

Homosexuality and the Christian Reformed Church

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She says she's "not an expert on the CRC and its decades of discussions about homosexuality and same-sex attraction", but that, she's "watched some of the developments up close in my work capacity. Much of my knowledge has come from research of past documents, including the Agendas and Acts of the annual synods of the CRC."

The [Christian Reformed Church](#) (CRC) made its first [statement on homosexuality](#) back in 1973. There had been occasional articles before that in various church publications, but in 1970, it was on the denominational stage. That was a year after the Canadian government decriminalized homosexual activity between consenting adults. The CRC congregations in Canada came to Synod 1970 (the annual, delegated leadership meeting of the CRC) and asked for a study committee to help the churches deal with "the problem of homosexuality."

Synod 1970 appointed a blue-ribbon panel of theologians and well-known pastors to study the matter.

Initially they were to report to Synod 1972 but delayed for one year because the CRC's mother church, the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands (GKN), produced its own study in late 1971 about the church and homosexuality, so the study committee members wanted the opportunity to study that first. Ironically, the CRC's ecumenical relationship with the GKN would

later come under fire for many years due to differing conclusions about homosexuality.

1973 - Synod Adopts a Progressive Report

The esteemed panel of church leaders came to Synod 1973 with what is known as [Report 42](#). In it, the authors posited that being same-sex attracted (homosexual) is not sinful, but that same-sex sexual intimacy (homosexuality) is. That distinction was considered progressive in its time. In fact, there were CRC congregations and even other denominations asking the CRC to declare that being same-sex attracted was sinful.

More specifically, the committee reported that “homosexuality is deeply rooted in the complex development of personality during the formative years of a person's growth ... not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person to be homosexual, just as the heterosexual person does not become heterosexual because at a certain age he determines to be so.”

That report goes on to say, “It is one of the great failings of the church and Christians generally that they have been lacking in sympathy and concern for the plight of the homosexuals among them,” noting that the plight of many homosexuals is a tragic one.

The pastoral advice adopted by Synod 1973 still stands today. Note those two words, pastoral advice, because decades later, those two words have become important in the church's discussion.

Among the statements of pastoral advice (summarized here):

- Homosexuality (male and female) is a condition of disordered sexuality, for which the homosexual may himself bear only a minimal responsibility.

- The homosexual may not be denied community acceptance and if he is a Christian, must be wholeheartedly received by the church.
- Homosexuality [explicit homosexual practice] must be condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.
- The church must exercise the same patient understanding of and compassion for the homosexual in his sins as for all other sinners. As with all Christians in their weaknesses, the homosexual must be admonished and encouraged not to allow himself to be defeated by lapses in chastity, but rather, to repent and thereafter to depend in fervent prayer upon the means of grace for power to withstand temptation.
- In order to live a life of chastity in obedience to God's will the homosexual needs the loving support and encouragement of the church. The church should therefore so include him in its fellowship that he is not tempted by rejection and loneliness to seek companionship in a "gay world" whose godless lifestyle is alien to a Christian.
- Homosexuals, especially in their earlier years, should be encouraged to seek such help as may effect their sexual reorientation and the church should do everything in its power to help the homosexual overcome his disorder. Christian acceptance and support can in all such cases be a means toward healing and wholeness. On the other hand, to those who are not healed and who must accept the limitations of their homosexuality, the church must minister in the same spirit as when it ministers to all who are not married. [In later years, this encouragement for reorientation therapy was removed.]

- Christians who are homosexual in their orientation are, like all Christians, called to discipleship and to the employment of their gifts in the cause of the kingdom. By the same token, churches should recognize that their homosexual members are fellow-servants of Christ who are to be given opportunity to render within the offices and structures of the congregation the same service that is expected from heterosexuals.
- It is the duty of pastors to be informed about the condition of homosexuality in order that the pastor may minister to the homosexual's need and to the need of others, such as parents, who may be intimately involved in the problems of homosexuality. The pastor is also in a position to instruct his congregation in appropriate ways about homosexuality and to alert members and office holders to the responsibility they bear toward homosexuals in the fellowship.
- The church should promote good marriages, and healthy family life in which the psychological causes that may contribute to sexual inversion are reduced to a minimum.
- Parents should be encouraged to seek Christian counsel and help when they see signs of disordered sexual maturation in their children.
- The church should speak the Word of God prophetically to a society and culture which glorifies sexuality and sexual gratification.

