Dear Reader:

This report from the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage is available to the CRC congregations and classes for discussion and careful review. Included in the following are both a majority and minority report from the committee.

All responses to this report must be in the form of an Overture or Communication to Synod 2016. Such documents must be processed through a church council and then classis and received by the Office of Synodical Services by March 15 in order to be on synod's agenda.

If you have any questions regarding proper procedures, please contact the executive director of the CRCNA or refer to the "Rules for Synodical Procedure" (pp. 7-9) available on the Synod Resources site: www.crcna.org/SynodResources.

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Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage (majority report)

Outline of the report

I. Introduction

For the first 150 years of its existence, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) ministered within a social context and a legal environment that agreed with the church's theological understanding of marriage as a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman. That situation is no longer the case. Civil governments, via legislative action in Canada and constitutional interpretation by the Supreme Court in the United States, have altered the *legal* definition of marriage so as to allow marriage between two persons irrespective of gender. From a *civil* standpoint, marriage may now involve partners of the same sex.

This change raises challenges for the CRC—challenges that invite us to ask questions and examine our thinking about marriage as we minister in today's cultural context. In many instances, the realities of same-sex marriage are intensely personal: A beloved grandchild is to be married in a same-sex ceremony and requests his grandparents' presence. Among the neighborhood children are two whose parents are a same-sex couple. A boss or coworker is in a same-sex relationship, and a wedding shower is planned. A close friend has experienced (or we personally have) a lifelong same-sex orientation, and we find ourselves sorting through our thoughts, emotions, and responses in light of this new legal possibility within society.

Beyond such personal realities, the legality of same-sex marriage raises questions about the relationship between marriage as a civil institution and marriage as an ecclesiastically blessed covenantal relationship. The legal situation today presents churches, church members, pastors, and church leaders with practical and pastoral challenges not contemplated by most of us more than a decade ago. This committee has therefore been mandated to provide pastoral guidance to churches, leaders, and members regarding same-sex marriage.

A. The committee's mandate

Synod 2013, in response to overtures from two U.S. classes, appointed a study committee to

> give guidance and clarification on how members, clergy, and churches can apply the biblical teachings reflected in the *Acts of Synod 1973* Report 42 (cf. also the report to Synod 2002) in light of the legality of same-sex marriage in certain jurisdictions, as well as how to communicate these teachings in a truthful and gracious way within North America.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2013*, pp. 617, 640-41)

The committee was asked to explore issues and provide advice for pastoral ministry as well as to identify resources and recommend best practices for use by the churches.

Further insight into synod's intent was evident in the stated grounds for the mandate. Synod observed that the synodical reports of 1973 (on homosexuality) and 2002 (on pastoral care to homosexual members) had served the denomination well by establishing biblical principles and foundations. The current committee was to focus its work on the implications of those teachings in light of recent political, legal, and social developments. These developments include the potential impact of same-sex marriage on church life as well as the significant shifting of public opinion, which also makes an impact on the membership of the denomination, especially among younger generations.

With regard to process, synod directed the committee to follow the shepherding model pioneered by the Faith Formation Committee. Further, a motion from the floor of synod, and subsequently adopted, instructed the committee

> to consult extensively with pastors in Canada and the United States, members of different ethnic minorities, and others who have a broad range of experience and expertise (i.e., biblical, pastoral, ethnic) to both inform and provide feedback regarding the work of the committee.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2013*, pp. 643-44)

The first task facing the committee when it convened in November 2013 was to clarify its mandate and outline a process to meet the expectations of the shepherding model. Concerning its mandate, the committee has interpreted its task as being to focus on issues relating to civil same-sex marriage and the church's ministry. Some have suggested that the committee cannot fulfill its mandate without opening up larger issues, including the denomination's biblical and theological position on homosexuality. In this regard the committee was urged by some to ask synod for an expansion of its mandate.

After significant deliberation, the committee concluded the following regarding its mandate:

1. The social, cultural, and legal dimensions of same-sex marriage pose sufficient challenges for the church and its ministry—sufficient on their own merits to warrant the attention of this committee.
2. Synod 2013 was clear in establishing the 1973 and 2002 reports as the biblical and theological baseline for the work of the committee and indicated that it did not want the biblical grounds reopened at this time. In fact, after extended discussion, Synod 2013 defeated a motion that would have allowed consideration of an amended mandate that would include reevaluation of biblical teachings relevant to homosexuality, human sexuality, and marriage.[1]
3. Broader questions about homosexuality and the church's ministry warrant further study and discussion. Such questions, however, have proven to be divisive in many Christian denominations, and members and CRC leaders are not of one mind about them. Addressing ancillary matters (such as civil same-sex marriage) well has the potential to move the church away from divisiveness and into fruitful areas of ministry. Civil discourse on civil same-sex marriage would be an encouraging step for the church.
4. Civil same-sex marriage raises ministry questions, challenges, and in some cases conundrums that force the church, through its leaders and members, to consider how Christ and the gospel can best be manifest in this world.

The committee has therefore focused its attention on civil same-sex marriage and ministry to persons affected (in various ways) by it. We believe this to be the most productive and appropriate understanding of our mandate.

[1] This motion and its vote were not recorded in the *Acts of Synod 2013* because it was a motion to *allow consideration* of an amendment, not a motion to include such an amendment.

B. Committee process and production of reports

The committee's work has been varied and extensive. The shepherding model, while offering opportunities for discussion and input unavailable through traditional committee work, requires a significantly greater investment of time and activity than does the traditional model. It should be noted that the success of the shepherding model for the Faith Formation Committee was related, at least in part, to the length of time that committee functioned—nearly twice as long as the typical denominational committee. Our committee has been stretched in its resources to follow the shepherding model and complete its work in the expected three-year period.

The committee's process included the following:

- Meetings—The committee gathered in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for two-day sessions on seven occasions, with meetings spaced approximately every 3-4 months. These meetings gave the committee opportunity to remain current on legal and social developments as well as to consult with a variety of persons, including ethnic and minority community leaders. These meetings also allowed us to revisit particularly vexing questions and provided the advantage of active engagement followed by periods of reflection.
- Survey—The committee commissioned a denominational survey through the Calvin College Center for Social Research. Over 4,000 people responded to the survey, including feedback from 700 pastors and 226 respondents who identified themselves as same-sex oriented (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or same-sex attracted). The survey provided background information on experiences and attitudes among CRC members regarding same-sex marriage and ministry with same-sex oriented persons.
- Consultations—The committee consulted with persons knowledgeable and experienced in areas germane to the committee's work. These persons included leaders in ethnic communities within the CRC, representatives of denominational agencies, persons with legal expertise, same-sex oriented persons who are or were members of the CRC, and others.
- Listening sessions—Committee representatives conducted listening sessions at a dozen classis meetings across Canada and the United States. Similar sessions were held with campus ministry leaders and CRC chaplains, as well as with representatives of the denominational Board of Trustees. Committee members also hosted a listening session with delegates and advisers to Synod 2015. These listening sessions provided valuable input to the committee's work. These sessions also began the conversation within the wider church on appropriate ministry in the context of same-sex marriage.
- Committee coordination—We noted the potential overlap between the work of our committee and the Committee to Study Religious Persecution and Liberty (RPL), whose report will also be considered by Synod 2016. Since religious liberty questions arise in the context of same-sex marriage, we have met with RPL representatives for consultation. Our committee also followed closely the work of the Strategic Planning and Adaptive Change Team in its recommendations for cultural and structural change in the CRC.

C. Same-sex marriage in relationship to homosexuality

A recurring challenge for the committee has been the perception that the committee's mandate is to address the issue of homosexuality. Reasons for this perception vary. For some, there is an assumption that the two—homosexuality and same-sex marriage—are one and the same thing. For others, civil recognition of same-sex marriage is a secondary matter—of less importance than reaffirming one's position on homosexuality. Others believe that general agreement among Christians on the biblical teaching and theology regarding same-sex attraction and behavior would settle all important questions surrounding same-sex marriage.

The committee consistently encountered in its listening sessions and in communications from individuals and churches an insistence on making statements regarding homosexuality more generally. This insistence contributed significantly to polarization within discussions. This polarization is, in the committee's estimation, unhelpful and not necessary in addressing the committee's mandate regarding same-sex marriage. We ask, as we have asked before in listening sessions and elsewhere, that this report be read and responded to as it addresses *civil same-sex marriage*; otherwise, whatever benefit the church might derive from this discussion regarding same-sex marriage and the pastoral guidance offered will be lost amid the voices clamoring that the conversation should really be about homosexuality.

D. The status of the 1973 and 2002 reports

Our mandate from synod (see section I, A above) directed us to take the 1973 and 2002 reports as givens, applying their biblical and theological teachings to the changed cultural landscape of a society that supports same-sex marriage. The 1973 baseline from which the committee provides its pastoral guidance can be stated concisely: same-sex oriented believers are brothers and sisters in Christ who should be fully embraced in the life of the church. Same-sex orientation, a disordering of sexual attraction, is not chosen and not in and of itself sinful; same-sex sexual behavior (what the 1973 report termed "homosexualism") is sinful.

The 1973 and 2002 reports constitute pastoral advice to the church on an ethical matter. As Synod 1975 noted in its categorization of types of synodical decisions, pastoral advice on an ethical matter is to be taken seriously—i.e., considered settled and binding—so far as the life of the church and the lives of its members are concerned. Synod 1975 clarified that synodical reports which function as pastoral advice on ethical matters remain open to discussion and even disagreement because they are not confessional matters. These reports, however, do bind the behavior of the church's members. (See *Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 44, 597-602.)

Consistent with our mandate and synod's understanding of pastoral advice, we are asking that this discussion of same-sex marriage be separated as much as possible from church conversations about the broader question of homosexuality. We understand the difficulty of separating these two matters. Not all committee members are in complete agreement with the 1973 and 2002 reports on every point. We were not asked to be in complete agreement. We were mandated to work within the teachings given in those reports.

Later in this report, we refer to "the logic" of the 1973 report and the Church Order. This logic (and indeed our mandate itself) inevitably pushes the discussion in a direction that focuses almost exclusively on same-sex

sexual behavior. Same-sex oriented believers in our churches have long felt the reduction of their personhood to proscribed sexual behavior, even when they commit to celibacy in keeping with the church's teaching. It cannot be stated strongly enough that same-sex oriented persons are whole and complex human beings loved by God, and that their desires for love, companionship, and intimacy should be respected, even as the denomination continues to follow its teaching on marriage and sexual relations.

E. Comments and cautions

Before turning to the body of the report, the committee makes the following observations and issues the accompanying cautions about its report:

1. Marriage—Until recently the term *marriage* could be used without qualifying adjectives to describe at one and the same time a legal status recognized by the state and an ecclesiastically approved covenantal relationship. The two concepts were conflated—not surprisingly, since a single ceremony, often presided over by a minister, initiated and solemnized both relationships.

   Our report will distinguish between *civil* marriage and *religious* marriage because there is increasing awareness of the distinction between these concepts. Some may question whether it is proper to use the term *marriage* in the context of monogamous, covenanted same-sex relationships. This report will follow Synod 2013's use of the term *same-sex marriage* in its mandate to the committee as well as legal usage in Canada and the United States.

2. Language—As happens continually with language, the meanings and uses of terms remain in flux and carry varying and variable connotations—both positive and negative. After much discussion, the committee agreed that using the language of "same-sex oriented" was the most neutral respectful option available at this time that would be acceptable to the majority of readers. The phrase "same-sex oriented" is intended as a descriptive umbrella term that encompasses persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or same-sex attracted, as well as those who experience romantic and sexual attraction to persons of the same sex but choose not to label (or perhaps even acknowledge) those feelings. The word *homosexuality* is still in wide use as a general term to describe same-sex sexuality; however, the word *homosexual* as a noun applied to persons is no longer considered respectful by the majority of those it once aimed to describe. For that reason we do not use *homosexual* as a noun in this report. It may also be the case that "same-sex oriented" may not be a self-chosen descriptor for those who identify as bisexual; our usage attempts to include rather than ignore those who experience sexual attraction to both genders. We ask those who do not find their preferred language reflected in this report to be gracious as the church undertakes this challenging discussion.

3. Matters not addressed—Questions relating to same-sex marriage are inevitably connected to other questions, including those about the nature of biological sex and gender identity. Respondents to the survey, for example, raised important questions relating to transgender persons, gender identity, and sex assignment. The committee as constituted and

mandated was not able to address these topics, important as they are to members and leaders in the church. The committee hopes that the denomination will address these questions in the near future and will ensure that its ministry encompasses persons affected by these realities.

II. The cultural and legal context of civil same-sex marriage

The past fifty years have witnessed dramatic changes in Western society, a fact particularly evident in the growing social acceptance of same-sex oriented persons and relationships. It is not that the percentage of same-sex oriented persons within society has increased during that time span, but the willingness to identify publicly as same-sex oriented has certainly increased as stigmas and discriminations have declined. The undeniable visibility of same-sex oriented individuals and couples today increases their profile in the fabric of social and cultural life. The visibility and profile of same-sex orientation varies, however, from community to community and region to region.

Prominent in this social change has been a shifting assessment of same-sex relationships and whether these relationships should be accorded legal status. Whereas opinion polls in the late 1990s showed support for same-sex marriages or civil unions as a decidedly minority position, polls today show well over half of the North American population supporting same-sex marriage, with civil unions no longer even considered as a possibility.[2] Since the committee's mandate included assessment of recent legal changes, a brief review of the Canadian and U.S. legal situations follows.

A. Canada

In Canada, same-sex marriage moved swiftly from provincial enactment to federal (i.e., nationwide) adoption in a period of just two years. The province of Ontario first formally legalized same-sex marriage in 2003, but in so doing it recognized retroactively the legality of same-sex marriages performed already in 2001. By the time the Canadian Parliament adopted the Civil Marriage Act in July 2005, eight of ten provinces and one of three territories had legalized same-sex marriage either by court decision or by legislative action.

Civil marriage in Canada is defined at the federal level, although procedural rules for solemnizing marriage fall within provincial jurisdiction. The Civil Marriage Act of 2005[3] altered the definition of civil marriage to encompass "the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others." Section 4 of the Civil Marriage Act of 2005 states that a marriage in Canada can be between two persons of the same sex, explicitly noting that "a marriage is not void or voidable by reason only that the spouses are of the same sex."

The preamble to the Civil Marriage Act of 2005 assembles the considerations that led Parliament to alter existing law regarding marriage and to allow same-sex marriage. Equal protection arguments (i.e., ensuring similar rights were available to all citizens, not just to some) were relied on to

[2] As recently as 2010, a vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Rev. Richard Cizik, resigned from his position in response to criticism from evangelicals following a radio broadcast in which he had expressed support for civil unions. Now civil unions are no longer even a part of the political discussion.

[3] Civil Marriage Act (S.C. 2005, c.33), published by the Minister of Justice at http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca.

require recognition of same-sex marriage alongside traditional marriage. Addressing the argument that alternatives to same-sex marriage might accomplish the same thing, the preamble explicitly rejects civil unions and notes that Canadian courts have ruled previously that civil unions are unacceptable as an equivalent to marriage.

In adopting the 2005 act, the Canadian Parliament recognized that establishing same-sex marriage as a right could place people and organizations—most obviously pastors and churches—in the position of being asked to act against conscience to solemnize same-sex marriages. Freedom of conscience and religious expression is a freedom explicitly recognized under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The right of clergy to refuse to perform weddings that are not in line with their religious beliefs is established in section 3 of the Act: "It is recognized that officials of religious groups are free to refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with their religious beliefs." In the decade since the adoption of the Civil Marriage Act, no legal consequences have resulted from pastors declining to perform same-sex ceremonies.[4]

B. The United States

The legal situation in the United States is more complex and has taken longer to develop than in Canada. Prior to 2003, the majority of U.S. states had taken steps to define marriage along traditional lines (i.e., between one man and one woman). Initially this was accomplished through legislative statute, but concern that statutes might be ruled unconstitutional led traditional marriage groups to pursue voter referenda or constitutional amendments, thereby enshrining traditional definitions of marriage within state constitutions. At the federal level, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was signed into law in 1996, defining marriage as "a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife."[5]

A legal shift began in 2003 when the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that same-sex couples had the right to marry and that designations such as "civil union" were discriminatory. Thus began a slow procession of states (New Jersey in 2006; California in 2008; Iowa in 2009) allowing same-sex marriage either by court decision or, less often, by legislative action.

In June 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court in *United States v. Windsor* ruled a portion of DOMA affecting federal benefits to partners in same-sex marriages unconstitutional. This successful challenge to DOMA led to a cascade of federal court cases challenging state bans on same-sex marriage. The *Windsor* decision, however, left unclear whether its decision to strike down a portion of DOMA was based on constitutional arguments (i.e., violation of equal protection or due process guarantees) or on the grounds that regulation of marriage is a matter best left to the states (a federalism argument). A constitutional basis for the court's decision would effectively authorize same-sex marriage nationwide. A federalism argument would leave it to each state's legislature and court to decide the civil definition of marriage for that state.

[4] We note, with the Committee to Study Religious Persecution and Religious Liberty, that discrimination issues have been raised in Canada in different contexts (Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C., on accreditation; and First CRC, Hamilton, Ont., on staff hiring).

[5] Defense of Marriage Act ("DOMA"), 1 U.S.C. § 7.

Following the *Windsor* decision, most state and federal courts relied on the constitutional equal protection argument to strike down bans on same-sex marriage. When this synodical committee was formed in 2013, fewer than 20 states recognized same-sex marriages. By January 2015, same-sex marriage was legal in 36 states and in the District of Columbia. Only the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals (covering Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Tennessee) and a Louisiana federal district court had ruled to sustain state bans on same-sex marriage. This decision was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the equal protection and due process clauses of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibited states from limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples. By a narrow margin, the court struck down state bans on same-sex marriage.[6]

The decided trend in Western society and in North America in particular is now toward cultural and legal acceptance of same-sex marriage. The Christian Reformed Church should anticipate that within both the United States and Canada civil same-sex marriage will remain a legal reality into the future, and that overall public opinion will be supportive of this reality, especially among younger age groups.

III. Marriage: Civil and religious in a pluralistic society

A. Religious and civil marriage

Marriage is an ancient institution, and if one is speaking biblically, the adjective might be *primordial*. As the early CRC Form for the Solemnization of Marriage (1912) stated, "The holy bond of marriage was instituted by God himself at the very dawn of history." While the Christian Reformed Church does not—as the Roman Catholic Church does—deem marriage a sacrament, it considers it a sacred bond. Marriage gives substance to God's intents for human society in this world. As the 1912 marriage form explains, "Marriage was established to extend the human race, to advance the kingdom of God, and to enrich the lives of those entering this state."[7]

The CRC's most recent and extensive study of marriage in 1980 affirmed the basic character of marriage as the union of husband and wife.

> Man and woman, created in the image of God, were made for each other to become one flesh in marriage. Thus marriage is not a human invention nor an experiment in social relationships which can be altered or abandoned at will.[8]

The backdrop for the 1980 CRC statement on marriage was the increasing divorce rate within society and the church, combined with a rise in the number of couples cohabiting without pursuing marriage. The CRC's 1980 statement affirmed a biblical and theological understanding of marriage as the covenantal relationship between a man and a woman.

This is not all, however, that needs to be noted. Especially in this era of hypercharged rhetoric surrounding marriage, it is good to be reminded that, revered as marriage is from a Christian standpoint, it is not the be-all and end-all of human relations or society. Jesus certainly "honored marriage

[6] *Obergefell v. Hodges,* 576 U.S. ___ (2015).

[7] *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 1007.

[8] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 469.

by his blessed presence at the wedding in Cana,"[9] but Jesus also noted that "those who are considered worthy of a place in that age [to come] and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage."[10] Similarly, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 contextualizes marriage as a penultimate good—that is, good as it meets the needs of those being married, but a good which may detract from single-minded devotion to "the affairs of the Lord."[11] Marriage, from a Reformed perspective, is creational; it is not eschatological.

What we do not find expressly stated in Scripture is an indication of the state's role in the institution of marriage. Within Western culture, marriage has become a social institution in which civil government, the state, has an interest and plays a role. This has not always been the case. In its origins marriage was religious, and only in the past few centuries—as modern nation-states have developed—has the state become involved in issuing marriage licenses and recording marriages for the good ordering of society. John Calvin, in fact, was one of the first to require the recording of marriages by the civil magistrate in Geneva.

As the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* notes,

> Reformed churches have insisted on the state playing its legitimate role. After modern states finally began to do so in the latter part of the eighteenth century, these churches have continued to respect the state's interest and involvement in marriage and family. They have always acknowledged the mandate God gave to civil government (Matt. 22:15-22) to regulate, say, the legal protections afforded to those who are married "under the law." In North America, the ordained minister of the Word who solemnizes the marriage is an agent of both church and state. It is not an either-or situation.[12]

In North American contexts, the close connection between the state and the church in regulating marriage has led, especially in religious circles, to a tendency to conflate civil and religious marriage. The confusion is understandable; the two often happen concurrently and under the auspices of a single ministerial officiant. The liturgy of another CRC marriage form (1979) indicates that the appropriate phrasing for the minister following the couple's vows includes recognition of this dual authority: "As a minister of the church of Christ *and* by the authority which the state has vested in me, I now pronounce you, _(name)_ and _(name)_, husband and wife" [*emphasis added*].[13]

Over the centuries and through religious and political shifts, the roles of church and state have changed. What began as record-keeping and vow-enforcing duties by the state in support of religiously authorized marriages has become a set of social rights, privileges, and responsibilities moderated by the state and tangential to religion. The relationship of civil and religious marriage now varies throughout in the Western world. In the Netherlands, for example, there are both religious and civil ceremonies for marriage.

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[9] Marriage form (1912), *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 1007.

[10] Luke 20:35 (NRSV).

[11] 1 Corinthians 7:32-34 (NRSV).

[12] Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2011), p. 372.

[13] Marriage form (1979), *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 1011.

They are held in separate places at separate times. However, the civil ceremony is the one that is required to be valid in the eyes of the law.

Even in the North American context the two are not synonymous, as states allow civil officials such as mayors, justices of the peace, or judges to conduct civil marriage ceremonies with no religious implications or connotations. As Christian legal scholar John Inazu notes,

> It has been a long time since civil marriage has primarily been about the goods of Christian marriage. That doesn't mean that Christians should give up on the importance of these goods. But it does suggest that same-sex marriage is symptomatic of, rather than the cause of, a vast gulf between Christian marriage and civil marriage in the United States.[14]

Inazu points out another aspect of Christian marriage in relationship to civil marriage that bears mention. Since the mid-1900s, the state has progressively distanced itself from regulating sexual relations. Laws against adultery remain in less than half the states in the United States and are rarely enforced. Laws against fornication and sodomy in the United States (traditionally enforced only in instances of same-sex encounters) have been declared unconstitutional. To quote another legal scholar,

> Sex and sexual morality are central to religious marriage, but increasingly peripheral to legal provisions for civil marriage. There is very little about sex among the hundreds of things defined by law as part of civil marriage.[15]

What to think, then, of the legal dimensions of civil marriage? In legal terms, marriage confers a variety of rights, privileges, and obligations that are unique to the marital relationship. "In short, the marriage laws transform a private agreement into a source of significant public benefits and protections."[16] In 2004 the Government Accounting Office examined the United States Code to determine the federal rights, responsibilities, and privileges that were provided to married couples. The study identified a minimum of 1,138 statutes in which marital status was a factor. At the state and federal levels, these rights, privileges, and obligations affect areas including family law, taxation, health care law, probate, torts, government benefits and programs, private sector benefits, labor law, real estate, bankruptcy, immigration, and criminal law.[17]

Three things should be noted from this brief discussion of religious and civil marriage. First, religious marriage and civil marriage have come to mean significantly different things. They function differently. The church should be careful in thinking through the relationship between civil and religious marriage.

