**A Summary of Actions taken in the RCA Related to the Topic of Human Sexuality**

**In 1978**, the General Synod voted to make a paper presented by the Commission on Theology available to RCA congregations. The paper stated that:

* "Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality."
* "While avoiding simplistic and obnoxious social crusades, the church must affirm through its preaching and pastoral ministry that homosexuality is not an acceptable alternative lifestyle. God's gracious intent for human sexual fulfillment is the permanent bond of heterosexual love. This redemptive word must be spoken, with sensitivity, caring, and clarity to any person who would make a perverted sexual choice, and to society as a whole."
* "It is one matter to affirm that self-chosen homosexual acts are sinful. It is quite another to reject, defame, and excoriate the humanity of the person who performs them. This distinction has often been missed. It is possible and necessary on biblical grounds to identify homosexuality as a departure from God's intent. However...there are no theological grounds on which a homosexual may be singled out for a greater measure of judgement. All persons bear within them the marks of the fall.
* "The denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology."

A report entitled "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual," presented to the General Synod **in 1979**, listed three areas of congregational life with which the church must come to terms if it is to witness effectively to the homosexual:

* Elimination of the double standard of morality applied to the homosexual. It often seems as though the church places certain sins, homosexuality among them, beyond its own responsibility for ministry and, by implication, beyond the reach of God's grace.
* The church should acknowledge its sins against the homosexual. Homosexuality is neither to be celebrated nor persecuted. Homophobia must be replaced by a sense of common humanity, the desire to understand, and the determination to put away the sins commonly committed against the homosexual, including stereotyping, caricaturing, and enjoying disparaging humor at the homosexual's expense.
* The church should make a genuine effort to understand homosexuality. The church must be willing to understand and deal with the concrete life situation in which [the homosexual] finds himself. There is much we do not know about homosexuality, but we do know that it is a complex phenomenon (MGS 1979: 130-131).

**The 1990 General Synod** voted to adopt an official position on the issue of homosexuality, as some classes felt there was confusion within the church as to the status of the 1978 report on homosexuality. The advisory committee recommended:

To adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings (MGS 1990: 461).

**In 1994**, General Synod voted to adopt another resolution addressing the church’s relationship with homosexuals. The resolution stated:

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America recognizes and confesses that the Reformed Church in America has failed to live up to its own statements regarding homosexualityin 1978 (MGS 1978: 229-240), 1979 (MGS 1979: 128-135), and 1990 (MGS 1990: 461). Few in the Reformed Church in America have creatively and lovingly spoken with persons with a homosexual orientation about the truths of Scripture and the hope of the gospel. Many have participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior which humiliate or degrade such persons. Many of the churches within the Reformed Church in America have not provided an environment where persons have felt the acceptance and freedom to struggle with hard issues involving sexual orientation. Many Reformed Church in America members have shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity. For all these wrongs, this General Synod expresses its humble and heartfelt repentance, and its desire to reflect the love of Christ to homosexual persons. In all that this General Synod does, it seeks to obey the whole of Scripture, demonstrating in its own life the same obedience it asks from others. It calls itself and the whole church to a greater faithfulness to Christ in relationships with persons of homosexual orientation.

To this end, the General Synod calls the church to a process of repentance, prayer, learning, and growth in ministry. This process will be guided by the basic biblical-theological framework presented in the previous statements of the General Synod (MGS 1994: 375-376).

**In 1997**, the *Formula of Agreement* was approved allowing for the free exchange of ministers between the partnering denominations: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church, USA, the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America. (At that time, the United Church of Christ had already approved of the ordination of persons in the LGBTQ community. The other two partnering denominations have done so since then.)

**In 1998**, the General Synod called for a temporary moratorium on the issue of homosexuality. It

adopted this proposal:

To instruct this General Synod to refrain from deliberative debate and policy decisions

relating to homosexuality, as these matters have already been thoroughly addressed by

previous synods, and to urge this same action upon the 1999 and 2000 General Synods.

To instruct the General Synod Council, through its Congregational Services Committee,

to help enable congregations and classes to enter a process of intentional discernment

concerning the pastoral challenges raised by the issue of homosexualityover the next

two years, utilizing the study guide and other resources, in order to fulfill the actions

called for on this matter by the 1994 General Synod (MGS 1998: 60).

In **2004**, General Synod “instructed the Commission on Theology to provide a study paper on ‘human sexuality and marriage.'” When that paper was presented to General Synod 2006, synod voted to refer it to the Commission on Theology for review and revision in light of the wisdom of Reformed theology (*MGS 2006*, pp. 233-260).