For more, see [Report 42](#) in its entirety.

Synod 1973 called members of the CRC to a very high standard of pastoral care for those who experience same-sex attraction, calling churches to encourage full participation from them in the same way that is expected of heterosexual people, including

holding offices of elders, deacons, and pastors. Pastors were called to be informed about homosexuality and to call members and officebearers to the responsibility they bear toward same-sex-attracted persons in the church.

1979 - Ecumenical Troubled Waters

In 1979 the Synod of Delft happened in the CRC's mother church in the Netherlands. As the CRC's interchurch relations committee reported, "the [GKN's] Synod of Delft has seemingly spoken with approval of homosexual expression on the part of members of the congregation of Jesus Christ. It appears from the decision of the Synod of Delft that there is no manifestation of homosexuality that may be judged as disobedience to the Word of God and so would bar those who engage in such practice from the table of the Lord or from serving in the offices of the church."

CRC Synod 1980 decided to seek clarification of the language and implications of the GKN's decision, and to reexamine its own provisions for the full table (communion) and pulpit (preaching) fellowship between the GKN and the CRC in light of this decision and its clarification ([Acts of Synod 1980](#), p. 50).

[Synod 1981](#) heard that the GKN responded to the query with a letter that essentially reaffirmed the position stated above and was also critical of the CRC's 1973 decisions. Synod 1981 decided to ask the GKN to reconsider its position. A couple of years later, the CRC voted to restrict the table (communion) and pulpit (exchange of ministers) fellowship between the two denominations ([Acts of Synod 1983](#), p. 629).

And so it went. That set off many years of classes (regional groups of congregations) asking the CRC's annual synod to sever its relationship with the GKN, with others asking that synod not

sever the relationship, but rather maintain a position of mutual concern and admonition.

The strain was further carried into broader ecumenical organizations like the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC), to which both the CRC and the GKN belonged.

Member denominations of the REC from New Zealand, South Africa, and North America, demanded the termination of the GKN membership. The REC didn't kick the GKN out but urged it to rescind its position on homosexual practice. The denominations that wanted the GKN out withdrew from the REC ([*Acts of Synod 1989*](#), p. 173).

The CRC's Synod 1990 urgently appealed to the GKN to give careful and responsible attention "to formulate a positive position on the authority and interpretation of Scripture, including hermeneutical questions relating to the use of biblical data in Christian ethics" ([*Acts of Synod 1990*](#), p. 625). It told the GKN that its response "is of vital importance for the continuing ecclesiastical fellowship between our two churches." That didn't happen.

Synods persisted in turning down requests to sever its relationship with the GKN but in 1996, the CRC further restricted its ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN for a minimum of two years by refraining from the "exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies" ([*Acts of Synod 1996*](#), p. 520).

1999 - How Was The CRC in North America Doing? Not Well!

The same year that synod restricted its relationships with the GKN, it appointed a committee to again "give direction about and for pastoral care of homosexual members in a manner consistent with the decisions of Synod 1973" because Report 42 was more than 20 years old. Synod wanted the committee to review how

well congregations were doing in providing ministry to their homosexual members, as was called for in the earlier report.

The study committee appointed in 1996 came to Synod 1999 with the result of their work. [The report](#) was quite stunning in its condemnation of the church for its treatment of its gay and lesbian members. In its surveys, the committee found that only 74% of clergy said they knew the 1973 report well; 25% said they knew only about the distinction made in 1973 or else knew almost nothing about the report; and 65% percent said the pastoral care guidelines of 1973 were not effectively carried out in their congregations. ([Agenda for Synod 1999](#), p. 239).

That is a far cry from the whole-hearted embrace of the church, patient understanding and compassion, and pastors informing themselves about homosexuality and dispelling prejudices, as called for in Report 42.

The 1996 committee also said that while the church was quite silent, a community made up of persons who love the Lord deeply, many struggling with their sexual identity, had all been waiting for their church to keep something of its promises. Synod 1999 affirmed its pastoral advice of 1973 and [called the church to repentance](#) and three years later, that same committee provided the church with [a plethora of resources](#) to improve pastoral care for persons who experience same-sex attraction. ([Agenda for Synod 2002](#), p. 313).