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[14] John Inazu, "What to Expect After the Supreme Court's Marriage Decision," *Christianity Today Online,* April 28, 2015. www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015 /april-web-only/what-to-expect-after-supreme-courts-coming-marriage-decisio.html.

[15] Brief of Douglas Laycock, Thomas C. Berg, David Blankenhorn, Marie A. Failinger, and Edward McGlynn Gaffney, as Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioners, March 5, 2015. www.supremecourt.gov/ ObergefellHodges/AmicusBriefs/14-556_Douglas_Laycock.pdf.

[16] Vermont Supreme Court ruling in *Baker v. State*, 744 A.2d 864, 883 (Vt. 1999).

[17] The American Bar Association Section of Family Law Working Group on Same-Sex Marriages and Non-marital Unions, A White Paper: An Analysis of the Law Regarding Same-sex Marriage, Civil Unions, and Domestic Partnerships. www.abanet.org/family/whitepaper, 16-17 (2004).

Second, the biblical and theological understanding of marriage within the CRC is incompatible with *religious* same-sex marriage. Religious marriage, as the CRC understands it, entails the union of a man and a woman in the bonds of holy matrimony.

Third, a substantial question remains about the church's stance toward *civil* same-sex marriage. It would seem, on first consideration, that the derivation from religious practice of civil marriage laws and enforcements in the eighteenth century would establish a necessary religious foundation for civil marriage. A historical case can so be made. But, as noted above, there has emerged a level of disconnect between civil and religious marriage. They are no longer, nor have they been for some time, of one piece. The question is how significant the disconnect is, and whether the state has both the authority and the latitude to redefine civil marriage to include same-sex relationships. In order to address this latter question, we will need to consider, albeit briefly, the nature and limits of pluralism in contemporary society and the role of civil government in the ordering of society.

B. Principled pluralism

The changing legal status of same-sex marriage in the United States and the legality of same-sex marriage in Canada highlight important questions about the relationship between the church's teachings and the state's laws. On these sorts of questions, the Reformed tradition has historically occupied a middle position within the Western Christian tradition.

At one end of the spectrum, the Roman Catholic Church uses the concept of natural law—a divine rationality that pervades the created order and is discerned by the rational human mind. This concept is used to insist that the state align its structuring of society with the church's understanding of God's will for society. In this natural law argument, the conditions for human flourishing are sufficiently clear that the church should insist (even if the state ultimately does not agree) that the state order society in ways consistent with the natural law, especially with regard to marriage, family, and procreation.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Anabaptist tradition has difficulty embracing the state's coercive power. From an Anabaptist perspective, the Christian community orders its own social life as it understands Scripture to require it and does not look to the state to affirm or enforce these community rules within the society at large. What happens outside the Christian community is not within the authority of the community except insofar as the gospel invites others to join the community. The church does not presume to direct the state.

The middle ground occupied by the Reformed tradition uses the Kuyperian concept of *principled pluralism* to navigate with conviction and civility the Christian life in the public square and to moderate our interactions with those with whom we agree and disagree on important social and political matters.

Principled pluralism holds that in God's diverse and differentiated creation there are different structures that have their own particular authorities and powers. These different structures of authority operate within different spheres of social life. Each of these spheres—family, school, church, state, etc.—has its own God-given task, right, and authority. Each possesses authority within its own domain, and each possesses an appropriate authority in their interrelationships with other spheres.

The Kuyperian view upholds the legitimate authority of the state *within* a particular sphere of life. Alongside the sphere of the state, we recognize other social structures as having legitimate authority within their respective domains of social life. The state is *one* structure to which God has given this relative authority. This pluralism, a *structural* pluralism, is both pragmatic and fundamentally good—that is, both useful and the way things are supposed to be.

Structural pluralism—understanding different spheres of life to have different authorities—is one aspect of principled pluralism. A second aspect is *confessional* pluralism. Confessional pluralism refers to the right of different religious (and areligious) groups not only to exist within society but also to promote their own views and develop their own patterns of involvement in public life. Confessional pluralism reflects an outworking of the relative authority of particular spheres: it is not the function of the state to discern the *ultimate* truth for those under its rule. The end result is not relativism, but a public square in which values and principles intersect in their relevance to social structure and public life.

In addressing questions regarding marriage, the state uses its authority toward different ends than the church does. The task of the government is not to compel everything that is right or moral by Christian standards, nor to punish everything that is wrong or immoral. The state's role is to maintain civil law and uphold public justice, protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens to fulfill their responsibilities—civic, social, familial, religious—and ensuring that they are not unduly harmed or restricted by the actions of others.

The church's posture in the public square ought to recognize the pluralistic nature of our world and the confessional pluralism of this political sphere. Christians ought not shy away from voicing particularly Christian values in the public square, but Christians need not make it their goal to enshrine Christian moral teaching into law.

So what of civil same-sex marriage? The challenge with marriage is that it intersects with multiple spheres. It is fundamentally a matter of family, which is a sphere of authority in its own right. The well ordering of society as a whole may be the primary responsibility of civil government, but other spheres have a stake in the wisdom of that ordering. Both the state and the church, it would appear, have relative authority with respect to marriage.

For many years there have been Reformed Christians who support the recognition of civil same-sex interdependent relationships for reasons of public justice in a pluralist society, while still holding that within the church, religious marriage has different standards. The CRC Committee for Contact with the Government within Canada wrote in 2003:

> Our understanding of justice is rooted in an assumption: *people have intrinsic dignity and related rights because they are created in the image of God, no matter what their creed, colour, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.* The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church has indicated that the denial of civil and social rights for homosexual persons threatens justice.[18] It follows, therefore, that church members

[18] In June 2002 a study committee reported to the CRC synod on the topic of Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members. The final section of that report requests the church "to reflect on the pursuit of God's justice and peace with respect to homosexuality" (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, p. 334). Key to this reflection is an attitude of grace, resting on a belief that, despite the legal complexity and moral ambiguity surrounding these issues, CRC members should "entrust the future to the God who holds it and who calls us to 'do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God'" (*Agenda*, p. 337; Mic. 6:8).

> ought to affirm the validity of legal recognition of long-term and committed same-sex interdependent relationships. Justice and grace are due to all people—even to those with whom one may have profound disagreements.[19]

Among North American Christians who lament the opening of civil marriage to same-sex couples there is a tendency to view the adoption of civil same-sex marriage as the work of an activist judiciary influenced by a liberal, antireligious agenda. It would be wise for the church to read carefully and consider well the arguments offered as underlying rationale for civil same-sex marriage.[20] They are arguments based on justice and equal protection of citizens, which is the arena of the state. While it is not incumbent upon Christians to *accept* or *agree with* these arguments, Christians are duty bound by the ninth commandment to represent them accurately as well as to acknowledge their considerable weight in the current cultural discussion.

For some, the reality is that the state has redefined civil marriage, and now the church has to come to terms with this new reality. Civil same-sex marriage is the law of the land and that is unlikely to be reversed. For others, it is important to make sense of the current cultural shift in which the state operates with a different understanding of marriage than that held by the church.

Principled pluralism does not of itself provide a definitive answer to whether Christians should oppose or be supportive of civil same-sex marriage. Rather, it provides a framework within which a society decides which policies shape its interactions. While principled pluralism does not give us definite answers as to how we ought to act, it does shape the way we think through our current situation, where the church's understanding of marriage is different from the state's. No longer must this be necessarily threatening; nor must we have a singular response in all areas of life.

In Appendix C we sketch two lines of argumentation—one that argues the church should work to reverse the state's decision to allow same-sex marriage, and one that supports the state's decision to allow same-sex marriage.

C. Pluralism and religious liberty

Freedoms of conscience and religious expression are protected freedoms in both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the U.S. Constitution. Recognizing the significant freedom of religious expression issues involved, legislators have implemented laws protecting the free exercise of religion. In Canada, the Civil Marriage Act itself recognizes that religious groups and their representatives may refuse to perform marriage ceremonies that conflict with the tenets of their faith. In the United States, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) was adopted ostensibly to ensure protections for religious groups and individuals from laws that burdened a person's free exercise of religion. It didn't absolutely prohibit any law from impinging on an individual's religious expression, but it did necessitate two things: (1) any law affecting religious expression must serve a compelling government interest, and (2) the law must be designed to achieve its ends in the least restrictive manner possible. The Christian church should

[19] Same-sex Unions: A Case for a Just Pluralism. A Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, the Committee for Contact with the Government of the Christian Reformed Church. April 10, 2003.

[20] The court's decision in *Windsor v. Connecticut* is available online, as is Judge Bernard Friedman's decision in *DeBoer v. Snyder* (see Appendix B).

support the protection of religious freedoms, but it should do so wisely and appropriately. We will have more to say about this in our section on pastoral guidance.

Religious freedom does not mean that individuals, churches, and businesses are free to engage in any conduct so long as it is religiously justified. It means (1) that the state has to have a compelling interest to infringe on that freedom and (2) that any requirement infringing on that freedom has to be narrowly drawn. Preventing discrimination in the public arena constitutes a compelling interest, so public actions that discriminate against persons may well be prohibited.

For churches and denominations, there is no legal requirement to support same-sex marriage or to perform same-sex weddings. A church has the right under law to set its membership requirements and establish its policies. Similarly, individuals such as pastors who represent a religious tradition are exempt from solemnizing or participating in same-sex weddings. *Pastors need not be concerned about being forced to perform same-sex weddings so long as they do not hold themselves out as available to solemnize weddings for members of the general public*.

What encouragement and support should the church provide to members who object in their lives or livelihood to becoming entangled with same-sex marriage, its observance, or its celebration? There is a growing list of disputes that have occurred in the United States and Canada, typically involving businesses providing products or services for weddings—bakers, photographers, florists, etc. The central issue appears to be where the religious person senses that artisanal work involves one personally in a ceremony with which one disagrees. While more will be said about this later in our report, we note that most judicial cases have ruled against individuals and businesses who declined service to same-sex ceremonies.

IV. Civil same-sex marriage and the covenant community

Same-sex oriented persons have become increasingly visible and accepted within North American society. Long relegated to the fringes of society and subjected to discriminatory treatment, same-sex oriented persons have experienced a significant shift in social attitudes, especially over the past fifty years. The Christian Reformed Church has played a small role in that shift, calling for an end to belittling and marginalization of same-sex oriented persons and instead encouraging inclusion within the covenant community and the pastoral ministry of the church. That has been our intent, although we have not always lived up to our intentions.

Civil same-sex marriage continues the trend toward visibility and social acceptance. Society now includes same-sex family units—both couples and families with children—as part of community life.

Negotiating these dynamics presents challenges for Christians and the church. Life events such as weddings and childbirths, and family milestones such as anniversaries or funerals, for example, have accepted social norms for their celebration or observance. Do social norms for celebration apply to same-sex couples and families? Uncertainty leads to anxiety, to social awkwardness and potential offense. No one wants such things with family, friends, neighbors, or colleagues.

Compounding the challenge are the variety of experiences with same-sex families; visibility and acceptance are not evenly distributed across North American society. In some communities, perhaps even where same-sex marriage is a relatively new phenomenon, same-sex oriented persons, couples, and families are a part of everyday life. Knowing same-sex married persons can lessen the anxiety. In other regions, even where same-sex marriage has been legal for years, some communities and persons have little or no contact or experience with same-sex oriented persons or couples.

It is important for the church to say something constructive and helpful about these personal and social relationships without imposing a rigid framework for negotiating the wide variety of relationships within which these questions may arise. We should note that even personal decisions may have an impact on the life of the church community. If church members attend a same-sex wedding of a friend who is or was part of the congregation, it has the potential to become a point of contention within the community. Not attending also has the potential to become a point of contention. Should we grant each other the freedom to figure out these situations and to listen to the variety of ways available to respond to them?

Of most significant impact to the church is its communal and institutional life, where same-sex marriage leads to questions about participation in the life of the church, including church membership and the sacraments. Many of the questions raised will not be answered simply. Consider the following variations on basic questions about the sacraments and church membership:

- A young woman, a longtime member of the congregation, announces that she is marrying her same-sex partner and adopting her partner's child. She asks to have her child baptized upon completion of the adoption process.
- A same-sex couple with young children begins attending the church, in large part due to the children's participation in the church's youth programs. The couple asks about joining the church and having their children baptized.
- A member of the congregation who has lived in another state for a number of years returns to be closer to family and resumes attendance. She is now married in a same-sex marriage and wishes to have her two infant children baptized. Her parents have been lifelong members of the church and support a request for baptism.
- A member of the congregation who acknowledges her same-sex orientation is nearing completion of the adoption process. She is not in a same-sex relationship, but has not ruled it out in the future. She requests baptism for her child upon adoption placement.
- A member of the congregation who is in a same-sex marriage in another state moves back home to take care of his aged mother while his spouse remains in their out-of-state home. The member brings his mother to church, takes communion, and brings his mother to congregational meetings, where they both vote.

V. Principles for pastoral guidance regarding same-sex marriage

The following principles derive from the preceding discussion and inform the pastoral guidance that will follow. It bears mentioning that these

principles do not, in every case or even in most cases, limit ministry to a single appropriate response. The church in its ministry is moving in shifting cultural waters. It is as great an error to presume more certainty and knowledge than we currently possess as it is to claim too little. If there is a primary message from the committee's listening sessions and survey, it is that a wide variety of experiences and social settings exist within the CRC.

A. Religious marriage, as understood by the Christian Reformed Church, is a covenantal union between a man and a woman

The Christian Reformed Church understands marriage as the union of a woman and a man as wife and husband. Both the 1912 and 1979 marriage forms and various synodical reports, most recently in 1980, have regarded marriage in this fashion.

Neither the Civil Marriage Act in Canada nor the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* requires the church to redefine marriage. While some within the religious community have tried to marshal opposition to same-sex marriage by warning that churches will be forced to accept same-sex marriage, forced acceptance has not been the case in Canada and is not anticipated in the United States. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution respect the freedom of religion, which includes the right of churches to define marriage according to their faith traditions. Whatever equal protection or due process arguments may operate in the civil sphere where legal rights and responsibilities apply, these are not applicable or essential to religious marriage.

B. Civil marriage is properly within the domain of the state and differs in significant ways from religious marriage

Civil marriage, as noted earlier, has diverged from religious marriage in important respects. If, as stated above, the Christian church is not bound in its understanding of religious marriage by the state, the church should acknowledge that the state has freedom to define civil marriage as it deems most just. Civil marriage is a matter of public policy, which is legitimately under the authority of the state.

The following table summarizes differences between civil marriage and religious marriage.

CIVIL MARRIAGE	RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE (AS UNDERSTOOD BY THE CRC)
Establishes legal rights, privileges, and responsibilities, with over 1,000 laws in the U.S. and Canada dependent on legal marital status	Establishes a covenantal relationship between a woman, a man, and God within a covenantal community
Establishes legal status for inheritance, medical decision-making, and kinship/parental status	Demarcates appropriate and inappropriate sexual relations
No longer (trend since mid-1900s) establishes legal and illegal (criminal) sexual relationships and practices with regard to civil marriage	

Whether civil same-sex marriage is a wise public policy decision or a matter of constitutional necessity is a matter on which Christians may differ. What this principle precludes is a claim that the state has no authority to define civil marriage or that the state must adhere to a particular religious definition of marriage.

C. Marriage—whether civil or religious—involves social and personal values and has social effects that the church holds in high regard

During the cultural contentions over same-sex marriage, the focus from religious communities has been almost exclusively on objections to same-sex sexual relationships. At times, the debate has been in danger of reducing these relationships to their sexual dimension.

Marriage, whether civil or religious, requires personal traits and social commitments that are highly valued by Christians—things like commitment, patience, self-sacrifice, and loving kindness. Same-sex couples, like traditional opposite-sex couples, value and display these traits, forming relationships that can provide stability and continuity within a social framework. The Christian church must be careful, in its commitment to truth and being cognizant of how it represents the gospel of Jesus Christ, not to be guilty of reducing same-sex marriage solely to sexual expression.

D. Intimate sexual relations belong within the bonds of religious marriage

While the Christian community is often caricatured as obsessed with sexuality in a negative way, the tradition teaches quite the opposite. Sexual intimacy is a gift of great promise and power and is therefore to be enjoyed within the safeguards of a religious covenant relationship. This has been the Reformed understanding of the import of the seventh commandment as well as church teachings on marriage and sexual expression. The 1973 and 2002 synodical reports on homosexuality continued this understanding of sexual expression within the bounds of religious marriage.

E. While both religious marriage and civil marriage involve an expectation or presumption of intimate sexual relations, the church's welcome, belonging, and discipling should not be based solely on presumptions

Civil same-sex marriage does not, in and of itself, entail improper sexual relations. Civil marriage provides a legal environment in which persons can establish stable, familial relationships, whether those relationships be opposite-sex or same-sex and whether or not those relations involve sexual expression. Sexual intimacy between married adults is, in most situations, an integral element of a stable, familial relationship. It is, however, but one element of many, and not an essential element in all cases or at all times.

The result is that a civil same-sex marriage likely, but not necessarily, involves same-sex sexual behavior. Situations have also existed, both in our denomination and in the broader Christian world, in which two celibate same-sex oriented people have lived together or have sought legal married status while refraining from sexual intimacy. These situations may arise in our churches as well, and we ought to consider them thoughtfully and on an individual basis.

The church, as an agent of God's grace in the world and a channel for Word and sacrament as means of grace, should not carry out its ministry based solely on presumptions. Its welcome to all who encounter the

community of Christ, its openness to would-be followers of Christ, and its encouragement to live in gratitude for grace must not be muted based solely on assumptions of sexual impropriety. This is true for all persons and couples, regardless of sexual orientation or marital status.

The Christian church faces a significant challenge in this regard. Pastoral ministry is relational ministry, and it is only in relationship that these questions can be explored appropriately through further conversations, taking account of every relevant consideration.

F. Solemnizing religious marriages is an ecclesiastical function governed by the church

In a religious wedding, the pastor functions as a representative of God and the church in solemnizing the wedding. The Church Order (Art. 69) limits ministers to solemnizing religious marriages that conform to the Word of God.

VI. Pastoral guidance regarding same-sex marriage

The committee's mandate is to provide pastoral guidance in addressing the pastoral and personal questions that arise from civil same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States. The term *pastoral guidance* is apt. As a committee, we are providing a set of principles and suggested courses of action that are consistent with the Christian Reformed Church's understanding of Christian marriage and the need for the church, its representatives, and its members to be a gracious, truthful, and contributing presence within the wider culture.

One aspect of the issue confirmed during our listening sessions and consultations is that people demonstrate a wide range of responses and attitudes toward same-sex marriage. These responses should not be oversimplified into oppositions: liberal/conservative, Bible-believers/culture-accommodators, relational/principial, or doctrinal/experiential. On the committee itself we experienced differences of opinion as to the appropriate response in different situations. Two years of listening and discussion may have nuanced those differences and brought us to better understanding, but the experience did not eliminate disagreement. Where these differences matter we have tried to indicate the options that the church possesses.

This is a time to be forthright. Any set of guidelines will leave a great number of people unsatisfied in some way or another. In some instances, we provide firm guidelines that flow out of the church's theology and ecclesiology. In other situations, however, we deemed it unwise to adopt a set of rules locking churches, pastors, and others into singular responses to what are novel and challenging situations.

A. Same-sex weddings and other occasions

1. Attending

An invitation to a same-sex commitment/marriage ceremony and its accompanying events raises a potential point of tension and uncertainty for many people. The invitation may well come from a family member, a neighbor, a coworker, or a friend.

Church members who have received such invitations have undoubtedly thought through their response, although they may have felt

ambivalence about their decision. Christians have addressed the tensions in a variety of ways—from a decision to attend in respect of friendship or family ties to a decision to decline because one is reluctant to be seen condoning a relationship with which they disagree. Some within the CRC may attend because they celebrate the relationship and do not consider same-sex committed relationships as inherently sinful. Decisions to attend or not are often shaped by conscience, and conscience deserves respect. A decision to attend a wedding means different things to different people. Given this, there is not one singular response to an invitation to a same-sex wedding that we recommend. We judge that the church is best served by allowing latitude and supporting thoughtful choices.

We note that ambiguity may accompany decisions to attend as well as not to attend. A decision to attend may be read as condoning a relationship that the Christian Reformed Church considers incompatible with the conclusions of its 1973 report. A decision not to attend runs the risk of reducing an assessment of committed relationships—relationships which possess a myriad of dimensions, many of them commendable—to sexual behavior. The latter exposes the invited friend or family member (and by extension the church) to the charge that the sexual dimension of marriage is the only thing that matters. These perils highlight that there is no perfect solution in the quest for grace and truth.

Some might question whether the same decisional freedom should apply to pastors and other church leaders. The presence of a pastor or church leader at a public event carries symbolic as well as personal meaning. Once again, the decision can be complex. A pastor might attend in order to maintain a relationship with one or both marital partners for the sake of future pastoral care or discipleship, even if the pastor does not agree with the marriage on biblical grounds. The marriage may be that of the pastor's own child, grandchild, or other relative. Family ties may be at stake. Or a pastor might attend to support a parishioner, neighbor, or friend who does not agree with the same-sex marriage but still chooses to be present as an expression of love and support for their family member.

As with any marriage celebration, attendance does not necessarily mean approval of every aspect of a relationship. It would be wise for a pastor to consult the church consistory regarding attendance at the ceremony. This encourages transparency and eliminates surprise should objections later arise, especially from within the congregation.

2. Officiating

The denominational survey and classical listening sessions conducted by the committee indicate that CRC pastors have received requests to perform same-sex commitment ceremonies and weddings. With the United States joining Canada in allowing civil same-sex marriage, requests to CRC pastors to officiate at same-sex weddings will undoubtedly become more common.

Four basic questions arise with respect to officiating at same-sex weddings:

- Might pastors be required by the state or province to officiate at same-sex marriages, especially where discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited by a city, state, or province?

– What are the marks of a religious marriage?
– Should pastors be permitted to solemnize religious same-sex marriages?
– Should pastors be permitted to officiate at civil same-sex marriages?

a. Legal aspects for pastors

Anxiety over potential legal vulnerability for refusing to officiate at a same-sex marriage is not uncommon among pastors, especially in U.S. states where same-sex marriage has only recently become legal. As one pastor asked in response to the committee's survey: What will I do if/when a same-sex couple asks me to officiate at their wedding? What guidelines or policies should be in place in my local church to protect me if/when such a request comes?

This is an area in which Canada's decade of experience with civil same-sex marriage is informative. Since 2005 when same-sex marriage was made legal in Canada, no Christian pastors have been forced to officiate at same-sex ceremonies against their convictions or against the position of their denomination. For all the concerns expressed, it has been a nonissue in Canada for ordained CRC pastors.

