

## Editorial Afterword: The Dialogue over Homosexuality in the RCA

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The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) approved its first official statement on same-sex relationships in 1978. This study, along with other follow-up reports adopted by subsequent synods, is the RCA's official position on the subject, although nothing explicit has been written into its constitutional documents. In recent years, the level of dissent and debate over this issue has risen dramatically in the RCA, reaching almost the same level of intensity as in other mainline denominations. In 2005, the fissures in the RCA were exposed by the trial and conviction of the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, then president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, for officiating in Massachusetts at the marriage ceremony of his daughter Ann to Jennifer Aull. This trial was painful in the church, and its aftermath has likely made the task of keeping to an orderly approach to this problem more difficult; one is reminded of the legal maxim, "Hard cases make bad law."

The RCA is now launching a formal program of church-wide dialogue about the issue of homosexuality. Its purpose is to "enable us to better understand and appreciate how others within the RCA family interpret Scriptures related to homosexuality and understand the role of homosexuals within the life of the church; and (2) strengthen the ability of RCA congregations to minister to and with homosexual persons."<sup>1</sup> This dialogue is long overdue, and we are behind other mainline denominations in the process of internal dialogue. In fact, it was supposed to take place in the 1990s, in the context of a "moratorium" on this issue by the General Synod. The moratorium on official study and new action was carried out, but the dialogue was not. The problem grew and is now much more difficult among us than ever before. The current plan is to continue this dialogue until 2009, under an informal "truce" arrangement between those who advocate for approval of same-sex relationships and those who oppose it, when the General Synod will be called upon to "respond in a more informed way to the many detailed questions related to the church's ministry to and with gay and lesbian individuals, and to decide how our response to these questions can best be reflected within the polity of the RCA."<sup>2</sup>

Many people see three possible results of this dialogue and decision. One possible result is that we can formally affirm and carry out one consistent

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<sup>1</sup> "Proposal to GSC: Dialogue on Homosexuality," accessed 10/27/2005 from <http://www.RCA.org/synod/homosexualitytalk.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

position, either for or against ordination and marriage of gay and lesbian persons. Second, we could compromise on this issue to allow a diversity of belief and practices in the RCA. For example, a “local option” could allow each classis to do what is right in its own eyes. This option could be written into our *Book of Church Order*, or it could be an informal understanding among the classes to “live and let live.” Third, we may find this issue so difficult, and our positions so intractable, that we split as a denomination. (In the history of American Protestantism, as a rule conservatives split away from a liberalizing denomination; liberals stay in conservative denominations and work for change.) Very few people now want this last option, but it is a possible outcome for us, just as it is for other churches struggling with this issue.

The Publications Committee of the *Reformed Review* has asked me to write the final piece of this issue. I have decided, with their approval, to frame my thoughts in an editorial epilogue about the road ahead for the RCA. Here, then, are my suggestions for our dialogue.

1. We should pledge to a covenantal, connectional process and work together toward as much of a common outcome as we can reach. This will encourage open, sincere, and honest communication in the different stages of dialogue. Given the tensions in the RCA, it is important that the dialogue process be fair to everyone, and be perceived as such.
2. Our dialogue should encompass different judicatories and different regions of the church. Classes and regional synods should dialogue within and between themselves. The East, Midwest and Far West should meet together at some point. Perhaps it is most important to have dialogue inside our congregations.
3. Other churches, most notably the Anglican Communion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and United Methodist Church, have been engaged in formal internal dialogue over homosexuality, and we should compare notes with them in our process.<sup>3</sup>
4. We should remember in this dialogue that we have a policy as defined by the General Synod, even though it is not written into the *Book of Church Order*. For the sake of church order, and out of respect for those who have

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<sup>3</sup> For the Anglican Communion, see the “Windsor Report” at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/>. In some key ways, the situation in the Anglican Communion is analogous to the situation in the RCA, and those who care about the controversy in the RCA should consider the Windsor Report carefully. For the United Methodist Church, see the “Report on the Dialogues on Homosexuality and the Unity of the United Methodist Church” on the UMC website, <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1324>.

labored so hard on this in the past, our dialogue should recognize our official policy and engage it seriously.

