

Affirmed + Celebrated

A Reformed Theology of Inclusion

Report of the Ad Hoc Theology Committee
of the Classis of New Brunswick
in the Reformed Church in America
2019

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1. Our Call for Unity in the Church	4
2. Reformed Interpretation of Scripture	6
3. Morality, Theology, and Scripture	11
4. Theological Account of Our Classical Position	14
5. Scripture as a Whole Supports Our Classical Position	19
6. Ethical Critique of the RCA Position	24
7. Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality	32
8. Life Stories	39
9. Worship Resources	45
10. Timeline of Our Classical Position	50
Bibliography	58
Appendices	60
Changing Views of Scripture	60
Scripture and Moral Discernment	62

The Ad Hoc Theology Committee expresses our sincere gratitude to The Study Committee on the Bible and Life-long Same-Sex Relationships in the Classis Grand Rapids East of the Christian Reformed Church of North America, whose rigorous 2016 report, “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage,” formed the basis and inspiration for our work.

Introduction

In September, 2015, President Hartmut Kramer-Mills of the Classis of New Brunswick (CNB) of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) formed an ad hoc committee to address theological issues as they arise in the life of Classis. Our preliminary issue is the Church's full inclusion and affirmation of people who do not conform to heterosexual and gender binary norms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual and queer people (LGBTIAQ, shortened to LGBTQ in the rest of this report).

The Classis has expressed and adopted the following position in its Welcoming Statement:

CNB Welcoming Statement: "As Classis of New Brunswick, we affirm the great diversity of God's creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."
(adopted at 5/27/15 Stated Session)

and codified this position in a legally binding bylaw:

CNB BYLAW 3: The Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church, Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. (Approved on 5/27/15, adopted on 9/26/2015).

This document addresses the congregations of Classis as our primary audience in order to:

- Provide theological and scriptural reasoning for the Classis position;
- Define sin and grace as they pertain to human sexuality;
- Contextualize the decades-long history of this issue within Classis and the RCA;
- Critique the majority RCA position;
- Provide pastoral direction and practical guidance for churches and congregants;
- Discuss the ways in which the unity of churches may be affected.

In this document, our hope is to confess what we have come to believe for our own benefit and for the benefit of the wider church and world.

Chapter 1

Our Call for Unity in the Church

In all of the matters described in this report, the Classis of New Brunswick recognizes that there are yet significant differences of understanding that lead to deeply felt tension. Such tension is perhaps most keenly felt because the church as a whole does not yet discern a consistent message between the Scriptures of God and the Spirit of God.

We feel this tension in our Classis as we continue to work our way through it.

Yet the actions of the Classis of New Brunswick, guided by sincere conviction directed by our understanding of both Scripture and Spirit, are offered to help lead the church in the Christ-like and gracious response to such real and genuine needs as:

- The LGBTQ disciples of Jesus who feel more greatly than anyone else the tension of an identity that simultaneously feels undeniably real and yet is regarded as wrong; who wonder if they may experience love in as full measure as their neighbor;
- The families suddenly navigating their way through the issues and questions of faith and faithfulness when a loved one “comes out,” wondering if the community of Christ, their church, will embrace or reject them, will offer care and counsel or critique and condemnation;
- The congregations who experience tension over how to support individuals and families; whose communities seek Christian witness in the face of discrimination and violence toward LGBTQ neighbors; whose pews increasingly include visitors and members who openly express LGBTQ identity;
- Classes, Regional Synods and General Synod, wondering how to lead the church in discernment of both God’s word and God’s will, wondering how a witness of unity can prevail in a context of discord;
- The wider culture, watching the church to see how we will resolve the differences in our understanding on these issues; watching to see if our confession of God’s love and reconciliation will be matched by the way we treat one another and the way we treat those of LGBTQ identity.

While recognizing the deep and sincere differences of understanding in the church, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks only to begin its ministry at the same point where Jesus did: at the point of human need.

Doing so challenges our assumptions, as Jesus did with those around him – particularly the leaders of his day. It will force all of us to think more deeply about our own identities in ways that perhaps we have not done before. It will require us to listen more deeply to Scripture and to the

Spirit and to one another than we perhaps have done before. It will call us to deeper and more humble prayer than perhaps we have offered before.

Yet, we can do these with confidence:

- Trust that God will reveal the consistency between the witness of Scripture and Spirit;
- Trust that God will preserve the church that he has called and gathered together;

and with patience:

- Discover that people who hold views different from ours also value and honor God's Word;
- Discover that common witness thrives when we seek mutuality and not simply a majority consensus.

With such trust, and choosing to live with such patience, the Classis of New Brunswick implores our brothers and sisters in the RCA to respect the discernment of conscience among both individuals and assemblies in these matters; and in particular to resist the impulse to modify the RCA Constitution to resolve theological disagreements, but rather to share in the continued mutual upbuilding of dialogue (Ephesians 4: 21) and to participate in common witness at all points of human need.

Chapter 2

Reformed Interpretation of Scripture

It is a gift and a joy to engage the Bible and apply its lessons to our lives and the life of the world. We acknowledge that any time we read the Bible, we inevitably become involved in interpretation.

Scripture is always and necessarily interpreted. Whenever anyone reads the Bible, he or she always brings a framework of interpretation, whether recognized fully or not....No theory of inspiration, no method of interpretation, provides in itself unmediated access to divine wisdom.¹

The interpretation of scripture is an important task which requires our careful attention and best efforts. We approach scripture from a posture of humility, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and using all the God-given resources and methods of critical study that are available.

The Classis of New Brunswick affirms the faithfulness of a Reformed hermeneutic, or method of interpretation, as we seek God's guidance in scripture. Our understanding of a Reformed hermeneutic includes 12 important aspects.

1. God engages in Self-Revelation|

God is a God of love who desires to be known by humans. In many and various ways, God reveals God's very self to us. While remaining always transcendent and higher than our highest thoughts, God gives us the gift of revelation which communicates God's grace to us. Although our human perspective is limited and finite, God, through acts of self-disclosure, allows us to see a bit of God's very heart.

2. General Revelation²

Creation bears witness to the handiwork of God. The stars hanging in the sky, the towering mountains and the flowing streams all reveal a bit of the power of the Creator. God can work through all things. By means of general revelation God can speak through creation as well as science, culture, art, literature, the movements of history, and personal experience.

¹ Scripture and Moral Discernment: Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches, page 7.

² The Belgic Confession differentiates between general revelation and special revelation. Article 2 states, "We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe... second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word."

3. **Special Revelation**

God also communicates through special revelation. Scripture is God's special revelation to us because it conveys God's word of grace and communicates the history of salvation. Scripture most clearly records the story of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.

4. **Ongoing Revelation**

Our living God is active and dynamic, continuing to speak to us even now. God continues to give us the gift of revelation. Knowing our finite human capacity, God continues to speak to us contextually, giving us what we need in this time and space. So, too, scripture is a living word rather than a dead letter. Each time we turn to it we may find fresh challenges and new hope.³ Therefore, "[the interpretation of scripture] requires due attention to the unfolding character of revelation and its unity in the person and work of Jesus Christ."⁴ The on-going revelation given to us by God holds together in Christ. A new word given by God will echo, resound, and amplify the timeless message of the Incarnate Word, Christ Jesus.

5. **The Spirit is our Guide**

The Spirit guides us in many ways. Firstly, the Spirit was active in the writing of scripture. The Belgic Confession references this by citing I Peter 1:21: "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."⁵ Therefore we affirm that "scripture as the word of the faithful God is infallible and inerrant in all that it intends to teach and accomplish concerning faith and life."⁶ When the Spirit speaks to us through scripture, the Spirit does not fail and does not make errors. Secondly, the Holy Spirit works within us to tell us that scripture is a gift from God. We accept the books in the Bible "because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God."⁷ Thirdly, the Spirit is active even now in our reading of the Bible today. When we interpret scripture, when we listen and pray, we ask the Spirit to continue to guide us.

6. **Historic, Cultural and Literary Contexts**

Scripture was not written in a vacuum, rather it came to be recorded in particular times and specific places through distinct languages.

The Spirit has inspired Hebrew and Greek words,
setting God's truth in human language,

³ Brian Blount is very helpful on this point. He draws a distinction between understanding scripture as the last word or the living word. Blount claims that the first Christians used scripture "to interpret, not just recite their traditions." For this reason, African Americans found hope in scripture despite passages which, on face value, condoned slavery. Similarly, the bible can offer us a new word on homosexuality. "...biblical words are not the Last Word. They are the Living Word." Brian K. Blount, "The Last Word on Biblical Authority," in Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 68-9.

⁴ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-267.

⁵ Belgic Confession, Article 3.

⁶ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-267

⁷ Belgic Confession, Article 5.

placing God's teaching in ancient cultures,
proclaiming the Gospel in the history of the world.
The Spirit speaks truly what the nations must know,
translating God's word into modern languages,
impressing it on human hearts and cultures.⁸

As part of our careful reading, we try to be informed about the historic, cultural and literary features of scripture. Our aim is to better understand the context in which texts were written so that we might better understand their intended meaning.⁹ Our knowledge of the historic, cultural, and literary features of scripture continues to advance.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has devised methods of historical and literary study by which to reconstruct the historical situation, to recover the language and meaning of the words in their original presentation, and to assist in understanding the abiding message.¹⁰

7. Whole of Scripture

Just as we look to the historic context in which a passage was written, we also look to the whole of scripture when trying to better understand the meaning of a particular text. We bear in mind the overall purpose of scripture—the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ—when seeking to uncover the meaning of a specific verse. By comparing the apparent meaning of a text with the message of scripture as a whole we gain insights and understanding. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament hold together to convey God's fullest message of grace. Scripture interprets scripture. Any one individual passage must be seen in light of the whole of scripture. Additionally, more obscure passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of clearer passages.¹¹ When facing a passage that is difficult to understand, we turn to the clear, central message of the Bible for insight and guidance.

8. Jesus Demonstrates Faithful Interpretation of Scripture

Jesus knew the sacred texts of the Old Testament and interpreted them, communicating their meaning in applicable ways to those around him. At times Jesus gave us new

⁸ Our Song of Hope, Article 6.

⁹ James Brownson summarizes a wealth of scholarship on biblical texts which refer to homosexuality. Brownson points out, for example, that some texts may have prohibited pederasty—the sexual use of younger boys by older men (I Corinthians 6:9), while others prohibited a practice of kidnapping, sex trade and sex slavery (I Timothy 1:10). Brownson then points out how drastically different such practices are in comparison with committed, monogamous loving relationships between two consenting adults. According to Brownson, the term “homosexual” has been used in biblical translation for many different words that bear no reference to homosexuality as we define it today. The term “homosexual” didn't exist in biblical times and is therefore an irreverent translation of scripture.

See Brownson's book, *Bible, Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 40-5.

¹⁰ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-7.

¹¹ *Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-sex Marriage*, Classis Grand Rapids East, January 2016, page 44.

teachings. For example, Leviticus 24:20 prescribes an eye for an eye as a form of justice. Jesus, on the other hand, says, “you have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt. 5:38-9). Jesus, out of love for scripture, demonstrated a faithful way of interpreting texts.

9. Christ is the Incarnate Word of God

Christ Jesus, as the Incarnate Word, helps us to see the whole of scripture more clearly. We claim that Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Therefore, Jesus, God’s clearest Word, guides our way of thinking. We place greatest value on the teachings of Jesus and how those teachings interpret other parts of scripture. We look at the Bible through Christo-centric lenses, giving greatest emphasis to the teachings, example and life of Christ Jesus. When we focus on the themes of love for God and love for neighbor which are primary in Jesus’ teachings, we are able to align our priorities with those of Jesus. Such teachings guide us in forming ethical principles¹² which engage our behavior but also our attitude; our actions and our hearts; encouraging us to follow God’s commands and live into a law of love.

10. Reading Individually and in Community

We read scripture on our own as individuals and we also read scripture together as the church in the world. Scripture is both a personal word and a public word. None of us has an exclusive claim to its meaning, but rather our reading is enriched when we read its message together. Similarly, no one faith community has a corner on biblical meaning, but rather the global Christian community informs our interpretation of scripture. God can speak through the words, actions and testimonies of faithful Christians today and throughout the history of Church tradition. When trying to interpret a text, we do well to share our interpretations with others and listen for the ways that the Spirit might be working through others, the communion of saints, to bring insight and understanding.

11. Discernment in Community

We look to the Bible to give us guidance as to how we should live our lives. As we spend time reading scripture, our ethics and moral decisions are shaped. This is a process that does not happen instantaneously, but rather takes time and requires thoughtful attention. As Christians we join with others in our faith communities and we commit ourselves to a posture of discernment. Rather than expecting a quick answer, we joyfully engage in discernment as an important part of life-long faithfulness.

¹² From a Reformed perspective, scripture’s authority lies not in specific rules but in guiding principles. This is explained in the paper, “Church and Scripture” in James I Cook, *The Church Speaks Volume 2: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1985-2000*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9-10. This topic is explored in greater depth in the next Chapter 3: Morality, Theology, and Scripture.

12. Encountering Redemption and Transformation

When we read scripture, we are not simply gathering abstract information but rather we are opening ourselves to being changed, renewed and restored by the message of God's grace encountered in scripture. We should expect that when we read scripture our minds can be changed; our hearts can be changed; and our church can be changed.

Daniel Migliore puts it well when he says:

Christians do not believe *in* the Bible; they believe in the living God attested *by* the Bible. Scripture is indispensable in bringing us into a new relationship with the living God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus into new relationship with others and with the entire creation."¹³

The transformation of lives and communities flows from the new life of God's word. The Spirit can work through God's gospel to constantly renew us. Therefore, we are reformed and ever reforming according to the word of God.

Grateful to God for the gift of the Bible, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks to employ these twelve principles of interpretation, as we apply scripture to our lives and the life of the world. This effort is always limited by our humanity and our conclusions will continue to change based on our knowledge and understanding. Since God has entrusted the church with the gift and the task of interpreting scripture, therefore, there is no single, inerrant interpretation of the Bible that is not subject to revision.

¹³ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Third Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 52.

Chapter 3

Morality, Theology, and Scripture

For Christians, determining what is moral is a deeply theological endeavor. Our understanding of what is moral is related to our understandings of God and God's desires for our lives. We affirm what is taught in the Belgic Confession that our primary means for coming to know God and God's will for our lives is God's revelation to us in the books of the Old and New Testaments. We also affirm what is taught in scripture: that the fullest and clearest revelation of God and God's will come to us in the birth, life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we seek to understand what is moral for our lives, we do so as a community, with the witness of scripture as our primary and indispensable guide, with Jesus Christ as our primary lens for interpretation, and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit who alone reveals God's truth.

Morality and Covenantal Life before God

Scripture reveals that the moral decisions we make are made in the context of our lives lived before God. We understand that we have a covenantal relationship with God in which God chooses, justifies, and sanctifies people for covenantal life and service. Our purpose as God's covenantal servants is to participate in God's ministry of love and reconciliation in the world. We understand that our moral lives are lived to participate in God's mission, in which Jesus Christ participated during his earthly ministry. As Christ embodied love through his incarnate presence, as he shared the good news of salvation through his preaching, as he called and taught others, as he sought out the lost, as he bound up the broken hearted, as he cast-out demons and healed the sick, as he sought fellowship with those who were considered sinners, traitors, and outcasts, as he gave his life as a witness to God's love, so, too, do we find ourselves called, equipped, and commissioned to live our lives of covenantal faithfulness before God.

Culturally Specific Expression of Covenantal Life

Scripture reveals that our moral decisions are made within our specific cultural contexts. As the authors of the RCA paper "Church and Scripture" say, "[our] covenantal life-before-God of which Scripture speaks is always specific, historical, and particular."¹⁴ God's call to moral life comes to individuals and communities living in specific cultural contexts and our context will shape our moral decisions. Thus, there is no single Christian culture to which all Christian communities strive to adhere. The writings of the apostle Paul in particular reveal that Christian communities, existing at the same time, but in different cultural contexts, came to diverse decisions about what was moral for their communities. In relation to this reality, which is seen in the writings of Paul and throughout the Bible, the authors of "Church and Scripture" write:

¹⁴ "Church and Scripture," *The Church Speaks*, Vol II, page 5.

