



Christian  
Reformed  
Church

# Agenda for Synod 2022

Because of the significant amount of material on the agenda for Synod 2022 (three years of reports and overtures), the Program Committee for synod (officers of Synod 2019) has identified matters within this agenda (indicated by shading) to be considered as “consent agenda” material and received as information by way of a single recommendation to synod. All other matters in this agenda will be deliberated by the advisory committees and the assembly of Synod 2022.

*Called*

# Agenda for Synod 2022



Christian  
Reformed  
Church

May 25 and June 10-16, 2022  
Calvin University  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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- Classis B.C. South-East overture to adopt the Human Sexuality Report
- Council of Ebenezer CRC, Jarvis, Ontario, communication
- Council of Wyoming CRC, Wyoming, Ontario, communication

## Matters Designated as Consent Agenda

The following is a list of matters in the *Agenda for Synod 2022* that have been identified by the Program Committee (officers of Synod 2019) as Consent Agenda (indicated by margin flags with shaded text).

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It is with gratitude to God that we look forward to coming together as delegates and advisers to synod for the first time in three years. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted our ecclesiastical gathering, but it did not keep us from serving and encouraging one another through technology and the written word.

The Council of Delegates of the CRCNA decided in October 2021 that due to an anticipated weighty agenda (three years of reports and overtures), the Program Committee for synod (officers of Synod 2019) should review the contents of the *Agenda for Synod 2022* to identify matters that can be categorized as “consent agenda”—to be received as information by way of a single recommendation to synod. This *Agenda for Synod 2022* is therefore marked with shading and tabs in the margins to reflect this categorization.

The Council of Delegates also decided to defer consideration of two study reports to Synod 2023—the reports of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force and the Study of Bivocationality Task Force. As a result, these reports will be included in the *Agenda for Synod 2023* rather than in this agenda. (*Note:* These reports remain accessible online at [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources).)

This *Agenda for Synod 2022* is provided as a historical snapshot of what God has continued to do in our ministries and denomination as a whole throughout the past year. The reports of the ministries, agencies, and institutions of the CRCNA, along with responses via overtures and communications, provide an important reminder of God’s work among us, especially during this unusual ministry year as so many churches, classes, boards, and committees have largely continued to meet virtually rather than in person to carry out the mission of the church.

Synod 2022 will begin with a virtual convening session on Wednesday, May 25, at 6:00 p.m. (EDT). Encounter Church CRC in Kentwood, Michigan, will serve as the convening church. Reverend Dirk M. vanEyck, pastor of Encounter Church, will serve as the president pro-tem until synod is duly constituted and its four officers have been elected. Synod will meet in person beginning on Friday, June 10, at 8:15 a.m. in the Covenant Fine Arts Center Auditorium on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A community-wide Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise will be held Sunday, June 12, 2022, at 5:00 p.m. in the Calvin University Chapel, 1835 Knollcrest Circle SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Prior to the May 25 convening session, *all* delegates and advisers to synod are encouraged to take time to view the video orientation posted on the synod site—designed as a secure site for delegates and advisers only. The orientation will assist first-time delegates and advisers in understanding the nature of synod and will provide helpful reminders for returning delegates and advisers to synod. In addition, virtual orientations will be held

for advisers to synod, as well as for advisory committee chairs and reporters and their alternates (see the proposed daily schedule in the Announcements section on the following pages for more information).

The congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are requested to remember the synodical assembly in intercessory prayers on the Sundays of June 5 and 12. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will equip the synodical delegates to serve in faith and obedience and will lead the Christian Reformed Church in unity, growth, and renewal.

May we honor and hold to the words of Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Indeed, may we be brought to complete unity in Christ as we do his work. May God bless us all with his abundant love.

Colin P. Watson, Sr.  
Executive Director of the CRCNA

## **I. Welcome**

Thank you for serving as a delegate to Synod 2022. Whether you are a returning delegate or you are coming for the first time, we sincerely hope and pray that you will find synod to be a rewarding and blessed experience. We come together as disciples of Jesus Christ, as members of the CRC, and as representatives of the classes that delegated and appointed you to serve. Synod is more than just a gathering of church leaders or a governing body. It is a reflection of the church and a time for reflection and celebration of what God is doing in and through the Christian Reformed Church in North America. God has richly blessed us, and you have been given a unique privilege to serve him and his kingdom by your engagement at synod.

The synodical services staff, under the leadership of Dee Recker, is available to assist you as you prepare for, arrive at, and serve throughout the week of synod. Please feel free to contact the Office of Synodical Services, if you need information or have any questions, by writing [synod@crcna.org](mailto:synod@crcna.org) or calling 800-272-5125.

## **II. Confidentiality of the executive sessions of synod**

The Council of Delegates calls the matter of confidentiality to the attention of Synod 2022 and urges that all necessary precautions be taken to prevent violations of confidentiality.

Synod 1954 stated that “the very principle of executive sessions, or sessions that are not open to the public, involves the practical implication that reporters may not ‘report’” (*Acts of Synod 1954*, p. 15). If reporters are not permitted to report on executive sessions of synod, it is certainly a breach of confidentiality also for delegates to the synodical assembly to report—publicly, privately, orally, or in print—on the discussions held in an executive session of synod (cf. *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 16).

## **III. Social media contact**

Synod 2019 recognized the increased influence of social media on synodical delegates and advisers and decided that delegates and advisers shall follow “guidelines to avoid inappropriate use of social media contact with nondelegates during advisory committee meetings and plenary sessions of synod, because such use might compromise the transparency and integrity of the deliberative process” (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 811-12).

## **IV. Audio and video recordings of synod**

Synod 1979 authorized the making of an official audio recording of the entire proceedings of the general sessions of synod as a way to verify the

written record of the synodical proceedings. Although the general sessions of synod are recorded, executive sessions are not recorded. Delegates to synod are informed at the opening session of synod that all the general sessions are being recorded. Synod has designated that the office of the executive director be responsible for the use and storage of the recordings.

