

The Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC overtures Classis to send the following overture to Synod.

Having read and reflected on the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality to be submitted to Synod 2021, and while appreciating the report's counsel on a variety of points, the Council of Jubilee

Fellowship CRC nevertheless overtures Synod to receive this report as information and not to approve it, for the following reasons.

GROUNDS:

1. This report describes issues surrounding human sexuality in contemporary society to be settled, and these interpretations binding in the CRC and in other traditions of Christianity, despite the serious and studied positions of many faithful Christians around the world that prove this not to be the case;
2. Unlike the compassionate, grace-filled 1980 Report on Divorce and Remarriage, this report instead uses the 1980 report and its recommendations as grounds to retreat from the healing power of forgiveness and restoration for divorced persons, and goes on to apply that same retreat to same-sex relationships;
3. This report has failed to present personal stories of any of our members or former members that would not confirm the conclusions of the committee's work (see Appendix A* for examples of such stories and the cost of this silence);
4. If accepted, has the potential to divide the CRC again by pitting our members against one another and undermining our witness as a body that accepts and works through disagreements with mutual love and support, all while maintaining our unity in Christ.

APPENDIX A

to the Overture from Jubilee Fellowship CRC, February 2021

These are the stories gathered from individuals connected with the Christian Reformed Church who want to be seen and heard. In most cases, they requested to be identified. In those instances where revealing their identity could cause harm to the individuals or to their relationships with others, their stories are included with pseudonyms and are identified as such.

Christopher Rynberk

My name is Christopher Rynberk, I am 72 years old, and I am a gay Christian. My husband and I were married in a church and we are active members of a loving church community. I love God, I experience joy every day, and I know that God loves me.

But it wasn't always this way. For 64 years I lived as a straight man, something that only changed when I was hospitalized and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My marriage of 37 years was in tatters, and attending church (Mountainview Christian Reformed Church in Grimsby) made me physically ill. It wasn't until doctors said they could find no medical reason for the neurological effects I was experiencing that I finally admitted what I had actually known since I was four years old: I am gay, and I can't do this anymore.

I had to come to grips with the fact that I can't live that life anymore. I had to be truthful about who I am.

I grew up in a Christian family and I knew how my parents expected me to live. We never talked about it, but when I was a teenager, my parents took me to both a psychiatrist and to a form of conversion therapy. My dad would drive me once a week to see a faith healer and he would stroke my body and pray the gay away, or whatever it was. My parents never used that word and they never asked me or told me I was gay. I was just different enough that they said, "You have to change your ways." So, between that, and the psychiatrist, and the conversion therapy, and the elders coming to our house, it put me in the closet, and I stayed there for years.

Yet, I had known since the age of four that I was different. There was something about me. At first, I thought I should have been born a girl, but when I hit puberty that did change, and today I can say I am happy to be male, but it was a very confusing time. I had no idea why my parents were taking me to a faith healer, but I just went along with it. I had relatives who told me I was different, but over the years I had learned to carefully cover up all of the feminine ways that I had had since I was a child.

I became a schoolteacher.

In those days, you'd be fired for being gay, and, in the church, you would be ostracized, so I just stayed in the closet and decided I wasn't gay. From time to time, I used to tell myself that. "I'm not gay. I am married. I have two children." I was an elder in the church. I was the treasurer. I was a worship leader. I played the piano for years. All of these things just kept me in the closet, because I knew what the church taught and I did not question it.

It was about three years into my marriage with my ex-wife when she decided there was something emotionally missing in our marriage. I was in total denial. I said, "We have to work harder." She said we should have some counselling, but I said "no, no, no. We just have to work harder at it." That came up a couple of times in our marriage, but overall, it was a happy marriage. As I have discussed many times since then with my ex-wife, for the first 25 years, we managed quite well. But then my mind started to get affected, and the last 10 years were really quite dismal. We weren't communicating well and although we didn't know it, I was getting PTSD.

We were in counselling for three years – three years! – before I realized I was gay. My counsellor – a Christian counsellor – said: "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "Well I have to tell my wife." My counsellor referred me to Generous Space Ministries, and I had many sessions with Wendy Vanderwal Gritter, and I would be bawling my eyes out, asking "What am I going to do? What are we going to do now?"

I was becoming free, but I also felt a great sadness when I moved out of our marital home and lived alone in an apartment. It was a horrible year, because, while I felt freedom, I also felt guilt, and shame-based trauma, which is part of the PTSD. I was feeling guilty that I was gay. It wasn't until I could say to myself that is how God made me – and it took a couple of years – that I realized that I didn't have to be ashamed. There are still moments — I mean I am 72 years old and I lived in the closet for 64 years. But it gets better and better each year.

If you were to ask me if I am glad to be gay, if I would prefer to be gay, the answer is "absolutely not." I would have preferred to be a straight person. I wish I could have continued to live my life as a straight person, but health-wise, and truth-wise, and authenticity-wise, I am not a straight person. And I have learned to accept that.

My ex-wife is a wonderful person. We are still friends. But I lived my life in the closet and that affected her too. Although she is not angry at me, she is angry at the church. It is her belief that what the church has put me through psychologically – even though they may not have known it – is unforgivable for her.

I don't know if she is angry at God, but I'm not. I have never been angry at God, not ever. I was confused, but I never said, "God, damn you for doing this to me." I always prayed that each day would bring me joy, and I still do that. And I thank God for each day I have. And I still thank God, as a gay person – now that God has finally let me come out.

My journey is shaped by my religious upbringing. Other people come out when they are younger, but this was how I was expected to live. So it's distressing to me to hear that the Christian Reformed Church wants to make its position on homosexuality confessional. My husband and I attend another church, but we still have family in the CRC and I do love my roots, so I can't disconnect from that completely. I don't feel animosity toward the church but there are other people who also need to come out and why should they be excluded? I lived as a straight person for 64 years and now I am gay and I am not welcome in the church anymore? That does not seem to be the way we should be understanding and interpreting Scripture. The main thing about Scripture is God is love, and that is how the church should be looking at us. We are working out our lives within the context of God's love, and that is how we should be included – no questions asked. We should be allowed to be at the table, anytime.

I have always felt that God loves unequivocally. I love God, and I sense God's presence. I am married to my soulmate now and I share my life, my love, my prayers with Doug. I know that without God in my life, I would be nowhere. Thank goodness I had a faith because there were times when I had suicidal thoughts.

But I feel the most alive and thankful when we are in church and the choir is singing or there is Scripture being read. And the fact the people sitting around us are mostly straight, that doesn't matter. We're just part of everybody else. That is the place I feel most alive, because I know God loves us all.

Joya Vandermeulen

When I was sixteen, I knew who I was.

I had been baptised as an infant into the Christian Reformed Church, a sign of God saying "you are mine," to which I responded with "I am yours" in my profession of faith 16 years later. I had run around the building with a pack of kids during coffee time, attended Sunday school, joined the girls' club and then youth group, volunteered for every task I could, learned all of the kids' bible songs, participated in Christmas plays, memorized tons of scripture and catechism and the apostles' creed, and attended CRC elementary and high schools. It was home, family, and basically my entire social life, and I loved it. I knew Jesus loved me just like my church family loved me and I loved him back.

So, at 16, I was a good Christian. A good church girl. A pleaser and perfectionist. I knew that God was a white man with a beard sitting on a cloud, who fit nicely into a square box, and I knew the answers to all matters of faith as written in the catechism.

I, like the Magi, saw a star in the east.

So with much clarity, I built a five-year plan: finish high school, go to Calvin college for a BA and Calvin Seminary for an M.Div. The next five years would of course involve good employment, a husband, 2.5 kids, a house, and a pension. Like a respectable adult.

I wonder if those magi knew how long their journey would be, or what they would find at the end? It turns out that I never went to Calvin, I did get a BA but no M.Div. Instead of that good job, I had precarious employment, lived with my parents to save on rent, and there was definitely no pension. The spouse and kids things was on hold because of something I'd noticed but had hoped would go away: while my high school friends all had crushes on Mr. Cook, I just respected his good pedagogy, and when they discussed their first childhood crushes I laughed along, even though, shamefully, my first crush had been on a woman named Holly from the kids' show "under the umbrella tree."

But I couldn't be gay, right? I just "hadn't met the right guy yet."

Then one day, God showed up in a terrifyingly true and holy way that pushed me to explore my own truth. My sister, who had left in the usual boring grey men's clothes, came home looking amazing. Buskerfest had been good to her. Hair done, wild makeup, a cute little skirt and a fancy top. She sat the

family down and let us know that she is transgender and that we'd been misgendering her since she was born. And suddenly the neat square boxes that I'd grown up in were squashed flat. That is her story.

But where it fits into mine is that it pushed me into community with a lot of 2SLGBTQ+ people of faith who don't live in square boxes. These wonderful beings know a living God, one that can handle big feelings, and doubt, and creativity — one who certainly doesn't fit into a box. They told their stories of coming out, of familial rejection, of church rejection, of new life. They learned some Greek and Hebrew and dug through scripture as a theology of survival.

It was beautiful. And it was terrible. Because as hard as I was trying to be straight, I felt their stories resonate deep within me. "Me too. Me too. ME TOO!" my guts said until I couldn't hold the charade any longer. Bit by bit I told safe people of my queerness, and with each telling it felt more true and right. Through this personal crisis, I found myself in need of a safe and affirming place to fall... and the CRC church wasn't and wouldn't be and couldn't be it. In fact, it became exhausting and dangerous. So I left. It was excruciating. This community that I thought was — that was supposed to be — my home, my family, my safety net just wasn't. In the midst of crisis, I felt like I had nobody. For a year I couldn't bear to enter a church building. The Bible felt like a weapon. The sound of worship music was unbearable noise. Devotionals made me nauseous. God was an abstract concept.

Then, in November of 2015, I was invited to a new church by a friend, and I found a home there. It's an inclusive place where I can be myself: doubting and queer and curious. A gentle community where I feel seen and valued and safe.

At this point, faith no longer feels nice and fluffy — it feels more like a constant cycle of death and resurrection, of certainty and doubt, of safety and danger. It feels essential and unreasonable. And that star that had pointed my teenage self toward seminary? I guess I miscalculated the angles or something, because it's taken me on a much more beautiful and complicated path than I expected. Now at the age of 32, I'll be starting a Master's of Theological Studies after all, with three questions to guide my learning goals: Who am I? Who is God? What work is mine to do? It's the theology of survival. I have no five-year plan. I don't know what I'll do, vocationally, when I'm done. I don't know if I'll even be employable — churches are kind of tricky for us non-heterosexual folks. But I do know that this is a right step.

So, like the Magi, I'll keep following that star.

