

# EXAMINING THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA'S STAND ON HOMOSEXUALITY

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**1. THE GENERAL SYNODS OF THE RCA HAVE ADOPTED MANY STATEMENTS AFFIRMING A BIBLICAL POSITION CONCERNING HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY AND PASTORAL CARE** The synods meet annually. A minority has been persistent in seeking to reverse that position.

FROM THE RCA WEB SITE, [rca.org/homosexuality](http://rca.org/homosexuality)

In 1978, the General Synod voted to make a paper presented by the Commission on Theology available to RCA congregations. The paper stated that:

- "Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality."
- "While avoiding simplistic and obnoxious social crusades, the church must affirm through its preaching and pastoral ministry that homosexuality is not an acceptable alternative lifestyle. God's gracious intent for human sexual fulfillment is the permanent bond of heterosexual love. This redemptive word must be spoken, with sensitivity, caring, and clarity to any person who would make a perverted sexual choice, and to society as a whole."
- "It is one matter to affirm that self-chosen homosexual acts are sinful. It is quite another to reject, defame, and excoriate the humanity of the person who performs them. This distinction has often been missed. It is possible and necessary on biblical grounds to identify homosexuality as a departure from God's intent. However...there are no theological grounds on which a homosexual may be singled out for a greater measure of judgement. All persons bear within them the marks of the fall."
- "The denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology."

A report entitled "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual", presented to the General Synod in 1979, listed three areas of congregational life with which the church must come to terms if it is to witness effectively to the homosexual:

- Elimination of the double standard of morality applied to the homosexual. It often seems as though the church places certain sins, homosexuality among them, beyond its own responsibility for ministry and, by implication, beyond the reach of God's grace.
- The church should acknowledge its sins against the homosexual. Homosexuality is neither to be celebrated nor persecuted. Homophobia must be replaced by a sense of common humanity, the desire to understand, and the determination to put away the sins commonly committed against the homosexual, including

stereotyping, caricaturing, and enjoying disparaging humor at the homosexual's expense.

- The church should make a genuine effort to understand homosexuality. The church must be willing to understand and deal with the concrete life situation in which [the homosexual] finds himself. There is much we do not know about homosexuality, but we do know that it is a complex phenomenon (*MGS 1979*: 130-131).

In 1980, General Synod voted to adopt a resolution

To bring to the awareness of RCA members, congregations, classes, and synods competent programs and persons which can successfully help the practicing homosexual and lesbian, minister or layperson, overcome his or her homosexual behavior (*MGS 1980*: 97).

The 1990 General Synod voted to adopt an official position on the issue of homosexuality, as some classes felt there was confusion within the church as to the status of the 1978 report on homosexuality. The advisory committee recommended:

To adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings (*MGS 1990*: 461).

In 1994, General Synod voted to adopt another resolution addressing the church's relationship with homosexuals. The resolution stated:

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America recognizes and confesses that the Reformed Church in America has failed to live up to its own statements regarding homosexuality in 1978 (*MGS 1978*: 229-240), 1979 (*MGS 1979*: 128-135), and 1990 (*MGS 1990*: 461). Few in the Reformed Church in America have creatively and lovingly spoken with persons with a homosexual orientation about the truths of Scripture and the hope of the gospel. Many have participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior which humiliate or degrade such persons. Many of the churches within the Reformed Church in America have not provided an environment where persons have felt the acceptance and freedom to struggle with hard issues involving sexual orientation. Many Reformed Church in America members have shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity. For all these wrongs, this General Synod expresses its humble and heartfelt repentance, and its desire to reflect the love of Christ to homosexual persons. In all that this General Synod does, it seeks to obey the whole of Scripture, demonstrating in its own life the same obedience it asks from others. It calls itself and the whole church to a greater faithfulness to Christ in relationships with persons of homosexual orientation.

To this end, the General Synod calls the church to a process of repentance, prayer, learning, and growth in ministry. This process will be guided by the basic biblical-

theological framework presented in the previous statements of the General Synod (*MGS 1994: 375-376*).

In 1998, the General Synod called for a temporary moratorium on the issue of homosexuality. It adopted this proposal:

To instruct this General Synod to refrain from deliberative debate and policy decisions relating to homosexuality, as these matters have already been thoroughly addressed by previous synods, and to urge this same action upon the 1999 and 2000 General Synods.

To instruct the General Synod Council, through its Congregational Services Committee, to help enable congregations and classes to enter a process of intentional discernment concerning the pastoral challenges raised by the issue of homosexuality over the next two years, utilizing the study guide and other resources, in order to fulfill the actions called for on this matter by the 1994 General Synod (*MGS 1998: 60*).

In 2009, the General Synod voted to "affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps are not a preferred course of action at this time." The 2009 synod also asked the General Synod Council to monitor how the assemblies of the church are dealing with this issue and report back to the 2011 synod. Finally, the 2009 synod recommended that "officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved."

In 2012, General Synod voted:

While compassion, patience, and loving support should be shown to all those who struggle with same-sex desires, the General Synod reaffirms our official position that homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures, therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense; and further,

that the General Synod Council shall oversee the creation of an eight member committee made up of representatives appointed by each of the regional synods to pray and work together to present a way forward for our denomination given the disagreement in our body relative to homosexuality. The purpose of the committee is not to revisit our stated position, but shall operate with the understanding expressed earlier in this recommendation and issue a report with practical recommendations to the General Synod of 2013 (*MGS 2012: 149-150*).

