Synod 2016 Rejests Doctrine of Discovery as Heresy

Synod 2016 rejected the Doctrine of Discovery as heresy in response to a study report on the topic.

The 68-page report mandated by Synod 2012 states that many Europeans tried to choke out Indigenous culture in North America, beginning with papal edicts during the 1500s and persisting in subtle ways to the present day. In the 1800s and 1900s, authorities used the Euro-superior worldview to place Native American children in boarding schools with the goal of assimilating them, the report states. One of those boarding schools, it adds, was a mission of the Christian Reformed Church: Rehoboth Christian School. The report is particularly critical of the Rehoboth school.

Synod recognized and gave thanks for “the love and grace extended over many years by missionaries sent out by the CRCNA,” but also acknowledged the pain of those who suffered from experiences in boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada, including Rehoboth Christian School.

But synod chose not to adopt most of the actions recommended by the report, such as forming a story-gathering commission, creating a denominational service of lament, or educating CRC members on the Doctrine of Discovery.

“With all respect to the task force, we felt that they had prescribed various actions without necessarily consulting with the Zuni and Navajo people,” said Daniel Zylstra. “We didn’t want to be prescriptive. We felt that it was not right to be dictating a process to a people who do not feel that they have been consulted or engaged in determining that process.”

Task force member Mark Charles, who has both Dutch and Navajo heritage, intimated that the lack of consultation was because Native American boarding school survivors are hesitant to dig into their painful past. “That’s the challenge at Red Mesa. There are certain conversations we don’t know how to have. There is a parental dynamic that exists because of the way that [boarding school students] were presented the gospel.”

Delegates participated in the Blanket Exercise to help grasp the emotions around the displacement of Native peoples by Europeans.

That got a strong reaction from the delegates from Red Mesa. “When people from Classis Red Mesa heard that I was coming to synod, over and over they said ‘Please tell the stories of love and grace and goodness that have happened in Rehoboth and Zuni Christian schools,’” said delegate Gail De Young. She proceeded to tell the stories of former boarding school students who had made strong connections with their supervising houseparents.

Ethnic advisor Darleen Litson told delegates that her boarding school experience was very good. “I want to acknowledge the missionaries who came out to the Navajo reservation to bring the gospel to our communities,” she said, weeping as she recited a list of Dutch surnames. “Because they brought the gospel, salvation came to my grandparents’ house, my mother, my children, my grandchildren, so to God be the glory, and I thank God for them.”
Ethnic Advisors Serve Synod 2016

Ethnic advisors for Synod 2016 were Darleen Litson, from New Mexico; John Lendein, from Alberta; and Sheila Johnson, from Michigan.

Up to seven ethnic advisors can be appointed to synod, but that number is decreased if the percentage of delegates to synod who are from ethnic minority backgrounds increases. This year 18 percent of delegates were from minority backgrounds.

—George Vink

Classis Arizona Mentors First-Time Synod Delegates

Long before Synod 2016, first-time delegates from Classis Arizona began their journey. José Rayas, an experienced delegate, prepared the group regarding both parliamentary procedures and the issues to be considered. Dan Kuiper, Samuel Aranda, and Erika Colyn kept in touch and had a great deal of discussion to be prepared to participate fully at synod. Rayas served as vice president of synod. All agreed it was worthwhile and helped their appreciation of synod and its workings.

—George Vink

Classis Arizona Delegates (l-r): Erika Colyn, Samuel Aranda, Dan Kuiper, and José Rayas.


Synod 2016 Officers

The officers elected for Synod 2016 had many years of synod experience between them. President Paul DeVries, 52, was at his seventh synod. Vice president José Rayas, 56, had already been to synod eight times.

First clerk Bert Slofstra, 63, was at synod for the eleventh time. And second clerk Elsa Fennema, 72, was at her third synod.

Noting the diversity of the officers, Slofstra said delegates are more sensitive to that than in earlier synods, electing males and females, different ethnicities, American and Canadian.

—Gayla R. Postma

Gina Taylor, Classis Hamilton: “What, specifically, are alleged to be the CRC’s sins? What are we apologizing for in Canada?”

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