The Canadian experience, of course, does not guarantee an identical result for pastors in the United States. The Canadian situation differs in that the Civil Marriage Act specifically guarantees religious freedom for pastors and churches. In the U.S., the Supreme Court in the *Obergefell* decision mentioned religious liberty issues primarily in the dissenting opinions. Still, most legal experts do not anticipate that pastors in the U.S. would be required to officiate at same-sex marriages. The First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion is almost certain to be held to obviate any duty to officiate at same-sex weddings.

We should note, by way of warning, one situation of potential difficulty: a pastor who holds him- or herself out as available to conduct weddings regardless of whether those being married belong to the pastor's congregation or denomination. While few, if any, pastors in the CRC advertise themselves as available to conduct weddings for all comers (and such pastors would do well to consider the implications of Church Order Art. 69 in this regard), we would be remiss not to mention the real possibility that a pastor who advertises availability to conduct weddings for the general public may be prevented from refusing to conduct same-sex weddings when requested. We address the institutional ministry contexts of chaplains in subsection C, 5 below.

Pastors would be wise to state clearly on their church's website (on, for instance, a Wedding or Building Use page) the CRC understanding of marriage and adopt a policy statement regarding officiating at weddings. Although the likelihood of a discrimination lawsuit against a pastor for refusing to perform a same-sex wedding is small, pastors who wish to minimize their risk should restrict officiating of all weddings to those in which at least one person is a member of the congregation or denomination.

b. Marks of a religious marriage

We noted earlier in our report the increasing distinction between civil and religious marriage. It remains the case that virtually all North

American religious marriages are also civil marriages, with a single ceremony solemnizing both the civil and the religious marriage.

Typically, a religious wedding initiates a marriage between Christian believers. What makes a wedding religious? Certainly setting plays a part. A wedding in a church sanctuary surrounded by the symbols and expressions of the Christian faith suggests an intent to seek God's and the Christian community's blessing on a marriage. More specifically, three things distinguish a wedding solemnizing a religious marriage:

- a declaration of marriage (following the exchange of vows) using the formula "by the authority vested in me by the church of Jesus Christ and by the State/Province of . . ."
- liturgical elements that invoke the name of God and prayers that express God's blessing on the couple
- acknowledgment that the couple's vows are being stated and the marriage is being solemnized "before the face of God"

c. Solemnizing a religious same-sex marriage

The CRC understanding of marriage in concert with Church Order Article 69 precludes a CRC pastor from solemnizing a religious same-sex marriage. As noted earlier in this report, the CRC understands marriage as a covenant bond between a man and a woman before God. Article 69 prohibits pastors from solemnizing marriages that are contrary to the Word of God. The biblical and theological basis of the 1973 report presents a denominational understanding that same-sex sexual behavior (not orientation) is sinful. Solemnizing a religious same-sex marriage runs contrary to that understanding.

A request to solemnize a religious same-sex marriage may well present a pastoral challenge. Assuming that the request comes from a church member or from a friend or relative of a church member, some pastors will be conflicted in refusing a request that originates in a strong personal or pastoral relationship.

If a pastor were to solemnize a religious same-sex marriage, he or she would be open to church inquiry and discipline, including potential suspension or loss of ministerial credentials. Some denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, have attempted to make suspension and loss of credentials virtually automatic in such cases. Significant national publicity, not to mention institutional and personal trauma, has accompanied such instances in which a Methodist pastor has officiated at a same-sex wedding.

While some may suggest that the CRC should adopt a similar policy, the committee does not recommend such a course. CRC polity does not operate in the same fashion as does the polity in, say, the United Methodist Church. The CRC is not hierarchically structured under the authority of bishops, nor do we have a Book of Discipline. Our covenantal life is moderated through the deliberative assemblies of the church, originating in the local church council and following processes laid out in the Church Order. Singling out solemnization of a religious same-sex marriage for automatic suspension or discipline would create categories of offense and curtail the deliberative nature of the church's assemblies. When a pastor has acted in violation of the Church Order,

the pastor's consistory is the appropriate venue in which to raise the issue, and from there the matter proceeds to classis and synod if necessary, according to established church polity.

d. Officiating a civil same-sex marriage

Most requests to officiate at a wedding involve an implicit request for a religious as well as civil marriage ceremony. Where such requests involve a same-sex couple, the above pastoral guidance applies.

It is unusual, but not unheard of, for a pastor to receive a request to officiate at a civil ceremony. Most pastors receive one or more such requests during the course of their ministry. The circumstances of such requests vary widely, as do pastoral responses. Some ministers refuse all such requests. Others will officiate if they discern a significant pastoral dimension in the relationship with the couple being married. At least in practice, the Christian Reformed Church has given latitude in this regard.

May a CRC pastor officiate a civil same-sex ceremony? This is, we note, an extremely narrow question—limited to instances in which a same-sex couple is committed to living within the bounds of the 1973 CRC position and does not seek a religious marriage. They wish, however, to avail themselves of the legal structures and benefits of civil marriage.

It is generally wise for pastors to refer people in such rare situations to a civil official charged with officiating at civil marriages. However, pastoral situations may arise in which it may be appropriate for a particular minister to be the civil officiant. Consider the following examples:

- Two older men have developed a deep friendship over the years. Neither has married. They share a house, friends, and business interests. As they age, they realize the vulnerability of their legal, medical, and personal situation. Having a longstanding relationship with the CRC pastor, they approach the pastor and ask if s/he will marry them in a civil ceremony.
- Two women with gifts and interests in adopting and parenting special needs children seek the stability of a two-parent household for their children. The church recognizes their gifts and wishes to be supportive. The women ask the pastor to officiate at their civil marriage ceremony.

The committee discussed these situations, uncommon as they might be. We are not of one mind as to pastoral guidelines. Some committee members thought that pastors should not conduct any civil ceremonies, same-sex or otherwise, in the absence of a religious marriage. Other committee members thought that in unusual and very limited situations such as these, latitude should be given based on circumstances. At the very least, however, these examples demonstrate that a civil same-sex marriage is not inherently in conflict with the CRC understanding of same-sex orientation and behavior nor with the church's position on marriage.

3. Hosting

Churches frequently make their facilities—usually the sanctuary and/or fellowship hall—available for events and ceremonies, including weddings

and receptions. Some limit availability to church members, while other churches allow access for the wider community, with perhaps a difference in rental fee for church members versus nonmembers. In some churches, the reservation may be made through a church member even though the event itself may be the wedding of persons not currently members of the church.

Allowing use of facilities by nonmembers could bring into play nondiscrimination provisions of federal, state, provincial, or local law. If a church advertises on its website or in its informational materials that its facilities are available to the general public for weddings, it may be required to make them available for same-sex weddings just as it does for opposite-sex weddings. As churches in Canada have been advised for the past decade, a church that does not wish to allow same-sex weddings to be solemnized in its building is best advised to do two things: (a) have a clearly stated wedding policy that references the CRC's understanding of marriage, and (b) limit facility rental/availability to congregational members. Appendix B of this report refers to legal resources for churches with concerns in this regard.

What if a CRC church is open to allowing a same-sex wedding in its facility? Some denominations have forbidden their churches to permit same-sex celebrations in their sanctuaries, usually in denominations where local church property is deemed to be owned by the denomination and managed in trust by the local church. In the CRC, property is owned by the local congregation, and decisions regarding its use have traditionally been local decisions.

For some churches, making the facilities available to nonmembers is a way to connect the church to the wider community. Access to facilities may also be a part of ecumenical relationships with other Christian denominations, including some that allow same-sex marriage. Some CRC churches, in fact, share facilities with other congregations. It would be unwise for the CRC to establish a blanket rule in this regard; this is a matter best addressed locally and at the discretion of the local church council.

4. Playing a role in a same-sex wedding

Much media attention has focused on persons whose livelihood or position may involve them in one way or another in a same-sex wedding—the baker, the florist, the photographer, the county clerk who issues marriage licenses, and so on. This is the initial arena in the United States where religious liberty vis-à-vis same-sex marriage is playing out, both legislatively and through the courts.

Legislatively, the challenge has been to find a proper balance between nondiscrimination interests in society and a religious individual's desire not to participate in celebrating or authorizing a relationship with which he or she disagrees. The primary sticking point in the U.S. has been whether businesses should be included within state statutes protecting religious liberty.[21]

Religious liberty issues are important, and the church should support legislative efforts to protect religious expression. The issues are too

[21] This is peculiar to the U.S. and is a result of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 573 U.S. ___ (2014), which recognized that the freedom of religion protections of the First Amendment extend to closely held businesses.

complex for detailed treatment here. It is important that the CRC has a study committee reporting on religious liberty and religious persecution.[22]

Those who work in civil positions (i.e., county clerk, magistrate, territorial judge, etc.) that involve the issuing of marriage documents will not be able to claim religious freedom as grounds for refusal to carry out their civil responsibilities. Part of the oath of office is a promise to faithfully execute public duties. A person's implication in issuing required public documents is insufficient to trigger religious liberty protections.

The same is likely to be held for public officials who are required by law to solemnize civil marriages. Attempts to accord civil officials the same right of refusal to officiate as religious clergy have failed in several Canadian provinces. As of 2015, the state of North Carolina has adopted such a policy, and it is currently being considered in other U.S. states. Overall, it is unlikely that civil officials will be excused from performing their official functions.

Initial cases in the United States for persons and businesses that provide wedding-related services indicate that religious liberty claims face an uphill struggle if a person or business advertises their services to the public. Especially in communities that have enacted antidiscrimination provisions that include sexual orientation as a protected category, courts and commissions are likely to require that services be made available regardless of personal religious objections.

Providing these services to same-sex couples may violate the conscience of some individuals in our churches. Others may feel no burden of conscience to refuse services to same-sex couples. Such decisions are best made on an individual level. Just as we do not mandate that members do not provide catering for bar mitzvahs or arrange flowers for a wedding between two atheists, providing services to other people does not inherently imply an agreement with the event taking place or with every aspect of the customer's life.

On a personal level, as opposed to a professional or business level, church members may be invited to participate in a same-sex wedding celebration in a variety of ways—from standing up in the wedding to being involved in the music or liturgy. We judge any participation short of officiating to be a discretionary matter in which a person's own conscience before God should guide their decision.

Ministers of the Word, commissioned pastors, and other ordained leaders of the church will be aware that their involvement in a same-sex ceremony is likely to be scrutinized closely. "Involvement" can include any of a dozen roles, from reading Scripture to prayer to walking a daughter down the aisle to receiving a token of thanks and appreciation from a son. These potential involvements are too complex to create blanket rules of prohibition or allowance. Suffice it to say that ordained and commissioned church leaders should exercise caution and discretion in their public roles.

[22] For an excellent legal argument in favor of recognizing religious liberty protection in relationship to same-sex marriage, see Douglas Laycock, "Religious Liberty and the Culture Wars," 2014 *Illinois Law Review* 839.

B. The church community

We now turn to same-sex marriage as it affects the Christian church community. We address this pastoral guidance through three aspects of church life: welcoming, belonging, and discipling. Welcoming is the introductory stage in which a person and a church become acquainted and establish a relationship. Belonging is the stage of enfolding a new person into membership within the community. Discipling is the process in which church members seek transformation into the likeness of Christ and the church becomes the body of Christ.

Addressing these stages sequentially runs the risk of implying that persons in same-sex marriages are most likely to encounter the church from a starting point outside the church. That would be misleading. Many same-sex oriented people already call our congregations home, and various questions will arise from our brothers and sisters who are already members. We are addressing it this way as a matter of conceptual convenience.

So we note that the church is most likely to encounter same-sex marriage when a same-sex oriented church member decides to marry. For the purposes of our discussion, we treat that situation under subheading 3, Discipling (below).

1. Welcoming

   In *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, the CRC affirms that "in the new community all are welcome" (para. 34). Welcoming involves the process of invitation, introduction, and establishing a relationship. We were encouraged during our listening sessions to hear pastors, elders, and church leaders consistently affirm that all persons are to be welcomed into fellowship and invited into relationship with Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel has no preconditions for its hearing; the faithful church has doors open to the world.

   In 1973 and in 2002, synod affirmed that same-sex oriented persons were to be welcomed and included in the pastoral ministry of the church. In 2016, synod should affirm that persons in same-sex marriages are also to be welcomed and invited into a relationship with Jesus Christ. If we are to be true to our confessions and our testimonies, we must be welcoming and an embodiment of the grace that is ours through Jesus Christ.

   To say that Synods 1973 and 2002 affirmed the church's welcome and pastoral ministry with same-sex oriented persons is, of course, not to tell the whole story. The affirmation of 1973 was adopted amid significant disagreement within the church, and Synod 2002's adoption of the report on Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members was prompted by acknowledging that the CRC had not been a supportive or welcoming place for persons, whether members or not, who were same-sex oriented.

   This remains a crucial challenge for the CRC, one that we deeply lament. While 78 percent of ministers who responded to our survey reported having intentionally tried to show Christ's love to same-sex oriented people, only 12 percent said their church is intentionally seeking to provide a hospitable place for same-sex oriented people to know and worship God. An additional 35 percent said their church is doing this in some ways, and 44 percent responded that they are not doing so.

   Responses to the question "Do you ever hear comments from church members that you believe would be offensive to people in your

congregation who are attracted to the same sex?" were even more alarming: 61 percent of responding ministers said they had heard offensive comments from congregants, and 75 percent of nonheterosexual (self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer,[23] or same-sex attracted) respondents in the whole survey reported hearing offensive comments from church members. This is profoundly disturbing; repentance is needed.

Can the CRC live out its intention to be welcoming to same-sex couples and families? We pray so. The challenges are readily apparent and, in some cases, require discernment of a high degree. In our listening sessions, the willingness to welcome was often accompanied by tempering statements such as "we wouldn't want to give the wrong impression" or "we shouldn't hide our denominational position on homosexuality." There was anxiety and uncertainty over the appropriate point or situation in which the CRC's position on homosexuality and same-sex relationships should be made clear. We understand the tensions inherent in the situation.

The key, we suggest, is that in welcoming, the church and its members are willing to enter into relationship with people as Christ does—without preconditions. To welcome involves entering into honest relationship, offering the hospitality of Christ, and in the process of an unfolding relationship discerning moments for appropriate and needed conversations and genuine encounter. Welcoming involves recognizing that the life and grace we share in Christ cannot be reduced to solely a matter of sexual orientation or behavior.

This is especially true in the programs and outreach of the church. One pastor, in response to the committee's survey, wrote that at a recent parenting series sponsored by the church and offered to the community, the first couple to sign up was a same-sex couple. What does it mean for the church to be welcoming in this situation? For a start, it means that the church is hospitable; it treats others with dignity. It respects the impulse that draws people to the church and does not stymie the desire to draw from God's goodness. Pastors and church leaders enter into relationships with people—relationships shaped by the grace and goodness of God.

There will be appropriate opportunities for conversation and for communicating the understanding of marriage within the CRC. Certainly, should a same-sex couple inquire about the church's position, leadership should invite the couple into a time of conversation that, while being invitational, does not conceal or obscure the denomination's theological statements from 1973. Later in this section on pastoral guidance we address communicating the 1973 report truthfully and gracefully. What is to be avoided is the impulse to "make clear where the CRC stands" in a way that would undo or block the welcome that the church offers.

Questions of serving and leadership in various church ministries were raised in our survey and listening sessions. Most frequently, these questions surrounded day-to-day participation in the life of the church. May a spouse in a civil same-sex marriage serve as an usher? A nursery supervisor? May they volunteer in the church office? May they teach a Sunday school class or volunteer in a children's ministry that their child attends? May they serve with their musical or creative gifts? The variety of

[23] "Queer" has been reclaimed as a positive umbrella term by many in the LGBTQ community.

potential situations is broad in scope. Also relevant are the church life context of each situation, the person's relationship with others in the church, and their discipleship journey. This committee wrestled with whether any productive advice can be given to the whole denomination on matters of service and leadership. We concluded that one size does not fit all and that it would be unwise to attempt to parse out advice for multiple potential situations in a report such as this. Decisions of this nature rightly belong to the discernment of the local church, where the persons involved are known and loved.

2. Belonging (membership)

   Welcoming inevitably moves toward belonging, and the welcoming ministry of the church naturally moves toward enfolding people into the life of the church as members. It is here that the most obvious tensions arise between the CRC's 1973 report on homosexuality and the church's ministry with married same-sex couples and, if applicable, their families.

   Enfolding is an interplay between two dimensions of the church's life: the organic and the formal. The organic dimension is the body life dimension—delightful, messy, full of surprises and peculiarities. It is the rich concoction of lives, relationships, and interactions that make up the body of Christ. It is people living in community, sharing life, struggling to overcome their own and the world's brokenness, offering their gifts in service to God, each other, and the world. It is the church being what it is called to be: family to one another, and salt and light for the kingdom as the body of Christ. It is the goodness and grace of God made tangible.

   The formal dimension of the church touches on belonging through its rules of membership. The church creates structure and establishes order so that the organic life of the community can flourish. The church has rules of membership and establishes rights and responsibilities for people who are members. It identifies expectations for church members and follows procedures for discipline. These formal rules are a mix of biblical principles, cultural practice, and pragmatic wisdom. The formal is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The formal serves a vital function—to create a form and structure through which the body life of the church flourishes.

   Contemporary ministry situations make it difficult for these two aspects of belonging to always mesh well. For many churches—those in urban areas, in the extended suburbs of larger cities, in college towns, or in areas of high transiency—the organic happens at a pace and with an intensity that the formal finds difficult to process. Relationships form quickly. Persons who are swiftly welcomed find themselves sharing in the ministry of the church before all the formalities of membership can be observed. This is one element of the tension.

   A second element is especially apropos to same-sex couples. As welcoming initiates the process of enfolding, especially the forging of relationships, disappointment and frustration are felt when obstacles arise to continuing and completing the process of enfolding. This disappointment and frustration are felt not only by those seeking to become members but also by those within the church community who have reached out in welcome. Friendships and developing spiritual relationships do not

await membership papers. Spiritual gifts are offered and received before formalities catch up. Inasmuch as same-sex couples are welcomed and begin integration into the body life of the church, it will be a not-insignificant challenge from a formal membership perspective to say "thus far and no farther." Below we address specific scenarios addressing questions of membership.

a. Transfers of membership

The first "belonging" situation to consider is a request from a CRC member in a same-sex marriage or relationship for a transfer of membership. It is not uncommon, for example, for young adults to leave for college and several years of work or graduate school before settling in to a new community and church. Meanwhile, their membership remains in the church in which they were raised, a church which they may be 5, 10, or even more years removed from regularly attending.

Church Order Article 59-d regulates the transfer of membership between Christian Reformed congregations:

> Confessing members coming from other Christian Reformed congregations shall be admitted to confessing membership in the congregation upon the presentation of certificates of membership attesting to their soundness in doctrine and life.

A straightforward reading of Article 59 suggests that transfers of membership can occur only when the church that is sending the membership to another church can attest that the person is a member in good standing. Along with the request for transfer, however, comes information that the person requesting transfer is in a same-sex marriage or relationship. This situation could give rise, unfortunately, to the home church (or "sending" church), despite having little or no current relationship with the person requesting the transfer, denying the request and beginning a process of discipline from a distance and without a meaningful relationship.

It seems to us that the appropriate place for membership (whether "in good standing" or otherwise), while focusing on discipling and potential discipline, is where organic belonging is currently strongest, which may be influenced by a number of factors—length of time away from the previous church, connections to the new church, distance between churches, and so on. It makes little sense to have a distant church attempting to pursue discipleship and to exercise discipline.

A situation raised in the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* points perhaps to a better way to respond pastorally to a situation of a member erring in doctrine or life but having stronger ties to the "receiving" church than the "sending" church. The *Commentary* explains:

> The "sending" council does have other options. It could take appropriate disciplinary steps and continue to work with the [individual] as an "erring" member. It could even ask the council of the "receiving" church for assistance, especially when long distances are involved.
>
> (*Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, pp. 359-60)

In such a scenario, the sending church could begin and follow up the process of discipline, relying on the receiving church to carry out the practical ministry of discipling in its place.

We wonder whether another option might also be appropriate and would be consistent with the intent of Article 59. In this option, the sending church includes a notation on the membership papers indicating that questions have arisen regarding the person's doctrine and life as well as the general nature of those questions. It then entrusts to the receiving church the decision whether to receive the membership, as well as the responsibility to follow through on discipling and potential discipline.

If this option is followed, there are some logical steps to be taken. First, the pastor or an elder should have a conversation with the person(s) requesting transfer. It should be an honest conversation that includes discussion of the potential implications of the same-sex relationship. In other words, the request for a membership transfer should be confirmed with knowledge of what the request entails.

Second, there should be communication between the two churches. Inquiry should be made as to whether the church presently holding membership is aware of the same-sex relationship and has formally responded to it (i.e., Is the person requesting transfer currently a member in good standing?).

Third, there should be an agreement as to which congregation is best situated to engage in the discipleship the situation warrants. If it is the original congregation, membership should remain there and pastoral care should be the responsibility of that congregation, with perhaps some assistance from the other church as appropriate. If it is the new congregation and its council agrees to it, the membership papers should be sent with appropriate notations and discipleship/discipline should become the responsibility of the receiving church.

Churches may be reluctant to accept a membership transfer in a difficult pastoral situation, one that perhaps seems likely to shift quickly from discipling to discipline. After conversation about the potential implications of transferring formal membership, some persons will choose to withdraw the request. They may decide to go elsewhere, or to live with the tensions of belonging organically but not formally. Regardless of the person's decision, the hope is that there is a depth of relationship with the person that will motivate a desire to continue in the discipling journey. That is most likely to happen within the community wherein the person has begun to find a spiritual home.

b. Requests for membership

From a formal membership perspective, a non-CRC same-sex married couple or an individual in a same-sex marriage requesting membership in a CRC church sets in motion a series of events that will seem straightforward to some but will seem, to others, fraught with uncertainties. Such a request will be one opportunity, although not the first, for conversation regarding the position of the CRC on same-sex sexual relations. The temptation for some church leaders will be to treat this as the end of the conversation, with the conclusion that membership is out of the question. If that is the case, why prolong the conversation?

We hope that the request for membership would either initiate or continue a conversation in which CRC members who are close to the

couple listen in concert with providing an explanation of the CRC position on same-sex relationships. There should be patience in answering questions. Biblical references should be apt and should be used without condemnation of same-sex oriented persons, in order to discern faithful living as citizens of God's kingdom. There will be a need to listen, and in some situations the couple may be well versed in Scripture and theology as it relates to their relationship. The conversation should avoid the poles of defensiveness and aggressiveness.

The logic of the Church Order on membership and the 1973 report on homosexuality is that a person in a same-sex sexual relationship is committing sin. To become a member, one must indicate their willingness to abide by the teaching as well as the admonition and discipline of the church. If one is engaged in sin, one must either repent (and commit to resisting sin) or be denied membership in good standing (we will address the situation of someone who is already a member of the church in the next section).

Following this logic, a person or couple in a same-sex sexually active relationship should not be accepted as members in good standing in the church. Most membership requests will end with the couple or individual either leaving the community abruptly or slowly disengaging from the church community. Others may live with an uncomfortable disconnect between organic and formal membership, existing in a form of limbo within the church community.

If a person or couple agree to accept the CRC's teaching on same-sex sexual relations and bring their lives into conformity, no obstacle prevents their acceptance as members. That is clear enough. What does "conformity" entail? The 1973 CRC position requires cessation of same-sex sexual relations. The current position does not require dissolution of a civil marriage; nor should the church be heard to require or encourage the dissolution of functioning families.

