

1999 GENERAL SYNOD REPORT OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND RCA DIALOGUE

In 1996 the General Synod, out of discussions pertaining to the Formula of Agreement, voted (Yes-112, No-110) to initiate a dialogue with the United Church of Christ “on the issue of homosexuality for the purpose of encouraging the UCC to move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior” (*MGS 1996*, p. 214).

The UCC responded favorably to the request, and a series of dialogue meetings was held over the next two and a half years between representatives from each denomination. What follows is the final report of the dialogue. (For additional background material, refer to *MGS 1997*, pp. 173-176 and *MGS 1998*, pp. 245-246).

CCU receives the report from the RCA/UCC dialogue with gratitude for the sincere, open, and honest manner in which the series of discussions took place. Further, CCU honors the work of all the participants in the dialogue and is pleased to present this final report to the General Synod for its assimilation. The commission believes the dialogue may serve as a model for future ecumenical engagement on matters of significant divergence within the body of Christ.

Final Report of the Dialogue Between the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ on the Membership and Ministry of Lesbian and Gay Persons in the Church

April 1996 to January 1999

Introduction

Recognizing that the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America differ in significant ways in their understanding of the nature of the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Christians in the life and ministry of the church, and that this difference could be obstacle to the full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed Churches—the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ—the

1996 General Synod of the RCA voted to initiate a dialogue with the UCC focusing on the different positions held by the two churches and the desire that the UCC move toward a “more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and...a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior,” (*MGS 1996*, p. 214). Following the General Synod, the Executive Council of the UCC voted to accept the invitation of the RCA to enter into dialogue in order to “demonstrate the integrity of the biblical and theological discernment that has informed and undergirded the UCC General Synod’s position” (*EC*, 1996).

The following persons were named by their churches to participate in the dialogue:

Reformed Church in America

The Rev. Heino Blaauw, pastor of Forestview Community Church in Grimsby, Ontario, and member of the Commission on Christian Unity.

*The Rev. Shari Brink, pastor of Colts Neck Reformed Church in Colts Neck, New Jersey, and member of the General Synod Council.

The Rev. Douglas Groen, chaplain, South Texas Veterans Health Care system in San Antonio, Texas; chaplain (colonel), U.S. Army, retired; and pastor of Chapel in the Cove in Spring Branch, Texas.

The Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink, professor of systematic theology emeritus at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan and past president of General Synod.

The Rev. Dr. Eugene Pearson, pastor of Lake Hills Community Church in Laguna Hills, California.

The Rev. Douglas Fromm, associate for ecumenical relations, and pastor of Upper Ridgewood Community Church in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Frank Dietz, pastor of Christ United Church of Christ in Cypress, Texas, and former chair of the UCC Council for Ecumenism.

Dr. Edith Guffey, secretary of the United

*Brink resigned from the dialogue in 1997 due to increased pastoral responsibilities in her parish.

Church of Christ.

The Rev. Dr. Paul Hammer, professor of New Testament (retired) at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York.

The Rev. Alice O'Donovan, pastor of First Congregational Church in South Windham, Connecticut.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, assistant to the president of the UCC for ecumenical concerns.

The dialogue met four times to explore the question of how two churches, both from the Reformed tradition, each honoring and reading the same Scripture, could come to such different conclusions. In the course of the sessions the participants engaged in significant biblical and theological reflection, shared stories of the discernment of the two churches on this issue, and experienced a rich, though challenging, encounter. Sessions included formal presentations on hermeneutics, pastoral care concerns, biblical study, and frequent sharing of stories. The sessions were marked by frank, open, and candid exchanges, and by respect for the integrity of each participant. Personal stories and testimony provided the means for deepening relationships across the divisions of differing perspectives. The basic positions of the two churches were upheld with each church feeling free to challenge and critique the partner church.

The reports that follow were prepared by the representatives of each church. They do not represent a consensus, nor do they reflect a conversion of one church to the point of view of the other. Each, however, is deeply informed by the process of dialogue both as a formal theological exchange and as a profoundly personal encounter. Significant disagreement continues to exist. Yet the promise of full communion is confirmed in this dialogue as churches seek to bear witness to a unity that can embrace differences and commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service.