2002 - A Toronto Test Case

No sooner had Synod 2002 provided the church with resources to fulfill its 1973 commitment than a church in Toronto said that it wanted to allow ordination of members living in same-sex relationships as elders and deacons.

First Christian Reformed Church in Toronto sent a letter to its classis (Classis Toronto) informing it that the congregation had voted to “consider nominations of gay and lesbian members, including those living in committed relationships, for all elected offices.” Out of respect for the denomination’s position, the congregation also voted to inform its classis and synod of its decision. The church council expressed “hope for ongoing discussions with classis and the denomination on this issue.” Before the year was out, the CRC denominational Board of Trustees (that acted on behalf of synod between its annual meetings) sent a letter to all church councils indicating that “all appropriate steps are currently being taken to encourage First CRC of Toronto to reverse its decision and to embrace the biblical position regarding homosexuality and homosexualism articulated by the synod of the CRC in 1973.”

In January 2003, Classis Toronto also urged First CRC of Toronto to reverse its decision.

A few months later, First CRC notified the classis that it wouldn’t alter its decision and “expressed its deep desire to remain in our denomination.” The classis held a special meeting of prayer, listening and dialogue and agreed to meet again on June 25, 2003, to make a final decision.

Just before June 25, Synod 2003 met and was asked to apply special discipline to the Council of First CRC for not rescinding its decision regarding gay and lesbian members. Synod said, no, the classis will act on the matter and synod should not intervene unless the church or the classis appeals to synod ([*Acts of Synod 2003*](#), p. 589).

Hours before the June 25 meeting, First CRC sent a letter to the classis promising to “refrain from acting on our earlier decision to

nominate gay and lesbian members living in committed relationships for elected office.”

For some classis delegates, refraining was not enough. They wanted First CRC to rescind its decision and repent, but a former pastor of the congregation responded, “If you insist on repentance, that’s the pound of flesh that is more than my consistory is willing to give. We paid a high price and gave up something we saw as God’s will for our congregation.” (*The Banner* July 2003, p. 29)

The council of First CRC also promised to bring to classis an overture (request) based on a biblical study of what it means to act on the recommendations of the report of homosexuality (2002) that addresses the issue of ministry to and inclusion of homosexual members in our church communities. “This opens the way for communal dialogue and the opportunity for a safe place to speak without fear of recrimination.” The Classis agreed, as long as the congregation provided that study by September 2004, some 15 months later.

2004 - Classis Ordered to Investigate First Toronto

Some members of the denomination were not happy with how Classis Toronto handled the situation. They wanted First CRC disciplined for not repenting and rescinding its decision, and also for allowing people in same-sex relationships to remain members in good standing in the congregation. “Refusal to apply discipline tacitly condones ungodly conduct,” said one of the requests that came to Synod 2004 to apply discipline.

Synod 2004 instructed Classis Toronto to investigate the allegations made regarding persons living in same-sex committed relationships and instructed Classis Toronto to urge First CRC to

act in accordance with the guidelines of the reports on homosexuality of 1973 and 2002 ([Acts of Synod 2004](#), p. 632).

The church visitors Classis Toronto sent indicated that they “felt uncomfortable with this investigative role.” They instead made a more general visit asking what it had been like dealing with classis over the past few years? Some members of First Toronto indicated unhappiness that their church might be labeled a “gay church.” Others indicated a desire that the denomination agree to disagree on the issue of homosexuality. Still others shared the belief that First Toronto had already made many compromises in withdrawing their open letter and committing “not to install practicing homosexuals as office bearers.”

2005 - Synod Investigates

By Synod 2005 there were overtures (requests) to outright depose the minister and elders of First CRC. One of those overtures noted that while the Toronto church council restrained from electing persons to church office who are currently engaged in acts of homosexual practice, the teaching of the Toronto consistory in this matter remains clearly opposed to the teaching of Scripture.

Subsequently Synod 2005 sent a committee of its own to “investigate the position of the council of First CRC, Toronto, regarding persons living in same-sex committed relationships and seek a response to the serious allegations raised against the church to determine if First CRC is in compliance with the guidelines of the reports on homosexuality of 1973 and 2002,” noting that “the seriousness and ongoing nature of the allegations warrant synod’s direct involvement in the situation.” The

committee was instructed to report to Classis Toronto at its September 2005 meeting ([Acts of Synod 2005](#), p. 744).

