

COMMUNICATIONS

COMMUNICATION 1

Classis Red Mesa

As our delegates to synod agree to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, Classis Red Mesa continues to remain a classis in protest. We do not protest anything in the creeds and confessions, rather we protest the changes to the gravamen process ratified by Synod 2024, as communicated in Article 5 of the Church Order. In particular, the requirement for officebearers to recuse themselves from classis and synod when they file a confessional-difficulty gravamen.

We treasure our denomination's colorful history of discussion, discernment, and disagreement about nonsalvific issues. For we know that even as we disagree, we can stand in alignment and agreement in worship before our Creator.

We lament the loss of our ability to dialogue and hold opposing opinions, and we grieve the loss of the ability to live together in unity as many feel excluded, living under suspicion with their consciences constrained. We pray that God will continue to provide opportunities for all of us to grow in our faith journey as followers of Jesus Christ.

Since our protest is about changes to the Church Order and has nothing to do with any reservations to the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA, we do not see any barriers to our full participation in classis or synod meetings.

Classis Red Mesa
John Greydanus, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 2

Classis Grand Rapids East

Classis Grand Rapids East sends the following communication to Synod 2025 in service of your process of discernment.

This is a progress report on conversations that have happened at various levels: within the Classis Grand Rapids East executive committee, among pastors and leaders of churches in our classis, and with input from other Grand Rapids-area CRC pastors and leaders. Church Order Article 39 notes the nature and purpose of a classis in the CRC, and the role especially of synod in any redistricting of classes. The proposal below is intended as a conversation starter within our classis, for other CRC congregations in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and with synod.

I. Background

As Synods 2022-2024 unfolded, a majority of congregations in Classis Grand Rapids East began to move toward disaffiliation from the CRCNA. Most of these anticipate finalizing their disaffiliations prior to or soon after

Synod 2025. Those congregations that have chosen to remain with the CRCNA face two difficult possibilities: either continue as a much-diminished Classis Grand Rapids East, or disband and disperse the classis to join neighboring classes.

II. Imagining an alternative

We have begun a discussion of what may be a compelling alternative: invite Grand Rapids congregations from neighboring classes to join with the remaining Classis Grand Rapids congregations to form a new “Grand Rapids City Classis.” As a place to begin, we have shared initial communications with congregations in the Grand Rapids urban and metro area, using as initial boundaries Leonard Street (North), 44th Street (South), Burlingame Avenue (West), and East Beltline (East).

Church Order Article 39 says, “A classis is a group of Christian Reformed churches that come together to seek, discern, and submit to God’s will; offer one another mutual support and accountability; find ways to live out a collective calling within their region; and allow for a healthy and sustained connection to the wider denomination.”

To that end, we are encouraging conversation regarding the constitution of a new classis that encompasses the heart of the city of Grand Rapids and exists to serve our diverse city. This “Grand Rapids City Classis” could seek to fulfill the nature and purpose of a classis with congregations

- who are within, or border upon, the city of Grand Rapids proper.
- who represent the cultural and ethnic diversity of our city.
- who are passionate about ministry needs that are prevalent in urban environments (e.g., housing and food insecurity, racial reconciliation, cross-cultural fellowship, evangelism).
- whose leaders are committed to keeping covenant with the CRCNA, upholding a historic Christian view of marriage, and wish to grow in caring and effective ministry in areas of gender and sexuality.

III. Early response

A sketch of these ideas was sent to area churches and an initial Zoom meeting was held on December 20, 2024. Twelve people attended the meeting, representing eight congregations. Several others gave feedback via email. Responses (at the meeting and via email) were quite positive. Participants spoke of the idea as attractive, intriguing, “a hopeful vision,” and a “positive and beautiful option.”

They also raised a number of issues and questions, including the following:

- Would this create an enclave that would continue or exacerbate some of the rural/urban divide in the CRC?
- What would be the impact on the various classes (Grand Rapids South, Grand Rapids North, Grandville, Thornapple Valley), and how would they receive this idea?

- What might be done in policy or culture relative to women in ministry?
- What might be done in policy or culture relative to ethnic-minority leadership?
- How broadly/narrowly might the bullet point regarding marriage and sexuality be interpreted and applied?
- What would be the impact on CRC-connected agencies and institutions (Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, etc.)
- Who would finally decide such things (councils, congregations, classes, synod)?

IV. Conclusion

We do not have answers to all of these questions, but we think they are important. And we thought it both valuable and important to give a summary of this conversation to Synod 2025. There are too many considerations and stakeholders for us to bring an overture at this time. But we want to inform synod of these conversations, and we encourage prayerful and wise discernment on how classis arrangements might best serve the cause of Christ's kingdom in our city and denomination.

Classis Grand Rapids East
Robert Arbogast, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 3

Classis B.C. North-West

As Classis B.C. North-West delegates, at our meeting of classis on February 25-26, 2025, we wish to share with Synod 2025 the impact of the discipline-related and gravamen-related decisions from Synod 2024. We wonder if there is another way of guiding individual officebearers and congregations. For some congregations, there is not only concern with some of synod's recent decisions but also a sincere struggle with implementing those decisions. In some cases, officebearers have resigned their positions and members have left their congregations, causing hardship and pain. We lament this reality. At the same time, we acknowledge that in the midst of this hardship our denomination is sincerely trying to find a way to call one another to faithfulness to our denominational covenants and to our shared witness to the ways we live out the gospel. This is a significant challenge.

Classis B.C. North-West heard these concerns from delegates and congregations in its October 2024 meeting. In response to this, during our February 25, 2025 meeting, and with the support of Rev. Sean Baker (Thrive), and Rev. Martin Vellekoop (B.C. Restorative Practices Task Force), we as delegates spent the afternoon being led through two trust-building activities:

1. Working through a polarity exercise on holding “denomination as shared beliefs” alongside “denomination as shared community and history.” Both are necessary, and we were able to see the strengths and the weaknesses if one of these poles were overlooked.
2. Working through listening circles with agreement-making, empowering us to listen well to each other, and giving us actionable decisions that will continue to shape our life together as classis moving forward. We recommend a similar process to synod so that our broader community life can be strengthened in a similar way.

This communication is an outcome of this process.

We believe Synod 2024’s pursuit of setting clear guidelines related to confessional adherence led to more far-reaching consequences—namely, the erosion of trust for individual officebearers and B.C. North-West congregations. For example, we note the following:

- Communication between delegates has been more difficult. Many fear that we have lost the ability to hold relationships with each other and our family members.
- The current language at synod regarding the confessional-difficulty process has precluded some members.
- We grieve that some officebearers in our congregations are now unable to serve.
- Synod 2024’s focus on “without reservation” (Supplement, Art. 5-a, A, 1) has brought a focus on one’s individual conscience, at the expense of an equally important emphasis on the *manner* in which the officebearers will serve in their roles.
- Synod 2024’s initiating a process of “limited suspension” brought about a climate of fear that resulted in some congregations focusing on disaffiliation, discipline, and bylaws in their congregations, instead of discernment and directing that energy toward learning how better to apply the confessions in our contexts.

May the Lord continue to lead this church that he loves: congregants, officebearers, church councils, and classical and synodical delegates.