Laura Eldon*

**A pseudonym. Laura is proud of who she is, but she does not want to be disrespectful to those people in her story who could be seen in a negative light.*

I grew up attending a Christian Reformed Church in British Columbia, and I went to Christian schools throughout my elementary and high school years. In my family, we were discouraged from interacting with non-Christians — we were taught that we live in the world but that we were not to live of this

world. For me, this created fear and an inability to connect with others outside of my faith-based community. I lived in a social bubble, which felt safe. Because I grew up with the same people in all spheres of my world, it was particularly difficult to connect with my peers when I switched schools in Grade 9. Rather than at school, I found belonging within my church. It was my home.

During this time, I participated in leading worship, I organized youth events, and I attended retreats. I also worked as a Sunday school teacher and youth leader, and at times worked to maintain the building itself. My work with the church was really important to me and gave me a sense of purpose and identity. My faith was strong and was my foundation for living. Due to traumatic childhood experiences and mental illness, there was a time that I wanted to take my own life. I was plagued by the feeling that I did not belong in this world and that heaven was my true home. I yearned for God. I wanted to feel safe in His arms. Thankfully, a man was brought into my life who helped me with these feelings — the youth pastor at our church at that time. He became my closest friend. He taught me to rely on God for my strength, and reminded me that God would not give me more than I could handle. The deepening of my faith and the support that I received from my youth pastor acted as a tether that helped me continue on living in this world. Without my faith and the church, I am not confident that I would still be alive today.

I wasn't always conscious of my sexuality, but looking back from an adult's perspective, I can see the signs. I understand now why I was so drawn to certain women, and why I felt resistance from them. Although it wasn't sexual at that point, the sense that I was somehow too involved left me with a feeling of "otherness." Now, I realize these were crushes.

What I *was* conscious of was that same-sex relationships were wrong, and not how God had created us. I remember clearly hearing my mom exclaim that gay couples were "disgusting" after seeing them on TV. Coupled with the messages that being gay was akin to murder, I clearly understood that I would be sent to hell if I acted on any urges. My youth pastor was the one person that I told early on. I explained that I thought I was gay and that I didn't know how to reconcile that with God. He was emotionally supportive and told me it wasn't wrong to have those thoughts. Rather, it was acting on them that would put me in opposition to God. It was obvious to me that he believed being both gay and faithful to God was impossible. I would have to make a choice, and it should be the "right" one.

When I was 20 I met a woman at work who made my stomach flutter. We were drawn to each other in a way that I had not experienced before. As our relationship grew, it became clear we wanted to be together as a couple. But this created an inner paroxysm for me — how was I to live a life in line with my God who I held so dear, and be true to my own individual identity?

This was not made any easier by my parents. They began to pick up on the romance between my girlfriend and I and made their disapproval apparent. They told me that if I decided to continue dating her, that I would not be allowed to live in their house. But by that time I had realized that my attraction towards other women was a part of who I am; it wasn't a choice. If I was to have any integrity, I could not deny that part of myself. So, I was left with little choice and had to leave.

I felt so much shame. When I spoke with my youth pastor about it, we decided that it would be best if I took some time away from church ministry while I figured things out. While I didn't feel kicked out, I was

very clear on the fact that there was not a path for me to continue leading worship and working with youth while also dating a woman.

My mom was so concerned for me that she brought the subject up with her church small group. However, as soon as she spoke the words, the fact that I was dating a woman spread like wildfire through the entire church family. My mom had outed me. She had already made me feel so much shame, and then all of a sudden, I was shamed by everyone. Hearing that my grandfather cried when he found out, and that people believed my attraction towards women was an effect of the trauma I experienced as a child was painful and invalidating. In the eyes of others, I was in the wrong for choosing this life, and if I didn't choose a heterosexual life then my soul was in peril. Although it wasn't an overt shunning, I felt the judgement surrounding me and no longer felt safe within my church family. I couldn't stay with the rumours and shaming comments. After I left, I didn't hear from a soul. The community that I had grown up with from birth just dropped me, and I was lost.

I went travelling through Europe for a few months soon after. During that time I wrestled. You would expect that travelling out on my own exploring new places and cultures would be exciting, but for me it was pervaded by sadness. However, there was an instant I remember clearly that brought me some peace. I was sitting on a riverbank in Germany and I was reminded of how Jesus would hang out with the rejects of society, and that God WAS love. I thought, well, if God is love, then He could not hate me. And, if Jesus spent his time with the outcasts then He certainly would spend time with me. At that moment, my perspective changed. I realized that I didn't have to subscribe to limitations placed on me by my home community and faith tradition.

When I returned home from Europe, I moved back into my parent's home. I was hoping that with time I would have been welcomed back. This wasn't the case, however. I was reminded that if I was going to be with a woman then I was no longer welcome to live in their home. So, when my girlfriend moved, I moved with her.

I didn't hear from any of my church friends or extended family after that and I only spoke with my parents occasionally. When we did talk, it was very difficult. My mom and dad were attending Christian conferences that were supposed to help them figure out how to change me, and they were given hope that this was only a phase and I would end up straight. The conversations we did have had an undercurrent of rejection — it felt as though they were consistently choosing their church and their relationship with God over their own daughter. It was profoundly painful. It didn't matter who I was, and it didn't matter what I said, I would always, always come second.

As time passed, my girlfriend and I were able to go to my parent's house occasionally. They realized they would have to make some accommodations or they would lose their daughter completely. However, when we did make it to their home, we were expected to act like friends. My brothers were allowed to be with their girlfriends at my parents' house comfortably and affectionately, but I wasn't allowed to be with mine. Although my girlfriend and I were together for nine years, my family never came to a place of comfort and acceptance.

Several years ago, I became very unwell, and it was clear that I could not live on my own during that time. Because I was no longer seeing anyone, I was welcomed to live and recover in my parent's home.

It was extremely difficult for me to be there, but due to my illness I didn't have another option. Now that I look back on this period, I can see there was a reason for me to be living with my parents — our relationships have healed in a lot of ways. I think we began to appreciate one another for who we are and, although not on the same page, we look past our differences and are able to appreciate the love that we have for each other.

While I was living at home, my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During the months between his diagnosis and his passing, I had the privilege of taking care of him. I watched him struggle with his diagnosis and physical decline, but I also witnessed the strength of his faith. Words cannot express how incredibly thankful I am that we had the opportunity to heal and get to know each other again before he died. He became my favourite person and I now think of him with fondness every single day.

It's really only been since my dad died that I have had a relationship with any of my extended family. My dad's mom and I have become particularly close. However, there are times when I am brought back into the place of shame. Although not directed specifically at me, she makes comments about how same-sex relationships are not of God and that she has no understanding of how anyone could follow that path. Even though she knows that her words hurt me, she feels justified in speaking her opinions because her faith in Jesus is foundational. Because of my history with the church, and the lack of flexibility when it comes to opinions about sexuality, I don't speak about my experiences. It's not that I feel ashamed about who I am, it's just that I am afraid of the judgement, rejection, and backlash, and I simply don't want to feel that pain again. But, in some ways this means that I am denying myself all the time.

When it comes to my personal faith, I find it very painful to speak of. When I was young, the church was my home, my support, my lifeline. However, the experiences of shame, rejection, and judgement killed my trust in the church and my faith in Jesus along with it. Singing, which was a huge part of my life and brought me comfort, died too. To be honest, at this point I don't feel safe enough to seek out other Christian faith communities. I cannot go back to Christianity because I no longer see the world through that lens. When I was in Europe, God's message of love to me was outside the confines of religion. I was not loved because I was Christian, white, lesbian, or straight. I was loved simply for who I am and because that is what God is. Something my dad said to me in a letter he left was, "Laura, your faith still exists." When I first read that statement, I didn't quite believe him, but as I reflect on it now, I realize that he was right. My faith does still exist; it's just different now. And that's okay.

Christopher Godwalt

My first two years of university were some of the most gut-wrenchingly difficult years I've ever experienced. Back then I was deeply entrenched in the closet, knowing that I was definitely not straight, but also trusting no one with that secret.

It remained my secret until I came out to my now ex-wife just a couple years into our marriage. My years at Redeemer and especially those years when I lived on campus, were marked with guilt and fear! I felt guilty that I wasn't straight. I felt guilty that I developed crushes on my dorm-mates. I felt guilty when I engaged in any sort of interaction with members of the same gender, and guilty when I interacted with members of the opposite gender. I felt guilty for "leading" females on whenever I expressed interest in their lives. I felt guilty when I accessed porn in my dorm room. I felt guilty when I

sat in accountability groups and had to pretend that I had once again “failed” to maintain a healthy sexual ethic with regards to members of the opposite sex, fantasy, pornography, and masturbation. I felt guilty when I “played along,” laughing and sharing homophobic jokes.

And I lived daily in fear. I was afraid that someone would catch my eyes wandering. I was afraid that I would get caught crossing my legs the wrong way. I was afraid that someone would catch me aimlessly singing Abba. I was afraid that I would talk in my sleep and accidentally out myself. I was afraid that one of my dorm mates would walk in on me. I was afraid that I would have an erection at the most inopportune times which would lead others to suspect about my orientation. I was afraid that my faith wasn't strong enough because despite having prayed for years and years and years, I was still gay. I was afraid that I was going to hell, and that there was no way a sinner like me could make it to heaven. I felt afraid that I wasn't working hard enough, or doing enough spiritually and community-wise to save me from eternal damnation. I felt afraid that I wasn't worthy of grace because I was gay. I felt afraid that one of my dorm mates would discover my darkest shame, would out me, and I'd face public ridicule and eviction.

Every day, waking and sleeping, I exhausted myself trying to be the best damn straight Christian on campus so no one would ever know. And my true friendships suffered for it. My academic life suffered for it. And without a doubt, my development as a young, spiritually maturing Christian suffered for it. Instead of developing a true faith, I developed the perfect facade and learned how to live it day in and day out.

These days I live in the Netherlands with my husband. It took years and years and years of work to slowly chip away at the shame, guilt and fear, which had, in place of a solid foundation based on Christ, formed the foundation of my daily life. Thankfully there were others, especially several within the RCA and CRC, who walked with me, journeyed with me, and crawled through the deepest valleys with me to help me unpack what I had learned in years of Christian Sunday school, youth group, Christian high school and Christian university. They've helped me see a God of love instead of a God of condemnation. Through their joint work, I've learned to build a faith and a life that is healthier (no, I've not yet learned it all, and I've a long way to go), I'm learning to trust that God is good, that His grace is sufficient for even me, and that He chooses me — a gay, married, reform(ed)(ing) Christian — just as I am. He loves me, yes, even me!