The following regulations were adopted by Synod 1989 concerning audio and video recordings of synodical sessions by media representatives and visitors:

- A. Representatives of the media are permitted to make video recordings of synodical proceedings provided they observe the restrictions placed upon them by the synodical news office under the direction of the general secretary of synod.
- B. Visitor privileges
  - 1. Visitors are at liberty to make audio recordings of the public proceedings of synod provided they do so unobtrusively (i.e., in no way inhibiting or disturbing either the proceedings of synod, the synodical delegates, or other persons).
  - 2. Video recordings are permitted provided the following restrictions are observed:
    - a. Video cameras are permitted only at the entrances, not backstage or in the wings.
    - b. Auxiliary lighting is not permitted.
    - c. Videotaping [video recording] is to be done unobtrusively (i.e., in such a way that it in no way inhibits or disturbs either the proceedings of synod, the synodical delegates, or other persons).

*(Acts of Synod 1989, p. 445)*

## V. Proposed daily schedule

Although each new assembly is free to alter the schedule, the following general schedule is tentatively in place for Synod 2022:

### *Thursday check-in*

5:30 - 7:00 p.m.	Officers of Synod Meeting
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:00 - 8:30 p.m.	Ministry Fair / Ice Cream Social

### *Convening Friday*

8:15 - 9:45 a.m.	Opening worship and session of synod
9:45 - 10:05 a.m.	Break
10:15 - 11:45 a.m.	Advisory committee meetings
12:00 - 1:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:15 - 5:00 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings

### *Saturday*

8:15 - 8:45 a.m.	Opening worship
8:45 - 9:15 a.m.	Brief plenary session
9:30 - 11:45 a.m.	Advisory committee meetings
11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:15 - 5:00 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Picnic hosted by President Le Roy
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings or tentative plenary session

*Sunday*

Morning worship at area CRC churches

12:15 a.m. - 1:15 p.m. Lunch

1:30 - 3:00 p.m. Plenary session—celebrating ecumenicity

3:00 - 3:20 p.m. Break

3:30 - 5:00 p.m. Prayer and Conversation Groups

5:00 p.m. Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise

6:15 - 7:15 p.m. Supper

7:30 - 9:00 p.m. Plenary session—State of the Church Address; Mercy and Justice Ministries presentation

*Monday - Wednesday*

8:15 - 8:45 a.m. Opening worship

8:45 - 11:45 a.m. Plenary session

11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Lunch

1:15 - 5:00 p.m. Plenary session

5:30 - 6:30 p.m. Supper

7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Plenary session

*Thursday*

8:15 - 8:45 a.m. Opening worship

8:45 - 11:45 a.m. Plenary session

11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Lunch

1:15 - 3:00 p.m.\* Final session

\*Synod will adjourn no later than 3:00 p.m. on Thursday.



# DELEGATES TO SYNOD 2022

Classis	Delegates	Alternates
<b>Alberta North</b>		
	Minister . . . Richard J. deLange	Minister . . . Lisa R. Vander Leek
	Elder . . . . . Alice G. Joosse	Elder . . . . . Roy G. Van Boom
	Deacon . . . . Nathan M. Gold	Deacon . . . . Nathaniel C. Vos
	Other . . . . . Peter Rockhold	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Alberta South/Saskatchewan</b>		
	Minister . . . Matthew D. Vanden Heuvel	Minister . . . Paul J. Droogers
	Elder . . . . . Albert J. Cramer	Elder . . . . . Darren Milne
	Deacon . . . . Geoffrey Vanderburg	Deacon . . . . Joshua Johnson
	Other . . . . . S. George Koopmans	Other . . . . . Paul W. Verhoef
<b>Arizona</b>		
	Minister . . . Anthony R. DeKorte	Minister . . . _____
	Elder . . . . . Mark Jansen	Elder . . . . . _____
	Deacon . . . . _____	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other . . . . . José Rayas	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Atlantic Northeast</b>		
	Minister . . . Joel D. Vande Werken	Minister . . . Jonathan B. Fischer
	Elder . . . . . Steven Zielinski	Elder . . . . . David E. Dill
	Deacon . . . . Matthew Everdyke	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other . . . . . Michael R. Saville	Other . . . . . Willard H. Barham
<b>B.C. North-West</b>		
	Minister . . . Samuel Lee	Minister . . . Janina S. Krabbe
	Elder . . . . . Irene Y. Kraay	Elder . . . . . _____
	Deacon . . . . Elizabeth A. Gysbers	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other . . . . . Willem J. Delleman	Other . . . . . Andrew E. Beunk
<b>B.C. South-East</b>		
	Minister . . . Jason D. Crossen	Minister . . . Christopher W. deWinter
	Elder . . . . . Janice E. Kostelyk	Elder . . . . . Andre Van Ryk
	Deacon . . . . Jeannette I. Huisman	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other . . . . . Daryl J. DeKlerk	Other . . . . . Nathan Elgersma
<b>California South</b>		
	Minister . . . John Harold Caicedo	Minister . . . _____
	Elder . . . . . Glenda J. VanderKam	Elder . . . . . Ralph E. Mack
	Deacon . . . . Eudell Vis	Deacon . . . . Dae Hoon Kim
	Other . . . . . Donald C. Porter	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Central California</b>		
	Minister . . . Paul H. Vander Klay	Minister . . . Bruce A. Persenaire
	Elder . . . . . Zachary J. Dewey	Elder . . . . . Daniel J. Harrison
	Deacon . . . . Luann D. Sankey	Deacon . . . . Dan Koolhaas
	Other . . . . . David E. Vander Meulen	Other . . . . . Mavis A. Moon