Classis B.C. North-West
Kathy N. Smith, stated clerk

Council of Washington D.C. CRC

Over the past four years, multiple synods have encouraged ongoing discussion about faith and sexuality across our denomination. In that spirit, we wish to add this essay by member Ryan Struyk to our denominational conversation. We are not all in agreement with every point or conclusion, but we find it a substantive and thoughtful contribution to the church's continued work.

Reformed Christians view God's work in the world through a creation, fall, redemption, and consummation framework—what N.T. Wright describes as a grand drama. Act 1 starts with Creation. It's followed with the Fall in Act 2, the story of Israel in Act 3, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Act 4, and the early church in Act 5, Scene 1. We know the play will end with the new creation in Act 6. Our job now is to fill in Act 5, Scene 2.¹

How we live out our moment in God's story hinges not only on how we understand the previous acts, but also how we understand the coming act. Neo-Calvinist giant Herman Bavinck emphasizes both the continuity *and* the transformation in *new* creation: "The point of arrival returns to the point of departure, and is *simultaneously* a high point elevated high above the point of departure. The works of God describe a circle which strives upward like a spiral."² Here's one of my favorite paragraphs:

Just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, as carbon is converted into diamond, as the grain of wheat upon the dying ground produces other grains of wheat, as all of nature revives in the spring and dresses up in celebrative clothing, as the believing community is formed out of Adam's fallen race, as the resurrection body is raised from the body that is dead and buried in the earth, so, too, by the re-creating power of Christ, the new heaven and the new earth will one day emerge from the fire-purged elements of this world, radiant in enduring glory and forever set free from the bondage of decay.³

When we think about a caterpillar or a chrysalis, we can hardly imagine the creative potential of the butterfly that will one day emerge. New creation is more. In Bavinck's own words: "Christ gives more than sin stole; grace was made much more to abound."⁴

Perhaps the most obvious biblical data we have to confirm this view is the nature of Christ's resurrected body. It is not a brand-new body. The nail marks are still in his hands. Jesus ate food. Thomas suggested touching his

¹ Wright, N.T. "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative? The Laing Lecture 1989." *Vox Evangelica*, vol. 21, 1991, p. 25.

² Bavinck, Herman. *Our Reasonable Faith*, 1909, p. 144. Quoted in Veenhof, Jan, "Nature and Grace in Bavinck," *Pro Rege*, Vol. 34: No. 4, 2006, p. 22.

³ Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, 1899, p. 719.

⁴ Bavinck, Herman. *De algemeene genade*, 1894, p. 43. Quoted in Veenhof, Jan, "Nature and Grace in Bavinck," *Pro Rege*, Vol. 34: No. 4, 2006, p. 22.

side. Yet, it is not the same as his previous body. Jesus suddenly appeared in a locked room. He disappeared after the Road to Emmaus. His resurrected body ascended into heaven.

Traditionalist scholar Darrin W. Snyder Belousek suggests that embracing same-sex marriage requires “replac[ing],” “rescind[ing],” or even “forsak[ing]” God’s intention at creation.⁵ He adds: “Seeing the ‘new’ in Christ as overcoming the ‘old’ in creation sets Christ the Savior against Christ the creator.”⁶

But leaning into Bavinck’s view of eschatology, I respectfully disagree. Revelation 21 paints a picture of the new creation that, frankly, repeatedly violates creation order. There will be no sun or moon. There will be no more sea. There will be no more night. Our bodies will be transformed. And there will be no more marriage. But more on that later.

My friend Jess Joustra, one of the world’s leading Bavinckian theology experts, writes that Jesus doesn’t produce a new *law*, but he brings “a new *understanding* of the law.” She continues: “Nothing is lost in the law; the original meaning and intent is gained.”⁷ What is the “original meaning and intent” for us to gain in marriage?

Here is the bottom line: Our eschatological direction does not point us toward creation, but toward *new* creation. We are not staying in the chrysalis, but we are joining creation in turning into butterflies. Could creation—and therefore, marriage—be right now today on its way to unfurling its wings?

Augustine outlined three core tenets of marriage in a widely accepted Western Christian marriage ethic: permanence, fidelity, and procreation. We can apply a Reformed, creation-fall-redemption framework to each of these three dimensions to understand its evolution from Genesis to Revelation.

	Creation	Fall	Redemption → Consummation
Perma- nence	God creates Adam and Eve to live forever in full communion with God and each other	Death divides and law of Moses allows for divorce due to hardness of hearts	Christ says marriage does not exist in heaven after the resurrection

⁵ Snyder Belousek, Darrin W. *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union*. Baker Academic, 2021, pp. 60, 81, 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷ Joustra, Jessica. “Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, Vol. 6, Iss. 2, p. 328.

Fidelity	God creates marriage as an exclusive bond between Adam and Eve in Genesis	Men marry multiple wives through polygamy and pursue sex out of marriage	Christ says that lust itself constitutes adultery in one's heart already
Procreation	God calls humankind to be fruitful, increase in number, and fill the earth in creation mandate	God curses Eve with pain in childbirth, and infertility derails entire family lines	God's family grows today through the Great Commission and includes Gentiles

In Creation, God ordained marriage to be permanent—that is, that the marriage bond could not be broken by death or divorce. It was exclusive—neither partner could violate it by leaving it for someone else, and no one else could enter the marriage bond. God also ordained marriage as the rightful place for Adam and Eve to fulfill God's mandate to grow God's family on earth.

After the Fall, marriage is no longer always the permanent institution it was intended to be because of death and divorce. The Fall also shatters the ideal of fidelity—commitments are broken, polygamy emerges, and prophets use the metaphor of an unfaithful spouse. The Fall also breaks God's good gift of procreation: pain is increased in childbirth. Some couples experience infertility, including biblical figures like Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. Still, God keeps the procreative lineage of the covenant going for God's people—ultimately culminating in a baby in a manger.

Now Jesus redeems each dimension of marriage by both embracing God's intent at creation and also making it new in the redemptive age. Jesus reiterates the creational permanence norm by rejecting nearly all reasons for divorce (Matt. 5:31-32). But notably, Jesus says that marriage does not exist in the resurrection, a stunning new revelation about the ultimate *impermanence* of marriage (Matt. 22:30). Christ's redemptive work also embraces a new vision for the fidelity dimension of marriage by proclaiming that anyone who lusts has already committed adultery in their heart—both honoring what came before and making it new by revealing its core meaning and intent (Matt. 5:27-28).

Finally, Christ both fundamentally makes new the procreation mandate while embracing its original intent. When Jesus expands God's family to include Gentiles more fully, the move also replaces the necessity of a biological family with the new reality of a spiritual family. A Synod 2003 panel says, "In the New Testament, adoption into the family of God through Christ is the theological concept that supersedes procreation as the point of entry into the covenant" (*Agenda for Synod 2003*, p. 283).