**In 2004,** synod also affirmed “that marriage is properly defined as the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others” and directed the Commission on Church Order to consider an amendment to the *Book of Church Order*that added the affirmation into the RCA’s church order (*MGS 2004*, pp. 332-333).

In **2005**, the commission reported that it had considered an amendment to the *Book of Church Order*but did not feel it was appropriate, and gave six reasons why (*MGS 2005*, pp. 90-91).

**In 2005**, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield was convicted by the General Synodof violating his vows as a General Synod Professor of Theology and as a Minister of Word and Sacrament for officiating the marriage of his daughter to another woman. Following the trial, the General Synod approved a three-year denominational dialogueon the topic of human sexuality. (Rev. Kansfield has since been reinstated, and supports an open and affirming position.)

**In 2005**, *Room for All* (RfA) was founded and organized by RCA members. From their website, their vision and mission is:

Compelled by the inclusive love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the

Spirit, Room for All is a community of Christ-followers in the Reformed Church in

America. Our vision and mission statements indicate our commitment to the welcome

and affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people and their allies,

while pursuing grace-filled dialogue with those who believe differently….and advocate

for a radically inclusive welcome and affirmation of the full spectrum of God’s people in

all aspects of our congregational and denominational ministries

**In 2006**, the General Synod voted to refer a paper entitled "Human Sexuality and Marriage" to the Theology Commission for review and revision in the light of the wisdom of Reformed theology.

In **2009**, the General Synod voted to “affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps are not a preferred course of action at this time.” The 2009 synod also asked the General Synod Council to monitor how the assemblies of the church are dealing with this issue and report back to the 2011 synod. Finally, the 2009 synod recommended that “officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved.”

**In 2012**, General Synod voted:

While compassion, patience, and loving support should be shown to all those who struggle with same-sex desires, the General Synod reaffirms our official position that homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures, therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense; and further,

that the General Synod Council shall oversee the creation of an eight member committee made up of representatives appointed by each of the regional synods to pray and work together to present a way forward for our denomination given the disagreement in our body relative to homosexuality. The purpose of the committee is not to revisit our stated position, but shall operate with the understanding expressed earlier in this recommendation and issue a report with practical recommendations to the General Synod of 2013 (MGS 2012: 149-150).

**In 2013**, the General Synod voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a diverse working group representative of the constituencies of the RCA and the varying understandings within the Reformed Church in America regarding sexual orientation and gender identity to identify, design, and/or develop resources for use in congregations and other RCA settings that will encourage grace-filled conversations among those holding varying understandings; and further, to identify, design, and/or develop resources for use in congregations and other RCA settings to assist the RCA in the development of strategies to preserve unity, purity, and peace (MGS 2013: 115).

The **2013 General Synod** also voted:

To acknowledge that in 2012 we, the General Synod, in the proceedings that led to the adoption of R-28, demonstrated a lack of decorum and civility, and a general atmosphere in which delegates were not always treating one another as sisters and brothers in Christ; and further,

to acknowledge that in 2012 we, the General Synod, usurped the constitutional authority reserved for the classeswhen, in R-28, we stated that “any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense” (MGS 2013: 179).

**In 2013**, Dr. James Brownson, General Synod Professor of Theology serving at Western Theological Seminary, published his book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships,* in which he reframed the biblical debate on same sex orientation and marriage. Brownson concludes the Bible does not opposed them.

**In 2014**, the General Synod instructed the Commission on Church Order to study the incorporation of a definition of marriage into the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* as between one man and one woman, and to report back to General Synod 2015.

**In 2015,** the General Synod accepted a paper entitled "The Word Became Flesh" from the Commission on Theology as a resource for further reflection on human sexuality.

Setting the topic of sexuality within the drama of God’s rule and reconciliation in Christ

might indeed enable our church to rediscover the ground of a meaningful cultural witness

in the midst of wearying conflict over a variety of topics concerning sexuality.

The General Synod, in judicial session, also approved the reception of a homosexual female ordained in another denomination into the membership of the Classis of New Brunswick.

The Classis of New Brunswick submitted an overture, which was denied, asking the RCA to approve:

People whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms—lesbian, gay,

bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, and gender non-conforming identities, among an

ever-increasing list of others—are gifts of God to humanity…. Therefore it is a sin to

disparage people because they do not conform to society’s heterosexual norms and

binary conceptions of gender (either male or female based on biology at birth).

