

Christian Reformed OK female ministers: After 37 years of struggle

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The Christian Reformed Church quietly made history last month as its Synod voted to remove the word *male* from its requirements for church office. After 37 years of back-and-forth struggle, delegates opened the way for women to become ministers in any of the CRC's 1,000-plus U.S. and Canadian churches.

Following that vote on June 12 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, delegates the next day also approved a step to allow women to serve as Synod delegates for the first time.

"This is the beginning of an opening I think is going to be monumental for the church," said Carol Rottman, an advocate for women's ordination since the mid-1970s.

However, the decision allows local church groups, called classes, to prohibit female ministers and elders from being delegates to Synod meetings. It was called a needed compromise to satisfy conservatives.

"There will be many of us who will continue to believe those biblical requirements involve a gender component, and it is impossible for us to surrender that idea," said Joel Nederhood, former director of the Back to God Hour. "What we have here is the kind of protection we must have."

The vote came on a day the Synod recognized 30 candidates for ministry, including three women. However, no church is required to consider a woman candidate—a hurdle for new female ministers such as Karen Norris of Ontario, who has not been hired after a yearlong search. "The next step now is for churches to own up to what was decided tonight and say, 'We're willing to consider calling a female pastor,'" said Norris.

In a signal that they were ready to make a historic change, delegates on June 9 elected as president Joel Boot of Jenison, Michigan, who favors full clergy rights for women.

“I hope and pray the occasion of our 150th anniversary will be the time we courageously step forward and say, ‘It’s time to settle it. Now we’re going to move into the future together and concentrate on the mission of the church,’” Boot said as the Synod opened. In electing Boot, delegates voted down Nederhood, known for his radio ministry.

The Synod also approved the appointment of two female professors at its flagship Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids. Seminary trustees had voted to hire Mary Hulst and Mary VandenBerg—the first time the theological school has hired two women teachers at once. The women were recommended to fill two new teaching positions. The appointments reflect the seminary’s commitment to bring more women and ethnic-minority teachers to the seminary of 300 students (51 of them women) while maintaining excellence, said its president, Cornelius Plantinga Jr.

The decision to create the posts followed the departure last September of Ruth Tucker, Calvin’s first female professor, who said she could not continue teaching because she was “held to a different standard” than male professors. Plantinga said Tucker’s charges were “painful to hear, so of course we had that in our minds.” But he insisted that the seminary wanted to diversify long before her allegations.

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