

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding First, Sibley and the RCA

The following questions and answers are in response to points of curiosity, confusion or concern raised during discussions I have had with Sibley and other churches. I offer this document to the entire congregation in hope of bringing further clarity and understanding as we discern God's will together regarding First's future relationship with the Reformed Church in America.

1. Does the RCA have an official position on human sexuality and marriage?

Yes, the RCA continues to hold to a "traditional" (also called "historic") view of human sexuality and marriage, which affirms that marriage is a life-long covenant relationship between a man and a woman. Position papers, statements made at General Synod over the past 30 years, and the current RCA wedding liturgy all confirm this. Even after the Vision 2020 process and General Synod this past October, this position has *not* changed. For more information, go to this link and click on "Sexuality": <https://www.rca.org/synod/statements/>

2. Then why are some churches leaving the RCA right now over this issue?

While the RCA maintains a traditional position on human sexuality and marriage, not everyone in the RCA interprets scripture in the same way. There are some churches (they are a minority) who have performed same-sex marriages. These churches have been able to do this because their classis (a network of churches in a geographical area) has allowed it to happen. Some churches are leaving because they don't believe there is enough accountability in the RCA to prevent something like this. Other churches are leaving for different reasons, such as they no longer see themselves as "Reformed" or they don't like the way the RCA is structured or they prefer to officially link up with other partners for kingdom ministry (networks, alliances, etc.).

3. Does First Church have a position on human sexuality and marriage?

Yes, I believe that First, Sibley holds to a traditional (or historic) view of marriage, affirming that marriage is a life-long covenant relationship between a man and a woman. While not every person connected to First may hold this view, this is the overall view of the elder board and First's staff. While we uphold this *position*, we also want to embrace a *posture* that seeks to love *all* people with the love of Christ and welcomes them into our church family, where we can all be transformed by God's grace more fully into the image of Jesus.

4. If First stays in the RCA, will we be forced to change our view on human sexuality and marriage?

The RCA and First, Sibley are currently aligned in our position on human sexuality and marriage. The RCA is structured in such a way that the classis (a network of churches) has the authority to make decisions about the ordination of pastors, and the board of elders on each consistory makes decisions about marriage. So no, First will not be forced to change our position and posture about human sexuality and marriage, nor do we intend to. We can and will continue to live out our theological convictions with integrity.

5. How many churches have left (or are leaving) the RCA? And will there be enough churches who remain for there to *be* an RCA?

To date approximately 60 churches out of 140 have left or are in the process of leaving our regional synod (Synod of the Heartland). Five churches out of approximately 15 churches in our classis (East Sioux) have petitioned to leave. There are just under 1000 churches in the RCA as an entire denomination. It's hard to know how many churches will ultimately end up leaving. There will certainly be loss. But there are also other churches coming into the RCA. This is the part of the story that isn't getting told. For example, in the Central Plains Classis (which includes churches in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas), the classis has gone from 13 (predominantly white) churches to 46 churches and ministries (predominantly Hispanic) in just a few years! This classis is also part of planting/receiving 50 churches in Argentina (South America) and 30 churches in the Washington DC area. Over the next decade, the "face" of the RCA will look very different as the RCA becomes more global and racially/ethnically diverse.

6. In the new structure that the RCA is working on, it talks about how churches can choose to be a part of an "affinity" classis. What is this and how will it work?

A restructuring team has been assigned to develop a plan for the future structure of the RCA. This includes evaluating the role of both the regional synods (a group of classes within a region) and the General Synod (national gathering of the RCA). Affinity classes are one of the things being discussed. These would be groups of churches that form different classes based on *shared vision* and *ministry goals* rather than shared geography. We already have models of affinity classes. For example, City Classis is a group of churches that are in urban settings. The restructuring team will present its report to General Synod 2024. Go to this link for more information about the restructuring team: <https://www.rca.org/general-synod-council-names-restructuring-team-for-rca-s-future/>.

