

A Communication from Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church February 2024

The mission of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church is: **“Believing that the grace of God, the sacrificial love of Jesus, and the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit are at work in the world and also in us, Neland Church seeks to be a community of hope where all will experience and extend the deep welcome of Christ.”**

Since 1915, Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church has served as Christ’s witness within the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). For most of those years, the church has been standing at the corner of Neland Avenue and Watkins Street, in the heart of Grand Rapids. Through many changes in church and neighborhood, Neland has endured, and the Neland faith family remains committed to living out the scriptures, the confessions, and its mission.

Nearly ten years ago, the Neland faith family embarked on a careful review of its mission. We have long been committed to serving with our neighbors and neighborhood; however, members of the congregation who identify as LGBTQ+ wondered if they were fully included in Neland’s mission.

Years of prayer, scriptural discernment, educational programs, and meaningful conversations led to the understanding that yes, Neland’s mission called for the full participation of our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ, including those in same-sex marriages, alongside members who hold traditional views of gender and marriage (*see the appendix for examples of our study*). The Kingdom of God is deep and wide and, as Jesus preached and embodied, open to all—especially to those typically overlooked by church leadership.

As we’ve stood with the marginalized, however, we as a church have felt increasingly marginalized. The decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 have left us wondering: *is there still a place for us in the CRC?* Many of our members wish for our congregation to stay in the CRC because of the theological roots we share, the strong ministries of the CRC, and deep personal ties; many others feel we can no longer stay. The actions and tone of recent Synods have brought harm to our LGBTQ+ members and division to the denomination.

So, as we’ve wondered if there is still a place for Neland in the CRC, we find that a deeper question has emerged: *What is God calling us to hold on to—to stay faithful to?* As we see it, there’s not just *one* thing, but *two* we’ve been holding on to; two Great Commission priorities which we cannot let go:

First, **Mission**: Since 2016 we have stood for *full participation of all* members in the body of Christ – including our LGBTQ+ siblings who have been marginalized for so long. We need them. We need the fruit of the Spirit they clearly bear. And we believe they are called to belong and bless others with *all* their gifts, as much as any part of our body. We find our identity not just in *looking back* but *looking forward* to our forever

family in the Kingdom of God. Only with that consideration can we understand marriage and sexuality, which are a shadow of things to come.

Second, **Unity**: While many claim it's impossible for Christians of different perspectives to hold together in these polarized times, we read in the Bible that "*all things are possible with God,*" in Christ. We refuse to let go of that promise. We do not believe our unity stems from uniformity to a specific interpretation of a confession or an ethical norm. Our unity is in the family of God, formed and held fast in *Christ alone*. We abide in Christ's covenant of grace, not in any we make on our own.

While our members think differently about questions of human sexuality, our Neland faith family has walked this journey together, understanding that our mission to serve others in Christ's name is more important than total agreement on complex social issues. We continue to be blessed by members who hold a variety of views on marriage and sexuality, even as we are being blessed with many new members—people drawn to mission and unity, not church order debates and disciplinary actions.

We believe that to be faithful to Christ and to the scriptures is to hold to *both* mission and unity. And we believe it is possible to live faithfully in a community where some matters remain unclear or uncertain. God has given the CRC many churches and numerous classes that serve as testimonies that this unity in diversity *is* possible.

Thus, we pray that Synod 2024 will give us room to:

1. **Live out our mission**, by continuing to allow office-bearers to conscientiously object to the Synod 2022 decision on same-sex marriage through an unrestricted gravamina process, and by respecting the authority of the local church to elect its office-bearers in accordance with the scriptures.
2. **Live in Christ-centered unity**, by continuing to allow our church and classis to fully participate in Synod and in the work of the denomination, and by refraining from punitive or probationary disciplines of our leaders, our church, or our classis.

If Synod should act to prohibit or inhibit this work—which we believe God's Word and Spirit are clearly calling us to do—it would sadly be closing the door on our participation in this denomination.

We hope you will receive this communication as an opportunity, and as a plea from the heart: to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." We share "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Impossible as it may sound in these divisive times, we know that "all things *hold together* in Christ."

Serving Christ together, The Council of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Appendix

1. To further understand Neland's journey, please refer to:

Neland's Communication to Synod on electing its deacon, via Classis Grand Rapids East (2021, pp. 594-616):

www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2021_agenda_supplement_shaded.pdf#page=95

Classis Grand Rapids East's Overture 55 to adopt in principle a "local discernment" approach, appoint a study committee to articulate the best Biblical rationale for Traditional and Affirming viewpoints, and continue denomination-wide prayer initiative (2022, pp. 663-680):

www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2022_agenda.pdf

Neland's Appeal of Synod's instruction to rescind its deacon (2023, pp. 622-627):

www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2023_agenda.pdf

2. For a thoughtful study that helped open our minds through careful Biblical study and a review of the discoveries of science to the Spirit's work: please read:

Classis Grand Rapids East's Communication to Synod 2016 and its Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage (2016, rev. 2017): <http://classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf>

3. Finally, a Biblical analysis presented by Neland member Rev. Duane Kelderman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAw5mMCCmL4>