Looking back, I remain grateful for much of my Christian school experience, but if I knew then what I know now, it would not have been my choice for schools. Back then I had no idea that there were Christians who didn't condemn every expression of LGBTQI+ reality. I had never met another gay or queer Christian, and I was convinced the two could never be married. I've now met so many Christians with deep, faith-based roots who are convinced that there is more than one possible way to journey through this life.

The church and Christian schools stand in a beautifully unique place to make a difference in the lives of many, and I pray that courage and wisdom lead to a holistic engagement of the reality of the beautifully diverse Christian reality, thereby helping to create a safe and nurturing learning and faith development space even for those within the LGBTQI+ spectrum.

Mary Vogelzang

I have a pretty deep connection to the Christian Reformed Church. Both my parents were long-time members; my father was a CRC minister and missionary. Because of this, I moved every seven or eight years, and lived in Chicago; Sheldon, Iowa; Bellevue, Washington; and Newton, Iowa. I am the youngest of seven children, and we went to Christian schools wherever we lived.

After graduating from high school, I went to Calvin College in Michigan. After a few years there, my mom started getting sick and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so I moved home and finished my nursing degree in the Seattle area. At about the same time, my parents officially retired from the CRC. I lived at home to spend time with and take care of my mom until she had to go to a nursing home.

After leaving Calvin to take care of my Mom I went to a community college in Seattle and played basketball there. It was the first time I had ever been around people who were openly gay. This was around 1985 or so, so when I say they were "openly gay," I don't mean it was like it is today. But there were women on the team who talked about having girlfriends and so on. The community college wasn't Christian, and was unlike anywhere else I had been before. Previously I had only gone to Christian schools, so to have people who were talking like that about who they were dating was very surprising to me. During that time, I developed a crush on my coach, who soundly rejected me, but that experience forced me to look at myself and ask: "What is this feeling that I have?"

I started realizing that there had always been certain women in my life, typically older women, towards whom I had really strong feelings. I always just thought we were just really good friends, and I admired them for being such lovely people that I just really liked. However, after having that experience with my coach, I was able to look back and identify those relationships differently.

When my mom passed away, I wasn't really even "out" to myself, and at that point I was still dating men. I was certainly starting to ask myself what it meant that I was attracted to women, but I was still dating men because it was just what was comfortable. My mom died when I was 24, and around that time, I cut off contact with the church. Members of the local CRC attempted contact with me, but I had already stopped attending church when I went to Calvin. It was then that I realized that I wasn't going because I wanted to go; I was going because that was what was expected.

My parents could not have raised children in a more stringently CRC manner. We did all the catechism and grew up as children of CRC pastors and missionaries. But now none of us are in the CRC and all of us have chosen different churches for various reasons. My sister was the last of us to attend a CRC church. She married a man whose family was really involved in the North Seattle CRC church. But then her son came out as gay. People in the church basically said, "How hard for you, to have to choose your son or the church!" And she was like, "Uhhh, no." She realized that the church was really quite anti-gay and she just didn't feel like she could go anymore.

My spouse and I are both former-CRC members, and neither of us plan to return to that denomination. We are both nurses, and we met at work. We've been together since 2004. She and I have a daughter,

who is such a blessing to us. We also fostered two little boys for a while, and they ended up being adopted by two dads. The amazing part is that we are now the boys' legal godparents. We see them a lot, and we enjoy spending time with the dads, so we vacation with the dads and the boys, and it's kind of this one big happy family of seven: two gay couples and three kids. Our daughter thinks of them as cousins.

I think it's sad when churches can't adapt and change. I do sometimes go to church now, occasionally. My wife and I wanted to renew that connection when we had a child, so we found a church close to us that we feel like we could be comfortable in ... but to be honest, it's sometimes still a struggle for both of us. It's the University Congregational United Church of Christ. At the time we joined, two of the three ministers or pastors were gay; it's an open and affirming church that practices what they preach when it comes to ministry.

I do sometimes feel sad that we are so far removed from the CRC now. It's a church with lots of history and heritage, and it's sad that my daughter won't know that part of it. But I am not sad enough that we would go back — since there is no CRC church that would actually accept us.

Reuben VanDam*

**A pseudonym.*

My name is Reuben. I am in my late 20s. I live and work in a small city a few hours away from the farm where I grew up. I attended university and graduated with a good job in a professional field. I am an uncle, brother, son. I am single and live with three other young professionals. I attend the local Christian Reformed Church, where I play piano during the services roughly once a month. I am blessed. I am happy.

Part 1 – A Child Born into Covenant and Brokenness

My connection to the CRC is generational. My grandparents were founding members. My parents met in the nursery as babies. My great grandmother passed on her faith to my grandmother, and her to my mother, and my mother shared her faith with me. My dad shared his faith with me too. He would pray with my siblings and I every night. They were, in more ways than not, good examples of Christian discipleship, and were both very involved in the church. Mom taught Sunday school, directed the choir, played piano, and was on the worship and education committees. Dad was on the building committee and served on council.

My parents had me baptized. The congregation promised to love, support, and encourage me. All this is not uncommon to the story of many who grew up in the CRC.

But my story is different (I assume) from many in the CRC. And it has been a deep-rooted sense of otherness that has defined so much of my life. I have limited the expression of my true self to be accepted, and I still do this. My earliest memories of this are when my brother showed his friends where I played with Barbies, before I was even in kindergarten. I remember asking for more boy's toys after that, not because I wanted them, but because I knew I would be teased if I played with a girl's toy. As an

older child and teenager, I remember hiding everything I liked, from clothes, to music, to movies, hobbies, even food. Can you imagine that food is gendered? Or I thought it was. I adjusted my behaviour to be accepted.

This was before I even knew I was gay. When I went through puberty, things got worse. I heard a lot of terrible things from the people who promised to love and encourage me when I was baptized. It wasn't always just people from my church, although a lot was. A lot of the horrible things I heard also came from people who went to other churches. But still, it all came from my spiritual siblings: the (broken) hands and feet of Jesus. I didn't think I knew anyone who thought that gay people could be good people or that they were worthy of love or kindness. Gay people, I was led to believe, were broken, rebellious people who hated God.

But I didn't hate God. So what I was experiencing was obviously a test, or a phase. I prayed every day that God would take that and exchange it for an attraction to girls. It wasn't that I wasn't attracted to girls. I was, just not in a sexual way. I wanted to be friends with lots of girls. And maybe I would have been friends with girls if I felt that was allowed. I didn't have many friends. It was difficult for me to make friends with boys because I wasn't very good at pretending to have common interests, and I felt I wasn't allowed to be friends with girls. So I just didn't have a lot of friends. I had my sister, though. She was younger, but she always looked out for me, and was kind to me. She included me. But I never trusted her with my secret. It was a secret between me and God. I never told anyone, partly I think because of shame, but also because I did fully trust that God would heal me. Why bother telling people if it was going to change?

Part 2 - Paper Flowers

But God didn't change me. I don't remember when I stopped believing He would. But sometime in high school I became okay with the fact that I would probably never be straight. But I wasn't okay with letting go of my imagined life, the life the church and society and everyone seemed to be telling me I would never be happy without. Having a girlfriend, a wife, a family, becoming a father. I called this my "paper flowers," which was from a song that I listened to a lot at that time. In it, the singer wishes she could live in her world of pretty (but fake) paper flowers and hide away from the real world of rampant chaos. I idolized this imagined heterosexual future.

What was worse, I came to believe that this fake future was not only critical to my own happiness, but also the happiness of many other people. I came to believe that my parents, my siblings, my uncles and aunts and cousins, my friends, grandparents, and people from church would be less happy if I did not someday marry a woman and have kids and a family of my own. My paper flowers would need to look real from the outside for the sake of everyone else. If God wouldn't heal me, I would just pretend.

Still in high school, I asked a girl to date me. We dated for six months, and I was very happy. She became my best friend. My family seemed to approve. It felt, finally, like I belonged in my world. This is what my whole world told me was supposed to be. And it was wonderful. Oh, so wonderful.

But it was also horrid. I knew I would have to tell her the truth at some point. But I thought that if we loved each other and trusted each other that it would just happen. And if we wanted to get married, we

could make it work somehow. It would be our secret. Nobody else would need to know. But that feeling of trust never grew for me. The homophobia in my circles got worse. I hated myself more and more for lying to her. Guilt became shame.

When she broke it off, I was devastated that I lost her as a friend. But I also lost a piece of my identity that I was just beginning to hope would last and become real. In my journal in the months following, I wrote about overwhelming heartache and hopelessness. I'm sure this is common for teenagers after a breakup, but I believe I was starting to grieve something so much more. My Paper Flowers were on fire.

But when we stopped dating, I also felt a weight lifted; I didn't have to lie anymore. For the next years my journal entries would reflect this; and constant back and forth between expressions of longing to be with a woman and have a family, but also recognising more and more that I would never again subject myself to the shame and guilt of being a lie in that specific way. I never had another girlfriend. I never went on a date with another girl.

Part 3 – It Gets Better

When I went to college, I had vague ideas of meeting new friends, maybe a lover, coming out, and being disowned by my family. I couldn't imagine bringing a boyfriend around them. It would have to be one or the other. And I imagined what that would look like. It was miserable. And lonely. But I was working hard, and I went home every weekend to be with my family. I never made new friends, and never had a boyfriend. I preoccupied myself with other things.

But I did grow. I grew in faith. I grew to love myself again, and I grew to love my family more. I used to believe that I was gay because I was born a broken person into a broken world, and just like some people were born blind, I believed that I was born with a brain that did not allow my sexuality to develop correctly. I believed that, for whatever reason, my brain was not exposed to the right balance of prenatal hormones, and so my gender and sex and sexuality grew to be out of sync because of that. And maybe that is still part of my belief; or, maybe being gay or straight is just a variation in a good creation, like blue or brown eyes. Or – maybe God made me this way because he knew that my family would need me to be exactly as I am. I don't know for sure. But I've come to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by a God who's always loved me. As the lyrics of my favourite hymn state:

"I find, I walk, I love, but oh, the whole
of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee!
For thou wert long beforehand with my soul;
Always, always thou lovedst me."

And sometime, and some point, it seemed like it was okay to just be me, slowly. Oh, so slowly. And as it became more okay to be me, I became less sad. The more I loved myself, the more I found I could love other people. I finally did find friends who accepted me as I am, and I found my space where I could be 100% authentic with no fear of being rejected. Life, as they say, gets so much better. I live with my best friends, play piano in church (although my church doesn't know me fully yet), and I have a great job. I am thrilled to be experiencing my family grow and change; siblings getting married and building their

homes, becoming an Uncle, watching my parents' transition into grandparents, Thanksgiving and Christmas and birthday dinners, experiencing tears and joys and challenges together.

