For John and Jane Smith, it was perhaps the quietest beginning to an automobile ride they had ever taken together. It’s not that they had nothing to say, but too much; for all that was going through their minds, John and Jane simply didn’t know where to begin, or what exactly to say, or how to sort out the churning emotions deep inside of them.

They were on their way home from their occasional get-together with long-time friends from a church they had formerly attended. Usually, after all the small talk and catching up; after trading the new pictures of children or evaluations of the most recent sporting event; after hors d’oeuvres and coffee; the group would often get to discussing something that was happening in their churches. Occasionally they would pick up on a particular social issue from the local paper that had caught everyone’s attention. Not this night, however.

This night no one talked much at all, just listened—to their good friends, Hank and Linda Jones, who poured out a tearful encounter they’d had just the previous week with their oldest son, Jeff. Twenty-six, successful accountant, living out west, he had come home, they said, to tell them that he was a homosexual.

What do we do, Hank and Linda had asked the group amidst their tears. We’re Christians. Jeff says he’s a Christian. How do we understand this? Where do we start? And where is God in all of this?

That’s what John and Jane were asking in their own minds as they began their drive toward home—where is God in all of this? And what did their own faith tell them? They were aware of some of the rhetoric, from both sides of the issue, about homosexuality and sin, about Christian love and compassion. They also knew they had some very hurting friends. Where is God in all this? It was quiet for a while...a long while.

Where is God in all of this? That is the question the church should be asking as our society continues to discuss and confront and often divide itself around the subject of homosexuality. Regrettably, it is one of the least-asked questions among many hundreds of others in what has become one of the most controversial and politically charged issues of our day.

Homosexuality is one of today’s “hot” topics, and that may be greatly understating the issue. Discussions of homosexuality have taken center stage at every level of the political process, from local and neighborhood discussions to national political debates. Companies and organizations are being boycotted because of stated views or policies connected with this issue, by persons on both sides of the political spectrum. The topic of homosexuality has, in just the last few years, spawned discussion and debate at such an intensely hot boil that, at times, the debate has even turned violent.

The church has hardly been immune. Many church watchers, from mainline Protestant to evangelical to Roman Catholic, say that this issue will be the one that will finally split church denominations and church-related organizations in the decade to come. Certainly it has raised loud cries and earnest debate to a level few other issues have done in recent years.

This study steps into the middle of this difficult issue, not as an edict or defining word on homosexuality, but as a means to understand what we have already said as a church and who we believe God is calling us to be as Christians within the Reformed Church in America. It is intended as well to be a means by which we might as Christian people understand the will of God and live out that calling as a community of Christ’s people. Finally, this study seeks to be a means by which we might begin to distill and understand key perspectives on the issue of homosexuality, a study grounded in Scripture, committed to ministry, and open to hearing God’s Word and each other.

**Background**

No study like this can happen in isolation. This study guide has been prepared in response to an action of the 1994 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, calling members of the Reformed Church “to a process of repentance,
prayer, learning, and growth in ministry” on the issue of homosexuality, a process to be guided by the “basic biblical-theological framework” already put before us by the Reformed Church in America’s Commission on Theology in years past.

The commission was first asked to study the issue of homosexuality in 1977, in response to a motion asking for the General Synod “to go on record affirming the human and civil rights of homosexuals and lesbians.” The result was a comprehensive, two-year report: in 1978 a biblical and theological appraisal of the issue of homosexuality, and the following year a paper on Christian pastoral care for the homosexual. General Synod made both papers available to the church for study and pastoral guidance, calling them “biblically sound, positive in spirit, and...a valuable resource to pastors and elders in the discharge of their pastoral duty.” Neither paper was seen as the “official position” of the Reformed Church in America on this issue.

More than a decade later, acting on a request to make the 1978 report the official position of the RCA, the General Synod instead voted “to adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture, while at the same time encouraging love and sensitivity toward such persons as fellow human beings.” And it called on the Commission on Theology “to conduct a new study on homosexuality.”

Task forces and General Synods have discussed the issue of homosexuality virtually every year since then, at times reflecting deep differences among persons in the church on this issue. The discussions continued to call the church to a faithfulness to Scripture and to a faithful living out of Christ's love for all persons. In 1995 the General Synod asked for the preparation of a study guide that would help members of the Reformed Church understand what we have said together as Christ’s people on this important issue.

General Synod approved this prospectus and instructed the Office of Christian Education of the General Synod Council to move forward in the preparation of study materials based on the prospectus. A small, ad hoc committee of RCA members reviewed the mandate and developed a course of action. This study guide is a product of that careful process, which included a number of drafts and a broad range of readers and advisers.

In drawing on the collective wisdom of those who prepared the original study papers and of those synod delegates who affirmed them for use in the church, we as a people of God say loudly and clearly that our understanding of God’s Word and God’s will for our lives and for our world can never be arrived at purely on an individual basis. Rather, we must think, speak, and dialogue collectively, testing our own individual assumptions with each other and against Scripture, being open to the Spirit, risking disagreement, and treating each other with the mutual affirmation and admonition that the gospel of Christ demands.

This guide, then, is not the stuff of political debates, where opposing groups often marshall their energies and resources simply to “win.” These types of debates almost always inflame emotions...
and deepen divisions. As the church, we have the opportunity to approach this potentially divisive issue differently: to seek together a biblical truth, to lovingly speak that truth to each other, and to encourage each other to walk in that truth.

The emotional intensity of the debate on homosexuality, in society at large and, regretfully, at times in the church, has often led to simplistic absolutes and unfair labels. One side accuses the other of being “homophobic” for upholding what they believe to be biblical principles; the other side publicly reviles “those sinners” for seeking basic human dignity for a group long demeaned. We propose but one label for those who engage in this study: “seekers.” Let us be Christian brothers and sisters, seeking to use the greater wisdom of the church to understand more fully whom God would have us be and how we might carry out effective ministry together.

A Note to Discussion Leaders

You are to be commended for your willingness to lead a study of such a controversial topic. Your most challenging task will be to allow all people to be heard in a climate that will encourage active discussion of the issues, even disagreement, without demeaning persons.

As noted previously, the outline of this study is based on the 1978 and 1979 study papers of the Commission on Theology of the Reformed Church in America. That means that one of the goals of the study is to communicate the essential content of those papers to the participants. That does not mean, however, that you as the leader should limit discussion simply to those statements or viewpoints that support the conclusions of the commission. Encourage questions; let the class wrestle with the statements and with the biblical insights that have informed them. Be sure that those who hold a viewpoint that doesn’t agree with the commission’s conclusions are not ignored or intimidated. Pay careful attention to those in the group who are silent; perhaps they are quiet out of fear. Finally, do not be afraid of a vigorous dialogue. Strong emotions will be present in dealing with an issue such as this. Be open to those emotions; encourage people to express them in ways that build community. Invite participants to describe what they are feeling at the end of each session. Raising disagreements with the commission’s conclusions; finding that we don’t all approach this issue from the same place; wrestling with the biblical texts—all should be seen as positive attempts as Reformed Christians to make the Bible and faith our own.