This diversity at the level of specific moral rules is seen throughout Scripture: in contrasting forms of piety, in different approaches to family life, in differing approaches to church discipline, etc. Rather than supplying a universal set of abstract moral rules which is equally binding upon all people in all cultures, the Bible challenges all people to live out – often in a variety of ways – the particular life which is theirs in Christ.¹⁵

As members of the Classis of New Brunswick, we therefore recognize that our decisions concerning what is moral may be different from what other Christian communities have concluded in the past and in the present. Furthermore, what makes our decision moral is not a direct correspondence to the specific moral rules found in a Biblical text. Instead, we understand that our decisions about what is moral depend upon faithfulness to the life we share with Christ, by God's grace, and in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-Led Moral Discernment

The concept of moral discernment is essential to our decision-making process, considering the tendency for our cultural context to shift and change. Moral discernment is the process of seeking God's revelation and guidance as to what, given our shifting cultural context, is right and good for the life to which we have been called. Together with our ecumenical partners, we understand that moral decision-making is best done as a communal process. Individuals and communities must listen to God's leading through various means such as biblical study, the study of tradition, prayer, worship, compassionate service, pastoral listening, discussion, and debate. We understand that our decisions will never be free of the influence of sin, which influences all our capacities. However, we trust that we are able, with Christ as our aid and the Holy Spirit as our guide, to determine what moral behavior is fitting for members of Christ's body.¹⁶

From a Reformed perspective, scripture's authority lies not in rules, but instead in principles which guide us through the work of the Holy Spirit: "Another way of clarifying a Reformed use of Scripture is to distinguish between moral rules and ethical principles. Moral rules focus upon specific behaviors, whereas ethical principles focus upon the values and dispositions which are expressed by those rules. Moral rules answer the question, 'What must I do?' Ethical principles answer the question, 'What kind of person must I be?' Scripture is authoritative in the formulation of ethical principles—principles which flow out of the Christian identity and knowledge of God disclosed in Scripture. At the level of specific moral rules, however, the authority of Scripture is not always prescriptive; sometimes it is exemplary or illustrative."¹⁷

Our Cultural Context

Through personal experience, the churches and members of the Classis of New Brunswick have come to know, believe and affirm that LGBTQ people are not broken, inherently sinful, or damaged, but healthy and whole persons, vital members of society and the church. The Holy

¹⁵ "Church and Scripture," *Church Speaks, Vol II*, 7.

¹⁶ Scripture and Moral Discernment: Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches, page 6.

¹⁷ "Church and Scripture," 9-10.

Spirit has moved LGBTQ people to become members and leaders of our church, as the Spirit has moved members and leaders of our church to come out, living openly in the dignity of their God-given identities. As people with LGBTQ identities and allies of LGBTQ people, we have felt and seen the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of LGBTQ people. This urging of the Holy Spirit has been confirmed by significant amounts of scientific research, which finds that LGBTQ people are capable, with support and acceptance, to be stable and healthy people who represent natural occurring variations in the human experience. Myers and Scanzoni explain in their book *What God Has Joined Together* that recent research indicates that lesbian, bisexual, and gay orientations are most likely not matters of pathology, choice, or rearing, but more likely due to biological factors.¹⁸ Research has begun to demonstrate that gender identity is also the result of biological factors which are beyond human control or decision.

¹⁸ David G. Myers, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 68.

Chapter 4

Theological Account of Our Classical Position

The Classis of New Brunswick believes that disagreement among Reformed Christians about same-sex relationships arises not only from differences in Biblical interpretation, but also from different beliefs about how God’s authority is upheld in matters of personal identity.

For proponents of the RCA’s position—that restricts marriage to heterosexual relationships and disciplines as sinful all sexual relationships between same-sex loving people—authority rests in the church to interpret God’s will for each person’s sexual and gender identity. For these Reformed Christians, faith requires individuals to submit their personal identities to the traditions, theology and biblical interpretation of the church.

For the Classis of New Brunswick, personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We believe that we can discover all aspects of our personal identity—including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—through experience, guided by faith. The role of the church, then, is to affirm and respect each person as they learn who it is that God is calling them to be; to guide all people to live in justice and love; and to help each person to interpret their experience of God’s call on their lives.

The following two positions explain the theology behind our non-discrimination bylaw and our welcome, inclusion, affirmation, and blessing of people in same-sex relationships.

Position 1: Personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship with God.

We believe personal identity—in the diversity of ways it unfolds, including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We find such intimate relationships in Biblical stories where God calls people of great faith out of their ordinary lives to take up an extraordinary role in God’s story of salvation. God calls Abram out of his father’s house in Chaldea, rebukes Sarah for her laughter, enflames Moses from a bush, confounds Hannah’s prayers in the temple, confronts Zechariah with his disbelief, and impregnates Mary with her mission to serve as the mother of humanity’s savior.

These ancestors in faith experienced a holy fear or terror when God challenged their pre-conceived notions about themselves and called them to act in ways their own limited imaginations could not fathom. We know God because they trusted God. Their personal relationships with God form the foundation of our faith. Therefore, we believe that personal identity is the holy ground where each person encounters God.

This personal relationship is the foundation of our faith and joyfully we confess our faith in God's sovereignty in determining personal identity.¹⁹

“We praise God because each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made!
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139).

Therefore, we proclaim that God alone prescribes who we are to be. As God determines whether we are right or left-handed, God weaves our gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation into our very being; No elements of our personal identity are more inextricable! People whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms—lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, and gender non-conforming identities—are gifts of God to humanity. They reveal that God's astonishing and diverse creativity surpasses our limited human understanding. Therefore, it is a sin to disparage people because they do not conform to society's heterosexual norms and binary conceptions of gender (either male or female based on biology at birth). The Bible affirms that God alone has primary authority over the gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation God has ordained for each of us.”

Therefore, we embrace the following as our call to new obedience in a life of transformation in Christ:

- Each person's unique expression of our God-given identity reflects the mysterious perfection in which we were made.
- In our Christian witness, we believe it is fitting to proclaim God's primary authority in determining each person's gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
- No human being should attempt to prescribe personal identity for another.
- We acknowledge that it takes tremendous faith in God for people to express God-given identities that diverge from societal norms.
- The pastoral role of the church is to affirm each person's God-given identity and to uphold our faith in God's primary authority over who we are to be.

God challenged our forebears in faith, with fear and trembling, to discard their preconceived notions about themselves in order to prepare them to become leaders who usher in God's kingdom. In the same way, God calls each of us to faithful lives that are unique, individual and terribly significant. For this reason, Classis determined that the equality and full affirmation of gender identity or expression and sexual orientation are as deserving of protection as other

¹⁹ This text, from the confession to the call to faithful living, was developed as CNB's overture to GS 2015: The Sovereignty of God in Determining Personal Identity.

aspects of our personal identity, including age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability, as expressed in our bylaw #3:

Bylaw 3. The [New Brunswick] Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church,²⁰ Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons.

Non-discrimination is a policy that is based on the equality of all people, which is a secular tenet, held by all those who uphold human rights. However, in the Classis of New Brunswick, we uphold the equality of all people because it is based on one of the most important biblical principles. In fact, people who study the 16th century philosopher John Locke (whose declaration of the equality of all men influenced Thomas Jefferson's) say he was educated as a Calvinist and based his concept of the equality of men on the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 27:

So, God created humankind in God's own image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them.

Since we are all God's image-bearers, none of us is more worthy in God's eyes. For millennia this principle has been known by its Latin name, *Imago Dei*, Image of God. *Imago Dei* is as foundational to our faith as the equality of all human beings has become to our secular world. Like human equality, *Imago Dei* is not an edict or decree, but a guiding ethical principle, like a compass or a kind of North Star, that constantly challenges us to walk deeper and deeper into God's heart.

Imago Dei means the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God. Today we are learning that God is male and female, transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer. The RCA's restrictions on marriage present a challenge to the faith of all people because, if any of us are to have a faithful relationship with God, we must acknowledge that God's plan for each of us is unlike God's plan for any other person.

Position 2: Christ's ethical principles for holy living are the bases for Christian sexual ethics today.

As we stated in Chapter 3, as members of the Classis of New Brunswick, we recognize that our decisions concerning what is moral may be different from what other Christian communities have concluded in the past and in the present. Furthermore, what makes our decision moral is not a direct correspondence to the specific moral rules found in a Biblical text. Instead, we understand that our decisions about what is moral depend upon faithfulness to the life we share

²⁰ As reported by the RCA's Commission on Theology, see Minutes of General Synod 2014, 284.

with Christ, by God's grace, and in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. At the level of specific moral rules, the authority of Scripture is not always prescriptive; sometimes it is exemplary or illustrative."²¹ For us, scripture is authoritative in the formulation of ethical principles—principles which flow out of the Christian identity and knowledge of God disclosed in Scripture. We have formulated the following three ethical principles and have made a series of ethical judgments on the matter of full inclusion in the church.

2.a. The Bible is poor rule book for sexual ethics.

The Bible is sorely lacking in admonitions against the world's gravest sexual injustices. There is no prohibition against striking one's spouse or one's child, or abusing them sexually and emotionally. Human trafficking that uses people as sexual prostitutes is not forbidden. Rape has negative consequences for its perpetrators only in some situations. Sexual slavery is encouraged. Consent was never required. While lust is admonished, the Bible offers no justice or restitution for the victims of sexual predation and pornography. Sexual ethics continues to be as highly contextual today. Today's church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though it was practiced by ancient Israel's patriarchs. The church no longer compels a practice known as Levirate marriage, required in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6, where the brothers of a dead man are required to marry his widow and continue his bloodline. The church acknowledges that the Bible is a poor book for sexual ethics when it modifies Jesus' prohibition against divorce to accommodate the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of heterosexual couples.

2.b. One sexual ethic for all people.

As Paul tells the Philippians, we have been left to "continue to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2: 12). In fear and trembling, then, as the woman who dared to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, our faith alone will make us whole (Mark 5:31). The Classis of New Brunswick believes that the Bible alone is insufficient for providing the rules for a modern sexual ethic. Instead, in our 21st century world, we must adhere strictly to the Bible's most important ethical principles: Christ's prescriptions for treating one another with justice, mercy, forgiveness, mutuality and with the infinite respect due to persons created in God's image. Therefore, we call all people to the same sexual ethic of respect, mutuality, and justice. While there is no one universal rule book for all times and all places, Christ expects us to work together to continually uncover the rules that build today's faithful communities.

2.c. Our timeless definition of marriage.

Throughout Holy Scripture, marriage is a social institution that changes and evolves to meet the needs of faithful communities. However, as people of faith, we celebrate holy relationships that are defined by qualities that do not change over time. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another, we see reflections of God and of our own selves. We reflect God's love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. We

²¹ Ibid, 9-10.

experience holiness in such relationships. When two people cultivate these qualities with one another, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, to their friends, and to their community. Thus, The Classis of New Brunswick joyfully extends the blessing of the church to both same-sex and heterosexual couples.

Conclusion

Based on our belief that God created all human beings in God's image and based on our faith in timeless Christian ethical principles including justice, mutually and respect, we can respond to the following ethical questions, as individuals, churches and as a Classis:

- **Does the God we trust expect churches to require faithful lesbian and gay Christians to live celibate lives?** No! The Apostle Paul says we cannot impose celibacy on any person. Celibacy, Paul says, is a gift from God (1 Cor. 7).
- **Does the God we trust, who said, “It is not good for a human being to be alone,” (Gen. 2:18) expect gay and lesbian people to live alone forever?** No! Sexual desire encourages each person to find a suitable life partner. Marriage enables us to consecrate our bodies and our lives to serve one another, our community and God. The church sins by denying this gift to same-sex couples.
- **Does the God we trust leave some sexual and gender identities off the list so that not all people are created in God's image?** No! *Imago Dei* means all people are made in God's image.
- **Does the God we trust love lesbian and gay people while hating the “sin” of same-sex sexual relationships?** No! Our sexuality and gender identity cannot be separated from who we are because they enliven our very being, they draw us into relationships, families and communities and lead us to desire and worship God.

Chapter 5

Scripture as a Whole Supports Our Classical Position

We believe that the Biblical texts that are most highly determinative for our moral judgement are those that talk about the love of God that has been shown to us in Jesus. To reach back to an ancient text that has been corrected by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is theologically irresponsible and simply poor methodology. Those texts are not the determinative texts. The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, Galatians 3 and Jesus' teachings on divorce found in Mark and Matthew provide sources of inspiration for our classical position about the full inclusion of people who express LGBT identities.²²

Creation Stories in Genesis 1 and 2

We believe that "scripture as the word of the faithful God is infallible and inerrant in all that it intends to teach and accomplish concerning faith and life."²³ We believe that it is not the intention of Genesis 1 and 2 to teach about gender roles and procreation. Rather, these creation narratives teach us how God's loving and self-giving creative activity invites us into relationship.

The purpose of these creation accounts is to present the call of the persistently faithful God to the world to exist in fellowship and in the good beauty which God himself created. Walter Brueggemann writes, "The claim made is not a historical claim but a theological one about the character of God who is bound to his world and about the world which is bound to God."²⁴ Brueggemann conceives of Genesis 1 and 2 as a poem that, "does not narrate 'how it happened' as though Israel were interested in the method of how the world became God's world. Such a way of treating the grand theme of creation is like reducing the marvel of any moving artistic experience to explorations in technique. Israel is concerned with *God's lordly intent*, not his *technique*."

Paraphrasing Brueggemann, the theme of gracious commitment is pivotal to the Genesis message: The news is that God and God's creation are bound in a relationship that is assured but, at the same time, delicate and precarious. The relationship is bound in a mystery of faithful

²² More in-depth presentations of a wide range of scholarship on these passages can be found in "Section 5: Interpretation of Biblical Passages Referring to Gender Differentiation and Same-sex Intercourse," pages 46-59 and "Section 6: Section 6: Quotations of Contemporary Authors on Biblical Passages Related to Gender Differentiation and Same-Sex Intercourse," pages 60-84 of the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report, previously cited.

²³ Minutes of the General Synod, June 1963, pp. 264-267.

²⁴ Marlena Graves, "It's Not a Matter of Obeying the Bible," from her interview entitled: 8 Questions for Walter Brueggemann, as accessed on Nov. 30, 2018 online at: <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2015/01/09/walter-brueggemann-church-gospel-bible/35739>

commitment. Everything depends on that commitment. This interpretation requires that we abandon two false assumptions which are alive in the church.

First, the relation of creator and creation is often understood in terms of coercion and necessity because of the power of mechanistic models of reality and tyrannical notions of God. However, the relation of creator and creation-creature in Gen.1:1-2:4 is not about coercion. It is, rather, a relationship of free gracious commitment and invitation. The linkage is one of full trust rather than of requirement or obligation. Second, in the church, there is a common inclination to confine God's grace to individual, guilt-related issues of morality. However, this text affirms that God's graciousness is his transforming disposition toward his whole world. Creation faith is the church's confession that all of life is characterized by graciousness. Well-being is the gift which forms the context for our life of obedience and thanksgiving.²⁵

Genesis 1: Procreation, Blessing and the Image of God

Based on the statement in Genesis 1 "be fruitful and multiply," some would tie reproduction to bearing God's image. James Brownson points out that procreation is preceded by blessing, "God blessed them."²⁶ Procreation flows out of blessing and is not a command which, when fulfilled, results in bearing God's image. The entire discussion of "one flesh" in Genesis 2 takes place without reference to procreation. Further, scripture honors marriages that are not fruitful. First Samuel 1 tells us Elkanah gave to Hannah, "a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." Despite her barrenness, Hannah is held up as a woman of faith (Brownson, p. 115). We find in *Song of Solomon* a celebration of the beauty of sexual union, yet no mention is made of procreation: "If procreation is the essential purpose of sex and marriage, one is hard-pressed to explain its absence from this entire book of the Bible that is devoted to sex and marriage" (Brownson, p. 116). Christian tradition asserts that single people bear the image of God. Tradition does not believe that single people do not bear God's image until they have found a mate of the opposite gender. Nor is bearing the image of God understood to be tied to one's ability to procreate. Brueggemann says, "The confession of Christian faith is that all of God's human creatures are made in the image of God. That means that they are to be treated with dignity, offered maintenance and security, as is necessary."

Genesis 2: Adm and Ashe

Some argue from Genesis 2 that man (in Hebrew, *adm*) and woman (in Hebrew, *ashe*) are created with complementary roles, and, therefore, same-sex unions fall short of God's desired intention for humans. However, the account of Genesis 2 does not begin with an understanding of the man being incomplete without a woman. Rather the emphasis is that he is alone. The passage playfully links the Hebrew word for man with the closely related and very similar Hebrew word for mud or earth. Alone, the man is somewhat dull, and inert, not unlike the mud from which he is made. The solution to this problem is first sought through the creation of "every

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann (2010) as quoted in *Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-sex Marriage*, Classis Grand Rapids East, January 2016, 91-92.

²⁶ All of Dr. Brownson's quotes and paraphrases, including those found in the Classis Grand Rapids East report, are from James Brownson, *Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

animal of the field and every bird of the air” (Gen 2.19). These animals are paraded in front of Adam in search of a helper. The effect is comic as one pictures every bird from a robin to an eagle and every animal from a mouse to an elephant paraded before the man in pursuit of a helper only to reach the obvious conclusion, “but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.” The goal is neither procreation nor a complement to the man. The helper is found when God fashions a creature that is equivalent to man who can function as a helper. The woman provides community and connection. The story is a critical reminder that women are *NOT* to be treated as property or livestock. Rather, created through a “C-section” that God performs on a man, woman is a gift from God, to be honored and respected, and absolutely not to be abused and consumed for the man’s unholy and self-centered purposes.