I am still single. Maybe I will stay single, or maybe I will find the right man to share my life with. I know I will most likely have to leave the CRC if that day comes. Maybe I will take a spiritual sojourn with my Anglican or United siblings. But the CRC will always be my home. I will always feel connected to this church; the church where my great grandmother was baptized, and her children, and so on. But wherever my life leads, I know now that my family will still love and accept me regardless, and I will love them too. And yes, life is messy and painful and frustrating. But it is also beautiful and warm and good, and I am happy to be living it.

Abigail Potsdam*

**A pseudonym.*

I was born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church. My family was deeply connected to the CRC, in the USA and in Canada. The way I see it now, looking back, is that our family has always been kind of like a family of servants to the CRC. My grandfather was a pastor, my dad was a pastor and a missionary, my ex-husband and I were a pastor and missionaries. But while we spent our lives serving the CRC, it wasn't a church that nourished us back.

Growing up, we moved around a bit. I was actually born in Nigeria, then we moved to Honduras. When I was seven, I moved back to Holland, Michigan, where my dad continued to work for the CRC. There was a lot of sexual abuse in my childhood, from my father and from my brother. I grew up hearing puritanical messages from my mother, about how sex was forbidden until marriage and any show of sexuality was very off-limits, but at the same time, sexual things were happening to me as a young child. This led to a lot of secrecy and confusion in my life. I'm not sure how much my mother knew about the abuse, but I believe that she knew.

At the time of the abuse, the church was what was most important — more important than family, more important than anything — so there was no one for me to turn to, no one to talk about what was happening to myself, either within the church or my family.

Of course, with this childhood experience, I naturally explored many different forms of sexuality during high school and college. It was complicated for me because of how the church talks about sexuality and because of how my parents raised me to believe that talking about sex is wrong, and then there was the added element of secrecy that come with sexual abuse. Thinking about these things, or even acknowledging that part of me, has only slowly started to come out now that I'm in my fifties. It was simply a lot to untangle. I now consider myself to be bisexual, as I've always been very attracted to both men and women.

My faith was always very strong despite all this; I completely felt connected to the Lord. After college, I taught English as a second language for two years, then I went to seminary. I was still kind of struggling with who I was at that point. I honestly thought I was going to be single all my life because I knew I was

struggling with these feelings of being more connected to women than to men. And then an unexpected thing happened: I fell in love with a man I met at seminary. We were married, and went together to work as missionaries in West Africa.

Our time as missionaries was marked both by great work and service for the church, and by traumatic events, including an armed robbery and a kidnapping. These events had an impact on our mental and emotional well-being. The trauma led to my husband going down another path, having affairs and other issues. It was only when our marriage was in trouble that support finally came from the church, and even then it was only for him and not for me or the rest of the family. When he decided to leave the CRC and started to attend a Catholic church — we were living in Michigan by then — I remained at the CRC. I didn't leave the CRC church myself, but it certainly felt like the church had left me. When my husband and I finally did separate, it was a shock to many people who knew us. We were missionaries, and missionaries aren't supposed to divorce.

It's only now that I'm divorced that I am struggling to decide what it actually means to be bisexual. When I was married, it wasn't really a factor. But now that I'm single, I have choices about who I'm going to date and how I'm going to live.

Part of being able to acknowledge my sexuality has come from my children. My children are much more open about who they are. I've left the CRC now, but I'm attending another church for my daughter. I purposely decided to join this church for my daughter because this is one she's willing to go to. It's a safe and affirming space for the LGBTQ community, and they're very open about it. And it's also a place where I feel like I can be a little bit more honest and where I can kind of explore who I am.

When it comes to the recent CRC human sexuality report, I've read it and found it very discouraging. The strictness and the black-and-whiteness of their thinking on sexuality reminds me so much of my mother. I see no grace in it, at all. Having come out of the CRC as this abused child, feeling neglected by the church I served for years, and then hearing the church self-righteously claim that they know that all these people can't be right or loved by God because of this inner part of them, it's tough to handle. As for myself, I don't know if I'm bisexual because of the abuse in my past, I don't know if this is because how God made me; I don't know why I'm this way! But this report claims that I'm supposed to say that I am sinful, and there's no grace, there is no love, there is no *Jesus* in that.

This is why I've had to leave the CRC. I thought perhaps that the CRC was becoming a more grace-filled church. I thought that grace was finally becoming a bandage that was wrapping over some of the puritanical tone and hyper-Calvinism of the past. I saw that process happening in my mom's life. Just before she died, I saw grace coming into her life, and it changed her. I thought that maybe the CRC was starting to undergo the same transformation. I started to feel a little bit of hope for people like my daughter, who is also bi, that she may be able to be part of the church and hear people say, "You're not damned; you're not gonna go to hell. You're loved. Christ loves you. We're all loved." But in this report, I don't see that at all.

David Hall

I am 63 years old. I am a gay Christian. I am not an oxymoron. I am David Hall.

For the first 59 years of my life, I struggled to live a life contrary to who I was. It was a life lived based on the expectations and beliefs of my family, of my religious upbringing, and of society. I feared the rejection, condemnation, and erasure I learned would be the result of living as a gay man. I did not want God's judgement of burning in hell for eternity.

I married Grace with whom I had two daughters, Megan and Chelsey. I studied and worked as a minister of youth music, a career which ended when my same-sex attraction was known. I continued to serve in the church in various capacities as moderator, elder, worship leader, children and adult choir leader, and on several boards – from building administration to finance – while supporting my family working in the insurance and human resources industries.

I loved my family, church and community. I received pastoral and clinical counselling, including reparative and conversion therapy, in the hope I would no longer be a homosexual, same-sex attracted, gay. I prayed constantly, often prostrate on the living room floor in the middle of the night, sobbing uncontrollably at times, for God to take away the gay. God did not answer my prayer. I was angry, confused, traumatized. Even so, I did not turn my back on God.

In our 33rd year of marriage, my wife Grace died of breast cancer. The facade of a straight Christian life crumbled. I hated God for taking away the life for which I had worked so hard and for not taking the "gay" away. I turned to alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity and gambling. I lost everything. Life was no longer worth the effort. Within 10 – 15 minutes of being found by my sister and pastor, I was saved from succeeding with my third attempt at suicide.

With the love, prayers and support of family and friends, I received counselling. It was my daughters and close friends of my wife who told me that it had been Grace's hope for me to live who I was created to be. It felt like being hit by God with the proverbial 2 X 4. God had not abandoned me. God had always been there waiting for me to acknowledge who I was created to be, in God's image, God's child. Loved. Beloved.

On January 1, 2016, I was able to say without shame, guilt, or hesitation that I was a gay Christian.

Within weeks I no longer looked for solace in the alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity, and gambling. I went off all the medication I had been on for more than 15 years for back pain, migraines, and intestinal problems. I lost 65 pounds eating healthier and exercising. I found joy in life, in people. My relationship with God felt closer than ever. I began to experience the abundant and fulfilling life God promised: a resurrected life of purpose and hope. I released myself to God and although I was ready to live single for the rest of my life, God brought Jim unexpectedly into my life, and I knew it was right. I have a relationship I never thought possible – faithful, nourishing, enriching, honest, trusting, unconditional love.

Jim and I began to look for a church where we could worship and serve in the ministry and life of a welcoming and affirming Christian community. We attended Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church during our first year of being together. At the time we were only able to attend every other Sunday as Jim was living in Barrie. There was love, support, welcome, and affirmation among those we spoke with and who sought us out each time we attended. However, we realized there were glass

ceilings limiting our involvement, as well as not being able to be married. There were also theological messages from the pulpit from guest speakers telling us indirectly that we didn't belong. We remain close friends with some Jubilee members and miss many others, but we simply could not continue to attend a church where there are conditions to Jesus' love — particularly for the LGBTQ2+ community.

We have found a community of faith where diversity is welcomed and affirmed, where love is given unconditionally, where we can worship and serve in the life and ministry of the church, and where we can be married. No human can be denied these inalienable rights to communion for all who seek God with heart, soul, mind, and body. We are all created in God's image, God's children, God's beloved. All with equal access to unknown measure of God's love, mercy, and grace.

I did experience rejection, condemnation, and erasure by some of my family and by my church when I came out as a Christian in a gay relationship, but not fear. Instead, I have seen God's goodness and blessing in ways I have never experienced before, including a new family and friends to walk through life with.

Thanks for this opportunity to serve God.

Carol Vanderstoep

We need to be brave with our stories so other people can be brave with theirs.

– Catherine Center

My deep belief is that stories are sacred and have the power to cultivate empathy and justice.

– Brené Brown

I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and I was educated in the Christian school system for elementary, high school, and post-secondary, attending Redeemer College for two years before moving on to Calvin University from where I graduated. I spent my career as a teacher in several Christian Schools. My husband, John, has a similar story, graduating from Kuyper College then Calvin Seminary, now 20 years into a 2nd career calling as pastor, missionary and church planter. Our three daughters are also graduates of the Christian school system. We have been fully immersed in the CRC. We are your poster children.

As a young mom, I listened to Focus on the Family to be the best mom I could be to my three little girls. Focus on the Family said the "gays" were going to destroy the family as we've always known it. They talked about "Exodus Ministries International," saying it was a place where any Christian who suspected they might be gay should go for healing. I personally didn't know any gay people. I was told (so I was certain) that homosexuality was a choice, and a bad one at that.

A dear friend (then also CRC) had two gay friends and she would often talk to me about them. I was concerned about her when she started to question so many things that seemed so foundational to the faith. I assumed what I'd been taught: that her friends must have had negative relationships with their fathers or had domineering mothers. I remember feeling so uncomfortable when she kept bringing it up. What I didn't know is that she was offering me a gift that started me on a journey that took way too long for me to understand.

We didn't talk about homosexuality when I was growing up. It wasn't really an issue. There weren't any gay people in any church or school I was part of, *or so I thought*.

During John's years as a pastor, he started learning about people in his care who identified as LGBTQ. John started to recognize the torment that some people go through when they identify as LGBTQ. We didn't talk about it a lot, and rarely with our school-aged children. We still believed that it was a sin even though we hadn't done any study on this issue. It's what we believed because that was what we were taught.

I remember the day that same-sex marriage was approved in Canada. I was not impressed that they were going to call it a marriage because we all *knew* that marriage is between one man and one woman. I was asked by "Focus on the Family Canada" to send a letter to all of my email recipients suggesting that they too send something to the government. Maybe they could call this a civil union, but certainly not a marriage. I remember receiving a gently worded letter from one of my recipients that maybe I should look at this from the other perspective, which sadly, I will admit, I did not do.