Here are some ground rules that can contribute to constructive communication (source: Managing Church Conflict, by Hugh F. Halverstadt):

- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- Listen to understand, not to refute.
- Don’t label people.
- Be specific by citing bases or examples of your views.
- Challenge others’ behaviors and ideas, not their motives or their worth.
- Don’t lay blame on yourself or others.
- Don’t allow people to say, “people are saying.” Give facts or cite names.
- Paraphrase what you heard another say before responding to it.
- When you oppose, go on to say what you propose.
- Address differences, not personal motives, intentions, or character.
- Don’t personalize issues.

If you choose to use these ground rules, be ready to enforce them. Participants may wish to test them—and you—early on.

How to Use This Study Guide

There are five sessions in the study guide. In a group setting, which is where this study guide will be most useful, you will need a minimum of five weeks to cover this material. However, each section could provide material for two to four weeks, depending on how deeply the group wishes to explore the issues.

Each session opens with a dialogue between our friends Jane and John. The session is then divided into three or four sections, each with explanatory material based on the commission’s work, followed by discussion questions. Ideally, everyone in the group will have read over the appropriate material prior to class. It may be helpful, however, to have a member of the group summarize each section for the whole group. The format of a typical group
session will include a summary or reading of the first portion, including the dialogue, followed by discussion of the material and then use of one or more of the study questions; a summary reading of the second section, followed by discussion and questions, and so on through all three or four sections. You’ll have to watch your time, but there is no rule that you can only use one day for one session. Feel free to stretch or condense the sessions to fit your time plans.

The discussion questions included in the study guide are meant to be discussion starters, not a rigid structure. Do not feel obliged to discuss every question. They are there to help the group engage with the material just presented. Remember, while the commission has drawn some specific conclusions in its reports, which are presented in the study, these questions may raise up some different viewpoints. Don’t be threatened by that. Allowing those viewpoints to be heard will, in the end, strengthen the work of the group.

You may find yourselves wanting to leap to related issues covered in a later section. Resist the urge; do not try to deal with every aspect of the homosexuality issue in the first topic. What isn’t addressed in one session will probably be addressed later. Stay with the topic at hand.

Finally, be sensitive to one another. Pray always, but especially before and after the group begins its study. Ask periodically how people are feeling. If there is significant uneasiness, step back from the material and explore those feelings. Allow participants to evaluate each session as they go, and use those reflections. Remember: what we say is very important; so is how we say it.

A Final Note

This issue is a crucial one in society and in the church. It is a difficult and emotional issue, tough to talk about. And it will be an enduring issue; no study paper or study guide will once and for all solve our differences or end our discussion. We must continue to talk with each other and, through the Scriptures, to seek God’s guidance and grace.
Jane finally broke the silence, if only as a way to ask John to break his. “So what do you think?” she asked.

“About what?” John replied, knowing full well what Jane was asking but less sure about any answer he might give.

“I didn’t know what to say to Linda tonight,” Jane confessed. “I know homosexuality is wrong, but that didn’t seem to be what Linda needed to hear. So I just...”

“How do you know homosexuality is wrong?” John asked gently.

“Well, it’s in the Bible,” Jane replied. “You know, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. And other places, too—I know of Romans and Leviticus.”

John nodded. “When we get home, I’d like to look up some of those passages. Just last week there was an article in that news magazine we get poking fun at people who relied on the Bible. It said the same part of the Bible that prohibits homosexuality also forbids poly/cotton sport shirts.”

“I guess that means we’ve got some digging to do,” Jane said. “We can’t ever discuss this subject as Christians without knowing what the Bible says.”

Any study of God’s intended expression of sexuality, whether specifically focused on homosexuality or heterosexuality, must begin in a place of uncomfortable reality: acknowledging that the church has rarely done well in its dealings with issues of any kind of sexuality. It is rarely discussed, rarely affirmed, and rarely celebrated, despite the fact that the Scriptures are explicit in their affirmation of human sexuality and in how that sexuality should be expressed. God intended our sexuality for good; in our fallen nature, we have become embarrassed about our sexuality and too often abusive in its expressions.

And is it any wonder? For too long the discussion of sexuality in the church has been driven by the belief that the Christian faith is antisexual; that sexual feelings are part of our sinful nature; that we must never experience any sexual pleasure. Human sexuality, stripped of its created intentions for joy and intimacy, instead became life’s dirty little secret. We denied that we were sexual beings, denied our God-given need for intimacy, and pushed those “bad” feelings into the small, dark closets of our being.

The society in which we live only reinforces such a belief. Oh, to be sure, our society talks about sexuality all the time, but in ways far from the sexuality God created for us. In our day, sexuality has become a means for manipulation and domination. Sex sells, and is used to sell, everything from clothing to cigarettes to automobiles. Or it is sold, on street corners and in back rooms. Or it is abused, confused, or commingled with power in rape and abuse and harassment. The resultant view of sexuality in our society is often one of confusion, tension, guilt, or fear.

Take a moment to reread Genesis, chapters one and two. As you do, read it not just for the story of God’s wonderful action in creating the world, but for the interaction of the world God created. These two chapters, while most obviously the account of God’s bringing the world into being, also lay the foundation and groundwork for a healthy ethic of sexuality. Examine the following clues:

- “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them” (1:27).
- “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’” (2:18).
- “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:24-25).

By themselves, these verses do not provide...
explicit commands about sexuality. But when to the first two chapters of Genesis we add the teachings of Jesus and Paul on divorce and extramarital sexual activity (Matt. 19:3-8 or 1 Cor. 6:12-20), for instance, or Old Testament readings from Psalms or Song of Solomon—we begin to see the biblical insistence that a healthy understanding of our sexuality is part and parcel of God's design for our lives. It's all part of being “fearfully and wonderfully made,” as the Psalmist wrote (Ps. 39:14), created by God with both body and spirit, with the capacity to know and seek God forever and also to enjoy the pleasures of this life. And when God saw “everything he had made,” recorded the author of Genesis, God proclaimed it “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

In our sinfulness we have corrupted God's intentions for this healthy and pleasurable sexuality, too often trading it for manipulation, abuse, and power over one another. We have misused the created differences between men and women for our own benefits. We have ignored the complementary sense that God intended—“male and female he created them,” each in God's own image, to be helpers and partners to each other—and instead have spent our energy and attention deciding which gender is better, which is more powerful, which should control the other.

This is why a discussion of homosexuality must begin with a biblical understanding of human sexuality and a healthy embracing of the sexual beings that God created us all to be. For if we cannot do that—if we cannot be honest with what God has created us to be—how can we talk about sexuality in any form without tarnishing our words with the same sinful stain that covers our lives?

**Discussion 1**

1. Reread Genesis 1 and 2 aloud, allowing each member of the group to do a part of the reading, then discuss briefly how these two chapters inform a discussion of sexuality. What do you see in these verses that speaks to our God-created sexuality?

