

RCA Discernment FAQ

Questions related to Denominational Affiliation

What is a denomination?

A religious denomination is a subgroup within a religion that operates under a common name, tradition, and identity.

What are the pros and cons of being part of a denomination?

First and foremost, it is biblical that as part of the greater body of Christ, we remain united with other churches.

The pros include oversight for the local church and assistance for negotiating conflict in the church. Denominations can provide training and equipping for the local church, missionary support, and resources for pastors. They also become a place where pastors can work together to encourage one another and address new challenges in the church.

Cons include mission drift over time. The longer an institution exists, the more it likely exists to sustain itself, and not its outward mission. Denominations can also be messy as new issues develop and people are forced to come together to solve them.

What are the pros and cons of joining an established denomination vs a new denomination?

One pro of joining an already established denomination is coming into a group that already knows what it believes, and what it is doing. This can also be a con because we would lack organization history with them, and could feel like outsiders for quite some time. Another con of joining an existing denomination is that the longer they exist, the more likely they exist for self sustainment, and not for mission.

A pro of joining a new denomination is that we get to blaze a new path with a group of churches united around mission and vision. There is new energy and life in figuring out how to work together for the kingdom of Jesus. A con of joining a new denomination is that there will be challenges as they figure out their structure and governance.

Can Fourth become independent?

No. The Book of Church Order states that any church wishing to leave the RCA must join another denomination.

Further, the consistory does not think it wise to attempt to be independent. The amount of time and work to address the numerous theological, legal, and functional questions that would arise would be overwhelming and would repeat the good work being done by others who are in the process of forming new Reformed denominations.

What criteria would we use to determine if a new denomination is a good fit?

When considering a new denominational home, we would look for theological alignment on core elements such as the gospel, discipleship, authority of scripture, the role of women in the church, and questions regarding marriage and sexuality. We would also consider geography. We want to be part of something that is local to us so that we have other churches and resources to engage with. We will also look at the mission of other denominations to consider how we align in terms of the purpose of the church.

What are some denominational options we might consider?

Two possibilities we will consider are groups that have been formed by RCA churches that have already left the denomination, or are in process of leaving the denomination. Those denominations are the ARC (Alliance of Reformed Churches) and The Kingdom Network. Both groups would fit well with the criteria listed above, and provide us a place where some pastoral connections have already been made, making our transition smoother.

If we leave the RCA, what happens to our building/property?

We get to keep them. In the RCA, a church owns its property and building up until the point where the church disbands. When a church disbands, then the Classis assumes ownership of building, property and assets. Since we are not disbanding, we remain the owners of the building and property.

What is the process for leaving the RCA?

1. Examine the current state of the RCA to determine if it is a good fit for us. This is what we've been doing since January.
2. Examine other denominations to see if there is one that would be a better fit for us. You can anticipate that we'll likely have at least one conversation with you all about this in the future.
3. If we find a denomination that fits us better, and there is consensus around leaving, the next step would be for the consistory to vote. We need 75% of the consistory to vote in favor of leaving to continue the process.
4. If that happens, we inform the congregation, and take an unofficial vote. If we have over 75%, we then begin the formal process of petitioning the classis to leave the denomination. At the same time, we would begin work with our potential new denominational home to ensure a smooth transition.
5. That process culminates with an official vote monitored by the classis. If over 75% vote to leave, we leave. If not, we stay.
6. There is a lot of behind the scenes detail work that goes into this process, but these are the main points.

What happens if we vote to leave, but don't have the 75% necessary to proceed?

We will pause the process. We have no desire to split the church in order to leave. If we have less than 75%, we will hold more forums to hear why people are desiring to stay, and then work to determine possible next steps.

Are there other RCA churches going through this process?

Yes. At least 77 churches (almost 29,000 members) have already left the denomination to join the Alliance of Reformed Churches (ARC). Others have left to join the Kingdom Network (9 churches, 13,000 members). The ARC says it is working with roughly 180 churches right now who are seeking to leave the RCA. As of April 18, the number of RCA members who have left since 2020 is 63,349, which is 34% of the 189,262 members of the RCA in 2020. So we are not alone.

Are there liberal churches leaving the RCA?

Yes. There are liberal churches and pastors leaving as well, though it seems they are fewer in number. Those churches tend to be joining either the United Church of Christ or the PCUSA.

What happens to our pastor if leave the RCA?

The pastors' process for leaving is separate from the church's process. Branson, Aaron and Eric could all leave the RCA, Fourth could stay, and we'd still be pastors here. Or Fourth could leave, and we could stay. Pastors have a separate process for leaving, and there is still work being done in the RCA to ensure that happens smoothly.

Who gets to vote at the congregational meeting?

Only confessing members in good standing. If you have been worshiping with us but are not a member of Fourth and would like your voice heard in this decision, we invite you to officially join us. Because of Classis bylaws and regulations, we cannot take absentee ballots on the day of the vote. However, we could present absentee ballots to help demonstrate the will of the church to the classis. It appears at this time that people ages 17 years and younger are not able to vote in this process. However, we would still encourage students who have been informed in this decision, to submit an absentee vote so their voice can be heard.