The foregoing, as we indicated, follows the logic of the Church Order and the 1973 position of the CRC on homosexuality. The realities of ministry are always complex. Some churches and pastors will encounter same-sex persons or couples (as well as other members in the congregation) who are committed Christians and versed both in Scripture and in contemporary theological discussions over same-sex relationships. Their affection for and devotion to Christ are not in question. They have reached a considered opinion that is at odds with CRC teaching. The 1973 denominational position, which constitutes pastoral advice on a pastoral matter, does not require agreement of opinion on same-sex relationships.[24] It does, however, bind sexual behavior.

Our pastoral guidance is bound by the mandate to our committee. A pastoral observation, however, to the church at large is that the complexities of ministry will keep membership issues a point of tension. A number of CRC churches are already navigating the challenges of

[24] As noted in section I, D of our report, Synod 1975 delineated the status of various synodical reports and pronouncements. The 1973 report on homosexuality constitutes pastoral advice on an ethical matter, and therefore provides rules governing the behavior of church members, but does not conclusively end discussion and debate on the issue. See also DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, pp. 165-71.

integrating same-sex couples into the life of the church and for them the logic of being denied membership is experienced as damaging rather than life-giving.

c. Children and baptism

Further questions arise for churches when a same-sex couple has children. The participation of the family in the church community may well begin through involvement in children's or youth programs.

The church as a covenant community has a responsibility to nurture the faith of children so that they know they are loved by God, that Christ has died for them, that the Holy Spirit lives in them, and that they have a purpose in God's kingdom. When a same-sex couple's household includes children, the children need the church as a community of grace for their own faith development, regardless of the relationship status of their parents. In this we follow the example of Jesus, who welcomed children and warned against placing obstacles in their path.

Scripture encourages and the CRC's teaching compels us to welcome the children of same-sex couples into its fellowship and programs. Again, a great deal of discernment and maturity is required. The church should not hide its views regarding marriage and appropriate sexual relations, but it shouldn't unnecessarily emphasize them in a way that causes public awkwardness or shame, especially for children. The church should take special care not to be disruptive or dismissive of family relationships or to undercut parental authority or legitimacy.

If children are of age to make profession of faith, their request for membership and baptism can be treated in distinction from the request of the parents. This will be dependent on the understanding and maturity of the child.

May a church baptize the infants and young children of a same-sex married couple? The Church Order states that "the covenant of God shall be sealed to children of confessing members by holy baptism" (Church Order Art. 56). In baptism, God makes covenant promises to that child. The profession of faith and membership in good standing of at least one parent are necessary for pledging covenantal promises to raise the child to know God's love for the child in Christ.

The CRC has rarely varied from the position that a parent is the appropriate covenantal member to make promises on behalf of the child. According to the Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary, in very rare instances, extended family members who function in loco parentis have brought the child for baptism.[25] Churches and leaders should minister creatively but cautiously.

d. Communion

Pastors and other church leaders have requested guidance on questions such as participation in communion. Participation in the Lord's Supper is one of the principal acts of belonging within a congregation. Partaking of the body and blood of Christ is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. While communion is usually considered as it relates to membership in a church, in many churches communion within

[25] Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, pp. 311-13.

public worship connects a community's members with visitors and new arrivals who are welcomed as part of the larger Christian communion.

Within the CRC, the question of participation in the sacrament is complicated by a diversity of practice with respect to communion. Some congregations still require nonmembers to request permission and receive consistory approval before being welcomed to the table. Emphasis is upon protecting the honor of the table and ensuring that only professing members participate. Visitors and persons who are not yet members are screened before permission is granted. Such CRC churches should continue their practice of welcoming all who are members in good standing of a Christian church to join the table. Unless and until someone is placed under formal discipline and access to the sacraments is denied, the table should remain open.

For many CRC churches, access to the table is moderated in the communion liturgy itself through the three-fold requirements of the invitation.[26] The honor of the table is protected in the first instance by God's own self, and the danger of undiscerning participation falls on the person responding to the invitation's expectations. Those who come to the table bear the responsibility of discerning participation.

Churches who follow this practice for communion should remain consistent in approach. People new to the congregation and visitors should be welcomed according to practice. Members in good standing should be welcomed to the table. The church's communion practice for those who have entered same-sex marriage relationships should be no different than for any others whose conduct is deemed contrary to biblical teaching.

Restricting access to the sacraments is a fearsome thing. It is not to be done hastily or lightly. Communion is the church's fundamental expression of oneness in Christ—one bread, one cup, one body. Only with the greatest reluctance and with the greatest procedural safeguards should the church take the step of forbidding access to the sacraments as means of grace. The Lord's Supper and its meaning may well provide an opportunity for conversation with those new to the church, including those in a same-sex marriage, to speak of the relationship between sin, grace, and a life of gratitude.

3. Discipling

The words *discipling* and *discipline* derive from the same root but carry different connotations. In common parlance, a disciple is one who follows a leader; discipline is understood as a penalty imposed in an attempt to bring an offender back in line.

Within the church, *discipling* is an interactive practice that holds us in relationship with Christ, our teacher. The church defines *discipline* positively and restoratively—consisting of measures intended to restore a person to full membership. It is difficult, however, for the term *discipline* to shake its association with a form of punishment, especially when traditional measures such as withholding the sacraments or excommunication are the most public forms of discipline.

[26] (1) Awareness of sin and the need of God's grace, (2) trusting in Jesus as the source of salvation, and (3) commitment to living obedient lives in gratitude to God.

So we have chosen the term *discipling*, knowing that discipling may in time and circumstance include discipline. We do so because we encourage the church to think first and foremost of our ongoing relationship with Christ. To jump prematurely to the question "Will the church formally discipline church members who are in same-sex marriages?" is to short-circuit the relationship between Christ and his disciples.

We have intentionally chosen the word *discipling* because we wish to emphasize that a church member who contemplates or pursues marriage in a same-sex marriage does so as a disciple of Christ—a fellow disciple. Pastors and church leaders should understand the situation in terms of discipleship. We are all disciples of Christ—in a discipleship process together pursuing faithfulness to Christ, discerning where God is calling us, and growing in maturity of life and faith.

For a same-sex oriented person who is considering marriage, or who has married, the church may be tempted to move quickly to discipline and a measure of finality. In many situations, the threat or possibility of discipline will break the relationship between the church and the same-sex oriented person or couple. Ending along with that will be the possibility of further discipleship. We encourage pastors and church leaders to show patience and to allow discipling to run its course. A healthy church should not seek to avoid difficult situations by dismissing them.

The process of mutual discipling begins with standing in relationship and with listening to each other. In most cases, a person's decision to contemplate or to enter into a same-sex marriage is not made casually or lightly. It follows years of questioning, introspection, and prayer. The spiritual aspects of the decision have been treated with deliberateness. The church and its leaders should treat those concerned and shape the church's response with patience, thoughtfulness, and prayer. The church should not rush to judgment on vital spiritual matters. Churches and members should be given time and space to address these matters.

Ministers and church leaders have a pastoral responsibility to speak with married same-sex couples or persons contemplating same-sex marriage about the CRC's teaching on sex and marriage. There should be honesty and openness about the personal as well as public ramifications of different courses of action.

Should the person or couple continue in a sexual relationship, Church Order Article 81 (in conjunction with the 1973 report's designation of all same-sex sexual relations as sinful) lays out a logic of formal discipline. The initiation of formal discipline is a discretionary matter that is not frequently invoked among our congregations today. It should always be a last resort after communication and mutual reflection have failed. It is, however, the appointed conclusion of the CRC's reading of Scripture and its understanding of Church Order.

We call the church's attention to a matter that troubles us as a committee. The formal process of discipline leading to excommunication is rarely exercised in our churches today. Perhaps the church will find that its teaching and discipling on same-sex sexual relations will result in either repentance or same-sex persons/couples leaving the CRC without formal discipline. It is deeply disturbing that the one category of sin that the church seems to affirm in its intention to discipline to the point of

excommunication is same-sex sexual relations. We run the risk of living into the stereotype that the world has of Christians.

We also note that differences in the pace and the certainty with which discipling morphs into formal discipline in the situation of same-sex marriage are likely to cause disagreement within the denomination. Some CRC churches are likely to move quickly. Others will move in a slower fashion. Still others will make accommodations in cases of conscience or acknowledgment of a person or couple's situation. The presence of a person's or couple's children may change the dynamics. These are descriptions of how churches are likely to act, not how they should act. We have given our pastoral guidance above in line with our mandate from synod. We do, however, encourage the churches at large to show forbearance in scrutinizing and questioning the process of discipling as carried out in other congregations.

C. Facing culture and the future

1. Supporting Christian marriage and the family

The legal acceptance of same-sex marriage in the United States and Canada does not, as we argued earlier, preclude the CRC from holding its own view of marriage and conducting its programs and ministries in consistency with that view.

In an earlier example, we mentioned that some churches and classes have sponsored seminars or conferences on marriage, making them available to all interested persons. There is much to commend about sharing the wisdom of the Christian tradition freely. The church should be intentional in shaping a message of encouragement and openness. Church leaders should think through how they will respond graciously and nonconfrontationally if same-sex couples attend. Conference or seminar leaders should state the church's understanding of marriage clearly but simply and avoid a hostile or aggressive style. They should avoid argument and encourage open conversation.

Similarly, sermons and the teaching ministry of the church that touch on marriage should focus on the divine intentions and blessings that undergird marriage. Undue disparagement of same-sex marriage or using the legalization of same-sex marriage as a prop to create alarm over threats to traditional Christian marriage is unbecoming to the gospel and counterproductive with many people.

There is also a temptation within parts of the Christian community to argue for the absolute superiority of the traditional Christian family and to warn against the damage that will ensue for families headed by same-sex couples. We suggest that this is neither honest nor beneficial. In recent years, courts in the United States have heard extensive arguments over the question whether children raised in families headed by opposite-sex parents fare better than children raised by same-sex couples.[27] Whatever differences there may be are too subtle to be statistically relevant. The church will not fare well in the long run if it overstates differences in outcome.

[27] For example, the ruling of Judge Bernard Friedman in *DeBoer v. Snyder,* www.freedomtomarry.org/page/-/files/pdfs/MichiganRuling.pdf.

Our pastoral guidance is that the church's gospel ministry is best served by offering the wisdom of the Christian community in support of marriage and of loving, stable family life.

2. Cultural contexts

The committee spoke with a spectrum of ethnicities and cultures across the CRC, including majority and minority communities. Conversations focused on the anticipated response within specific ethnic communities to same-sex marriage. The committee found these meetings instructive.

With due regard for the dangers of generalization, ethnic and multi-ethnic communities support the CRC's 1973 position on homosexuality. Overall, there was only mild concern regarding society's move toward approval of civil same-sex marriage, with uncertainty as to the effect of same-sex marriage on churches and leaders. There was concern, on the other hand, over same-sex marriage and the church. Changes to the CRC's position on homosexuality would cause varying degrees of tension. In the case of immigrant minority persons, first-generation immigrants and those who have spent less time in North America were more likely to consider homosexuality in a wholly negative light. Same-sex oriented persons who are also ethnic minority may need significant pastoral support and enfolding.

3. Young adults and the coming generations

In the opening paragraphs to this report, we mentioned the shift in public opinion regarding same-sex relationships, with opposition to same-sex marriage now a minority position within North America. Nowhere is this shift more evident than among young adults, including Christian young adults and, among them, those who have grown up within the CRC. In a May 2015 poll by the Pew Research Center, 73 percent of Millennials (born after 1980) support same-sex marriage.[28] In our own survey, 52 percent of the CRC-affiliated students who responded said they support civil same-sex marriage, and 41 percent believe same-sex marriage should be allowed in the church.

The reasons for this are many, but chief among them is that same-sex oriented persons and same-sex couples are a visible and accepted part of social networks and the lived experience of young adults. They have thought through matters of sexuality with varying degrees of intentionality. Their experiences and opinions often show a critical disconnect with the conclusions of the 1973 report and with its biblical interpretation. In their daily lives they make no distinctions between same-sex oriented and opposite-sex oriented persons. Many do not understand why that distinction should matter in the church.

The pastoral guidance that we offer in this regard is of a cautionary sort and, we surmise, deeply unsatisfying in many ways. Later in this report we will discuss truthful and gracious ways to present the conclusions of the 1973 and 2002 reports. There are limits to what can be done in this regard. At the least, the church ignores the disconnect between young adults and the position of the CRC on homosexuality at its peril. Rather than avoid discussion of same-sex marriage and homosexuality, the CRC

[28] www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/26/same-sex-marriage. Accessed August 8, 2015.

will need to undertake it thoughtfully in a way that goes beyond mere taking notice, instead incorporating and responding to the reflections and experiences of the rising generation, as well as continuing to explore the church's understanding of Scripture and of living faithfully in accordance with it.

4. Same-sex oriented persons

Each same-sex oriented Christian is a unique individual with their own journey. This principle was articulated in the 2002 report and remains true today:

> Ministry, especially pastoral care, must be specific to each person. Prejudgment is prejudice. Making pastoral assumptions before meeting a person and hearing her or his story is not only poor pastoral care; it also violates an officebearer's subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 43), which reminds us not to "judge anyone unheard."[29]

Much has changed since the CRC's last report on homosexuality in 2002, and both the cultural conversation regarding same-sex relationships and the conversation within the Christian community have developed and have become more accessible in the past ten years. Same-sex oriented Christians have invested significant energy and effort exploring these resources. They are active in discerning how they will integrate their faith and their sexuality.

The committee had opportunity to speak with same-sex oriented persons in the CRC as well as leaders experienced in ministry with same-sex oriented persons. A significant number of respondents to the committee's survey (326 persons) self-identified as other than heterosexual or not sure. For some, the availability of civil same-sex marriage presents them with a decision not afforded earlier generations. This societal change is accompanied by an increasing number of voices within the wider Christian church wondering whether committed same-sex relationships can be a part of a Christian's faith journey.

The committee received this response from a CRC member who read a draft of this report. She noted that the report prompted

> . . . [a] deep sadness [that] came from the fact that once again this report, much like the 1973 and 2002 reports, relegates LGBT persons to the sidelines of the conversation. The very people whose lives the report seeks to provide comment on are given no voice here. There is a great deal of talk about LGBT people and how pastors and churches should manage such people, but no chance to hear directly the voices of LGBT people within this conversation. Throughout the report there is still a distancing of LGBT people as "those people." There is never a sense that they are "our people" [whom] we love deeply.
>
> This feeling of "othering" and "distancing" is most evident to me in that, in the report, there is great deal of talk about sex within same-sex marriage but very little talk about love. Is this how heterosexual people would talk about their own opposite-sex marriages? Whether or not the committee agrees with same-sex marriage, it seems important to grant a bit more dignity to same-sex oriented members of the CRC.

[29] *Agenda for Synod 2002*, p. 317.

The committee has been aware of this regrettable consequence in addressing its mandate but has found this consequence unavoidable in following the teaching of the 1973 report.

In our conversations with same-sex oriented persons in the CRC, a recurring theme has been that same-sex oriented Christians are sensitive to assumptions made by the church and its leaders. More importantly, they are sensitive to the church's desire, both perceived and real, not to talk about homosexuality and related matters such as same-sex marriage. Same-sex oriented respondents to the survey were the demographic most insistent that the church must continue to talk about homosexuality and ministry with sexual minorities.

5. Chaplaincy ministries

Approximately one in ten CRC ministers is a chaplain. Chaplains represent the presence of Christ and the gospel ministry in nonecclesiastical settings: the military, hospitals, hospices, jails and prisons, counseling offices, universities, and workplaces. For chaplains, the institutional settings where they serve are analogous to their "congregations." Likewise, people who work in these places may consider the chaplain to be their pastor. Especially for people who have no religious affiliation or are not part of a faith community, the chaplain may be the only pastor in their lives and the one they turn to for important life events such as baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Chaplains, as ordained ministers, are supervised in their faith and life by a church council.

Military chaplains are in a unique situation. Supervised by and accountable to both the federal government and the church, they must abide by federal nondiscrimination laws, which include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories. Currently in the U.S. and Canada, if a chaplain's endorsing faith group does not allow for same-sex marriage, the chaplain is allowed to refuse to perform a same-sex wedding when asked to do so. If the endorsing faith group allows for same-sex marriage, however, the chaplain must perform the wedding of a same-sex military personnel couple who request it, even if doing so violates the chaplain's conscience.

Since the CRC does not permit religious same-sex marriage, military chaplains will opt out of performing a same-sex wedding. Nonmilitary chaplains, on the other hand, may face a pastoral dilemma, since they are accountable to their workplace policies as well as their local CRC council. If a workplace employee asks the chaplain to perform her or his same-sex wedding, it is important for the chaplain to consult with the chaplain's direct supervisor in the workplace and the council of the church that holds the chaplain's ministerial credentials.

Such a request may present the chaplain with a pastoral challenge, given that the way the chaplain responds will affect the spiritual care relationship with the employee. It may be that the chaplain can affirm the employee, support the Christlike qualities of the relationship, and decline the request to perform the wedding. The chaplain may also refer the employee to another clergyperson who is able to respond to this request without risking her or his ministerial credentials. The goal of such conversations becomes maintaining a caring, supportive, spiritual relationship

while also acknowledging the pastor's own boundaries in the area of same-sex marriage.

The CRC should be sensitive to the potential conflict that might arise for a chaplain whose work is overseen by a CRC council as well as by a governmental or other employer. If potential officiating at a same-sex ceremony is required as a condition of employment, is the chaplain's only option to resign (if that is even possible)? Or may the chaplain lodge his or her objection and officiate in an official capacity (such as a judge or justice of the peace might)? While we would hope that such cases not arise, we would also hope that the supervising church council would grant some leeway within Church Order Article 69 in such an exceptional circumstance.

6. Communicating the 1973 position with grace and truth

Synod requested that the committee explore how the denominational position on same-sex orientation and behavior can be communicated graciously and truthfully in the current cultural situation.

This is a significant challenge. In the current cultural climate even voices of caution and hesitation regarding same-sex relationships may well be heard as bigoted or biased. While the church's witness should never be muted, learning to speak when necessary and in measured tones is the better part of wisdom. We consider three situations in which the 1973 synodical report is likely to be represented.

a. To individuals, especially same-sex oriented persons

Many pastors have faced or will face a situation in which an individual or a couple (same-sex or opposite-sex oriented) inquires about the stance of the CRC. This may be a difficult conversation to navigate well. One minister writes, for example:

> We have a member who encourages her daughter and her partner of 17+ years to come to church. Their question is, "What is the stance of the church?" To tell them what the official position is implies a judgment against them whether we intend it or not. The irony in this is their relationship is more stable, loving, and caring than many who serve as leaders of this church.
>
> (Pastor, survey respondent)

Gracious and truthful communication involves attention to both the context and the content of the communication. Regarding context, we suggest the following for pastors and church leaders:

- Familiarize yourself with the current resources available to same-sex oriented Christians committed to a traditionally believing view of marriage.[30]
- Offer to meet for prayer and study. Agree together to read widely, from a variety of interpretive perspectives for the purposes of discussion and exploration.
- Explore together opportunities for this individual or couple to connect with others sharing a similar journey—either online or in person.

[30] See Appendix B.

– Encourage this individual or couple to connect with a spiritual director or mentor (the pastor, someone else in the church or broader Christian community) who can support them in building sustainable spiritual practices.

In terms of content, care should be taken to respect the following:

– Become more than just familiar with the 1973 synodical report. Understand the Reformed contours of its thought and its anchoring in a positive vision of God's creation.
– Use scriptural texts appropriately. Emphasis should be on the scriptural witness to creation and marriage.
– Avoid emphasis on Hebrew terms of taboo, which are translated sometimes as "abomination" or "detestable." These terms need to be understood in the larger theological context of the Old Testament, and read in ways that are consistent with a Reformed interpretation of the entirety of Old Testament law in its various forms. Too often, these terms have been used to incite a sense of shame and self-loathing that is inconsistent with the intent of the 1973 and 2002 reports and can be spiritually and emotionally destructive.
– Avoid misuse of texts that apply only tangentially, if at all. The 1973 report provides exegesis of several commonly used texts, noting that each had a context not directly speaking to committed same-sex relationships. When texts are situated within sexual violence, idolatry, power imbalance, and excessive lust, it is important to take such contexts into consideration. Phrases such as "God gave them over . . . " or "will not inherit the kingdom of God" can do great harm when insensitively applied to all same-sex oriented persons. Questions of causation are complex. Declarations about such matters ought not be made on the basis of simplistic application of a biblical text.
– Honor the person's responsibility in clarifying their convictions and beliefs. Focus on encouraging their commitment to Jesus Christ and cultivating a vibrant spiritual life.
– Entrust this person to the Holy Spirit and resist using shame or fear as motivators to embrace celibacy.

b. In church contexts

In many congregations, aversion to discussing sexual orientation or same-sex marriage leads to an unhealthy silence. Church members and leaders are not always clear about what synod actually recommended in 1973 and 2002, nor certain as to how to bridge the gulf between that advice and the current context. The 1973 report distinguished between same-sex orientation as symptomatic of a disordered creation but not sinful in and of itself, and same-sex sexual behavior, which is considered sinful.

In the survey, we found that 80 percent of CRC ministers polled, 75 percent of CRC students polled, and 57 percent of respondents in the survey's church member sample personally hold that same-sex attraction is not sinful, as synod advised in 1973. However, a substantial minority of respondents maintain that simply experiencing attraction to the same sex is sinful. In contradiction to the

denomination's position, 14 percent of CRC ministers—100 of the 700 respondents—hold that "being attracted to a member of the same sex is sinful, even if it is never acted upon." Thirty-one percent of respondents in the church member sample and 17 percent of CRC students similarly believe same-sex attraction itself to be sinful.

Further, 9 percent of ministers polled say that gay Christians should "repent of choosing to be gay," along with 12 percent of the church member sample respondents and 8 percent of CRC students responding. This belief is also not supported by the synodical reports from 1973 and 2002.

We recommend churches and ministers take note of the following when considering how to communicate the teachings of the 1973 report in the church setting:

- Do not assume everyone is heterosexual in the church, even if you are not aware of anyone who is same-sex oriented. Always speak as if same-sex oriented persons and their loved ones are present. Create a climate in which families will not reject their gay children and where same-sex oriented persons can be honest about all aspects of their personhood.
- Speak with respect and hold others to the same standard.
- Leaders must set the tone and give permission for others to have a generous dialogue that does not jump to polarized extremes.
- Acknowledge the reality that same-sex oriented people are loved by God and that same-sex orientation is not chosen or sinful.
- Be humble: acknowledge that the church and Christians have often contributed to stigmatization of gay people and have tried to keep them from gaining basic rights.
- Make clear that the gospel calls all people to chastity.
- Take intentional steps as a congregation to enfold single members in the day to day life of families, in service, in ministry, and in leadership. This may mean some families and singles living in intentional community together. Only if our churches can become a more supportive community for single people of all kinds will lifelong celibacy be a more viable vocation for same-sex oriented people.
- Serve the local LGBT community. Support local antibullying initiatives. Volunteer at youth homeless shelters or with a suicide crisis hotline. Above all, listen. Initiatives like this will do more than preaching to convey the love of God with grace and truth to the LGBT community.

c. In the public arena

When speaking to persons or institutions outside the CRC, care should be taken to represent the CRC's position accurately and thoughtfully. This involves explanation of both the "what" and the "why" of this position. As Richard Mouw notes in his book *Uncommon Decency*:

> The whole point of the biblical perspective is to promote a sexuality that is kind and reverent. So it is important that we present the biblical viewpoint kindly and reverently to those with whom we disagree about sexual standards. Not to do so is to undermine our own message.