The committee's findings were as follows:

- "It is our perception that the council of First Toronto CRC holds that same gender sexual intimacy is not sinful in committed relationships."
- "It is our perception that the council of First Toronto CRC does not require the elders, in their pastoral care guidance, to view homosexual practice as sinful."
- "It is our perception that the council of First Toronto CRC does not teach that homosexual orientation is a disorder nor that homosexual practice is sinful."

([Agenda for Synod 2006](#), p. 457)

The committee reported that while desiring to remain within the CRC, the council of First Toronto CRC had serious reservations about the denomination's position with respect to ministry to members with same-sex attraction. "We concluded that the opinions and actions of First Toronto CRC council regarding same-gender relationships did not demonstrate solidarity or compliance with the denomination's guidelines as expressed in the reports of 1973 and 2002."

So what happened? As is by now fairly obvious, the CRC is very careful. It appoints committees to study in depth before making pronouncements. In this case, Classis Toronto appointed its own committee to take the conclusions of the synod's committee, ask First Toronto for its responses, and to advise Classis Toronto how to proceed. ([Acts of Synod 2006](#), p. 458).

How Authoritative is Pastoral Advice?

One of the things the Classis Toronto advisory committee studied was just how much weight and authority should be given to decisions of synod. This is where that framing of “pastoral advice” from 1973 comes in. Synod 1996 referred to the 1973 conclusions as “pastoral recommendations.” Synod 1999 referred to them as “guidelines.” Synod 2002 called them “specific pastoral guidelines of the 1973 report.”

The Classis Toronto advisory committee noted that Synod 1975 said that “synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters ... ‘shall be considered settled and binding’ unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (the CRC’s book of rules). All office bearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances.”

Classis Toronto noted therefore that First CRC, in its ministry, had chosen a contrary position on a significant biblical/ethical guideline, one which the denomination has carefully considered and is “settled and binding.” That led it to “regretfully inform the Council of First CRC that its action constitutes a breaking of the denominational covenant. It asked the Council to provide “a clear and unambiguous answer in writing in time for the January 19, 2006 meeting of Classis Toronto, stating that it will bring its pastoral care and teaching ministry within the guidelines of Synod 1973...” ([Acts of Synod 2006](#), p. 459).

The response of First Toronto CRC after extensive discussion with the congregation: “... having taken into consideration the discussions at meetings with the Synodical in loco committee, the classical pre-advice committee, and Classis Toronto, and not wishing to contribute to further unrest in the denomination, and wanting to maintain affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church

(C.R.C.), herewith declares our resolve to acknowledge the C.R.C. guidelines with respect to homosexuality as the current position of our denomination and agrees to tailor its ministry accordingly” ([Acts of Synod 2006](#), p. 460).

Classis Toronto accepted that response, as did the committee sent by Synod 2005. Synod 2006 concurred with the results.

2008 - On the Other Side of the Pond

While all that was going on in Toronto, the relationship with the GKN was still in rough waters. The GKN had started a merger with the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, and the Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk. Because the CRC cannot be in an ecumenical relationship with just one part of a denomination, a new relationship would have to be defined with the new denomination, now called the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PCN) ([Agenda of Synod 2008](#), p. 183).

Progress toward defining the CRC’s relationship with the PCN was slow. One of the factors the CRC ran into was that it had a new ecumenical charter. The only choice regarding the PCN was either move closer and be in full fellowship or move further away and be only churches in dialogue.

Synod 2008 turned down both options, in effect severing the relationship with the PCN, but it also instructed the interchurch relations committee to figure out some way to keep the two denominations talking. No one was sure what a new relationship would look like or if the PCN would even want it ([Acts of Synod 2008](#), p. 512).

Finally Synod 2014 approved a memorandum of understanding with the PCN that allowed the denominations to stay in close relationship while recognizing their differences on various issues.

The memorandum included, among other things, a commitment to deal honestly and transparently with each other; consult each other on major issues that affect the global Christian church (especially those churches that are part of the Reformed family); collaborate with churches and/or ministry partners that have relationships with both the CRC and the PCN.

