

33 Christian Reformed ministers take oath to a rival denomination as church split deepens

(RNS) — The ministers, mostly from Grand Rapids, are no longer willing to abide the denomination's increasingly rigid stance on sexuality.



Thirty-three ministers of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are ordained in the Reformed Church in America, Feb. 18, 2025, during a ceremony at The Community Church in Ada, Mich. The pastors are all leaving the Christian Reformed Church because of its new strictures on LGBTQ participation. (Photo courtesy of James Early)

[Yonat Shimron](#)

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(RNS) — At a church just outside Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Tuesday (Feb. 18), 33 ministers from the Christian Reformed Church in North America stood up to read aloud a declaration, officially accepting ordination in a rival denomination, the Reformed Church in America, and thereby gaining the freedom to be more accepting of LGBTQ believers.

Having stated they will abide by the creeds and confessions of the RCA, each of the ministers was then offered a loaf of bread as a symbol of fellowship and welcome.

The group ordination ceremony — the first of its kind — is one of the more public signs of an ongoing split in the Christian Reformed Church on the part of churches no longer willing to abide the CRC's increasingly rigid stance on sexuality.

The ministers are not moving alone. Since June of last year, 26 churches have informed the denomination that they intend to disaffiliate from the 1,000-church body based in Grand Rapids, according to a CRC spokesperson. Most of those churches have declared themselves open and affirming of LGBTQ+ members. Not all are moving to the Reformed Church in America. **Some ministers have sought to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA)** or the United Church of Christ.

The 33 ministers in Tuesday's ordination will all be absorbed into the North Grand Rapids Classis, or regional group, of the RCA. The North Grand Rapids Classis will hold another group ordination of CRC ministers in May.

The RCA has no denomination-wide policy on LGBTQ matters, allowing local church groups, or classes, to discern their views on human sexuality for themselves. The RCA went through its own split in 2021 when conservative churches broke away after it was unable to pass an amendment to its book of order on a human sexuality.

Newly ordained pastors in the Reformed Church in America were each given a loaf of bread as a symbol of friendship and welcome on Feb. 18, 2025, during a ceremony at The Community Church in Ada, Mich. (Photo courtesy of Amanda Benckhuysen)

"The RCA has more local freedom to really determine exactly how they want to operate and what their policy is going to be," said the Rev. Steven Koster, pastor of congregational life at Grace Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. Koster was one of the ministers ordained Tuesday.

Grace CRC is one of 10 churches in the Grand Rapids area that decided to exit the CRC after the denomination codified its opposition to LGBTQ sex last year. At a churchwide meeting, known as a synod, in June, the Christian Reformed Church instructed LGBTQ-affirming congregations to repent, retract any divergent statements and comply with the denomination's prescribed beliefs on sexuality. Church leaders who spoke or advocated for LGBTQ affirmation, including pastors, elders and deacons, were placed on a limited suspension, meaning they cannot vote in church meetings.

The RCA and the CRC are among the oldest Christian traditions in the United States. The RCA was formed in 1628 by an initial wave of Dutch Calvinists who came to the Colonies. The CRC was founded in 1857 by a later wave of Dutch immigrants.

This week, the Institute for Christian Studies, a Toronto-based graduate school that offers master's and doctoral degrees in philosophy, announced it would drop its affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

"It became a reputational issue and an identity issue because our affiliation with the CRC clouded our identity," said Ron Kuipers, president of the Institute for Christian Studies. "We were trying to recruit board members, and when they saw the affiliation, they declined to join our board, even though we have a history of speaking out on this issue and supporting LGBTQ+ persons."

Neland Avenue CRC is one of the 10 Grand Rapids-area churches that plans to leave the CRC. Its pastors attended the ordination ceremony on Tuesday to support their colleagues. They will be part of the next group to switch their ordinations in May.

"There is a reunion to it, which is beautiful, but there's also the sadness of being forced to leave," said the Rev. Joel DeMoor, the Neland Avenue pastor.

DeMoor said not all the churches leaving have voted to be open and affirming of LGBTQ+ people, but they do not want to be in a denomination that does not tolerate dissent in the issue.

"We've been told, you may not have such a range of views in your leadership, and you may not come and participate anymore," DeMoor said. "And we feel like, OK, we have no choice. They have shown us the door and we can't stay in good conscience."