Progressive scholar Robert Song writes: “Unlike the old covenant, in which membership of the chosen community was determined by shared ancestral blood, membership in the new covenant community is determined by sharing in the blood of Christ.”⁸ “If we accept that sex even in a non-procreative context can be good, and that there is no final reason why all committed relationships should be intrinsically or deliberately open to procreation, we are opening the way to same-sex relationships.”⁹

Even Snyder Belousek points to this moment as one in which “traditionalists must accept the burden of argument,” particularly when it comes to contraception. “Christians cannot, consistently, affirm intentionally non-procreative marriage and then oppose same-sex union on account that God intended procreation as a good integral to marriage.”¹⁰ Yet that is exactly what the CRCNA has done: Synod 2003 determined that nonprocreation in marriage is a “disputable matter” — allowing “a husband and wife the freedom to prayerfully before God choose not to have children” (*Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 648).

So, does Christ’s work abolish the creational good of children? Of course not. Without a doubt, children are a blessing from God. But, in short, the creational *intent* of procreation has been made new. Our new covenant family is God’s family!

In Genesis, God creates Eve as an *‘ezer kenegdo* for Adam — or a “like-opposite” partner.¹¹ Why? Men and women are “like” because they are both human — “bone of my bone” and “flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). But how are they “opposite?” Why does it matter? And what are those differences now in the already-but-not-yet of Christ’s redemptive work? If procreation is no longer the binding force undergirding the like-opposite ethic in marriage, another option is gender complementarity — specifically, male headship.

The traditionalist case for male headship originates in Genesis 2 — in which Eve is created as a “helper suitable” for Adam. Adam names her and receives her; Eve is silent. Traditionalists say multiple New Testament passages appear to confirm the headship principle — 1 Corinthians 11:2 (“the head of the woman is man”); 1 Corinthians 14:34 (“women should remain silent in the churches”); and 1 Timothy 2:12 (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.”).¹²

⁸ Song, Robert. *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*. SCM Press, 2014, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁰ Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture and the Church*, p. 160.

¹¹ Keller, Timothy. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Marriage with the Wisdom of God*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2011, p. 195.

¹² For much, much more detail, see also Report 33, *Acts of Synod 1984*, pp. 282-376; Report 26, *Agenda for Synod 1990*, pp. 309-30; Report 31, *Agenda for Synod 1992*, pp. 359-83; Committee to Review the Decision re Women in Office for Synod 2000, *Agenda for Synod 2000*, pp. 351-407.

In 1984, synod narrowed male headship by rejecting it on a societal level and “quietly laid aside what had been for nearly two millennia the unquestioned status of man’s priority and dominance in society on the basis of creation order.”¹³ Further, Synod 1990 determined that the headship principle did not necessarily extend to church leadership (*Acts of Synod 1990*, p. 657).

In marriage, the CRCNA describes headship as a husband’s “direction-setting role” and a wife’s role of “voluntarily accepting his leadership” (*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 330). Theologian John Piper writes that men have “a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect women,” and women have “a freeing disposition to affirm, receive, and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men.”¹⁴

But the 1984 headship majority report also finds that “it does not appear that spiritual gifts as such are sex-specific—some feminine, some masculine” (*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 322). Theologian Karl Barth says attempts to articulate tangible, normative headship definitions “have tended to lapse into apparent arbitrariness and been vague about their premises.”¹⁵ He suggests that these descriptions “obviously cannot be said or heard in all seriousness. . . . On what authority are we told that these traits are masculine and these feminine?”¹⁶ Indeed, I would think that most traditionalists would be hard-pressed to articulate normative social roles of husbands and wives that absolutely must be present in every single marriage.

In his argument against extending the headship principle to the church, Calvin Theological Seminary professor (emeritus) John Cooper writes that, in Genesis 1, “there is no hint of hierarchy or differentiation of roles.”¹⁷ A 1990 synodical study committee report in the Christian Reformed Church in North America paints a picture of what it means to pursue an eschatological direction of the headship principle (*Agenda for Synod 1990*, pp. 327-28):

Isn't the future kingdom already present now? Isn't God's kingdom already in our midst now? What does the here and now of God's kingdom mean for husband-wife relations? What does it mean for males to be married to persons who will someday stand before God as their total equals in Christ?

¹³ Boomsma, Clarence. *Male and Female, One in Christ: New Testament Teaching on Women in Office*. Baker Book House, 1993, p. 86.

¹⁴ Piper, John, and Wayne A. Grudem, editors. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Crossway, 1991, p. 36. Quoted in Rivera, Bridget Eileen. *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*. Brazos Press, 2021, p. 128.

¹⁵ Roberts, Christopher C. *Creation & Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage*. T&T Clark, 2007, p. 181.

¹⁶ Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, III.4, p. 153. Quoted in Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, p. 146.

¹⁷ Cooper, John W. *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church*. Calvin Theological Seminary, 1991, p. 42.

The overall thrust of the Bible—its eschatological orientation and direction—is toward women’s attaining a place alongside men, rather than under them or separated from them.

One might also argue next that anatomical complementarity still exists separate from procreation and separate from any social dimension. But what is the significance of this anatomical complementarity without the purpose of procreation? Does our entire biblical sexual ethic rise and fall on only our literal, physical genitalia? To stake our sexual ethic here is to reduce the gift of marriage to a biological jigsaw puzzle.

So Barth offers one final suggestion: orderedness.¹⁸ He argues the simple fact that men came first and women came second is sufficient to maintain normative sexual difference in marriage:

Man and woman are not an A and a second A whose being and relationship can be described like the two halves of an hourglass, which are obviously two, but absolutely equal and therefore interchangeable. Man and woman are an A and a B, and cannot, therefore, be equated. . . . A has not the slightest advantage over B, nor does it suffer the slightest disadvantage. . . . Every word is dangerous and liable to be misunderstood when we try to characterize this order. But it exists.¹⁹

Barth says any explanation of this difference is “better left unresolved.”²⁰ How convenient for Barth not to enumerate any specific normative difference—given that we have not been able to find any normative, real-world reason to undergird our “opposite” ethic to this point! Reformer John Calvin ultimately agrees that this basis “does not seem to be very strong” because “John the Baptist went before Christ in time and yet was far inferior to him.”²¹ I’m with Calvin: The existence of an ordered pair at creation, with some hidden meaning that we are unable to articulate, is far too narrow upon which to mandate lifelong celibacy for all LGBTQ individuals.

And when the denomination’s 1973 report attempts its own reasoning for male-female difference beyond procreation, it actually backs into a more compelling reason to actually endorse same-sex marriage (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 615):

Turning to Genesis 2 we learn that the male-female polarity is by no means only for the purpose of biological reproduction. The account stresses the role of sex differentiation for the purpose of fulfilling the individual man’s fundamental need for companionship and personal

¹⁸ This section relies heavily on a synopsis of Barth’s views in *Creation & Covenant* by Christopher Roberts. His book is extremely helpful for understanding the traditional views on sexual difference in the last two millennia.

¹⁹ Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, III.4, p. 169. Quoted in Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, pp. 160-61.

²⁰ Barth. *Church Dogmatics*, p. 287. Quoted in Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, p. 145.

²¹ Calvin, John. *New Testament Commentaries: Commentary on I Timothy*, 1561, p. 217. Quoted in Boomsma, *Male and Female, One in Christ*, p. 56.

wholeness. Woman is created as a complement to help man so that the two cleave to each other in love and form a unity in marriage.

