was one of the founders of the Federal Council of Churches).

A century later the new congregationalism — spawned by changing national demographics and a bureaucracy determined to capitalize on expanding market opportunities while facing competition for reduced resources — was to significantly erode the underpinnings of cultural collectivism that had held the RCA together for over a century. An early warning sign — the initial death knell, as it were — of this impending flood tide was the gradual reallocation of

institutional funds away from collective, denominational activities and increasingly toward local, congregational expenses. Per capita giving (in 1990 constant dollars) more than doubled from about \$210 in 1946 — a level which had held steady since the 1870s! — to \$500 in 1966.<sup>7</sup> Along with much of Middle America, the socioeconomic tide was rising in the RCA as well, and some of the increased disposable income found its way into the church's coffers. For a short time the resources were proportionately shared; as expenses for local congregations grew, so too did funds distributed "upward" to the denomination. Yet, even in the 1950s, an increasing proportion of the RCA's finances was being directed toward new church starts — a largely congregational objective.

However, by the mid-1960s funding in the RCA experienced a dramatic shift. Moneys were increasingly directed away from extracongregational undertakings in order to cover skyrocketing congregational expenses. Until then, roughly 25 percent of money contributed to the church was earmarked for external expenses. By the 1990s that proportion had plummeted to less than 10 percent.

It would appear that several trends were embedded in this changing pattern. For instance, pastors' salaries — long treated as arbitrary matters between congregation and cleric — came under increased regional synod regulation. Compensation levels were pegged to church size, length of ministry, and other "rational" standards, away from congregational wealth or whim. As a result, congregational budgets were taxed in a new way; discretionary funds for extracongregational purposes became more strained.

On another note, the proportion of small congregations (those with fewer than one hundred members) jumped between 1950 and 1990 from 20 to 40 percent of the RCA. Many of these ailing congregations were in eastern synods, which experienced significant out-migration; more and more RCA constituents were migrating away from rural and inner-city parishes and toward suburban ones. Small congregations have always been the least able to generate "surplus" resources from which extracongregational programs could be funded. As the number of small parishes grew, less support flowed to the national church.<sup>8</sup>

7. Roger J. Nemeth and Donald A. Luidens, "The RCA in the Larger Picture: Facing Structural Realities," *Reformed Review* 85 (winter 1993-94): 85-113, and "The RCA: A Virtual Denomination?" *Church Herald* 8 (November 1998): 8-11.

8. See Roger J. Nemeth and Donald A. Luidens, "The RCA: A Virtual Denomination" and "Dutch Immigration and Membership Growth in the Reformed Church in America: 1830-1920," in *The Dutch-American Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Swierenga*, ed. Hans Krabendam and Larry J. Wagenaar (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2000), pp. 169-88, and "Fragmentation and Dispersion: Post-Modernism Comes to the Reformed Church in America," in *Reformed Encounters with Modernity: Perspectives from Three Continents*, ed. H. Jurgens Hendriks et al. (Stellenbosch: Media.com, 2001), pp. 125-38.

Additionally, the RCA saw a tremendous shift in its core constituency away from the urban centers of the East Coast to the mid-sized towns and suburban sprawls of the Midwest and West. In the process, the denomination lost the historic economy of scale which had been present when its largest congregations were urban, "parish" churches. These "tall steeple" congregations — lining the main streets of New York City, Philadelphia, Newark, Jersey City, Albany, Schenectady, and Rochester — had long been the strongest supporters of denominational programs. They had been the chief proponents of a rationalized, bureaucratized, corporate denomination, a model their business and civic leaders had introduced to the church. They had historically contributed a disproportionate amount of their funds to denominational endeavors (often a third of their income went to extracongregational programs) and of their sons to RCA leadership positions. Indeed, so complete was their thrall over the operation of the corporate RCA that their dominance was long resented by their smaller, country cousins.<sup>9</sup>

In their place the suburbs of the Midwest and West have produced a like number of megachurches. However, as market-driven regional niche churches rather than as local parishes, this new brand of large congregation has extremely costly overhead. Constantly challenged to meet rising competition from other niche churches, a megachurch must continually provide new and innovative programs for prospective members. Membership size plays a key role in the survival/success of these churches, so the recruitment and currying of new members becomes the principal preoccupation of leaders and pastors — and an overwhelming demand on the church's budget. As a result, their operating expenses and localist focus have increasingly precluded supporting denominational endeavors. In the RCA today, the largest congregations (those with over one thousand members) contribute to denominational ventures at the same per capita level as the smallest congregations.<sup>10</sup>

As with most mainline denominations, the RCA was also hit during the 1960s with a rapidly declining birthrate. While it had long depended upon replenishing its member losses from within its own ranks, for the first time in its history the RCA found fewer young people in their pews from which to draw. This pattern had a devastating effect on the denomination's confidence in its ability to grow. Indeed, the drop in membership, which has been unabated

9. Historian Randall Balmer traces this tension back to rivalries in the seventeenth century between the burghers of New York City and the country folk of surrounding New Jersey and Long Island parishes! *A Perfect Babel of Confusion: Dutch Religion and English Culture in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

10. See Nemeth and Luidens, "The RCA."

since 1967, has led to a variety of efforts to promote church growth strategies — strategies which themselves reinforced the centrality of congregations over the denomination. Willy-nilly the RCA found itself a competitor with countless other denominations for new members in a wide-open religious marketplace.