Several years later we were invited to a fundraising dinner for an organization that supports people who are both LGBTQ and Christian. Their guest speaker for the evening was Tony Campolo. The evening was eye-opening. Could this really be a thing? Not a choice? Created this way? Christian and gay? Tony Campolo and his wife agreed that people can be LGBTQ and Christian, but did not agree on whether or not they could marry. And Tony Campolo shared his humble posture: "Maybe I am wrong."

Against this backdrop, I will share a bit about my family.

John and I have been married for 32 years. We have been blessed with 5 children — three girls now in their twenties, Erin, Kristin and Meghan, and two teenaged boys, Nathan and Stephen. In the past three years our family has grown by three as we welcomed our son-in-law, Jordan, our daughter-in-law, Kimberley, and this past October our first grandchild, Avery.

Allow me to share about the journey we've been on with our second daughter. Kristin was born in August of 1994. She followed Erin, who was a calm, quiet, rule-abiding little girl who made us look like really good parents. We took on that mistaken identity! When Kristin entered the picture we were humbled as parents and realized that we actually didn't have a clue what we were doing! She was the kid who fell down the stairs while acting silly or found a way to jump out of a shopping cart when we turned our heads for a split second. She was the little kid who couldn't sit still long enough to snap a cute Christmas photo (which, by the way, are the most adorable pictures for me to look at now!). She was a vivacious, lively, animated and fun-loving little girl and there was never a dull moment with her around.

Kristin was also a girl with a huge heart, putting the needs of others before her own. When she was eight years old, she found an adoption agency flyer at church with pictures of kids who needed to find their "forever families." Kristin pleaded with us to adopt all of them or at least one or two. She knew all their names and faces. She has always loved kids and is good with them. Already as a young girl, she started looking forward to the day that she could have her own children. She was a much loved babysitter and in high demand in the neighbourhood. She was twelve years old when my youngest son

was born and she was my right-hand lady. I don't know how I would have managed without her. She has always been a "baby whisperer."

When Kristin was about twelve years old and entering puberty, she started to realize that something did not seem "right" about herself. She was attracted to girls rather than boys and confusion set in. She didn't understand what she was going through. We didn't talk about being gay at home but she did get the message through home, church and Christian school that homosexuality was a sin. She assumed she couldn't be gay because she didn't choose this and was told that being gay is something you choose. She begged and pleaded with God during those years to change her and she suffered in silence with all of her wondering and questioning.

She had decided that she would try dating guys to see if it worked out for her. It didn't. She dated three guys over the next few years — one guy at a time, of course. :) When she finally came to the conclusion that she must be gay, she decided that she would marry a man and keep her secret forever and tell her husband on her death bed.

She wondered what would happen if she ever shared her deep dark secret. Would she be rejected by her family and/or community? What should she do about her deep longing to get married and her longtime dream to be a mom someday? What should she do with her faith — her love for God? Did God still love her? So many questions and struggles ... ALONE. It still pains me deeply to share that part of the story knowing how much she was going through and not sharing it with anyone.

Part way between Grades 10 and 11, Kristin slipped into a depression. It made no sense to us. Kristin had always been a lively, fun-loving kid. We did everything we could think of to help her. We tried to support her in organizing and completing her school work, helped her change her diet as maybe the depression was food related, sent her to a therapist etc. We wondered if she was carrying the burden of all of her friends' problems as she was the friend with a huge heart who would help carry their burdens. She could listen, counsel and encourage her hurting friends for hours. We urged her to let some of that go and suggest her friends get help elsewhere. Supporting them was not helping her get better and yet, she was sinking deeper. One day I discovered that she was cutting herself to mask the pain that was really below the surface. I was devastated. Why was this happening to her?

Kristin took a year off after high school because she was not emotionally ready to tackle post secondary education. At the end of that year off, Kristin chose Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. While there, she discovered a group of LGBTQ Christians and was able to admit for the first time that she was a lesbian, and discovered that it was possible to be both gay and Christian. Prior to sharing this with us, she took time to learn and study and listen to the stories of other people who were both LGBTQ and Christian. She wrestled with coming to a point where she was at peace with being a Christian and gay while the church that she grew up in was telling her that this was not possible. She came to a place of accepting herself for who she was made to be. She had several months (years really) before telling us.

I will always remember the evening that Kristin came out to us. A few months earlier she had called us from Winnipeg and told us that she was looking forward to coming home so that she could share something with us that she had been going through. My mind went in all directions except the possibility that she could be a lesbian. It honestly did not even cross my mind. As we sat in the living

room together that evening, she opened her computer and read a beautifully written letter to us. After the initial “I am gay,” she went on to say that it had nothing to do with us being “bad parents.” Her words were a shock to me. She didn’t seem gay (whatever that meant!). Although her words were initially jarring to me, her letter was so caring and thoughtful, truly emulating her beautiful personality. She has always been one who puts the other person first and she wanted to assure us through this letter that being gay was not our fault. We hugged her and told her that we love her no matter what and that we would figure this out. We told her that although in this moment everything changed, nothing changed. We would never stop loving or supporting her.

I recall the denial setting in the next day. I told her that maybe she should keep this quiet until she “really knew” whether or not she was gay. She was so gracious. She just hugged me and said “Mom, I’ve known since I hit puberty.” She went on to tell me that she remembered going to a basketball tournament when she was in Grade 7 when all of her friends were talking about the cute guys, but she was totally focussed on the girls.

The three months after Kristin came out were a blur. I was in the process of wrapping up my teaching year and John was wrapping up a 10 year pastor position just prior to our family moving to Haiti for a year to work for Christian Reformed World Missions (now Resonate Global Mission.) There was no time to process until we arrived in Haiti. The year in Haiti was a gift to me as I used as much of my spare time as possible to read, study, pray, journal and learn. I realized that identifying as LGBTQ is not a choice. If it was a choice, I doubt people would choose it since it usually involves so much heartache, pain, and loss. I immersed myself in stories and sadly heard the most horrific and painful stories of LGBTQ people and my heart broke. I found other people through social media who were further ahead of me on this journey and I began to learn from them.

While we lived in Haiti, many of our family members (also mostly Christian Reformed) came to visit us. On a number of occasions, we sat on our deck together with our visiting family and Kristin came out to them as gay. We were surprised and thankful by their responses. They too told Kristin that they would love and support her no matter what. I will never forget my dad’s response — my dad, a leader and elder in his church for years. He stood up to hug her and through tears said, “Kristin, I am so sorry that you had to go through this alone all those years.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the group. On boxing day of 2015, now back in Ontario, we met the person who is now our beautiful daughter-in-law, Kimberly. She had also spent a year at Canadian Mennonite University and, although they didn’t meet there, they had common friends who introduced them to each other. They were married on May 12, 2018. They are both so happy, thriving in their true identity instead of hiding who they are.

There have been many days over the past six years that I have felt guilty for not being able to “be there” for Kristin during her darkest days. Her response to me has been so gracious. “Mom — you did the best you could with what you knew at the time.” It is my passion to let other parents know my story so their kids will know that they are a safe place to come out, if necessary. I know that this journey will be harder for people who are faith- based.

I wonder where Kristin would be if we had rejected her that night? I thank God that he allowed us to express love instead of fear, and faith instead of judgment. Has this journey been hard? Yes! Do I feel

the judgements of people who don't understand? Yes! Does this journey feel lonely sometimes? Yes! Would I change anything? NO.

Two key things I have discovered on this journey: 1) Having gay relatives and friends introduces me to learning I couldn't experience without them; and 2) How the church had interpreted the Bible saying about homosexuality — like our mistaken views on Jews, slaves, and women in the past — is at least worthy of being questioned so that we can accurately know God's heart for LGBTQ people. Because of this, over the past couple of years, my passion has grown for doing something to spread the word that people who identify as LGBTQ are loved by God and that LGBTQ followers of Jesus are part of his church and welcomed at his table. Like all of us, they need to be loved and supported. Three years ago, John and I along with four others started a Generous Space group in Centre Wellington, which offers support for people who identify as both Christian and LGBTQ and those who are supportive allies. We have been richly blessed to know and love LGBTQ people whose faith in Jesus has persisted despite their churches not being able to extend God's welcome to them.

When the CRC's 2020 Report on Human Sexuality was released on October 29, I was in a COVID-19 quarantine with Kristin for two weeks so that we could safely spend a week with my oldest daughter, husband, and new baby. I told her about the report and we talked briefly. She told me that she didn't really want to talk about the report. She was tired of hearing about how there are people arguing about whether or not she can fully belong in the church since true belonging is being accepted for who you really are. She is weary of listening to those who want her to change before she can be a full member of the church. She acknowledged her confidence in knowing that she is loved by Jesus. Although Kristin and her wife would love to find a Christian church capable of communicating God's love without fear they know it's a challenge and one that they don't always have the energy for.

One of Christianity's key teachings is that people are made in the image of God. Yet, that portion of image-bearers who identify as gay are finding themselves squeezed out of the church by heterosexual Christians insisting that LGBTQ people fit into a heterosexual image. May God forgive us for standing in his place and withholding welcome where he would extend his love. I'll end with part of a quote from Brené Brown. "True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are." My hope and prayer is that the church will rise with compassion, love and justice and do the right thing.

Brian Zonder*

**A pseudonym*

Born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church, Brian ticks all the boxes: baptised as an infant, participated in weekly worship, educated in Christian day schools, joined cadets as a boy, attended youth group as a teen, professed his faith as a young adult, and volunteered in his local CRC in various capacities for twenty years.

When asked what his favourite worship song was, Brian, a millennial, responded without missing a beat: "Anything in the grey hymn book." A fan of organ music, "When Peace Like a River" tops his list. "I love getting dressed up on Sunday morning and going to church."

But as young teen he began to struggle with whether or not he was gay--*and* with being both gay and Christian. Eventually he came out: first just to himself. "I came to a point where I was able to say, 'This is who I am.' I stopped hiding it from myself. I was still hiding it from family and friends, but I was opening up to it."

At the same time, the church he'd grown up in began to feel less safe. Looking back now, he realizes that while the church itself was not affirming, there *were* many affirming people sitting in its pews. He just didn't know who they were at the time.

He has since connected with many other members of the CRC who are LGBTQ or allies. He posits that you probably don't have to look far in your congregation to find someone who is affirming. "It might be someone sitting beside you in the pew, only you don't know it because you haven't opened up the conversation."

As a young adult Brian attended his first *Q Christian Fellowship Conference* in Chicago. (QCF is an ecumenical Christian ministry focussed on serving lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer, and straight ally Christians.) The conference is the largest such gathering in the world. Brian now volunteers his technical and organizational skills to help run the annual event.