The holy relationship between woman and man is the site of both human perfection and human disobedience, which produces learning, the hard way. The nature of this relationship is centered around becoming helpers in order to create community and covenant. What it means to be in a helping relationship can be learned by looking to the word “helper” throughout the Old Testament. The word “helper” is most often used to refer to God as our helper. “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1). The goals of a helping relationship include relational mutuality, respect, a far greater fullness of life.

In Genesis 2, according to Brownson, “the procreative meaning of marriage should, in fact, be subordinated to its more essential unitive purpose” (p. 89). This is because “the primary movement in the text is not from unity to differentiation, but from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community” (p. 30). As the first family is run out of Eden, this shared kinship is deadly in the short run, yet their kinship community becomes the integral foundation of the human community, a critical component to salvation history.

Throughout scripture, “one flesh” points not to sexual intimacy, but to familial relationships and kinship. It is used in reference to the relationship of Laban and Jacob and of David and Amasa. While in Genesis 2, the man is said to leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, it was not the practice in the centuries recorded in the Hebrew Bible for the man to leave his parents’ home. In fact, leaving the parents’ home was impossible for financial and security reasons. Brownson points out the meaning behind this statement is “the realignment of primary kinship ties . . . the location of primary kinship moves from the family of origin to the new family constituted by marriage. Only such an interpretation can make sense of the reference to leaving” (p. 33).

As the man and woman unite in a new family, they commit first to each other, “to live beyond one’s own needs and concerns for the purposes of God and for the sake of the other. . . Already here, humans are summoned out of isolation, out of familiarity, into a deeper and more mysterious reality that transcends their lives as individuals and participates in the divine purpose. Already here, life is called out of itself into something deeper and richer” (p. 90).

The partnership and unity of the man and woman is not for the sake of completion, procreation, or complementary otherness. Rather, the first humans fit together because of their similarity and

ability to be companions and partners. The creation stories are not intending to define marriage as solely between members of opposite sexes, but as a partnership in which one deepens one's relationship with another human being, and thereby becomes closer to God.

Galatians 3: New Life in Christ

Pauline theology presents a new view of life in Christ, as Paul boldly proclaims:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28).

This statement sweeps away the distinctions of insider/outsider, powerful/powerless and the pairing of male and female for procreation. Paul shifts his use of the conjunction in the last pairing from "or" to "and." Emphasis shifts from the elimination of contrasting elements to the coupling of male and female, which passes away in keeping with Jesus' words about the absence of marriage in the resurrection. In Christ, we begin to live into the values of God's kingdom. The old distinctions that ordered and structured society are no longer of importance, as all people become one in Christ Jesus. Aristotle stated that two things are essential to any community (1) family and the procreative relationship and (2) the master-slave relationship. Jews add the distinction between Jew and Gentile as essential. All these societal distinctions are wiped away in the new life we have in Christ (Brownson, p. 65-66). Therefore, for Christians, the primary role of coupling and marriage for the sake of procreation alone is de-emphasized. Gender roles and procreation are no longer sufficient conditions to exclude LGBTQ people from the Christian blessing of same-sex marriages.

Matthew 19 and Mark 10, Jesus Teaches about Divorce

When we look to Jesus' teaching on divorce, we gain insight into what is essential to marriage. When asked if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife Jesus' replies, "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery." In Jesus' day, lack of children was a common reason for a man to divorce his wife and leave her destitute. Jesus says lack of children is not sufficient reason to divorce. We learn, "the covenantal obligations of love and loyalty alone are sufficient to constitute a permanent marriage, even if children are not present" (Brownson, p. 116).

In writing about the blessings that grow from a couple who have made a lifelong commitment to each other in marriage, Jacques Ellul writes: "An inseparable couple, a united couple, is an extraordinary force on behalf of the lonely, the suffering, the deprived, those who need a comprehensive and attentive love and who can draw strength from the venture made by this couple, finding in it support, and confidence, and secret riches. This story of love is the opposite of a narrow restriction, an extreme shutting away, an egoism of two. In a joy that cannot be alone, it makes room for the welcoming and understanding of all."²⁷ A same-sex couple, when encouraged and supported in a lifelong commitment, can become an "extraordinary force" for good in God's world.

²⁷ Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 84.

Conclusions

Classis concludes that God's children need not be in a procreative heterosexual relationship to bear the image of God. By becoming one flesh, the Bible intends to teach us about family, relationships and commitment and not only sexual intimacy or procreation. As new creations in Christ, gender and procreation are subordinate to the ways in which we are all one in Christ. The confession of Christian faith is that all God's human creatures are made in the image of God. All people are to be treated with dignity and are to be enabled to thrive in security, peace and justice.

Understanding that the Bible is dynamic, Reformed tradition constantly presses us to embrace new, and challenging truths. Our society is still coming to terms with the implications of all people bearing God's image including women, people of color, disabled people, atheists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, transgender people, refugees and asylum seekers. Paul's statement in Galatians 3, that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Barbarian, slave or free is one of these ultimate challenging truths with which we continue to grapple.

We are one in Christ: that truth is timeless! The gospel tells us that God's love reaches toward all God's creation. Thus, to sort human beings based on tradition and societal values, to judge that a majority are deserving and qualified, while a minority are not, is to impose a limited, unjust, secular judgment on a God-given and God-ordained human reality. People who express identities that do not conform with society's expectations, therefore, reveal God's intent to make humanity in diverse forms that may continue to surprise our cultural expectations and teach us about God.

To refuse to re-evaluate our tradition of biblical interpretation is to fail to respect the inspiration and guidance of morally determinant Biblical texts; the relevant and overwhelming evidence of general revelation, as God speaks through creation as well as science, culture, art, literature, the movements of history and personal experience; and the testimony of LGBTQ people and their allies who are convicted by the Holy Spirit. The gospel explains that God's saving love works to restore all humanity to full communion. When we affirm and celebrate God's image in all persons, our relational communities stretch and grow, helping us to embrace God's full blessing for all of humanity.

Chapter 6

Ethical Critique of the RCA Position

The Classis of New Brunswick believes that the RCA errs gravely when it prevents churches and ministers from celebrating same-sex marriages and disciplines all sexual relationships between same-sex loving people because it considers homosexual behavior to be sinful. We believe that the RCA mistakenly adopts cultural norms, prevalent in the eras in which the Bible was written, without considering the ways in which, in today's world, they may be unjust, cause harm, and deny the principle of justification by faith.

The Classis of New Brunswick agrees with the RCA's 1978 Commission of Theology paper when it acknowledged that an understanding of sexual orientation is simply missing from the Bible:

As Jesus remained silent on the entire subject, so the biblical writers did not address the human condition now known as homosexual inversion. [Note: in 1978, the term "inversion" is equivalent to today's "orientation."] ²⁸

No position about same-sex relationships can be justified in a single Bible passage or in the notorious 7-10 verses about homosexuality (see Section 7 of this report, Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality, page 32). The 1978 Commission on Theology clearly states this and confirms that it used Christian ethical reflection, informed by doctrine, to interpret a sense of scripture as a coherent whole. Therefore, the RCA position is not derived from scripture alone but on ethical reflection, as the 1978 paper states:

Christian ethical reflection is informed by those key doctrines which present the 'sense' of scripture as a coherent whole.

However, this 1978 paper mistakenly applies heterosexual norms to all people:

It does not follow from this fact [that an understanding of sexual orientation is simply missing from the Bible], however, that the heterosexual norm is less binding, as many in the homosexual context aver, or that any sexual act accords with God's will if it is performed in fidelity, trust, and love. The norm expressed in creation and reaffirmed in Jesus' own teaching is not abrogated by the fact that some persons cannot conform to it, any more than it is set aside because some persons will not live by it.

This 1978 paper errs because heterosexuality is not expressed as a norm in creation. As we learn through general revelation, a wide variety of sexual orientations are expressed among all God's creatures. As the 1978 paper acknowledges, heterosexuality is not expressed as a universal norm in any of Jesus' teaching. In fact, Jesus is silent on the topic of homosexual orientation. This RCA conclusion is a terrible mistake, which has resulted in damaging consequences for countless LGBTQ individuals, as well as their families and communities. The

²⁸ "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," (Minutes of General Synod 1978), 229-240.

Classis of New Brunswick urges the RCA to correct its theological mistakes and repent the harm the RCA has done when it claims: “Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality,” for the following seven reasons:

1. A just precept must apply to all people.

The RCA position requires same-sex loving people to live celibate lives or to marry people to whom they feel no sexual attraction. Thus, the RCA position compels a sacrifice from same-sex loving Christians that it does not require of heterosexual Christians. However, a precept is just only if it applies equally to all people, as Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow, and that it is willing to follow itself.²⁹

King was echoing the principle that Paul describes in Galatians when he accuses Peter of selectively adhering to Jewish law as a free choice while compelling Jewish law universally on non-Jewish Galatians (Galatians 2:14). In the case of human sexuality, it is unjust for the RCA to compel some people to lives devoid of satisfying sexual intimacy and the possibility of life-long sexual partnerships, if the RCA does not compel all people to live this way.

2. No one can be compelled to celibacy, except by the Holy Spirit.

To compel celibacy is contrary to the guidance of Paul who definitively states that celibacy is a gift of the spirit of God given to some, but not all (1 Cor. 7:7). Therefore, the RCA sins when it compels celibacy upon people who do not experience it as a divine call. Paul cautions that to deny the need of some for sexual satisfaction is to invite sexual immorality. Thus, the RCA sins when it requires same-sex loving people to either be celibate or enter heterosexual marriages. To do so puts people at odds with their own sexuality and God-inscribed need for a like-minded helper. It thereby endangers their health, safety and security as well as that of their partners, families, children, and communities.

The 16th century reformer Martin Luther said that celibacy cannot be imposed because God does not compel us but sets us free: “It is impossible to make vows unless you are led inwardly and wondrously by the Spirit of Christ and are already saved.”³⁰ Therefore any rule that compels celibacy is human in origin. To compel someone to a life of celibacy, as God’s commandment, is a dangerous form of idolatry, according to Luther:

Let us bring this discussion to an end now by reaching the conclusion that lifelong poverty, obedience, and chastity may be observed, but cannot be vowed, taught, or imposed. The freedom of the gospel may still be retained by observing these things (poverty, obedience, and chastity), but as soon as you teach them, vow them, and

²⁹ In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this principle to indict the hypocrisy of white Christian pastors who urged him to cease unlawful demonstrations and wait patiently.

³⁰ Martin Luther, (1999) *Luther’s works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Editors, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 30.

demand them, then evangelical freedom is lost. By the same argument, the saints who observed these things did so freely. They would have observed them even if they had never made vows, even if vows had never been taught or demanded of them. For that very reason their vows, though foolish, did no harm to their faith and their freedom of spirit. It is one thing for something to happen when it has neither been taught nor demanded, but quite a different thing altogether for the same thing to be taught, demanded, and made compulsory. This makes a law out of a single instance, a precept out of a work, a rule from one example, an essential out of the nonessential. What could be more absurd and what could be more harmful? The former is of God; the latter, of man. Therefore, we must abide by the first and let the other go. We do not therefore condemn vows in themselves if anyone should choose to follow them; it is the teaching and the prescribing of vows that we condemn.³¹

3. It is unjust to modify moral precepts for a majority but not for minorities.

The RCA has modified the Bible's ethical rules for heterosexual marriage to promote the well-being of heterosexuals and to allow for historical changes in culture. The church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though it was practiced by ancient Israel's patriarchs. The church no longer compels a practice known as Levirate marriage, required in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6, where the brothers of a dead man must marry his widow and continue his bloodline. The RCA modifies Jesus' prohibition against divorce to accommodate the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of heterosexuals.

Nevertheless, the RCA refuses to adapt its rules for marriage to support the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of people who experience same-sex attraction. By accommodating heterosexual people and failing to accommodate same-sex loving people, the RCA harms the Body of Christ.

4. Paul's conversion provides an ethical principle, Justification by Faith, which Paul applies when a majority threatens to harm a minority.

By restricting marriage to heterosexual couples because of longstanding tradition and the traditional interpretation of scripture, the RCA inflicts suffering on lesbian and gay people. However, this puts the church in a state of contradiction with scripture itself. The importance of re-examining Scripture and tradition in light of one's experience of suffering is emphasized in the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

Paul tells us that as a Pharisee, he embraced scripture and tradition, excelling so far beyond his peers that he violently pursued the assembly of people who followed Jesus, to the point that he ravaged it (Gal. 1:13-14). As a young Pharisee named Saul, he was so pleased with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4) that he became bloodthirsty for more punishment to purify his faith:

Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, Saul committed them to prison (Acts 8: 1-3).

³¹ Ibid., 315–316.

Paul's drive for purity, based on his excellence in scripture and tradition, so blinded Paul that he witnessed Stephen's stoning without pausing to consider Stephen's extraordinary faith or trust in God. To explain how he went from being the persecutor of the church to the church's great evangelist, Paul says, "It pleased God to reveal God's son in me" (Gal. 1: 16). The author of Luke/Acts dramatized this revelation with a stroke of blinding light and an audible voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" and then, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9: 4-5). Jesus identifies himself with Saul's victims. Paul experiences Jesus in the suffering of Paul's victims.³²

To Paul's astonishment, Paul discovered that God was not on Paul's side! God was on the side of Paul's victims, people Paul **justifiably** bludgeoned and **lawfully** executed. Instead of the self-righteous Paul, who aggressively executed the law, God raised as God's son the humble Galilean healer who became a willing victim of lawful persecution. This is the scandal of the cross (1 Cor. 1: 23, Gal. 5:11), the stumbling block that stops Paul dead in his tracks and causes him to re-evaluate his entire moral framework. But there's more. When Paul says, "It pleased God to reveal Christ **in me**," not only does Paul see Christ in the victims of his persecution. But Paul sees Christ, the resurrected victim, in himself. Paul experiences Jesus handing himself over in love for Paul, so that the persecutor in Paul could be replaced and Christ himself could live in Paul. The lawless victim and the lawful persecutor are enfolded together in the love of Christ. This divine embrace—the supersession of moralistic law by God's more foundational law of love—is true Christian atonement. God's law of love is a super-law, Paul says, a law that underlies all other laws:

The entire law is summed up in one Word: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest by one another you are destroyed (Gal. 5:15).

Adhering to religious tradition to justify rules that cause only suffering is exactly opposite the intent of the Gospel. Unlike the RCA, Paul does not increase his persecution but ceases it entirely and then joins those he persecuted. Paul considers himself to be judged by Jesus. Like Jesus, Paul allows himself to be crucified—for his sin of causing human suffering. If changing one's mind because one experiences Christ in human suffering were contrary to the Gospel, we might not **have** a Gospel today.

The story of Paul's divine revelation shows that for Christians, the experience of human suffering must be a ground for re-evaluating our moral positions. Paul first awakened to this

³² Jesus identifies himself as the one whom Paul persecutes, when he asks Saul: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [Saul] asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5), much as Jesus explains, in Matthew's Judgement of the Nations, "to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25: 41-46).

revelation in his conversion experience. Then, in an entirely new situation, Paul explained how his revelation provided an ethical principle for adjudicating between conflicting moral claims and re-evaluating doctrine in our communities. He wrote his Letter to Galatians to stop Jews who followed Christ from compelling circumcision on Galatians who were not Jews. Later, in his letter to Romans, Paul used the same principle of justification by faith to convince Hellenistic Romans who followed Christ to maintain social solidarity with their Jewish neighbors who were persecuted by Rome (Romans 5:1-15). In the same way, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks to stop the RCA from compelling faithful LGBTQ Christians to life-long celibacy simply because they are not heterosexual.

Reformed Christians who hold the traditional position on homosexuality may be theologically rigorous, faithful people like Paul. Like Paul they may be supremely skeptical about departing from tradition and changing biblical interpretation. That is why Paul tells us that the only way for Christians to be justified in our moral reasoning is to follow Jesus, crucified and resurrected (Gal. 2:16). Paul understood the cross of Christ to be a giant direction marker or billboard, an ethical rule for the Christian application of moral law. Every time we must judge between executing a law and the welfare of people whom the law is to protect, we must constantly privilege our care for the law's victims. **This** is what distinguishes us as Christians in the world. In the resurrection of Jesus, God affirmed that God is always on the side of people who are harmed by our merciless adherence to law.

6. Experiencing the suffering of Christ in the suffering of LGBTQ people requires an openness to revelation.

A conversion like Paul's is a holy and personal experience. Revelation happens when each of us is guided by the Holy Spirit. For some people, the Holy Spirit may move us when we read personal stories of faithful LGBTQ Christians who suffer from the unjust judgments of the Church. But the Holy Spirit is most likely to move us when we are in the physical presence of a person who is suffering, someone who, like Paul, bears the marks of Jesus, the stigmata of the cross (Gal 6:17). When we perceive the marks of our idolatrous punishment etched in the flesh of their body and in the church-endorsed torment of their souls, we must blind ourselves to the requirements of law and tradition. We must suspend our deadly judgments. Blindly we follow Jesus because we Christians are justified by faith alone.