In each of these ways, structural and cultural changes swirling around the RCA have buffeted and remodeled the corporate denomination. Each contributed to the diminishing size of the national staff, and each underscored the growing centrality of the local congregation. Internal forces were at work as well.

### *Internal, Corporate Decisions*

In a number of cases, what were intended as corporation-enhancing decisions in the RCA contributed paradoxically and inadvertently to the weakening of the corporate denomination. Some of these decisions were broadly supported at the time as “rational” and “efficient” choices for the church to make. For instance, the Board of World Missions (BWM) had long been the flagship branch of the denomination. During the 1950s and 1960s the RCA underwent a period of considerable “rationalization and consolidation” of its national office structure, as Coakley’s historical introduction notes. Much of this restructuring was at the expense of world missions. The story of the declining role of the BWM can be told in the fits and starts of bureaucratic decision making, and its ultimate cost has been the inexorable shifting of denominational focus away from external, global initiatives and toward internal, congregational ones.<sup>11</sup>

In 1952 the RCA established the Stewardship Council (which was formally staffed in 1956). Its aim was, in part, to systematize the budgeting procedures of the denomination so that the four competing boards (World Missions, Domestic Mission, Pension, and Christian Education) and agencies would not be (or be perceived to be) in competition with each other.<sup>12</sup>

As Marvin Hoff, a church historian and erstwhile national staff member,

11. In retrospect, historical trends have an air of inevitability. When those trends are the result of very human decisions, the impression of manipulation or contrivance can be inadvertently implied. Institutional decisions, often made for limited and immediate purposes, can interact with environmental changes to weave patterns of unintended outcomes. So it has been with the metamorphosis of the national staff of the Reformed Church in America. Misimpressions of manipulation or malicious intent are hereby disavowed (as are perceived slights toward individuals). Other persons, in the same positions and faced with similar choices, would likely have made the same (or parallel) decisions. What has come about is most evident in retrospect and may have had little chance of being averted.

12. See Nemeth and Luidens, “The RCA.”

recounts the process, the Stewardship Council initially divided all undesignated money sent to the denomination on a proportional basis reflecting the designated funds which had also been received.<sup>13</sup> For instance, if the BWM had received 38 percent of the designated funds in a given year, it would receive a similar 38 percent of the undesignated funds. As had long been the case, this board continued to receive the lion's share of denominational funding.

However, by 1958 the council had altered its allocation policy in order to promote greater funding parity among the boards and agencies in the face of their historic imbalance. One component of this policy was a plan to "equalize" funding for the various branches. Hoff cites the 1958 Minutes of the General Synod: "The new plan developed by the Stewardship Council provided that 'at the conclusion of the year all boards which have received more than their askings shall return to the Staff Conference such funds in excess of their askings as shall have come from undesignated funds. These returned undesignated funds, together with other undesignated funds, shall be used to assure all other boards of their full askings.'"<sup>14</sup> By Hoff's calculations, the BWM was the great loser during the next few years, receiving by 1965 barely a third of the undesignated funds that its previous proportion would have garnered.

The rationale for this reallocation of funds was an organizationally sound one: several boards and agencies were having difficulty meeting their basic operating expenses while the mission boards were generally flush with funds at the end of each fiscal year. Why not redistribute the resources so that all would have an operating level of support? Did not the sizable undesignated funds allow such redistribution?

This shift in funding resulted in two incipient wedges being driven between the corporate bureaucracy and the denomination's constituency. First, the allocations were increasingly going to programs and activities that were perceived as less important by the membership. While there was wide support for world and domestic missions programs among RCA members, there was less enthusiasm (perhaps founded on ignorance of the programs involved) for many of the other initiatives being undertaken — such as building the ministers' pension fund or stockpiling resources in the Extension Fund.

The second wedge was that the agencies which were the principal recipients of the enriched funding were precisely the ones that generated localist tendencies among the congregations. The Board of Education and the Church Building Fund were substantially enhanced during this period, and their efforts were explicitly localist in thrust.

13. Marvin D. Hoff, *Structures for Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 104.

14. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, p. 104.