2. With the biblical materials in mind, reflect briefly on the contrast between a biblical model of sexuality and the images we see daily through the media, our society, and even in the church. How has human sinfulness colored our understandings of sexuality? Where do you see issues of power, control, and manipulation expressed?

3. Think of your own life. Is your own sexuality, and the intimate feelings that accompany it, something you can openly embrace as a gift from God? Or does a discussion of sexuality make you very uncomfortable? Why or why not?

Homosexuality is one particular expression of human sexuality. The Bible gives what the 1978 report of the Commission on Theology called “incidental attention” to the issue of homosexuality. None of the Old Testament prophets ever mentions the subject; neither does Jesus. But where homosexuality is mentioned—and to be sure, to say it is not mentioned often does not mean Scripture is thus unconcerned about the subject—the commission's study concludes that those texts “are clear in their condemnation of the practices they describe”; that is, of homosexual behavior or practice.

The 1978 commission study looked at passages from both the Old and the New Testaments. Read carefully this brief summary of its conclusions, provided by the commission itself in its 1995 prospectus:

Although the Bible gives relatively little attention to the issue of homosexuality, those texts which do refer to homosexual activity are clear in their condemnation of the practices they describe. Some of the passages which are cited to make the case against homosexuality do not in themselves justify a blanket condemnation of homosexuality (e.g., Gen. 19:4-11, the story concerning the men of Sodom). Nonetheless, two passages in the Old Testament clearly prohibit such conduct (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13)....

The clearest passage in the New Testament bearing on this issue is found in Romans 1:26-27. Here, the apostle Paul is arguing that human sinfulness is rooted in one's
exchanging the worship of God for the worship of the created order...Homosexual behavior is one symptom of the “exchange” of natural for unnatural relationships, although not the only one, not necessarily the most serious. The censure of homosexual relationship is rooted in Scripture’s strong sense of a natural, created order for human life...Human sexuality is created for heterosexual expression, since both male and female appear when humankind is created, and since each is complemented and completed only by the other.

(NOTE: the full text of the prospectus outline can be found in the Appendix to this study.)

In your own exposure to this issue, you may have heard quoted some of the key passages surrounding the issue of homosexuality, a number of which were already mentioned above: the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:4-11); the Levitical prohibitions (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13); Paul’s list of those persons living outside of accepted practices (1 Cor. 6:9-11); and Paul’s discourse on human sinfulness that begins the book of Romans (Rom. 1:26-27). While it is not possible in the scope of this limited study to do justice to texts on which whole books and more have been written, it is important to draw out some of the key conclusions of the Commission on Theology in regard to these essential biblical texts. (NOTE: The full text of the 1978 study provides a more complete look at the biblical texts.)

• Some of the traditional texts used as a blanket condemnation of homosexuality have indeed been misused in that way. The most visible example is the story concerning the actions of the men of Sodom, where interpretations regarding homosexuality have overshadowed key issues of hospitality, rape, and even the treatment of women.

• Specific biblical texts dealing with homosexuality must be seen in light of the whole witness of Scripture. This is especially true of the Leviticus text, which includes lengthy lists of commands and prohibitions, some of which we continue to follow today and others which we clearly don’t. (John and Jane’s discussion of the news magazine’s cavalier statement linking homosexual practice to poly/cotton shirts is one example.) To understand any one specific command, then, as binding for us today, we must again look to the broader witness of Scripture rather than arbitrarily making those choices for ourselves.

• Human sinfulness, and the resultant disruption it causes in our relationship with God, underlie both New Testament passages. Paul compellingly argues, in the view of the commission, that homosexual behavior has exchanged the natural order of God’s creation for an unnatural and, in Paul’s view, sinful behavior. And key to Paul’s understanding of our relationship to God is our remaining within the right relationships God created, both with God and with each other.

Clearly, the commission is writing from a sense that the whole of Scripture must be understood when examining the ethic of sexuality and of homosexuality. For too long, even the church has been content to take one or two verses, in or out of context, as a so-called “proof-text” to support one particular position or another. The work of the commission asks that we study the texts referring to homosexuality within the context of an overall biblical understanding of human sexuality, always open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we seek God’s will in the Scriptures.

Discussion 2

1. Discuss among yourselves your own understanding of biblical authority. Is the Bible normative for your life? How do you understand what that means? What role should the Bible play in your understanding of homosexuality?

2. The Commission on Theology, while acknowledging the content of the Old Testament passages relevant to this discussion, also suggested that there may be ambiguity in their meanings. Was this
new to you? Can you follow their study? (If you haven’t read the relevant portions of the 1978 study [see Appendix], you will want to. You may also want to restudy some of the key passages in this report.)

3. The key New Testament passage is in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Here the author places homosexual practice among those human activities that are focused not on the worship of God but on the worship of the created order. What other activities does he list? How do you see those acted out in our age?

At the heart of Reformed faith is the Word of God. Indeed, sola scriptura (Scripture alone) has long been a descriptor of our faith. That description witnesses to the world that the words of the Bible have authority for us, both in their inspiration (of God through the Holy Spirit) and in their revelation of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. We don’t worship the Bible; we worship God revealed in the pages of the Bible.

That means that, for us as Christians, there is always more to understanding the Bible than just reading its words. Because it is of God, it is a living Word, one which we believe the Holy Spirit helps us to interpret so that we might understand its meaning and direction for our faith and our lives. Indeed, it is only in such a process of interpretation, led by the Spirit, that the biblical witness becomes relevant in our lives today.

One caution: we all interpret what we read, whether we are reading the Bible or the daily newspaper. No matter how much we pray, how cautious we are, we will—at least in part—understand whatever we read through the lenses of our experiences. That is why we must all read the Bible for ourselves, but why we must also read it in the community of other believers. Certainly, biblical scholars can make a unique contribution to our understanding of the Bible because of the unique and carefully developed gifts of interpretation God has given them. But the body of Christ is more than just scholars. We are, in the language of the Scripture itself, eyes, ears, hands, feet, and heart. No part of the body can say to the other, “we have no need of you.” Thus, in attempting to hear the voice of Scripture, we must carefully examine the insights of all Christ’s people, not merely those who voice views compatible with our own.

The whole world lies in wickedness, Calvin wrote. Yet the God who reconciled us to himself in Jesus Christ gives us the Word and the Spirit to direct us in faithfulness.
Ironic, Jane thought, that it was near milepost forty-three that she first voiced the question about Jeff's place in the church, given his revelation about his homosexual orientation. For it was forty-three years ago that she had first made profession of faith in her childhood church.

"John, does being a homosexual mean that Jeff can no longer be a member of his church?" Jane asked. "After all, if homosexual practice is a sin, well, isn't the church against sin?"

John was quiet for a moment. "Seems to me that, if the church were to lock the door on everyone who sins, there wouldn't be anyone there. After all, doesn't it say in the Bible somewhere that everyone has fallen short?"