<b>Classis</b>	<b>Delegates</b>	<b>Alternates</b>
<b>Central Plains</b>		
Minister . . .	Richard J. Admiraal	Minister. . . . . Michael L. Bentley
Elder . . . . .	Steven J. Holwerda	Elder . . . . . _____
Deacon . . . . .	Migael L. Randall	Deacon . . . . . _____
Other . . . . .	Aaron J. Gunsaulus	Other . . . . . Brad Bierma
<b>Chicago South</b>		
Minister . . .	Michael J. Kooy	Minister. . . . . _____
Elder . . . . .	Sally J. Larsen	Elder . . . . . _____
Deacon . . . . .	Jim C. Bolhuis	Deacon . . . . . _____
Other . . . . .	Derek Buikema	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Columbia</b>		
Minister . . .	William S. Wilton	Minister. . . . . Frank Meneses
Elder . . . . .	Ralph N. Akin	Elder . . . . . _____
Deacon . . . . .	Doug Vande Griend	Deacon . . . . . _____
Other . . . . .	Robert J. Toornstra	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Eastern Canada</b>		
Minister . . .	Daniel Hoogland	Minister. . . . . Jacob M. Van de Hoef
Elder . . . . .	Ron Hosmar	Elder . . . . . _____
Deacon . . . . .	Scott D. Bandy	Deacon . . . . . Anjo Norg
Other . . . . .	Craig L. Hoekema	Other . . . . . Daniel C. Zylstra
<b>Georgetown</b>		
Minister . . .	Curtis A. Walters	Minister. . . . . Matthew A. Palsrok
Elder . . . . .	Douglas D. Holtrop	Elder . . . . . Melvin Vander Bie
Deacon . . . . .	Linda J. Witte	Deacon . . . . . Kathy L. Jelsema
Other . . . . .	Cory J. Nederveld	Other . . . . . Jeffery W. Scripps
<b>Grand Rapids East</b>		
Minister. . . . .	Rebecca L. Jordan Heys	Minister. . . . . Michael F. Abma
Elder . . . . .	Larry L. Louters	Elder . . . . . Arthur E. Jongsma
Deacon . . . . .	Donna R. Anema	Deacon . . . . . Pamela Kay Bratt
Other . . . . .	Patricia L. Borgdorff	Other . . . . . Joel C. DeMoor
<b>Grand Rapids North</b>		
Minister . . .	Moon B. Kim	Minister. . . . . Richard L. Pinckney
Elder . . . . .	Ronald L. Karelse	Elder . . . . . Bryan R. Dam
Deacon . . . . .	Shannon L. Rop	Deacon . . . . . Jane A. Tol
Other . . . . .	Benjamin L. Gandy	Other . . . . . Joshua E. Blunt
<b>Grand Rapids South</b>		
Minister . . .	Michael W. Hoogeboom	Minister. . . . . David A. Struyk
Elder . . . . .	Don Dekker	Elder . . . . . Daniel J. Netz
Deacon . . . . .	Scott M. Hekstra	Deacon . . . . . Richard S. Gerndt
Other . . . . .	Joshua S. Van Drunen	Other . . . . . Robert L. Boersma
<b>Grandville</b>		
Minister . . .	Robert Huisman	Minister. . . . . Thomas Vander Ploeg
Elder . . . . .	Shaun M. O'Brien	Elder . . . . . Mark A. Oosterheert
Deacon . . . . .	Bradley S. Diekema	Deacon . . . . . _____
Other . . . . .	Cedric W. Parsels	Other . . . . . Roger B. Groenboom
<b>Greater Los Angeles</b>		
Minister . . .	Joel D. Van Soelen	Minister. . . . . Matthew B. Ford
Elder . . . . .	Robert Golding	Elder . . . . . C. Brian Hibma
Deacon . . . . .	Dick Van Eck, Jr.	Deacon . . . . . Angela Shepas
Other . . . . .	Mirtha M. Villafane	Other . . . . . Matthew M. Le

<b>Classis</b>	<b>Delegates</b>	<b>Alternates</b>
<b>Hackensack</b>	Minister . . . Edward Wayne Coleman Elder . . . . . Karen J. Walker Deacon . . . . . Joe Sanderlin Other . . . . . Frederick L. Harvey II	Minister. . . . . Petr Kornilov Elder . . . . . Amy Vander Vliet Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Norman Viss
<b>Hamilton</b>	Minister . . . Kenneth F. Benjamins Elder . . . . . Mark Vandervliet Deacon . . . . . Marcia Hosmar Other . . . . . Anthony Elenbaas	Minister. . . . . William T. Koopmans Elder . . . . . Mike Bekendam Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Everett J. Vander Horst
<b>Hanmi</b>	Minister . . . Sang Myeun Moon Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . Sung Y. Kim Other . . . . . Teukkoon Timothy Jung	Minister. . . . . _____ Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Heartland</b>	Minister . . . Jesse L. Walhof Elder . . . . . Michael V. Krommendyk Deacon . . . . . Darin Dykstra Other . . . . . John C. Klompfen	Minister. . . . . Phillip T. Westra Elder . . . . . Bruce Lefever Deacon . . . . . Dave Weilenga Other . . . . . Drew A. Heynen
<b>Holland</b>	Minister . . . Darwin K. Glassford Elder . . . . . James C. Schippers Deacon . . . . . Dwayne L. Nienhuis Other . . . . . Benjamin J. Petroelje	Minister. . . . . Rodney Brandsen Elder . . . . . Donald A. Bemis Deacon . . . . . Christine S. Larson Other . . . . . Brady J. Mulder
<b>Hudson</b>	Minister. . . . . KwangBae Lee Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Timothy J. McHugh	Minister. . . . . _____ Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Huron</b>	Minister . . . Andrew J. Vis Elder . . . . . Steve E. Vogel Deacon . . . . . James Vanderleeuw Other . . . . . John A. Vanderstoep	Minister. . . . . Henry W. Meinen Elder . . . . . Marguerite E. Ridder Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Gary van Leeuwen
<b>Iakota</b>	Minister . . . John R. Lee Elder . . . . . Tim J. Klein Deacon . . . . . Trevor M. Mouw Other . . . . . Kurt A. Monroe	Minister. . . . . Clifford D. Hoekstra Elder . . . . . Brian D. Faber Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Matthew A. Haan
<b>Illiana</b>	Minister . . . James C. Hollendonner Elder . . . . . Arlyn J. Van Ek Deacon . . . . . Gary L. Siegersma Other . . . . . Blake I. Campbell	Minister. . . . . Richard T. Vanderwal Elder . . . . . Joshua Dykstra Deacon . . . . . Kenneth M. Brink Other . . . . . Joshua Christoffels
<b>Kalamazoo</b>	Minister . . . Simon A. Tuin Elder . . . . . Seth Koerner Deacon . . . . . Nancy G. Dyksterhouse Other . . . . . Todd L. Eckstein	Minister. . . . . Joel Klingenberg Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Derek M. Zeyl