One by one, the power of the Holy Spirit converts us. Thus, we hear about a steady stream of conversions of formerly non-affirming parents after their beloved children come out as gay or transgender. We are moved by the stories of faith leaders like the ministers and elders of San Francisco's City Church. In March 2015, City Church leaders changed their membership rules because they were converted by the suffering of faithful, loving gay couples in their congregation. As people who experience Christ crucified in the church's persecution of LGBTQ people, we in the Classis of New Brunswick need no further justification to disavow any rule, guideline, liturgy, judicial decision or edict that supports the RCA's restriction of marriage to heterosexual relationships.

Sadly, many Reformed Christians do not understand Christ's crucifixion as a divine "Stop Sign" meant to halt our very human trait of destroying people in our zeal to be seen by God as righteous in the law. When people suffer because of church discipline, some Reformed Christians may tell themselves, "This is God's will." Like Saul, they cannot see the crucified Christ in the people they persecute. They judge faithful, same-sex couples to be unrepentant sinners. They refuse to re-examine the biblical interpretation that drives them to confront, disparage, and discipline openly gay and lesbian people and their allies, including the Classis of New Brunswick. They long to purify the church of CNB's perceived defiling presence. They imagine the presence of sinners like us prevents the church from upholding Christ's one-time atonement for all humanity's sins. Tragically, they miss the mark. Jesus handed himself over to be crucified in order to show us how wrong we can be. In his willing crucifixion, Jesus expanded upon the holy truth that each of us is created in the image of God. When we use the law to destroy one another, it is God we destroy. God suffers on the cross. God raised his beloved son from the dead to prove to us that, when it comes to God's mercy, our only hope is to let go of the law and let God take over.

7. Church discipline that produces no benefit or fruit of the spirit is unholy.

In the RCA's Book of Church Order, the RCA considers its authority to discipline to be divinely bestowed to the church by Jesus, "to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ." But any church rule or discipline that results in the systematic destruction of human life is an abomination against our Lord Jesus Christ. The RCA has ample reason to abandon it. It does not at all benefit offenders if the threat of church discipline makes people miserable and destroys families and communities.

God's Holy Spirit yields love, joy, peace, willingness for patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). However, Christians who are LGBTQ people and their allies testify that the RCA's traditional position on homosexuality is a kind of church discipline that produces no spiritual fruit in their lives. Instead, in their lives, as in our denomination, this position creates enmity, strife, anger, divisions and sects.

Faithful LGBTQ people and their allies who are long-term members of the RCA's sister denomination, the CRCNA (or Christian Reformed Church in North America), contributed personal narratives to a 150-page report that supports same-sex marriage in the church.³³ They describe the heartbreak the traditional position on homosexuality causes them, their partners, family members and communities even when they are faithful, even when they **comply** with the position of the church.

They say the church hurts them in five ways.

- **PERSONAL CONDEMNATION.** The simple fact that their church holds the traditional position on homosexuality causes them pain, as they say: "To be told in strong terms that God does not approve of you acting out a primary drive that comes naturally is

³³ "Section 9: Psychological Issues Involved in Considering Full Inclusion Versus Non-inclusion," 106-19 of the "Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage," Christian Reformed Church.

devastating.” Reformed Christians have been known to claim they “love the sinner but hate the sin of gay sex.” However gay and lesbian people do not feel their love but their hatred of the sexuality that God has woven into their personal identity.

- **COMPELLED CELIBACY.** Celibacy, says the Apostle Paul, is a gift from God and compelling someone to be celibate who does not experience that call puts them at grave risk of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7: 7). Gay and lesbian Christians in the CRC say they do not experience a divine call to celibacy, they never experience an end to same-sex attraction, and they find no spiritual benefit in church-compelled celibacy, at all—only deprivation.
- **PERSECUTION BY OTHERS.** Lesbian and gay CRC members say they find themselves subject to the traditional position not only by official actions of church discipline, but also by *all* church members. They say: “All [church members] fear God’s judgment on them for not calling a person they know to be actively sinning to repentance, as stated in Acts 20.” Therefore, families and friends must choose between standing with the church and supporting one’s family member or friend: “Parents mourn over gay children who are condemned and ostracized by the church. Marriages are damaged when one parent remains loyal to a gay child while the other disowns the child out of loyalty to the church. Gay people choose between their church and their partner. Loss of a faith community takes a heavy toll.”
- **LIFE-THREATENING MENTAL HEALTH.** Lesbian and gay people say enforced celibacy causes them, “pervasive loneliness and low self-esteem. They experience deep-seated longings for the love, touch and affirmation that are fundamental to their identity. All around them they see viable partners, opportunities for life-long partnerships of mutual love and service but the church requires them to sacrifice these for the sake of membership.” These CRC members experience numerous cases of depression, addiction, and suicide. They cite alarming national statistics that correlate family rejection with astronomic rates of homelessness, anxiety, depression and suicide.
- **DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES.** CRC members explain how the traditional position encourages gay people to hide behind a heterosexual marriage though they may be caught indulging in forbidden, same-sex affairs. Paul advocates marriage to help people avoid this very same temptation (1 Cor. 7:5). Thus, their perfectly human inability to forego satisfaction in sexual intimacy—the same kind of intimacy that churches endorse to fortify the fabric of heterosexual lives—damages the lives of their children, spouses, and parents; it destroys families and caring communities.

Conclusion

Based on the five ways our CRC siblings tell us the church’s restriction of marriage to heterosexuals harms LGBTQ people, and based on the seven points of our ethical examination, the Classis of New Brunswick concludes that Reformed Christians who restrict marriage to heterosexual relationships harm people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

intersex and queer. Sadly, this firmly held RCA position prevents its proponents from experiencing conversion in Christ whose suffering we find exemplified in the suffering of LGBTQ Christians.

As Saul sought to destroy the early church, the RCA position encourages its proponents to discipline people in same-sex relationships and to discipline ministers, consistories and classes that enable the blessing of same-sex weddings, thereby destroying the unity of the RCA.

The Classis of New Brunswick strongly disavows the RCA position as abhorrent to the Gospel and holds the RCA responsible for all harm this position causes. Classis calls the RCA to disavow this position and repent the harm it has done. We call Reformed Christians everywhere to do all we can to restore wholeness and healing to people, families and communities whom the church has harmed.

Chapter 7

Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality

On January 29, 2005, the Classis of New Brunswick held an open discussion about homosexuality and Christian faithfulness, reviewing the perspectives and passages that inform our Christian life as individuals, church leaders, and as churches. The Classis prepared the following study document about the passages that have traditionally influenced decisions about this topic.³⁴ Each passage is presented along with two conflicting perspectives, described below. We state **Perspective Two** more fully than **Perspective One** because the verses cited by Perspective One have dominated debate in the Reformed Church in America. The verses cited by Perspective Two are not included in this examination (but are provided throughout this Affirmed + Celebrated report).

Perspective One

One perspective on homosexuality and Christian faithfulness is that the biblical affirmation of heterosexuality, the seven or so pronouncements against homosexuality, and the absence of any positive statement about homosexuality show that scripture is against all homosexual relationships and sexual acts. The command to be fruitful and multiply, and the sense that in heterosexual relationships each partner is “complemented and [completed] by the other” bolster this perspective.

While affirming that heterosexual union is God’s desire and preference for human sexual expression, this perspective recognizes all human sexuality suffered in the fall (Gen. 3:16). Many who hold this perspective believe that some are oriented toward people of the same sex, and that orientation, in and of itself, is not something that one can control. Therefore, Christians are called to show compassion when addressing homosexuals, even while maintaining a stance that all homosexual acts are sinful. While the many documents of the RCA concerning homosexuality are nuanced and give credence to some other views, this perspective is the one that best represents the RCA 1978 paper on homosexuality, found in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1959-1984*. “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal.”

³⁴ PLEASE NOTE: this section presents a 2005 document, edited for clarity and additional scholarship by the editors of this Affirmed + Celebrated report. More in-depth presentations of a wide range of scholarship on these passages can be found in “Section 5: Interpretation of Biblical Passages Referring to Gender Differentiation and Same-sex Intercourse” pages 46-59 and “Section 6: Section 6: Quotations of Contemporary Authors on Biblical Passages Related to Gender Differentiation and Same-Sex Intercourse” pages 60-84 of the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report, previously cited.

Perspective Two

A second perspective also turns toward scripture but looks beyond particular verses and even beyond the topic of sexuality, instead emphasizing a framework that might be called, “the growing understanding of God’s ever-widening circle of love and salvation.” God’s work began at creation. God’s love worked specifically through Abraham and the nation of Israel, with a promise that, one day, all the nations of the world would be blessed through that covenant. Even before Christ, the expansion of that promise began as the prophets called God’s people to consider “the stranger within one’s gates.” As examples of God’s widening love, we can point to non-Israelites and women who had been traditionally considered “unclean,” whom God used in the course of salvation history (e.g., Tamar, Rahab, Ruth in the Hebrew Bible; the Roman centurion in Matthew 8, the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7, in Luke 10, the Good Samaritan and in Luke 17, one thankful Samaritan leper; Gauls and Greeks in Paul’s letters to Galatians and Romans). In Jesus, through his unlikely table companions, his willingness to touch the people whom his society and tradition deemed to be untouchables, we come to understand his reinterpretation of the law in pursuit of a wholeness deeper than the letter of the law provides. Jesus displayed that when the kingdom is at hand, it is a place of incredible inclusion.

The book of Acts states that “what God has called clean, let no one call unclean.” What law once excluded is now welcomed in the Christian church. Even before the debate and council over Peter’s Gentile mission to Cornelius, Phillip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. By Hebrew law, this foreign treasurer and student, both because of his ethnicity and because he was a eunuch, should have been excluded from fellowship with the devout followers of the Hebrew Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

At this time in history, the Spirit is calling the Church to widen the circle to full and equal inclusion of homosexual people. Perspective 2 holds that we should not hinder the work of the Holy Spirit and instead embrace the ever-widening circle of God’s love and saving work and continue the radical inclusiveness of Jesus and the practice of the New Testament Church.

Importantly, those who hold Perspective Two believe that the cultural context of biblical passages needs to play a large part in biblical interpretation. It is right to condemn what the Bible clearly condemns about the same sex activity it names: violent rape, temple prostitution, and idolatrous self-indulgent sexual expressions. These activities must be condemned when they occur between individuals of different genders as well. However, it is a grave mistake to condemn homosexual expressions of love that are in the context of relationships that exhibit mutuality and respect. It is unlikely that ancient Middle-Eastern biblical cultures understood in-born, same-sex desire and orientation, or loving and respectful same-sex relationships. Therefore, there can be no certainty that any biblical passage condemns homosexual expressions of love, mutuality, and respect.

There is a grave possibility that the RCA has not sufficiently examined the extent to which its condemnation of homosexuality rests on the requirements of faithful people in ancient biblical cultures that are not valid today. In particular, those who hold Perspective Two remind everyone in the RCA that none of its women would be ordained if the RCA did not re-examine the intent of

the Holy Spirit in light of differences in cultural contexts between the ancient Middle East under Roman Rule and the modern era.³⁵ Even when the Bible demands women’s silence in the church, states the RCA’s 1957 Report on the Ordination of Women, its demand is about social accommodations—not essential differences in how male and female believers participate in the life of Christ. Women are instructed not to teach or have authority over men and to keep silent in church (1 Tim. 2:12) in order to “avoid publicly embarrassing their husbands and prejudicing an unsympathetic public against radical expressions of Christian freedom. Rules such as this protected vulnerable Christians in a hostile Roman environment but are not essential to the meaning of the gospel in modern contexts.”

Those holding Perspective Two believe it is relevant to look at other cultural practices that were accepted in scripture which the church has challenged on cultural grounds: slavery; women as unworthy to lead or teach; first born sons inherit all rights. Therefore, this perspective urges that we look beyond heterosexual behavior itself and ask “what does scripture value about the coming together of male and female?” Ethicists have proposed that we value (1) relation between two who are different, (2) enduring commitment, (3) the ability to create new life, and (4) a humble selflessness. Individuals of the same gender will always remain distinct and mysterious individuals to each other. Two people of the same sex can make enduring commitments. New life need not (and ought not) be limited to reproduction: i.e. new life can be found through surrogacy, adoption of children, renewed life and career directions, new art or music, healing through recovery, participation in a faith community, etc. Along with heterosexual couples who do not have obligations of child-rearing, same-sex couples without children are able to uniquely contribute in a creative and nurturing way to their Christian community and the wider neighborhoods. Same-sex couples are as capable of humble selflessness as heterosexual couples.

Scriptures Often Referenced in the Discussion on Homosexuality

We turn to the verses that have often been used in the formulation of church position papers that condemn homosexual relationships as sinful and hinder the ordination of openly gay

³⁵ In 1979, General Synod opened the door for the RCA’s official approval for the ordination of women by adopting a report of its Judicial Business Committee. The report dismissed the complaints against the two ordinations of women and upheld the complaint of the Albany Classis in support of Rev. Joyce de Velder’s ordination. The report ruled that the central point of all the complaints was the definition and interpretation of the word “person.” The only support it found for restricting “person” to male candidates for ministry was long-standing tradition, “custom and practice,” which is not binding on the church today: “In a church such as ours, reformed and reforming according to the Word of God, custom and practice cannot take precedence over the declaration of the General Synod regarding the meaning of the Scripture.” For the committee, the scriptural and theological question about women’s ordination was closed with the actions of GS1958. In 1957, a General Synod study committee submitted a groundbreaking report in the form of four essays. The committee concluded that “there is no sufficient scriptural reason for insisting that the nature and function of the office is such that women should be excluded from eligibility.” In 1958, after re-examining the intent of scriptural passages previously considered to exclude women from church office, General Synod declared, “Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence and equal status with men in the church of Jesus Christ (See The Office of the Stated Clerk of the Reformed Church in America, *Report on the Ordination of Women, Submitted to Consistories for Study and Report in June, 1957, 58-59, 74*).

ministers. Below each verse we state the traditional perspective and a revised perspective. Unless otherwise noted, page references are to: "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," found in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1959-1984*. All bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Hebrew Scripture Texts

Genesis 19 and Judges 19

Genesis 19:4-11: But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

Judges 19:16-26: (Tells the story of Gibeah, a city that like Sodom and Gomorrah desires to rape male visitors to the city. In this telling the men of the city rape the man's concubine.)

Perspective One: While there is violence in this passage and there are a number of other sins elsewhere attributed to Sodom, the sin that is predominant in this text is a homosexual sex act. "The text stresses the reprehensible nature of the violation as strongly as the fact of the violation itself" (p. 245).

Perspective Two: The prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), when referencing the destruction of Sodom, focus on the sin of inhospitality. The intent of this text is to condemn the violence of actions and inhospitable behavior. "This text . . . may be interpreted as a clear condemnation of persons who would force homosexual acts upon unwilling partners. The text by itself will not justify a blanket condemnation of homosexuality" (p. 246). Condemnations against rape cannot inform or judge a nurturing, loving, consenting sexual relationship between adults.

Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20

Leviticus 18:22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13: If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Perspective One: The laws regarding homosexual practice are part of an extensive list of laws regarding sexuality and associated penalties. This section of Leviticus is about holiness, indeed it is often called “the Holiness Code.” Since all of God’s word, from Genesis to Revelation, is revealed truth, these pronouncements need to be obeyed. Mercy can call for Christians to not seek capital punishment for homosexual behavior. Deeper understandings of the commitments and intimacy of marriage teach us not to tolerate polygamy (which is shown to be acceptable in the same section of scripture). Biology and a clearer understanding of reproduction and the nature of blood would teach us not to shun women in menstruation. There is, however, no comparable valid argument for removing the strong prohibition against homosexuality.

Perspective Two: The prohibitions are listed with other prohibitions that we, as a Christian community, chose to reject. We are inconsistent when we lift up only one of many sins named in the holiness code. To be consistent, we should advocate capital punishment for male homosexual behavior, shun women in menstruation, accept polygamy, ignore lesbian behavior, and never wear a garment made of two different materials! While other passages more directly speak to the issue of sacred prostitution, “In the Hebrew mind, homosexuality was inextricably linked to the . . . practice of sacred male prostitution, one of the ongoing threats to the integrity of Israel’s worship” (p. 246). Whether temple prostitution is named or not, the Hebrew culture associated same-sex intimacy with pagan worship practices. This condemnation is informed by this bias. There was no concept of loving, enduring homosexual relationships or same-sex orientation, therefore this condemnation does not speak to such relationships.

Deuteronomy 23, 1 Kings 14, 15, 22

Deuteronomy 23:17: None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute.

1 Kings 14:24: There were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.

1 Kings 15:12: He put away the male temple prostitutes out of the land, and removed all the idols that his ancestors had made.

1 Kings 22:46: The remnant of the male temple prostitutes who were still in the land in the days of his father Asa, he exterminated.

