

The Rev. Norman J. Kansfield, Ph.D.

March 15, 2011

The President and Board of Trustees
Hope College
Holland, MI 49423

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This long letter is occasioned by the recent publication of your “new” position statement on homosexuality. I am compelled to write, not so much because I disagree with your conclusions about human sexuality (which I do), but because your statement seriously undercuts Hope College’s stated Mission; it short-changes the College’s teaching and research heritage, and it misrepresents the Reformed tradition.

Your position statement undercuts Hope’s stated Mission

Hope’s published mission statement commits the College “to pursue truth so as to renew the mind, enrich the disciplines and transform culture.” My sense is that the College, itself, can justly claim to carry out that mission. The Board’s position statement, however, indicates that the Board in no way “pursued truth.” The position you describe within the statement fails to present truth as it is broadly known. Neither the theological position of the church nor the current state of scientific research on homosexuality contributed to the policy that you outline. All six of the College’s stated core values are, therefore, compromised by your statement.

Your position statement short-changes Hope’s teaching and research heritage

Since the early twentieth century, Hope has been widely renowned for its science program. The quality of teaching and research in biology, chemistry, and physics has been so extraordinary that Hope graduates have been able to gain admission into the most prestigious medical schools and graduate programs in the sciences. By your failure to be informed by the witness of the sciences relative to the nature of homosexuality, you are turning your back on the long and rich tradition of the sciences within Hope. My sense is that few, if any, members of the College’s Science faculty were consulted in the formulation of your statement. This has left you attempting to sustain a highly flawed perspective on human sexuality.

Your statement misrepresents the Reformed Tradition

To my mind, it is no accident that Hope has such an outstanding reputation in the various divisions of the sciences. This is consistent with the long history of the Reformed tradition. John Calvin was committed to the noble goal of shaping a church that honored God, valued ordinary people, knew and was faithful to the witness of Scripture, and fully understood and cared for all of God’s creation. Calvin’s own body was

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often weakened by disease and continuously wracked with pain. Nevertheless, he saw his body and all the rest of the created order as means by which God continues to speak to us – to reveal God’s personal self and God’s will for humankind.

Calvin began his famous systematic theology, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with thirty pages committed to exploring how God is revealed in nature and in history (see especially 1.5.1). Nature *does* reveal God! In this, Calvin is the precursor of (and perhaps the point of origin for) Article II of the *Belgic Confession* of 1561 – one of the Reformed Church in America’s Standards of Unity. Article II affirms that:

We know God by two means: first by God’s actions in the creation, preservation, and governance of the universe, since that universe opens before our eyes like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, function as the letters of the book to enable us to understand the invisible things of God – God’s eternal power and divinity

The importance of this affirmation is reinforced when we realize that, for the *Belgic Confession*, Scripture is the other means by which we know God.

In light of this role for nature, it was not difficult, in the same era during which Roman Catholic leaders were attempting to refute Copernicus and Galileo, for leaders of the Reformed tradition to make statements appreciative of the role of research in the realm of the physical sciences – even astronomy and physics! (See, for example, Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.14-16, and *Commentary on Genesis*, commenting on the first chapter of Genesis.)

There is a long tradition of attempting to seek God’s self-revelation in the scriptures alone. But, to do so is to limit God to a single means for making God’s will clear. If we limit the sphere in which we seek God’s revelation, we, at the same time, limit the field within which God can effectively reveal God’s truth to us. When this happens, we and the church become detached from the world to which we are called. In the end, we are left with a self-absorbed fellowship that is a shrunken, ugly, and weak agent of God’s mission within the world. But there may be a still more sad outcome. When we work with Scripture without taking seriously the witness of nature – without valuing science, history, rational thought, and human experience – then we end up with a distorted view of the message of the very Scripture that we seek to follow. On the other hand, if we confess that the fabric of the world, in relationship with Scripture, reveals God, then science, history, reason and experience can be reliable tools in helping us to understand what it is God is revealing in and through Scripture. This has to be one of the reasons for Hope College’s long quest toward excellence in scientific teaching and research. It certainly was one of the reasons that Hope, over the course of fifty years (1919-1969), changed the name of its “Bible Department” to the “Department of Religion.” The College sought, by that change in name, to recognize that there was more to being responsibly Christian than the study of the Bible alone.

The brave minds and faithful hearts who prepared the Reformed Church in America’s 1978 statement regarding homosexuality (See *Minutes of General Synod*, 1978, 229-241) also recognized this truth. After the Theological Commission had carefully outlined its interpretation of the relevant biblical texts, it directed the attention of the church to the findings of science. Citing the American Psychiatric Association and the ground-breaking research of Albert Kinsey, the Commission acquainted the church with the reality that there are persons who are homosexual “not from any conscious choice but from determinative factors over which the person has no control.” (*MGS*, 1978, 237) The Commission further observed that “Scripture does not refer to the problem of homosexual acts which emerge in accord with one’s conscious, sexual orientation and not against it.” (*MGS*, 1978, 238) While the Commission continued to insist that the witness of Scripture and the creation of humankind as both male and female

make it clear that heterosexual sexuality is “normative,” the Commission urged the church to begin to think about heterosexuality and homosexuality in ways that recognized the essential sexual orientation of individuals. (*MGS*, 1978, 238) In recognizing that this was a truth about which the Scriptures did not know, and remembering that St. Paul said, “Where there is no law, there can be no transgression” (Romans 4. 15), the Commission urged the church to “learn to deal differently with persons who are homosexual by constitution and not by choice.” (*MGS*, 1978, 238)

The 1978 Report of the Theological Commission gave us the best science then available. In light of the first of the qualities for which Hope says it strives – to provide “Academic excellence and deep Christian faith joined together to strengthen each other” – it seems to me that Hope’s current task is to provide the church’s continuing conversation about homosexuality with the best science that is currently available, rather than to provide old, misdirected biblical interpretation. If Hope were to state for the church where the best of research and teaching has taken the thorough understanding of homosexuality since 1978, then it would be providing the church with the understanding needed for the church to establish forms of pastoral care and approaches toward inclusion that would take note of the difference between same sex relationships that are carried on contrary to a person’s orientation, and those that occur in concert with a person’s orientation. Until Hope takes up that task it has failed its mission, its goals, and the qualities it seeks to embody.

Both Mary (Class of 1964) and I (Class of 1962) are proud of the education we received while at Hope. We cherish the impact made upon our lives by the giants who were found among the faculty during our years on campus. The College has made enormous strides toward still greater excellence since then, and continues fortunate to number among its faculty scholars and teachers of amazing competence. Please keep faith with the values with which Hope shaped us, with the needs of contemporary culture, and with the winsome call of our Lord and Savior, and radically revise your position statement on homosexuality.

Sincerely,
Norman J. Kansfield