Hoff writes the following about the impact on the Board of Education of the reallocation of resources into their coffers:

Providing new financial resources to the Board of [Christian] Education made the greatest program impact on the life of the Reformed Church. The additional funds came as the board was publishing the Covenant Life Curriculum with several other denominations and as American Protestant churches began to provide increasing staff services for the burgeoning educational programs in their local churches. The exceptionally large increase . . . made it possible for the board to increase its staff and provide significant new services to the church. . . . Without the new equalization policy this growth in staff providing educational services to local churches would not have been possible.<sup>15</sup>

While not the intended outcome, this expansion of the Christian Education portfolio resulted in rising expectations — both among congregations and among staff members — that supplying local congregations with services was of a growing premium.

Inevitably, increased denominational funding for new church starts further promoted competition for denominational dollars. New congregations in the Reformed Church were being promoted *ex nihilo*, as it were. While in the past, most new church starts had been extensions of existing congregations, the new model of church planting involved more generic church growth principles. For three centuries new congregations in the RCA were the organic extensions of existing congregations. With few exceptions (including “new” congregations developed to appeal to migrating RCA families who moved to southern California, Florida, and the American Southwest), new churches grew from established congregations that were commissioned to launch daughter congregations. Whether because of population growth in an existing RCA “enclave” or the migration of entire congregations (such as the move from an inner-city locale to the surrounding suburbs), “successful” new congregations traditionally followed current or former RCA congregants.

In the wake of the redirection of funds to the Church Building Fund, however, a whole new pattern of church planting was initiated. Once again, the rational-bureaucratic decisions made by the corporate leadership led to unintended, localizing consequences. The RCA adopted and adapted more widely established church growth techniques being promoted throughout the country by church growth specialists. Extensive “market research” would be undertaken in a “target community”; potential parishioners in the neighboring area were

15. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, pp. 105-6.

polled as to their preferred religious experience. A ministry would be designed to meet these market-generated expectations. Trained “evangelists” would be supported in these extension contexts, often at considerable denominational expense and for extended periods of time. Sizable resources would be needed to purchase property and set the stage for the construction of a religious facility. In the words of one former church executive, “The RCA has come to plant congregations the same way that Walmart decides where to open a new store.”<sup>16</sup>

In many cases — especially in the suburbs of the East and Midwest — this approach was successful. That is, many new congregations were opened (at the same time that others were abandoned, so the denomination’s total number of congregations changed very little throughout the postwar years) and new parishioners were being attracted. However, as generic mainline (or, increasingly, conventional evangelical) Protestants, this new constituency of religious shoppers represented a significant change in composition from earlier generations of RCA members.<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of the current conversation, their key commonality was that their involvement in the RCA was incidental to their commitment to the local congregation. If it existed at all, their loyalty to the denomination was very much an instrumental one, seeing it as the source of services rather than as an organic extension of their own church lives. This new breed of congregations came to see itself as the legitimate end source for denominational programmatic and funding attention. The resulting impact on the culture of the Reformed Church was a lasting one, leading to extensive discussions about the identity of the transformed denomination.<sup>18</sup>

The negative effect of the reallocation of funds on world missions operations was a profound one. Its extent is only partially indicated by the decline in the number of persons supported as RCA missionaries (a decline not entirely accounted for by this reallocation of funds). In 1946 there were 132 nondomestic missionaries listed in the Minutes of the General Synod; this number increased with the rising economic tide to a high of 157 in 1966. However, by 1986 the number had fallen below 1946 levels (to 130), and in 2000 there

16. Douglas Walrath, sociologist and church executive responsible for new church starts, made this comment in my presence during a conversation in the early 1980s.

17. Donald A. Luidens and Roger J. Nemeth, “‘Public’ and ‘Private’ Protestantism Reconsidered: Introducing the ‘Loyalists,’” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (December 1987): 450-64, and “Refining the Center: Two Parties of Reformed Church Loyalists,” in *Reforming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. William Trollinger and Douglas Jacobsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 252-70.

18. Donald A. Luidens, “Between Myth and Hard Data: A Denomination Stuggles with Its Identity,” in *Beyond Establishment: Denominational Cultures in Transition*, ed. Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pp. 248-69.



were only 75 missionaries supported on a full-time basis by the RCA. An additional 39 were World Mission Program Associates, often short-termers receiving partial funding through the RCA. More consequently, the shifting of funds away from world (and domestic) mission programs signaled the waning of a global perspective within the national staff and a redirection of its focus toward national and local issues.