This is the created order into which male and female polarity form an integral part of being human.

Fulfilling a fundamental need for companionship and personal wholeness. Holding fast to each other in love. Coming together in unity in marriage.

“This is the created order.” Could it really be that simple?

Scripture links marriage to three important images: the one-flesh union, the image of God, and Christ and the church. All three mysteries, to borrow from Paul’s vocabulary, find their meanings “already” revealed to us in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

First, the one-flesh motif in Scripture points us toward not only a unitive coming together of two individuals in marriage but also the new unity of Jews and Gentiles, Christ and the church, and, ultimately, heaven and earth. The one-flesh motif does not, as some traditionalists claim, allude to some sort of reunification of the sexes into some original, unisex human being in Genesis.²² Nor can the “one-flesh” motif be reduced to only a familial bond, as some progressives suggest. That is certainly a piece of the puzzle, but Scripture certainly suggests a unitive component (see 1 Cor. 6:16-17). Snyder Belousek writes that marriage “would not fully reflect God’s unitive plan of salvation” if male and female are not united.²³ But why? This unitive salvation plan has *already* been revealed to us in Christ. No doubt, the *meaning* or *intent* of the figure lives on in Christ. This work is done!

The denomination’s Human Sexuality Report makes a fair point here that Jesus’ mention of “male and female” alongside “one flesh” in Matthew 19 was not strictly necessary to answer the Pharisees’ question. But we can understand Jesus’ teaching within a creation-fall-redemption framework: he describes the creation account, acknowledges the Fall by moving to Moses’ law, and then ushers in the new era with his own authority. That’s why I must split with the report’s conclusion that this means Christ “understands sexuality in creational terms” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 327). While Christ *grounds* marriage in creation, he understands it now in terms of *his own self*. Christ issues new rulings on all three Augustinian dimensions of marriage out of his own Messianic authority. (Regardless, this is far from the main thrust of the passage, in the same way traditionalists reference 1 Timothy 3:2 as a proof text against women in office because it requires elders to be “the husband of one wife.”)

Second, Genesis 1 explains that Adam and Eve are created “in the image of God.” The traditional argument suggests that this male-female binary is essential to humanity’s reflection of God’s image. However, the grammar of

²² Ganson, Robert A.J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Abingdon, 2001, p. 60. Quoted in *Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage*, Jan. 2016, pp. 60-61.

²³ Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church*, p. 152.

the sentence does not directly tie the two: the first two clauses of the verse are separated by a comma, and then the male and female dichotomy is separated with a semicolon. Regardless, Colossians 1 tells us that Christ is the truest and fullest image of God. When we ask ourselves what it means to be imagebearers of God, we find the best understanding by looking at the incarnation of Jesus Christ—the one through whom all things at creation were made.

Third, the traditionalist argument suggests that husband and wife ought to model the relationship between Christ and the church. We find here yet another image revealed to us in Christ. Traditionalist Christopher Roberts writes: “The sexes were created for the purpose of responding to their prototype, Christ and the church.”²⁴ But does the Christ-church relationship point us toward normative husband-wife relations? Or did Paul’s understanding of husband-wife relations point his readers toward a better understanding of the brand-new Christ-church relationship? Now that Christ has been revealed to the church, and is still present with the church in the Holy Spirit, sexual distinction in marriage is no longer necessary to point us to the reality *in which we are already living*. Indeed, Paul himself communicates that reality to us when he writes: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21).

In conclusion, the Belgic Confession states, “We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ended with the coming of Christ, and that all foreshadowings have come to an end, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet the truth and substance of these things remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled” (Art. 25). The foreshadowings have come to an end. The truth and substance remain.

Romans 1 is the lone apparent *theological* condemnation of same-sex relationships. Synodical reports lead us to three main components of biblical interpretation: the grammatical-literary dimension, the historical dimension, and the theological dimension.²⁵ As Cooper writes, “The issue is not *whether* the Bible is normative or *which parts* are normative, but *how* it is normative for us today.”²⁶ Much of my analysis will be in conversation with New Testament ethicist Richard Hays, who wrote a 1996 landmark exegesis of Romans 1 that is widely accepted and cited by traditionalists today.

First, the grammatical-literary component of Reformed interpretation points us toward an observation of what Romans 1 is *not*: Romans 1 is not a rule against same-sex relationships. It is not, in the view of Hays, primarily

²⁴ Roberts, *Creation & Covenant*, p. 154.

²⁵ See also “Report 24: Infallibility and Inspiration in the Light of Scripture and the Creeds,” *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 253-328; “Report 44: The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority,” *Acts of Synod 1972*, pp. 493-546 ; “Report 31: Hermeneutical Principles Concerning Women in Ecclesiastical Office,” *Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 484-533 (referenced in Cooper, *A Cause for Division?* pp. 17ff).

²⁶ Cooper, *A Cause for Division?* p. 26.

even about providing moral instruction for Christians.²⁷ Instead, the verses regarding same-sex relationships are “of a secondary and illustrative character.”²⁸ Hays calls it an “image” of “humanity’s primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the creator”²⁹ and a “sign” of “humanity’s confusion and rebellion against God.” Further, same-sex relationships are not listed here as a *reason* for God’s wrath but, rather, as an *image* or *manifestation*. Hays writes: “When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design.”³⁰

(As a side note, Romans 1 also creates problems for the moderate traditional position. Is attraction to the same sex “shameful”? Are they “lusts”? Are they “sinful desires of their hearts”? If so, how do we hold the position that sexual orientation is not sin? The Presbyterian Church in America recently determined that same-sex attraction “is not morally neutral” and “must be repented of and put to death.”³¹ John Calvin goes so far as to call “unnatural lust” a “dreadful crime.”³² Superimposing our modern ethic here—ultimately a compassionate approach meant to absolve individuals of guilt over sexual orientations that they cannot control—prompts its own exegetical problems in Romans 1.)

The second core Reformed hermeneutic is an exploration of the historical culture.³³ Classics scholar Sarah Ruden writes this riveting description:

Perhaps, in the matter of homosexuality, what he saw as a boy influenced him more than his tradition did. . . . Flagrant pedophiles might have pestered him and his friends on the way to and from school. . . . As he preached what Jesus meant for human society, he wasn't going to let anyone believe that it included any of this.³⁴

I picture Paul, flushed and sweating in his rage as he writes that everyone is responsible for what pederasty has made of society. . . . All this leads to a feeling of mountainous irony. Paul takes a bold and effective swipe at the power structure. He challenges centuries of execrable practice in seeking a more just, more loving society. And he gets called a bigot.³⁵

²⁷ Hays, Richard B. “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 14, no. 1, Apr. 1986, p. 195.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. HarperCollins, 1996, p. 386.

³¹ Presbyterian Church in America. “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019-2020),” p. 8. [pcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf).

³² Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. 1540, p. 79.

³³ Cooper, *A Cause for Division?* p. 20.