5. Since we are to have, for the sake of dialogue, a “truce” between those who advocate for ordination and marriage of same-sexed Christians and those who oppose their ordination and marriage, it should be a real cease-fire based on our current policy from the General Synod. Those on the “right” should not propose new policies or the enforcement of existing policies beyond the status quo. Those on the “left” should not conduct further ordinations of homosexual persons or marriages/blessings of gay unions. This truce among us is fragile (not quite as fragile as the truce in the Anglican Communion, but fragile nonetheless) and provocative or even careless acts from the right or the left have the potential to break it. Moreover, it may be difficult to keep this “truce” for three years while dialogue goes on. By keeping the “truce,” we will show respect for each other and for the church as a whole as we dialogue.
6. Dialogue should be above the suspicion that one or another group in the RCA is using it to promote their own agenda. With the fractures among us, some mistrust of “the other side” and of our leaders already exists. Dialogue and those who administer it must work hard to gain the trust and confidence of its participants.
7. Our dialogue should deal with what I call the two hard facts of this debate. First, as Robert Gagnon argues in this *Reformed Review* issue and as RCA policy papers have stated, the Bible affirms heterosexuality as God’s norm for human life, and rejects homosexual practice as running against this norm. A growing number in the academic field of religious studies and in the church – even those who advocate same-sex liberation – now are intellectually honest enough to admit that this is the case.<sup>4</sup> But discerning what the Bible says about homosexuality has not been a problem for us in the RCA; discerning how to use the Bible is a growing problem. However, a Reformed approach to Scripture does not allow us to neutralize the Bible’s affirmation of heterosexuality, which is clear, consistent and comprehensive, by making room alongside it for same-sex practice. A second “hard fact” is that for most same-sex oriented people, their orientation is not consciously, deliberately chosen. A strong consensus among scientists holds that it is deeply rooted in personality. For most same-sex oriented people their orientation probably cannot be changed, and their calling to live chaste lives can only be enacted by a

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<sup>4</sup> In this vein, a leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church was reported to have remarked, “Sometimes the Bible and the Gospel conflict with each other, and we have to choose which to follow.”

combination of divine power and great human effort. How to relate these two hard facts should be a part of our dialogue. Some say that science rules out Scripture, others that Scripture rules out science. Perhaps a better path is to let God's voice in Scripture have its rule among us as we continue to live by "Sola Scriptura," but let God's voice in nature help to inform us about how we can best relate to same-sex oriented people among us.

8. The differing hermeneutical approaches outlined by Robert Gagnon are evident in the RCA. Some of us approach the topic primarily from Scripture, others primarily from experience. As an example of this, the "Proposal to the GSC: Dialogue on Homosexuality" states, "Some within the church have said candidly that they cannot imagine . . . being a part of a church that would exclude some of God's children from the RCA family [Gagnon's "Experientialists"]. Others with equal sincerity and passion cannot imagine why the church would continue to debate a subject which appears to them to have such clear biblical directives ["Scripturalists"]."<sup>5</sup> The dialogue that we have should examine these different approaches, especially in light of our confession of "Sola Scriptura."
  
9. This dialogue comes at a time when the RCA is working to focus as never before on the task of mission in North America, especially church growth. The dialogue over homosexuality is typically framed in that light; for example, we hear admonitions from several quarters about "keeping the main thing" in focus as the "main thing." All this is well intentioned and has an important point – the church must always pursue its mission. However, mission and doctrinal discussion are not an "either-or," but rather a "both-and." Some of the greatest periods of church growth were accompanied by sharp internal doctrinal controversy; for example, the second century (the challenge of Gnosticism) and the nineteenth (the early struggle over modernism). The Great Commission suggests that mission and doctrine go hand in hand: Jesus commands us to preach the Gospel to all people and make disciples, but making disciples is a matter of "teaching them to observe all I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). In Jesus' scheme of things, especially as presented in the Gospel of Matthew, mission and morality – making disciples and doing the will of God – are inseparable, and together they are the "main thing." Any church that separates them or subordinates one to the other cannot expect God's blessing on its efforts in mission.

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<sup>5</sup> "Proposal to GSC: Dialogue on Homosexuality," accessed 10/27/2005 from <http://www.RCA.org/synod/homosexualitytalk.html>.

10. Anecdotal evidence about denominations suggests a connection between an internal consensus in moral teaching and numerical growth. The mainline churches wracked for years over same-sex gender issues (and other issues of moral theology as well) are churches that are shrinking. On the other hand, growing churches like the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), which is often held up to the RCA as a denomination whose dedication to growth is worth emulating, are typically united on this issue. The ECC Annual Meeting in 2004 voted almost 11-to-1 to adopt in its church laws, and enforce in its practice, “celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage as the Christian standard,” and to forbid all blessing of same-sex unions.<sup>6</sup> Lest one suppose that this decision is only a result of the ECC being a conservative denomination in matters of gender, it should be noted that it practices a more affirming policy toward women in church office than the RCA does; its opposition to same-sex practice does not spring from patriarchy. If consensus in moral theology has a connection with effectiveness in mission, this challenges the RCA to work toward a greater shared understanding in this topic. We will not agree fully, but the more we can close the gap in our dialogue and the decision-making process that follows it, the better it will be for us.
  
11. In this process, we should keep to our Reformed method of decision-making. We rule ourselves in and through our judicatories, which are deliberative and decision-making assemblies. We do not rule ourselves by conversation or dialogue groups, no matter how large they are or how long they work. Therefore, we should not naively expect that dialogue will lead to a consensus about such a difficult issue, and that such a consensus could then be easily adopted as our policy. Neither should we keep dialoguing beyond the three-year process until we reach a consensus or compromise. We are Calvinists after all, not Quakers! Our form of government makes it more difficult for us to reach a decision than in episcopally-governed or papally-governed churches, but what Winston Churchill once said about representative democracy may be true about a church like ours that governs itself by a form of representative democracy: It is the worst kind of government, except for all the others.
  