"It does," Jane said. "Don't you remember—all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God,' Romans 3:23—from the pastor's sermon a few weeks ago. But if you know something isn't right—like living a homosexual lifestyle—and you still do it, well, that's different than asking for forgiveness for when we sin." She paused. "Isn't it?"

This second session in our study, like the first session, begins by looking beyond the specific issue of homosexuality to a broader issue vital to our understandings as Reformed Christians: the nature of sin and grace. As with the first session, where it was not possible to approach the biblical passages on homosexuality until we examined our understanding of the role and authority of Scripture in our lives, so here is it impossible to understand the connection of homosexuality and sinfulness until we look more generally at the place of sin and grace in the church.

Sin is a part of all of us. Indeed, the Bible teaches explicitly what Jane remembered from her pastor's sermon: that we all are sinful people in the eyes of God. As Christians we believe that our only redemption from sin comes through the grace and love of God in the action of Jesus Christ on the cross, and not through any action of our own.

No man or woman may claim that any part of his or her life completely fulfills the original intent of the Creator. There is nothing about us that of itself can ultimately justify a person before God. Persons who embrace a Reformed faith know that, for in embracing our faith, we embrace the doctrine that we are all sinners, saved only by the grace of God.

Every person, then, bears in himself or herself the marks of fallen nature. But—called to repentance, confession, and faith, and saved by God's grace—we each become, in the words of one church observer, "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Thus, despite the compulsive fear and loathing that homosexuality can and often does arouse in our society, there are "no theological grounds," concludes the 1978 report, on which a homosexual person may be singled out for a greater measure of judgment.

**Discussion 1**

1. Read aloud questions five through twenty of the Heidelberg Catechism. How would you summarize this Reformed understanding of sin? Is that how you have traditionally understood the role of sin, or is it different?

2. Some have suggested that a Reformed sense of sin is too pessimistic, that we are not really such bad people. Others have said that the Reformed sense of grace is too easy, that it gives license to a lifestyle of intentional sin. How do you understand the balance between our sinful nature and the grace of God? What does that mean in your own life?

Nothing in a Reformed understanding of sin and grace implies a kind of suspension of moral judgment: that is, to say that since we are all sinners anyway, we can just go on sinning. Nor...
does it ask that we sugarcoat or deny the reality of sin in lives and in the world around us. A healthy understanding of the reality of sin, expressed not just in our personal lives but in a community of faith, calls us to a kind of mutual accountability. A Reformed understanding of sin is more than simply, “Well, this seems right (or wrong) to me, so it must be right (or wrong).” We understand the world—and the place and role of sin—through the eyes of the community, where people can be affirmed for the gifts and goodness of God within each one and also held accountable for the sin that has become part of each of us.

We have numerous examples in Scripture of persons living out this understanding of the worth and value of each person as created in the image of God, and the sinfulness that has infiltrated each and every person. Nathan the prophet confronted David, the king of Israel, with David’s unacceptable behavior (2 Sam. 12:1-15). Jesus was not shy about naming sin, even among those considered the most righteous of people. Paul the apostle confronted not only others but himself when he wrote to the Romans that he found himself doing even the things he didn’t want to do (Rom. 7:15-25).

Our Reformed liturgy helps us to live out this understanding of sin and grace in our worship together. We approach God almost immediately in Reformed worship through a corporate confession of our sin, understanding that we cannot hear God’s word and will for us until we first acknowledge how unable we are of our own accord to hear that word and will clearly. We follow that confession with an affirmation of God’s grace, that out of God’s goodness and unilateral action we have been forgiven of our sins. We are then called, in grateful response to that grace, to live a life of prayerful obedience to God’s plan for our lives, as spelled out in the whole of Scripture. Then, and only then, are we prepared to hear what God would say to us through the Scriptures, and to live that out.

Yet the liturgy is more than simply a means by which we order a worship service on Sundays; it is a way of life and appropriate for us as we consider the issue of homosexuality and of how we all are seen in the eyes of God. It may be good to pause here for additional discussion about the Reformed concept of sin.

Discussion Two

1. Sin often is considered too negative a depiction of humanity. We’d rather focus on more positive depictions of ourselves. Think about the Reformed understanding of sin. What makes it, in reality, a positive understanding of the human condition?

2. What does the Reformed understanding of sin say about the way we interact with other persons?

In just a few short decades the world has in many ways been turned upside down. Many of the things our parents, cultures, and religions taught us about what—and who—is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, are being challenged, often very publicly and many times very eloquently. Many of us feel we are being asked to accept, and perhaps even approve of, actions that were considered unacceptable as we grew up in our homes and churches—and that doesn’t feel right! How do you handle that kind of pressure? The easiest response is to gather together with other like-minded people. Our beliefs are not challenged; neither must we endorse that which we believe to be wrong. But in doing this, we often, perhaps unconsciously, begin to divide the world into two groups, “us” and “them.” Our group is “us,” and those who engage in the kinds of actions or behaviors we find unacceptable are “them.” Sometimes our strategy is to devise ways in which we can convert “them” to be more like “us.” If that isn’t possible, we simply try to keep “them” out of our group, or at arm’s length. Sometimes that’s very positive; it helps us isolate crime and cults. At other times it can be destructive, as in racism.

Think of your own reactions to people who aren’t like you; think of your own reactions to homosexual persons. “I just don’t understand them,” we say, or, “I just don’t understand how they could live that way.” “Look at them. See how they are,” we say when confronted with those people who do cruel, illegal, weird—to us, anyway—or sinful things. More often than we’ll admit, or perhaps even realize, people we don’t understand or agree with become “them,” part of a conveniently anonymous group whose differentness confounds
us. We hear the word “gays” and feel our emotions begin to bubble. We feel differently, not because we know the person but because we know the category. It's the “them” thing that makes us feel wary of, or superior to, faceless folks whom we don’t know.

Ironically, that's part of the very reason that a Reformed understanding of sin is not a negative doctrine, but a very positive one. For in acknowledging that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we also acknowledge that before God there are not separate groups of “them” and “us.” We are all “us,” all created in the image of the divine, tainted with sin, and saved by grace. It’s no longer a question of “us” and “them,” but “us” and “God.” That doesn’t excuse a particular behavior that's wrong or inappropriate. The church, for example, said in 1990 that “the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture” (see Appendix, 1990). It doesn’t minimize in any way how far our humanity has separated us from God, and how willful we are in maintaining that separation through our actions. It says, simply, we all need God’s grace.

“The church,” wrote the Commission on Theology in 1979, “seems arbitrarily to have placed certain sins, homosexuality conspicuously among them, beyond its own responsibility for ministry and, by implication, beyond the reach of God’s grace...The church’s mission to the homosexual is in most respects the same as it is to the heterosexual: to preach God’s good news of grace and forgiveness through Christ, release to those in bondage and liberty to the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). In other words, we call all persons, of both homosexual and heterosexual orientation, to a life of repentance and discipleship.