³⁴ Ruden, Sarah. *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. Image Books, 2010, p. 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Traditionalists dispute whether ancient authors were familiar with any consensual, committed same-sex relationships approximating marriage. Comprehensive work by progressive scholar Matthew Vines ticks through a lengthy list of proposed counterexamples to demonstrate that nearly all ultimately stem from pederasty, come from fiction, or just plain don't fit.^{36 37} Even traditionalist Preston Sprinkle ultimately admits: "It is unlikely that Paul has monogamous same-sex marriages in view when he pens Romans 1. Consensual same-sex relations existed in Paul's time, but they were rare."³⁸

Likewise, Paul likely believed that same-sex relationships stem from excessive lust or a lack of self-control. Sprinkle says this point is "one of the strongest arguments" for an affirming view — admitting that "no one can deny with any historical credibility that homosexual behavior was often believed to result from excessive lust and uncontrollable sexual desire."³⁹ Hays writes that "there is no trace either in the New Testament or in any other Jewish or Christian writings in the ancient world" of the idea of sexual orientation.⁴⁰ (A line from Sprinkle in the Human Sexuality Report about ancient writers who "explored" an idea that "could be" considered a "version" of same-sex orientation ultimately references an approach that rooted sexual preference in astrology, age, and wealth [*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 421].)

John Chrysostom, a key fourth-century theologian, can help us shed some light on how Paul might have been thinking about Romans 1:

No one, he means, can say that it was by being hindered of legitimate intercourse that they came to this pass, or that it was from having no means to fulfill their desire that they were driven into this monstrous insaneness. For the changing implies possession. . . . That which is contrary to nature has in it an irksomeness and displeasingness, so that they could not fairly allege even pleasure.⁴¹

What a stunningly different understanding of same-sex intimacy than we have today! Plus, he's indeed correct that "the changing implies possession" — why would Paul symbolize the universal fall of all humankind with an "exchange" that literally no LGBTQ individual actually demonstrates? Let me be clear: These two very different understandings of homosexual orientation and practice do not render the passage nonauthoritative. But it

³⁶ Vines, Matthew. "Did Same-Sex Marriage Exist in the Biblical World? A Response to N.T. Wright and Preston Sprinkle," The Reformation Project; reformationproject.org.

³⁷ Sprinkle, Preston. "Paul and Homosexual Behavior: A Critical Evaluation of the Excessive-Lust Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27." *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2015, p. 501.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

⁴⁰ Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," p. 200.

⁴¹ Chrysostom, John. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Homily 4.

should prompt us to ask how we ought to interpret the passage for real LGBTQ individuals today.

(Further, I have little original thought to add about the meanings of the words “arsenokoitai” and “malakoi” in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. I find it noteworthy that Martin Luther’s first 1534 translation translates it to “boy molester.”⁴² And in the end Hays suggests he chooses to focus so heavily on Romans 1, as I do, because he has found that “there is room for reasonable doubt” about their meanings.⁴³)

Third, the theological dimension of Reformed hermeneutics asks how Romans 1 fits into the overall message of Scripture. My hope is that my analysis on the one-flesh motif, the image of God, Christ and the church, procreation, and headship largely contribute to this section’s purpose. Still, traditionalist scholars rightly make the distinction that, contrary to other contemporary issues like women in leadership, no biblical texts explicitly endorse same-sex intimacy,⁴⁴ or give examples of Christians who are in same-sex partnerships.^{45 46}

Still, just as the Human Sexuality Report rejects the argument that Jesus’ silence on same-sex relationships ought to be taken as a sign of approval (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 413) (agreed!), the Bible’s lack of examples of Christian same-sex relationships ought not be taken as a sign of disapproval, either. We should also note, along with Hays, that “the New Testament contains no passages that clearly articulate a rule against homosexual practices.”⁴⁷

Finally, we also must recognize that this short passage on same-sex intimacy lands in the “fall” section in Paul’s creation-fall-redemption analysis. We have not gotten to the gospel yet! As Hays later writes: “The wrath of God—manifested in God’s ‘giving up’ of rebellious humanity to follow their own devices and desires—is not the last word.”⁴⁸ “Neither the word of judgment against homosexuality nor the hope of transformation to a new life should be read apart from the eschatological framework of Romans.”⁴⁹

I do ultimately agree with traditionalists who say that Paul is talking about *all* same-sex relationships in Romans 1. The Human Sexuality Report says: “The problem that the apostle identifies involves not one of wrong *degree* (excessive behavior) but of wrong *object*” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 419). Indeed, the thrust of Paul’s entire argument hangs on the sameness of the

⁴² Oxford, Eric. “Has ‘Homosexual’ Always Been in the Bible?” *Forge Online*, Mar. 21, 2019.

⁴³ Hays, Richard B. “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” p. 184.

⁴⁴ Cooper, John W. “Not Like Women in Office: Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Same-Sex Relations.” *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, vol. 22, no. 3, Fall 2015, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. HarperCollins, 1996, p. 395.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

sexes. This presents the progressive case with a dilemma. Hays arrives at this exact same point and writes: “Does that settle the contemporary issue? By no means. This is precisely the point at which genuinely fruitful reflection must begin.”⁵⁰ We will attempt that here:

The hermeneutical study committee report to Synod 1978 implores us to consider the possibility that “that which looks like a moral principle and has long been considered such by the church is in fact no more than an application of a moral principle” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 500). Some examples might be greeting each other with a holy kiss, raising hands in prayer, or abstaining from meat with blood.⁵¹ This interpretive hermeneutic applies even when Paul explicitly roots his command in creation order (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 622). In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul requires that women must pray with their heads covered. Just two verses later, Paul explicitly references Genesis 2. Later, Paul references “nature” — the same word he uses in Romans 1 — to insist that men have short hair and women have long hair (1 Cor. 11:14).

The Synod 1978 panel points to John Calvin’s approach to this passage — that nature here simply means “the custom that prevailed in Paul’s day” and it is “a far cry from taking it to be a reference to something that is embedded in the fabric of nature itself” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 516). This is also how Cooper approaches the 1 Timothy injunction for women not to speak in worship: “His appeal to the creation and fall of Adam and Eve does not automatically make Paul’s prohibitions in [1 Timothy 2:12] universally binding creational norms.”⁵²

In short, our hermeneutic does not require direct, literal compliance with these creation-rooted directives even when the New Testament explicitly lays them out as rules to follow. This brings us back to our note that, in Romans 1, we do not even find an explicit *rule* against same-sex relationships but, rather, a symbolic *image* of idolatry. Hays calls this idea the “symbolic world” or “mythico-historical” representation of a Creation-to-Fall dynamic.⁵³ But the intellectual leap from this representative world — Paul’s “image,” “sign,” and “symbol” — to normative mandatory lifelong celibacy for all same-sex-oriented people — is not clear.

In fact, Hays himself admits that “Romans 1:26-27 cannot be read as an account of how individuals become homosexuals.”⁵⁴ So if Romans 1 does not articulate *why* individuals are gay — though that is a main thrust of the entire passage — then how can it tell us anything about how LGBTQ individuals ought to behave?

⁵⁰ Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” p. 205.

⁵¹ Cooper, *A Cause for Division?* p. 27.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵³ Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” p. 189.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

Hays suggests that individuals who search for a principle behind an application of a principle here are left with only vague platitudes about love or analogies about the Gentiles. I agree that is not enough. But then he asserts that a “principle that human actions ought to acknowledge and honor God as creator” is also “too general.”⁵⁵ Why? That what Hays himself says is the entire point of Romans 1!