These four texts relate to temple prostitution and the fertility cults of Israel’s pagan neighbors. It is generally agreed that they do not inform a discussion of homosexual behavior in current society. However, they support the thesis that eliminating temple prostitution was a major cultural concern of the Hebrew Bible that is irrelevant to today’s culture.

Christian Scripture Texts

Jude 5-8

This passage makes reference to the destruction of Sodom. Please, refer to the discussion above of Genesis and 1 Kings.

Romans 1

Romans 1:16-2:8: ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error...

We note that, in order to study this passage, it is helpful to have a sense of the movement of Paul's argument. He is discussing the human condition. He points out that humans are condemned before God, and are slaves to sin. Salvation comes through faith. Apart from faith, humanity stands under "the wrath of God." Paul demonstrates the consequences of human separation from God by showing the moral failure of Gentiles. General revelation (i.e., knowledge of God all people can see in the natural order) should lead to grateful obedience and faith. Instead, humanity glorifies itself. Because the human relationship with God is distorted, human relationships are distorted. This idolatry is seen in sensual vices (24-27) and antisocial vices (29-31). Homosexual acts are listed under sensual vices.

Perspective One: Paul's language points to a perversion of the divine-human relationship leading to a perversion of human relationships. Our perverted relationship to God "is parallel to and occasioned by the" act of self-willed rebellion on the human level. This self-willed rebellion has been compared to the first act of rebellion in the garden of Eden. "One who dishonors God will dishonor [his/her] . . . own body as well" (p. 248).

While homosexual behavior is named as a sin, we must recognize that it is not singled out. Homosexual behavior is one of many consequences of humanity's sinful state. It is listed with covetousness, malice, envy, gossip, disobedience to parents, and others sins of the mind and heart. Paul goes on to condemn all those who would judge others. Recognizing homosexuality as one of many sins leads to humility and compassion for those with a homosexual orientation, but scripture still names it as a sin to be renounced.

Perspective Two: Paul's concern is a distorted relationship with God. Paul is concerned about many sexual and antisocial sins that result from a distorted relationship with God. However, in ancient times, there was no sense of in-born sexual orientations, either heterosexual or homosexual—neither of these terms existed. In Paul's mind and the mind of his culture, there was no understanding of human sexual diversity. The perceived natural order led to male/female sex and reproduction. Sexual acts among people of the same gender were prevalent in the domain of temple prostitution or other pagan practices. Paul argues that heterosexual people reflect a faulty relationship with God when they engage in same-sex behavior in cultic practices and where there are unjust power imbalances. Paul's prohibition

does not speak about the nurturing, loving, and consenting same-sex relationships to which God has called many men and women.

Historians of ancient Rome advise us that applying this passage to any group of Christians today may be a grave misuse of the passage. By “those who suppress the truth” (1:18), historians believe Paul meant a very specific set of people: the most recent Roman emperors. They note that, in Rome at this moment, everyone was living with a huge, open lie—the current Emperor had poisoned his predecessor/stepfather and then DIVINIZED him—there were sickening statues of the dead victim in the streets of Rome. Historians say that Paul could not write about this openly—though everyone in Rome was forced to live in daily obeisance to such open lies, including the open knowledge of emperors who sleep with their mothers and sisters, which is deviously unnatural by all accounts. God’s beloved in Rome would have no problem identifying the utter depravity of a notorious group of people whose “wickedness suppress[es] the truth.” Quoting ancient historians in detail, historians can show the extent to which it was public knowledge that the emperors Augustus, Caligula and Tiberius “exchanged the glory of immortal God” for their own images and have been given up “for degrading passions”, “debased minds” and every kind of wickedness (Rom. 1:18-32).

Ignorance of Paul’s implicit intention to elicit public outrage at blatant abuses of emperors has enabled Christian exegetes to misuse this passage to accuse modern-day people who experience same-sex attraction of the highest level of evil.³⁶

1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1

1 Corinthians 6:9-10: Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:9-10: This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.

Perspective One: These are more instances of those who engage in male homosexual behavior being condemned along with other universally accepted sins.

Perspective Two: There is great debate about the meaning of the Greek words used here (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*). It is not clear they were ever *intended* to refer to homosexual behavior. While these terms may include sexual activities between people of the same sex, they also carry connotations of sex trafficking, pedophilia, and subjugation.

³⁶ This summarizes Neil Elliot’s argument on pages 75-86 of *Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

Chapter 8

Life Stories

Introduction

Despite the limits on our knowledge, the Classis of New Brunswick has found that God has given us deep convictions when it comes to affirming and celebrating all people into the life of God's church, including those of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. The preceding pages offer the expression of our Classical understanding of the biblical and theological support for our position to affirm and celebrate the full inclusion of persons with LGBTQ identity in the life of Christ's church.

Our position did not come without wrestling with scripture, and indeed, such wrestling continues. But this wrestling with the scriptural texts and the development of theological arguments has never been prompted by the mere goal of developing an abstract theory or philosophy of ministry. No, these were both prompted and informed by people whose stories and experiences give witness to the presence and the movement of the Spirit of God; whose experiences prompt *them* to ask, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8: 36) and from encounters with whom *we* have been left to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10: 47).

And while these questions may have originally arisen in the context of people *newly* coming or returning to faith in Christ, the Church's questions around inclusion of LGBTQ people often center on people who have been raised in the Church; whose baptismal covenant was made long before their sexual and gender identity was known to anyone other than God. Their confession of faith in Christ is sincere; their discipleship is dedicated; their desire to serve is inspiring; their longing to be recognized in and use their gifts for Christ's Church is unmistakable. They serve as our living reminders that the complete meaning of baptism from a Reformed perspective encompasses not only cleansing from sin, and newness of life, but also full inclusion in the household of faith.

The Classis of New Brunswick has learned firsthand that people who wish seriously to engage the discussion of the place of LGBTQ persons in the life of Christ's church must hear their stories in their voice. We encourage you to listen to stories of personal experiences and stories of faith to see if indeed you see evidence of the Spirit of God at work within them. As with Phillip and with Peter, and eventually with the whole of the first-century church, from these stories of exclusion, eventually, we will all discern a clear movement of the Spirit leading us to embrace a wider trajectory of inclusion and celebration in Scripture.

Room for All shares many stories of Gay Christians and those who are allies to the LGBTQ community here: <https://roomforall.com/resources/stories/>

Love Will Ultimately Win: The Life Story of a CNB Deacon

I grew up in the church. Since I was a child, it has been a part of my life and has shaped and molded me. It is where I learned to sing and where I fell in love with music. It is where I learned about God and this beautiful world, and where I came to see God's presence and love in everything around me. It is where I learned to love others because we are all God's children, even those that appear to be different than me. It is where I learned to think of others more than of myself.

As I grew older, however, the church of my youth became less relevant to me because in many ways I felt the church was straying from the teachings of Jesus and had sadly and strangely aligned itself with the Republican party and had become more political. I saw how my church (the Roman Catholic Church) as well as many other churches that were considered part of the "religious right" had given in to the allure of political power, of prestige, and of money. The church rarely aligned with my convictions of helping the poor, the stranger, the dispossessed, the suffering. As a gay man, the church also by its own choice became my adversary and, along with the religious right and the Republican party, fought hard to keep me and those like me down and to keep us in the margins of society.

I left the church.

I was fortunate after many years to find an RCA church that is open and affirming, but more importantly I was fortunate to find a church community that is truly fueled by God's love – one that finds ways to unapologetically express that love through service to the community and service to each other. I was humbled, honored and blessed to be elected a deacon of the church and to have the opportunity to serve others.

It saddened me greatly that the 2016 General Synod recommended a change in the Order for Christian Marriage in order to preclude same sex couples from marrying in the church on the very same day that a deranged person murdered many innocent LGBTQ people in Orlando, Florida. At the same time, GS passed a resolution "*rejecting all forms of mockery, degrading words and thoughts, economic oppression, abuse, threats, and violence made against members of the LGBTQ+ community...*" The irony of this statement and the actions of GS to withhold the joyous union of two loving adults is stark, cold, and heartless. What many in the RCA have completely failed to realize is that preventing two people who are in love from sanctifying their love through the dignity of a religious marriage is in itself *an act of violence* to the LGBTQ+ community. It is a small, insidious act of violence that, like a little white lie, can grow and fester into something far worse. It is an act that is both *degrading* to same sex couples as well as one

that *makes a mockery* of the couple's relationship. It is an act that *seeks to oppress* their love and therefore *to abuse* the love that they have for each other. I fear that the RCA has damned itself with its own words and conflicting resolutions.

Perhaps the church as a whole has truly lost its way. The Reformed Church in America in particular has left "reformed and reforming" by the way-side. The RCA is closing its heart, and is closing itself off from God's greater love by not supporting loving same sex couples and all the wonderful gifts they can bring to God's community.

The church has so much to learn – *or perhaps to re-learn* - from the LGBTQ+ community. This is a community that is strictly built on Love and respect, despite all of our differences. This is a community that has fought so very hard for love, and has fought against all sorts of opposition from churches, political groups, and those afraid of change. This is a community that has continued to face all sorts and forms of violence, fear and hatred at every turn. This is a community that has learned that Love wins.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that churches like the RCA learn from the LGBTQ+ community and accept and welcome the Love of God that comes through people like me. When Love Wins, God Wins. However, as a Christian I have been taught that our ways are not God's ways, and our thoughts are not God's thoughts.

As one who looks forward to the time when God's Kingdom will be fully realized "on earth as it is in heaven," I am confident that Love will ultimately win, whether or not the greater church is there to help take part in God's victory.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: The Life Story of a CNB Church Member

I grew up in the Episcopal Church, and while I always appreciated the pageantry, ritual, and drama of the Episcopal Church, I never felt I made a real spiritual connection through the Church. It wasn't until the summer after I graduated from high school, when I spent a week or so at Frontier Ranch (a Young Life camp nestled in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains) that I really established a relationship with God. (That's also when I realized I felt much more connected to God sitting by myself on the side of a mountain than I did sitting in a church full of people.)

Although I was raised Episcopalian, my belief in God isn't rooted in the teachings of a specific denomination. Maybe that's why my faith never caused me any inner turmoil when I realized I was gay or later when I decided to come out as transgender. I didn't have any heartfelt struggle. I didn't think I was going to hell. (Mainly because I don't believe in hell, but still...) I didn't think I was an abomination in God's eyes. I really didn't think about God at all when it came to my

sexual orientation and then later to my gender identity. (Though my dad definitely did. The first person he called when I told him I was transgender was his priest.) I was confident in my relationship with God and I was confident in myself. And I know that not everyone who comes out as gay or as transgender is so lucky.

There are two quotes regarding God, Jesus, faith, etc. that have stuck with me over the years. When I was at Frontier Ranch, one of the counselors told me after a long heart-to-heart, “It’s not the ‘don’t do’s’, it’s the ‘get to’s’ that make having God in your life such an amazing experience.” And when I was in college (I went to The University of the South, a small Episcopalian liberal arts university), there was a poster on the wall of our bookstore that had an illustration of Jesus with the headline, “He died to take away your sins, not your mind.” Those two sentiments definitely helped me create my own personal theology.

My God is a God of justice and a God of mercy. My God has a great sense of humor. My God doesn't judge based on race, sexuality, gender identity, economic status, educational level, etc. My God not only doesn't judge based on these things—he doesn't care about these things. He's got way more important things to worry about, like if you're a good person, if you're happy, if you're kind... My God has helped create some pretty cool stuff. I believe my God hears my prayers, but I honestly don't know if he's able to do anything about them. I think that sometimes my God has to watch some really terrible stuff happen and sit by helplessly just like we do. My God is a really good listener. My God is a really good friend.

I know God is fine with me being a transman. I have no doubt he wants me to be a better parent, a better partner, a better sibling, a better son, a better friend. But I'm confident he has no problem with me being transgender. I am confident that I am “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

We Reflect God’s Love in Relationships:

The Life Story of a CNB Choir Director as Told to an Elder

One Sunday in 2014, Cameron listened to the message at his place of worship, Abundant Grace Church, whose pastor preached: If you’re Christian, you shouldn’t post anything that is un-Christian on social media. After service, a church leader pointed to a picture that Cameron had posted online of him and his partner together the night before. The Abundant Grace leader asked, “Are you and this gentleman together?”

“Yeah,” Cameron replied. “We’re planning to get married.” And that was it. Cameron was told he could no longer serve as one of the main soloists on the pastor’s elite praise team. A few minutes later, on the sidewalk outside, Cameron googled “gay friendly church NJ” and his current Reformed church popped up.

Cameron found the Reformed church the most racially and culturally mixed congregation he had ever worshipped in. He appreciated its different musical styles. The second time Cameron and his partner attended service the Reformed co-pastor approached them. He said, “I noticed you guys have been here before. I want to connect with you. Do you think we could sit down sometime and have a conversation?” Right then and there, Cameron said, a lightbulb went on for his partner. This pastor treated them like they were a couple.

From the time he was a child in his uncle’s Jersey City congregation, Cameron had been taught homosexuality was wrong. Hearing his uncle’s condemnation was hard because Cameron knew he was gay from the time he was four-years old. By the time he was 12, his mom figured Cameron was gay. She told him, “I’m not going to not love you. I’ll still love you and you’re still my son. But it’s wrong.” But Cameron knew he could not marry a woman. He also knew he couldn’t bear to live alone for the rest of his life.

Today, Cameron loves leading a Gospel choir at the Reformed church. But the African American worship experience Cameron was raised in is different. There’s more emotion. When he’s hungry for that kind of expression, he returns to services at Abundant Grace. He has friends there. He joined Abundant Grace when his high school choir director invited him to come along. After college, though Cameron moved 30 minutes north, he kept worshipping at Abundant Grace. Every so often, the message was about the sin of homosexuality.

While serving as a soloist, Cameron decided to ask his Abundant Grace pastors for help. When they heard about his struggles with same-sex desires, they sent him to an ex-gay counselor who works with clients who wish to disavow their homosexuality. Cameron hoped it would help. Cameron respects people of faith, even when he disagrees with them. Cameron respected the counselor because the counselor believed what he was saying. The counselor asked Cameron to talk about the thoughts he was wrestling with. The counselor gave Cameron reading materials about men who had left the gay lifestyle behind. He encouraged Cameron to try dating a girl. Cameron spent Valentine’s Day with a girl he dated, though they were just friends. He felt he had to be honest. It wasn’t right to be with a woman if he truly wasn’t interested in her.

Cameron and his husband met in 2012, through an online dating site. Like Cameron, his soon-to-be-husband was looking for a companion. (His profile read, “if you are looking for something else, move on.”) When the two men met, Cameron realized he did not want to live his life alone. Cameron felt, wow, this is exactly what I am looking for. “I felt so much more joy when I finally decided to be me,” Cameron said. “The Church is wrong—you can’t say, hate the sin, love the sinner.” If part of you is sin, then God hates you. To Cameron, that just didn’t make sense from what he had come to know about God.

At Cameron’s request, before his wedding, his Reformed co-pastor met with Cameron’s mother and four of his friends because they could not imagine how a same-sex relationship could be sanctified or holy. This pastor, too, had grown up with a more conservative view. Over the

years, he had come to see that the definition of marriage progressively changes throughout Holy Scripture, and so the following definition was used at the celebration of Cameron's same-sex marriage:

The definition of marriage changes throughout Holy Scripture. For Abraham and King David, marriage meant polygamy. The practice of Levirate marriage obligated a widow to breed with her dead husband's brothers to continue his bloodline. First century marriage in the days of Jesus also differed radically from our modern-day religious arrangements. However, what does not change throughout history are the kinds of holy relationships that God calls us to celebrate. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. We reflect God's love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another we see reflections of God and of our own selves. In such relationships we experience holiness. When two people cultivate with one another these qualities, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, their friends, and their community.

Note: Names have been changed to respect privacy.

Chapter 9

Worship Resources

The following liturgy was written for use in worship at the Reformed Church of Highland Park on June 6, 2016, immediately following the actions of General Synod 2016. The Call to Confession could be changed to reflect current events. In worship, this was led by 2 people: a pastor and an openly gay deacon, with the openly gay person reading the section from Psalm 139. It was meaningful for our community that he read that section in worship.

Call to Confession

Pastor: We live in a beautiful and broken world, where glimpses of God's grace can be seen, and where unthinkable violence can shatter lives. Many of us gathered here on Monday and on Tuesday for vigils to mourn the killing of 49 people at the Pulse dance club in Orlando. We have held the victims and their loved ones in our thoughts this week. We acknowledge the real fear felt by many within the LGBTQ community. And we lament a world in which such evil actions can be directed toward the gay community. Over the past week, many of us have also felt sadness and outrage as we watched the actions of our Denomination, the Reformed Church in America, at its annual meeting. These actions included making statements and requesting policy change that do violence to the souls of our LGBTQ members by attempting to deny them the right to Christian marriage in the church.