The establishment of the Stewardship Council was followed in quick order (in 1961) by the formation of the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC, as it was widely known). This body was charged with the daunting task of conducting affairs on the denomination's behalf between sitting general synods. As a result of this charge, it accrued considerable and unprecedented authority. Through the office of the Stated Clerk of the Church, GSEC became the first denomination-wide agent to act on behalf of the entire RCA. Its very *raison d'être* was to rationalize and systematize the "business" of the Reformed Church — quintessential "corporate denominational" tasks. But the rationalizing and consolidating were not complete. As historian John Coakley has written:

The Executive Committee found itself charged early on (by the Synod of 1962) . . . to make a study [of] the possibility of further restructuring, which it entrusted to a committee (not insignificantly comprised of lawyers and businessmen) that recommended further consolidation. Their recommendations led to the third major structural change, the formation of the General Program Council in 1968, which carried consolidation of program significantly further by literally merging the Boards and agencies into a single corporation with its own representative board and staff.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout this period of reorganization and consolidation the driving motif was the corporate mandate to increase efficiency and productivity. Coakley points out that the principal actors in much of this were lay leaders. Business executives and lay professionals set the pace of bureaucratic rationalization and served on the restructuring committees which marched this process to fruition. Thus, during the stages that brought the RCA to fully embrace the corporate model, theological reflection was not an integral component, although there was some effort to legitimize the process with theological rhetoric. For instance, it is not accidental that the initial organizational entity in this process was named the "Stewardship" Council, an indication of the implicit theological model that dominated this period. While the rationalization of pro-

19. John W. Coakley, "National Organization in the Reformed Church in America: Some Historical Background" (paper shared with author, July 30, 1998, 26 pages).

cesses and structures was driven by the management paradigms of the business community, its theological legitimation was couched in terms of “stewardship” of the church’s resources, the religious equivalent of “bang for the buck.”<sup>20</sup> Issues of justice, service, and commitment, all of which had undergirded the early stages of the corporate model and each of which was firmly grounded in Calvinist theological formulations, increasingly gave way to arguments of efficiency and productivity for “stewardship’s” sake. While the structures grew more rational, they grew more remote from their constituencies.

Other “rational” decisions inadvertently helped to undermine the corporate model in the RCA. In response to the growing budget crunch mentioned above, and to the membership’s growing disquiet about the perceived remoteness of “475” (the national headquarters of the RCA is housed in the Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive, New York City), the General Program Council (GPC) initiated a decentralization venture in 1968. This innovation resulted during the next decade in a general dispersal of the RCA’s national staff throughout the regional offices of the denomination.<sup>21</sup> Hoff comments on this decision: “[T]he General Program Council developed its ‘centers’ proposal which assumed that the resources of the Reformed Church could be more thoroughly released for mission through several decentralized locations rather than through one central office.”<sup>22</sup> The consequence was that program agencies were scattered around the country — women’s programs in one locale, domestic missions in another; publication and distribution facilities in one city, new church start agents in another. Most dramatically, the world mission staff was divided by region of the globe served — the Middle East executive stayed in New York City; the agent for Far Eastern missions was housed in California; the one responsible for Latin and South America was in Iowa; and so on. Once again, “efficiency for mission” was the legitimating watchword for a step that decentralized the denomination’s national staff and thereby diluted the cohesion of the corporate entity. The unanticipated consequence was, once again, the undermining of external programs, as the locus of RCA activity was moved away from external programs and toward local ones.

20. When translated to the world mission field, this model of cost accounting spelled doom for mission work in the Middle East, Japan, and the Indian subcontinent. The “yield” in terms of converts to capital expended was lower in these places than elsewhere, such as in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Mission funds were gradually directed away from the former and into the latter. In recent years, funds have been further reallocated toward work in Eastern Europe, widely perceived as a field ripe for a great harvest. Stewardship language lends itself nicely to concerns of bureaucratic productivity and heathen conversion rates.

21. See Luidens, “Organizational Goals, Power, and Effectiveness.”

22. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, pp. 159-60.

Arie Brouwer, the associate general secretary of the GPC (1968-77, and general secretary of the RCA, 1977-83), was instrumental in this process of dispersion of the members of the GPC staff. His experience, prior to becoming associate general secretary, had been exclusively in local parishes. While Brouwer had served for a time on the governing body of the Board of World Missions, his predisposition had always been toward parishes. This inclination is evident in his rationale for the regional centers: "[World] mission cannot be carried out in separation from local mission. The dispersal of world mission staff, missionaries and Christians from other countries across the Reformed Church is an essential part of the center style. I believe it is fundamental to a renewal of our participation in world mission."<sup>23</sup> Looking back on the restructuring from the perspective of 1977, Brouwer reaffirmed this initial intention:

The development of . . . field services staff [the national staff executives of the respective boards and agencies] and a growing emphasis on the importance of communication between the staff and local congregations gradually led the boards to locate an increased number of their staff out of New York. . . . In 1972 the General Program Council took a further step in this direction by regionalizing its administrative structure and assigning its entire program staff to such regional structures. *This administrative reorganization and dispersion of staff was designed to relate national program services more closely to local congregations.*<sup>24</sup>

It was Brouwer's notion that, by bringing the members of the national staff into closer proximity with congregations, they would serve as leaven to the churches. Indeed, that was the case; national staff members were much more visible in the local judicatories of the denomination and in local congregations. However, by displacing a lively informal network of staff relations (which had existed in "475") and by decentralizing power, this dispersion further undermined the cohesiveness of the historic mission structure and facilitated the weakening of its national and international mission.