This is what the General Synod was suggesting in 1994 when, in a resolution it said:

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.

That's for us. All of us.

**Discussion 3**

1. Reflect on your own experience and contact with homosexual persons. Have you ever talked directly with a homosexual person? Did you know you were? Were you uncomfortable? Concerned? What tone did that conversation take?

2. Are you “us” or “them?” Think of groups of people you have put together under a single stereotype—or of groups in which others might include you. Ask if anyone in the group has ever felt ostracized because of a personal characteristic.

3. Reread the 1994 General Synod resolution. What do you think the synod had in mind when it passed that resolution? Are you living out its suggestions in your life? Is your church doing so in its corporate life?
“Do you think he can help it?” John asked, breaking another long silence.

“Help what?” Jane replied, although she was pretty sure what her husband was asking.

“Do you think Jeff really chose to be a homosexual, or was he, well, you know, born with that in him,” John said, carefully measuring his words. “This isn’t something Hank and Linda would have taught him.”

They drove in silence for a while longer, each deep in his or her own thoughts. “I did read in a magazine,” Jane said quietly, “that some researchers are saying that a part of our brain controls what they call our sexual orientation. I’ve read other stuff that says all that research is simply an excuse for people not wanting to take responsibility for their own actions. Frankly, I don’t know what to believe.”

“I don’t either,” John sighed. “But I do wonder. Jeff’s a good kid, always was. In our youth group he was a leader; I remember we adult leaders encouraged him to consider the ministry. Would he really choose to bring this much pain on his folks?”

One of the key phrases you have probably encountered in your thinking and reading on the issue of homosexuality is the term orientation. The human sciences have expanded our thinking in this area beyond mere descriptions or caricatures of persons as heterosexuals or homosexuals. We more accurately speak of persons with a heterosexual or a homosexual orientation.

What that means, according to the commission summary, is this: “that for some people, homosexual behavior arises out of a basic orientation toward members of the same sex. This orientation is not consciously chosen and is generally a matter over which the individual has no control. For people with a homosexual orientation, homosexual attraction does not occur as a deliberate perversive of a heterosexual instinct, but rather is simply discovered or realized in the process of sexual maturation.”

The commission based this statement on two understandings that are also key to this session. First, there was not in 1978—and there is not yet now—any consensus regarding the cause of homosexual orientation in a person; the scientific community remains deeply divided over this issue. Secondly, one must consciously separate homosexual orientation from homosexual practice. There is agreement that, despite the uncertainty over its cause, the sexual orientation of a person, in most cases, is highly resistant to change.

This distinction, consistently reflected in the Reformed Church in America statements, draws a line between a person’s orientation and a person’s practice. It points to an orientation that may be something with which we are born, or perhaps a combination both of genetic and environmental factors; factors that may put an imprint on us that is difficult, if not impossible, to change.

What does it mean for genetic and environmental factors to influence who we are as persons? Here are two common examples that illustrate these concepts. Most of us are right-handed. A much smaller part of the population prefers the left hand as the dominant choice. They didn’t choose to be right-handed or left-handed; they were born that way. It’s a result of some kind of genetic building block in their makeup.

Now take, conversely, the particular accents attributed to residents of Brooklyn, or Mississippi, or Iowa. No one comes genetically predisposed to a southern drawl or the flat vowel sounds of Midwestern speech. Children growing up in Brooklyn don’t consciously choose to speak in a certain way. Rather, their environmental surroundings cue them to certain patterns. They speak like the people they hear. But people can, and do, change the way they speak, all the time. It’s not a part of our makeup in the same way that being
left-handed is.

Now, it would be far too simplistic, and even misleading, to equate the complex factors that contribute to the formation of our sexual orientation with being left-handed or having a southern accent. But there appear to be genetic and environmental factors that may contribute to the formation of sexual orientation, albeit in ways we still don’t understand. And so, the commission reminds us, the causes of sexual orientation “are still a matter of research and debate. There is no consensus (in the scientific community) regarding the causes of homosexuality, but there is consensus that the causes are to be found in factors over which the individual has no direct control.”

Such a statement inevitably raises the question of whether a person of homosexual orientation is able to change that orientation. Two responses from the commission stand out. First, change in such a basic orientation may be possible, but may not happen. Actual cases of change do exist. But so do many cases of persons who, despite sincere attempts, did not experience change in their basic sexual orientation. Secondly, to suggest that a change in orientation is either always or never possible is to say that God can only work in ways we understand. The Holy Spirit is a powerful presence among us, allowing us at times to embrace what we do not yet understand, and at other times to change that which seemed immovable. But we can neither demand or predict how the Spirit will work in the life of any individual.

The distinction being drawn, then, in this particular part of the discussion is not between homosexual or heterosexual orientation, but between a person’s orientation and a person’s sexual practice. Here again, an example tied to experiences with which we may be more familiar could help. Take a person of heterosexual orientation; in short, the vast majority of us. We affirmed earlier in this study that our sexuality is a gift from God, and that the sexual joining of a man and a woman within a covenant of marriage is part of God’s design for us.

But we also acknowledged that this same sexual nature can be, and regularly is, tainted with sin. Our practice of sexuality is all too often laced with deceit, with issues of control and power, even with a lustfulness for others about which Jesus spoke strong words. It is at times lived out by some in extramarital affairs, in rape, in sexual harassment. None of that makes our heterosexual orientation bad. Rather, the living out, or practice, of that orientation is how we identify the taint of sin. Notice the difference between orientation (what God has given us, perhaps touched by our environmental surroundings) and practice (what we choose to do with that nature).

It is then homosexual practice, or behavior, which the commission understands to be outside of God’s intended expression of sexuality. With those who would live out their homosexual orientation (or, for that matter, their heterosexual orientation) in faulty ways, we are called as Christians to voice our biblical understanding of a whole and healthy sexual expression.

**Discussion 1**

1. **Is this the first time you have heard the term orientation? What effect does the commission’s finding that a person’s sexual orientation is most often “not consciously chosen” have on your own thinking on this subject?**

2. **What does the concept of orientation suggest for the church when a person comes to the church, asking for membership and saying he or she is a homosexual person?**

In 1978, in regard to the ongoing research into the causes of homosexuality, the commission wrote: “Nowhere is this complexity more obvious than in the homosexual phenomenon and the plethora of scientific opinion as to its nature, cause, and cure. Theories abound among therapists, physicians, sociologists, and other experts, but a consensus is not within sight.”

That statement was written two decades ago, yet despite the volumes of research that have been published since then, it remains by-and-large true. No broad conclusions have been reached among the disciplines, despite the high level of interest in the subject.

That’s not to say that theories do not continue to be put forth. In 1991, for instance, a neurobiologist wrote that his work on the brains of thirty-five
male cadavers, including those of nineteen known homosexual men who had died of AIDS, showed that a part of the hypothalamus in the brains of the homosexual men was on average smaller than that of the other men and about the same size as that of women. Yet that same year, in another study, this one with twins, the research argued for nongenetic factors as influencing a person’s homosexuality. Numerous other examples of conflicting research have been published.