Even though neither denomination had changed their positions on homosexuality that had divided them for 35 years, the CRC was reunited in close fellowship with its sister denomination, with no restrictions ([Acts of Synod 2014](#), p. 565).

2013 - Time for a New Study

Five years after Classis Toronto and First CRC in Toronto settled their disagreement, a classis in Michigan (Classis East Grand Rapids) wanted a new study committee “to review biblical teachings about homosexual orientation and practice” ([Agenda for Synod 2011](#), p. 633). Synod 2011 declined, stating that the 1973 report thoroughly studied the issue from a biblical and theological perspective, and the 2002 report addressed the pastoral issues well. “These reports are still relevant today. There have not been enough new biblical and theological insights since 1973 to warrant a new study,” synod said. We recognize the pastoral failings of the church toward those struggling with issues around homosexuality, so we strongly urge the churches to study, use, and implement the 2002 report” ([Acts of Synod 2011](#), p. 826).

By 2013, however, gay marriage had been legalized in Canada and was soon to be legalized across the U.S. Although the 1973 report had been affirmed by many synods, Synod 2013 judged that new social and political circumstances raised a wide variety

of questions. The 1973 report did not anticipate legalization of gay marriage and how churches should respond.

So Synod 2013 appointed a new committee to give guidance on how members, clergy, and churches can apply the biblical teachings reflected in the Acts of Synod 1973 and guide them regarding the ramifications of the legal, ethical, and spiritual issues that they face ([Acts of Synod 2013](#), p. 617).

2016 - Guidance for Same-Sex Marriage

The committee to provide guidance came back to Synod 2016 ([Agenda for Synod 2016](#), p. 361) but with a split report, because two committee members dissented from the majority on some recommendations.

The report addressed a myriad of situations from church membership of people in same-sex relationships, to same-sex couples presenting children for baptism, to participating in volunteer roles such as teaching and leading worship, to participating in same-sex weddings. For the purposes of this article, I will touch on just a few of them in summarized form. Note carefully which recommendations came from the majority and how the two dissenting members differed from them.

The committee *majority* recommended:

- Attendance at a same-sex wedding is up to an individual church member (p. [379](#));
- Attendance by a pastor is more complex, and he or she should consult with his church council (p. [380](#));
- If a pastor solemnizes a religious same-sex marriage, he or she would be open to church inquiry and discipline, including loss of ministerial credentials. This, too, would be the purview of the local church council (p. [382](#));

- In cases of a civil same-sex marriage, pastors should be given latitude based on specific circumstances ([p. 383](#));
- Regarding participation in worship and volunteer ministries by people in same-sex relationships, the committee majority said that is best left to the local church ([p. 388](#));
- Regarding church membership, the majority states: “To become a member, one must indicate their willingness to abide by the teaching as well as the admonition and discipline of the church,” and thus should not be accepted as members in good standing. (p. 390) It also acknowledged that “the complexities of ministry will keep membership issues a point of tension.” ([p. 391](#))
- Regarding baptism, the majority noted that the CRC only allows baptism of a child if at least one parent is a member in good standing. However, it noted, there are rare exceptions to this and the churches should “minister creatively but cautiously.” ([p. 392](#))

The two dissenting members came with their own report ([p. 429](#)), noting that there were three sections of the majority report they could not endorse: Officiating weddings, playing a role in weddings, and membership.

- Regarding a pastor officiating at a civil same-sex wedding, the dissenting members posit that ministers can solemnize marriage *based on being an ordained minister*. Thus no ceremony performed by a pastor has the capacity to be strictly civil. Thus, a CRC pastor cannot officiate a same-sex wedding ceremony. ([p. 438](#))
- Christians should understand that participating in a same-sex wedding runs the risk of placing such members in a

position of supporting a relationships contrary to Scripture ([p. 440](#));

- The advice for officebearers is different because they “will be seen as operating out of their ordained roles” and thus should avoid accepting roles in same-sex wedding ceremonies. ([p. 440](#))
- Participating in the life of the church is open to all, including those in same-sex relationships. However, that does not mean all should be filling leadership roles, such as elder deacon and ministry leadership. Those should be limited to members in good standing ([p. 442](#));
- Regarding church membership, a member who enters a same-sex relationship must heed the admonishing of the church or will no longer be a member in good standing. “The church needs to be both compassionate and deliberate in confronting such members, as it would in admonishing and disciplining any other sin,” they wrote ([p. 442](#)).