With the establishment of regional centers, the leadership of the RCA also shifted dramatically from those who had been highly invested in external programming (principally world and national mission advocates) to those who were primarily engaged in serving congregations (such as Christian Education developers and promoters of new church starts). In the course of barely fifteen years, former missionaries and those who were aggressive proponents of world and do-

23. Hoff, *Structures for Mission*, p. 160.

24. Arie R. Brouwer, *Reformed Church Roots: Thirty-Five Formative Events* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1977), p. 108, emphasis mine.

mestic mission programs virtually disappeared from the ranks of the principal executives. In their place came denominational “team players” — that is, skilled administrators who looked to the smooth functioning of the corporate structure as a whole rather than the promotion of world and domestic missions.<sup>25</sup>

A final illustration of the shifting culture of the corporate denomination is buried in the publication history of the denomination’s journal, the *Church Herald*. Beginning with volume 1 in 1944, the *Church Herald* was intended to provide the denomination with a single forum for discussion and reflection. During the heyday of the corporate denomination, the fortunes of the *Church Herald* soared. By the mid-1950s it boasted more than 50,000 subscribers. Regular features attested to the world mission program of the church, and the editorial thrust championed American evangelical themes. Operating under an independent board, the *Church Herald* was reluctant to be drawn into the denomination’s growing corporate structure, a lure which was unrelenting as the corporate structure solidified.

The independence and success of the *Church Herald* was not to last. Subscriptions continued to rise until 1969, peaking at over 78,000 (these and subsequent subscription data were published annually in the Minutes of the General Synod). Gradually at first, subscriptions began to fall off; by 1984 fewer than 44,000 subscriptions remained. As a result, the *Church Herald* began to cut back from its weekly publishing schedule. From 1962 to 1973, summer issues came out biweekly. Beginning in November 1973, the paper further reduced its publication rate so that it appeared biweekly throughout the year. In 1982 the summer issues became monthly ones, a harbinger of things to come.

In January 1989 the editor, John Stapert, announced “A New Beginning” for the *Church Herald*. Attributing rising costs to postal rate changes, Stapert revealed that the *Church Herald* would now appear on a monthly basis: “You won’t be getting a *Church Herald* as often this year as last — just twelve times, once a month, rather than the twenty-two times you received it in 1988. But

25. The author sat in on a (representative) Administrative Council meeting during the general synod of 1976. The council was headed by the executive secretary — the “chief operating officer” under the general secretary’s more public “chief executive officer” role. In addition, there were three staff members responsible for “operations” or “interpretation” of the denomination’s program, and three who were regional secretaries, responsible in part for interacting with their regional judicatories. None of these officers had been a missionary — although one had spent a short term overseas (his denominational portfolio had nothing to do with mission work, however). Moreover, while the regional secretaries were charged with oversight of some aspect of world or national mission, their personal experiences and immediate-past responsibilities had been on the local level — serving congregations through the development of Christian education material or through church extension projects.

with twice as many pages in each issue, and twice as long to read, reflect on, and react to, its contents, we hope this *Church Herald* will be the helpful and challenging denominational magazine the RCA needs as it nears the last decade of the twentieth century.”<sup>26</sup>

While postal rates were indeed escalating, that was not the whole story for the contraction of *Church Herald* publication. Subscriptions — which had been voluntary throughout the history of the journal — were significantly reduced. On the eve of the “New Beginning” initiative, only 41,000 subscribers were still on the rolls. While striving to remain independent (the board continued to be independently selected) and reflect the interests of lay members, the *Church Herald* suffered from growing competition from outside publications, the decline of denominational loyalty among parishioners, and general malaise about extracongregational matters. Significantly, the quality of the publication, the editorial rigor, and its commitment to the RCA were extremely high, belying the weakening subscription pattern.

By 1993 the circumstances surrounding the publication’s financial status were so acute that major transformations were required to sustain it. These came about, in part, through muting the independent voice of the *Church Herald*. As recounted in the 1992 report of the General Synod Executive Committee to the General Synod:

In an earlier study GSEC indicated that the relationship between the *Church Herald* and the General Synod “should be closer and more mutually enhancing.” . . . The *Church Herald* should create a sense of identity, build community for the denomination, and provide news and information of what is happening throughout the RCA. There should be more emphasis on material about and from within the RCA, even if it reduces the number of articles of a generic nature about topics relating to Christian living. The editor should be allowed to retain a high degree of editorial discretion *in order to further the work and witness of the denomination.*<sup>27</sup>

In exchange for being incorporated into the “assessment” structure of the general synod (each congregation would be assessed subscription rates based on its membership), the *Church Herald* was made available to every RCA family. On the recommendation of its incumbent president, the 1992 General Synod adopted the following measures: “To send the *Church Herald* to every household of the Reformed Church in America as a benefit of membership in the denomination, beginning in 1993; and further, to set the General Synod assessment for

26. John Stapert, “A New Beginning,” *Church Herald*, January 1989, p. 4.

27. Minutes of the General Synod, 1992, vol. 72, p. 72, emphasis mine.

the *Church Herald* in the 1993 General Synod operational budget at \$4.87 per active-confirmed member; and further . . . to urge every RCA congregation to submit its membership list to the *Church Herald* by September 1, 1992.”<sup>28</sup> After having long resisted absorption by the corporate structure, the *Church Herald* is very much a part of that apparatus today. Financial constraints and the impetus for consolidation and constriction have had a profound impact on this journal.