In 2013, the General Synod voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a diverse working group representative of the constituencies of the RCA and the varying understandings within the Reformed Church in America regarding sexual orientation and gender identity to identify, design, and/or develop resources for use in congregations and other RCA settings that will encourage grace-filled conversations among those holding varying understandings; and further,

to identify, design, and/or develop resources for use in congregations and other RCA settings to assist the RCA in the development of strategies to preserve unity, purity, and peace (*MGS 2013*: 115).

The 2013 General Synod also voted:

To acknowledge that in 2012 we, the General Synod, in the proceedings that led to the adoption of R-28, demonstrated a lack of decorum and civility, and a general atmosphere in which delegates were not always treating one another as sisters and brothers in Christ; and further,

to acknowledge that in 2012 we, the General Synod, usurped the constitutional authority reserved for the classes when, in R-28, we stated that “any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense” (*MGS 2013*: 179).

## **2. OUR DENOMINATIONAL STATEMENTS FROM 1978, 1979 AND FOLLOWING NEED TO BE "UPDATED", NOT IN WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES, BUT IN RESPONDING TO THE PRACTICAL SITUATIONS WHICH WE FACE**

We could benefit from careful guidelines to meet these and other needs:

- a. How can the church be a helpful place for teens and single young adults who are facing same sex attractions, or are facing bullying, or are facing homosexuality in their school or their immediate family?
- b. How can we help parents teach about homosexuality, when children now hear about the subject much earlier than in the past- involving athletes, entertainers, relatives, marriages, and the media?
- c. What can be helpful in relating to co-workers and family who identify themselves as gay?
- d. How can we encourage Christians dealing with same sex attraction, while not unrealistically promising them freedom from all temptations?

- e. What are the best practices for helping those who struggle?
- f. How can we help Christians who feel hatred or bitterness toward gay people?
- g. What kind of counseling can the church encourage?

These issues and others may not have been as pressing or as clear in 1978, when the first General Synod document was adopted.

### **3. IS THERE DANGER OF THE RCA ADOPTING AN UN-BIBLICAL VIEW OF HOMOSEXUALITY?**

Yes, but it is not inevitable. In the 1980's the Presbyterian Church USA had a special committee reporting on homosexuality. The majority report recommended acceptance. The minority report was represented by Dr. Richard Lovelace, professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, advocating a Biblical position, and the minority report was adopted.

In the providence of God, at times seminaries, colleges, even whole denominations have been turned around from spiritual and doctrinal weaknesses.

### **4. HOW CAN DISCIPLINE HAPPEN IN THE RCA IF IT HAS TO BEGIN AT THE LEVEL OF A CONSISTORY OR A CLASSIS? (THE GENERAL SYNOD DOES NOT CARRY OUT DISCIPLINE EXCEPT WHEN A CASE IS APPEALED.)**

The General Synod can issue statements, but it does not initiate discipline.

The controversy at the General Synod of 2012 and 2013 about discipline for homosexual activity is related to the larger questions about how explicitly offenses for discipline should be listed, and who carries out discipline.

Compare the 19th century when the Reformed Church had one order of service for the Lord's Supper, adopted in 1792, which was expected to be used every time in all congregations. The "Exhortation to Self-Examination" said, in part:

"Therefore we also, according to the command of Christ and the Apostle Paul, admonish all those who are defiled with the following sins to keep themselves from the Table of the Lord, and declare to them that they have no part of the kingdom of Christ: such as all idolaters; all those who invoke deceased saints, angels, or other creatures; all those who worship images; all enchanters, diviners, charmers, and those who confide in such enchantments; all despisers of God and his Word, and of the holy Sacraments; all blasphemers; all those who are given to raise discord, sects, and mutiny, in church or state; all perjured persons; all those who are disobedient to their parents and superiors; all murderers, contentious persons and those who live in hatred and envy against their

neighbors; all adulterers, whoremongers, drunkards, thieves, usurers, robbers, gamesters, covetous; and all who lead offensive lives."

Not until the form for the Lord's Supper was abridged in 1906 was this long, detailed list eliminated.

In the same way, the RCA Disciplinary Procedures once listed a number of individual offenses, but now has this single direction: "NATURE OF OFFENSES. Section 1. The only matters to be considered as offenses subject to accusation are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America." (p. 75)

At the Synod of 1980 an overture came from the classis of Schoharie (upstate New York) overturing the General Synod "to deny ordination into the ministry of the RCA to practicing homosexuals and lesbians. . . ." Also, the classis of Wisconsin asked that the Disciplinary Procedures be amended to include in the list of offenses "the offense of practicing homosexuality". The advisory committee, of which I was a member, recommended no action on both overtures, and gave the reasons, which the General Synod accepted. Our reasons, to Schoharie: "1. General Synod cannot deny ordinations; only the classis can do that. . . . 4. Because it is impossible to list all unrepented sins that would cause ordination to be revoked or denied, it is inappropriate to list only one." And to Wisconsin: "The proposed revision of the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures removes the list of offenses from the *Book of Church Order*."

The hope must be that matters needing discipline will be dealt with by boards of elders or by a classis, or appealed to the classis or regional synod, or, finally, appealed to the general synod.

## **5. MANY OF US BELIEVE THAT THE RCA'S CONTINUED STRUGGLE WITH THE ISSUE OF HOMOSEXUALITY IS:**

- a. A battle that can be influenced by Biblical writing, prayer and action.
- b. A challenge to learn from effective ministries to those facing same-gender attraction.
- c. An opportunity to humbly support effective ministries and/or develop effective ministries in local churches, and among Christians in local communities.
- d. An opportunity to train congregations in applying the Bible's teachings in loving relationships with family members, classmates, co-workers, and others who identify themselves as gay.
- e. A challenge all the time to keep the church's primary focus on evangelism and mission- words and deeds- at home and in the world- "majoring on the majors".