Synod 2016 received both reports but *recommended* the pastoral guidance of the minority report ([Acts of Synod 2016](#), p. 917).

Yet Another Committee

Synod 2016 didn't stop there. It appointed a new committee to (wait for it) “Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality” ([Acts of Synod 2016](#), p. 915). Its mandate was to:

- Provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life;
- Serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive

affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin.

Additionally:

- Outline how a Reformed hermeneutic does or does not comport with readings of Scripture being employed to endorse what are, for the historic church, ground breaking conclusions regarding human sexual behavior and identification;
- Dialogue with, and potentially critique, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies;
- Evaluate whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider ... declaring a *status confessionis* (giving the church's position on same-sex relationships confessional status).

But there was a caveat: All the members of the study committee had to adhere to the CRC's longstanding view on marriage and same-sex relationships ([Acts of Synod 2016](#), p. 916).

2020 - Churches Not Waiting for Synod

Church members are not sitting quietly in their pews waiting for the various synodical reports to be published. Members of the CRC have established their own groups, leaning in to particular views.

A group of pastors and church leaders calling themselves Returning Church published a [website](#) in support of traditional marriage. That same group maintains an active [Facebook group](#).

Other members of the CRC formed [All One Body](#), which supports full inclusion in the church of practicing homosexuals. Two CRC congregations in Classis Grand Rapids East were hosting the group for various events. That raised the ire of others in the denomination who wanted Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish the churches hosting “a group whose goals and purpose promote behavior that synod has declared to be sinful.” Grand Rapids East declined to do that.

Last year, a congregation in Grand Rapids East went ahead and ordained as a deacon a woman living in a same-sex marriage (“[Woman in Same-sex Marriage Installed as Deacon](#),” *The Banner*, September 14, 2020).

In taking that action, Neland Avenue CRC cited a report from Classis Grand Rapids East in 2016 ([The Banner, January 29, 2016](#)). “that shows a wide range of biblical interpretations one can support with a reformed view of Scripture.” The council of Neland Avenue consulted with advisors from the classis. When it reported its actions to the classis in September 2020, there were no comments or questions from delegates.

The response could not have been more different than the response of Classis Toronto when First CRC in Toronto broached the topic of officebearers in same-sex relationships nearly two decades earlier.

As *The Banner* reported, although the decisions of 1973 had been held as the church’s stance on homosexuality for 47 years, the Neland Avenue council said it did not believe it had “crossed any line of orthodoxy.”

The current Church Order expert from the denomination's seminary seems to agree. "Matters of pastoral advice would not be considered matters of orthodoxy—doctrines found in our confessions—since it is possible to disagree with synod's positions on matters of pastoral advice, as noted by Synod 1975," she told *The Banner* in an email.

In the fall of 2020 churches and individuals wrote to the Council of Delegates (the successor to the Board of Trustees that acts on behalf of synod) to complain of Neland Avenue CRC's actions. A minority of the Council delegates were loath to act for two reasons. They felt it would be overstepping its authority to rule on behalf of synod in such a weighty matter. And they also noted that the [human sexuality report](#) (from the committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality) was due out on November 1 to be dealt with at Synod 2021 to be held in June 2021.

However, some of the delegates were quite eager to act and communicate. It decided, by a very close vote, to send a letter to the Neland Avenue council "grieving Neland's decision to break covenant with the CRC and ordain a deacon who is actively involved in a same-sex relationship before Synod 2021 has addressed the Report on Human Sexuality." (See "[Council of Delegates Discusses Neland Avenue CRC](#)," *The Banner*, October 16, 2020).

Since then, Sherman St. CRC has also communicated to Classis Grand Rapids East its decision to also allow people in same-sex relationships to enjoy full participation in the church, including holding leadership roles ("[Classis Watch Spring 2021](#)," *The Banner*, April 2, 2021).

In the lead up to the release of the human sexuality report, *The Banner* published an article "[Same-Sex Relationships and the CRC](#)." In it, six people were invited to express their views. Half are straight, half are gay. Some are living in same-sex relationships. It was interesting to note the similarities and differences in their views.