> Sexual civility is an important way of living out our commitment to the gospel.[31]

There may be skepticism about the practicality of expectations for those who are same-sex oriented. Reference can be made to same-sex oriented Christians who align their lives with this position and who publicly discuss the possibilities as well as the challenges of living in that alignment.

It would also be wise to have the denominational office, through its media representatives, prepare statements and explanatory materials that present the CRC's position in the most gracious and truthful light possible.

In our listening sessions, we were troubled by the repeated occurrence of certain terms. Use of these is less than truthful, and certainly not gracious. These terms were, in most cases, being used by pastors and church leaders. Two terms that should be avoided are

- *Gay lifestyle*—this term is sometimes used to explain one's opposition to *all* same-sex relationships. Saying "I'm opposed to the gay lifestyle" evokes stereotypes of gay bars, promiscuous behavior, surreptitious rendezvous, and a flagrant counterculture of gay socialization—and then applies this stereotype to all same-sex oriented relationships. There is no such thing as "the gay lifestyle," just as there is no "heterosexual lifestyle." There are simply ways people live. It is highly offensive to same-sex oriented persons when opposition to "the gay lifestyle" is invoked.
- *Homosexual/gay agenda*—this term is problematic as well and should be avoided by those in the Christian church. It uses negative associations with the word *agenda* to explain changes within society and to insinuate a coordinated conspiracy to improperly advance the interests of one group over against another. Most social changes are of complex origin. Christians would do best to avoid the language of insinuation and conspiracy. Instead we should speak in terms that resonate with the Christian faith's language of justice, fairness, and flourishing.

7. Observations on the 1973 and 2002 reports and the CRC

Synod 2013, in establishing the mandate for this committee, noted that the 1973 report on homosexuality had "served the church well" in the intervening four decades. In so noting, synod limited the scope of this committee's work to applying the biblical and theological conclusions of 1973. We were not to re-examine the biblical basis of the 1973 report or its theological or ethical conclusions.

We have honored the mandate of synod in our work. We would be remiss, however, if we failed to call attention to several aspects of the 1973 report that require the attention of the church. These are matters that now compromise the ability of the 1973 report to continue to serve the church well. These observations arise from the deliberations of the committee but were also heard regularly in our survey and in our listening sessions with classes and colleagues in specialized ministries.

[31] Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Press, rev. 2010), p. 94.

a. Language and terminology

It is to be expected that language will shift over a forty-year span. Some of the language issues encountered in the 1973 report, however, make it difficult to recommend it as a resource for the church. Particularly telling was the reluctance among pastors and others who work with young adults to refer those seeking information, pastoral care, or instruction to the 1973 report in response to their inquiries.

Three brief examples should suffice. First, the term *homosexualism* figures prominently, especially in the 1973 report. The term has never gained common usage in society or the church. Its prominent use in the 1973 report is confusing and misleading. Use of *-ism* implies some sort of identifiable movement or cultural force. As such, it contains resonances with terms such as *homosexual agenda* or *gay lifestyle*, terms that have been justifiably identified as inappropriate and harmful within the conversation. Continued use of the term *homosexualism* does not represent the CRC well in this discussion.

Second, the phrases *the problem of homosexuality* or t*he problem of the homosexual* are used over forty times in the two reports. To young adults seeking to understand their sexual orientation and its implications for their lives, the repetitive use of the term *problem* increases the likelihood that they will internalize that designation. In other words, it is not a problem "out there," but they themselves are "a problem."

Third, the terms acceptable for use to refer to same-sex oriented persons have changed. Terms such as *gay* and *homosexual* carry different connotations today, or we think about the connotations differently than we did forty years ago. The CRC should be sensitive to these language issues. If the 1973 and 2002 reports are to continue, as Synod 2013 said, "to serve the church well," they need to be revised so that their potential for use remains.

b. Conversion/reparative therapy (sexual orientation change efforts)

Both the 1973 and 2002 reports suggest that the first strategy for dealing with same-sex attraction is to attempt to change orientation. In 1973, not much was known about therapies or strategies for changing one's sexual attraction. In 2002, there was appreciation that the causes of same-sex attraction were varied and that assessing the potential for change of orientation was made difficult by uncertain research protocols, by lack of clarity over what constituted a successful "change of orientation," and recognition that certain forms of therapy could do significant psychological and spiritual harm to those receiving them.

Since 2002, the understanding of so-called conversion therapy has changed significantly in light of research and experience. In 2013, Exodus International, the most prominent umbrella organization for ex-gay ministries in North America, officially ended its ministry after acknowledging the ineffectiveness of conversion efforts. Its leaders issued an apology for the harm done by reparative measures.

Since then, the potential harms of reparative or conversion therapy have been highlighted with a movement to ban the practice for minors. In the U.S., four jurisdictions have outlawed conversion therapy for minors (California, New Jersey, Oregon, and the District of Columbia). In Canada, Manitoba and Ontario ban conversion therapy for minors.

We deemed this aspect of the discussion to be beyond the mandate of the committee. We do, however, think that the church has an obligation to give responsible and realistic pastoral advice to those of same-sex orientation. The 2002 report conveyed cautions with regard to the efficacy of conversion therapy. Data and experience since then suggest that these cautions should be amplified and great care taken with any recommendations for therapy and treatments regarding sexual orientation change, especially with minors. While a few persons find the concept of orientation change fits their own experience, in many cases the change has been from promiscuity to chastity or from same-sex relationships to a mixed orientation marriage,[32] rather than a change in the direction of a person's sexual attractions. The reality of bisexuality may also account for some of these testimonies. An updated position on conversion therapy is very much needed as an accompaniment to any revision of the 1973 and 2002 reports.

VII. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Dr. Rolf Bouma, chair, and Ms. Julia Smith, reporter, when the majority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage is considered.

B. That synod receive the accompanying report for information and recommend it for consideration to churches, pastors, and church leaders and members for background understanding and to promote informed discussion on the matter of civil same-sex marriage.

C. That synod adopt the pastoral guidance contained in section VI of this report as its counsel to churches, pastors, church leaders, and members for addressing the ramifications of civil same-sex marriage as it affects the church and its members.

D. That synod accept this report as fulfilling the mandate of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage.

E. That synod dismiss the committee.

Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance
re Same-sex Marriage
Dan Borst
Rolf T. Bouma, chair
Jessica Driesenga*
Wendy VanderWal-Gritter
John M. Rottman*
Julia Smith, reporter
Ryan Struyk
Karl J. Van Harn
David A. Vroege

*Two members of the committee submitted a minority report regarding specific sections of the majority report.

[32] A mixed orientation marriage describes a marriage between a man and a woman in which one or both of the spouses experiences same-sex attraction.

Appendix A
Summary of Survey Findings

A. Rationale

As the committee's mandate notes, public opinion on same-sex relationships is shifting both outside and within the church. In order to give useful guidance and clarification to the churches on matters raised by same-sex marriage, the committee commissioned a survey as a cost-effective way to gauge the current situation in our congregations.

Our intention in conducting this survey was not to sway opinion or influence future deliberations in the denomination. Rather, as a shepherding committee, we sought by this means to gather the scope of questions, concerns, and experiences present within our community. On a topic that touches strong convictions, fears, and pain, the anonymity of an online survey allows people to share their views honestly without repercussions. While not exhaustive of the survey data, this summary gives an overview of findings that can increase the denomination's self-understanding at this time.

As noted in our report, the survey was not the committee's only avenue of engagement with the churches. The committee also convened several listening sessions with classes and other groups for more in-depth listening around the topic of same-sex marriage.

B. Methodology

The survey was conducted from March 26 to June 30, 2014, by the Calvin College Center for Social Research (CSR). The full survey instrument is available from the committee by request or online at www.calvin.edu/go/ssm-survey-preview. Groups invited to participate in the survey are described below.[33]

1. **Ministers** (n = 700). CSR emailed a unique link to the questionnaire to all 1,276 currently serving ordained ministers in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC); 700 ministers (55%) responded to the survey.
2. **CRC Students** (n = 587). The committee considered it important to hear the hopes and concerns of younger members of the denomination (the college-age population) and from those preparing to enter the ministry. To this end, CSR sent an email with a unique link to the questionnaire to 1,931 students of CRC-affiliated colleges and seminaries who self-identified at enrollment as CRC members or attenders. The response rate for students was 30% (587 students).
3. **Church Member Sample** (n = 363). Since it is not logistically feasible to survey congregants of all CRC churches, CSR devised a method of hearing from a randomly selected sample of church members. Eighty randomly selected CRC congregations were invited to participate in the study; 23 of the 80 agreed to participate. Each participating congregation provided 40 names and email addresses randomly selected from their church directory, such that a total of 920 congregants were invited to take the survey. Of this group, 363 individuals (39%) completed the survey.

[33] All statements have been tested for statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. However, since most of our data is population-based rather than random sampling, tests of statistical significance are generally not meaningful.

4. **Public Sample** (n = 2,547). In addition to the samples above, 2,547 persons affiliated with the denomination took the survey through a link made available through *The Banner* and the CRC website. While these public sample responses are not representative of the denomination and are only mentioned infrequently in this report, the high response rate and the length of comments submitted by this group indicate the importance of the topic and the desire that many have to share their thoughts and concerns.

A total of 226 survey respondents identified as other than heterosexual—179 of these were respondents in the public sample; 16 were CRC ministers. A further 100 respondents including 21 ministers checked "other" or "not sure" on the sexual orientation question. All survey participants were over the age of 18, and all are current or former regular attenders of a CRC congregation.

The committee wishes to thank all those who participated in the survey for their valuable input and the Center for Social Research for their professional assistance in this project.

C. Limitations

The committee cautions the reader to use these survey results lightly and prudently. The pastor and student samples were samples of convenience rather than random samples, and the church member sample, while selected through a random process, is not to be considered representative of all CRC members/attenders. In order to guard against over-interpretation of data from this latter group, we use phrases such as "respondents in this survey's church member sample" instead of "church members." Despite these limitations, the committee offers this data as helpful for gaining a broad overview of current (Spring 2014) attitudes to homosexuality and same-sex marriage in our denomination.

D. Results

Note: The use of terms below—LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual), same-sex attracted, gay, lesbian, etc.—follows the language used in the relevant survey question.

1. Timeliness of the Discussion

There was broad agreement that discussion of homosexuality and same-sex marriage is needed in the denomination at this time:

- 80% of the ministers' sample agreed.
- 90% of the student sample agreed.
- 76% of this survey's church member sample agreed.

Younger ministers are more likely to agree: 85% of those younger than 45 say discussion is necessary now, compared with 77% of those older than 45.

One hundred percent of respondents from this survey's church member sample and student sample who identified as nonheterosexual said discussion is necessary at this time, as did all but two of the nonstraight CRC minister respondents. An overwhelming 173 of the 179 nonstraight

identified respondents in the public sample said that discussion is needed at this time.

2. Knowing Same-Sex Oriented Persons

2.1 Do you personally know anyone in your family or friend circle who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual?

Yes:

- 83% of CRC ministers have an LGB friend or family member, including
  - 82% of male ministers, 97% of female ministers.
  - 89% of ministers younger than 35, 82% of those 35 and over.
  - 86% of White ministers.
  - 41% of Asian/Pacific Islander ministers (other ethnicities range from 74 to 100%).
- 71% of CRC student respondents have an LGB friend or family member.
- 69% of this survey's church member sample have an LGB friend or family member,
  - 56% percent of those with less than a 3-year college degree.
  - 76% of those with a 3-year college degree or higher.
- 84% of respondents in the public sample have an LGB friend or family member.

2.2. How many people in your congregation have disclosed (to you or generally) that they are attracted to members of the same sex?

- 49% of ministers know at least one congregant who has come out.
  - 58% of Canadian ministers know at least one congregant who has come out.
  - 46% of U.S. ministers know at least one congregant who has come out.
- 16% of ministers know three or more congregants who have come out.
- 27% of the CRC student sample know at least one congregant who has come out.
- 24% of this survey's church member sample know at least one congregant who has come out.
- 41% of respondents in the public sample know at least one congregant who has come out.

Comparing these results to the number who know someone in their family or friend circle, it would seem that either there are fewer LGB-identified people in our churches than in our family and friend circles, or that LGB people are less comfortable sharing that part of their lives with others in the church setting.

3. Same-Sex Weddings

At the time of the survey, the majority of respondents had not been invited to attend a same-sex wedding or commitment ceremony. When the survey opened on March 26, 2014, same-sex marriage was legal in Canada, in 15 U.S. states, and in the District of Columbia. By the time the survey closed on June 30, 2014, five additional U.S. states had passed same-sex marriage laws, though these were under appeal in two states.[34]

[34] See http://graphics.latimes.com/usmap-gay-marriage-chronology/.

3.1 Have you ever been invited to a same-sex commitment ceremony or wedding?

Yes:

- 12% of the ministers' sample had been invited—the same in Canada and the U.S. (5% attended).
- 3% of the student sample had been invited (2% attended).
- 9% of this survey's church member sample had been invited (7% attended).
    - 20% of Canadian residents in this survey's church member sample (15% attended).
    - 5% of U.S. residents in this survey's church member sample (3% attended).

3.2 If invited, would you attend a same-sex commitment ceremony or wedding?

- Ministers: 15% yes; 39% under some circumstances; 12% not sure; 33% no.
- Students: 34% yes; 26% under some circumstances; 17% not sure; 24% no.
    - 73% of Canadian students would attend, at least in some circumstances; 6% would not attend.
    - 58% of U.S. students would attend, at least in some circumstances; 25% would not attend.
- This survey's church member sample: 18% yes; 27% under some circumstances; 15% not sure; 40% no.
- In this survey's church member sample, Canadians and those (in both Canada and the U.S.) with college degrees are more likely to say they would attend a same-sex wedding.

3.3 Should church members/attenders be free to attend same-sex ceremonies or weddings?

- Ministers: 46% yes; 36% it depends on the circumstances; 13% no.
- Students: 59% yes; 19% it depends on the circumstances; 11% no.
- This survey's church member sample: 47% yes; 24% it depends on the circumstances; 17% no.

3.4 Should pastors be free to attend same-sex ceremonies or weddings?

- Ministers: 41% yes; 32% it depends on the circumstances; 21% no.
- Students: 53% yes; 19% it depends on the circumstances; 16% no.
- This survey's church member sample: 40% yes; 22% it depends on the circumstances; 27% no.

3.5 Same-sex Marriage in Civil Society

Christian Reformed ministers were divided on whether civil society should allow same-sex marriage (the survey predates the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in June 2015):

- 45% of ministers say same-sex marriage should be allowed in civil society; 40% say Christians should oppose it. Among pastors, opposition to civil same-sex marriage was much stronger among men than women, among Americans than Canadians, and among Asian ministers.
- 52% of CRC students say same-sex marriage should be allowed in civil society; 33% say Christians should oppose it.

- Among this survey's church member sample, 39% say same-sex marriage should be allowed in civil society; 49% say Christians should oppose it.

3.6 Same-sex marriage should be allowed in the church (i.e., religious same-sex marriage)

- Ministers: 14%
- Students: 31%
- This survey's church member sample: 21%

Twelve to 15% of respondents from these three groups said that none of the three options listed[35] matched their position. This may indicate that many have not yet formed a clear opinion about religious same-sex marriage.

4. Engagement and Education

Eighty-eight percent of ministers have studied the Bible to find answers to questions about same-sex sexuality, and 75% have used books or other resources to learn more about homosexuality. Thirty-eight percent of ministers have attended a class, workshop, or other event concerning sexual minorities. Among CRC students, 72% have studied the Bible to find answers to questions about same-sex sexuality; while 61% of this survey's church member sample have done the same.

Ministers report high rates of having read the 1973 report on the denomination's position (85%) and the 2002 report on pastoral care to LGB people (71%), although this percentage is as low as 28% for Asian/Pacific Islander ministers. Canadian ministers and those under 45 years old are more likely than their counterparts to have attended a workshop or event concerning sexual minorities. Female ministers are more likely than male ministers to have attended a class or event, read the 2002 report, studied other books, and studied the Bible on this topic.

Only 16% of this survey's church member respondents have read the 1973 or 2002 reports. Among CRC students, 11% and 16% have read the 1973 and 2002 reports, respectively. However, it may be that more students and church members have read the CRC reports on homosexuality than reports on other topics.

5. Church Climate for LGB People

5.1 Is the church seeking to provide a hospitable place for same-sex attracted people to know and worship God?

Although 78% of pastors report that they have intentionally tried to show Christ's love to gay people, only 12% say their church is intentionally seeking to provide a hospitable place for same-sex attracted people to know and worship God. A further 35% say that their church is doing this in some ways, and 44% answer "no."

Among church members, only 6% say their church is intentionally seeking to provide a hospitable place for same-sex attracted people to know and worship God; 19% say it is "in some ways"; 32% "don't know"; and 42% answer "no."

[35] The three options were (1) same-sex marriage should be allowed in civil society but not in the church; (2) Christians should oppose same-sex marriage in civil society; (3) same-sex marriage should be allowed in civil society and in the church.

5.2 Do you ever hear comments from church members that you believe would be offensive to people in your congregation who are attracted to the same sex?

- Ministers: 61% hear offensive comments.
- Students: 52% hear offensive comments.
- This survey's church member sample: 40% hear offensive comments.
- 75% of nonheterosexual respondents in the whole survey report hearing offensive comments from church members.

5.3 Are congregations a safe place for gay people?

Implicit in the questions about safety is the understanding that a church's culture and power dynamics directly affect the well-being of minority group members. The survey asked about three aspects of safety, defined as follows:

- Spiritually safe: people can explore their spiritual questions and grow in faith as Christian believers.
- Emotionally safe: people can appropriately express their emotions without fear.
- Intellectually safe: people can express their opinions freely about a range of topics.

All three major demographic groups in our survey perceive church to be much safer—spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually—for straight people than for same-sex oriented people.

Ministers:

- 50% say their congregation is a spiritually safe place for gay people.
- 32% say their congregation is an emotionally safe place for gay people.
- 31% say their congregation is an intellectually safe place for gay people.
- 10 to 12% answered "I don't know" to the three questions.
- American ministers have a more positive estimation of the spiritual and emotional safety of gay persons in their congregation than do Canadian ministers, by 8 and 12 percentage points, respectively.

CRC students:

- 70% say their congregation is a spiritually safe place for gay people.
- 28% say their congregation is an emotionally safe place for gay people.
- 25% say their congregation is an intellectually safe place for gay people.
- 17 to 20% answered "I don't know" to the three questions.

This survey's church member sample:

- 45% say their congregation is a spiritually safe place for gay people.
- 30% say their congregation is an emotionally safe place for gay people.
- 27% say their congregation is an intellectually safe place for gay people.
- 14 to 17% answered "I don't know" to the three questions.

In contrast to these results, 71 to 89% of respondents in the three sample groups judge their congregations to be spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually safe for heterosexual people.

"For me personally" responses:

All groups clearly perceive their congregations to be lacking in safety for same-sex oriented persons. However, a more nuanced picture emerges by comparing the "for me personally" answers of straight-identified and non-straight-identified persons. Forty-two respondents out of 1,650 in the three sample groups (2.5%) self-identified on the survey as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or same-sex attracted (LGBQ/SSA).[36] Responses from persons in the three sample groups who self-identified as LGBQ/SSA were as follows:

5.4 My congregation is a safe place for me (ministers, students, and church member sample combined)

	Heterosexual (n = 1,500)	LGBQ/SSA (n = 42)
Spiritually safe for me	88%	67%
Emotionally safe for me	73%	54%
Intellectually safe for me	70%	57%

Percentages among non-straight-identified respondents who took the survey via the public link are lower on every count: 50% (spiritually safe for me), 36% (emotionally safe for me), and 41% (intellectually safe for me). Combining the answers of all LGBQ/SSA identified respondents in the whole survey (including the public sample), percentages of safety in their congregation were as follows:

All LGBQ/SSA survey respondents (n = 226)	Agree	Disagree
Spiritually safe for me	54%	30%
Emotionally safe for me	40%	40%
Intellectually safe for me	45%	36%

These responses should give us pause. Thirty percent of sexual minority respondents say their CRC congregation is not a place where they can explore their spiritual questions and grow in faith as Christian believers; 40% are afraid to appropriately express their emotions in the church setting; and 36% feel unable to express their opinions freely in their CRC congregation.

The high incidence of antigay comments as reported above likely contributes to this unacceptable situation. It is well attested that LGB youth are at elevated risk for depression, self-harm, homelessness, and suicide. One recent study found that each episode of physical or verbal harassment or abuse increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average.[37]

5.5 Have you offered pastoral care to a same-sex oriented person or their family members?

- 81% of ministers have done so at least once.
- 70% of ministers have done so at least twice.
- 21% of ministers have done so more than ten times.
- 18% of ministers have never done so.

[36] "Queer" has been reclaimed as a positive umbrella term by many in the LGBTQ community. A further 38 respondents in the student, minister, and church member samples checked "other" or "not sure" on the sexual orientation question.

[37] IMPACT (2010), mental health disorders, psychological distress, and suicidality in a diverse sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths; *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(12), 2426-32. Quoted at www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/facts-about-suicide.

6. The CRC's Position

6.1. What is the CRC's theological and ethical position on homosexuality?

Respondents could select all that apply from a range of options, both correct and incorrect.

Ministers (percent identifying correctly what the 1973 report recommends):

- 89% said the CRC views homosexual orientation as not sinful, but views same-sex sexual behavior as sinful.
- 83% said the CRC views homosexuality as a result of the fall.
- 63% said the CRC says that LGB people should be fully included in the life of the church.

This survey's church member sample (percent identifying correctly what the 1973 report recommends):

- 57% said the CRC views homosexual orientation as not sinful, but views same-sex sexual behavior as sinful.
- 56% said the CRC views homosexuality as a result of the fall.
- 32% said the CRC says that LGB people should be fully included in the life of the church.

However, more than 27% of respondents in this survey's church member sample incorrectly said that the CRC says that both homosexual orientation and practice are sinful; 6% of ministers and 17% of students also checked this answer.

Students (percent identifying correctly what the 1973 report recommends):

- 74% identified the distinction between orientation and behavior, as well as homosexuality being considered a result of the fall.
- 50% said the CRC says that LGB people should be fully included in the life of the church.

6.2. Agreement with the Christian Reformed position

Approximately two-thirds of ministers (65%), 44% of CRC students, and 41% of respondents from this survey's church member sample personally hold that gay Christians are called to lifelong celibacy.

Eighty percent of CRC ministers, 75% of CRC students, and 57% of respondents in this survey's church member sample personally hold that same-sex attraction is not sinful. However, a substantial minority of respondents maintain that simply experiencing attraction to the same sex is sinful. In contradiction to the denomination's position articulated in 1973, 14% of CRC ministers—100 of the 700 respondents—hold that "being attracted to a member of the same sex is sinful, even if it is never acted upon." Thirty-one percent of respondents in the survey's church member sample and 17% of CRC students believe that same-sex attraction itself is sinful.

Further, 9% of ministers say that gay Christians should "repent of choosing to be gay," along with 12% of this survey's church member sample and 8% of CRC students. This belief is also not supported by the synodical reports from 1973 and 2002.