We bring to God our grief and our outrage, our pain and our fear, our lament and our desire to work for a better world. Let us turn to God, first in silence and then by joining in prayer:

—Silent Meditation—

People: Listening God, we cry out to you over the shattered lives and shattered hopes of so many of your beloved children. We denounce hatred and violence. We ask that you would be close to those who are grieving and those who fear for their personal safety. Work through all of us, we pray, and help us to end a culture of violence and a climate of hatred. Work through us, together with all people of good will, to create a safe home here on your blessed earth. May your will be done here and now so that justice and righteousness may embrace, so that each person may be seen as your beautiful creation. Amen.

Choral Response: *Nada Te Turbe*
[Or *O Lord Hear Our Prayer* or *Kyrie Eleison*]

Assurance of God's Grace

Deacon: God hears our cries of anguish and anger. God sees the broken-ness in this world and, by the Spirit, works to heal and make lives whole again. God meets our despair with a powerful reminder of who we are, and who ALL people are: God's beloved. Psalm 139 tells of the great care and tender mercy of our God who created ALL people as beautiful works of art. May these words be an affirmation, even a celebration, of the greatness of the work of God's hands. May we heal as individuals, as communities and as a world, so that all might be seen as fearfully and wonderfully made.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.
Amen. (Psalm 139:13-18, NRSV)

When looking for a confession and a call to faithful living, Classis churches may wish to consider using the text formulated for CNB's Overture to GS2015 on God's Sovereignty.

Leader: We believe that each person's identity, including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We find such intimate relationships in Biblical stories where God calls people of great faith out of their ordinary lives to take up an extraordinary role in God's story of salvation. God calls Abram out of his father's house in Chaldea, rebukes Sarah for her laughter, enflames Moses from a bush, confounds Hannah's prayers in the temple, confronts Zechariah with his disbelief, and impregnates Mary with her mission to serve as the mother of humanity's savior.

These ancestors in faith experienced a holy fear or terror when God challenged their pre-conceived notions about themselves and called them to act in ways their own limited imaginations could not fathom. We know God because they trusted God. ***Their***

personal relationships with God form the foundation of **our** faith. Therefore, we believe that personal identity is the holy ground where each person encounters God.

This personal relationship is the foundation of our faith and joyfully we make the following confession of faith in God's sovereignty in determining our personal identity.³⁷

**People: "We praise God because each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made!
For it was you, Lord who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, Lord, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139).**

**Therefore, we proclaim that God alone prescribes who we are to be.
As God determines whether we are right or left-handed,
God weaves our gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation into our very being;
No elements of our personal identity are more inextricable!
People whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms—
lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, and
gender non-conforming identities—are gifts of God to humanity!
They reveal that God's astonishing and diverse creativity surpasses
our limited human understanding.
Therefore, it is a sin to disparage people because they do not conform to
society's heterosexual norms and binary conceptions of gender
(either male or female based on biology at birth).
The Bible affirms that God alone has primary authority over the gender,
sexuality, and sexual orientation God has ordained for each of us."**

Leader: Based on our confession, we embrace the following as our call to new obedience in a life of transformation in Christ:

- We respect that each person's unique expression of our God-given identity reflects the mysterious perfection in which we were made.
- In our Christian witness, we believe it is fitting to proclaim God's primary authority in determining each person's gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
- No human being should attempt to prescribe personal identity for another.
- We acknowledge that it takes tremendous faith in God for people to express God-given identities that diverge from societal norms.

³⁷ This text, from the confession to the call to faithful living, was developed as CNB's overture to GS 2015: The Sovereignty of God in Determining Personal Identity.

- The pastoral role of the church is to affirm each person's God-given identity and to uphold our faith in God's primary authority over who we are to be.

With fear and trembling, God challenged our forebears in faith to discard their preconceived notions about themselves in order to prepare them to become leaders who usher in God's kingdom. In the same way, God calls each of us to faithful lives that are unique, individual and terribly significant.

A Confession Adapted from the Colts Neck Reformed Church (2015)

We Confess to Believe:

"For it was You (God) who formed my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (Psalm 139:13-14).

We believe that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) and that God has equipped every member of the church with gifts for ministry (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). In the history of the church, some of God's people have not been welcomed and affirmed. For example, the gifts of people of certain races, of women, of divorced persons, and of those with differences of physical or mental ability have been discouraged or discounted in the service and membership of the church. We make clear our beliefs concerning the rightful inclusion of all people in the life and ministry of God's church.

In particular, we welcome and affirm people of various gender identities and sexual orientations. We understand that no one chooses their gender identity or sexual orientation, but instead we experience these identities as inherent parts of who we are as individuals.

The National LGBTQ Taskforce sponsors the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), founded by Mark Bowman and Ann B. Day. Mark is the founder of Reconciling Ministries Network (United Methodist) and Ann was the spearhead of Opening and Affirming Program (United Church of Christ), both founded in the early 1980's. These two pioneering programs were joined in cooperative efforts by More Light Presbyterians, Open and Affirming Ministries (The Christian Church/Disciples of Christ), Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, Reconciling in Christ Program (Lutheran Churches/North America), Affirming Congregation Programme (United Church of Canada) and Supportive Congregations (Brethren/Mennonite). Together they published an award-winning journal, *Open Hands*. This was followed by the publication of the study program, *Claiming the Promise*, and a volume of worship aids, *Shaping Sanctuary*. Together in 2000 they sponsored the largest gathering of welcoming church supporters ever. After the highly successful WOW 2000 gathering in Dekalb, Illinois, the

leadership of the cooperative welcoming programs decided a formal organization was needed to facilitate the growing movement. Howard Bess, an American Baptist, and Peter Barbosa, an active member of the United Church of Christ, led the effort to bring the organization into reality. IWR was incorporated in 2002 under the name Welcoming Ministries Incorporated and attained its 501(c) (3) federal tax-exempt status. A seven-person board of directors was drawn from the sponsoring welcoming programs. Six programs became the formal sponsors of IWR.

An excellent collection of worship resources (be sure to scroll all the way to the bottom) can be found at:

<http://www.welcomingresources.org/worship.xml>

The IWR page above includes a link to another collection of resources that we highly recommend called, "A Place in God's Heart... A Place at Christ's Table." A preview and a complete download are available at:

http://www.welcomingresources.org/A_Place_in_Gods_Heart.htm

Many Voices: A Black Church Movement for Gay and Transgender Justice has an excellent collection of worship resources:

<http://www.manyvoices.org/resources/?/worship/>

Out in Scripture, offered by the Human Rights Campaign, is lectionary-based resource primarily for sermon preparation, but it also includes prayers that might be suitable for worship:

<http://www.hrc.org/resources/out-in-scripture>

The United Church of Christ offers worship resources here:

<http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/lgbt/>

Music resources can be found on the Room for All website:

<https://roomforall.com/resources/room-for-all-songs/>

A song written by Mark Miller, called "I Choose Love" can be found here:

<http://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/122296683625/i-choose-love-mark-miller>

Chapter 10

Timeline of Our Classical Position

The church of Jesus Christ has a long history of failing to fully affirm the sexual orientations of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, a-sexual, queer, and the non-binary gender identities and expressions of people who identify as neither simply male or female. In the Classis of New Brunswick, awakening to our error and the pain caused by the church has been a process that has taken place over decades of pastoral experience, theological discussion, and prayerful congregational discernment. Our work has been fueled by our faithful response to repeated ecclesial litigation in the Reformed Church in America against our classis and our allies in the denomination.

Here is a **partial list** of milestones in our walk of faith, affirmation, celebration, and litigation beginning in 2003.

2003

The Buchanan Group Formed. United Methodist Pastor, C. David Buchanan (son of the Reformed Church of Linden and former pastor at The Reformed Church of Highland Park), took a tithe of his inheritance to found The Buchanan Group, an ecumenical group of pastors and scholars in association with New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey in order to advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQ people within the church. The Group developed the Holy Relationships Conference, co-hosted by First Reformed Church of New Brunswick in 2005.

2004

In January, at its stated session, two overtures were brought to classis regarding the inclusion of people who express LGBTQ identities in the life of the church. One of the overtures was approved.

Classis also agreed to:

“. . . set aside time in a stated meeting of Classis to be given to explore issues related to homosexuality: to share our experiences relative to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people, to explore the pastoral implication relative to LGBTQ people within our congregations, and to gain a better understanding of scripture, theology, and our role as a classis within RCA polity.”

In September, at its stated session, Classis approved a letter addressed to the Classis of New York encouraging them to move forward with the ordination of an openly gay NBTS seminarian, Ann Kansfield, as Minister of Word and Sacrament. While it is questionable polity to involve ourselves in the dealings of another classis, it was known that letters had gone to New York

Classis discouraging them from approving the ordination of Ann Kansfield. The letter was brought forward and approved in order to provide an alternative voice from within the Reformed Church in America.

2005

In January, the Board of Trustees of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary announced the conclusion of the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield's presidency. The Seminary affirmed the Rev. Dr. Kansfield's work and endowed the Mary and Norman Kansfield Chair in Old Testament in their honor. At the same time the board announced that the Board of Trustees reprimanded the Rev. Dr. Kansfield for taking a controversial public action while President by officiating at the same sex marriage of his daughter in Massachusetts without prior Board discussion or approval. However, in announcing the Rev. Dr. Kansfield's retirement, the board emphasized its commitment to continue the ongoing dialogue as it relates to the presence and participation of gays and lesbians in the Church. Signers of the letter affirmed a series of convictions that guided the Rev. Dr. Kansfield in his performance of his daughter's wedding and therefore affirm the place of LGBTQ people within the church of Christ.

In January, at its stated session, classis members engaged in a dialogue process around homosexuals and their place in the Church, as a result of the January 2004 motion. Topics on this day included biblical matters, personal experiences, and pastoral perspectives. Out of this arose a commitment to continue the conversation at three more stated sessions.

In spring, General Synod received charges against the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield for officiating at the same-sex marriage of his daughter, Ann Kansfield to her wife Jennifer Aull, graduates of NBTS. In response, a CNB minister prepared a letter, endorsed by at least 17 members of the Classis, entitled, "Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable, Too."

In June, at General Synod, the Rev. Dr. Norman J. Kansfield was tried and found guilty of acting "contrary to our faith and beliefs as affirmed by the Holy Scriptures and the decisions of General Synod concerning the relationships of active homosexuality, having failed to uphold the vow stating, 'I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace,' the Rev. Dr. Kansfield failed to submit himself to the counsel and admonition of the General Synod, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of my understanding of the Christian faith." General Synod voted to exercise discipline of the Rev. Dr. Kansfield by deposing him from the office of General Synod Professor of Theology and suspending him from the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

On October 16-18, "Holy Relationships: A Conference on Theology and Sexuality." Classis churches helped to sponsor this important conference, held in New Brunswick, NJ. Featured theologians and church leaders included Psychologist and Educator, Dr. David Myers, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, John Selders, Miguel De La Torre, and Mel White. The conference was sponsored in part by New Brunswick Theological Seminary, which had gained attention in January for reprimanding its then-president, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield,

and not renewing his contract after he officiated at his daughter's wedding. Asked if the seminary's participation contradicted that action, trustee Larry Williams said it is in keeping with the board's interest in "continuing conversation" and dialogue on the subject.

In December, the First Reformed Church of New Brunswick took steps to become the first of many Classis churches to establish their congregation as open and affirming. FRC New Brunswick described this historic step on their website: "Our leading board, the Consistory, received an overture signed by four women who are members of the church. The overture asked Consistory to declare the church welcoming and inclusive 'regardless of our differences in understanding particular texts of the Bible.'" It also asked for an amendment of the church's bylaws to include a statement that "candidates for the ordained offices of the church (Deacons, Elders, Pastors) will not be discriminated against on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or physical ability." This overture was preceded by several months of meetings of a task force on inclusiveness, and a congregational meeting that discussed the process of becoming open and affirming. Consistory adopted the overture, published it in the newsletter of January 2006 and invited more comments from the congregation. One month later it amended the bylaws in accordance with the overture.

2006

In September, at its stated session of Classis, the first of three dialogues on the place of LGBTQ people in the church was held. A focal point of the session was time spent at table discussions, hearing one other's voices.

2007

In January, at its stated session of Classis, the second of three dialogues took place. A focal point of this session was hearing the voices of LGBTQ people, family, and friends.

In May, at its stated session of Classis, the third of three dialogues took place. At this time, classis members were invited to submit position statements. These statements were sent out in advance of the meeting. Conversations around these statements took place at the classis meeting.

An invitation was extended to classis members to write and distribute their positions on the inclusion of LGBTQ people as well as their theological reasoning. Succinct statements of views were encouraged, no more than 15 pages, and included the implications of the positions, in order to help Classis understand how each position would impact church life. It was asked that respondents include how they would answer the following questions:

- Is "gay marriage" legitimate?
- Are "civil unions" good public policy?
- Should we ordain gays and lesbians in committed relationships?
- May committed gays and lesbians come to the Lord's table?
- Should LGBTQ people be adoptive guardians?
- May we baptize children of LGBTQ guardians?

Should LGBTQ persons be ordained as elders or deacons?
How should we respond to LGBTQ youth in our churches?

Throughout these three dialogues it was emphasized the goal was understanding and dialogue and not a judicial process.

2011

The Reformed Church of Metuchen, 150 Lake Ave, Metuchen, NJ 08840, www.rcmetuchen.org joined the Room for All roster of Open and Affirming Churches at:

<https://roomforall.com/welcoming-and-affirming-congregations/roster-of-affirming-congregations-in-the-rca/>

Other Classis churches that have joined the Room for All roster include:

- Colts Neck Reformed Church (2015), 72 County Rd 537, Colts Neck, NJ 07722
www.coltsneckreformed.org/
- Reformed Church of Highland Park (2007), 19-21 S 2nd Ave, Highland Park, NJ 08904
www.rchighlandpark.org
- Community Church of Keyport, Warren St, P.O. Box 562, Keyport, NJ 07735
www.communitychurchofkeyportnj.org
- Middletown Reformed Church, 121 Kings Hwy (2016), Middletown, NJ 07748
www.mrchurch.us
- First Reformed Church of New Brunswick (2005), 9 Bayard St, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
www.firstreformedchurch.net
- Second Reformed Church of New Brunswick, 100 College Ave, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
www.secondreformednb.org

On September 28, 2011, the Classis received into its membership the Rev. Dr. Ursula Cargill, and ordained her to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

On November 4, 2011, a complaint was filed with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic Synod against CNB by CNB ministers David W. deForest, Ben Lin, Allan Conover, Samir Youssef, and Mark Vander Meer. It alleged, among other things, that the Rev. Dr. Cargill “is a practicing homosexual” and that the action of the Classis “is contrary to the teaching of Scripture on the matter of homosexual practice, and in violation of the stated position of the RCA as expressed over the last three decades which affirms that the practice of a homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture. It is inappropriate that a person living a homosexual lifestyle should hold office in the RCA.” On May 5, 2012, the Regional Synod, acting on the findings and recommendations of its Judicial Business Committee, voted to “to confirm the action of the Classis of New Brunswick.”

2013

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to repeal its 2012 reaffirmation that “homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures, and therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense.” MGS 2013 p. 176-7, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2013MGS-Overtures.pdf>

- In June, GS adopted this overture in part, acknowledging that it usurped the authority of the classes.

On May 21, the Appellants in Lin and deForest appealed the action by the Mid-Atlantics Synod to the RCA’s Commission of Judicial Business (CJB). The CJB stated: “Based upon the record before us, which we find incomplete, particularly because of the lack of any scriptural argument to rebut the position of the Appellants, the commission believes that Scripture has been put aside in the Synod’s review of the New Brunswick Classis’s examination of the Rev. Dr. Cargill. Given the incomplete record before us, the commission believes our polity is best served by returning the case to the Mid-Atlantics Synod and requesting the Synod to reconsider this case according to the findings herein.”

- GS 2013 voted on the appeal of “Lin and deForest” to remand the decision of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics for further hearing to resolve whether the Classis of New Brunswick properly examined and approved the installation of the Rev. Dr. Cargill, giving full recognition to the importance of Scripture as central to the faith and life of an ordained minister of Word and sacrament.

2014

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to state publicly that throughout the Reformed Church in America, classes, churches, theologians, and members hold a wide array of positions about same-sex relationships; and to confirm that the constitution of the RCA includes no statement about same-sex marriage and to re-emphasize Christ’s love in all human relationships.

MGS 2014, pgs. 133-4, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2014MGS-Complete.pdf>

- In June, GS2014 denied this overture.

In April, CNB’s Justice and Mercy Committee participated in a community workshop led by the Reformed Church of Metuchen called, “Jesus Christ in the LGBTQ Community: An Open Conversation.” The goal was to transform area churches and people’s hearts into places where our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are received and affirmed as equal members of the body of Christ. Presenters included members of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Metuchen; Marilyn Paarlberg, Room-for-All workshops & DVD series, *Body & Soul*; James V. Brownson Ph. D., Western Theological Seminary, author of *Bible, Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*; Michael C. LaSala Ph.D., Rutgers School of Social Work, author of *Coming Out: Coming Home*.