12. We must recognize the sobering possibility that dialogue will deepen some of our difficulties even as it holds the promise of solving others. For example, those on the “right” will be shocked that many people on the “left” believe that same-sex relationships can be called holy, and that

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<sup>6</sup>“Delegates Approve Human Sexuality Report,” found at 12/27/2005  
<http://www.covchurch.org/cov/news/item3729.html>.

people in them can be leaders in the church. Those on the “left” will be shocked that many on the “right” believe that homosexual orientation is a conscious, deliberate choice. It’s one thing to read about these opinions, but another thing altogether to be in an actual conversation with someone from the other side who embodies them. It will take careful leadership of dialogue sessions to negotiate these difficulties.

13. Discussion will no doubt center on the propriety of “committed relationships” between homosexual Christians, as James Brownson’s thought-provoking article suggests. Here again, those who approach the question from a primarily “biblical authority” point of view will tend to give one answer, but those who approach it from primarily an “experience” standpoint tend to think otherwise. The success of dialogue will depend on how well people maintaining these two standpoints about “committed relationships” can be brought to understand each other, even if they cannot always agree with each other.
14. Our RCA dialogue should take the wider world church into our conversations in some meaningful way. We must keep the whole church in mind as we talk, and we should have some of them present among us at some point to talk with us. We are a part of the body of Christ, the “Holy Catholic Church” we confess in the creeds. Our dialogue, and especially our decision, will have an ecumenical impact, especially on those denominations closest to us in North America, our world mission partners in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and the other Reformed churches worldwide. We should not repeat the mistake of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and the Anglican Church of Canada, which changed their policies without regard for the catholicity of the church, the wider Anglican Communion in particular.<sup>7</sup>
15. Our dialogue should aim to make progress in our ministry to homosexual people, whatever we think about God’s will for same-sex practice. The church has been good at saying no to same-sex practice, but it must learn to say yes to homosexual people in a way consonant with the Gospel. A part of saying yes is by including same-sex oriented RCA members – both those who are “self-affirming” and those who out of their understanding of the Gospel resist practicing their orientation – in our formal dialogue as fully as practicable. Talking about same-sex oriented people cannot take the place of talking with them. Let’s face it: one reason why the debate over homosexuality has become more difficult among us is that we have

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<sup>7</sup> In my reading, the Windsor Report is just as critical of these two churches for breaking the catholicity of the church as it is critical of them for breaking biblical norms.

not followed our own past good intentions to do a better job at showing love and care to same-sex oriented people in our churches, and to accept them as God's children. Listening to them and conversing with them in our dialogue will begin to show this love.

16. Our formal dialogue should consider whether our RCA policy on homosexuality should be written into the *Book of Church Order* or not. Some among us say that it should, because it would bring clarity in theology and church order; others maintain that it is better not to, because it would open a hornet's nest of difficulties and judicial disputes. Here I would simply observe that every other North American denomination that has wrestled with this issue, no matter if they reach a "liberal" or "conservative" conclusion, has had to specify this policy formally in its church law sooner or later. Are we such a special denomination that this will not be necessary for us? Our track record as a denomination on this issue – a misspent moratorium, conflict in classes, a difficult (albeit unavoidable) trial of a seminary president – indicates not. The General Synod Council's letter indicates that the 2009 General Synod will be called upon to decide "how this can best be reflected in our polity," so the church should be discussing this to give its input to the Synod.
17. Most people don't enjoy controversy, especially over matters of sexual morality. Some shy away from it because they think that controversy will give visibility and credibility to the other side and will lead to no good conclusion. Others in the middle are put off by activists on the left and the right, whom they rightly or wrongly view as extremists. Although I am now asked to speak and lead discussion in churches more about this topic than any other, and although those who attend these sessions are typically eager for deep consideration of the difficult dimensions of this issue, I find that many people would still rather not talk about it at all. They would rather ignore it, some of them thinking it might go away in time. Unfortunately, difficult social issues with moral and religious dimensions "solve themselves" about as often as an automobile engine solves its own problems! Dialogue should be aimed to bring a wide variety of people into the conversation, not just those on the right and the left.
18. Dialogue over this controversial issue can lead to articulate, firmer decisions and better church life. Recent events in the United Methodist Church are a good example. Its 2004 General Conference, after two years of formal dialogue in the UMC, took a more unified, clearer stand than its last two General Conferences in 2000 and 1996. In this case, the conservative position is becoming more widely accepted, with

strengthened votes prohibiting practicing homosexuals serving as clergy, prohibiting same-sex marriages or blessing ceremonies in churches or by United Methodist clergy, and in favor of the standard of celibacy in singleness and monogamy in heterosexual marriage. The downside of this growing unanimity is that as churches like the United Methodist Church, the Anglican Communion, and the Roman Catholic Church move toward articulate, more thoroughly enforced policies, those in these churches opposed to the strengthening of the traditional view sometimes grow more frustrated and vociferous.

19. Finally, but most importantly, our conversation should not be aimed ultimately at what *we* think, as important as that may seem to us. Rather, our conversation should work to discern what God is telling the church by God's Word and Spirit.