Reaction to these studies and many, many, more has ranged from cautious optimism to scientific pessimism to outright rejection. Some have been dismissed because of the highly questionable methods on which they were based; others simply didn’t fit preconceived notions. This field of research continues to develop slowly and is fraught with unprecedented emotional and political baggage. Persons on both sides of the debate have said publicly that they would like nothing more than conclusive scientific evidence on causation. Others, again on both sides of the issues, have said that such scientific evidence would ultimately do nothing to change the climate surrounding the public perception of homosexual persons. All, however, would affirm that any attempt to make simplistic explanations of a person’s sexual orientation are futile at best, and deeply destructive at worst.

What the Commission on Theology has concluded on this subject is this:

- The causes of homosexual orientation are still a matter of debate.
- Specific causes can be attributed to matters over which an individual has no control, including genetics, hormonal functioning, psychosocial development in infancy or early childhood, or some combination of these factors.
- Such orientation does not lend itself easily to medical or psychotherapeutic redirection.

**Discussion 2**

1. What strikes you, in the brief information provided, about the scientific research being done in this area? What findings would make a difference for you? Why?

2. Can scientific research inform the church for ministry? Should it? Discuss briefly the role of scientific studies in the understanding and practice of our Christian faith.

When the writers of Scripture, in a very different political climate, addressed the issue of homosexuality, they did so without drawing the careful distinction the commission has drawn between orientation and practice, or behavior. That is why we have been and must be clear in the biblical view of homosexuality, that “homosexual orientation should be understood as a result of the general problem of evil, rather than the sin of specific individuals,” acknowledging further that “how a person acts with regard to such orientation is, of course, a matter of personal responsibility.”

Such a statement, of course, should have a profound impact on how a church understands its ministry with homosexual persons. To leave no open door to the church for homosexual persons would be to deny the basic truth that God has created all persons in his image. Recall the whole statement of the church in 1990: “To adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture, while at the same time encouraging love and sensitivity toward such persons as fellow human beings” *(MGS 1990, p. 461)*.

Too often, the church has left homosexual persons to struggle with and understand their orientation on their own. In 1994 the General Synod of the Reformed Church, in struggling with this issue, acknowledged the failure of the church to provide a place of refuge for all persons, no matter what name their sin has been given. That statement is in the Appendix of this study. When you read it, ask this: do I see myself, or my church, in this recommendation?

The church has always been an imperfect living out of the body of Christ. Its glory is in its acknowledgement of its sin, its repentance before God, and in its acceptance of the grace of God that sustains it and its ministry, in Christ’s name.
Discussion 3

• Has your church ever openly discussed the issue of homosexuality? How have you dealt with homosexual persons in your midst? Would those persons find a welcoming place to live out their Christian journey, or would they find themselves subject to a level of judgments not applied to others in the church? Would your church be able to extend love and grace to all sinners, as well as to call them to repentance?
The silences were less frequent now, the conversations more steady.

“Do we have homosexual persons in our church?” John asked.

“Oh, I’m sure we do,” Jane responded quickly, then added, “Don’t we?”

“I guess I wonder if they would really feel welcome. You have to think that for someone willing to walk into a church on Sunday morning, this homosexuality thing has got to be quite a struggle. Our church is starched pretty stiff on Sunday morning.”

Jane laughed, for maybe the first time on the whole trip home. “That we are, because, I think, we take our faith pretty seriously. But also, I suppose, because there’s a lot of pressure, in all of society, to have your act together. No questions allowed.”

“I wonder,” said John, “what I would say if one of our members came up to me after the service on Sunday and said, “John, I’m struggling with homosexuality.”

“I hope,” replied Jane, “that you’d say the same thing to him that you would to anyone else struggling with something in their lives. ‘How can I help?’”

What would you say? What would your church say? And what has it been saying over the past years? Chances are quite good that members of your congregation have faced head-on the issue of homosexuality.

Discussion 1

• As a means to begin your study today, rather than your usual response to material presented in the study, reflect on how you would answer the three questions posed in the conversation above: (Do we have homosexual persons in our church? Would they be/are they being welcomed? How would I respond personally to a person struggling with homosexuality?)

The position of a person with a homosexual orientation in our society can be extremely painful. Defined by a sexuality that in many cases he or she did not choose, and that many in society and the church openly regard as disgusting, one must cope with the fear of being unclean and false. Guilt, self-loathing, and a fear of close relations may become part of one’s life. The resulting loneliness may lead a person to expect instant, unqualified approval from others, and may lead to despair when it is not forthcoming. Preoccupation with one’s homosexuality—or heterosexuality, for that matter—may hinder the development of a well-rounded character.

Again, we find ourselves faced with a theological issue that encompasses all of us, not just persons of a homosexual orientation. That issue is one theologians call sanctification.

Sanctification is one of those long words theologians have thrown around for centuries, obscure enough from daily use that the dictionary initially can’t define it: “the process of being sanctified.” But it goes on, thankfully, and what it says is illuminating: “to be set apart for sacred use; to be made holy.”

Interesting, isn’t it, how spiritual a plain old dictionary can be, even when it’s attempting only to write a definition. Look at the key words in that short definition; look at how crucial they are for understanding the Christian life. Process. Set apart. Sacred use.

Sanctification—“the process of being set apart for sacred use”—is a ladder of years, an ongoing commitment that lasts a lifetime. Scott Brown, an RCA pastor who wrote about sanctification a few years ago in the Church Herald, likened it to something we can all relate to: “always a marriage, never just a wedding.” Over time, never complete,
always growing—that's what we mean when we talk about sanctification. Look more closely at each of the key terms.

Process. You’ve seen some pretty direct hints about that already. Christ's saving act on the cross—a different theological term, called justification—happened at a specific moment in time, once and for all. But our response to that overwhelming action happens over a whole lifetime. We can never reach our ultimate goal in the Christian life: to be like Christ in all we do, speak, think, touch. But each and every day, we continue to strive toward that goal.

What goal? To be set apart. Do you remember how this is summarized in the Bible? “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). That’s what sanctification is: a sense of being different; of living by different, higher standards, standards set by Christ, in a community of faith we call the church. It’s not that we ourselves are becoming perfect, lest anyone should boast; rather, as God perfects us, we in turn seek to do good works for God. Life becomes increasingly joy-filled as we discover what God has designed for us.

Which is what? Sacred use. That’s a different measurement than the big house, big car, big bank account standard we see all around us. Those things may be part of who you are. But it's not part of sanctification. Sanctification is growth in holiness that over time will begin to produce what we know as the fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). These qualities permeate us wherever we go: in our work, in our play, in church, or in the world. Being sanctified is looking for ways to be a serving Christian. It is consciously seeking to conform our lives to the image of Jesus Christ and ultimately to reflect the character of Christ in our own lives.