Report of the Reformed Church in America Participants

Introduction

It is not an overstatement to say that in this time of human history, the topic of sex seems to be most prominent. Whether the topic is addressed in terms of sexual behavior, sexual

morality, sexual orientation of persons, sexual violence, concern with role modeling for children and youth, a culture seemingly saturated with blatant and subliminal sexual messages, or the biblical and traditional witnesses of the church with regard to human sexuality, the topic is before us in a host of venues.

While all these themes and sub-themes are the source of intense debate, the issue of homosexuality is most intense within culture and the church—especially concerning the presence of gay and lesbian persons in the life and ministry of the church.

In 1974 the issue was first raised at the General Synod of the RCA. Through the Commission on Christian Action, the whole church was enlisted in an endeavor to understand homosexuality. Being aware of the need for expression of pastoral care toward those who are rejected because of their homosexual identify, the General Synod was urged to encourage churches to continue the study of homosexuality as it relates to the life and work of the church.

The General Synod also affirmed the biblical teaching against the practice of homosexuality. It rejected the language of the commission that the church provide the compassionate acceptance of each persons within the life and mission of the church (*MGS 1974*, pp. 221-222).

For the next twenty years the issue was before the church in a variety of ways, ranging from actions calling the discipline, biblical and theological appraisals, and denial of ordination to practicing gay and lesbian persons, to programs for helping homosexuals and creating a climate of acceptance.

In 1994 the Commission of Theology, as instructed by the General Synod of 1992, presented a report entitled "The Church and Homosexuality." It was recommended to the General Synod that RCA congregations, classes, and regional synods enter into a season of discovery and discernment guided by study, prayer, listening, and discussion, aimed at relating to homosexual persons in ways which are more faithful to Christ, and that resources and materials be provided to enable congregations, classes, and regional synods to carry out this season of discernment and discovery (*MGS 1994*, p. 375).

After a period of intense debate, the General Synod adopted a substitute recommendation. The text resulted from an all-night session of persons representing divergent views on the issue of homosexual persons in the life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

In an emotionally charged moment the General Synod adopted the following statement:

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 statements regarding homosexuality in 1978 (*MGS 1978*, pp. 229-40), 1979 (*MGS 1979*, pp. 128-35), and 1990 (*MGS 1990*, R-11, p. 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 (*MGS 1994*, pp. 375-376).

It was further voted by the General Synod that a study guide, a process of reflection, and a collection of models for ministry be developed to assist the church to understand its own statements on the church and homosexuality. The process of reflection would be used to increase the church's sensitivity and awareness of ways in which persons of homosexual orientation have wrongly suffered in our churches and society. The models to be used demonstrate ways of implementing ministry to persons of homosexual orientation in harmony with the church's stated theological positions (*MGS 1994*, p. 376).

The issue of homosexual persons in the life and ministry of the church was again brought before the General Synod of the RCA in 1996. Concern was raised via overtures from several classes about the United Church of Christ, a partner in the dialogue for full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The overtures focused on the UCC for its policies condoning homosexual behavior and its need to

move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality (*MGS 1996*, p. 207).

In response to the overtures, the General Synod stated its opposition to the policies adopted by the United Church of Christ that condone homosexual behavior and offered to enter into dialogue with the UCC on the issue of homosexuality for the purpose of encouraging the UCC to move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior. The recommendation passed by two votes out of 222 voting delegates (*MGS 1996*, p. 214).

The first round of the dialogue was held on April 17, 1997, and concluded with a fourth round on January 13, 1999.

How has this dialogue affected us as persons?

Both RCA and UCC participants found themselves being pushed into their own heads and hearts in their attempts to be understood and understanding. In general, all participants in the dialogue learned the truth spoken by the theologian Howard Thurman that "understanding requires great artistry. This is why conversation, and good talk and dialogue are of such immense value."