Classis	Delegates	Alternates
<b>Ko-Am</b>	Minister . . . Sungjin Kim Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . Soon O. Yi Other . . . . . Daniel D. Yi	Minister. . . . . Sung Chul Lee Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Lake Erie</b>	Minister . . . John JungUn Park Elder . . . . . Mary A. Rupke Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Steven M. Jensen	Minister. . . . . Harry R. Winters, Jr. Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Lake Superior</b>	Minister . . . Benjamin C. Verkerk Elder . . . . . Rob Braun Deacon . . . . . Marilyn A. Stulen Other . . . . . Daniel De Graff	Minister. . . . . Aaron J. Greydanus Elder . . . . . Gaye Rieger Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Nicholas J. Van Beek
<b>Minnkota</b>	Minister . . . Brian M. Kornelis Elder . . . . . Erick C. Van Dyken Deacon . . . . . Marshall R. Pater Other . . . . . Chad E. Werkhoven	Minister. . . . . Scott M. Muilenburg Elder . . . . . Brian F. Busker Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Roger W. Sparks
<b>Muskegon</b>	Minister . . . Jeffrey Hough Elder . . . . . Robert R. Broekema Deacon . . . . . Heidi Sytsema Other . . . . . Kenneth T. Krause	Minister. . . . . Drew K. Sweetman Elder . . . . . Ronald Bielma Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . John S. Huyser
<b>Niagara</b>	Minister. . . . . Steven J. deBoer Elder . . . . . Leo Van Tuyl Deacon . . . . . Ingrid A. Beck Other . . . . . Michael J. Van Dyk	Minister. . . . . Robert J. Loerts Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Erick J. Schuringa
<b>North Cascades</b>	Minister . . . Ben E. deRegt Elder . . . . . Michael T. Jager Deacon . . . . . Drake Likkel Other . . . . . Mark L. Wagenaar	Minister. . . . . Sean A. Taylor Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Northcentral Iowa</b>	Minister . . . Tyler R. Helfers Elder . . . . . Paul Kleinwolterink Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Seongjun Kim	Minister. . . . . Randall C. Raak Elder . . . . . Thomas Kuyper Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Philip J. Boender
<b>Northern Illinois</b>	Minister . . . Gregg M. DeMey Elder . . . . . Bonnie L. Zigterman Deacon . . . . . Jennifer Stolzenbach Other . . . . . Eric D. Schlukebir	Minister. . . . . Kyle E. Haack Elder . . . . . _____ Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____
<b>Northern Michigan</b>	Minister . . . John P. Kostelyk Elder . . . . . Mark A. Ebels Deacon . . . . . Robert M. Ebels Other . . . . . Todd Kuperus	Minister. . . . . James Zwier Elder . . . . . Timothy J. Kimbel Deacon . . . . . _____ Other . . . . . _____

Classis	Delegates	Alternates
<b>Ontario Southwest</b>		
	Minister . . . Peter A. Hoytema	Minister. . . Michael G. Borgert
	Elder . . . . . Jenny Douma	Elder . . . . . Scott Sipkens
	Deacon . . . . Kyle W. Nutma	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Michael R. Wagenman	Other . . . . . Lynette A. van de Hoef Meyers
<b>Pacific Northwest</b>		
	Minister . . . Matthew J. Borst	Minister. . . Kyle D. Sanford
	Elder . . . . . Tamara Kuklenski	Elder . . . . . Tim Van Hofwegen
	Deacon . . . . Eric Lamfers	Deacon . . . . Brian Vander Vlies
	Other. . . . . Douglas E. Fakkema	Other . . . . . Philip J. Zylstra
<b>Quinte</b>		
	Minister . . . Daniel G. Brown	Minister. . . Michael D. Nanninga
	Elder . . . . . Leo B. Jonker	Elder . . . . . _____
	Deacon . . . . Helena Rhebergen	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Ronald P. Rupke	Other . . . . . John T. Wildeboer
<b>Red Mesa</b>		
	Minister . . . David J. Dykstra	Minister. . . John W. Dykhuis
	Elder . . . . . Evelyn H. Bennally	Elder . . . . . N. Theresa Rottschaefer
	Deacon . . . . Mitzie Begay	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Debra L. Chee	Other . . . . . Joseph M. Kamphuis
<b>Rocky Mountain</b>		
	Minister . . . Dominic J. Palacios	Minister. . . Katrina J. Olson
	Elder . . . . . Barbara J. Bulthuis	Elder . . . . . Julie A. Walden
	Deacon . . . . Donn Hansum	Deacon . . . . Delinda Baker
	Other. . . . . Andrew R. Sytsma	Other . . . . . Daniel I. Bud
<b>Southeast U.S.</b>		
	Minister. . . . Christopher N. Cassis	Minister. . . Kristin J. Vos
	Elder . . . . . James Dykstra	Elder . . . . . _____
	Deacon . . . . Jeff Huntley	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Scott A. Vander Ploeg	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Thornapple Valley</b>		
	Minister . . . David J. Bosscher	Minister. . . Steven M. Hull
	Elder . . . . . Mark L. Houskamp	Elder . . . . . Roze Meyer Bruins
	Deacon . . . . Ken Stienstra	Deacon . . . . Will Dotinga
	Other. . . . . Robert C. Van Zanen	Other . . . . . _____
<b>Toronto</b>		
	Minister . . . Samuel Cooper	Minister. . . Richard A. Bodini
	Elder . . . . . Jake Veenstra	Elder . . . . . Dorothy Thomson
	Deacon . . . . David Nightingale	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Janet deWinter	Other . . . . . Harry Bierman
<b>Wisconsin</b>		
	Minister . . . Jason S. Ruis	Minister. . . Rodolfo Galindo
	Elder . . . . . Ben Verhulst	Elder . . . . . Wally Purdun
	Deacon . . . . Anthony Wick	Deacon . . . . Geoff Bazuin
	Other. . . . . Mark J. Pluimer	Other . . . . . Josh Van Engen
<b>Yellowstone</b>		
	Minister . . . Steve Bussis	Minister. . . _____
	Elder . . . . . Reuben C. Sinnema	Elder . . . . . _____
	Deacon . . . . Jake H. Van Dam	Deacon . . . . _____
	Other. . . . . Timothy A. Kuperus	Other . . . . . _____