Discussion 2

1. Were you familiar with the concept of sanctification? It’s been described in this study in a fairly formal way. How would you describe sanctification in your own words?

2. Look at your own life for a moment. How do you see God working in your life in a process of sanctification? Be specific. Don’t settle for saying, “Well, I’m more loving.” Where, and how, might you be more loving, or joyful, or kind?

Because sanctification is a lifelong process, it can also be an erratic process. There are days and years when we do grow in holiness and trust God more, and there are days and years when our faith seems to stagnate or perhaps even deteriorate. And that applies to all of us. Ironically, however, it’s when we are at our weakest that this process of sanctification has the greatest opportunity to take hold of us. For we believe it is God who causes us to grow in faith; it’s not our own doing. And when we are at our weakest, God is at his strongest. The more space within our lives that can be filled with the love and grace of Christ, the more sanctified our lives become.

What has all this to do with the subject matter of this study, homosexuality? Reread what the Commission on Theology said on the subject:

In any case, the homosexual person needs the same thing that all Christians need in order to experience God’s grace: gracious acceptance of the person and an understanding of the call to repentance and the process of sanctification. This process of sanctification must always be viewed in light of the “already/not yet” tension within Scripture. The Spirit of God is moving in the lives of all Christians to lead them toward greater faithfulness and conformity to Christ. At the same time, Scripture is equally clear that this movement is a lifelong process, often full of failure and dormant times, as well as growth and victory. No one reaches sinless perfection in this life, though all can expect the grace of God to be at work in their lives, accomplishing more than one might ask or imagine.

This means, the commission goes on to say, that we can acknowledge, even embrace, the difficulties of life, including the great struggles a
homosexual person may have in working out his or her own sexuality. It means continuing to walk with a person, in Christ’s love, through thick and thin, trusting that the Spirit will continue to work—in your life and the lives of those you accompany in faith.

What does this mean for the church, as it relates to homosexual persons within its midst or contemplates a ministry with persons of homosexual orientation? Again, let’s pause before looking more carefully at that question, and reflect on our own thoughts.

Discussion 3

1. First, think back to the opening discussion question. Has your church ever specifically ministered to and/or with a person of homosexual orientation? Would your congregation be a place where a homosexual person would be comfortable coming to worship? Why or why not?

2. What does your understanding of sanctification say to what such a ministry might look like? Has that changed in any way from the beginning of your study time today?

What, then, does this mean for ministry and the life of the church and its relationship to homosexual persons? The commission suggests a number of conclusions:

• Genuine, responsible, self-confrontation before God. Ask not of someone else what you are not willing to do yourself. Ask not that someone else examine his or her own lifestyle if you are unwilling to be open and honest with your own self-examination. Remember one of the keys to sanctification: it’s an ongoing process.

• Commitment to the other. Seeking the hope and help we all need means making a commitment for the long haul. “Instant righteousness” is unreasonable.

• Openness to new possibilities. Too often we put a ceiling on what God can do. Not only should we be open to the working of the Holy Spirit in ways we cannot imagine; we must expect it.

• A welcoming place. You won’t go where you don’t feel welcomed, whether that’s the home of a friend, a local restaurant, or a church.

These are general principles that most people and churches will quickly affirm. Where the discussion of ministry to homosexual persons often breaks down is how these principles get translated into action, especially in two specific areas: can homosexual persons be “healed”; and, are loving, committed homosexual relationships permissible, since they indeed mirror in most ways a committed heterosexual relationship? As you might expect, there’s not agreement on the answer to either one of those questions, and indeed there’s some very deeply felt disagreement. Our task is not to solve that disagreement, since that would hardly be possible. Our task is to present and study what the commission has discerned, knowing disagreement may continue.

Healing. As we have studied over the past few sessions, the commission has drawn clear distinctions between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice. Orientation is a sexual understanding rooted in genetics and environmental factors, often deeply connecting the two, most often uninvited and unchosen by the person in whom it resides, and thus deeply resistant to change. Practice is how we act on our orientations.

Given that most persons of homosexual orientation will remain that way all of their lives, what then do we say to committed, homosexual relationships that some will form in a quest for the intimacy and wholeness we all desire and need in life? This takes us beyond the promiscuous lifestyle so often attributed to, and lived by, what statistics say is the majority of homosexual persons, a lifestyle clearly destructive and outside of how God would have us live and interact. Rather, it is a relationship which is remarkably similar to heterosexual marriage, with one very significant difference.

Is there, then, a place for homosexual persons to enter into a relationship that resembles a marriage? Again, the study must rest simply on the foundation laid by the commission, which concluded, “We cannot affirm homosexual behavior.” That speaks clearly an answer to the above question, and also suggests some obligation on our part to live out our
understanding of our faith on this question. But the commission also reminds us that “the church must itself be a welcoming place to wrestle with the issues of sexual orientation and behavior, inviting all its members to a deeper wholeness guided by the truth of Scripture.” That suggests, also with some clarity, that a choice of a committed relationship by two homosexual persons should never be the end of the church’s dialogue with them.

These are hard issues. They tear at the very core of who we are. That’s because sanctification is hard. It’s tough to live in the world, but not of it. That goes for all of us. We must seek God’s grace and understanding, through Christ, with each other and in community, every day of our lives.

Discussion 4

1. Look back at the brief discussions about healing and committed relationships. Can you articulate the view of the commission on each issue? Review how they arrived at that point.

2. To ask that the church remain in dialogue with persons who have made a lifestyle decision contrary to what the commission has found to be biblical can be confusing. Does it mean for us to walk with them, even as we call them to repent? Does it mean that we are implicitly condoning their choice? Reflect on how you would relate to persons in such a situation.

3. Can there be disagreement within a community on this question? Within your particular community? Why or why not?
They were almost home, exhausted by their evening, yet in a strange sort of way, exhilarated too. John found himself thinking how he and Jane had talked about their faith tonight in a way they rarely had before. It was more than a simple, How was your devotional time today? or Did you have a good prayer group? They had asked some tough questions of their faith and had wrestled honestly with the answers.

“There’s a bill in the legislature about extending civil rights protection to homosexuals,” Jane said, interrupting John’s thoughts. “What do you think about that?”

John sighed loudly. “Almost everyone at work is downright hostile about this bill. They say it’s just legitimizing an aberrant lifestyle. I can’t say I disagreed much with them. But after hearing what Jeff has gone through, well, I’m not so sure anymore. How can it be Christian to deprive any person of basic human or civil rights?”

“I agree,” Jane replied. “But I still worry. We’ve got teenagers. If our government specifically supports the rights of homosexuals, as it has for others on the basis of race or religion or national origin, well, aren’t we just approving of that lifestyle? Can’t we find a way to treat such persons with dignity and respect without appearing that we approve of their behavior?”

