

In Memoriam:
The Reverend Dr. Arie R. Brouwer, 1935-1993

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Published in
Perspectives
A Journal of Reformed Thought
December 1993, pp. 7-8

Dr. Arie Brouwer died at his home in Teaneck, New Jersey, on October 7, 1993. Arie had served in pastorates in the Reformed Church in America before moving to executive positions in the RCA denominational structure from 1968 to 1983, holding the top leadership position, General Secretary, from 1977 until he moved to Geneva, Switzerland, to serve the World Council of Churches as deputy general secretary in 1983-1984. He returned to this country to assume the position of general secretary of the National Council of Churches, which he held from 1985 to 1989.

Arie had been asked to reorganize a failing, faltering National Council of Churches. Yet, as is often the case, the call for reform encountered strong opposition from entrenched power blocs with vested interests in maintaining an inviable status quo. In a speech before the governing board of the NCC, Arie dared to “speak truth to power,” setting forth his vision for the council’s future through the restructuring he had been mandated to effect. With the governing board deadlocked and movement toward reconfiguration at an impasse, Arie resigned his position.

Arie was sad at this turn of events but never doubted that he had done what he was charged to do—and, failing to effect the necessary reforms, he would not have been content simply to manage an institution in a maintenance mode, for the ecumenical vision of the Church of Christ was the passion of his life.

That same passion plunged him into a new effort for justice and peace. Recognizing the critical nature of the Middle East conflict, Arie established Middle East Peacemakers. His hope was to lift the issues that divided Jew and Muslim, Israel and Palestine and the Arab states, in order to build bridges of reasoned discourse and understanding.

And then in December of 1992, Arie was diagnosed with a serious cancer. During the struggle against the disease that finally took his life, he wrote several journal pieces that he shared with a circle of friends and that will soon be published by the World Council of Churches. In one entry he was asked what his faith meant to him in the midst of his illness. He responded:

Long ago Horace Bushnell argued that children growing up in the church should never know themselves to be “other than a child of God.” That has been my experience. I recall it now in the hymns I especially treasured at various stages of my life, “Jesus Loves Me,” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “God of the Prophets,” and “God of Grace and God of Glory.” From love through service to justice and hope, my whole life has been a love affair with God. I do not intend to give that up just because I have cancer.

My last visit with my friend Arie Brouwer was on July 8 of this year in company with another mutual friend of college and seminary days, Dr. John Richard deWitt. For us all it was a sacred time as we reminisced and reflected together on the diverse ways of our pilgrimages. At one point I suggested that while our ways had become diverse over the years, we yet shared something very deep for we knew that we would each face our final moments in the same way, trusting the good and gracious God. There was a nod of agreement among us, acknowledgment of that deep trust that undergirded us all.

It was a difficult parting. I was so poignantly aware of the wealth of experience, insight, wisdom, and gifts of leadership possessed by my friend, now a ghost of himself. He had so much to give to the church in these days of faltering structures—and to the world with whose presidents and prime ministers he had conversed. Three weeks before his death the event of the accord between Israel and the Palestinians energized him with hope and with a sense of what was now necessary in order to effect a lasting peace.

Death came with a good deal of suffering, but finally as the strains of Handel's “Hallelujah Chorus” came to a close, Arie Brouwer bade good-bye to his beloved wife, Harriet, and his daughter, Pat. He closed his eyes and moved from life through death into the presence of the Lord of life. Arie Brouwer has left us with a model of one who was a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, a fearless leader and spokesperson for truth and justice, a believer whose hope was undiminished in the face of death. His legacy is ours to examine and to act upon. We have lost a significant leader, but the years and fruit of that leadership will not be lost.