Thus, at the very time the RCA was most fully incorporated as a bureaucratized organization, the stage was being set for its further transformation and shrinkage. Indeed, the very rationalizing processes that marked the bureaucratic ethos were instrumental in undermining the corporate model.

### The Final Thrust

The corporate model in the RCA is not yet buried; while it has shrunk significantly in size, it has resorted to displacing its outward-reaching objectives. Its most recent step has been the transition from an agency acting *on behalf of* congregations to one acting *on* congregations — the national structure fully engaged with local matters. While the groundwork for this transition was laid during the 1960s and 1970s, the decisive stages began in the 1980s under the leadership of Edwin Mulder (1983-94) and came to full fruition under Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (1994-present), the most recent of the general secretaries of the RCA. For the former, the change in focus was a gradual and reluctant one. As the paragraphs at the outset of this chapter attest, the latter has embraced the new order and has seen in it a viable thrust for the corporate denomination.

### *The Mulder Years*

In the words of Kenneth Weller, then president of Central College, an RCA-affiliated college in Iowa, and a lifelong friend of Mulder, the touchstone of Mulder’s service as general secretary was his pastoral approach. Witness Weller’s comments at the time of Mulder’s retirement: “In Ed Mulder’s case, his remarkable success clearly derives from the fact that deep at the core of his being beats a pastoral heart. He has been a pastor to me for thirty-five years, as he has been for countless others. But in a very real sense he has been a pastor to all of us as members of the Reformed Church in America.”<sup>29</sup>

28. Minutes of the General Synod, 1992, vol. 72, pp. 198-99.

29. Kenneth Weller, “The Pastor as Leader,” *Church Herald*, June 1994, p. 19.

Despite his relational and pastoral predisposition, Mulder was not blind to localism's challenge to the corporate denomination. The matter of finances provided several instances of this challenge. At the end of 1991, the General Program Council found itself in considerable debt. Breaking from long-standing practice, the elected members of the GPC (through the staff) decided to appeal directly to "friends" for financial support. Pastors, missionaries, and other denominational leaders — active and retired — were solicited for donations to sustain the corporate structure. Some of the shortfall was covered in this way, but it was clear from the responses that parishioners (and Mulder himself) were uneasy about this direct encroachment on the autonomy of local congregations. Mulder wrote in his monthly editorial in the *Church Herald*:

The year-end appeal has again raised the issue of direct solicitation; that is, the denomination contacting individuals directly rather than through the local congregations. There are those who feel that this undermines congregational giving. In no way does the General Program Council want to diminish giving to the local congregation. . . . Somehow we have to find a way to provide RCA members with an opportunity to become informed about the mission of our denomination and to support it, without taking away from the local congregation. After all, we are part of one body.<sup>30</sup>

While some people saw this issue as a matter of congregational autonomy, Mulder felt it was one of denominational integrity. Despite Mulder's plea that the unity of the denomination and its congregations be honored, the issue of finances would continue to plague the corporate RCA.

A year after this episode Mulder directly addressed the issue of localism (what he called "congregationalism") in his monthly editorial: "One of the trends in religion today is an expanding spirit of what is called congregationalism. It means simply that each congregation considers itself autonomous; that the final authority for decision-making is in the assembly of the local congregation. . . . It comes as a surprise to some people that Reformed Church congregations are not entirely autonomous. No RCA congregation is at liberty merely to do its own thing. We are a connectional church."<sup>31</sup>

This issue clearly troubled Mulder. In the next month's editorial he returned to it, challenging congregationalism's implicit religious isolationism as an affront to the denomination's Reformed heritage. He concludes: "The ways denominations defined themselves in the past are becoming increasingly blurred. There was a day when churches — even our church — defined them-

30. Edwin Mulder, "A People Who Respond," *Church Herald*, April 1992, p. 11.

31. Edwin Mulder, "The Reformed Connection," *Church Herald*, February 1993, p. 11.

selves in over-against terms. Today the emphasis is on the experiential. We stress our similarities rather than highlighting our differences.”<sup>32</sup>

Mulder then considers the 1992 article by Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler (cited above) and its implications for the RCA: “I ask myself, Who is the denomination? Is the General Synod the denomination? The General Program Council? The seminaries? The denomination is us [*sic*]. It is 967 congregations comprised of 340,000 members. It encompasses our history, liturgy, standards, polity, programs and institutions.”<sup>33</sup> His solution to the growing dilemma? “We must close the gap between individuals, congregations, and the denomination. We are all members of one body. In unity there is strength. There is much that needs to be done. We need to be about God’s mission in the world.”<sup>34</sup> For Mulder the pressing issue of his tenure was the headlong rush of the congregations of the RCA into isolationist enclaves. He brought to bear the diminishing resources of the corporate structure to advance this unity; but it was a frustrating struggle.