Human and civil rights for homosexual persons—now there’s a subject sure to get an argument going. What John heard loud and clear at the water cooler could have happened virtually anywhere in North America—and has, countless times over. The state of Colorado was rent asunder by the debate over whether or not to have a so-called gay rights law. Cities who have such laws won’t be convention sites for certain groups; cities who don’t, or refuse to consider the same laws, find themselves the subject of boycotts from the other side. More and more companies are now providing health and other benefits to the same-sex partners of their homosexual employees—and finding themselves the subsequent target of groups fighting what they perceive to be an attempt to push an aberrant lifestyle into the mainstream.

Human and civil rights for homosexuals ride very high on the waters of politics, be you for them or against them. And indeed, you will find committed Christian people on both sides of this issue. What you will also find is that slogans and accusations, flung out in the heat of the debate, often get more attention than any thoughtful dialogue or discussion. And because that happens, the people whose hearts are closest to this issue—the people for whom the pain of the debate is most real because the debate is finally about them—are the ones who are considered the least.

The words are hurtful and hateful, spat from the mouths of children and adults alike, most often flung with a vicious intent no different than a gunshot: fag and queer and dyke. The sure way to send a child home from school with his or her bottom lip quivering, or even in great convulsions of tears, say school guidance counselors, is to have the accusation of fag or dyke cast upon them. To be named a homosexual is still the mark of the outcast today, especially among young people in the midst of typical teenage struggles with sexuality, but also among adults for whom their sexuality, their unchosen sexuality, makes them different than the majority of people around them.

For us in the church, this issue of human and civil rights is less political than theological: how do we love our neighbors as ourselves? How do we live out this commandment, with its accompanying call to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength (Luke 10:27)? And how do we live that out beyond the community of believers we call our church, in the whole of society into which we are called to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16)? That’s the issue, or, as the commission is quick to remind us, “approval of homosexual orientation or acts is not a prerequisite to firm support of basic
civil rights for homosexual persons.” In other words, you aren’t being asked to approve a practicing homosexual lifestyle when you are asked to support human and civil rights for homosexuals; rather, you are being asked to stand up for basic Christian justice, for a person created in the image of God. Basic rights for homosexual persons should be afforded them, not because they are homosexual, but because they are people.

**Discussion 1**

1. And just who, the young lawyer asked Jesus, is my neighbor (Luke 10:29)? Can you recall the story Jesus told to illustrate his answer? What does that mean for us today?

2. Reread the two paragraphs from the commission under the heading quoted at the beginning of this session (see Appendix, 1995), paying special attention to the first paragraph. Discuss what you understand to be their reasoning and whether you find it consistent with your understanding of what “rights” constitute in our society.

Dennis Voskuil, then a professor at Hope College, an RCA college in Holland, Michigan, wrote in a *Church Herald* article a few years back: “One of the negative by-products of this liberal and conservative party alignment...is a process of polarization in which we fail to learn from each other. Amidst our debates and finger-pointing, however, are two...important truths: liberals can learn from conservatives, and conservatives can learn from liberals.”

We can learn from each other in the ongoing debate over the issue of rights for homosexual persons. No study of this nature could ever presume to bring all who read it together to a single place on this issue, nor should it. The commission has rather a different focus: to challenge the church on those areas in which it can and must make a crucial witness.

For example, young people in today’s society face increasing pressures from the outside in areas of sexuality. Images in the media, in advertising, and on the street promote a sexuality and sexual activities that are far from a healthy Christian understanding of sexuality. What are we as Christian parents, and as a Christian community, doing to help our young people deal with their sexuality? The second paragraph in this fifth portion of the commission’s prospectus is especially valuable here. Or when the issue is dealing with those who are different than we are, what examples have we provided for our children and our neighbors? How do we interact with those who are different from us? Can we learn from and indeed embrace each other even as we retain our distinctive, individual qualities? All this is part of the rights question: as the people of God, who are we for others?

**Discussion 2**

1. Ask yourself: What role have I played in helping my own children, or the young people of my congregation, as they work out their own understandings of and dealings with persons who are different than they are? Have we talked about that? Have we lived that out in our own Christian witness?

2. More specifically, what role have I played in helping my own children, or the young people of my congregation, as they work out their own understandings of sexuality? What can I share with others that has been most healthy?

The Bible has a special heart for those not well placed in society—indeed, even for sinners or those identified by the mores of the day as outcasts. Jesus, the gospels report, ate with sinners and tax collectors and found himself reviled by the religious leaders for doing so. He talked with a Samaritan woman, touched lepers, and plucked grain on the Sabbath, all actions restricted by the laws of the day.

The climate of the Christian church, wrote the commission in 1979, “is to be receptive, gentle, and humble. Christians are to think of themselves as a household, a grateful family of redeemed sinners, and not as a club for the socially approved...The Good Shepherd entered the lives of those who needed him without condescension. He responded to people’s needs with respect, concern, solace, healing, and challenge to new life. This Spirit marks his church whenever it is faithful to her Lord. Jesus
teaches us that what is basic and most important about a person is always larger and deeper than anything negative presently associated with him or her."

Here’s what the 1979 report asked of our churches, in defining its actions and responses to homosexual persons:

• Elimination of the double standard of morality applied to homosexual persons.
• Acknowledgement of its sins against homosexual persons.
• Promotion of a genuine effort to understand homosexuality.
• Personal acceptance and an understanding, from all in the church, of the process of sanctification.

In return, the report says, the church can expect of homosexual persons, as it does of all who strive to be a part of it, an active and unreserved commitment to a life of discipline; participation in worship and submission to the authority of the Word of God; and new expressions of growth and new possibilities through the power of Jesus Christ.

In such a climate as this, human and civil rights are respected. And so the discussion question here is quite straightforward:

**Discussion 3**

• Is this the way it is in your congregation? What practices reflect a mutual commitment to each other and to each other’s continued process of sanctification? What areas could be improved?

Finally, then, consider this paragraph from the commission’s 1979 report:

The story of the church’s dealings with the homosexual is mostly a story of ignorance, ineptitude, and ill will. For centuries, both church and society have used legal punishment and severe moral censure to control or eradicate homosexuality. The approach proved worse than useless, and in employing it the church denied its essential nature and failed the homosexual. Falling readily into the role of the elder brother (Luke 15:25-30), the church either drives homosexuals underground or, if acknowledging them, at best extends conditional affection. At worse, the church excludes homosexuals, leaving them the choice either of isolating themselves or joining the homosexual community. Through this paper, the Theological Commission voices its conviction that when the church is true to her Lord’s intention for her she will be God’s instrument for extending refuge, new beginnings, and healing to all whom life has damaged or overwhelmed, excluding no one.

For the church, then, the goal is not politics but ministry—to welcome all whom God created into a process of sanctification and discipleship, with the same steadfast love with which God has sustained us. In Christ’s church, all are welcome in his grace and guided in his love. Come, Holy Spirit. Renew the whole creation.

**Discussion 4**

• Close this session with a focused time of prayer, asking for God’s guidance in all your future endeavors of ministry.