6.3. Orientation change

Orientation change remains a plausible option in the opinion of some ministers and church member respondents. Two in ten ministers (21%) say

gay Christians should "pray to become straight," and 16% encourage reparative therapy. Respondents were asked to check all options they agreed with in this section:

Gay Christians Should… (check all)	Ministers	This survey's church member sample	CRC students
Pray to become straight	21%	23%	14%
Seek therapy with a view to changing their orientation	16%	20%	11%

6.4. Other life and relationship options for gay Christians

Other life and relationship options the survey listed for gay Christians were as follows. Respondents were asked to check all options they agreed with in this section:

Gay Christians Should… (check all)	Ministers	This survey's church member sample	CRC students
Seek a permanent nonsexual relationship with someone of the same sex	17%	8%	11%
Marry an opposite sex partner if possible	13%	8%	11%
Be permitted to live in a monogamous same-sex partnership as a concession to fallenness if they have tried other options	20%	8%	9%
Be free to follow their own conscience before God with regard to a marriage/a committed partnership	24%	32%	41%
Celebrate the sexual identity God has given them	16%	17%	34%

While 14% of ministers who took the survey hold that same-sex attraction per se is sinful, almost a quarter (24%) say that gay Christians should be free to follow their own conscience before God when it comes to same-sex relationships; 32% of respondents from this survey's church member sample and 41% of CRC students agree.

Of the LGB respondents in the CRC student and church member samples, none believed LGB people should pursue orientation change, whether by prayer or reparative therapy. Notably, none of the 43 LGB respondents in these samples and in the minister sample believe that being attracted to the same sex is sinful, or that LGB people should "repent of choosing to be gay." Only 6 of the 226 LGB respondents across all samples hold that being attracted to the same sex is itself sinful even if it is never acted upon.

In all samples, American respondents are more prone than Canadians to say LGB people should be celibate, repent of choosing to be gay, and seek reparative therapy. More Americans than Canadians also said that same-sex attraction is sinful even if it is never acted upon.

Among ministers, Asians are more likely than White pastors to believe LGB people should pray to become straight, repent of choosing to be gay, or marry a partner of the opposite sex, while White ministers are more likely to believe that gay Christians should be celibate for life. A majority (53%) of

Asian ministers believe that being attracted to the same sex is sinful even if it is never acted upon. Only 13% of White ministers believe the same.

Respondents younger than 45 are less likely to support orientation change efforts by prayer (12%) and by reparative therapy (10%) than those over 45 (24% and 21%, respectively). They are also less likely to believe that LGB people choose to be gay (7% and 14%, respectively).

7. Other Notable Findings

Thirty-six percent of ministers and 51% of all LGBQ/SSA respondents said the CRC should conduct a thorough review of the 1973 and 2002 reports. Nine of the 16 ministers who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or same-sex attracted say the denomination should be more welcoming but not bless same-sex relationships, while only 4 of the 19 sexual minority students say the same. Four of the 16 sexual minority ministers, 12 of the 19 sexual minority students, and 86% of sexual minority persons who accessed the survey via the public link believe the CRC should embrace sexual minority individuals and affirm their relational commitments.

8. Common Themes Expressed in the Comments

Survey respondents had the opportunity to write text answers to several questions:

- What practical dilemmas do you encounter related to homosexuality or same-sex marriage (for example, situations at church, in your family, at work, or at school)?
- What do you see as the most pressing questions for your congregation with regard to same-sex attracted people and/or same-sex marriage?
- What are your greatest fears, if any, concerning same-sex marriage?
- What are your greatest hopes, if any, concerning same-sex marriage?

The committee received a wealth of comments on these questions, describing a wide variety of situations, hopes, and fears expressed in people's own words. No summary can do justice to all that is contained in these responses.

We tracked 16 commonly recurring themes in the comments from ministers, from the survey's church member sample, and from 100 LGB-identified respondents from the public sample. It is important to note that this summary reports only on the prevalence of identified themes. Readers should not assume that mention of a theme is uniformly positive or negative.

8.1. Practical Dilemmas

Unsurprisingly, for ministers, the most frequent practical dilemmas encountered regarding homosexuality or same-sex marriage were pastoral concerns. Nineteen percent of the comments from ministers were ministry focused and expressed concern for how people are treated, perceived, and supported or not in the church. The next most common theme (11%) in ministers' comments was church life: questions about church membership, participation in communion, baptism, leadership, and matters of church discipline. Ten percent of the comments from ministers spoke of the desire to welcome people without changing the church's theological stance.

In this survey's church member sample none of the themes was found in 10% or more of the text answers for this question.

In the 100 comments coded from gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons who accessed the survey through the public link, by far the most commonly cited practical dilemma concerned people leaving the church. Twenty-two percent of comments from respondents in this group talked about themselves or others leaving the church over these matters, or expressed concerns that the CRC's stance is harming our mission in the world.

8.2. Most Pressing Questions for Congregations

When asked about the most pressing questions for their congregation, 15% of ministers identified questions about how to welcome LGB persons but not affirm same-sex relationships. Pastoral questions were the next most frequent theme—mentioned in 13% of answers. Ten percent of this survey's church member sample also echoed this theme in their answers to this question. Among LGB participants from the public sample the most prevalent theme (found in 9% of comments) concerned matters of church life, such as church membership, participation in communion, baptism, and leadership.

8.3. Greatest fears concerning same-sex marriage

The most frequently cited fear from ministers was that of division. Twelve percent of ministers' comments mentioned the possibility of split, division, separation, or schism—either along generational lines, divides/splits within a congregation, or in the CRC as a whole. The next most frequent theme for ministers (8%) was that of legal concerns: mentioning lawsuits, being sued, or fears of losing one's job or ordination status because of one's response to same-sex marriage.

Among respondents in this survey's church member sample, 8% of comments expressed fears that acceptance of same-sex marriage would precipitate moral and ethical decline in society.

Among LGB respondents in the public sample, 11% expressed fears that the church will lose people because of its stance on same-sex marriage. The next most frequent response for this group was fear of how this topic is affecting the church's witness in the world (6%).

8.4. Greatest hopes concerning same-sex marriage

Under the category of greatest hopes, 9% of ministers and 9% of this survey's church member sample spoke about welcoming sexual minority people and affirming same-sex relationships; 37% of the LGB respondent group echoed this theme.

The only other themes to reach 6% or more in the comments for this question were as follows: for ministers, the "welcoming but not affirming" theme; and for LGB respondents, the theme of legal concerns relating to the hope for further legalization of same-sex marriage and equal protection under the law.

9. Conclusions

The survey has been a valuable means of listening to the denomination on matters relating to same-sex marriage. While we cannot treat this data as being representative of the denomination as a whole or of any subset of the denomination, results nevertheless give a useful and rich description

of the range of views and questions at a given point in time (Spring 2014). For the purposes of this report we highlight three key findings:

First, large numbers of ministers, church members, and CRC students have same-sex oriented family members and friends. What is more, some of us find *ourselves* to be so oriented. These connections represent a God-given opportunity for individuals, leaders, and churches to learn more about the varied journeys, experiences, and felt needs of same-sex oriented persons—especially those who are fellow believers or are connected to the church in some way.

Second, a fundamental area to address is the way we speak to and about one another with regard to differences of sexual orientation. Offensive language is never appropriate. Instead, the emotional and spiritual well-being of vulnerable persons in our midst should prompt us to listen well, speak charitably, and create a safer environment that could enable same-sex oriented persons to consider their relational options in light of scriptural teaching.

Third, arguably the most important finding revealed by this survey is the extent of our diversity as a denomination on these matters. At one end of the theological and political spectrum, a substantial minority of respondents (including ministers) consider same-sex attraction to be sinful and even support orientation change efforts. At the other end of the spectrum we see a substantial minority of persons who believe same-sex oriented Christians should have freedom of conscience before God regarding their relationships—the same freedom that heterosexual people enjoy. Navigating the challenges that lie before us as a denomination will require much prayer, sustained scriptural reflection, a strong commitment to the unity of the body of Christ, and an abundant measure of the fruit and wisdom of the Holy Spirit promised to us in Christ.

Appendix B
Resources

The committee offers the following list of books, articles, and other resources to help churches engage questions around same-sex marriage. Resources have been selected for their usefulness in contributing to well-informed ministry. **Inclusion on this list does not indicate endorsement of the perspectives or viewpoints expressed in any particular resource**.

Legal questions around religious freedom and same-sex marriage will continue to play out in the coming years in North America. While Canadian churches have had a decade to adjust to the reality of civil same-sex marriage, most of the resources currently available in the U.S. context are necessarily based on predictions and speculation. We anticipate that helpful resources for U.S. churches will continue to emerge as American legal scholars begin to respond more fully to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling from June 2015.

History of Marriage

Abbott, Elizabeth. *A History of Marriage*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011.

Anderson, Ryan T., et al. "The Church and Civil Marriage: Eight Scholars and Writers Discuss Whether Religious Institutions Should Get Out of the Marriage Business." *First Things*, 242, April 2014:33-40.
Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Civil Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty
Canadian Civil Marriage Act (S.C. 2005, c.33). Published by the Minister of Justice at http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca.
U.S. Supreme Court Decision on same-sex marriage: *Obergefell v. Hodges,* www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf.
The ruling of Judge Bernard Friedman in the Michigan case *DeBoer v. Snyder,* www.freedomtomarry.org/page/-/files/pdfs/MichiganRuling.pdf (concerning outcomes for children of same-sex couples).
Inazu, John. "What to Expect After the Supreme Court's Marriage Decision." Christianity Today Online, April 28, 2015. www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015 /april-web-only/what-to-expect-after-supreme-courts-coming-marriage-decisio.html.
How the Supreme Court's decision for gay marriage could affect religious institutions. June 26, 2015. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/26/how-a-supreme-court-decision-for-gay-marriage-would-affect-religious-institutions/.
Laycock, Douglas, Anthony Picarello, and Robin Wilson, eds. *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

Principled Pluralism
Smidt, Corwin. Chapter 3, "The Principled Pluralist Perspective" in *Church, State, and Public Justice: Five Views*. Ed. P. C. Kemeny. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007.
Chaplain, Jonathan. "The Bible, the State, and Religious Diversity: Theological Foundations for 'Principled Pluralism'" http://www.klice.co.uk/uploads/EST08JC.pdf (accessed April 2015).
Monsma, Stephen. *Pluralism and Freedom: Faith-Based Organizations in a Democratic Society*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012.

Dialogue
Mouw, Richard J. *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, rev. 2010.
Kraus, C. Norman, ed. *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality.* Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 2001. (Mennonite circles, covering all sides of the subject, focusing on models for dialogue.)
Swartley, Willard M. *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment.* Telford Pa.: Herald Press, 2003. (Mennonite circles, covering all sides of the subject and a model for congregational discernment.)
Respectful Conversation on Christian Faithfulness and Human Sexuality (a model Christian dialogue covering a variety of topics relating to same-sex sexuality between July 2015 and February 2016). www.respectfulconversation.net/cfahs.

The Colossian Forum (hosts conversations and produces resources for engaging Christian dialogue on difficult issues at the intersection of faith, culture, science, and sexuality). www.colossianforum.org.

Oriented to Love Dialogues, Evangelicals for Social Action (a three-day retreat for in-depth listening and dialogue among Christians on LGBT). www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/oriented-to-love/oriented-to-love-event.

Bridging the Gap (a DVD series for small groups). www.newdirection.ca/shop/bridging-the-gap-conversations-on-befriending-our-gay-neighbours.

Same-Sex Sexuality

While our committee's report has not centered on same-sex sexuality, our committee notes the influx in new resources and scholarship pertaining to same-sex relationships since the Synod 2002 report. Some of these resources will reaffirm the CRC's 1973 report. Others will offer alternative conclusions to the report of 1973. The committee offers this list as a sample representation of current voices in the conversations regarding faith and sexuality that may be useful for study and discernment and for fostering constructive dialogue.

Brownson, James V. *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013. (Offers alternative interpretive conclusions to that of the 1973 report.)

Champagne Butterfield, Rosaria. *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012.

Champagne Butterfield, Rosaria. *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2015.

Citlau, Ron, and Adam T. Barr. *Compassion Without Compromise: How the Gospel Frees Us to Love Our Gay Friends Without Losing the Truth*. Bloomington, Minn.: Bethany House, 2014.

DeYoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015. (Offers current argument that reaffirms 1973.)

Fishburn, Janet F., ed. *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2003.

Gagnon, Robert. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2002.

Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: On Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010. (Hill writes as a gay Christian committed to living a celibate life.)

Hill, Wesley. *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015. (Hill explores the concept of spiritual friendship for gay Christians committed to celibacy.)

Lee, Justin. *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay vs. Christians Debate.* New York: Jericho Books, 2013. (Lee writes as a gay Christian seeking a more fruitful dialogue in the church. In one chapter, Lee explains why he has come to affirm same-sex relationships.)

Otto, Tim. *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships*. Euguene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014. (Otto, a gay Christian committed to celibacy, critiques aspects of both "sides" in the same-sex marriage debate.)

Stacy Johnson, William. *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006. (Stacy Johnson writes as a pastor, theologian, and lawyer; the book discusses many different aspects relevant to same-sex marriage.)

Tushnet, Eve. *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2014. (Tushnet explores the concepts of vocation and service as a lesbian Christian committed to celibacy.)

VanderWal-Gritter, Wendy. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2014. (VanderWal-Gritter discusses a range of topics important to ministry and invites the church to embrace unity in diversity concerning same-sex marriage.)

Vines, Matthew. *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships.* New York: Convergent Books, 2014. (Vines, a gay Christian, summarizes current arguments for an affirming position on same-sex marriage.)

Wilson, Ken. *A Letter to My Congregation*. Canton, Mich.: David Crumm Media, 2014. (Wilson shares his journey of seeking to open the conversation on same-sex marriage with his congregation, and he proposes a "Third Way" approach.)

Blogs and Websites

The Gay Christian Network (www.gaychristian.net) supports Christians who are same-sex oriented across a range of theological views. Side B is the descriptive term for those committed to sexual abstinence. Their online community has forums particularly for those holding a side B view (accessed April 2015).

New Direction Ministries (www.newdirection.ca) offers consultation and resources to churches, and connection and community to LGBTQ+ Christians (accessed April 2015).

A Queer Calling (http://aqueercalling.com) features the journey of a self-described queer Christian couple committed to sexual abstinence (accessed April 2015).

Spiritual Friendship (http://spiritualfriendship.org) features the writings of several gay Christians committed to celibacy and others who hold a traditional view of marriage (accessed April 2015).

Church Facility Use/Pastor Officiating Policy

A number of Christian legal organizations have published materials intended to guide churches and pastors in creating policies that will enable churches and pastors to exercise their religious freedoms with regard to their beliefs on marriage, homosexuality, and other matters. These are written, in most cases, from a conservative evangelical stance.

Pacific Legal Institute (www.pacificjustice.org): Under the "Get Help" menu are materials for bylaws and a model marriage policy.

Christian Legal Society (www.clsnet.org): Church Guidance Webinar materials

We list these in the interests of providing resources to churches and pastors. We do so with reservations. Even a cursory reading of these materials

reveals some provisions and advice that would not be consistent with CRC polity or theology.

Churches and leaders should follow the cautions expressed on these websites: *This guidance is not intended to substitute for legal counsel specific to a church's own circumstances and geographic location, particularly since applicable federal, state, and local laws vary widely. Consequently, it is highly recommended that knowledgeable nonprofit legal counsel be sought for such specific questions and particular issues.*

In late August of this year, the CRCNA denomination sent out materials providing advice to churches regarding adoption of articles of incorporation and a Model Church Facilities document. The committee was unaware that these materials were being prepared. While the materials sent out were helpful, we are concerned that churches and church leaders may be uncertain as to the proper use of these materials. We also have a few reservations about the materials. We include the following observations:

1. Churches and church leaders should note that, despite media warnings of potential legal challenges to churches, the likelihood of litigation regarding building use or officiating is quite low. Litigation is an expensive proposition with uncertain results.

2. A few simple steps can place the church and its leaders in a position to avoid most legal uncertainty:

   a. Make sure the church's Articles of Incorporation are up-to-date. The model Articles of Incorporation available from the Synodical Services Office should be used as the template. The Articles of Incorporation need not say anything about church policy on marriage or homosexuality, but should address (as the model Articles do) the basis of authority within the CRC.

   b. Have the church council adopt a Facilities Use policy governing use of the facilities and their availability for rental for weddings and other events. The council will need to determine the level of availability. The safest approach in preventing legal questions is to limit availability to church members or denominational members in good standing, coupled with a requirement that weddings and related activities be consistent with the teachings and understanding of the CRC. If it is decided that others may rent the facilities, it should be stipulated that weddings and related activities should be consistent with the Christian teachings and understanding of the CRC. This Facilities Use policy should be reviewed by legal counsel.

   c. The Facilities Use policy should be prominently noted on any written brochures and any websites regarding building use and/or weddings. References and links should be provided to CRC statements on marriage.

   d. The pastor(s) and the council of the church should develop a policy for officiating at weddings consistent with the CRC understanding of marriage. This policy can include a restriction of weddings to church members or to Christian weddings consistent with the CRC under-

standing of marriage. It should include a provision allowing the pastor to refuse or to accept a request to officiate at the pastor's discretion.

e. If the availability of a pastor to officiate at a wedding is included in a brochure or a website, the policy should be set forth in those materials.

In reviewing the materials sent out by the synodical office, we have concerns that should be addressed in the near future. Some terms used, for example, could create confusion. The "position of Final Authority" is unusual language, and in the CRC the final authority on different issues lies with different bodies. Oversight of property, for instance, lies with the local council. Consistories have original authority on ecclesiastical matters, with classis and synod having delegated authority. It would help if this were clarified in the advice.

On a more important matter, we note that in the advice given in August 2015 churches are encouraged to reference denominational statements on the crcna.org website and the synodical decisions referenced there. However, reference should not be made to website statements, but to the synodical decisions themselves. The website statements are summaries of synodical decisions and written without first thought of their legal relevance. They have no standing in CRC polity, unlike synodical reports. We are concerned that the summary statement on marriage, for instance, opens questions of consistency regarding the church's allowing weddings to be held where one or both partners have been previously married or divorced.

Appendix C
Two Views of Church and State

During the committee's listening session at Synod 2015, delegates were asked to consider four options describing the relationship between the church and the state regarding marriage. The four options offer a spectrum of views that have been found within the Christian church. The options discussed were as follows:

1. Marriage is fundamentally a religious institution. The state should recognize the religious nature of marriage and only authorize marriage as understood by religious authority.
2. Marriage as the covenantal union of a man and a woman is grounded both religiously and by proper recognition of the created order. The state, even if it attempts to be religiously neutral, makes a profound error when it ignores what nature itself teaches, and authorizes civil same-sex marriage.
3. Both the state (civil government) and the church have a direct interest in family structure and well-being, but these interests are not identical. Both the state and the church have latitude (within limits) to define marriage to pursue their legitimate interests, even though those interests may not be the same. The state and the church may end up with different definitions of marriage.

4. The church does not tell civil authority what to do. The church simply defines marriage as it finds itself compelled by Scripture and orders its internal life as Scripture and the gospel requires. What the state does is the state's business.

Option 1 corresponds roughly to a medieval Roman Catholic view, in which the church's understanding of social order is enacted by the state. The Roman Catholic understanding of marriage is discerned in the mutual agreement of Scripture and natural law. The responsible state recognizes and legislates the human flourishing that the natural law identifies.

Option 4 is expressive of an Anabaptist approach wherein the Christian community is uncomfortable with the enforcement power of the state, or what is traditionally referred to as "wielding the sword." The Christian community does not look to the state to enforce Christian moral norms. The Christian community is to be leaven in the world, but does so by maintaining its own pattern of life.

Options 2 and 3 both fit within a Reformed framework, with Option 2 tapping into the Reformed concept of creation order to argue for society-wide acknowledgment that marriage is a gendered and biologically complementary relationship between a man and a woman. While society is pluralistic and civil government should recognize this reality, there are limits to pluralism that are evident within the ordering of creation itself. Option 3, on the other hand, allows for a greater distinction between religious and civil purposes of marriage, and suggests that pluralism in combination with sphere sovereignty allows the state latitude to define marriage in terms different from those of the church. The majority of 2015 synodical delegates identified either Option 2 or Option 3 as the one with which they were most comfortable.

For some, this seemed an academic (pointless?) exercise. Governments in the United States and Canada have adopted legal positions making Option 3 the reality in which we live. For others, though, the discussion was important. Do Christians have an obligation to challenge the government and society on same-sex marriage? Must the church speak prophetically to the state of its errors on civil marriage? Or may Christians support the government in legally recognizing same-sex relationships as part of the state's interest in the good order of society and the just treatment of its citizens?

In the body of our report, we have addressed the realities of the current situation. The state has adopted a view of marriage that differs in significant ways from that of the CRC. In Canada this occurred legislatively—by an act of Parliament. In the United States, despite state attempts to shield marriage from the political process by enshrining traditional opposite-sex marriage within state constitutions (which usually require super majorities to change and both legislative and electorate votes), courts ultimately ruled that restricting marriage to opposite-sex unions violated constitutional guarantees of equal protection and due process.

Certainly the path followed in the U.S. is more susceptible to critique politically. In Canada, one is left to argue that society or its representatives have made a bad choice and to seek a course reversal. In the case of same-sex marriage, changing course is difficult, at least in one direction. To allow same-sex marriage changes little regarding the rights and responsibilities of opposite-sex couples who marry; it allows others to benefit from and enter

into the same rights and responsibilities. To reverse course, however, raises a host of legal and practical issues. Can one undo marriages lawfully enacted? How feasible is it to walk back from a decision already made?

As noted in the committee's report, even conservative justices of the U.S. Supreme Court allowed that a government could legislatively permit same-sex marriage. None said that it was outside the bounds of governmental authority to permit same-sex marriage, despite the fact that six justices are Roman Catholic and have more than passing acquaintance with natural law arguments. The primary legal argument before the Supreme Court was whether a constitutional "right to marry" should be recognized, or whether it would be wiser to see any such changes as the work of the legislative process at the state level.

The overtures of 2013 that prompted synod to establish this committee were not concerned whether same-sex marriage, if adopted, should be done so legislatively or by constitutional interpretation. A question was raised whether Christians had an obligation to "oppose the legality of same-sex marriage . . . in civil society."[38] What we suggest is that two lines of argumentation are compatible with a Reformed understanding of church and state. One will imply that Christians should be politically active and call society to reverse course on same-sex marriage. The other leads to a thoughtful acknowledgement of civil same-sex marriage as a way of addressing certain inequities that would otherwise arise in our contemporary, pluralistic society.

A. Marriage as a creational given

The first line of argument has the authority of the historical Reformed tradition underlying it. Going back to John Calvin, the Reformed tradition understood marriage to be founded on both the teachings of Scripture *and* the evidences of creation. These are not separate authorities; rather, the testimonies of Scripture regarding marital relationships echo the observational reflections of persons familiar with the workings of the created world and human society.

Whereas Calvin would have used the language of "natural law"—this is not a matter in which he would deviate from Roman Catholic theology—succeeding generations of Reformed theologians were to speak of creation orders, or the ordering of creation. In creating the world, God established certain structures and institutions through which the divine will for society is manifest. Marriage is one such institution. Marriage as an institution between a man and a woman is grounded biologically and socially as well as biblically.