Through both QCF and *Generous Space* (a Canadian Christian organization that supports LGBTQ+ people and their allies), Brian was exposed to a wide range of Christian traditions. It opened him up to new ways of thinking critically about the scriptures and his faith. "There are different ways of doing church. Different ways to do communion. Different ways of reading the Bible. We need to ask, what was going on in society when a particular passage was written. What was the context?"

To those who say, "But the Bible doesn't change," Brian responds that our *understanding* of scripture has indeed changed through the ages. Pastors continue to write new sermons every week, researching, re-thinking and re-interpreting familiar passages. "Christians once believed that women shouldn't serve in church office, children shouldn't come to the Lord's table, and that slavery was just fine. If the church was able to change its mind about these things, maybe it can change its mind about LGBTQ people too."

Brian left the CRC in 2015 when he couldn't find a church where he felt safe and which was also within a reasonable, geographical striking distance. He now attends a United Church which he describes as having a good mix of affirming members and still feels very much like a CRC.

However, he continues to connect and work with many CRC members. A born organizer with an analytic mind, he remains involved because he believes change can be made to stem the steady flow of folks exiting the denomination. "There's a lot of talk about declining membership in the CRC. Ok, so maybe we need to think about the things that are making it decline." Despite everything, Brian continues to have hope for the denomination.

What are his hopes for the church that baptized him as an infant? Unity for one. "That it won't split up over this issue. That it can find middle ground as it has on so many other issues." He wonders if that could perhaps mean the generosity of allowing for a local option in which, as he puts it, "We're not going to say if it's good, bad, right, or wrong, but we recognize there is a variety of belief."

He also hopes the CRC will be both cautious and humble in its pronouncements about the place of the queer folk in the church because, whether the church realizes it or not, they are already among us. “Remember, they could be sitting at your Thanksgiving table or in your pew. Many people don’t think that LGBTQ inclusion is their issue. Until it is. When that imaginary gay person is gone, and instead it is someone you know and love and trust and value.”

He hopes the CRC will be careful in its teachings. “Hearing the message that you’re condemned over and over again is a lie that can become your truth if you tell it to yourself often enough. I care about the future generation. The young people still sitting in the pews unsure of where they fit in and whether they have a safe space to come out.” Recalling his own childhood in the pew of the CRC church he loved and attended as a boy, he quotes Mary Griffith: “Before you echo amen in your home or place of worship, think and remember a child is listening.”

Sandi Morrison

I was not familiar with the Christian Reformed Church until middle school when I moved to Gallup, New Mexico. Before that, our family had been with a non-denominational mission organization in Ethiopia and other countries in Africa, and I had attended non-denominational churches. When we landed in Gallup, I started attending Middle School at Rehoboth Christian school, so that was my introduction to the CRC.

My parents continued to attend a Baptist church in town, but my sister and I soon chose to attend Rehoboth CRC instead. It seemed more liberal and community-focused than some of the other local denominations, and the sermons and music were more interesting and appealing to me. Of course, it also helped that my friends went there, too. After high school, I ended up at Calvin, so I did become quite involved in the CRC, despite not being from a CRC family.

I had a good group of supportive friends throughout high school, and we had fun together, but I don’t know what the response from my friends would have been if I had realized that I was attracted to women when I was a teenager. In retrospect, it’s pretty clear that I have been a lesbian my whole life — I definitely recall my friends all having crushes in elementary school and middle school and I was just not interested in guys. I would kind of look at the guys in my class and decide which one I was going to have a crush on so that I could fit in. I generally just convinced myself that I just wasn't into guys, and that was okay. In high school, I decided I needed to be dating, so I kind of found somebody and decided that we were going to be dating, and it turns out that most high school guys are kind of amenable to that. As soon as he kissed me, I thought it was absolutely horrendous and wanted nothing to do with him, but I still just thought it was him specifically that was the problem, not men in general. I think that your mind is great at convincing yourself what you want to rationalize, and that’s probably what I was doing. When I was 25, after I had graduated from Calvin with a nursing degree and spent some time working back in Gallup, I spent a year in Ethiopia working at a hospital there, which was a really formative experience. I met interesting people, and really started exploring a lot of religious and spiritual questions. I was still trying to date men, and while I made good friends and had great conversations with them, dating just did not work out well for me.

When I moved back to the US, I had a lot of free time on my hands because it took a while for all the paperwork to go through for me to start working again. It was at this point that I finally allowed myself to wonder about my sexuality. Through talking with a supportive friend, I kind of had an epiphany and finally came to the point where I could accept that I was attracted to women, and that maybe that was okay. I realized that the choice I faced was to either acknowledge it and move on, or to keep denying a huge part of myself. I really believe that I was simply in a place in my life where I could finally accept this reality.

Throughout this time back in Gallup, I was back to attending my CRC church because that's just what I did when I was in town. I went regularly, and even attended a small group, but there were definitely big religious questions happening for me in the back of my mind. It felt to me like church was not really a place where I could explore who I was. I don't know how explicit or implicit it was, but it was definitely there. I ended up wanting to move somewhere where I could go back to school if I chose to do that, and I ultimately ended up in Albuquerque.

Once I moved to Albuquerque, I left behind the social obligation and habit of attending church every week. It was then that I started dating women, and it was such a huge difference from my previous dating experiences. It was quite an amazing time of self-discovery, and a very eye-opening thing for me. Up until this point, I still hadn't come out to any of my family members because I figured that if I had never dated a woman, I couldn't really say I was a lesbian. When I started seeing someone regularly, I decided I would tell the rest of my family.

My parents had split up when I was in high school, and I knew they would respond differently to this news. I told my mom, and I was kind of expecting that she would be fine with it, but it turned out to be rather hard for her. She pretended that she was fine with it, but it was definitely challenging. It took her time, I think, to accept that I wasn't going to marry the boy next door and have five kids and let her raise them. My dad's response was basically what I had expected: a long email about religion, saying things about how I'd chosen to stray from the Lord and that he hoped I'd choose to "forsake this life of sin." When it comes to churches, what I wish they would hear is that it always seemed to be the case to me that if your sexuality was different, it was met with a "let's just not talk about it" kind of attitude, and that definitely sends a message to people. I pretty firmly believe that your sexuality is something that you're born with, and you can try however hard you want to fit in or to deny it, but ultimately, you're just denying a part of yourself, and you can't live fully when you're in denial. So, if the church is welcoming, and acknowledges the fact that people have differences and that those differences are okay, I believe that's powerful.

One thing I've found too that is very helpful, in churches and other places, is if I see more diversity represented, and I can tell there's LGBTQ people and couples and families, then I do find it a lot more comfortable because I can believe that it's accepted.

These days, I think that meaningful human connection is probably one of the biggest ways I experience joy. I also find enjoyment in little things like the cat crawling up on my lap, or going out in the mountains, or taking a walk in the snow.

Lyle Clark and Fred Heerema

When Lyle Clark fell in love with a member of the Christian Reformed Church, he was introduced to a way of integrating his faith into his daily life that, as a Christian raised in the Roman Catholic Church, he hadn't experienced before. And, as a classically trained musician who had been involved in leading and participating in worship all his life, Lyle also appreciated the liturgy of the CRC and the sense of belonging in a congregation.

And for Fred Heerema, Lyle's partner for more than 30 years, the Christian Reformed Church was the place he was born and raised. The couple met while they were both attending another church, and even though that church was affirming, Fred, especially, missed "a depth of faith experience, the kinds of things the Reformed community stands for, it's social and cultural involvement." Fred longed to be back "within my own background and tradition."

For most of their time together, the couple have been active, participating members of First Christian Reformed Church of Toronto, a place where Lyle is involved in the worship committee and in leading worship, and Fred is currently on the finance committee. Some years ago, Lyle also officially joined the Christian Reformed Church after doing profession of faith. Most importantly, for Lyle and Fred, it's a place "where the people are caring and supportive."

Both Lyle and Fred are grateful for the opportunity to use their gifts to support their church, and they are glad to be in a community that sees their identity as Christians as more important than their sexual orientation. "In terms of my identity, first of all, I am a child of God, and the second is, I'm gay," Fred says, quoting a pastor he knows.

As an adolescent, growing up in the CRC, Fred struggled with his growing awareness of his sexual orientation as a gay person, but "there has not been a time in my life when I felt estranged from God. There have been times when I was in doubt whether I was okay with God, but I never felt that I was not accepted by God." That realization hit home for him when a wise and kind therapist asked him once, if he were standing in front of Christ right now, how do you think Christ would treat you?

"I said, 'I think Christ would love me.'"

As a youth and young man, Lyle felt less conflict between his faith and being gay because of what he calls the "the duality" experienced by many Roman Catholics: "you go to Sunday mass and you confess your sins, and then for the rest of the week, it's just your everyday life that really has nothing to do with the Christian faith."

Both say they are grateful for the love and stability that their committed relationship gives them and the ordinariness of their daily lives. Fred laments the situation of gay friends who don't enjoy the comfort and blessing of a committed relationship, while for Lyle, having the blessing of a Christian life partner has drawn him deeper into his Christian walk and into his sense of God's love and presence in his life.

Quoting Victor Hugo, Lyle says: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Robin Hampton

I attended Sunshine CRC in Grand Rapids from the age of four until I was nineteen. My parents were heavily involved in different ministries, so naturally my sister and I were as well. As a middle schooler and young adult, I spent almost all of my free time at church: I participated in youth groups, mission trips, coaching teen Bible Challenge, singing, drama, and so on. When I was young, I felt most safe while at church; it was probably the only place that I felt safe and loved.

After I came out as gay and started dating Terra, I had a very difficult time. Almost all of my Christian friends stopped talking to me or treating me like a person. People I had known my whole life made it clear to me that I was sinning against God, and if I wanted to be included back into the fold I would need to repent immediately. It made me question my relationship with God and whether I mattered at all to my Christian friends. My family was no exception when it came to ostracizing me. After some time, some of my old Christian friends started tolerating me at an arm's length, but they no longer wanted a close friendship. This was so painful to me.

I've been with Terra for 14 years – since meeting her through mutual friends. We are married, and she has been so supportive and is always there for me. I am currently disabled, due to a health condition for which I have had several surgeries. My body deteriorated to the point where I was basically bedridden for four years. Terra was the only one around during all of that — the only person who was a constant support to me. I was fighting with my mom a lot, because the way she talked about my relationship with Terra and the way she told other people about our relationship, was quite hurtful. But Terra single-handedly paid all of the bills, took care of me, helped me get dressed: she and I were all we had for a while. That was very stressful for both of us, but we knew at least had each other. She worked full time and has done an exceptional job of taking care of both of us. She sees it as a problem for both of us to get through together. Our relationships with our families are better, but they are still strained. Yet Terra and I still have each other, and we really rely a lot on each other.