In spite of the obvious difference between the two churches, which was the reason for coming together for dialogue, RCA participants learned that even such uncomfortable—and at times "testy" confrontations—can be occasions in which one experiences the gracious presence of God. In spite of apparent disconnects in some areas of conversation, there was an abiding affirmation of our own commitment to Jesus Christ as the basis for our unity.

For the RCA delegation as a whole, it was insightful to be confronted by an articulate lesbian pastor. One cannot be hostile to a person with whom you may disagree sharply when dealing with that person face to face. Hearing firsthand the views of a gay/lesbian Christian was new and proved to be an enlightening experience. It is one thing to talk about a person of this sexual orientation; it is quite different to talk with that person. Dialogue/discussion/conversation does not take place in a vacuum and needs to be sensitive to those persons who are gay or lesbian and to those who have family members who are gay and lesbian. We found that it is incumbent upon us to use appropriate forms of speech and behavior so as not to humiliate or degrade persons with whom we share a common baptism.

For some RCA participants it was the first known and acknowledged opportunity to be with an openly gay person. To be conversant, laugh and cry, worship and pray, read and discern Scripture, and to share meals, life stories, hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties was to experience the discussion of homosexuality in a much different context. For some the issue still remains that of homosexual orientation as well as homosexual practice. For others, the issue is only focused on the practice, even including faithful monogamous relationships. As one of our RCA participants said, "I can and do accept and love you as a person of the church, but I cannot accept or condone the homosexual relationship in which you live." Another stated that "homosexual orientation is not in accord with God's original created order; it is not God's expression of human sexuality."

What have we learned about our own church's approach to Scripture?

In the first round of dialogue the question was framed: How is it that two churches of the Reformed tradition, honoring, and reading the same Scripture, can come to such different conclusions? By the end of the first round it was agreed by all participants that the Bible has been and continues to be the foundational guidance for our churches on the issue of homosexuality, though we come with differing hermeneutical and interpretive principles. Both sides agreed that both churches seek to take Scripture seriously. There is, however, a clear difference in the hermeneutical approach of the two churches.

Central to the differences in the two church's approach to, and use of Scripture, is in the relative weight given to the role of experience. This use of experience in the hermeneutical process allows one to challenge, reinterpret, or even to set aside certain texts as culturally conditioned or irrelevant. As one of the UCC's participants said, "There are just some texts we need to leave behind." The role of experience as an entrance into biblical reflection is the crux of the difference in approach to the exegetical (historical task) and hermeneutical (contemporary task) process of each church. As the RCA participants listened to the UCC, it appeared that in the UCC one begins with the experience of the situation, addressing Scripture more in its totality and less by lifting up particular, individual texts, whereas the RCA begins with the Scripture and applies it to the reality of the situation, citing specific texts. The key issue finally is whether we begin with revelation and interpret the human situa-

tion in that light or begin with the situation and go to revelation.

During the course of the dialogue, UCC participants raised a question for the RCA. They asked, "How do you come to new understandings of Scripture?" Cited were the issues of slavery and role of women in the life and ministry of the church. In both cases there was earlier justification based on Scripture which condoned slavery and excluded women from authority roles in the church. How, then, were these justifications mollified and previously held positions completely reversed? Presently the RCA condemns slavery and permits women to hold ordained offices in the church. However, in these cases, the seeds for both the abolition of slavery and opening of church offices to women are found in the Bible itself. Diverse perspectives exist within the canonical witness itself regarding the roles of women and the institution of slavery. In both cases, however, the New Testament makes explicit statements that call into question earlier assumptions about hierarchy and patriarchy.

The issue of slavery and the role of women in positions of authority in the church are not exact parallels to the question of homosexuality. Diverse perspectives do not exist in the canonical witness with regard to the question of homosexuality, and the texts that speak to this issue are consistent in condemning the practice.

What have we learned about our own church's response to and experience with gay and lesbian Christians?

The UCC position is formed and shaped in part by the presence of persons with gay and lesbian orientation participating in the process of discernment of biblical witness, whereas the voices of these persons are absent in RCA assemblies. This is an important difference between the two churches.