The basis for that claim is not, in the first place, Scripture, but creation itself. Christians remind society that one does not tamper lightly with the created order. To compromise the ordering sewn into the fabric of creation is to weaken the foundation of society and risk affronting divine wisdom. One can expect ill consequences when society deviates from the proper patterns evident within creation itself.

In this approach, Christians do not speak to society from a dogmatic position (i.e., from a position of revealed faith to an unbelieving world). Christians speak into the common experience of human beings in society.

[38] Overture 12, *Agenda for Synod 2013*, p. 419.

They speak into a shared encounter with a world structured according to God's wisdom.

This line of argument in large part informs the 1980 synodical report on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It has a long and venerable history within Reformed thought. It continues to resonate with many in Reformed circles.

B. Malleability in civil marriage

For others within the Reformed tradition, however, there is uneasiness at the confidence and the structural specificity of the creation order tradition. The Reformed tradition exists in a different social, political, and cultural context today than it did in Calvin's Geneva or, for that matter, at the height of the Kuyperian era of the late 1800s. It has been shaped by historical experience and chastened by missteps along the way. It understands the ordering of creation by God in less rigid terms than in traditional Reformed theology, although it takes seriously the biological and social character of human life and relationships.

Creation order theology fared poorly in the twentieth century. The two theological traditions that most emphasized ethical interpretation of creation's structure—the Lutheran and the Reformed—both suffered significantly by overreaching and becoming implicated in social and political errors of great magnitude. Lutheranism was used to promote the National Socialist (Nazi) agenda of the 1930s-1940s; Reformed theology was used to justify *apartheid* in South Africa. In both cases, the inclination to read social and political programs into the structures of creation combined with a peculiar reading of Scripture to implicate the church deeply in injustice and oppression.

This legacy should not cripple arguments from the ordering of creation, but it does encourage a level of humility. The realm of creation is not characterized simply by order, but also by complexity, fluidity, practicality, and creativity. Human flourishing can be found along more than one path.

Within the church, of course, Scripture stands supreme. Within the political arena, however, a Reformed argument on marriage is not an argument from Scripture. It is an argument from shared experience of and reflection on creation. It argues from evidences—sociological, biological, political.

Just such an argument has been attempted in the current debate over same-sex marriage. Christian groups have funded sociological research intended to show that children raised in stable families by heterosexual couples have better outcomes than children raised in unstable families and/or by same-sex couples. The most well-known of these studies was offered as evidence in the Michigan case of *DeBoer v. Snyder.* It withstood neither close scrutiny nor cross-examination and was roundly dismissed. In academic circles it has been discredited. That does not mean its proposed conclusions are wrong, only that they are unsupported by evidence analyzed to date.

The integrity of the Christian community is at stake in research along these lines, and research with what feels like predetermined outcomes is subject to suspicion. There are scholars working on research related to family structure, well-being, and positive outcomes. The *National Marriage Project*, led by University of Virginia sociologist and director Brad Wilcox, is one such venture, although it is not without controversies. It has also been cautious with claims related to same-sex marriage. It is, however, a step in the right direction.

Reformed Christians who adopt a more guarded approach to claims regarding the divine will manifesting itself in the structures of creation may be inclined to allow civil society more latitude in establishing its rules for social structuring. They may also find compelling the need to address inequities and social harms that result from prohibitions against legal same-sex committed relationships.

C. Concluding observation

The committee considered it important to include these two lines of argumentation within its overall report, but not as part of its pastoral guidance. A rich theological dialogue can be had between these views (and other variations within the Reformed tradition). Both views are likely to be found within the CRC for the foreseeable future, and it would be commendable if each view would learn to read the other sympathetically.

Appendix D
Encouraging Dialogue on Same-Sex Marriage

Over the past two years, the study committee has invested significant energy in inviting feedback from churches, ministers, and church members. It is no surprise that our listening, like that of the committee that wrote the 2002 report, has revealed significant diversity in experiences, perspectives, and opinions regarding same-sex marriage in Christian Reformed congregations.

This diversity carries implications for the church. In the larger Christian community in North America, there is a concern that the church's position regarding same-sex marriage and homosexuality is creating a generational divide. In 2007, the Barna group found that 80 percent of churchgoing 16-29 year olds chose *antihomosexual* as the primary descriptor of Christians. For their unchurched peers, this number increased to 91%.[39] The church's response to sexual minority persons constitutes a stumbling block for many teens and young adults.

The reality of diverse experiences, perspectives, and convictions leads to a range of anxieties—ongoing commitment to biblical and theological truth, maintaining the unity of the church, keeping the gospel relevant to coming generations—regarding the future of the church. Dialogue is quite distinct from other forms of group communication. The primary purpose of dialogue is not decision-making but enlarged mutual understanding. In dialogue, persons with differing perspectives and experiences commit to listen to one another to seek better understanding of the other's position, recognizing the potential of better understanding of the matter itself. People who are struggling with different questions and interpretations concerning the matter of same-sex marriage have the opportunity to hear not only what other persons think, or wonder, or believe, but why these things are important to them. Rather than using a conversation to develop arguments to discredit the position of the other, dialogue invites participants to temporarily suspend argumentation and debate and to listen carefully.

[39] See Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2012).

Some may be wary of the call to dialogue because

- consideration of other perspectives has already occurred and doesn't need to be revisited.
- Scripture and the 1973 report are clear and need no further exploration.
- dialogue could be viewed as an attempt to sway another's convictions or as the opening of the door to relativism or as capitulation to cultural accommodation.

Such concerns need to be heard and honestly addressed. People need to be able to decline the invitation to dialogue without being judged or labeled.

At the same time, it is clear from the listening process of the committee that there are those who desire a safe and open place in which to explore the many complex factors that make an impact on our understanding of same-sex marriage. Commitment to a process of dialogue means to seek greater understanding: understanding of the Scriptures, understanding of the denomination's theological position, understanding of ongoing physical and social science research, and understanding of the journey of other denominations and churches addressing these matters.

The need for dialogue was affirmed by the committee that produced the 2002 report:

> Finally, it was clear from many presentations and discussions with individuals and groups, and from the responses by churches, that there is considerable diversity of opinion and feeling within the denomination about individuals with same-sex attractions and ministry to them. We believe it is important for diverse perspectives to be able to be openly discussed and examined. We also believe that it is important that members of our church family who experience same-sex attractions can belong to, openly participate in, and be ministered to within the fellowship of the church.
>
> (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 315-16)

A. Is dialogue appropriate for your congregation?

While specific groups of individuals may desire the opportunity for dialogue, not every congregation is ready to take this on as a communal activity. Consider the following questions to help you determine if your congregation has a healthy level of readiness for dialogue:

- Does the congregation have experience discussing matters on which there are different opinions or convictions? What lessons were learned in that process? Did the congregation feel unified during and after those discussions?
- Has the congregation been intentional to welcome people from very different walks of life? Is there ethnic diversity? How are people from other Christian traditions welcomed? Is there space in worship for different expressions? What voices are represented in leadership? Are there people from the local community attending?
- Are there diverse views in the congregation today? How are they expressed? How do people demonstrate an honoring of one another?
- Has the congregation ever gone through an intentional process of reconciliation? What was learned in this process? Was it a positive experience for the congregation?

- How have matters of social justice been addressed in the congregation? Have there been intentional teachings, discussions, or projects?
- Is the congregation a place where people feel safe to share deeply personal struggles?
- Historically, how has the congregation addressed matters of same-sex sexuality? Are there any unresolved matters from the past that will need to be addressed prior to launching intentional dialogue?
- Have there been personal stories and experiences of same-sex oriented people that have had an impact on the life of the community?
- How aware are congregational members of the 1973 and 2002 CRC reports? Have people raised questions about these reports—and if so, how were these questions received?

The more questions a congregation can answer positively in this list, the greater their readiness to engage in healthy dialogue about same-sex marriage.

With the hope of expanding the possibilities for dialogue and limiting the potential for negative effects, we suggest the following guidelines or parameters for conversations regarding same-sex marriage:

1. Consider opening with prayer. A standard, well-known prayer such as the Lord's Prayer would be ideal to set the tone of seeking God together without making the prayer time an opportunity for directing the tone of the conversation.
2. Establish a process for the dialogue that provides fairness for all participants, regardless of their perspectives. Inform participants of the process by which an impartial facilitator will lead the dialogue and ensure many voices are heard.
3. Emphasize that there is no threat hanging over the dialogue. People are encouraged to share their honest perspectives, experiences, and questions. Participants refrain from using ultimatums or penalties.
4. Begin by establishing common ground and shared values:
   a. Every person present is created in the image of God with inherent dignity and value and is worthy of being treated with respect.
   b. Participants in the dialogue share a common commitment to serving Jesus as Lord.
   c. Participants share a commitment to the authority of Scripture and promise to listen carefully to scriptural interpretations.
   d. Participants acknowledge that the Spirit is present in our dialogue.
   e. Participants affirm the necessity of such dialogue being a prayerful process.
5. Seek to identify the core issues to be addressed in the time of dialogue.
   a. Distinguish between moral matters and public policy.
   b. Clarify priorities in pastoral ministry.
   c. Identify the impetus for the dialogue.
6. Affirm that the church is a fellowship in Christ, called to enfold same-sex oriented persons. Most congregations already have members who experience same-sex attraction, though they may not have disclosed this reality in the church.

7. Assure everyone, regardless of their experiences or perspectives or proficiency or style of communication, that they are loved by God, that their voices matter, and that they are welcome to participate.
8. Avoid using slogans or name-calling:
   a. Make clear that negative stereotypes and derogatory language are unacceptable.
   b. Make clear that it is unacceptable to unfairly categorize or call people homophobic because, as a matter of faith and discipleship, they do not support same-sex marriage. Encourage people to focus on what is said, not who is saying it.
9. Affirm that everyone, regardless of their sexuality, has gifts to use in the church and God's kingdom.
10. Affirm a common commitment to seek justice for every member of society, working together to remove the barriers that prevent others from experiencing the shalom of God.
11. Commit to being patient and gentle with each other when it is difficult to know how to express oneself and when the risks of vulnerability are felt.
12. Allow room for persons to humbly acknowledge and repent of wrongdoing that may come to awareness in these conversations, so that the power of grace and forgiveness may work to restore personal peace and relationships.
13. Represent any position with which you disagree accurately and fairly. Be wary of making assumptions and ask for clarifications when needed. Heed the advice of James 1:19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

B. Potential questions for dialogue

The following are questions that may prompt helpful dialogue. Some of these were used in listening sessions by the committee over the past two years.

1. Is there anyone in your circle of relationships (family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc.) who is in or is considering a same-sex marriage?
2. If you were invited to attend a same-sex wedding, what considerations would go into your decision whether to attend or not?
3. How would you think a church/church leader should respond pastorally and ecclesiastically to the following situations?
   a. A same-sex couple with children requests to join your church and to have their children baptized.
   b. A pastor requests the council's permission to officiate at his/her son's/daughter's same-sex marriage ceremony.
4. What questions do you have in thinking about same-sex marriage?
5. What does Scripture have to say that helps in understanding same-sex marriage?

Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage (minority report)

The committee's report on pastoral guidance regarding same-sex marriage, as noted in section I, B of the majority report, was created through extensive listening, conversations among committee members, conversations with others, study, careful consideration, and prayer. We are thankful to have been a part of this work, and we are thankful for a majority of the guidance the committee has given in response. Even though there are parts we would have chosen not to include or places where we would have chosen different language, we can support much of the committee's report. There are three sections that we are unable to completely endorse. In these three sections—officiating weddings, playing a role in weddings and the life of the church, and membership—we deem that there is more that must be explicitly said.

I. Theologically framing a discussion of same-sex marriage

The discussion of same-sex marriage ought to be understood within the larger framework of what Scripture teaches about marriage: its essence, its purpose, and its obligations. The CRC has most recently addressed these questions in the 1980 statement on *Marriage Guidelines* (as described in section III, A in the majority report).[1] This comprehensive study of the meaning and purpose of marriage, in light of changing societal standards regarding divorce and cohabitation, properly frames a discussion on marriage still today. In our discussion of same-sex marriage, the church can often give the impression of merely saying "no" to questions of same-sex marriage. While the church teaches that Scripture precludes same-sex sexual relationships, it does so in light of a broader, positive teaching of how God designed our relationality, in particular, of how God designed marriage. The report begins to discuss both the biblical teaching on marriage and principled pluralism, but we deem that there is more to be said.

The CRC's 1980 statement on marriage highlights Scripture's clear answers to questions regarding the purpose and meaning of marriage. First, consistent with the historic Christian tradition, the 1980 statement affirms that marriage is a fundamental creational structure instituted by God:

> Marriage was instituted by God at creation. Declaring that it was not good for the man to be alone, God created woman as a helper fit for him (Gen. 2:18). Man and woman, created in the image of God, were made for each other to become one flesh in marriage. Thus marriage is not a human invention nor an experiment in social relationships which can be altered or abandoned at will. It is a God-ordained, monogamous structure, requiring faithful commitment on the part of husband and wife.[2]

Second, the 1980 statement reaffirmed the purpose of marriage:

> Marriage is, therefore, for the benefit and enrichment of husband and wife. Although man was created for fellowship with God, according to Genesis 2 man discovered and God confirmed that man had need also for fellowship and support from a fellow human being. Thus woman was created and marriage instituted so that man and woman could exist in community. Under God's blessing this community of husband and wife would be enlarged by the birth of

[1] See *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 467-85.

[2] *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 468-69.

> children. Thus marriage and family were instituted at creation to meet human need and to achieve the purposes of God (Gen. 1:28).[3]

Finally, the 1980 statement highlighted the New Testament reaffirmation, illumination, and enrichment of God's purposes for marriage given at creation:

> Paul declares that the creational institution of marriage, which affirms that husband and wife become one flesh (Eph. 5:31), contains a mystery (Eph. 5:32). This mystery has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church, of the Bridegroom and the bride (Eph. 5:23-32). Thus marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church.[4]

In the 1980 statement, while marriage is understood as a fundamental creational structure that God has instituted, it is clear that marriage is not necessary for the individual person:

> So even now, as Christians await the final coming of the kingdom, the Scripture indicates that marriage is not necessary as a Christian obligation, nor is it necessary for personal fulfillment. All that is necessary for discipleship and fulfillment is membership in the family of God by which one participates in the marriage between Christ and his church. Since the purpose of the marriage institution has been fulfilled in Christ, one may choose or be called not to enter marriage (celibacy is one form of discipleship), or one may choose or be called to be married (marriage is also one form of discipleship). Christian single persons should be able to find in the body of Christ that community of fellowship which every human being needs for effective service and for personal fulfillment.[5]

As noted in section III, A of the majority report, marriage is a creational structure, not eschatological. Marriage was instituted in creation but will be no longer in the new heaven and new earth. As we await Christ's final coming, there is no necessary obligation to the Christian person to be married. The familial relationships established in creation remain important as we await the final coming of the kingdom but are secondary to the relationship that God has established with his people in Christ. Marriage (and family) is not the most important relational reality; the most important reality is the family of God seen in the relationship of Christ to his people. This ecclesial family includes those who are single and those who are married, and it ties them together in a deeper, eschatologically enduring way, for when the kingdom of God fully arrives, there will be no more marriage: only the family of God.

These are not the only creational purposes to be found in marriage; however, marriage is also a foundation for society. "Implied in marriage is the family; in the family is implied society; in society is implied unity, community, and cooperation of the human race."[6] Within marriage and family we see all kinds of relationships that will later develop in society. Marriage, then, should not be seen as something separated from the rest of society. Rather, its structure helps provide the structure of society.

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[3] *Acts of Synod 1980,* p. 469.

[4] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 469.

[5] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 471.

[6] Herman Bavinck, "Christian Principles and Social Relationships," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 122.

While the 1980 statement on marriage did not say much explicitly on marriage as the context for sex, this too is an important, biblical concept. Marriage as the proper context for sex is, of course, implied in the 1980 affirmations of husband and wife becoming "one flesh" in marriage and of marriage as the context for family and children. Lewis Smedes makes the point clear in *Sex for Christians* as he discusses what Paul writes about sexuality:

> [Paul] meant that "immorality" included sexual intercourse outside marriage. And if unmarried sexual intercourse was wrong, it was a serious wrong. . . . God's will is that we abstain from fornication, not giving way to the "passion of lust like heathens who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:5). Fornication is sin; intercourse by unmarried people is fornication; therefore intercourse by unmarried people is sin.[7]

Put positively, marriage between one man and one woman is the God-designed context for sex. This statement is repeated time and time again in Scripture: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure" (Heb. 13:4), and "the husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife" (1 Cor. 7:3-4). These are two examples among many. Marriage, understood biblically, is the proper context for full sexual expression.

Finally, marriage is not an end in itself. Christian marriage is to serve in God's redemptive purpose as it is patterned after the example of Christ's relationship to his people—establishing a new community in Christ, molding people for living in the family of God, experiencing forgiveness and reconciliation, growing together in unity, loving one another as imitators of Christ.

It ought to be repeated time and time again that marriage is not a necessity—or a given—for any individual. We, as a church, often still fall prey, through our words and our practice, to the elevation of marriage as something that is necessary for a fulfilled life. We are wise to remember, in word and deed, that the purposes of marriage are indeed fulfilled in Christ. The family of God is now the foundational place where our need for community is met and where we grow in our relationship to God and others. While the church can rightly celebrate the joy and the beauty of marriage, we must also remember that marriage is not a necessary part of the life of the Christian. One can become spiritually mature, live a rich and fulfilled life of service to God, serve the church, and serve the world without being married. The over-exaltation of marriage as something that one needs in order to become mature, hold places of leadership, have a complete life, and other such ideals imparted via implicit and explicit messages is something that the church must rid itself of. We ought to proclaim in word and deed, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7, that singleness is a legitimate and important calling for some believers. However, as we proclaim this, we must bear in mind the grave responsibility to *the church* as a place of welcoming, enfolding, encouraging, and communing with those who are single. Singleness is not a solitary task. As singleness is a legitimate form of discipleship, the church must become the kind of community that creates space for healthy, life-giving, communion-filled singleness. This is a high call to the church, one that has explicit meaning in the current discussion of same-sex marriage. Given the church's

[7] Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 108.

call to live in accord with a traditional, biblical sexual ethic, our churches have to be a place in which celibacy is a viable option.[8] The body of Christ must live out the call to communion and relationship modeled by Christ's own relationship with the church.

The biblical teaching on marriage, then, seen in Scripture and espoused in the CRC's 1980 statement on marriage, can be summarized by the following statements:

1. Marriage is a fundamental creational structure instituted by God.
2. Marriage is a covenanted relationship established by the mutual vows of one man and one woman to be husband and wife to one another and to live together as such.
3. Marriage between one man and one woman is the God-designed context for full sexual expression.
4. Marriage exists for the benefits and enrichment of the husband and wife; it is a relationship that was created to meet the human need for community and to achieve the purposes of God.
5. Marriage, by its form and the implications of family and structure, also has a fundamental role as a means of structuring society.
6. The New Testament affirms the importance of marriage, now highlighting the ways that the marriage relationship between a husband and wife points to the relationship between Christ and the church.
7. The marital relationship is fully understood when it reflects the relationship between Christ and the church—a relationship marked by characteristics such as love, permanence, respect, faithfulness, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
8. The relational purposes of marriage and the need for community are now primarily seen, understood, and felt in the relationship that God has established with his people in Christ; marriage is not necessary for the Christian person.
9. Singleness and marriage are both legitimate forms of discipleship that the Christian person may be called to. The body of Christ, therefore, has a high calling to be the community of fellowship for all people—single and married—where individuals can find ways to serve God and grow in their relationship to God and others.
10. Marriage, though a permanent relationship between a husband and a wife until "death do us part," will not be an eschatological reality. In the new heavens and new earth, there will be no marriage; instead, there will be only the family of God.

The importance of a proper understanding of, and living out of, marriage is underscored by the CRC's 1980 statement on marriage. This statement

[8] Wesley Hill describes the practical longing and need for a type of community that enfolds the single person beautifully when he says: "As a single person, I acutely need intimacy and loyalty from my friends. I'm eager for them to say to me, 'We love you because you're ours,' without leaving an escape clause. Part of the reason I need that kind of friendship is because I don't think marriage is in my future. I'm gay, and also committed to the traditional Christian view that marriage is the union of a man and a woman. When I contemplate a lifetime of celibacy, I know I want committed friends who will walk beside me on the journey. . . ." For the full article, see: http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september/why-cant-men-be-friends-wesley-hill-friendship.html?share=/PceuI5CuHwyT8rdo8t3t0Yfl1CVb8aU&paging=off.

endorsed marital vows as critical to uphold in a time when divorce rates were rising inside and outside of the church. In the midst of divorce, the church is called to uphold the permanence of marriage, calling spouses to confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and obedience. This report instructed church leaders to listen when couples in the midst of divorce come to them, so that the church can understand

> the attitudes and behaviors of each spouse toward the other, how these affect the marriage relationship, and what God teaches concerning these attitudes and behaviors. But the church must not only listen, she must also speak in confrontation and with promise. Where overt sinful conduct is present, the church must address the Word of God in rebuke.[9]

Listening and understanding were highlighted as critical parts of relating to a culture with shifting ideas about the permanence of marriage. However, this was the beginning of the process, not the end. The 1980 statement on marriage urges churches to consider the purpose of discipline. In situations of divorce, which this statement primarily responded to, formal discipline may be a helpful way to help urge couples toward repentance and reconciliation.[10] While taking caution not to exercise formal discipline in any situation leading to divorce, discipline was to be used if one or both spouses showed disdain for biblical teaching and would not repent of their sins.[11] This call to exercise discipline, repeated throughout the report, was explicitly stated in the "Guidelines for the Ministry of the Church" section in the 1980 study committee report on marriage guidelines, adopted by Synod 1980.

Our current social context is again experiencing a time of changing attitudes toward marriage. Rather than changing social norms regarding the permanence of marriage, our society is now experiencing a changed legal understanding of who may be married; that is, a changing of the legal status of marriage as between one man and one woman to the recognition of same-sex marriage as well (see section II of the majority report). In light of this changing legal definition of marriage, we again ask, How do we respond to different understandings of marriage? The 1980 study committee report on marriage guidelines, though focused on a different question, can be instructive to the church today as we again wonder about how to respond to changing societal understandings of marriage. The pattern of genuine listening, then responding with biblical counsel—using discipline as a response to continued hardness of heart—is the right paradigm for us to continue to employ.

As we listen and seek to understand the changing societal and legal understandings of what constitutes marriage, we note that in our current context civil and Christian marriage have come to take on very different forms. This is most clearly seen in the different definitions of marriage in the church and the state. As noted in the majority report (section V, B, and earlier), it is not new that church and state have defined marriage differently, for different purposes, in their own contexts.

In the midst of our observance of the differences in kind and content of the church and state definitions of marriage, we must continue to remember that, at its core, we are talking about something that is constitutive of a single

[9] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 482.

[10] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 482.