Dare I venture to say, in today’s culture, the image or sign of same-sex relationships in Romans 1 actually *confuses* rather than *clarifies* our understanding of idolatry? Perhaps we can take the words of our 1978 synodical report—“the symbol was abrogated, the principle was not” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 498)—and declare them for our modern question about Paul’s representation of humankind’s idolatry in Romans 1.

For decades, Christian Reformed scholars have been wary of using Galatians 3:28 as any kind of determinative proof text for women in office. However, this passage cannot be ignored—and it must, in my view, weigh heavily on our discussion. Importantly, Paul does not write “neither male nor female,” as one might expect from the parallelism of the verse. Paul changes his sentence structure to write—*nor is there male and female*—clearly referencing Genesis 1:27. (In fact, the sentence is so grammatically clunky that there is no other logical understanding.)

Hays goes so far as to say: “The formula alludes to the creation story and says ‘no more.’”⁵⁶ He continues: “The question we have to ask ourselves is this: How shall we order the life of our community in such a way that we retell the story of God’s new creation in Christ, in whom there is no male and female?”⁵⁷

Traditionalist John Cooper, in his argument for women in office, writes this:

Unity within the body of Christ is the most basic thing about our lives. It is more fundamental than the husband-wife relation, the parent-child relation, the master-slave relation (Eph. 5:21), or any other human relationship. . . . Equality in Christ is the operative relationship between Christian men and women unless it is modified by some other legitimate role or relationship of authority.⁵⁸

In its celibacy section, the traditionalist Human Sexuality Report agrees: “Our identity in Christ transcends all other identities, whether those that are consequences of the fall (such as slave and free, gay and straight) or those that are gifts of creation and redemption (such as male and female, married and celibate)” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 339). The implications of that statement ought to apply to marriage, as well.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵⁶ Hays, Richard B. “New Testament Ethics: The Story Retold.” (The 1997 J.J. Thiessen lectures) CMBC Publications, 1998, p. 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Cooper, *A Cause for Division?* p. 43.

What is the alternative? We cannot view this as simply a choice between endorsing same-sex marriage or maintaining the status quo. Instead, it is a choice between endorsing same-sex marriage or endorsing the new idea of mandatory lifelong celibacy.

Calvin Theological Seminary professor Jeffrey Weima says: “Those today who find themselves beset by same-sex attraction are ultimately in the same position as heterosexuals who face inclinations to act outside of God’s revealed intention for humanity.”⁵⁹ As someone who has personally seriously grappled with the idea of lifelong celibacy at just 20 years old, I find this is stunningly wrong.

Put yourself in a gay child’s shoes: two-thirds of LGBTQ individuals first felt they might not be straight when they were fourteen years old or younger.⁶⁰ That child, under the traditional ethic, might come out and fully know, at that moment, that he or she must be single for the rest of the next seven decades. On the contrary, straight individuals may enter multiple dating relationships and, at any time in the future, from their twenties to their eighties, choose to marry.⁶¹ In short, the difference is the hope of a future relationship. While the end result might be the same—a single life—these are wildly different *practical* realities over the course of a lifetime.⁶²

So what should we make of the biblical ethic of celibacy, and why we might or might not adopt it as mandatory for all LGBTQ individuals?

In Matthew 19, Jesus suggests that celibacy is voluntary in two ways: he suggests that celibacy is “given” and “not everyone can accept” it (Matt. 19:11). Indeed, “accepting” lifelong celibacy requires an action by the individual; it’s not simply something forced upon them with no discernment of call. Jesus also outlines three types of eunuchs—including those who “choose” so for the sake of the kingdom. These individuals, in Martin Luther’s words, “are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God.”⁶³

Paul says unmarried individuals should try to stay single—but “if they cannot control themselves, they should marry” (1 Cor. 7:9). As Lewis Smedes writes: “If Paul thought that most heterosexual people lacked the gift of celibacy, would he not have thought that at least some homosexuals lack it?”⁶⁴ Traditionalists assert this is only the gift of self-control (*Agenda for Synod*

⁵⁹ Weima, Jeffrey A. “Same-Sex Activity: What Does the New Testament Say?” Calvin Theological Seminary *Forum*, vol. 22, no. 3, Oct. 2015, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Pew Research Center, “A Survey of LGBT Americans,” June 13, 2013. n=1,197. MOE +/- 4.1% pts.

⁶¹ See “The Significance of Singleness” by Christina Hitchcock for an example of this.

⁶² To be clear, none of this should be misconstrued to suggest that I think marriage ought to be elevated over singleness. In fact, I agree with the observation of virtually every theological traditionalist that our evangelical culture has elevated marriage to an unacceptable and idolatrous expectation.

⁶³ Luther, Martin. Sermon: “The Estate of Marriage.” 1522.

⁶⁴ Smedes, Lewis B. “Like the Wideness of the Sea?” *Perspectives*, May 1999.

2022, p. 339). But as we've noted, mandatory lifelong celibacy is a *far* different reality.

In the Reformation, Martin Luther mocks the idea that it's possible to "possess virginity as we do shoes and clothing." He also suggests that mandatory celibacy is "simply impossible" — and "they will not remain pure but inevitably besmirch themselves with secret sins or fornication."⁶⁵ Calvin's assessment of forced-celibacy vows for priests: "It is of no consequence to mention with what impunity whoredom prevails among them, and how, trusting to their vile celibacy, they have become callous to all kinds of iniquity."⁶⁶

Importantly, Snyder Belousek goes so far as to call such a celibacy mandate an "innovation"⁶⁷ — using the exact same word he uses throughout the book for supporters of same-sex marriage! He ultimately proposes an alternative: mixed-orientation couples. But this would be a fraught, irresponsible path forward for pastoral care. Elsewhere Snyder Belousek rejects an accommodation argument for same-sex couples to marry. But if anything is an accommodation, it is an LGBTQ individual marrying a straight individual and insisting it meets God's creational vision for marriage.

(Finally, I hope it goes without saying that advocating for orientation change is repugnant. Every major ex-gay organization has shuttered and apologized. Our 2016 synodical study committee unanimously recommended rejecting it [*Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 404]. The Human Sexuality Report's suggestion that LGBTQ people should "pray that God will allow them to be drawn to a partner of the opposite sex" is an absolute disgrace [*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 437].)

In other words, there is no "safe" option. The choice is between endorsing marriage without sexual difference or endorsing mandatory lifelong celibacy imposed on millions of LGBTQ individuals. Whether you support or oppose same-sex marriage, you must endorse overturning two thousand years of church history regardless of where you fall.

Former Calvin Theological Seminary president James De Jong used what he called an "inverse test of systematic correlation" to tease out the implications of women in office: "When one asks what of confessional Reformed orthodoxy unravels when one approves the ordination of women as pastors, elders, and evangelists, the answer is, 'Nothing.' None of this redefines by implication the entire fabric of Reformed faith."⁶⁸

Nothing I've written here redefines our faith either. The Augustinian marriage ethic remains intact. The meanings of the biblical images of the one-flesh motif, the image of God, and Christ and the church are revealed to us

⁶⁵ Luther, "The Estate of Marriage."