The RCA lives with the reality that life stories are seldom heard from gay or lesbian persons. No living human documents were able to be presented from the RCA to share firsthand experiences on the subject of homosexual persons in the life of the church. At times this left an appearance of an abstract approach to the issue.

The UCC's discernment of Scripture on this issue is shaped to a significant degree by the testimony of gay and lesbian persons among the baptized. In contrast, the RCA discernment is shaped by the conviction of heterosexual persons who believe that homosexual behavior is not God's intended expression of sexuality. This

conviction is shaped by biblical interpretation without benefit of the experience of gay and lesbian persons being introduced.

Being in this dialogue has led us to ask, "How do we change a climate in our church that has had the effect of silencing and keeping invisible the persons in our midst who deal with gay or lesbian orientations, and limiting support to their parents, siblings, and friends?" Our denomination has produced a resource, available through the RCA Distribution Center, that could facilitate healthy discussion on this issue. Called *Homosexuality: Seeking Guidance*, this five-session study is helpful in understanding what the RCA has said as a church and includes previous RCA statements about the subject. The study should be given greater attention in the church and disseminated throughout its local congregations for use.

Further, the dialogue has surfaced the need for more biblical understanding of human sexuality, its purposes and expressions. We need to understand sinful expressions of heterosexuality more clearly. When this is understood with a repentant heart, then more of a climate to help those dealing with a homosexual orientation will be created. The RCA needs to mature in this. We could also use more and better teaching on genera and on healthy sexuality within the marriage covenant.

In all this we recognize the need for sensitivity in language and behavior when discussing the issue of homosexuality and the church. We must remember that these persons in the church are baptized members of the body of Christ. The church, as the body of Christ, needs to reflect the love of Christ and these persons in its words and actions.

Conclusion

The question stands before us: Has anything been accomplished by the dialogue? In response we must say that both churches remained true to their positions. While we can say that the dialogue was generally friendly and rarely acrimonious, we wonder if that will bring much satisfaction to either church. We can say that each church may gain a clearer and better understanding as to how the other has come to the position it holds with regard to the life and ministry of gay and lesbian persons in the church.

With a desire to live together under the gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a change to growth,

we offer the following affirmations and admonitions to the United Church of Christ.

Affirmations

We affirm the willingness with which the UCC has engaged us in this ongoing theological dialogue, to risk, to confront, and to reveal their church's journey. In so doing, we affirm their openness, the sharing of feelings, and candid feedback in the process of clarifying their position, reacting to our mandate and in critiquing our presentations. Of importance was their ability to speak the truth in love during time of differences, facilitating an authenticity in the dialogue and its continuance. As RCA dialogue members we have sensed and experienced the fervent manner in which the UCC team has approached the Scriptures, even though their hermeneutic differs from ours. Furthermore, we affirm the passion of the UCC dialogue members on issues of justice. Especially apparent is their loving concern for the marginalized in society. We have been enriched by the dialogue and our worship together, in which we claimed the collegiality developed from our personal relationships. The constructive dialogue amid the diversity of our positions is a perpetual witness to our commitment to the one body of Christ, our common baptism, and our love for Jesus Christ.

Admonitions

We realize that the UCC has already taken an official position on the issue of gay-lesbian relationships, but we would still ask the UCC to be open to the leading of the Spirit and the Word in reconsidering its stance in view of:

1. The fact that many biblical scholars cannot agree with the process by which the UCC reached its conclusion. There are other hermeneutical approaches to Scripture, and we urge the UCC to consider other biblical and theological scholars within its own communion who take a different view and to engage in dialogue with them.
2. The fact that a sizable number of UCC congregations are not on record as being "open and affirming" in regard to this issue. We could encourage the UCC to continue its search to discern God's will in regard to this issue, together with the significant number of its members who are not in accord with the official position of the church. Therefore we urge the UCC to

be more sensitive to the concerns and convictions of those within the UCC who do not affirm the official position of the church.

3. The fact that the UCC official stance threatens to divide the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. To look at the RCA as being unenlightened and judgmental on this question overlooks the fact that the RCA position is that of the vast majority of denominations in North America and that the UCC position is regarded as a scandal by many overseas churches. This, we feel, calls for serious self-examination.

