

The Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands and homosexuality

On a synodal level the three churches which together formed the Protestant Church in the Netherlands have each had a separate history regarding homosexuality.

Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC)

In 1984 a first exploration of the issue of homosexuality with a survey of various points of view was published in the NRC synod. Matters gained momentum in 1987 when two men in Rotterdam were refused admission to the Lord's Supper by the church council on account of their homosexual orientation. At that time, as now, there were generally no restrictions in the Netherlands Reformed Church against participation of homosexual members in congregational life, but a church council could independently impose such restrictions (discipline) if it judged that a way of life was not in accordance with the Bible. In connection with the Rotterdam affair a new report was published in 1989 with a plea for mutual respect and the call to refrain from disciplinary measures against homosexual congregation members. In this year the synod called such a ban on taking part in the Lord's Supper 'abuse of power' and rejected disciplinary measures on the basis of homosexual orientation. However, because church councils can decide independently on this, the synod posed urgent questions to church councils on their sincerity in so acting. In 1994 the synod regarded it as undesirable that homosexual congregation members would have to go to neighbouring congregations to take part in church life there. Therefore the synod issued a statement in 1995 that members of the church have equal rights, regardless of their sexual orientation or way of life. In this way the synod wanted to put an end to the uncertainty of homosexuals about their position in the church.

Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN)

The debate over homosexuality has a long history in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. A central role was played by an important decision of the synod of Delft in 1979. Before then, however, the subject had been discussed several times. The first discussion took place in 1967 in the synod of Amsterdam. The synod decided that a letter would be sent to ministers with a view to 'care for homosexual fellow human beings'. In 1969 an initiative was taken for further discussion on the basis of a report. Meanwhile church councils were urged to combat 'misunderstanding' and prejudice. In 1971 the synod of Dordrecht dealt with the report 'On people who are homosexual'. The approach was pastoral and ethical. Because it took a balanced line, the report did not seem threatening. In 1979 the synod of Delft, despite a divided committee of preparation, took some important decisions: no condemnation of homosexuality, not on the basis of Bible texts either; all offices are open to both heterosexuals and homosexuals. The synod called on all congregations to act accordingly. Also the church was to help combat the social discrimination of homosexuals. After criticism by the international Reformed Ecumenical Synod (Nîmes, 1980) the Reformed synod in 1980 reaffirmed the pastoral import of the 1979 decisions: people should respect each other's secret of life. An ongoing point of difference within the Reformed Churches was the interpretation of Bible texts. In the 80s church congregations made little progress in the calling of homosexual ministers. The confidential committee that mediated in this work of calling was hindered by a synodal statement of Almere (1987) that the decisions of 'Delft' were 'only pastoral advice and no more'. As a result, congregations ignored the anti-discriminatory decisions of Delft. In 1990 the synod of Emmen let it be known that 'Delft' was more than advice, namely a 'call on all congregations to accept homosexual members, in office too'. The status of the 1979 synodal decision was thus left intact.

Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC)

As early as 1972 the Lutheran synod declared that homosexuality formed no obstacle to being a minister or office-bearer in the Lutheran church. Gradually, too, the church paid more attention to other life-long relationships than marriage. In 1995 the Lutheran synod decided to bless these relationships in the church as well. The synod stated that there are no theological arguments 'against blessing two people in their promise of lasting friendship, devotion, and faithfulness'.

Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN)

In the joint framework of the three churches homosexuality has only been addressed indirectly in connection with the mention of life-long relationships in the church order of the united church. In 1995 the trio synod decided not to incorporate a separate article on marriage in the church order. In doing so the trio synod adopted the advice of the committee of preparation. In the NRC church order

marriage is called 'an ordinance of God'. This formulation is not taken over in the new church order. But the by-laws do include the possibility of blessing other forms of relationship besides marriage. Because congregations sometimes avoid calling homosexual ministers, the so-called 'homotheologians working group' was set up. This group, which was formed in the 80s as an initiative in the RCN, advises church councils and other church assemblies on stimulating the discussion of homosexuality in general and the calling of homosexual ministers in particular.

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