If we leave the RCA, would we change our name?

Likely. Since our name is tied to denominational history in Grand Rapids, it is possible the RCA could ask us to change our name. At the very least, if we leave the RCA, it provides us with a good opportunity to consider what our name should be going forward.

Should we stay and work within the denomination, or separate ourselves?

Churches have been trying to work within the structures of the denomination for years to bring about meaningful change. The reason churches are leaving, and we are exploring leaving, is that the structure of the RCA doesn't work, and real change has been difficult to bring about. The exodus from the RCA has been a long time coming, and as more and more churches leave, it will be increasingly difficult to be part of an institution that may drift further away from the authority of scripture.

If there have been issues for years, why are we talking about leaving the RCA now?

See the above answer. The denominational issues are at a boiling point, and even the denomination has recognized that things can't stay the way they are any longer. Even if we stay, the RCA will look very different in the next five years as it restructures itself around the churches that remain.

If we stay, what's the next issue in the RCA?

The next issue is the same as the current issue; the authority of scripture. Furthermore, the significant restructuring in the RCA will be an issue for years to come.

Questions related to human sexuality**Is same-sex marriage the issue for leaving the RCA?**

There are multiple reasons we are considering leaving the RCA.

The first issue is the authority of scripture. As we have stated throughout the RCA CE classes, there are a number of churches in the denomination that have argued scripture is wrong as it relates to same-sex marriage. By questioning the authority of scripture, these churches make it clear that we are not resting on the same foundation for discipleship and godly living. If we don't share the same scriptural foundation, it is hard to do ministry together.

Another issue in considering to leave is the broken polity structure of the RCA. As it stands, it is nearly impossible to make the changes necessary for a healthy and vibrant denomination anchored on scripture, and engaged in a mission to declare the gospel.

How do we balance holding to the authority of scripture and loving people well?

If we hold to the authority of Scripture, we should naturally be compelled to love people well. Jesus' teaching and life demonstrate that one can hold to the authority of scripture and love God and people well. Love does not require us to approve of everything a person does, but it does challenge us to care deeply for everyone as we see them bearing the image of God.

How do we handle situations where we differ on our understanding of human sexuality?

We approach scripture and each other with humility and patience. We need to listen, ask good questions, and be open to conversation. We need to let scripture guide the conversation and work together to seek understanding through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

With this in mind, it is wise for us to take every situation on a case by case basis. Too often we settle for blanket statements and solutions, but the world is more complex than that. We need to engage one other in a way that glorifies God. This will be an ongoing conversation as we seek to do this well.

How do you invite people into the body when we differ on key beliefs?

The answer to this also begins with approaching scripture and each other with humility and patience. We believe that good hospitality toward those who are not yet part of our church requires clarity regarding where we stand on core beliefs, including marriage and human sexuality. We also believe that we need clarity for the sake of discipleship and about how we walk well with one another through the challenges and joys of the Christian life.

Where does Fourth land on issues of human sexuality?

Fourth Reformed holds to the biblical, historic view of marriage that it is between one man and one woman. We see this affirmed in the creation account of Adam & Eve, echoed throughout scripture, and reaffirmed by Jesus.

Where do the denominations we're considering stand regarding human sexuality?

Both the ARC and the Kingdom Network use the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality as a doctrinal standard that clarifies their stance on marriage and sexuality.

Understanding Your Vote

Topic	A vote to stay in the RCA (no) means...	A vote to leave the RCA (yes) means...
Property and assets	We will keep our land, building, and assets	We will keep our land, building, and assets
Authority of Scripture	We affirm that we can be part of a denomination and church where some explicitly reject the authority of Scripture.	We want to be part of a denomination where the authority of Scripture is clearly affirmed in teaching and practice.
Leadership	We want to stay in a denomination where our pastors and leaders are part of a dysfunctional system that is draining and isolating.	We want to be part of a denomination where our pastors and leaders can work together with other church leaders for the sake of the gospel and mission.
Reformed identity	We remain Reformed in name but are part of a denomination with “functional diversity” on many issues, including the authority of Scripture.	We affirm our Reformed identity by partnering with other Reformed churches who hold to the authority of Scripture and other key Reformed teachings.

<p>Pastoral Training</p>	<p>We acknowledge that pastors ordained in our denomination may or may not hold to historic Reformed belief, such as the authority of Scripture and a biblical view of marriage.</p>	<p>We want to be part of a denomination where pastors ordained in our denomination are held to the standards of historic Reformed belief, such as the authority of Scripture and a biblical view of marriage.</p>
<p>Marriage and Sexuality</p>	<p>We affirm that we are a church and denomination where there is “functional diversity” in how we approach marriage and sexuality, including affirming same-sex marriage.</p>	<p>We affirm that we want to be part of a denomination that clearly holds to the biblical, historic view of marriage as between a man and woman.</p>