I do not experience God through church anymore now. I was very angry at God for a long time for the way that all of my friends and all of my support network treated me. It's just been in the past year and a half or so that I just started praying for God to help me stop being so angry. Then a few months ago, I asked God back into my life. I had realized that he was the only reason that I was good and happy at all, and that every good gift comes from Him. However, I know that I still have to be careful with who I share my renewed faith with. I told my mother, and her reaction was quite painful to me. In fact, she would disagree with me about the fact that I am a Christian at all because of the fact that I'm married to Terra. So I still very much have to guard my faith. But I've seen God work in my life in the past year and a half or so since I've started to listen to him again.

I want the church to know that when you keep pointing out what you feel is wrong about other people, you're not helping anyone. You're not pushing anyone to do better or feel better, or to have the same beliefs as you — you're just ostracizing them. Even saying something kindly is not helpful. All you're doing is driving people away, making them feel angry and hurt. I feel like it would be helpful to me if people would look for common ground instead of making me feel like I'm wrong, I'm going to hell, I'm evil. All it did was shut me down. If all these people are telling me I'm wrong, am I? Why would God make me this way? It's not like I said, "I want to be gay; Let me figure out how to go do it!"

It's been difficult to find supportive friends. From my past, just one or two of my friends are supportive and loving, and they don't live close to me. This is a stark contrast from how many friends I had before I came out, so now I definitely find it hard to trust new people.

Terra Hampton

My faith journey has been complicated. As a child I was required to attend a Methodist church, and I did not enjoy going. I fought it even more after I experienced sexual abuse starting in the sixth grade. I became angry with God about why He would let this happen to me. When I was required to attend church with my family, I would not participate in singing or reading scripture from the Bible. Once I graduated high school and was attending college, I stopped attending church unless it was for an event that I was required to go to, such as a wedding or a funeral.

However, even when I was angry with God, I would pray to him. It took me many years to forgive God and myself for what had happened to me. Once I forgave myself, I was even more troubled and angry with hypocritical individuals who call themselves Christian but do not treat others as they would like to be treated themselves. I believe that we are all children of God, and that we should love one another for who we are, and not by any labels society puts on us.

It was when I met my wife that I first became familiar with the CRC. I was aware of the CRC before, but I didn't really know that much about it until I met Robin. I learned a little bit more about it, and I saw how much she had loved attending church growing up and how committed she had been to it. One of my responses is that it seems very strict! I definitely got the impression that the CRC is quite rigid.

I do not have a connection with the CRC community anymore. Robin and I have spoken about attending church, but we have not found one that makes us both feel comfortable. I do often pray to God at work. I am a respiratory therapist, and as a healthcare worker, I see a lot of human pain: trauma, cancer, COPD, other chronic illnesses, and now COVID-19. I pray to God to help these patients find peace, I pray for the patients' families, and I pray for my co-workers.

I would like the church to understand that LGBTQ people are often people of faith, and should not be rejected. I have experienced conflict within myself, and I know many others who have experienced the same, due to having our faith, families, and friends reject us for who we are. We need a safe space where we can go and worship without fear.

When I am with my wife and our pets, I experience joy. She makes me laugh, and helps me to forget my stress and worry. I do not care what we are doing, just as long as I am with her.

Corry van der Ende

I was born in Holland in 1948, the eighth child of nine. I have five brothers and three sisters. Ours was a traditional Dutch family with dad working to earn a living and my mother busy in the home caring for the children. Each lunch and dinner was preceded by prayer and finished with a bible passage and more prayer. On Sunday we went to church in the morning followed by an elaborate dinner and an afternoon of visiting family or friends. Then it was church again in the evenings. It was understood by all of us that organized sports activities were forbidden on Sundays. We were taught to say our bedtime prayers kneeling at our bedside.

By the time I was to start Grade 2 the Dutch immigrant population in the area had built a multipurpose building which would house the elementary school during the week and church on Sundays. I attended the Christian Reformed elementary school from grade 2 through 7 and then switched to the local public school from grade 8 through 12 because it was located across the street from our home so we no longer had to take the bus to school as in elementary school. Thereafter it was the local secular university for my Bachelors degree followed by a doctorate in Saskatchewan. I attended catechism classes in the evening once I turned 16 and did profession of faith in our Christian Reformed Church.

As an adolescent I was attracted to male classmates and later in my late teens and throughout my twenties there were several boyfriends. I fell in love and received marriage proposals but remained "single" waiting for "the right one to come along." The years passed as I built my career and business. I was happy and contented. I became a self-made professional woman. However as I entered my fifties I began to realize I did not want to get "old" alone. I prayed for a partner.

It was at the age of 55 on October 6th at 11:30 in the morning sitting in a small row boat out on a lake in B.C that God answered my prayer. The battery to the electric motor for my boat had been on the charger all night and was fully loaded. We had a female visitor from Holland with us at the cabin and I suggested the best way to experience the beauty of B.C.'s nature was in a small boat on the lake. Ninety minutes into our boat ride the motor stopped. It would be a long row back to the cabin As I assumed rowing position facing the bow, I asked our visitor who was sitting behind me if she could row a boat. "No" she stated. It was then when the emotion that I had always felt only for certain men hit me like a thunderbolt. I expressed my confusion and was immediately embraced. It felt like "the right one" as my mother had told me. There was no question about it; this is who I wanted to marry.

But I was afraid as to how my family would react and my clients. What about the church? Was the bible really against this? As any scientist would do, I started to research the literature and discovered numerous books written by respected Christian authors who presented an alternative interpretation of the most commonly quoted bible verses on the topic of same sex attraction. Perhaps it is the Christian Reformed church that is misinterpreting the verses as they did with slavery, racism, women in office, etc. I moved to Holland where same sex relationships were accepted and not frowned upon. In 2003 we were married by the government official and an ordained minister in the Herformde kerk in the town in which we were living. The pastor officiating was my 80-year-old uncle. He started his sermon by recognizing "the elephant in the room" stating that there were those present who approved, those who didn't and those who were unsure. The theme of his sermon was love being the strongest emotion expressed in the bible in general and by Christ.

One year later we returned to B.C. Within the first week of my return, I met with the pastor of my church to inform him of my marriage and to ask if we would be welcome as a couple in the church. He stated that he estimated 50% of the congregation would be supportive but the official position of the church was not supportive of same sex unions. It was only then that I started to probe synod rulings on the issue. I was appalled by what I read. Shortly thereafter my spouse and I attended a weekend retreat put on by Generous Space. Again, we were shocked by the pain that the Christian Reformed Church had afflicted on LGBTQ members and their families who dared to be supportive. I was ready to quit the church but encouraged to stay by one of its pastors with the assurance not all Christian Reformed churches were judgemental.

Being of the generation I am and having the family background I do, I can understand the difficulty those of my generation have understanding same sex attraction, bisexuals, trans individuals and so on. I was there myself at one stage in my life. It is human nature to be frightened of the unknown and when our peers support our fears we feel justified being judgemental and even condemning. Add to this condemnation the support of synod, we feel justified in how we feel. It brings to mind historical events of the past such as racism, slavery, the holocaust, modern day ethnic cleansing and the death penalty for gays in 13 countries today. Imagine if it's your son or daughter. I don't believe this was ever biblically justifiable.

Steph Busuttill

My name is Steph. I was raised in the CRC. I am queer, non-binary and I believe in God. These are just parts of what make me wholly and authentically who I am. This is my story.

I was a couple months old when my parents adorned me in a perfect white dress, stood up in front of our congregation, family, and friends and had me baptized. That Sunday my parents, friends, and family promised to love, support, and encourage me in my life and in my faith. The congregation, with one voice, promised to do the same. I did not know at that time what all of this meant, but as I grew up in the Christian Reformed community, I came to learn and love what those promises and what my faith meant for my life. For 18 years I was a dedicated and God-loving Christian. I grew up learning children's stories in Sunday school, earning badges in Calvinettes, earning trust and learning responsibility by babysitting kids in the church nursery, and at 17 years old, I stood up in front of the same church and congregation that baptized me and did my profession of faith.

During these same 18 years, I came to realize that I was different. By my mid-teens, I quietly realized that I was having feelings for girls. My first girl crush was a close friend of my brother. She was amazing and all I wanted to do was be around her and get to know her on a deeper level. These feelings went far beyond physical attraction. They were electric. It was the first time I finally felt what all my female friends said they felt about guys. Feelings that, up until this time, I had never related to. I had tried so hard to make myself like guys and be "normal" to no avail. My feelings for this girl were like a switch in my brain and body flipping on. These were the feelings I had hoped for years I would feel for guys, but never did. As amazing as this revelation felt, with it came a gut-wrenching dread and anxiety. I was a Christian; how could I be gay? My life wasn't supposed to go like this. I knew what the Bible said about homosexuality, it was a sin and that God punished those who engaged in homosexuality by banishing them to hell. I spent more nights than I can count praying that these feelings would go away, even though I had never felt more complete. I prayed God would make me "normal" and make me like guys. No matter what I did, no matter how hard or long I prayed, my feelings didn't change. This wasn't a phase; this was who I am, and I knew I had a choice to make. I could hide who I was to be a "good" Christian, or embrace and love this part of myself and live my life the way God had made me. To say that I was terrified was an understatement. I spent more than a year hiding these feelings from my family. I knew that my parents loved me, but I also knew that they were church-going, God-fearing people, and that me being gay did not fit into that. Within me laid a strong fear that if people in the church found out that they had a gay child, my parents would be judged — possibly ostracized — and would lose the respect they had as serving members of our church. I was terrified that something I could not change would cause my family to lose one of the few constants we had in our lives. Despite the fear, I kept

going to church while, outside the church, I was secretly living a life that felt more honest and real to who I was. Eventually I came out to my parents, and even though it was hard for them, they never, ever stopped loving me. I slowly came out to friends at school and, just like my family, no one left me or made me feel the shame I felt every time I stepped into church. After almost two years of living with shame, guilt, and fear every time I went to church, I decided that I could no longer live a double life, filled with such drastically different feelings. I knew that suppressing my truth and my identity would be harmful to my health.

I didn't know it at the time, but my relationship with the church was coming to an end. One Sunday morning, while sitting in church and listening to a sermon with my family, the pastor began preaching about homosexuality and the scriptures about homosexuality in the Bible. This was the second or third time in a short while that I had sat through a sermon about homosexuality. I felt so isolated and alone listening to those sermons. I knew on that Sunday that I couldn't take anymore. I knew in my heart that I had to choose to be me, all of me, without fear, without shame, and without guilt. So during that pastor's sermon, I got up and walked out. I left feeling sad, angry, and hurt. The same people and community that had promised to love and support me were causing the most hurt and harm. At the same time, I felt more free and powerful than I had ever felt. I trusted that I was making the right choice for me and for my family.