We admonish the UCC to repeal its official positions that sanction homosexual practice. While we recognize that relatively few (less than 10 percent) UCC local churches have adopted the status of “open and affirming,” nevertheless denominational statements are important within the Reformed understanding of the church. The Reformation churches are confessional in nature. Our collective statements therefore become the basis of our union, and we covenant together to live them out. This is what makes it necessary for the official UCC position to be changed. Our motive for this call is not only a desire to be faithful to what we understand is the biblical teaching; it is also the motive of love and concern for the UCC and its future.

A concluding word

In closing we express appreciation to the RCA for giving us the opportunity to serve as participants in this most important dialogue with another church of our Reformed tradition. We also express our appreciation to the participants from the United Church of Christ for their willingness to engage in this dialogue with us.

The experience confirms for us the conviction that dialogue over continuing differences in faith, life, and witness becomes the way churches can live more faithfully into full communion characterized by an ongoing process of mutual affirmation and admonition.

Report of the United Church of Christ Participants

Introduction

The United Church of Christ participants in the dialogue with the Reformed Church in America began their involvement in the dialogue

in the context of judgments made by the General Synod of the RCA regarding the UCC's biblical fidelity. The explicit purpose of the dialogue, from the perspective of the RCA, was to “encourage the UCC to move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior.” Thus, we began our dialogue recognizing the need to respond to the judgment that we fail to respect Scripture, give it authority, or read Scripture with discernment. In the face of this uncomfortable and offensive assumption, the members of the dialogue team are grateful to have encountered RCA colleagues ready to engage us rather than dismiss us, willing to wrestle with some very difficult questions, prepared to listen to our stories of hospitality and pastoral availability to gay and lesbian persons and their families, and able to be honest about differences both through passionate speech and thoughtful listening. In spite of enduring and significant disagreement, we have come to appreciate and respect the integrity of our dialogue partners. Above all, we are grateful that increasingly the issue among the representatives of our two churches was not “does the UCC read the Bible?” but “how do we hear God's Word and will through Scripture in the midst of our present life circumstance?”

What have we learned about ourselves?

This dialogue has given rise to important personal reflection among our team even as we have attempted to represent the ethos, experience, and conviction of the United Church of Christ. One member, who grew up in a conservative African-American church, found herself asking for the first time why, given her background, she has never had strong negative reactions to gay and lesbian persons, and discovered at least part of the answer in a formative friendship during her teenage years with a gay man in her congregation, as well as the awareness of what it can mean to be marginalized and excluded as an African-American woman. A pastor in Texas found himself reaching deeply into the wellsprings that have informed us as the United Church of Christ. These wellsprings, part of both our present and hoped-for reality, include a passion for justice, shalom, and deep hospitality. A pastor from Connecticut found herself reflecting on the difference between being part of a church that historically has been a church of establishment and privilege, and being part of a church with a living remembrance of the immigrant experience. She has become more aware of the significance of the challenge to commun-

ion when some are of the establishment and some are truly new to the land. A biblical scholar and teacher discovered in a deeper way the importance of “nonfellowship-breaking” relationships and of the need to remain open to those with whom we differ strongly.

The presence and participation of a UCC pastor on our team who is a lesbian was very significant for our participants. She reminded us that our dialogue was about persons, not merely issues and ideas. She bore witness to the fact that our dialogue was with those inside the body of Christ—members and ministers—not simply about those outside the church. She demonstrated God’s call to ordained ministry is not confined to our sexual orientation. Finally, she helped us see the pain experienced by many who are excluded by the church or by their own families, who must hide their sexual orientation from others, or who face physical and emotional abuse from those encouraged in their prejudice by some forms of biblical interpretation or theological understandings. Yet even as the other members of our team felt gifted by her participation, we were aware of the costly commitment such participation must require. We hope that members of the Reformed Church in America will come to recognize that the language of their General Synod resolution does not merely call into question the United Church of Christ’s biblical fidelity; it also calls into question the integrity and vocation of faithful UCC persons and ministers and, we believe, the integrity and vocation of faithful persons and ministers within the Reformed Church in America.