In response to the 2014 General Synod’s instruction to incorporate a definition of marriage as

between one man and one woman into the BCO, the Commission on Church Order reported it

“could not find a way to make a definition fit the church order but did arrive at a possible regulation.” They then proposed an amendment to the BCO which would shift the authority to determine the nature of marriage from the level of General Synod to each Consistory or local governing body.

In response to the President’s Report, the General Synod approved that a “Special Council”be held within a year to devise a constitutional resolution determining whether the RCA’s position on human sexuality.

**In 2016,** the Special Council was held in April. The gathering included representatives from across the denomination and from varying perspectives. The Special Counsel did not fulfill its goalto devise a constitutional resolution determining the RCA’s position on human sexuality. Instead, the Special Counsel sent two proposals to General Synod: one allowing for the acceptance of same-sex marriage, and one formally adopting an orthodox view of marriage.

The 2016 General Synod sent two proposed changes to our Constitution which would have constitutionalized the orthodox view of marriage to the classes for approval. One was to makethe Marriage Liturgy, which states marriage is “a joyful covenant between a man and a woman,” as part of our Constitution. The second recommendation was to add a statement to the BCO that marriage is between one man and one woman. In order to be approved, each of these proposals needed a 2/3 majority vote of the classes. Neither received the necessary votes to be approved.

The **2016**General Synod also declared that the RCA does not support the use of reorientation/reparative therapy. Reparative therapy describes a variety of treatments intended to change someone’s sexual orientation. “There has been no data found for the widespread and long-term effectiveness of reparative therapy. However, there is documentation of the adverse effects of reparative therapy,” said the report of the Commission on Christian Action, which had been tasked with studying reparative therapy.

The **2016** General Synod also adopted as constitutional the 2002 “Order for Christian Marriage” liturgy, which describes marriage as “a joyful covenanting between a man and a woman.” Synod also voted for a change to the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*), mandating that consistories or governing bodies “shall assure that marriages in a church or congregation are between a man and a woman.” Neither constitutional amendment achieved the required approval of two-thirds of the classes (*MGS 2017*, pp. 41-42).

General Synod **2016**also passed this resolution:

No matter what position we as Christians have taken on the moral status of same-sex behavior, we reject all forms of mockery, degrading words and thoughts, economic oppression, abuse, threats, and violence made against members of the LGBTQ+ community, and we call on anyone involved in such behavior to repent and immediately begin walking in obedience to Jesus’ command to love.

General Synod **2017** voted “to affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.”

General Synod 2017 also voted “to urge all RCA assemblies and other bodies and all RCA members to maintain our covenant bonds with each other, especially with regard to the conflict over human sexuality; and further, to urge classes to refrain from approving the requests of churches to transfer to another denomination prior to the conclusion of General Synod 2018, instead focusing on our God-given mission.”

The **2018** General Synod responded to overtures from two classes and a regional synod by approving a recommendation:

To commend the [Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality](http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/GLCatechism.pdf) for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry. (OV 18-21, *MGS 2018*: 148)

In his [report to **General Synod 2018**](http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/InterimGeneralSecretary.pdf), interim general secretary Don Poest acknowledged deep divisions within the RCA. Citing the urgency of the moment, he proposed a 2020 Vision Team “to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America: staying together, radical reconstituting and reorganization, or graceful separation.” Poest identified human sexuality as a point of significant division, along with divisions about polity, biblical interpretation, and lack of alignment with Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s strategic goal.

The Vision 2020 Team was formed by General Synod 2018, and tasked with exploring these possible future scenarios for the RCA. After thousands of hours of research, discernment, and feedback, they arrived at a combination of the three.

General Synod **2019**declined to receive the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality as a “catechism” based on the Commission on Theology’s review of the document, instead instructing that it be referred to as a “teaching tool” in future denominational references.

The General Synod also spent time in small groups reviewing the Vision 2020 Team’s work of the previous year, discussing and giving feedback on the impacts of each of the three scenarios the team was tasked with researching.

In **June, 2020,** the Vision 2020 team released its report and recommendations. This report was scheduled to be considered and voted-upon at General Synod 2020, but synod was postponed due to COVID-19. A special session of General Synod has now been set for October 2021. If the pandemic also necessitates the postponement of this special session, General Synod will finally be held in June 2021.

General secretary Eddy Aleman has urged people throughout the RCA to pray over the coming year.

Regional gatherings will provide space to discuss the Vision 2020 report. These gatherings will be held from October to May, organized and led by Vision 2020 Team members, General Synod officers, and the RCA’s Executive Leadership Team. Depending on pandemic conditions, these events may be held in person with an online option, or exclusively online.