Classis	Delegates	Alternates
<b>Zeeland</b>	Minister . . . Stephen F. Terpstra Elder . . . . . Robert W. Brower Deacon . . . . Shane A. Langeland Other . . . . . Aaron J. Vriesman	Minister. . . . Lloyd H. Hemstreet Elder . . . . . Michael J. Miedema Deacon . . . . _____ Other . . . . . Gary J. DeKoekkoek

# COUNCIL OF DELEGATES



# COUNCIL OF DELEGATES REPORT

The Council of Delegates (COD) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) began its service of interim governance on behalf of the CRC's annual synods after being appointed by Synod 2017. COD delegates represent the CRC's forty-nine classes. There are also currently five at-large members, and another at-large member may be added in 2022. The COD met this past year via video conference due to the COVID-19 pandemic to address the mission and ministry of the CRCNA on behalf of synod. The ministry matters addressed by the COD include agency matters with regard to ReFrame Ministries (formerly Back to God Ministries International [BTGMI]) and Resonate Global Mission, along with matters concerning the Congregational Ministries of the CRCNA—each of the entities being governed by the COD.

The COD presents the following report as a summary of its work in the interim since its special meeting June 11-12 and June 15-16 in lieu of Synod 2021, which did not meet because of the pandemic.

## I. Introduction

### A. *Governing on behalf of synod*

The COD functions with a constituent-representative model of policy governance. Policy governance suggests a board's role is to see that the organization achieves what it should, avoiding the unacceptable (via the concept of limitations), all on behalf of its constituents. (Read more about the constituent-representative model in the COD Governance Handbook at [crcna.org](http://crcna.org); search "COD Governance Handbook.")

This constituent-representative model of policy governance provides a "link between the organization's board and its constituents. The constituents are represented on the governing board and participate in policy development and planning."<sup>1</sup> For these purposes, the term *constituents* refers to CRCNA members.

Similar to all forms of policy governance, there is clear differentiation between board activity and staff/administrative activity. Those serving on the COD are not invited into management functions. Staff/administrative members do not chart the direction and set the policies for the denomination, but they serve as implementers, working within the contours of COD-set policies toward the goals and limitations identified by the COD in conjunction with the CRC constituency. Moreover, as the COD sets direction and evaluates the effectiveness of outcomes, staff and administration are always attentive to context, making recommendations and providing analysis to the COD in ways that consider national contexts, diversity, and the like.

<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw, P., R. Hayday, R. Armstrong; "Non-profit Governance Models: Problems and Prospects," paper originally presented at ARNOVA Conference, Seattle, Washington, 1998.

This model flows from CRCNA church polity as described in Church Order Article 27-a: “Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated.”

In other words, ecclesiastical authority begins with congregations and is delegated to classis and then to synod. Church Order Article 27-a is balanced by Article 27-b: “The classis has the same authority over the council as the synod has over the classis”—emphasizing the authority of the broader assemblies, which are made up of officebearers who represent Christ’s authority in those assemblies as they make decisions for the broader church. The role of officebearers in each of these assemblies is significant in Church Order Article 1-a: “The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that officebearers are ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up’ (Eph. 4:12), and to do so ‘in a fitting and orderly way’ (1 Cor. 14:40), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities.”

As an ecclesiastical governance entity serving in the interim of synod, the COD provides governance by means of the authority delegated to it by synod and with its synodically elected membership representing classes or serving in at-large capacities.

(COD Governance Handbook, section 1.1: Governance)

The mandate and functions of the Council of Delegates as adopted by synod are outlined in the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook (at [crcna.org](http://crcna.org), search “Council of Delegates”).

COD members also serve as the directors of the CRCNA Canada Corporation, the CRCNA U.S. Corporation, the ReFrame Canada Corporation, and the ReFrame U.S. Corporation. These legal entities (Canada and U.S.) interact via joint ministry agreements to govern ministries that are shared across the border between the ReFrame corporations and the CRCNA corporations. In fall 2019 the directors of the CRCNA and BTGMI Canada Corporations alerted the Council of Delegates to organizational implications of charitable laws in Canada, which necessitated immediate interim action to comply with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). The COD continues to work on a proposed new structure that would bring the denomination into better alignment with CRA regulations (see section II, A, 11 of this report for an update on restructuring).