What have we learned about our approach to Scripture?

For the United Church of Christ the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are authoritative. While there is no single approach to Scripture in the UCC and while there is not a single doctrine of Scripture, those involved in the dialogue have come to understand that the authority of Scripture is authentic in that it includes both content and process over a thousand years of Hebrew and Christian history. The biblical writers’ approach to their Scripture did not absolutize it, as if God were locked into voices from the past. For them, Scripture could challenge Scripture in the ongoing process of interpretation, recognizing that God’s Spirit works by leading the communities of faith to fresh understandings (e.g., in terms of stoning, diet, death, slavery, and women).

Yet the major themes of God’s love story with Israel and the church in Scripture resound for

them and for us: creation, sin or human rebellion, liberation/salvation, healing/wholeness/blessing, truth, justice, peace. A selective proof-text method, which does not begin with the Bible but with views already held, may miss the large forest of Scripture by focusing on a textual tree or two. Further, to superimpose a single doctrine of Scripture on the Bible means making the Bible fit our doctrine and refusing to let the Bible be what it is, with all the rough edges of human experience and God’s engagement of that experience over a thousand years of writing.

In the context of this understanding, we might describe the basic UCC interpretive process as one that pursues an “interpretive circle” which begins with where people are in their faith and life in the present and then engages the voices from Scripture and church traditions in the past to let them inspire, guide, and challenge us again in the present. Thus, with this and other issues we tend to begin by hearing the experience of people. In this instance, specifically, we listen, learn from, and seek to value and appreciate the lives of lesbian and gay persons who are already full members and participants in the church as the body of Christ. On the basis of this experience, we then listen to the voices of Scripture as they inspire, guide, and challenge our life together for the purpose of building up the community. We do not use a few (six or seven) biblical texts to exclude or condemn gay and lesbian persons as sinners, believing that to so use such texts from the past is to deny the way in which God is working now to lead us into more and more dignity and freedom, justice, and peace for all people. Rather, we attempt to search the Scriptures in their fullness, allowing our interpretations to build up persons in faithful relationships with God, one another, and God’s creation; build communities of love, justice, and peace both within the church and within God’s beloved world; and build communities of stewardship that care for the earth, its peoples, its resources, and its place in God’s universe. Finally, we seek to allow the Scriptures in their wholeness to guide us into the responsible use of God’s gift of our sexuality to demonstrative God’s tender love and gracious care for all God’s beloved children.

What have we learned about our own church’s experience with its lesbian and gay members?

There is a certain irony in the fact that a dialogue originally intending to challenge our United Church of Christ convictions and com-

mitments actually led each of the UCC dialogue team members to a deeper appreciation for the richness and integrity of our journey with gay and lesbian members over recent decades. The invitation to tell our story became an opportunity to discover in new ways the significance of this experience and to connect it to other points in our history when openness to others who have been at the margin—women, persons of color, persons with disabilities—has led us to discover ways in which the Bible calls us to receive and offer hospitality. One learning we take from this dialogue is the need to gather together a historical and theological account of this story, both for ourselves and for our ecumenical partners.

We found it difficult to find ways to articulate the fact that, while there is a growing and deepening receptiveness throughout our church to the conviction of the General Synod, in every congregation, association, and conference of the United Church of Christ there are those who continue to struggle with these issues, who remain uneasy and unsure, including those who would support the position represented by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. That difficulty is due in part to a sense that some among our dialogue partners interpret the presence of dissent to suggest that our position represents only the view of a small elite or that our church may one day change its mind. Without denying that our journey has been marked—and continues to be marked—by struggle, we tend to see these diverse views as a wrestling with the Spirit who makes us aware that God is alive and well and caring about what we are becoming. Our current discernment, biblically and theologically, is not an “end,” but a milestone along the way of discovering that God is not through with us, even now, even with this issue. Yet we would say firmly that there is no going back for the United Church of Christ. As our lesbian sister puts it, “while there are some in the UCC who wish that I and my lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers were not at the table, there is nonetheless a growing sense of welcome to our table and a growing sense that we can trust the ‘ties that bind,’ since those God-given ties are stronger than the differences which may divide.” Here our UCC polity helps us. We come together expecting differences; we come together giving up expectations of uniformity. Our polity allows for this difference, enabling some to lead while granting others the freedom to respond to the leadership in their own discernment process.