⁶⁶ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.12). 1536.

⁶⁷ Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church*, pp. 179-80.

⁶⁸ De Jong, James A. *Freeing the Conscience: Approaching the Women's Ordination Issue by Means of Theological Correlation*. Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995, p. 23.

in Christ in the same way. This argument doesn't dismiss Paul as out-of-touch. It doesn't overgeneralize about love. It doesn't rewrite the creation account or push a potpourri of negative arguments and hope one lands. This is a cohesive, *positive*, theological argument, rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and exegeted with a Reformed hermeneutic.

It can be scary to open ourselves up to an understanding of Scripture that steps away from church tradition—especially a position that has been perceived for so long as such a flagrant departure from sound doctrine. But it's not. It's time to consider it. And it's time to realize that our Reformed theology and hermeneutic are not *barriers* to supporting same-sex marriage, but our greatest *strength* in discovering how God calls us to live in our chapter of Christ's redemptive work.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of Washington, D.C.
Ryan Struyk, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted to the March 4, 2025, meeting of Classis Hackensack but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 5

Classis Minnkota

Classis Minnkota sends delegates to synod each year that protest the ordination and seating of women at synod. In the interests of transparency and clarity, classis wishes to explain the rationale for our protests by sending this communication.

The churches of Classis Minnkota affirm that men and women are created by God with equality in essence and dignity but with distinction in some roles. We praise God for the beautiful diversity he created when he made us male and female. These distinct roles are taught in Scripture, derive from God's creative will, and are to be manifest in complementary roles in the family and church. This belief is reflected in an accurate translation of the Belgic Confession, Article 30, which reads, ". . . when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy." (See the original French wording, which refers to persons using the masculine gender.) This belief is therefore not rooted in chauvinism or patriarchy but in Scripture and in our historic confession of faith. It is our hope and prayer that this communication will provide a clear and respectful understanding of our convictions in this matter.

We believe that men and women are created equal as imagebearers of God and as heirs of salvation. We also believe that men and women complement each other in mutually enriching ways and that God has given each gender

specific callings in the church and home. We seek to honor and glorify God by celebrating and using the gifts and abilities he has given to us within the roles he has established for us.

As a classis we affirm the following convictions:

1. That men and women equally bear the image of God and are called to serve him throughout their lives (Gen. 1:27-28).
2. That we are to follow Christ's example when he honored and respected women during his earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42) and as he continues to equip them for service in his church today (1 Cor. 12:4-7).
3. That the roles for men and women in the church must be defined solely by the Word of God and not by human ideologies such as feminism, male chauvinism, patriarchy, or sexist oppression (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
4. That from the beginning of creation God assigned headship to males in the family and in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:12-13; 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).
5. That the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" and then grounded this argument in the good created order (1 Tim. 2:12-13). The church, therefore, should not ordain women to its authoritative offices.
6. That the purpose of spiritual gifts is not self-fulfillment but service to God and others, to the end that God receives all the glory (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26).
7. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women is contrary to Scripture.

We also offer the following observations:

1. That even though Synod 1995 declared that both complementarian and egalitarian views are faithful interpretations of the Word of God, synodical practice since that time has become markedly egalitarian, making it difficult for complementarians to participate in good conscience.
2. That the complementarian position is held by many male and female members and by other officebearers, churches, and classes in the CRCNA.
3. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women has resulted in offense, division, strife, loss of members, and our expulsion from NAPARC in 1997.
4. That celebration of the egalitarian position and practice through video and song (as done at Synod 2018) causes offense and pricks the consciences of those who hold to the historic complementarian position regarding women in church office.

As members of the body of Christ in the CRCNA, Classis Minnkota does not present this communication in order to offend our brothers and sisters

who hold to the egalitarian view; rather we wish to explain that our convictions are rooted in the Word of God. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 6

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana

We write in regard to the confessional-revision gravamen we submitted to Classis Holland in February of 2023. We will give a brief history of the gravamen, request that Classis Holland acknowledge the factuality of this history, and pass this communication on to Synod 2025 for its information and records.

For weighty biblical and theological reasons, Church of the Savior (CotS) disagreed with Synod 2022’s declaration that “unchastity” included “homosexual sex.” Heeding the admonition of those who said it was a misuse of confessional-*difficulty* gravamina to use these kinds of gravamina as a means of privately communicating ongoing disagreement with the confessions, CotS chose to submit a confessional-*revision* gravamen. This made the matter public, and open for discussion by the whole church (see Church Order Article 5).

According to the rules of Church Order, CotS’s gravamen went to Classis Holland as an overture at its February 2023 meeting. Classis Holland opted not to discuss the overture, which they later admitted was a mishandling of the matter. They sought to rectify the mistake but were told by the Office of General Secretary (OGS) that it was too late to do so. Meanwhile, CotS appealed the overture/gravamen to Synod 2023, and for reasons unknown Synod 2023 did not engage with it in any way at all, inaccurately claiming that the matter had already been addressed.

Certain that this nonengagement with its gravamen/overture was in violation of Church Order, CotS submitted an overture to Classis Holland in February of 2024 that asked that Synod 2024 deal appropriately—that is, according to Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers—with confessional-revision gravamina previously submitted, including CotS’s. Classis Holland saw the reasonableness of this request and joined CotS in making the overture to Synod 2024. The OGS refused to receive this overture, however, claiming that it lacked new and sufficient grounds, and changed it into a communication to Synod 2024 that did not require a response. Synod 2024 then instructed Classis Holland to resolve the matter with CotS—effectively contradicting the original advice of the OGS that it was too late for

resolution. Classis Holland reached out to CotS to see how the matter might be resolved.

Meanwhile, Synod 2024 also ordered that churches who are not in alignment with Synod 2022's definition of "unchastity," including CotS, disaffiliate from the CRC. Classis Holland has expressed its agreement with Synod 2024 in this regard, and CotS is acquiescing to this decision. In light of this reality, CotS believes that it is not possible at this time to have a good-faith dialogue with Classis Holland about its gravamen, nor to move toward genuine resolution. The matter has been decided before the dialogue even begins.

CotS's gravamen was not handled at either the classical or synodical level according to the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers, which states that officebearers will "receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel." As such, the CRCNA has a debt outstanding to CotS. However, CotS recognizes that this is a debt that cannot be repaid at this time; nor can genuine resolution be achieved in the current climate. Thus CotS proposes that the matter be set aside without resolution, so that CotS and Classis Holland may go their separate ways in peace.

Council of Church of the Savior
Christine Hedlin, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted to the March 6, 2025, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 7

Classis Iakota

Dear Dr. Roels and EIRC members,

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Last year our classis submitted Overture 15 to Synod 2024 regarding the Reformed Church in America (RCA). In response to that overture, synod directed your committee to dialogue with the RCA and bring forth a recommendation to Synod 2025 concerning its status as a "church in communion." We are grateful for your committee's work toward that end and write to you now concerning it.

We took note of several concerns mentioned in your evaluation of our overture to Synod 2024 but wanted to continue this important conversation by addressing the first. Your claim was that a change in our relationship with the RCA would cause the EIRC to violate Church Order Article 49-a, since the Ecumenical Charter states that requiring ecumenical partners to "think biblically, theologically, and confessionally like the CRC" is "no longer a meaningful option."