The Council of Delegates met three times via video conference since May 2021—in June 2021 to address matters on behalf of Synod 2021, which was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see section II, A, 1 for action requested re the Minutes of the Special Meeting of the COD 2021); in October 2021; and in February 2022. The COD is scheduled to meet in person in May 2022—looking forward to its first in-person meeting since February 2020.

The COD’s agenda is processed both by the legal corporations mentioned above and by the full ecclesiastical body of the COD. The agenda items are first reviewed by one of five committees: Congregational Ministries; Global Missions Ministries; Mercy and Justice Ministries; Ministry Plan, Communication, and Synodical Services; or Support Services. These committees hear and study reports regarding the mission, vision, and values of our various ministries; the ways our ministries are integrated into a ministry (strategic) plan and are evaluated; the financial status, administrative leadership, and

organizational health in each ministry-priority area; and the ways in which the COD responds both to synod and constituents. Committees present their recommendations for review and feedback first to the four corporations (CRCNA and ReFrame Canada Corporations, and CRCNA and ReFrame U.S. Corporations) and then to the full COD for information and any required action. In addition, the COD is responsible for overseeing the work of the executive director of the CRCNA.

While the national corporations deal with several matters that are specific to their country's context, nearly all of the matters addressed by the COD affect the full CRCNA as one denomination in two countries. In compliance with Canadian regulations, the Canadian corporations review and approve all actions relative to providing effective national direction and control for collective ministry activities and, as necessary, address the nonecclesiastical matters that relate directly to uniquely Canadian issues and matters of law. The same is done by the U.S. corporations. The COD, as synod's agent, is grateful for the opportunity to serve the entire church.

*B. Tasks carried out on behalf of synod*

A significant part of the COD's work over the past year reflects the *continued* response to synodical instructions (Synods 2020 and 2021 were unable to meet due to the COVID-19 pandemic) directed to either the COD or the executive director in conjunction with the COD. An outline of the various instructions, organized by ministry-priority area, is provided in the following.

1. Faith formation

*Note:* The COD received no additional assignments in this ministry-priority area.

2. Global mission

*Note:* The COD received no additional assignments in this ministry-priority area.

3. Gospel proclamation and worship

*Note:* The COD received no additional assignments in this ministry-priority area.

4. Mercy and justice

**Addressing Abuse of Power** (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 794-99)—**Monitoring by the COD:** "That synod mandate the Council of Delegates to ensure implementation by . . . monitoring progress at each meeting of the COD . . . making necessary adjustments in specific plans . . . and reporting to synod. . . ." (See section II, A, 17, c.)

**Appeal Process** (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633): "That the COD, on behalf of synod, affirm the work that has already been done and instruct the executive director to make recommendations to the COD for improving the appeal process in light of Church Order. . . ." (See section II, A, 17, c; coming by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.)

**Diversity Report** (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 829): “The executive director will continue to request an annual diversity report from each agency and ministry and will include a summary of these reports in the report to the [COD] each February.” (See section II, A, 5.)

**Implementation of Code of Conduct** (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633): “That the COD, on behalf of synod, adopt the proposed Code of Conduct report . . . and instruct the COD to devise a plan for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches per the instruction of Synod 2019.” (See section II, A, 17, b, 1.)

**Safe Church Reporting** (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 476): “That synod instruct the executive director to have Safe Church Ministry report annually through the Council of Delegates to synod regarding the number and names of classes with and without Safe Church teams, and the number of congregations with and without Safe Church teams and policies.” (See the report of Safe Church Ministry, section III.)

5. Servant leadership

*Note:* The COD received no additional assignments in this ministry-priority area.

6. Other areas

**Evaluation and Prioritization** (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 455): “That synod instruct the Council of Delegates and the executive director to continue the important work of evaluation and prioritization by working together to implement a robust evaluation strategy whereby in a five-year cycle all agencies and ministries will be continually evaluated through the framework of the five ministry priorities.” (See Section II, B, 5.)

**Review of Evaluation:** (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 674): “That the COD, on behalf of synod, instruct the executive director to review the four-year program evaluation process; clarify the purpose, outcomes, goals, and metrics to be used; and bring any recommended revisions to the COD for consideration to the current policy.” (See section II, B, 5.)

**Heritage Hall and Historical Committee Mandate** (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 761): “That synod instruct the COD to work with the Historical Committee to review their mandate and clarify the continued relationship between the committee and all of the stakeholders.” (See section II, A, 14.)

**Communication re Neland Avenue CRC** (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, pp. 629-30): “That the COD send a ‘formal communication’ to Synod 2022, reaffirming the COD letter of admonition and grave concern to Neland Avenue CRC and urging Synod 2022 to be mindful of the three marks of the true and vital church.” (See section II, A, 10.)

**LGBTQ Voices** (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 676): “That the COD, on behalf of synod . . . instruct the executive director to develop and implement a mechanism or forum that would allow LGBTQ voices to be heard by the delegates to Synod 2022 with regard

to the human sexuality report and present the proposal to the COD in February 2022 for approval.” (See section II, A, 9.)