Finally, as we have remembered our story and reflected on it in the context of the biblical story,

we have been reminded of a striking reality in the gospel accounts of Jesus: The primary people with whom Jesus had trouble was the religious establishment, which excluded those who did not fit into its theological systems. Jesus’ words of judgment fell primarily on those who would not express the inclusiveness of God’s reign. Thus the interpretive circle which began with the story of our journey together with gay and lesbian persons in the United Church of Christ, and which continued as we engaged the voices of Scripture, now returns us again to the present where we hear the Scriptures’ challenge to consider gain the ways in which we may be continuing to restrict God’s grace and limit God’s love.

A word to the Reformed Church in America: affirmations and admonitions

We affirm the seriousness in which the RCA has entered into full communion, particularly the commitment to ongoing theological dialogue, to consultation and shared decision-making, and to the vulnerability involved in the process of mutual affirmation and admonition. We affirm the individuals who have represented the RCA for their willingness to struggle with difficult issues, to hear new and challenging perspectives without immediately dismissing them. We have sensed a real attempt on the part of our dialogue partners to understand our church’s journey in spite of its sharp contrast to their own. Above all, we have cherished the development of personal relationships, the opportunity for worship, the times of joyful table fellowship, and the reminder in the midst of mutual prayer that we are saved not by our theologies, but by the grace of God which can embrace many theologies as long as those theologies do not negate God’s grace itself or violate God’s “good news of great joy for all people” (Luke 2:10).

We admonish and encourage the Reformed Church in America to seek out, welcome, and listen to the faith and stories of gay and lesbian persons who are, or have been, members of the RCA. In our dialogue we have experienced the ways in which the voice of these persons has been silenced by official positions and discipline. In many settings of the RCA, gay and lesbian persons have been rendered invisible by the fear of ecclesiastical sanction and the language of rejection. Frequently in the dialogue we heard gay and lesbian persons described as “other;” they are not seen as part of “us.” Part of the price of this silence is that few members of

the RCA have the opportunity for personal, healing relationships with gay and lesbian Christians in the context of the church. As a result, gays and lesbians are often seen through the lens of stereotype and prejudice, as was the case at points in our dialogue.

Unable to experience the reality of many gay and lesbian persons living in faithful covenant relationships that reflect and share the sacred love of God, such stereotype and prejudice tends to caricature homosexuals on the basis of instances of abuse, promiscuity, or exploitation—generalizations we would never draw of heterosexual persons on the basis of similar instances of abuse, exploitation, or promiscuity. An additional price is that pastoral care to gays, lesbians, and their families is, in our view, compromised. Is it possible for gay and lesbian persons or their families to fully trust the pastoral care of a church that officially condemns the expression of their sexuality and bars them from the leadership of the church?

Finally, this silencing of gay and lesbian persons often allows the more virulent voices of prejudice and hate in our society to go unchecked by a word from the church. The dialogue team from the United Church of Christ hopes that the RCA will seriously explore the ways in which it might lift up, welcome, and encourage gay and lesbian persons to express their hopes and fears, bearing witness to the richness and reality of their faith in many congregations, classes, and the General Synod.

Our second admonishment is to explore an understanding of biblical authority that does justice to both the content and process which the biblical writings themselves demonstrate. The biblical writers themselves do not isolate texts from the past, making them prescriptive for life in the present. They listen to the voices in their Scripture which can engage them in dialogue and which can help them to discern God's will in the ongoing interpretive work of God's Holy Spirit. To fail to see the nature of this process among biblical writers themselves is to be unfaithful to the Scripture. The Bible needs no defenders. It only needs faithful interpreters to be aware of all that is there, in terms both of the glory and tragedy of human life, the faithfulness and faithlessness of human beings, the theologies that build persons and communities of faith, hope and love and theologies that harm both persons and communities. Most of all it needs persons who know that God's grace is greater than all our destructive sin and who want to lift the blindness that excludes any of God's beloved children from God's human family, a family that God has fully embraced in Jesus

Christ.