After leaving the church, I sought out a community like myself. In this community I found love, support, compassion, and an overwhelming sense of pride. Regardless of who I was or where I came from, my mere existence was one to be celebrated.

Over the last 20 years I have struggled to maintain a strong relationship with God. I knew God from the perspective of the Church, but I also knew God as the creator who made me in their image. I have attended churches over the years but none that felt like home, where I could be authentically open and feel like I was in a safe space. Despite the struggles in my relationship with God, I can feel God in my life, still watching over me and guiding me. I feel a pull back to God and to the church, even though it has been a source of shame and anger. Recently I came out as queer and non-binary. These personal revelations have brought me an ever deeper sense of understanding of self and I trust that that is also God working in my life. Throughout my entire faith journey there has been a passage that has been a sense of comfort, inspiration, calm, and guidance. It is Jeremiah 29-11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord. "Plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." I hold on to this passage and trust that God has a life of love, pride, and faith set out for me.

Liz and Joe Busuttil

We have two journeys with loved ones who identify as LGBTQ+ to share.

My (Liz) eldest brother Al got married in the early 70s in a CRC church — a time for a family celebration. Al and his wife had a beautiful daughter. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last. A while later my brother said he was gay. Our family did not know what to do with this news. My parents, and we as siblings, were shocked and confused. We had nowhere to go. My brother had no one to turn to: certainly not the church. We hid our family's shame. My brother's life went into a downward spiral of self-destructive behaviors and he tried to commit suicide several times. Thankfully, he recovered and spent a number of years working at AIDS hospices in Toronto. Al found his love; he married Daniel and they spent a number

of good years together before Daniel passed away. My brother never returned to a CRC, but he and Daniel were able to join an affirming church in Toronto. They belonged to a beautiful community of LGBTQ+ believers.

In the early 2000s, our beautiful daughter Stephanie told us she was gay. From the beginning, we affirmed our love for her — that would never change, but, truthfully, this new reality was not easy. Admittedly, we had prayed that God would take this "burden" away from her. We feared a repeat of my brother's experience of rejection and a downward spiral. It took us a number of years to slowly "come out of the closet" as parents. We feared judgment for our daughter. We tested the waters to find out who/where it was safe to share that our daughter was gay. We grappled with the conflicting emotions: our love for our daughter versus the voice of the church and its doctrine that taught us that homosexuality is a sin.

Thankfully, our relationship with our daughter has been honest and real. We welcome Steph's LGBTQ+ friends into our home and our lives. Steph is in a loving committed relationship with an amazing woman. We celebrate their love. Her partner is a blessing to our family!

I (Liz) work in a Christian ministry office. We are members of the CRC community, home church group, and various social media groups with fellow Christians. However, these environments have been places of wounding. We hear statements of condemnation, rejection, and homophobic sentiments. These words are hard to hear when it relates to someone you love. The Human Sexuality report submitted to Synod is a major disappointment and setback. Thankfully, in these same environments, we have heard voices of God's love, grace, inclusion, and advocacy that give us hope and encouragement.

We thank God that over the course of time we have learned so much, met and interacted with inspirational LGBTQ+ Christians and allies. We have pored through Christian resources that have revealed a new understanding and narrative of God's love and inclusion. It is our desire to see our LGBTQ+ loved ones welcomed as full participating members of our denomination.

Today, Steph identifies as queer non-binary. We are confident that our God who knit her in my womb, created her to be blonde, blue-eyed, athletic, fiercely independent, AND queer non-binary. Our God loves her deeply. Steph knows this to be true as well. We believe God loves his church and its LGBTQ+ sons and daughters. The church and the LGBTQ+ community belong together, in grace, hope and love! To worship and serve Him in unity!

We are so proud of our daughter and those who identify as LGBTQ+ and their continued courage to share their stories to be the catalysts for change in our Christian denominations.

Matthew Deroo*

**A pseudonym. Matthew wants his story shared publicly but attaching his name would negatively affect family members in the CRC.*

My story begins like so many others: a childhood being raised in a Christian family and attending the nearby Christian Reformed Church every week. My world seemed to revolve around the CRC community. Our family friends were mostly from within the CRC and my extended family – top to bottom – was Christian Reformed. Needless to say, nearly my entire life growing up was informed by the doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church. That is, until I came out as gay.

It took many years of pain and isolated struggle to come to grips with who I am. But when I finally did, it became clear to me that the CRC doctrine I had previously relied on for truth and stability no longer provided me that. To the contrary, it seemed to have abandoned me altogether – unable to love me for who I was or to recognize me as an equal brother in Christ. I came to realize that the Church and its teachings were largely responsible for why my journey had been so painful and so lonely. I was taught that I was inherently sinful – not in the same way that everyone else is sinful, but in a much worse and more shameful way. Through a culture of bigotry that ran just beneath the surface in the Christian community around me (conveniently hidden beneath smiles and pleasantries), it was clear to me that I would be cast out and condemned if anyone knew the truth. As a result, I knew even as a child that I had no choice but to suffer alone, drowning in self-hatred and shame. This was deeply traumatic and has left me with scars that still hurt to this day.

Fortunately, I grew up. I moved on from my Christian high school, attended Christian university, and ultimately attended a large secular university for postgraduate studies. Along the way I met so many amazing people – some Christian and some not. I learned a lot from these people. They each brought with them a worldview shaped by experiences that were different than my own. Honestly, it was a relief to learn that life existed outside of the CRC and that there was not just one way to follow God. The secret that the Church had tried to keep from me – that there were queer people like me everywhere authentically living their life for Jesus – was finally discovered. What's more is that I also found Christians who were straight, white, and cisgendered who loved and affirmed me for exactly who I was. Coming from the church I grew up in, this was earth-shattering. For the first time I was seen, understood, and truly loved by my Christian community. It was then that I truly left the CRC behind. I saw that God had prepared a table for me and I went running. I have never looked back since.

It was in Christian spaces outside of the CRC that I first encountered other Christians like me. If I'm being honest, it was in these spaces that I first encountered Jesus. Well, at least a version of Jesus that finally made sense: one that loved radically, challenged religious authorities, and lived in the margins. This, I thought, is the Jesus of the Bible and the one I was always meant to meet. I have walked with him ever since.

But our path has not been without its obstacles. The deep-rooted trauma I experienced as a young, gay Christian has had its toll. There are times when I am so consumed with hurt and anger towards the Church and its people that I find it difficult to continue holding the hand of my Saviour. Like a child in a fit of rage I want to throw away my Father's hand and get as far away as possible. This has led to times of spiritual drought and distance from Christ that leave me feeling broken and alone again. Even now, years after leaving behind the churches that hurt me, I can still fall into self-inflicted isolation from Christ: a remnant of the loneliness I felt as a closeted Christian. As much as this reality pains me, it is a part of my story just as it is for so many others.

However, I am fortunate in ways that not everyone like me is. I have a loving, supportive, and faithful husband who can be my spiritual rock when I falter. Contrary to the belief that same-sex relationships are inherently sinful and separate people from God, my husband challenges me to be a better Christian when I feel like giving up. He picks me up off the floor and pushes me back into Christ's outstretched arms when I am struggling to do so myself. He does this for me like I did for him when we met and he had fallen away from his faith. When one is weak, the other is strong. When one becomes complacent,

the other encourages them back into relationship with Christ. If you think it impossible for a same-sex marriage to lead people toward Christ, I can assure you that you are wrong. My husband has helped to heal so many of the wounds inflicted on me by the Church and that is one of the greatest gifts that the Lord has given to me. When we met, I had resigned myself to the reality that I would never see the deepest desires of my heart realized because I was taught that I could not follow Christ and have a family of my own. It was in this exact moment that God brought him into my life and told me He had other plans. We choose to follow Him, regardless of the rejection we face within the Christian community, because he brought us together when hope was nearly lost and has blessed us beyond measure. When fear and pain threatened to consume us entirely, he saved us. For this reason, and so many more, we strive to live by faith and to make Christ the centre of our marriage.

Leaving the CRC was not a decision I took lightly but it was a decision I made easily. Despite the hurt caused to me by the church, I did not leave because I thought the CRC was a lost cause. I left because I felt that the CRC saw *me* as a lost cause. I felt that if I could not either change or deny my true self, I was beyond salvation in their eyes. This message still rings loud and clear from the CRC despite recent attempts to right their previous wrongs. As a gay Christian, I feel it is important to let the CRC know that these attempts, although well-intentioned, have done very little to right these wrongs. Forming a committee made entirely of people with views that align with the traditional CRC beliefs, claiming to have given each side an equal voice, and then ultimately changing nothing does *not* make queer people feel any safer or any more welcome in the church. Acknowledging the pain and suffering that has been caused and listening to stories like mine, while a necessary step, can feel more like an inauthentic “checking of boxes” if nothing is then done to prevent that pain in the future. If I could ask one thing of the CRC it would be to genuinely examine the fruit that your tree is bearing. When it comes to the topic of LGBTQ+ Christians, that fruit looks a lot like hurt, condemnation, isolation from Christ, abandonment of faith, and, in some cases, death. We are suffering and we are dying because of these long-held beliefs and that cannot be changed simply by being “progressive” enough to finally acknowledge our pain. I am past the point of applauding churches for being willing to even say the word gay. More needs to be done. We deserve better.

I am writing my story not because I need to have my hurt acknowledged. I no longer seek apologies or retribution for the wrongs done to me. I write this for one reason and one reason only: for the kids in church today who are struggling like I did. My only prayer is that my words can somehow, in some way, ease their suffering and maybe prevent that suffering in the first place. Luckily for people like us, there are places where this pain does not exist. Leaving the CRC allowed me to find a church and a community where real change is happening. I have finally been invited to join a table where there is a seat set aside just for me – exactly as I am. A church where my son will never be made to feel condemned, rejected, or alone like I did. I thank the Lord every day that I no longer have to hide myself or my family. Where there was once pain, there is now joy. He has replaced friends and family who rejected me with others who embrace me. He has shown me how to love myself as the person He created me to be. He has made me strong where I was once weak. Although there are many who would think me lost or spiritually misguided, I am not. I am right where God wants me to be. I can now say with joy in my heart that I am profoundly grateful that God gifted me with being gay. It has opened my heart, made me into the person I am today, and shown me what it truly means to love as Christ intends us to love.