C. *COD membership*

The members of the Council of Delegates from the classes include Bev Bandstra (B.C. South-East), Jesus Bayona (Southeast U.S.), Rachel Bouwkamp (Grandville), Wayne Brower (Holland), Thomas Byma (Greater Los Angeles), J. Harold Caicedo (California South), Paula Coldagelli (Wisconsin), Lora A. Copley (Red Mesa), Heather Cowie (Alberta South/Saskatchewan), Wendell Davelaar (Northcentral Iowa), Wendy de Jong (Niagara), Bruce DeKam (Northern Michigan), Andy de Ruyter (B.C. North-West), Peter J. DeVries (Yellowstone), Kyle J. Dieleman (Chicago South), Jeanne Engelhard (Grand Rapids East), Sherry Fakkema (Pacific Northwest), Jill Feikema (Illiana), Laurie Harkema (Lake Erie), Roy G. Heerema (Hudson), Sheila E. Holmes (Hackensack), Michael Irshad (Toronto), Casey Jen (Thornapple Valley), Jeanne Kallemeyn (Georgetown), Jonathan J. Kim (Ko-Am), Michael D. Koetje (Kalamazoo), Michelle J. Kool (Alberta North), William T. Koopmans (Hamilton), Jose Antonio (Tony) Lara (Arizona), John R. Lee (Iakota), Daudi Mutisya Mbuta (Grand Rapids North), Daniel A. Meinema (Eastern Canada), Brian L. Ochsner (Central Plains), Roger W. Sparks (Minnkota), Arnie J. Stolte (Northern Illinois), David A. Struyk (Grand Rapids South), Samuel D. Sutter (Atlantic Northeast), Drew Sweetman (Muskegon), Michael L. Ten Haken (Lake Superior), Rob J. Toornstra (Columbia), Kelly L. Vander Woude (Rocky Mountain), Arie Vander Zouwen (North Cascades), Mark Vande Zande (Heartland), Mark VanDyke (Central California), Tyler J. Wagenmaker (Zeeland), Ralph S. Wigboldus (Huron), and Frederick Wind (Quinte).

The following person is serving as *interim* delegate until Synod 2022 can act on the appointment (included below): Nathaniel E. Van Denend (Ontario Southwest). In addition, the Classis Hanmi delegate position is currently vacant—the COD anticipates presenting nominations to fill these two vacancies by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

Five at-large members also serve the COD. They include Henry Eygenraam, Greta Luimes, and Melissa Van Dyk in Canada, and Paul R. DeVries and Elsa Fennema in the U.S.

The denomination’s executive director (Colin P. Watson, Sr.) serves *ex officio* as a corporate trustee of the CRCNA and ReFrame Ministries U.S. Corporations and as a member of the Council of Delegates (without vote). The executive director is invited as a guest to the meetings of the CRCNA and ReFrame Corporations based in Canada.

In addition, guest representatives from three denominational boards attend the meetings of the COD and serve on a COD committee: Victor Chen and Henry Lane from the Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees, Richard Mast from the Calvin University Board of Trustees, and Chuck Adams and Andrew Geisterfer from the World Renew Board of Delegates. These nonvoting COD guests are given privilege of the floor during meetings.

The following serve as officers of the COD and of respective corporations for the 2021-2022 term:

1. COD officers: Andy de Ruyter, chair; Michael L. Ten Haken, vice chair; John R. Lee, secretary; Greta Luimes, treasurer.

2. Corporation officers

- a. CRCNA Canada Corporation: Andy de Ruyter, president; William T. Koopmans, vice president; Bev Bandstra, secretary; Greta Luimes, treasurer.
- b. CRCNA U.S. Corporation: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Sheila E. Holmes, vice president; John R. Lee, secretary; Daudi Mutisya Mbuta, treasurer.
- c. ReFrame Ministries Canada Corporation: Andy de Ruyter, president; William T. Koopmans, vice president; Bev Bandstra, secretary; Greta Luimes, treasurer.
- d. ReFrame Ministries U.S. Corporation: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Sheila E. Holmes, vice president; John R. Lee, secretary; Daudi Mutisya Mbuta, treasurer.

3. Executive Committee: Heather Cowie; Andy de Ruyter, chair; Laurie Harkema; John R. Lee; Greta Luimes; David A. Struyk; Michael L. Ten Haken; and Melissa Van Dyk. Colin P. Watson, Sr., serves ex officio.

D. COD nominations

Prior to the fall meeting of the Council of Delegates, the COD received the resignation of Mark Verbruggen (Ontario Southwest—formerly Chatham) and Roger Ryu (Hanmi). Classis Ontario Southwest submitted the name of Nathaniel E. Van Denend, who was appointed by the COD as an interim delegate in October 2021 and is being recommended to synod for appointment. His first term will conclude June 30, 2023, and he will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.

*Nathaniel (Nate) Van Denend* is the pastor of First CRC in Chatham, Ontario. He previously served as a seminary student adviser to *The Banner* Advisory Committee (2008-10), as a delegate to Synod 2014, and as the Classis Toronto delegate to the 2016 Canadian National Gathering. He has served on the classical candidacy committee as well as the Classis Ontario Southwest ad hoc committee to study ecclesiastical structure. He is also presently serving on the Indwell Chatham Project Steering Committee.

The COD Nominating Services Committee works from an adopted rotation of concluding terms for the current COD membership—ideally eight or nine members conclude their term of service with the board each year to provide continuity. Some members are serving out their terms from previous board service (transitioning from the CRCNA Board of Trustees, the ReFrame Ministries board, or the Resonate Global Mission board) with a shortened term rather than two full terms (six years) on the COD.

Concluding service to the Council of Delegates in June 2022 are the following members:

<u>Classis</u>	<u>Member</u>
Alberta North	Michelle J. Kool
Atlantic Northeast	Samuel D. Sutter
Central Plains	Brian L. Ochsner
Grand Rapids South	David A. Struyk

Lake Erie  
Northcentral Iowa  
Yellowstone  
U.S. at-large

Laurie Harkema  
Wendell Davelaar  
Peter J. DeVries  
Paul R. De Vries (served an extended term  
in the at-large position by way of exception)

The COD recommends that synod express its gratitude to these members for their faithful service and significant contributions to the denomination during their tenure on the Council of Delegates.