By the final year of his service, Mulder had come to recognize that the corporate denomination’s future focus would have to be on congregations — although he was loath to relinquish the denomination’s prophetic responsibility to challenge congregations to look beyond themselves: “The denomination exists primarily to serve congregations and to enable congregations to do what they cannot do for or by themselves. In a consumer age, denominational leadership must listen to what the church says it needs, while calling the church to be and do more than it asks. A general secretary is required to be both pastoral and prophetic.”<sup>35</sup>

### *The Granberg-Michaelson Years*

The tension between congregationalist demands and the connectional, ecumenical, and worldwide focus which had historically characterized the corporate Reformed Church has continued to intensify. While Granberg-Michaelson has a well-deserved reputation as an ecumenist, he signaled early in his tenure as general secretary his intention to focus the corporate denomination’s attention on the local congregation. In his inaugural interview with the editors of the *Church Herald*, he responded as follows:

32. Edwin Mulder, “Constantly Being Reformed,” *Church Herald*, March 1993, p. 22.

33. Mulder, “Constantly Being Reformed,” p. 22.

34. Mulder, “Constantly Being Reformed,” p. 22.

35. Edwin Mulder, “Gee, Ed, What Do You Do?” *Church Herald*, December 1993, p. 16.



Q. The search committee in its material reported about your “clear commitment that the local church is at the center of the mission of Christ in the world.” What does that mean to you?

A. It means that mission takes place in every congregation and that the life of the church comes in response to God’s mission in the world. Mission is not something that happens “out there” or “over there” but that happens from the local congregation.<sup>36</sup>

In this initial conversation, Granberg-Michaelson echoes Mulder’s concern with those who would see the local congregation as the final expression of “church”:

Q. How do you understand the relationship between local congregations and a denomination?

A. No local congregation can live successfully unto itself and be biblically faithful. Even the way in which we frame these questions, we still have this feeling that it’s the denomination out there and then local churches. . . . The denomination is all of us; when we begin to function out of a we/they mentality, it reveals a premise that is finally going to fail. The church simply can’t exist as only a local congregation. . . .<sup>37</sup>

Granberg-Michaelson then lays out his vision for the role of the denomination: “[F]irst, the denomination becomes that mechanism that links local congregations to each other, links them together in local situations. . . . Secondly, the denomination becomes the means by which the local congregation makes real, in concrete ways, its belonging to the church global, to the body of Christ throughout the world. Finally, a denomination becomes a means for taking the full diversity of members of Christ’s body and bringing them into interaction with one another.”<sup>38</sup> As this list of denominational responsibilities suggests, in his first year as general secretary Granberg-Michaelson struggled with the tension between inward-looking endeavors and outward-reaching ones.

However, by February 1995 he had clearly come down on the side of inward endeavors. At this time he prioritized “the denomination’s” (that is, the national corporate structure’s) efforts in a significantly different way:

36. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “Taking a Closer Look,” *Church Herald*, July/August 1994, p. 15.

37. Granberg-Michaelson, “Taking a Closer Look,” p. 15.

38. Granberg-Michaelson, “Taking a Closer Look,” p. 15.

First, the denomination exists to strengthen the life and ministry of the church in each local place. That means our 968 RCA congregations and also each of our forty-six classes. Strengthening such local ministry should be the focus of the denomination's resources, training opportunities, and educational efforts. . . . But then we are called to be part of the church global. Here, the facilities of the denomination exist to make specific connections between the local church and its global identity. Our world mission efforts, for instance, can be understood largely in this way.<sup>39</sup>

In this quotation the primacy of the corporate leadership's focus is unmistakably on the local congregation.

The impressive array of initiatives that have been directed at local congregations in the last decade makes obvious the ascendance of the localist focus for the corporate denomination. For instance, through the introduction and establishment of such denomination-wide programs as an elaborate training and structuring of diaconal ministries (soon to be followed with similar programs for elders); a biennial gathering of ministers and spouses for rest and religious rehabilitation; the financing and promoting of a unified computer network to connect all congregations;<sup>40</sup> the development of an extensive "urban ministry" enterprise to be carried out by local congregations;<sup>41</sup> the promotion of "vision statements" for local judicatories and congregations, statements which reflect the denomination's vision statement;<sup>42</sup> and a call for including some form of worship in all congregational meetings, the denomination's corporate engine has effectively interposed itself in the life of the local congregation on many levels.

