

Women in Ecclesiastical Office

For full reports and exact statements of the denomination's position on this issue, the reader should look to the references provided.

Position

All congregations in the Christian Reformed Church in North America may allow women to serve in the office of minister, elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor. The CRC recognizes that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God (for the biblical-theological argumentation undergirding the CRC's approach to this issue, *see Agenda for Synod 2000*, pp. 355-73; www.crcna.org/SynodResources).

Classes may also, in keeping with their understanding of the biblical position on the role of women in ecclesiastical office, declare that women officebearers may not be delegated to their classis. All duly elected and ordained officebearers—men and women—may be delegated to synod, but officebearers will not be asked to participate against their convictions on this matter.

History

The CRC began to deal with this issue in 1970, when synod appointed a committee to examine the practice of excluding women from the various ordained offices in the church in response to discussions in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES), of which the CRC was a member (the RES subsequently became the Reformed Ecumenical Council, which in 2010 became part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches). This first study committee reported to Synod 1973, concluding that excluding women from ecclesiastical office cannot be defended on biblical grounds, but synod decided to appoint another committee to study the matter. The second study committee on the same topic came to the same conclusion in 1975, but, judging that the church was not ready for women in office, synod appointed two more committees—one to help the churches make all possible use of women's gifts and another to study hermeneutical principles and apply them to relevant Scripture passages. The first committee was given an expanded mandate in 1977 and was renamed the Service Committee for the Use of Members' Gifts. The second committee reported in 1978 and recommended that women be ordained as deacons. Synod agreed, provided that the work of deacons be distinguished from that of elders.

Synod 1979 deferred ratification of the change in the Church Order required for women to be deacons as well as implementation of that decision and instead appointed another committee to study the whole issue. Synod 1981 received the report of the study committee, which recommended that women be ordained as deacons, but synod again decided to defer the decision of 1978 and appointed another committee to study the issue of the headship of men over women in marriage and its implications for the church. The headship study committee reported in 1984 and made the same recommendation that synod had passed six years earlier—that women be ordained as deacons provided their work is distinguished from that of elders. Synod agreed and finally ratified the necessary change in the Church Order.

Synod 1985 declared that the headship principle prohibits women from being elders and ministers, disallowed the use of adjunct elders, and appointed a committee to study the authority and function of elders and deacons. Synod 1987 distinguished between a church's consistory (elders), diaconate (deacons), and council (both elders and deacons); decided that deacons may not be delegated to classis meetings; and appointed yet another committee to study the headship principle. Synod 1989 instructed some churches that were ordaining women as elders to cease doing so and declared that unordained adjunct positions are allowable for women.

In 1990 the second headship study committee recommended that all the offices—elder, minister, and evangelist (now commissioned pastor)—be open to women, after finding that the headship principle does not transfer from marriage to the church. Synod agreed and opened all the offices to women but deferred implementation and ratification of the necessary Church Order change until 1992. Synod 1991 appointed a small ad hoc committee to gather biblical grounds for the decision of 1990. That committee reported in 1992, but synod decided against ratification. Synod 1992 did encourage the church to use the gifts of women, in teaching, expounding the Word of God, and providing pastoral care, all under the supervision of the elders.

Synod 1993 decided to revise the 1992 decision by allowing local churches the option of ordaining women as elders, ministers, and evangelists (now commissioned pastors). It also decided to delete the word male from Article 3 of the Church Order, which gives the requirements for elders, ministers, and evangelists (now commissioned pastors), but left it to Synod 1994 to decide on the advisability of ratification. Synod 1994 did not ratify the change but maintained the original language of the Church Order, claiming that the clear teaching of Scripture prohibits women from holding those offices. It instructed all churches that had ordained women as elders to release them. It also appointed a committee to clarify the meaning of "expounding the Word of God" from the decision of Synod 1992.

Synod 1995 recognized that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, and decided to give classes the option of declaring the word male in Church Order Article 3 inoperative, thereby allowing their churches to ordain women to all the offices. Synod 1995 also passed a set of regulations to be in effect until 2000 that restricted women from serving as delegates to synod or as synodical deputies or to be appointed by synodical agencies to ordained positions. The regulations also prevented any synodical delegates, synodical deputies, or seminary board members from being required to vote, against their consciences, on women candidates or nominees. Synod also decided that, in classes that do not declare the word male inoperative, churches may still choose to ordain women as elders. Synod 1995 also received the report of the committee on expounding but did not alter the 1992 decision. Subsequent synods did not accede to overtures attempting to change the 1995 decision due to Synod 1995's plan to revisit the issue in five years. Synod 2000 extended the church's position on women in office for another five years, to 2005. Women were first approved as candidates for the ministry of the Word in the CRC at Synod 1996. By 2000, eighteen of the forty-seven classes had declared the word male

inoperative in Church Order Article 3-a, thereby opening the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist (now commissioned pastor) to women in those classes.

In 2000, synod also approved the appointment of women advisers to synod, and in 2001 synod adopted guidelines for women advisers and included those in the Rules for Synodical Procedure. Synod 2005 approved revisions to the Church Order Supplement regarding examination of ministerial candidates at classis meetings and delegation of women officebearers to synod (see *Acts of Synod 2005*, pp. 758-60) and decided that the issue would be revisited when more than half of the classes had declared the word male in Church Order Article 3-a inoperative. Such was the case the following year, so Synod 2006 proposed and Synod 2007 decided to delete the word male from Church Order Article 3-a and to make related changes in the Church Order Supplement. Synod 2007 also stated that "all duly elected and ordained officebearers may be delegated to synod," noting that "officebearers shall not be asked to participate against their convictions" (*Acts of Synod 2007*, pp. 610-12). Further, Synod 2007 decided that classes "may, in keeping with their understanding of the biblical position on role of women in ecclesiastical office, declare that women officebearers not be delegated to classis." Given the inclusion of women serving as delegates, Synod 2008 approved the discontinuance of women advisers to synod.

In 2010 two churches requested permission to transfer from their current classes to join a classis outside of their geographical area that agrees with their position not to seat women delegates at classis or synod meetings. Synod 2010 decided not to accede to those requests, on the grounds that "a classis shall consist of a group of neighboring churches" (Church Order Art. 39) and that synod already permits delegates to "record their protest" on this matter while participating "in an assembly where women officebearers are present" (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 890-91). Synod 2013 received overtures regarding the same two churches and requesting that synod create a new classis in which churches that do not allow women in office could gather together "in harmony rather than . . . 'in protest'" (*Agenda for Synod 2013*, pp. 399, 405). Synod did not accede to those overtures, mainly on the principle that a classis should not be formed on the basis of "theological affinity," but it granted those churches "the option to move to the classis in closest proximity that is willing to receive them and which they are willing to join" (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 619).

In response to an overture in 2015 synod reinstated "the practice of including women advisers to synod in a way that parallels the guidelines established for ethnic advisers to synod . . . including that twenty-five women delegates be set as the minimum representation for synod to achieve the goal of gender diversity" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 673).

For the 64 references to Agenda and Acts of Synod visit www.crcna.org/synodresources