

RCA struggles over gay issues and growth: Former seminary president defrocked

News in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

After a former seminary president was defrocked for presiding at his daughter's gay wedding, the top official of the Reformed Church in America urged the denomination not to be paralyzed by disagreements over homosexuality.

Delegates to the RCA's General Synod in Schenectady, New York, on June 17 defrocked Norman Kansfield, 65, the recently dismissed president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey, for presiding at the wedding of his lesbian daughter a year ago.

The evangelical-and-ecumenical denomination has had simmering debates over opposing views of homosexuality and biblical interpretation as the denomination has struggled with declining numbers. The latest report put the size at 279,000 members and 897 congregations.

Some 150 clergy in the RCA had signed a statement prior to the General Synod saying they either had performed same-sex union blessings or had been asked to do so in the past. But Kansfield's case assumed a higher public profile, according to Rob Williams, senior associate pastor at New York's historic Marble Collegiate Church, who said he has performed same-sex blessings himself.

Kansfield presided over the June 2004 wedding shortly after the ceremonies became legal in Massachusetts and while he was president at one of the only two RCA seminaries. He was dismissed by the board of trustees from that post in late January.

About two-thirds of the 240 delegates to the June 16-22 annual synod agreed that Kansfield violated church and biblical teachings. At a subsequent closed session, delegates suspended Kansfield's ministerial credentials until he agrees to follow church doctrine. The RCA also stripped his standing to teach theology in its

seminaries.

The next day the church's general secretary, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, told delegates they must not lose sight of more important issues, such as accomplishing a ten-year goal of starting 400 new churches.

"We are unexpectedly at a crossroads, where the priority of our call to common mission is being tested," said Granberg-Michaelson. "We can decide that fighting over issues related to homosexuality is our most important task, and proceed down that road. Or we can keep the main thing the main thing, while agreeing to an honest and discerning dialogue over differing perspectives."

Kansfield's daughter Ann called the controversy "a great sadness for our denomination." In taking the punitive actions, "we have made a grave mistake," she said.

Ann Kansfield was studying for the ministry at New Brunswick Seminary when she met and later married Jennifer Aull, another seminarian there. She has since been asked to lead an RCA church in Brooklyn as an unordained pastor. "We have left out not just a little bit of the church, but a whole third," she lamented. "Not every congregation is like some of the congregations where the accusers serve."

Delegates noted that Kansfield had not sought counsel from the denomination before conducting the wedding. He notified his seminary in a letter shortly before the wedding that he would officiate, declaring that he would not seek the board's permission.

In his statement before delegates June 17, Kansfield said that the RCA should think about marriage in the widest possible framework—recalling for some observers a newly published book coauthored by psychology professor David G. Myers at RCA-related Hope College arguing for Christian gay marriages.

"The church of Jesus Christ needs to be as inclusive as the arms of our Lord himself," Kansfield said to delegates.

Although the denomination is based in New York City, nearly one-third of its members live in Michigan, including Granberg-Michaelson. He said he fears that the homosexuality debate will steal time and energy as the RCA tries to meet its growth goals and pursue a more multicultural profile.

“Let’s provide a pastoral place for this conversation, and not ongoing judicial confrontations,” he said. “We have no right to close our hearts and our doors to those on society’s margins whom Jesus would invite to dinner.”