2021 - [The Human Sexuality Report](#)

The report did indeed get released to the churches last fall. It reaffirmed the decisions that came from Synods 1973 and 1999. That is hardly surprising since the committee members were required to adhere to the 1973 position. In addition to homosexuality, it discussed pornography, gender identity and gender dysphoria.

In its hefty 176 page report, it noted (again) the fact that the church has "grossly mistreated" persons who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender. "Imagine the distress," the authors wrote, "if the family of God begins to shun or despise people who reveal that they are attracted to the same sex. Robbed of the intimacy to which God has called them in Christ, such persons will either die spiritually or turn elsewhere for support" ([p. 9](#)).

The authors noted that the church's actions have been in stark contrast to the pastoral care recommendations of the 1973 synodical report. "[Gay people] deserve the same acceptance, recognition, compassion, and help that is given to any person," they wrote. "It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex, making it very difficult for them

to live a life of holiness.” It again stated the the church’s response to homosexuality must begin with confession and lament ([p. 114](#)).

In response to those that say the Holy Spirit is leading the church to a new understanding, in the same way it did when confronting the evils of anti-Semitism, slavery and racism, the authors said, “It is one thing to reexamine Scripture, but it is quite another thing to ignore the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture in order to reach an alternative reading of the key texts and then claim that this all happened through the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” ([p. 111](#)).

Confessional Status

Unlike previous study committees, the committee that wrote the human sexuality report doubled down on its commitment to 1973. It stated that the church’s position on homosexuality *already* has confessional status ([p. 146](#)).

As the authors pointed out, raising the question of confessional status is to wonder whether some teaching or ecclesiastical practice, if adopted, would violate the teachings of the confessions of the church. This is important because the teachings of the confessions are understood to represent biblical teaching on the matter in question.

The authors noted that even if a teaching has confessional status, that does not mean there is no room for disagreement within the bounds of that teaching. *However* officebearers must sign the [Covenant for Officebearers](#), signifying adherence to the positions of the church.

The authors acknowledge it raises a host of questions. If the church agrees that its teaching on homosexuality has confessional status, what does that mean for people who have

already signed the Covenant for Officebearers? What if they don't agree with this declaration? What about the professors at Calvin University, owned by the Christian Reformed Church? Its faculty members are required to sign the educational equivalent of the Covenant for Officebearers. If they don't, do they lose their jobs? While the report raised these questions, it didn't answer them.

Does the church's teaching on homosexual activity, as well as premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, pornography, and polyamory already have confessional status? The authors said, "It is important to remember that the question is not whether a particular action violates the confession but whether a particular teaching violates the confession."

In the end, the committee is recommending that synod declare that the church's view on adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status. (See also ["Sexuality Report Released to Churches, Suggests Historical Position is Already Confessional,"](#) *The Banner*, November 25, 2020.)

And so the CRC charges headlong into another chapter in a discussion that has gone on for almost fifty years. Overtures are rolling in about the latest report and about Neland Avenue's actions. One classis wants (further) clarification on how much weight is given to "pastoral advice." Other classes want Neland Avenue CRC investigated in the same way that happened in Toronto 25 years ago. Those requests ask that Neland Avenue's council either repent and rescind its decision or be deposed. (See ["Classis Watch Spring 2021,"](#) *The Banner*, April 2, 2021).

The board of All One Body has [expressed its alarm and disappointment](#) with the report, saying it will have an earth-shaking impact and will bring painful resignations of church

officebearers, pastors, Calvin University professors and staff, and church members leaving the denomination. “It is a sad time for the CRCNA that such a blatantly uninformed report would be submitted and if this report is approved it will tear at the heart of the church,” the board said on its website.

COVID-19

As the church roils over the human sexuality report and the actions of Neland Avenue CRC, the COVID-19 pandemic has required the cancelation of Synod 2020, and now Synod 2021 as well. Never before has the CRC canceled its annual synod, much less two in a row. It probably couldn't come at a worse time in the life of the church, as the questions around homosexuality and same-sex marriage threaten to split the denomination up.

The church's Council of Delegates has decided not to formally process the report this year when it meets in June in lieu of Synod 2021. The Council chose to extend the discussion of the report in the churches for an additional year. The denomination has created a [Challenging Conversations toolkit](#) for use by the churches. The report will be taken up by Synod 2022, along with everything else postponed since Synod 2019.