

Calvin tells black professor to find a Reformed church: Issue sparks student protest

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Professor Denise Isom loves her work at Michigan's Calvin College and her Grand Rapids church, Messiah Missionary Baptist. The problem: Isom must choose one or the other.

The Calvin board refused in October to exempt Isom from a rule that requires professors to attend a congregation with ties to the Christian Reformed Church.

The issue sparked a student "prayer protest" and discussion about how the church-membership policies may hurt diversity on campus. It also has drawn disdain from Isom's pastor, Clifton Rhodes Jr.

"I'm not sure I understand the position of the school," Rhodes said. "She's not involved in some cult. We are a community of believers and we, in my eyes, are quite compatible."

Isom, an assistant professor of education since 2003, is black and her research focuses on race and education. She told the board that she finally found what she was looking for at the predominantly black Messiah Missionary Baptist Church.

"Though there are CRC churches and communities that are striving to reflect a multicultural vision in the church's make-up and worship content, they're not 'there' yet," she wrote in a recent letter requesting the exemption.

Since the board's October 18 decision, college leaders and Isom have been exploring her options, according to provost Claudia Beversluis. Those include Isom's departure from the private college or finding a CRC church to attend.

Isom, 42, told the board she visited churches of various denominations without finding a good fit: "I need a place of worship that is already consistent with my culture and able to grapple with issues of race in ways which make it a respite, a recharging and growing place for me, as opposed to another location where I must 'work' and where I am 'other.'"

The issue has prompted much discussion on how to retain the college's Christian Reformed identity while becoming more diverse, Beversluis said. "I wish there was a [Christian Reformed] congregation in Grand Rapids that was fully multicultural or even that there was one that was largely African American." —*Religion News Service*