7. If we stay in the RCA, will our assessments support "open and affirming" churches?

Assessments are the annual financial commitment each congregation pays to the denomination at three levels: the local classis level, the regional synod level, and the national level. We do this as part of our covenant relationship with RCA churches and in order to share resources (staff members, ministry and mission resources and programs, learning communities, etc.). *No money from assessments goes directly to support a specific church's budget or ministries outside of our regional synod.* So no, our assessments do not support an open and affirming church. Learn more about where assessments go at this link: <https://www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials/what-are-assessments/>

8. If First, Sibley discerns to leave the RCA, what would be the impact on our RCA missionaries?

100% of support for RCA missionaries comes from Partner in Mission (PIM) shares, which is where congregations give a certain amount of money toward a particular missionary of their choice (0% of support for RCA missions comes from assessments). Even if we are not part of the RCA, we can still continue our support and partner with all of our RCA missionaries. Being connected to the RCA strengthens that relationship, but it is not necessary for us to continue the partnership.

9. If First, Sibley discerns to leave the RCA, can we be independent (a non-denominational church)?

There is no option for a church to be independent because it goes against the RCA's biblical understanding of what it means to be the church, which is to be in some kind of covenant partnership with other congregations and connected to the larger historical and global Church. So if First leaves, we will need to join another denomination, alliance or network of churches.

10. So if we can't be independent, where would First go? What are the options?

The following denominations may be aligned with our theology and values: The Christian Reformed Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, ECO (A Covenant Order of Presbyterians), and the Evangelical Covenant Church. These are denominations that have Reformed roots, align with our core theology, affirm women in leadership, and hold to a more traditional view of human sexuality and marriage. Of course, as with any denomination, they each have their strengths and weaknesses.

Another option would be to join an "alliance" or "network" of other churches. The Alliance of Reformed Churches (arc21.org) - several churches in our region have decided to go in this direction. There is also the Kingdom Network (kingdomnetworkusa.org) - at least two churches in our region have decided to go this direction. Both of these groups (ARC and the Kingdom Network) are still being developed.

A third option would be to start an alliance or network of our own (Third Reformed Church in Pella did this with "the Sending Network").

12. Is there a sense of urgency for First to make a decision? How soon do we need to decide to stay or leave?

I do not believe there is a sense of urgency. Tension in the RCA around differing perspectives has been present for decades. And the window for churches to make use of the "mutually generous exit" approved by General Synod this past October is open through 2026. Even after this, there is a path for a church to leave the RCA at any point if they discern to do so. In addition, some of these other new alliances and networks are still being formed and there are important logistics that need to be worked out. We do not need to rush this decision. To leave our denomination of 100 plus years would be a very big decision that will impact future generations. We want to be prayerful, diligent, patient, and discerning. We trust the Holy Spirit to work through a good and faithful process.

13. Who will make the final decision on whether First stays or leaves the RCA? And what role will our congregations have in that decision?

First's consistory will make a final decision after receiving input from discernment meetings, surveys and a congregational vote. If the discernment is that First should leave the RCA, the Vision 2020 "rules and regulations" requires a vote of agreement from at least 75% of the members present for an official congregational meeting (some churches have even required at least 75% of all communicant membership). If the decision is to stay in the RCA, this does not require a vote since nothing has changed in the status of the church.

14. What will the timeline look like in terms of making a decision?

We are beginning to meet in discernment groups October 23. Depending on how long it takes to bring the congregation up to speed will determine the timeline. It is unfortunate that for much of the discussion First has been without pastoral leadership. We can take as much time as we need to discern God's will for our community of faith. Please continue to hold our leaders and our church in prayer as we seek God's direction. Our ultimate desire is to do God's will. Nothing more. Nothing less. And our ultimate hope is that Jesus is Lord and the Holy Spirit will guide us.

Additional Resources and Websites:

Link to Video from Tom Smith (Synod of the Heartland): :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5EMQvPFclU>

Reformed Church in America (RCA) website:

https://www.rca.org/?gclid=CjwKCAjwopWSBhB6EiwAjxmqDeMwFkWrZ3BNWSTVqa7mld1SYmwB3-H1bmZAea2Czakup_2FkbmhEkxoCL1AQAvD_BwE

Alliance of Reformed Churches (ARC) website:

<https://arc21.org/>

The Kingdom Network website:

<https://kingdomnetworkusa.org/>

Other denominational websites:

Christian Reformed Church (CRC): <https://www.crcna.org/>

Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC): <https://epc.org/>

ECO Presbyterian: <https://eco-pres.org/>

Evangelical Covenant Church: <https://covchurch.org/>