Perhaps the most powerful and telling of these initiatives has been the reconceptualization of the congregation from principally a community of worship and renewal (foci which are still affirmed) to one that has an activist, "missional" priority. "Congregation as mission agent" is the watchword of this new image, and it serves as the principal corporate entrée into the lives of local congregations. As Granberg-Michaelson has written, "In the future, each con-

39. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "No Christian Is an Island," *Church Herald*, February 1995, p. 11.

40. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "A Chip off the Old Gutenberg," *Church Herald*, November 1996, p. 14.

41. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "New Opportunities for Ministry," *Church Herald*, March 1997, p. 19.

42. See Mathonnet-VanderWell's article in this volume; also, Granberg-Michaelson, "New Opportunities for Ministry," p. 14, and "Vision from the Mountain," *Church Herald*, June 1997, p. 22.

gregation in the RCA should come to see itself as a mission outpost.”<sup>43</sup> While congregations have long been involved in their local communities in a vast array of programs, it is only with this new corporate thrust that these programs have been stoked by denominational support and configuration.

At the present time, the focus of considerable denominational corporate effort is an urban ministry thrust, one being urged on congregations regardless of their particular social environments. With the support of several branches of the national staff (including the “minority councils” and the “urban ministries team”) and of regional judicatories engaged in urban ministry, this program is drawing congregations from throughout the RCA into new and creative efforts in cities.<sup>44</sup>

The earliest signs of the corporate crisis in the RCA were the diminishing of financial resources, a shrinkage that came with the shift during the 1960s away from extracongregational programs to local ones. The march of this financial erosion continues apace.<sup>45</sup> In recent years, numerous measures have been taken to stem the tide: individual missionaries are now required to engage in fund-raising for their own support (as clear a signal as any that “the goose that laid the golden egg” has been institutionally cooked); “area secretaries” — historically charged with overseeing global mission efforts in Asia, Africa, South America, and elsewhere — are now uniformly entitled Coordinator(s) for Mission Stewardship, a title not shared with nonmission executives and one indicative of their added fund-raising responsibilities; consolidation of classes has begun (particularly in the California and mid-Atlantic regions) and will continue; the utility of regional synod judicatories has been brought into question, and there are concerted efforts to disband or radically reconfigure them; staff in the corporate offices have regularly been “restructured” (a church structural euphemism for the secular euphemism “downsized”), and retirees have been reluctantly replaced.

There are also proposals on the table to reduce the representative apparatus of the denomination (although these have been resisted at the most recent general synods). It has been formally proposed that the general synod gather biennially and that standing boards and commissions meet less regularly than they currently do.

43. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “Four Key Issues in RCA’s Future,” *Church Herald*, September 1995, p. 17.

44. Granberg-Michaelson, “New Opportunities for Ministry,” p. 19.

45. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “Sharing Our Common Gifts,” *Church Herald*, March 1995, p. 10.

## Epilogue

Along with other mainline Protestant denominations, the Reformed Church in America found itself increasingly drawn into institutional rationalization that accompanied the rise of large-scale mission and Christian education work in the late nineteenth century. The resulting “corporate” structures in the RCA — embodied in a “national staff” initially located in New York City headquarters and focused on promoting and orchestrating foreign and domestic mission work — reflected the unique interests of the denomination’s membership. However, when the post-World War II church growth occurred, there was a vast reordering of priorities among parishioners. Local concerns became increasingly paramount, and the historic connectional underpinnings of the corporate model were significantly eroded.

As the national entity began to shrink, it sought a variety of ways to sustain itself. Almost as a final resort, it has turned its focus to the local congregation, directing much of its attention and resources on these bodies. In a real sense, the denomination has come full circle from the early-nineteenth-century experience. At that time the denomination was an ephemeral entity, vaguely charged with church discipline and order, and the local congregation was the focal point of all RCA activity.

What does the future bode? That is a tantalizing question. Perhaps Ingham and Mulder got it right, and we are on the verge of a twenty-first-century renaissance of denominationalism with a new face:

In 1928, the tercentenary year of the RCA, the Rev. John A. Ingham made this observation: “There are some today who seem to cherish the notion that a discarnate religion, one without organization, creeds, ceremonies, in short without embodiment of any sort, would be preferable to the concrete realities with which we are familiar. Of course such an altogether vague and misty church, if it could be called a church at all, would be entirely free from bureaucracy and ‘organizationalism,’ if we may coin a word. And it would likewise be as ineffective and inert as the fog. If one could lay off his body he would presumably be rid of rheumatism, toothache, and sundry ills that flesh is heir to, but it would be at the cost of life itself.” Ingham was saying sixty-five years ago that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. He was saying we need certain structures through which we do the work of church.<sup>46</sup>

46. Mulder, “Constantly Being Reformed,” p. 22.

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