This dialogue began with a challenge to the United Church of Christ "to repeal...its policies condoning homosexual behavior." At the conclusion of our dialogue, we respectfully invite the Reformed Church in America to reconsider its official position on gay and lesbian persons, not for the sake of agreeing with us, but for the sake of gay and lesbian members in your own church. They need to know that their church welcomes and cherishes them. They need to know that their church trusts them to walk a journey of faith with them. They need and deserve to be invited to live openly and joyfully as lesbian and gay persons and as joyful and faithful members of the RCA. Their families need to hear a voice of love and acceptance from the church so that parents no longer need to counsel a son or daughter of the RCA to find a spiritual home in another faith communion.

A concluding word

Because of the judgmental tone of the Reformed Church in America's invitation to dialogue, we entered into this dialogue with some suspicion about how open our partners would be to a full and honest conversation. We are grateful to have encountered brothers and sisters in faith who listened with care and who took us and our church seriously. Yes, there were painful, awkward, and disturbing exchanges. But we also grew to appreciate and enjoy each other. The issues between us are not resolved any more than the questions before us in this dialogue are fully and finally resolved in either of our two churches. Nevertheless, the dialogue did help us clarify our own understandings, learn to appreciate our own experience more fully, and challenge us to find ways to articulate our commitments and convictions in ways that can be understood by those who share with us the same Bible and who have been nurtured in the same Reformed tradition. For this we are deeply grateful. We trust this experience will become a model for how churches can face difference even while nurturing the communion that God has given us.

A Joint Statement of the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America Dialogue Participants

This dialogue, although difficult and at times painful, was an enriching experience for each of the participants. In the context of a shared faith,

and in an atmosphere of respect and growing friendship, we learned much about each other's traditions and churches, gained insights from each other's biblical and theological perspectives, and came to a deeper understanding of both the hopes and the challenges confronting each of our churches as we face the twenty-first century. We also learned something of the meaning of full communion and of the dialogue process itself which we would like to share with our churches.

First, we note that the votes on the *Formula of Agreement* in 1997, establishing full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed churches that were themselves already in communion with one another, took place during the course of our dialogue. While the commitment to dialogue on this potentially church-dividing issue may have facilitated the vote on full communion for some of our churches, we believe it is significant that resolution of differences on this issue was not required for our two churches to enter together into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Rather, the experience of the participants confirms the conviction that dialogue over continuing differences in faith, life, and witness becomes the way of living in full communion, a life characterized by an ongoing process of mutual affirmation and admonition.

Second, we believe the presence of participants or observers from other full communion partners would have enhanced our dialogue. On an issue that broadly affects the whole Christian community, the differences between our two churches would be more helpfully seen in the context of wider ecumenical discernment on the issue of homosexuality. Furthermore, we question the appropriateness of engaging in dialogue without including those churches to whom we have an ecumenical commitment. In the future,

we encourage dialogues to include others with whom we are in full communion.

Finally, while acknowledging the importance of the question of the membership and ministry of lesbian and gay Christians in the life of the church, we also urge our churches to seek ways of living together in full communion through dialogue and common witness on other critical matters of mutual importance. We note in particular the call of the twenty-third General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to "give special attention to the analysis and understanding of economic processes, their consequences for people's lives, and the threats to creation...to work towards the formulation of a confession...which would express justice in the whole household of God...and to act in solidarity with the victims of injustice as they struggle to overcome unjust economic powers and destructive ecological activities."

In the Reformed tradition we confess that "we belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Knowing that in our dialogue we have not always been faithful to our confession, we close with this prayer, using the words of the "Declaration of Debrecen" adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1997:

We confess our theological and moral failures, our complicity in adding to the world's burdens, our inadequate witness to God's purposes. We ask forgiveness from God and from each other for these transgressions, and also for the injuries we have done to one another.

May this spirit of humility, and this reliance on God's grace, be the way of walking together in full communion for our two churches.