On the “Lin and deForest” complaint:

- Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics again found that the Rev. Dr. Cargill had been properly examined and denied the charge.
- Complainants Lin and deForest appealed the ruling to General Synod.

In December, CNB submitted a supplement to its defense of the transfer of the Rev. Dr. Ursula Cargill into our classis, pleading that General Synod statements and reports are not constitutional and therefore do not restrict the classes, citing a report of the Commission on Church Order, adopted by General Synod 2014, that stated that statements and papers of General Synod are binding on GS staff, but not on the classes, its ministers and congregations who are bound only by the constitution of the RCA.

2015

In January, CNB voted to send two overtures to GS2015. The first, asking GS to proclaim God’s Sovereignty over Personal Identity, was referred to the Special Council on Human Sexuality. The second overture request was that Synod denounce the RCA’s ongoing support for reparative therapy, and in the meantime to remove all references to reorientation/reparative therapy from the RCA website. Then, upon that committee’s report, this overture was subsequently adopted by GS2016.

MGS 2015 pages 83-89 <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2015MGS-Overtures.pdf>

- GS2015 removed all references and papers that advocated for reparative therapy from its public Web pages.
- GS adopted a recommendation to denounce reparative therapy, after the Committee on Christian Action submitted a report based on this overture.

In May, at its stated session, CNB adopted its welcoming statement and introduced its non-discrimination bylaw.

CNB Welcoming Statement: "As Classis of New Brunswick, we affirm the great diversity of God’s creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."
(adopted at 5/27/15 Stated Session)

CNB BYLAW 3: The Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church, Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. (Approved on 5/27/15, adopted on 9/26/2015).

In June, after nearly two hours in judicial session, GS2015 affirmed the role of the classis in receiving ministers of Word and sacrament into membership. The ruling was a response to the “Lin and deForest” complaint. Synod ruled to affirm the decision of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, which affirmed the action of CNB in receiving the Rev. Dr. Cargill into membership.

Because the matter was filed as a procedural complaint against an assembly and not as a charge against an individual, neither the synod nor the Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) was provided with evidence about the Rev. Dr. Cargill’s lifestyle. On questions of whether she is celibate or “practicing,” the CJB report noted that in RCA polity the classis is charged with the supervision of its enrolled ministers and is the only assembly in close enough relationship with each individual minister to make definitive judgments concerning character and morality:

“It is only the local classis that is fully capable of discerning the theology, life, and moral character of a particular minister so as to determine whether he or she is fit for ministry. By the time a judicial case reaches the General Synod it is often so far removed from the facts on the ground that the prospect of supplanting the reasoned view of a local classis with our own determination is troubling.”

In presenting the CJB report to delegates, commission member Jonathan Gundlach said the seven voting members of the commission hold differing perspectives on the subject of same-sex relationships. Yet, they were unanimous in affirming that procedural requirements were followed. “Our recommendation is not a moral affirmation of the position of New Brunswick on the matter,” Gundlach told delegates. “Several on the commission would not want to affirm the position. The decision is rooted in our polity.”

An amendment to CJB’s original recommendation proved helpful to delegates who struggled to reconcile the judicial procedure with the RCA’s stated position that homosexual practice is sinful and contrary to Scripture: “This affirmation only affirms that the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics followed the procedural requirements of the *Book of Church Order*.”

- GS2015 approved the amended recommendation 134-77.
- Though the Commission on Judicial Business was swayed by CNB’s arguments from polity, they pointed to the fact that CNB provided scant theological and scriptural support.

In September, President Hartmut Kramer-Mills formed an ad hoc committee to address theological issues as they arise in the life of Classis, including the committee’s first issue: the full inclusion and affirmation of people who do not conform to heterosexual and gender binary norms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, and queer people (LGBTIAQ, shortened to LGBTQ in this report).

2016

On June 14, a vigil to remember the victims of the Orlando, Florida, nightclub shooting early Sunday was conducted on a Tuesday night in the borough of Highland Park at the Reformed Church of Highland Park social hall, organized by the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale and the Rev. Stephanie Kaper-Dale, the church's co-pastors, and Pandora Scooter, co-chair of The Pride Center of New Jersey's LGBTQ social justice group. A vigil also was held the night before.

In summer, Classis formed a committee to investigate the benefits of dual-affiliation with the United Church of Christ, in light of the RCA's increasing enforcement of the position of its majority on homosexuality, ordination of openly gay ministers, and same-sex marriage.

2017

CNB congregations voted to seek dual-affiliation with the UCC.

2018

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to affirm that LGBTQ persons are fully included and welcomed in the offices, commissions, positions, synods, classes, consistories, ministries, and operations of the Reformed Church in America. The main reason stated was that the purpose of the Reformed Church as stated in the *Preamble* of the *Book of Church Order* reads, "The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works." The meaning of the word "all," necessarily includes LGBTQ people.

- GS2017 denied the overture, deferring it to the work of its 20/20 Vision Team.

In November, at a United Church of Christ congregation in Cedar Grove, dual affiliation was celebrated among some CNB churches. Two and a half years earlier, churches in the Classis started exploring opportunities to connect with the United Church of Christ. This decision was driven by serious disappointment over the direction of our RCA denomination, in terms of their ongoing General Synod statements on homosexuality being sin.

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Appendices

Changing Views on Scripture

As Reformed Christians, we approach scripture with reverence, trusting that the God whom we encounter in faith is beyond the limitations of the written word. Our relationship with God, mediated through the word, is dynamic and guided by the Spirit. Within scripture, in the history of the ancient church, and in the contemporary church our understanding of God's work in the world, God's desire for us, and God's desired response from us has developed with the guidance of the Spirit. Scripture mediates our encounter with God through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In different times and places the Holy Spirit has led God's people to new interpretations of scripture and new ways of faithfully walking with God.

Scripture tells the story of the relationship between God and God's people. Within scripture itself we find that faithful responses to God have varied in different times and places. For Adam and Eve, a faithful response meant not eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Noah's faithful response was building an ark. Abraham's faithful response was stepping out time and time again based on God's promise. For Moses and the Israelites, the ten commandments became central to their faithful response. The prophets reminded God's people the desire of God's heart was for humanity, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8b) Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, "love one another." (John 15:12) The early church expanded from a Jewish enclave to a ministry that welcomed gentiles. The Holy Spirit has guided communities to varied faithful responses in circumstances as unique and varied as God's creation.

Within scripture itself human circumstance and divine expectations in conversation led God to alter what was required of God's people. The book of Numbers records the story of Abraham's descendants being shaped into God's people prior to entering the promised land. God's expected faithful response was renegotiated between the first and second generation of freed Israelites. Initially, inheritance of the land was the exclusive right of sons. Because Zelophehad died without a male heir his daughters came forward and objected to the inheritance laws. They asked, "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?" (Numbers 27:4) Moses took their concern to the Lord and the Lord revised what was allowed among God's holy people, and the daughters of Zelophehad inherited land. Before the first draft of the laws are put into practice, the laws were adapted to the needs of a second generation of Israelites. Dennis Olson, in his commentary on *Numbers* reflects on what is different in this new generation of God's people. He writes: "The new generation honors the tradition of the old generation. But they seek to be faithful to that tradition through a process of dialogue, compromise, and negotiation, whereby new circumstances and factors may be accommodated in a spirit of obedience and creativity. The tradition is not a dead letter but a

living spirit.”³⁸ (Olson, 1989, p. 192-193) Even in the days of Moses we learn that the practice of our faith is guided toward new responses through faithful dialogue between human need and God’s expectations.

In the life of the early church we discover that the Holy Spirit challenged and expanded what it meant to be God’s holy people. Peter, while experiencing a heavenly vision, resisted a call to touch food that was once called unclean. A voice stated, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15) The Spirit called Peter to a new understanding of God’s expectations, and he proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to a “profane” gentile soldier occupying the promised land. Recognizing the gospel of Christ had been proclaimed and received, and flourished among gentiles, the Jerusalem Council wrestled with what God required of a faithful people in a diverse multi-cultural environment. The Jewish Christians speaking about the gentile converts recognized “that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:11) An unclean gentile people and the chosen people of the law were both understood to be saved by grace, not by works of the law. As Paul tells us in Galatians 2:21, “if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” The Holy Spirit led the early church to a new understanding of the practice of their faith as human need and God’s call remained in dialogue.

Church history tells us that our understanding of scripture has changed as God’s call and human need have remained in dialogue. The role of women in the church has changed. There was a time when it was not permissible for women to preach and teach in the church. Recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in calling women to ministry, equipping women for ministry, and ministering through women, the church recognizes the gifts of women for ordained ministry.³⁹

For much of church history, Christians who divorced—even those who bore little responsibility for their divorce and who worked to prevent it—were told that they should not remarry but should remain single and celibate until their former spouse died. Those who did remarry were often marginalized or expelled from their churches as they were judged to be living in adultery (Mt. 19:9, Mt. 5:31-32, Rom. 7:2-3, 1 Cor. 7:10-11). In recent decades, much of the church has changed its views on remarriage. It is not that divorce is viewed as a good thing, or even as a trivial thing. But the church has also seen the good that can emerge in the lives of some individuals through remarriage—good for them as individuals, good for their children and extended families, and good for their ability to serve God’s kingdom.

Interracial marriage was opposed for centuries by many Christians who interpreted Scripture to support their views (Gen. 28:1, 2 Cor. 6:14). As the suffering caused by racism became more visible to the church as a whole,

³⁸ Dennis T. Olson, *Interpretation: Numbers* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996) 192-193.

³⁹ see footnote 35

simultaneously, Christians began to see more examples of the good that came from interracial marriages—good within families, good within the churches, and good within society as a whole.⁴⁰

Scripture, traditions, memories, and experience tell us our God is a living God, and our living God invites new ways of living faithfully. Responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit includes an openness to reconsider our practice based on deeper values and convictions embedded within God's relationship with humanity. In light of this, New Brunswick Classis has re-examined dominant teachings about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people within Christ's church. Within our context in this time and place "we affirm the great diversity of God's creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."⁴¹

Scripture and Moral Discernment:

Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches

Background and Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2010, the Formula of Agreement churches experienced notable controversy and dissent over issues involving human sexuality and church order. Disagreement over these matters is not new and occurs within most Christian bodies. The character of this controversy, however, raised significant questions more generally about the viability, focus, and function of the Formula of Agreement itself as different partners took a range of approaches to these questions. As Formula partners reflected together on these issues, several expressed interest in initiating a conversation centered ecumenically and broadly on the use of Scripture in moral discernment. The need for this conversation involved not only issues of sexuality, but reached more broadly. The practice of scriptural interpretation in moral discernment stands at the heart of many of the controversies faced in Formula of Agreement churches, and that

⁴⁰ *Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage*, January 2016, p. 15.

⁴¹ The **1975** General Synod stated that: Where the one flesh relationship has been irreconcilably shattered, there one has divorce (*de facto*) and it must be recognized. In fact, where a marriage has been destroyed, the Christian community may even counsel severance to prevent further damage to persons involved.

question had not been directly and comprehensively addressed in previous Formula of Agreement conversations.

In the summer of 2010, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America voted to invite Formula partners to join in a conversation on these issues and all agreed: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. These partners also invited three additional communions to participate and offer their insights on the topic due to close working relationships with members of the Formula of Agreement churches: the Christian Reformed Church in North America; the Moravian Church in North America, Northern and Southern Provinces; and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. Each of the Formula of Agreement churches sent a specialist in Bible, one in Christian ethics, and an ecumenical officer to the consultation. Several experienced pastors contributed as well. Other communions sent one or more representatives who could bring their own distinctive perspectives and experiences to the table. The goal was not necessarily to produce a statement to which all denominations would subscribe, but rather to explore common ground that would strengthen the capacity of churches to walk together in relationships of mutual affirmation and admonition around these issues and questions. This document is the result of these efforts.

As the conversation worked through a wide range of issues in three meetings (fall of 2011 to fall of 2012), those of us gathered in consultation discovered several things. First, we discovered that we had significant areas of substantial agreement, as well as areas where we used different language and took account of distinctive emphases and questions. We also discovered a deep resonance between debates inside our various communions and those among ecumenical partners. In engaging each other ecumenically, we also were engaging the variety of perspectives often found within our own communions.

Most importantly we discovered in greater depth and richness the bonds that unite us to each other. These discoveries are reflected in the major sections comprising the remainder of this document.

- The first section articulates our shared commitment as followers of Jesus.
- The second section explores our shared commitment to embrace the testimony and guidance of Scripture in our lives.
- The third section probes our shared commitment to shape our moral discernment, both individually and collectively, in ways informed by salutary practices under the guidance of the Spirit.

In the pages that follow, we bear witness to these discoveries. It is our hope and prayer that in offering these pages to our various communions, the unity of the church will increase and our capacity will grow in the use of Scripture for deepening our moral discernment.

“Jesus Is Lord” as the Starting Point for the Use of Scripture in Moral Discernment

As ecumenical partners discussing the use of Scripture in Christian life, we quickly identified a common theme that emerged in many of our denominations’ decision-making processes, particularly in areas of complex moral and ethical discernment. That common theme focuses on our shared reception of God’s gracious salvation in Jesus Christ, mediated through Word and sacrament, which awakens in all of us a recital of the core Christian confession, “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3). This confession is a central Christian response to the call of God’s grace, around which our unity is most clearly evident. This shared experience and confession also provides the common foundation for our various processes of moral discernment. We recognize each other as ecumenical partners, first and foremost, because we are co-recipients of the same grace, and therefore follow the same Lord, witnessed in the same Scriptures, whose reign encompasses every arena of our lives.

Together we recognize and affirm that the confession “Jesus is Lord” occupies a central place in the core theological frameworks that shape our use of Scripture in moral discernment. As this confession functioned in the first century, so it functions today. It is both an expression of resistance against the powers that enslave human life (“Jesus—not Caesar—is Lord”) and an expression of an allegiance that transcends all others (“We must obey God rather than human beings” Acts 5:29).

This confession grounds our moral decision-making because it stands at the heart of the witness of Scripture itself. This confession also provides a broad context or disposition that shapes all our attempts to interpret Scripture in ways that can inform our moral lives. It becomes a critical point of orientation in the application of Scripture to complex contemporary questions. The authentic and deep recognition of the Lordship of Christ in every area of our lives constitutes the goal of all our attempts at moral living. These considerations shape, in important ways, how we read and apply Scripture to our lives. They provide a positive criterion to center our moral interpretation of Scripture, and a boundary marker that warns against any attempts to interpret Scripture in ways that conflict with this confession.

We also can be more specific about the ways in which this confession shapes the moral life of Christians. To say that Jesus the Savior is Lord is to say that human beings stand in need of salvation, that they are alienated from the love and justice of God. It is to say that the person and work of Jesus Christ is the means by which God intends to set both our lives and the whole world right again. To make this confession is to recognize that creation and human history do not proceed in random fashion. Rather, this confession looks in hope toward that time when Christ will be the judge and redeemer of the whole creation, restoring the cosmos to God’s intention.

To say that Jesus is Lord is to become his disciples, living by his example and teaching, and centering our moral vision in his dual command to love God and to love our neighbor as the fulfillment of the whole law. This confession leads us to trust continually in Christ’s gracious

mercy when we fail to follow Christ as we should. For some of us, to say that Jesus is Lord is to acknowledge the place of both the gospel and the law, a recognition that transforms how we engage ethical and moral questions. Others of us are more cautious about differentiating gospel from law too sharply but agree that the lordship of Christ provides the proper context within which to address these questions.

For all of us, to embrace the confession “Jesus is Lord” is to embrace in hope an upside-down world in which the crucified one is exalted. It is to accept, in trust, that life is found by giving it away. It is to accept, in faith, that God is at work where the lowly are lifted up, the sick are healed, the outsiders are welcomed, and agents of oppression are brought low. To confess Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge him as the one through whom all things have come into being (John 1:3), the one by whom all things are reconciled (Colossians 1:20), and the one in whom all things find their fulfillment in God’s redemptive purpose (Ephesians 1:10). This is the grand narrative framework within which we seek to exercise moral discernment and the end toward which our moral effort is rightly oriented.

Indeed, the confession “Jesus is Lord” and the Christian commitment to Scripture are intimately interwoven with each other. We embrace the Hebrew Scriptures and the apostolic testimony of the New Testament because of their unique place in bearing witness to God’s purpose, culminating in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Together, we celebrate and affirm this testimony, and seek God’s grace to live into it more deeply. But as we remember why we embrace Scripture, we also are guided in how the Word of God comes to bear upon our lives in processes of moral discernment, never divorced from the context of following Jesus.

We share the common conviction that the confession “Jesus is Lord” needs to be heard and lived out in the context of a robust Trinitarian faith. To confess Jesus as Lord is the central and most important step toward the great confessions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which recognize one God in three persons. As we seek to discern how our shared confession of the Lordship of Christ must inform our interpretation of Scripture in making moral decisions, we agree that we must be informed by the leading and experience of the Holy Spirit, who continues to guide us into all the implications of Christ’s embodiment of God’s mission to the world (cf. John 14:25 ff.). Moreover, these explorations must be informed also by the will and purpose of the Triune God, revealed in Scripture and discernible to the eyes of faith in the texture and fabric of the creation itself.