[11] *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 482-83, 485.

relationship. Without the marring of sin, marriage would be seen in its true form by both church and state. As we recognize the blurring of what defines marriage in our society, we are wise to recognize three additional truths:

1. Within the church too we see sin's divisive and destructive power. Christians are not immune to sin's marring power. We too show misunderstandings and wrongdoings in our understanding of marriage and sexuality. As we acknowledge this, we ought to do so with repentance and a willingness to follow God's law, looking to Scripture as our rule and guide for life.
2. As we come into relationship with those who do not hold to the church's definition of marriage, demonizing the other, making blanket assumptions about the other, or isolating ourselves from those who hold different views than we do is unacceptable. Such actions are not indicative of the gospel.
3. Different definitions of marriage within the church and the state do not give us the option to divest ourselves of engagement in the state or to delegitimize the role and power of the state.

Given the added legal element in the question of same-sex marriage that currently faces the church, we must add to the paradigm given to us by the 1980 report on marriage. In addition to genuine listening, then responding with biblical counsel—using discipline as a response to continued hardness of heart—we must also think about the way that we engage in and respond to a state that defines marriage in a way that is different from the biblical understanding of marriage outlined above. As noted in section V, A of the majority report, the state's definition of marriage does not require the church to change its definition of marriage. Rather, it raises questions about how the church relates to the state in light of these different definitions.

Principled pluralism (see section III, B of the majority report) provides a helpful framework for the latter question: How do we engage in and respond to a state that defines marriage in a way that is different from the biblical understanding of marriage? This framework clarifies who is responsible for what, especially after the fall, which has *necessarily* broken human political and social solidarity and introduced fundamental differences on the meaning and practice of things like marriage, ethics, and more. Principled pluralism understands that both the church and state are given relative authority within their respective areas—that is, while God has the complete authority, God has given limited authority in different areas, such as the church, the state, and society. Unlike God's authority, which extends to the entire created order, the relative authorities given to different areas for their own tasks and purposes go no further. The state, in carrying forth the task of public justice, may well become a forum for deliberation and hot debate as pluralist voices struggle to maintain, challenge, and reform received social and political wisdom. The Christian too is part of this politics of principled pluralism, but we know and have come to expect that the state will often only capture in part, or at times actually contradict, the reign of Christ. Christians nonetheless remain committed to that work of the state, knowing no *just* society can prescribe Christian ethics. Within the framework of principled pluralism, Christians remain deeply involved in the public square,

to which all people come to bring their distinctive and theologically rooted convictions into the political sphere.

In the case of same-sex marriage, both the state and the church have relative authority with respect to marriage. In this relative authority, however, we recognize the supreme authority of God as the one who created and ordained marriage. We can affirm that there are real, divine structures built into creation by God that can be understood by all people. Without the marring of sin, marriage would be seen in its true form by both church and state. The reality of sin, however, makes these structures more difficult to find by observation alone. It ought not be a great surprise, then, that in seeking to understand *what* marriage is, humanity may come to multiple definitions. The state, within its own relative authority, has the responsibility to seek to understand marriage so that it can rightly define it. While this may not lead the state to the biblical understanding of marriage, we ought not forget that the state has a legitimate, God-given relative authority different from the church's relative authority. In the legal and civil questions surrounding the changed status of same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States, this is important to keep in mind.

Christian engagement in the state ought always first to affirm God's supreme authority and the validity of the structures God has set in place. Second, citizens ought to affirm the relative authority of the state and the church. Third, Christians ought to be aware of the pervasive nature of sin in society, affecting both the church and those who are not a part of the church. Affirming God's providence and eschatological vision of a new heavens and new earth in which God's justice and peace will be made fully known, Christians should be encouraged to engage in the struggle to change those things in society that sin has corrupted. But we should engage in this change recognizing the important voice that others have in a pluralistic society and affirming the truth of God's Word. This still leaves the question of *what* change we should seek to engage, a question to which principled pluralism does not give exact answers. As noted in the majority report, Appendix C presents two ways of applying a Reformed understanding of the relationship between church and state.

While principled pluralism does not give us exact directives for how to engage the state, it can help us understand the connection between, and the distinctions between, the church and the state. Principled pluralism gives Christians tools to make sense of the world in which we now live and how to posture ourselves in light of it. As these distinctions are delineated, we begin to understand the different operative rules within the various spheres we inhabit. For example, principled pluralism alleviates the pressure to either have the church speak for the state or the state speak for the church. It should relieve us, further, that the state *cannot* "change" the definition of marriage any more than it can "change" the law of gravity—it has neither the competence nor the authority to exact a change of fundamental, created reality. This does not mean the state has no *interest* in definitions of marriage, since marriage and the family are the foundation of every human society. It does, however, mean that as states err further and further from the structures of creation, we can expect severe social and political fallout.

This also means that we may respond to questions of same-sex marriage differently in ecclesiastical and civil settings. In the church and in the state there are necessarily different relative authorities. It is under this framework,

then, that we determine proper action within each area. While principled pluralism does not give us definite answers as to how Christians ought to act, it does shape the way we think through our current situation, where the church's definition of marriage is different from that of the state. Different definitions do not necessarily have to be threatening; nor must we have a singular response in all areas of life.

II. Areas of disagreement with the report

In light of the church's theological teaching on marriage and our framework of principled pluralism, we note three areas of disagreement with the majority report: (1) officiating same-sex weddings, (2) playing a role in weddings and in the life of the church, and (3) questions of membership. The sections below include references to related sections in the majority report.

A. Officiating same-sex weddings

1. Legal aspects for pastors (cf. majority report section VI, A, 2, a)

The report provides helpful guidance regarding the legal aspects for pastors in officiating same-sex weddings.

There are very strong constitutional and legal protections for religious freedom and religious organizations in the United States. Canada's decade of experience with the legality of same-sex marriage also highlights the protection of religious liberty in Canada.[12] The situations highlighted in the report that may cause potential difficulty for pastors in the United States and Canada are important to note.

However, we deem the report to be insufficiently strong in its advice to churches regarding what to state on their website and/or in their articles of incorporation. Because of the growing incongruity between the CRC's convictions about marriage and the view accepted in our society, we regard it as important to stress that it is critical for churches to be clear and direct in what they state on their websites and in their articles of incorporation and other governing documents.

To enjoy the protections of religious freedom, it is important for the pastor and church to make clear in the church's documentation and website their identity as belonging to the Christian Reformed Church. Legally and politically the most critical factors helping pastors and churches to be protected by these laws are *clarity* and *consistency* in the application of religious principles. For this reason, churches ought to be explicit in stating their identity and in citing the beliefs and statements of the CRC, in this case particularly regarding the CRC understanding of marriage, and adopt policies specific to officiating and hosting weddings. Churches and pastors ought to be mindful of projecting and protecting their church identity so as not to make the outside world and government recategorize a facility or practice as outside the sphere of freedom of religion or belief.

The denomination has recently provided helpful guidance regarding this matter. For further resources on how to update your church's website

[12] For more on religious freedom, specifically regarding the situation in the United States, see *Free to Serve: Protecting the Religious Freedom of Faith-Based Organizations* (by Steve Monsma and Stanley Carlson-Thies). For an extremely useful summary of Canadian legal and political precedent, see Janet Epp Buckingham, *Fighting over God: A Legal and Political History of Religious Freedom in Canada* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2014).

to reflect the beliefs of the CRC, articles of incorporation, and other official forms, please see the statements shared by the executive director of the CRCNA. These statements can be found at www.crcna.org/SynodResources under the headings "Model Church Facilities" and "Attachment to the Articles of Incorporation Form."

2. Marks of a religious marriage (cf. majority report, section VI, A, 2, b)

As earlier noted, there are differences in kind and content between the ways the church and the state define marriage. Nonetheless, it remains the case that virtually all North American religious marriages are also civil marriages, with a single ceremony solemnizing both the civil and the religious marriage.

Therefore, to address the question regarding the types of marriages a pastor ought to solemnize, it is important to understand what makes a wedding religious. As noted by the report,

> Typically, a religious wedding initiates a marriage between Christian believers. What makes a wedding religious? Certainly setting plays a part. A wedding in a church sanctuary surrounded by the symbols and expressions of the Christian faith suggests an intent to seek God's and the Christian community's blessing on a marriage. More specifically, three things distinguish a wedding solemnizing a religious marriage:
>
> – a declaration of marriage (following the exchange of vows) using the formula "by the authority vested in me by the church of Jesus Christ and by the State/Province of . . ."
> – liturgical elements that invoke the name of God and prayers that express God's blessing on the couple
> – acknowledgment that the couple's vows are being stated and the marriage is being solemnized "before the face of God"

These explicit marks are important indicators of religious marriage. However, there may also be instances in which there are no explicit references to God, any particular Christian doctrine, or use of a declaration of marriage that uses the formula mentioned above, but still is performed by an agent of the church. Though such an instance would strip away important Christian elements of a marriage, such a solemnization of a marriage by a minster of the Word would still mark the marriage as a religious marriage. For a purely civil marriage, there are civil alternatives to having a minister of the Word perform the wedding ceremony; a justice of the peace or a civil officer could officiate. While the guidance of the report suggests that there may be rare instances in which a minister might officiate a civil same-sex wedding ceremony, we understand that suggestion to be incompatible with the theology and polity of the CRC.

A minister of the Word in North America is both an agent of the church and an agent of the state. As previously noted, there is thus not often a purely "religious" or purely "civil" marriage that occurs in North America. While the minister functions as an agent of both church and state, it is important to remember that ministers are "authorized to function as agents of the state only as a matter of convenience. Their being an agent of the church must weigh more heavily."[13] Ministers are given authority from the state to solemnize weddings on the basis of their ecclesial status

[13] Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010), p. 372.

as being ordained to the office of minister of the Word. The *office* of the minister therefore has an attendant civil authority, but his or her civil authority proceeds first and foremost from the minister's office as a minister of the Word. The minister's role as an agent of the church is always primary. Thus, no ceremony performed by a minister of the Word has the capacity to be purely civil, even if the ceremony is stripped of the explicit markers of a religious wedding. In all cases of a pastor officiating a wedding ceremony, the pastor is doing so by way of his or her ecclesial office.

The majority report states that the religious markers listed above are what makes a wedding ceremony religious. We deem that information insufficient, noting that a pastor's role in officiating a marriage also is a critical component of a religious marriage.

3. Officiating a civil same-sex marriage (cf. majority report section VI, A, 2, d)

The majority report states,

> Most requests to officiate at a wedding involve an implicit request for a religious as well as civil marriage ceremony. Where such requests involve a same-sex couple, the above pastoral guidance applies.

Given the discussion of religious and civil marriage noted above, the involvement of an agent of the church (that is, a minister of the Word or another person whose ability to solemnize marriages is given on the basis of their affiliation with an ecclesial body) necessarily means that the marriage is not *merely* civil, even if the explicit marks of the wedding would indicate as much. Thus, pastors cannot officiate a civil same-sex wedding ceremony. Were they to do so, the ceremony would, in some way, have the marks of a religious ceremony, because the pastor would be officiating on the basis of ecclesial office.

However, in the case of a pastor being asked to officiate a civil same-sex wedding, in light of the biblical teaching on marriage and the primacy of the role of the pastor as agent of the church, guidance that suggests there may be, under certain circumstances, latitude for a pastor to officiate a civil same-sex wedding is in conflict with the theology and polity of the CRC. First, a pastor, whose authority to officiate weddings is based on ecclesial status, cannot perform a *merely* civil ceremony. Second, officiating a same-sex wedding would be in conflict with the CRC's teaching on marriage. Again, a marriage ceremony, even stripped of the explicit marks of a religious ceremony as listed in the majority report section VI, A, 2, b, cannot be merely civil if a pastor officiates the ceremony. A pastor officiating a same-sex wedding with no explicit religious marks, then, would again be contrary to the teaching of the CRC. The same pastoral guidance given for solemnizing a religious same-sex marriage should apply in this situation. When a pastor has acted in violation of the Church Order, as in the case of officiating a wedding that is contrary to the Word of God, one must first take the matter up with the consistory of the church and then go through the established church polity to address the situation.

It is important to note, however, that while officiating a civil same-sex marriage is not consistent with the CRC's understanding of marriage, Church Order Article 69 (regarding the solemnizing of marriage), and the CRC's teaching on homosexuality stated in both the 1973 and 2002

synodical reports, there may be situations where two individuals married in a civil same-sex marriage could be fully consistent with CRC teaching.

As noted in the majority report, there could be a same-sex couple committed to living within the bounds of the 1973 report on homosexuality—that is, two same-sex oriented individuals committed to celibacy who do not seek a religious marriage but may have due cause to be civilly married. Even more likely would be the case of a couple that has already been married and is now entering the church. In the latter case, it could happen that a same-sex couple with children, through the course of many conversations, Scripture reading, and pastoral guidance, becomes convicted that a same-sex sexually active relationship is not consistent with the teaching of Scripture. This couple could determine that the legal, medical, and personal protections provided to themselves and their children through civil marriage are important to their well-being, and they could decide to maintain a legal married status. Were that couple to maintain celibacy within their relationship, their civil marriage could be in line with the teachings of the church on same-sex relationships. In other words, *remaining* in a same-sex, celibate relationship may not be in conflict with biblical teaching on sexuality and marriage. Such decisions ought to be made in concert with the consistory of the church and with deep deliberation and prayer. Were the couple to decide to remain married in a celibate relationship, the couple and the consistory would be wise also to discuss together what to communicate, and how best to communicate, about these decisions to the church body so as not to confuse the public witness of the church in regard to same-sex marriage. A Christian person—or a current member of a church—entering into such a relationship would, however, be in conflict with the church's teaching on marriage.

In situations such as these, again principled pluralism is a helpful framework. The state does have the relative authority to establish and uphold civil marriages. Within this area, a definition of marriage different from that of the church would be upheld and protected. It would not necessarily be inconsistent to uphold the church's views on marriage and same-sex sexual behavior while still maintaining the legal protections afforded by the relative authority of the state. This framework can help negotiate the difference between an instance in which someone is married in a civil same-sex ceremony and an instance in which an agent of the church officiates a same-sex marriage. In the case of the former, we affirm what is noted in the report (at the end of section VI, A, 2, d):

> At the very least, however, these examples demonstrate that a civil same-sex marriage is not inherently in conflict with the CRC understanding of same-sex orientation and behavior nor the church's position on marriage.

As we have noted, however, we do not take this to mean that a pastor may officiate a same-sex marriage.

4. Playing a role in a same-sex wedding (cf. majority report section VI, A, 4)

A Christian person may have a wide range of involvements in a same-sex wedding, and no report could hope to be exhaustive. We hear stories about florists, bakers, and photographers struggling to come to terms with supporting or providing services for same-sex weddings. We, the writers of the minority report, affirm what the majority report says:

> Providing these services to same-sex couples may violate the conscience of some individuals in our churches. Others may feel no burden of conscience to refuse services to same-sex couples. Such decisions are best made on an individual level. Just as we do not mandate that members do not provide catering for bar mitzvahs or arrange flowers for a wedding between two atheists, providing services to other people does not inherently imply an agreement with the event taking place or with every aspect of the customer's life.

However, we deem there is more to be said. There is more to "playing a role" than providing business-related services for the day of a wedding. Within the committee's work of listening to various classes in the CRC, questions often came up with regard to how a Christian might respond to a request to participate in a same-sex marriage ceremony itself.

For laypeople asked to participate in the ceremony—standing up, Bible reading, preparing music (and so forth)—we further affirm the above, that some may feel a burden of conscience to refuse to participate while others may choose to attend and participate as they would in another religious ceremony. Participation (of various forms) does not *need* to imply endorsement. However, Christians should understand that same-sex marriage is inconsistent with biblical teaching about marriage. Participation in a same-sex marriage runs the risk of placing such members in the position of supporting a relationship that is contrary to Scripture.

Ministers of the Word, elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors (that is, all officebearers of the church) must be held to a different standard. Since those in that office will be seen as operating out of their ordained roles, they should avoid accepting roles in same-sex wedding ceremonies because such acceptance and participation can easily be seen as supporting a sinful pattern of sexuality.

The advice for officebearers is different because it is harder for them to act independent of their office, which bears authority on the basis of the confessional and doctrinal positions of the church and the denomination. Officebearers may well attend a same-sex wedding (as they might attend an interfaith wedding) but ought to refrain from playing a role. If officebearers participated in a same-sex wedding ceremony, they would be embracing a higher risk of endorsing the same-sex relationship, because the authority of their office might be associated with endorsing a relationship precluded by the Bible.

B. Belonging

1. Membership (cf. majority report section VI, B, 2)

The committee's majority report raises important dimensions of membership as it pertains to same-sex couples. Such couples, though without official membership, may already be involved in the church and integrated into the life of the body in some, if not many, ways. The relational dynamics surrounding questions of membership are important to consider. However, there are other dimensions of membership that we think are important to highlight as well, particularly the connection between membership and discipline and questions of participation in the life of the church.

Membership in the church is necessarily complicated at present, partly because church discipline and practical discipleship have become major challenges for many congregations today. In a context in which discipline has often become a bad word, it is important to remember the clear

relationship between discipling and discipline. In fact, as Article 78 of the Church Order puts it,

> The purpose of admonition and discipline is to restore those who err to faithful obedience to God and full fellowship with the congregation, to maintain the holiness of the church, and thus to uphold God's honor.[14]

There is a close and essential relationship between making disciples and discipline. The Heidelberg Catechism refers to church discipline as a key for opening and closing the kingdom of heaven,[15] and the Belgic Confession lists discipline as one of the three marks of the true church.[16] Discipline, in short, is something every Christian *necessarily* experiences as part of their regeneration in Christ, and in this respect the elders of the church truly do hold "keys of the kingdom" for building true faith. Marriage itself, we should not forget, is a structure of discipline, of *discipleship*, to which some are called.

Understanding discipline as a part of discipleship is the attitude that consistories should consider when deliberating on membership for same-sex couples. The goal of discipline, unambiguously, is a restoration of right relationship as Scripture teaches. But the path is about creating disciples, not simply fencing the membership or excluding the often already marginal.

Membership, in the first place, is certainly open in all its forms (including leadership) to Christians living lives of celibate, same-sex attraction. But membership questions for noncelibate same-sex couples need to follow the path of discipleship laid out in the Church Order. The above advice on divorce is useful for the church here too:

> The church must not only listen, she must also speak in confrontation and with promise. Where overt sinful conduct is present, the church must address the Word of God in rebuke.[17]

As noted earlier, same-sex marriage, unless it is a celibate marriage, is incompatible with the criteria for soundness in doctrine and life. Discipleship for members erring in life or doctrine, as noted in the Church Order, results in discipline as a next step to urge the member to repentance and restored full fellowship (see Church Order Art. 78). While the Church Order used to require that congregations follow exact "steps of discipline,"[18] there are no longer specific steps that must be taken in order to enact discipline; consistories are now given greater freedom in the exact modes of operation for church discipline. Discipline is further complicated because some consistories no longer possess markers and means for discipline, having opened communion tables and attendance to a wide range of participants. Many churches also have categories of "regular attender" or other such designations for those who are committed to a church body but have not become formal members, to whom

[14] DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, p. 400.

[15] Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83, 85.

[16] Belgic Confession, Article 29: The Marks of the True Church.

[17] *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 482.

[18] See DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, pp. 411-12. These steps were (1) private advice not to partake of the sacrament, (2) public announcement and prayer in worship without the name, (3) public announcement and prayer with the name, and (4) public announcement in worship that an excommunication of the named person will take place at a certain time unless there is repentance.

discipline would apply. With this, many churches embrace members and nonmembers in nonordained (that is, not elder or deacon) leadership roles in the church, so those who are not members may already be serving in many capacities in a church. They may be Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, vacation Bible school volunteers, greeters, and more.

If a member enters into a same-sex marriage, he or she becomes subject to the regular admonition and discipline of the church. As stated by Church Order Article 81-a,

> Members who have sinned in life or doctrine shall be faithfully disciplined by the consistory and, if they persist in their sin, shall be excluded from membership in the church of Christ.

Consistories may first wish to address such a member as simply "under discipline." If the member is placed under discipline, this may also include informing the member that until he or she heeds the admonition and discipline of the church, the member is no longer in good standing and for the time being is not permitted to participate in communion (see also VI, B, 2, d of the majority report; the church's communion practice for those who have entered same-sex marriage relationships should be no different from its practice for those who are in other sorts of relationships that the Bible identifies as sinful). It may be that this discipleship fails to produce repentance, at which point church discipline also has the task of removing the pretense of allowing the church to keep in standing a member obviously at odds with the teaching of the church. But this is certainly not the goal; in the administration of discipline, we must always keep the goal in mind: repentance and restored fellowship. Consistories are wise to remember that "preventive discipline," that is, both churchwide teaching on sexuality and marriage and loving confrontation outside the bounds of formal discipline, is the most effective means of discipline.

Finally, in the survey and in the listening sessions conducted by the committee, broader questions of participation arose. Most frequently, these questions surrounded day-to-day participation in the life of the church. As in the discussion above, someone in a same-sex marriage could have a wide range of involvements in the life of the church, and, again, no report could hope to comment on all the possibilities. Broadly speaking, however, it is important to make a distinction between participation in the life of the church and participation in its leadership. As with any person who seeks to participate in worship or other aspects of the life of the church, those in same-sex marriage relationships should be allowed, and encouraged, to participate. The level of participation should be no different from what has been made available to any other person desiring to explore life in the church community. It cannot be repeated enough that all people are to be welcomed into participation in the worship and other aspects of the life of the church. Soundness in life and doctrine is not a precondition for participation. Including anyone who desires to participate into the life of the church, however, does not necessitate including all in leadership roles. Leadership roles such as elder, deacon, and any ministry leadership role should be limited to members in good standing.

2. Requests for membership (cf. majority report section VI, B, 2, b)

Initial membership in the church always begins with the sacrament of baptism and the vows that new members take before they submit to this sacrament. In the case of infant baptism, the vows come later in the public profession of faith. In profession of faith, the noninfant member affirms the baptismal vows taken by his or her parent or sponsor on his or her behalf.

In these vows the church member promises to "forsake the world and to put to death" his or her "old nature and to lead a godly life." Further, the professing member promises to "submit to the government of the church" and also, if he or she "should become delinquent either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline."

When a person enters a same-sex marriage, he or she violates his or her baptism vows. Since same-sex marriage undermines the biblical teaching on marriage, the issue of having become delinquent in doctrine arises. If the same-sex marriage initiates a relationship that involves sexual activity, the issue of delinquency in life also surfaces, since the Bible disallows same-sex sexual activity. The Christian Reformed Church's reports on homosexuality have affirmed and reaffirmed this biblical teaching (see section I, D of the majority report).

If a member in good standing enters into a same-sex marriage, he or she becomes subject to the regular admonition and discipline of the church. If a person in a same-sex marriage wishes to become a member of the church, he or she ought to abandon that sexual relationship as part of his or her forsaking the world, putting to death the old nature, and beginning to lead a godly life. This commitment is part of taking or accepting his or her baptismal vows. Particularly in the case of same-sex couples who are raising children, breaking the social relationships that having and raising children involves is not desirable or necessary. In addition, abandoning a same-sex relationship in seeking membership need not mean more or less than a commitment to celibacy as a member of the church.

The pastors and elders will need to discuss these matters as they arise with Christian love and compassion as part of the process of preparation for baptism or membership in the church. In the case of members who enter same-sex marriages, the church needs to be both compassionate and deliberate in confronting such members, as it would in admonishing and disciplining any other sin.

II. Recommendation

That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Ms. Jessica Driesenga and Rev. Dr. John Rottman when the minority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage is considered.

Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance
re Same-sex Marriage
Jessica Driesenga
John M. Rottman