We wanted to raise several concerns in response. First, the point raised cites not the Ecumenical Charter itself, but its Preface. But, more importantly, we wonder about applying such a broad principle on “ecumenical relationships,” generally speaking, to what you have called our “closest ecumenical” partner (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, p. 317). Does such an interpretation and application of our Ecumenical Charter mean that there are no longer any faith and practice expectations defining our closest partners? If that is the case, where is our unity grounded?

To observe that we are no longer in alignment on significant confessional matters of faith and practice, and to then change the status of a partnership to accurately reflect that reality, is not a matter of policing or holding accountable, but of honesty. The interpretation and application of our Ecumenical Charter offered by your committee’s memo to Synod 2024 would lead us to wonder what another church could do, if anything, that would lead to a change in their status. Such an application of the Charter (or to be specific, its Preface) seems untenable.

We deeply lament the hurdles and consequences that would come out of a growing separation from the RCA. Consequences, however, arise out of actions. Where there is no longer a deep alignment on matters of faith, unity—especially to the extent of “church in communion” status—no longer truly exists. We in Iowa and South Dakota no longer recognize the RCA of 2025. Most of the brothers and sisters who we work together with in our local communities have left the RCA, and they have done so specifically because of commitments on human sexuality and biblical interpretation that we share.

As you consider your recommendations to Synod 2025, we hope that you will bear these concerns in mind. The RCA of 2025 is not the RCA with whom we formed the so-called “Pella Accord” in 2014. We urge you to let this reality, lamentable as it may be, be reflected in your decisions.

Classis Iakota
Bernie Haan, stated clerk

APPENDIX

Relevant Portion of EIRC “Right of Comment” Memo to Synod 2024 Regarding Classis Iakota Overture 15

1. If the overture were adopted, the CRC would be going against its Ecumenical Charter.

The preface to the CRC’s 2019 Ecumenical Charter reads, in part, as follows:

Historically, ecumenical contacts of the CRC were exclusively with denominations in the Reformed tradition who shared the viewpoint that ecumenical partners assume responsibility for keeping each other confessionally Reformed. Not only did synods

consult each other on important theological issues, but the one partner could hold the other partner accountable for deviations or practices that were considered to be objectionable.

The CRC has learned that requiring such uniformity for ecumenical relationships is no longer a meaningful option. The requirement that ecumenical partners think biblically, theologically, and confessionally like the CRC can soon make the circle of ecumenical relationships very small. Furthermore, such a demand for similar perspectives exposes the risk of being perceived as being theologically arrogant. . . .

These changes in ecumenical relationships prompted Synod 2006 to revise its Ecumenical Charter. The Charter was revised again in 2010. The CRC is less insistent than it once was that our ecumenical partners understand issues in the same way as those issues are understood in the CRC. The CRC does not endorse every position taken by ecumenical partners; nor do we need to (cf. Church Order Art. 50-c). Rather, the present understanding in ecumenical circles is that churches learn from each other and discuss differing perspectives. Ecumenical relationship can be built on common interests and commitments to the ministry of the gospel and the mission to which the gospel calls the whole Christian church. . . .

Were Overture 15 to be adopted, the EIRC would have to operate contrary to this stance in the Ecumenical Charter, which would itself be a violation of Church Order Article 49-a: “Synod shall appoint a committee to encourage ecumenical relationships with other Christian churches, especially those that are part of the Reformed family, *as articulated in the synodically approved Ecumenical Charter of the Christian Reformed Church* so that that the Christian Reformed Church may exercise Christian fellowship with other denominations and may promote the unity of the church of Jesus Christ” (emphasis added).

COMMUNICATION 8

Members of Third CRC, Kalamazoo, Michigan

I. Background

In Overture 15 to Synod 2024, Classis Iakota asked synod to “review the ecumenical status of the Reformed Church in America as a church in communion” (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, p. 453).

Synod 2024 decided to (1) “instruct the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) to communicate with the Reformed Church in America general secretary and Commission on Christian Unity . . . and to report to Synod 2025 regarding the responses received” and (2) “propose that the

EIRC provide a recommendation to Synod 2025 regarding the ecumenical relationship of the RCA as a *church in communion* with the CRCNA" (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 883-84).

II. Recommendation

We, the undersigned members of Third Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, wish to communicate a desire to remain in ecumenical relationship as a church in communion with the Reformed Church in America. We recommend that synod make no changes to the ecumenical relationship between the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America—in particular, our current practice of the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers.

Grounds:

1. The shared heritage of the RCA and the CRC cannot be easily brushed aside. For many years, our two denominations have worked to collaborate where our goals align and to remain separate where they do not. This partnership was affirmed in our Ecumenical Charter and in the "Pella Accord" of 2014. As the RCA is our parent denomination, the CRCNA could not exist in its current form without this shared history.
2. In their response to Overture 15 in the *Agenda for Synod 2024*, the EIRC provided the assurance that "rules governing the orderly exchange of ministers already require that an RCA minister respect and submit to the polity, theology, and traditions of the CRCNA" (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 744).
3. In their response, the EIRC also shared that, at the time of writing, that there were 46 RCA ministers currently serving CRC churches. In particular, two of them are currently serving at Third CRC (we have four in our classis altogether), and they have been doing excellent work for our congregation for the past several years. If synod were to make a decision that would cause a disruption to the ability of these ministers to serve their congregations, all of them, including Third CRC, would be put in a very difficult position.
4. Many churches in both denominations are currently experiencing great difficulties in calling new pastors, and the decreasing supply of ministers has been noted at past meetings of synod. With this fact in mind, any decision made by synod to suspend or cease the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between our denominations would only exacerbate the struggle in many churches to maintain pastoral leadership for their congregations.

In conclusion, Third CRC's relevant experience, and our deep appreciation for the RCA ministers currently serving our church, led the undersigned members to petition for the stability of this ecumenical relationship. We respectfully urge Synod 2025 to continue to affirm the value of the CRCNA's

continued relationship with the RCA, particularly the wisdom, experience, and excellent work we are blessed with in our RCA ordained ministers.

Members of Third Christian Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Andrew Bolles	Ed Maring
Nicole Bolles	Cindy Nanninga
Dave Bierenga	Tom Nanninga
Amy Brimmer	Carolyn Osterhouse
John Buttery	Aaron Potter
Jane Buttery	Andrea Potter
Barb Dyk	Lucas Potter
Christee Dyk	Leslie Rafferty
Ken Dyk	Kay Severson
Randy Dyk	Sandy Siegfried
Bill Dykhuis	Saara Spitzer
Nell Dykhuis	Erica VanderKooy
Eric Edewaard	Tim VanderKooy
Marlene Hikok	Jennifer VanderMolen-Potter
Peggy Link	Mary Lagerwey Voorman
Jane Lockwood	Rich Voorman
Linda Maring	

Note: The above communication was presented to the Council of Third CRC on January 27, 2025, but was not adopted. It was also presented to Classis Kalamazoo on March 11, 2025, but was not adopted.