These profound areas of agreement do not always lead us to complete agreement on specific moral issues. Differing emphases and different perceptions, both of the Spirit’s leading and of the will of God as it is revealed in the created order to the eyes of faith, help to frame and interpret many of the differences in how we use Scripture in making moral decisions.

For example, disputes over the church’s response to committed, same-sex intimate relationships can be viewed through this lens. Some Christians point to what they believe is the work of the Spirit in disciplining and sanctifying these relationships. They believe the Spirit is bringing them under the Lordship of Christ as we live toward the new creation to which Scripture

bears witness, fulfilling the old creation in wonderful and surprising ways. Other Christians object that their understanding of the Creator's will and purpose manifested in the created order necessarily excludes such relationships from the Lordship of Christ. They point instead to the transforming power of the Spirit to bring lives into conformity with what they see as God's original created purpose for human life. Still other Christians view this disagreement through the lens of law and gospel, regarding the disagreement as arising outside of core gospel affirmations. In these disputes it is often difficult to sort out the boundaries between Scriptural interpretation, perceptions of the leading of the Spirit, and one's construal of God's self-revelation in the created order.

We see similar patterns of difference in ecumenical dialogue surrounding other areas involving the interpretation of Scripture in moral discernment. These areas include, for example, a Christian vision for economics, the interplay between justice and freedom, and the appropriate Christian use of the legal codes of the Hebrew Scriptures. Our common experience in conversation has demonstrated that deeply shared affirmations of Christ's Lordship and the foundational testimony of Scripture do not in themselves guarantee consensus on particular moral judgments. We are keenly aware of a divergence of opinion on contested issues among sincere Christians both within and between our various churches.

These disagreements are often real, substantive, and painful. They need not, however, prevent Christians from recognizing each other as authentic followers of Jesus. Those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord remember how Jesus prayed that his followers would be "perfected into one" (John 17:23). Jesus' prayer makes it clear that this visible unity of Christ's disciples is the central means "by which the world may know" that Jesus has been uniquely sent by God. This unity among Christians is a reality we share as followers of one Lord and, at the same time, a goal toward which we strive in obedience to that one Lord. We are common recipients of God's mercy in Christ, and we therefore share the same confession, "Jesus is Lord." We share a common and ecumenically affirmed Trinitarian framework of understanding that shapes in profound ways our moral commitments even amidst our differences. We share a common Scripture that forms our imaginations, inspires our discipleship, and guides our lives and witness. These common frames of reference help to shape and inform our continued dialogue and engagement when we encounter differences in understanding of Scripture and its relationship to Christian moral living.

We are convinced that the more deeply we embrace the core confession, "Jesus is Lord," in the context of a robust faith in the Creator and a deep reliance upon the leading of the Holy Spirit, the more deeply we shall find our common ground in the use of Scripture in moral discernment and move toward deeper insight and consensus. Our shared confession of Christ's Lordship kindles the hope that a deeper moral understanding, a more profound obedience, and a richer unity still lie before us. Indeed, we believe that dialogue over our ecumenical differences in moral discernment can be, in God's design, the occasion where the church is led more deeply into all the truth that God intends to reveal to us.

Interpreting Scripture in Moral Discernment

We receive Scripture as a gift from God, mediated to us by our forebears in the faith. The Holy Spirit, active in its writing and transmission, remains at work in the church that reads and hears Scripture. Our reading of Scripture has, as its primary subject, God and God's gracious ways in the world, central to which are the life, death, resurrection, and saving grace of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Through it we come to know, love, and serve the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Scripture invites us into the long and ongoing history of God's creative, reconciling, and redemptive work with humanity and all of creation. We celebrate the manifold settings in which we encounter it, including personal devotions, group study, common worship, and theological discernment. Scripture's authority and normative status reside in its Spirit-given capacity to form, instruct, and challenge the people of God, an authority demonstrated when the church encounters the living Word of God. The church encounters the words of life in Scripture, as the Holy Spirit calls, sustains, empowers, guides, reforms, admonishes, comforts, queries, critiques, and inspires the people of God.

We acknowledge that Scripture does not always shed direct light on contemporary questions, but it always illumines our Christian vocation. As individuals and in community, we confess that Scripture shapes and forms our identity, our imagination, our language, and our moral development.

Scripture is best read and understood in community, in conversation with other followers of Jesus across time and around the world. While disagreement in interpretation sometimes requires loving critique and dialogue as the church moves toward greater clarity, diversity in interpretation is often a gift from the Holy Spirit. As we read in community with each other, we gratefully claim its power to speak to us and to shape us in diverse times, places, and cultural contexts. Just as we each have differing gifts of the Spirit, that Spirit graces our ecclesial traditions and individual lives with different gifts of interpretation. These different ways of hearing and understanding it do not diminish but often enrich our shared biblical heritage. This is not surprising because, as Scripture itself attests, God speaks to the community of faith in diverse times and ways (Hebrews 1:1). For instance, we cherish four Gospels, not one. When we read and understand Scripture in different ways, our common engagement with it nourishes our relationship of mutual affirmation and admonition, a commitment that demonstrates the Bible's authority in communities of flesh and blood. Scripture continues to speak to us in fresh ways, addressing unanticipated contexts and kindling ongoing and common reformation.

Scripture is always and necessarily interpreted. Whenever anyone reads the Bible, he or she always brings a framework of interpretation, whether recognized fully or not. While some want to believe that Scripture can be read at face value, more is always involved in discerning its truth. Sometimes these frameworks of interpretation are constructive and necessary, arising from original language research, confessional frameworks, historical reconstructions, Christian experience, and our location within broad Christian traditions. Sometimes they are unhelpful,

springing from prejudice, limited experience, or narrowness of vision. No theory of inspiration, no method of interpretation, provides in itself unmediated access to divine wisdom.

The Spirit continues to lead us into all the truth of Scripture, but the fullness of this leading ordinarily comes to those who persistently seek to deepen their grasp of Scripture in conversation with all of God's people, over time, as the church continually reforms itself according to the Word of God. At the same time, to say that we all always interpret the Bible does not imply that all interpretations are equally valid. We therefore treasure relationships of mutual affirmation and critique. With humility, we rely on the Holy Spirit to work in and through us as we read it in community.

Moral discernment in the light of Scripture calls forth both devotion and art. We read the Bible with the understanding that every passage was written in a particular genre and for a specific audience, time, and place. Scripture's meaning for us is not limited to what it meant in its original contexts, nor can its meaning be entirely sundered from those contexts. The dynamics of Scripture as a word from God at particular times and places open our imaginations for discipleship in our particular time and place. Faithful interpretation includes attention to text and translation, to literary form and genre, to larger literary contexts and rhetorical aims, and to social and historical contexts ancient and contemporary. We pray for humility, trusting God's grace to foster repentance, reconciliation, and life where we may err.

Rarely does a single verse, phrase, or passage from the Bible constitute an adequate guide for moral discernment. Even less often does Scripture directly dictate specific approaches to matters of public deliberation. Rather, every passage and phrase stands within the entire wisdom and arc of Scripture. In seeking to understand God's Word to us in Scripture, all of us acknowledge the church's ancient wisdom regarding the rule of faith and the rule of love toward God and neighbor. We also honor the distinctive criteria to which our respective traditions appeal. Whether these traditions begin with an appeal to law and gospel, salvation history, or the teachings of Jesus Christ in framing moral discernment, their wisdom guides response to Scripture and informs our ecumenical conversation.

We affirm that the sciences and other contemporary sources of wisdom can illuminate our reading of Scripture. We affirm that scriptural interpretation occurs in the flow of human experience. We acknowledge among our respective communions' diverse heritages, practices, and traits regarding how we take account of science, experience, and other contemporary wisdom in the reading of Scripture. We agree that Scripture grants us wisdom for understanding, appreciating, and questioning contemporary assumptions and experience.

Turning to Scripture for moral vision and ethical guidance at once calls forth and nurtures Christian character and virtue. Discerning God's will among the pressing moral issues of the day requires the fruit of the Spirit. Through God's grace, those gifts come alive in our practice of mutual affirmation and admonition.

In the midst of diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Scripture, we rejoice in Christ's promise that the Holy Spirit will continue to work in and through the church, drawing the community of Christ's followers into fuller appropriations of the truth (John 16:13).

Practicing Moral Discernment in Christian Community

Life in community is never easy and the Christian community is no exception. While we may say, "They will know we are Christians by our love," too often we fall short of that adage despite our best efforts. This is particularly true when one considers the process of moral discernment in the Christian community. Experience and time have taught us that successful moral discernment is as much about the process of discerning as it is about the outcome. The process needs to be intentional, thoughtful, grounded in trust, and guided by mutually agreed upon guidelines and practices. The process of moral discernment must be rooted in the rule of love and in the call of all Christians to be "reconcilers in Christ" (Matthew 22:36-40 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

The church's unity in Christ is a gift of God that calls us forward to seek relationships of reconciliation and trust with one another. Such relationships are essential for any process of discernment. In moral discernment we rely upon the church's unity in Christ because we all see through a mirror dimly and all of us rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Sometimes trust springs from hope rather than experience. At times the horizon of trust seems extremely distant, particularly when injustice and ill will have fractured the fellowship of Christ's body. Differentials of power, particularly when they are not clearly identified, can subvert unity and trust. Together we commit ourselves to nurture repentance, unmask injustice, seek reconciliation, and build trust and mutual respect.

Building trust requires time and commitment to shared values, including the Lordship of Jesus Christ and Scripture's foundational role for the life of the church. It also requires attention to practices that foster mutual respect, fairness, inclusion, and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A number of common practices contribute to the building of trust and the enterprise of moral discernment. Specifically, we would encourage the following practices: prayer and worship, articulating statements of common ground, negotiating ground rules and practices, and determining the exact nature and status of disagreement. These all can take on a different tone or character from one tradition to another. Despite the diversity among various communions, each provides structure and context to facilitate moral discernment in difficult and charged situations.

Prayer and Worship. A context of prayer and worship situates our moral discernment in relationship to God. God calls together the Christian community, and prayer and worship are primary contexts for Christian community. Authentic worship is not a means to an end; it keeps us ever mindful of God's presence in and through us and our neighbors. Worship reminds us

that we all stand as individuals accountable before God. Worship and prayer should permeate the process of moral discernment.

Articulating Statements of Common Ground. When we gather in conversation, we remind ourselves of the already-proclaimed beliefs and values that we hold in common. We remind ourselves that everyone present is a Christian who adheres to common beliefs and values that bind the community together. Chief among these beliefs and values is that everyone present takes the Scriptures seriously. In the heat of discussion, it is all too easy to accuse others of being less than fully Christian. An agreed upon list of common beliefs and values, or community-forming practices, prominently displayed, serves to frame the conversation for everyone.

Negotiating Ground Rules and Practices. Christian moral discernment calls us to create a climate of civility. Establishing ground rules helps communities to move beyond the faulty assumption that everyone shares a common approach to conversations that involve strongly held beliefs and opinions. We cultivate a common understanding of what a climate of civility looks like and what behaviors foster healthy conversation. These understandings may vary from setting to setting and from context to context. Different types of conversations may call for different ground rules. A clear set of ground rules, tailored for the purpose and context of the discussion, promotes healthy and beneficial conversation. Ground rules may include processes for discernment, the use of silence, and the need for periodic prayer and reflection. Communities may further consider the roles some individuals may play in facilitation, calling the body to prayer, and other contributions to the process.

Determining the Exact Nature and Status of Disagreement. The body of Christ gathers for discernment at multiple levels, including small groups, local congregations and communities, regional, national, and global denominational assemblies, and ecumenical gatherings. When disagreement occurs, participants often hold divergent understandings concerning what exactly lies in dispute. Moreover, some discussions may lead to specific action, including legislative action, while others do not. In all settings we find it helpful to clarify the nature and status of the matter at hand.

Among the many approaches available to them, communities should seek those methods best suited to the purpose and context of the discussion. Discussions that may result in legislative action may require one set of methods and ground rules, while non-legislative discussions may call for another. In some instances we may conduct a non-legislative discussion prior to moving into legislative session to allow for types of conversation not usually found in a legislative setting, a process that may occur within one day or over a period of several years. When issues have grown contentious, communities will seek criteria for assessing whether an issue rises to the level at which participants regard faithfulness to the gospel to be at stake and how seriously the issue at hand jeopardizes Christian fellowship. We extend every effort to maintain visible unity in Christ and the bond of peace.

Conclusion

Since the advent of the Christian church, the use of Scripture in moral discernment has resulted both in joyful confessions of common faith and in painful struggles in areas of dissent. This is still the case today. Yet we have hope.

We have hope because by the grace of the Triune God we are made members of the body of Christ and thus of one another. While maintaining the wisdom of our various traditions as guided by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, we are empowered by this grace to enter into ecumenical dialogue that enriches each of our confessions.

We have hope because those of us who gathered in consultation quickly discovered that the Formula of Agreement churches and those other churches with whom we have consulted share significant points of consonance and commonalities in our ecumenical expression of Christian faith and practice. Together, we were able to articulate some of the affirmations that marked our common ground and guided our deliberations.

We affirm together that salvation is an unmerited gift of God's grace and favor, received by faith alone apart from any consideration of human righteousness.

We affirm together that so-called "cheap grace" falls short of God's intention for our new life in Christ. We understand cheap grace to be "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, chapter 1).

We affirm together that the church must be prepared to stand over against the values and mores of popular culture when those values conflict with the call of Christ.

We affirm together that God's call from Scripture rings through contemporary life with an invitation to work for justice and the rights of the oppressed.

We affirm together that God's claim upon human beings includes the call to honor God in the sphere of bodily life, including our sexuality. "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We affirm together that the claim of Christian love includes loving admonition and mutual up-building in faithfulness among the members of Christ's body.

We have hope because, in mutual discernment and admonition grounded in worship and prayer, Formula of Agreement churches have found that our diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Scripture challenge and mutually enrich our ongoing communion. We bear witness that, in regular, broad-based, ecumenical conversation, we are given glimpses of that day when we will all understand fully the will of God, even as we have been fully understood,

that day when all of creation will be redeemed and reconciled to God through Christ Jesus our Lord (1 Corinthians 13; Romans 5:10).

In this hope we claim our shared confession, “Jesus is Lord.” This confession rests at the heart of Christian theology and shapes our use of Scripture for moral discernment. This confession calls us to live as citizens of heaven within the God-beloved world, knowing that this call will sometimes put us at odds with the ways of the world. Shared affirmations of Christ’s Lordship do not in themselves guarantee consensus on particular moral judgments; our disagreements can be real, substantive, and painful. Yet we believe that dialogue concerning our ecumenical differences in the context of our common confession and Scriptures can be an occasion for God to lead the whole church more deeply toward living into our radical confession of Christ’s Lordship.

In this hope, we embrace the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament as foundational to our understanding of God’s creative, reconciling, and redemptive work with humanity and all of creation and to our life together under the Lordship of Christ. We all strive to interpret Scripture faithfully, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its interpretation requires attention to text and translation, to literary form and genre, to larger literary contexts and rhetorical aims, and to social and historical contexts ancient and contemporary. Faithful interpreters relying on the Holy Spirit may reach differing conclusions, and these differences may lead to conflict. Yet we celebrate the call to read Scripture in community and in conversation with followers of Christ around the world. We honor the distinctive criteria to which our respective traditions appeal, even as we wrestle with the different interpretations at which we may arrive. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, God uses Scripture to strengthen the church’s moral vision, obedience, character, and its varied expressions of our common Christian vocation.

In this hope, we celebrate that the body of Christ enters into intentional times of moral discernment for the mutual affirmation and admonition of the believers (Romans 12:1-2). To be effective, this process of moral discernment must be intentional, thoughtful, grounded in trust, and guided by mutually agreed upon guidelines and practices.

Christian moral discernment is shaped by guidelines such as the affirmations above, the rule of love, and the call of all Christians to be “reconcilers in Christ” (Matthew 22:36-40; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). It is strengthened by regular prayer and worship. It is guided by the intentional articulation of our common beliefs and honest, ongoing negotiation of rules for us

life together. It is bounded by a clear determination of the nature and status of our disagreement, remembering our common call to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). It is careful not to turn unexamined differences of power and privilege into an opportunity for injustice. In Christian moral discernment, God calls the church to nurture repentance, unmask injustice, seek reconciliation, and build trust and mutual respect.

In this hope, we commend this document for use in the wider Christian family, whether gathered as a handful of members of a local parish or in global, ecumenical assembly. We hope that it will contribute to the deepening of our shared communion, both within and beyond the Formula of Agreement churches. Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we hope that this document will strengthen the use of Scripture in moral discernment. We hope that the body of Christ may be nurtured in Christian practice and virtue, continue to live together in mutual affirmation and admonition, and press on to know, love, and serve our Triune God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God alone be glory

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