

## Remarks to General Synod

By David W. Waanders

I am grateful to the Reformed Church in America and to New Brunswick Theological Seminary for the opportunity to have served as a theological professor in this church and at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. It is especially meaningful for me that this occasion occurs in Iowa, because Iowa is the place of my birth.

My field of study and teaching has been pastoral care. One of my central concerns in teaching pastoral care has been to help my students appreciate the role of the family in our formation, in our nurture, and sometimes in causing us pain and struggle.

I have thought of families as systems. The church is also a system, and understanding systems has been important in my view in providing meaningful family life and in contributing to effectiveness in ministry. I would like to use the theme of family to organize my remarks.

I was born in Sioux City, Iowa. My father grew up in Hospers, Iowa, and his family were members of the Christian Reformed Church and I was baptized in the Christian Reformed Church. Within a year of my birth my family moved to Michigan and then joined the Reformed Church in America.

My mother grew up on a farm near Sheldon, Iowa. My mother's family were among the founding members of the American Reformed Church of Primghar, Iowa. My mother was the oldest of ten children. If my family's sense of history is accurate, the Rev. Russell Redeker was the first pastor of that congregation and he came there as a young man just out of seminary. You can imagine how important a family with ten kids was to a young pastor trying to establish a new congregation. Russ spent a lot of his time with my mother's family, and there are many family stories about Russ's ministry in Primghar.

One of my favorite stories involves my mother's younger twin brothers, whose sole purpose in life was to have fun and create havoc. On an afternoon when Rev. Redeker was paying a pastoral visit to the family at the farm, my uncles put some blocks under his car's rear wheels, so when Russ had completed his visit and started up his car in order to leave, his back wheels spun wildly in the air. You can imagine his surprise and the hilarity which my uncles enjoyed. Russ was a good sport and had to put up with a lot with this spirited and complicated family.

Many years later I had a chance to connect with Russ when he worked at the RCA offices in New York City in domestic missions, and in his retirement years when he worked for New Brunswick Seminary in the development office.

My life in the Reformed Church has been characterized by family connections. During my high school years the Rev. Henry Vermeer and his wife, Alberta, moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan. Alberta had been my mother's favorite cousin. Henry is a distinguished pastor in the Reformed Church, having served in many parishes, and is now retired here in Pella. He was pastor of Hope Reformed Church in Grand Rapids during my high school years. I

watched him and was fascinated with his ministry, and I believe his life and witness were primary factors in leading me to consider ministry as a vocation.

Family systems theory has been a major contributor to my pastoral care classes, and if I think of my own family system I need to express my deep appreciation for my wife's family and their influence on my life and career. Janet's father was deeply committed to the Reformed Church in America. Janet's mother was a substantial contributor to our sense of family coherence. Both of them have had significant impacts on our lives and values.

Janet's father, Willard Wichers, was a major figure in Holland, Michigan, especially in his contributions to Hope College. His uncle, Wynand Wichers, was president of Hope College for a number of years. Willard served for many years as secretary of the Board of Trustees at Hope College. He also made significant contributions to New Brunswick Seminary in his service on its Board of Trustees. He has been a mentor to me in his vision and in his commitment to community service.

Another Reformed Church family connection for me is Elton Bruins. I worked with Elton for two years in a field assignment in Queens, New York, during my last two years of seminary. Elton provided me with numerous opportunities to practice ministry with young people—several of whom I have remained in contact. I also had the opportunity to experience ministry in an urban context. When Elton moved to Holland to join the religion faculty at Hope College he became very involved with my father-in-law in joining with him in their common interest in the archives of Hope College and Holland, Michigan. Elton and Elaine have continued to have a family connection with us.

Moving to a wider sense of family, my years at New Brunswick Seminary have also helped me to understand family in some significant ways. Being a member of a faculty is like being a member of a family.

We have been blessed at New Brunswick Seminary with a richness in diversity that is the envy of seminaries around the United States. When I describe a typical classroom at New Brunswick Seminary to my colleagues at other seminaries, they are amazed that we can reflect upon not just one cultural context, but Hispanic, Haitian, Korean, African American, Jamaican, and European American contexts. I am extremely grateful that this kind of diversity has graced my later years of teaching. It has enriched me, and my hope is that this kind of diversity will continue to grace the Reformed Church in America. I have tried to think about what this richness of diversity has to contribute to the Reformed Church's sense of family.

I would like to envision a Reformed Church committed to a sense of unity—thinking of ourselves as a connectional church.

I would like to envision a church which is open to debate and engaging differences in opinion and willing to strive for unity while we disagree.

I would like to envision a church which is committed to addressing issues of racism.

I would like to envision a church which is committed to addressing issues of injustice.

I would like to envision a church which is prepared to support persons struggling with poverty.

In my role as a teacher of the church, I have some concerns. My concerns about the current state of the Reformed Church in America have to do with what I see as fragmentation. We are missing the unity which is so necessary in a connectional church. We are too much concerned with local issues and not enough aware of how our churches need to be engaged in global issues—how each of our churches needs connectedness with all of our churches. This is a family metaphor for the whole Reformed Church in America and the global church.

We need to cultivate the capacity to debate and disagree and then come together around our common commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and our gratitude to God for calling us into a covenantal relationship to save us and to nourish us in faith. My prayer for the Reformed Church in America will continue to be that we be passionate in seeking unity in the church, but a unity that is respectful of diversity. One of our oldest theological convictions in the Reformed Church in America is stated in the Dutch language: “Eendracht Maakt Macht” (in unity there is strength).