Heather Cowie (Alberta South/Saskatchewan) is completing a first term on the COD. Heather has decided not to serve a second term on the COD. A nominee for the Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan position will be presented by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

The COD recommends the following nominees from the classes indicated for appointment to a first term of three years on the Council of Delegates:

#### *Classis Alberta North*

*Amy Nydam*, a member of Inglewood CRC in Edmonton, Alberta, is a psychologist and owner of YEG Family counseling. She previously served as chair of Inglewood's intergenerational ministries action committee, as vice chair of the transition team, and on the pastoral search committee. She also trained as a facilitator of the *Challenging Conversations Toolkit*. She continues to serve as a member of the Inglewood CRC transition team.

#### *Classis Atlantic Northwest*

*Anthony T. Selvaggio*, previously trained in law, is the pastor of Rochester CRC in Penfield, New York. He previously served on the worship committee in his previous church, on the Genesee County village and museum boards, and on the Brockport Foundation board.

#### *Classis Central Plains*

*Thomas R. Wolthuis*, a member of Peace CRC in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is the director of Geneva Campus Ministry. He has served as the chair of the Dordt University theology department and has served on the Christian Reformed Campus Ministers Association. He served as a pastor from 1987 to 1991 and also from 1993 to 2000, during which time he gained local church council experience.

#### *Classis Grand Rapids South*

*Jessica Maddox* is the pastor of education and discipleship at Community CRC in Wyoming, Michigan. Her experience includes serving her congregation on the pastor search committee, the worship committee, and the faith formation and vision committees. She also served as the PTO president and as a board adviser at Thornapple Elementary School, and as a member of the Heartside Ministry board. She currently serves on the local neighborhood association board.

#### *Classis Lake Erie*

*Matthew Ackerman* is a campus chapel pastor and the director of the Center for Faith and Scholarship in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His local church membership is with Ann Arbor CRC. He has served as a delegate to Synods 2016 and 2018, with service as an advisory committee reporter in 2018. He also served on the Classis Lake Erie specialized ministry committee and the

University of Michigan Association of Religious Counselors Executive (three years as president). Currently he is serving as cochair of the Classis Lake Erie leadership development committee and as chair of the Christian Reformed Campus Ministry Association.

*Classis Northcentral Iowa*

*Herbert W. Schreur*, a member of Wright Christian Reformed Church in Kanawha, Iowa, is employed as a truck driver. He served on a major political party county central committee from 1988 through 2010, on a county platform committee for more than thirty years, and on a district platform committee various times. He served two terms (six years) on the board of Kanawha Christian School. He served as a deacon at Britt (Iowa) CRC and has served as an elder at Wright CRC for 15 of the past 20 years.

*Classis Yellowstone*

*Steve Bussis* is the pastor of Bethel CRC in Manhattan, Montana. He served as chair of council at Coopersville (Mich.) CRC, as a board member of Coopersville Cares, and as a delegate to synod twice. Currently he serves as chair of the Classis Yellowstone interim committee and has served as a member of council and as chair of the consistory.

The COD recommends the following members for reappointment to a second term of three years:

<u>Classis</u>	<u>Member</u>
Hamilton	William T. Koopmans
Heartland	Mark Vande Zande
Kalamazoo	Michael D. Koetje
North Cascades	Arie A. Vander Zouwen
Rocky Mountain	Kelly Vander Woude (filling out the term of previous delegate)
Southeast U.S.	Jesus Bayona
Canada at-large	Greta Luimes

The COD, recognizing a need to increase the number of Canada at-large positions to help provide more options in the appointment of leadership positions within the COD (e.g., chair/vice chair of committees and denominational board guests), approved the addition of two Canada at-large members on the COD. Having additional at-large members opens the way for increased diversity and addressing needs for expertise in areas such as finance and law. The COD Governance Handbook states that the COD may include up to ten at-large members. Nominations for these additional at-large members will be presented by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

*E. Salary disclosure*

At the directive of synod, the Council of Delegates reports the following salaries for senior CRCNA, ReFrame Ministries, and Resonate Global Mission staff directly employed by the Council of Delegates:

Job level	Number of positions	Number below target	Number at target
E1	1	0	1
E2	4	3	1
E3	4	4	0

Synod 2014 adopted a salary administration system that uses a salary range *target* and a minimum of 85 percent of that target. In addition, the COD recently adopted a revised salary structure with fewer levels than the previous structure. Salary ranges within which the agencies will be reporting actual compensation for the current fiscal year are as follows:

2021-2022 Salary Grade and Range Structure

Level	U.S. Range		Canadian Range	
	Minimum	Target	Minimum	Target
E1	\$152,440	\$190,550		
E2	\$137,566	\$171,957	\$131,078	\$163,848
E3	\$116,581	\$145,726	\$114,859	\$143,574
H	\$98,798	\$123,497	\$98,447	\$123,059
I	\$83,726	\$104,658	\$84,382	\$105,477
J	\$70,954	\$88,693	\$72,325	\$90,406
K	\$60,131	\$75,164	\$61,991	\$77,489
L	\$50,958	\$63,698	\$53,133	\$66,416

**II. Activities of the COD**

*A. Polity matters*

1. Special meeting of the Council of Delegates in June 2021

The Council of Delegates acted on behalf of Synod 2021 (canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic) to decide matters identified by the Program Committee of synod (officers of Synod 2019) that could not await decision until Synod 2022. The minutes of the special June 2021 meeting were recorded in the *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, sent to the churches and posted at [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources). The COD presents the Minutes of the Special Meeting of June 2021 for ratification.

2. Special meeting format of Synod 2022

The COD in June 2021 mandated the Program Committee of synod to explore options for the meeting of Synod 2022 due to an anticipated weighty agenda. Upon adoption of the proposal presented to the COD in October 2021, the Program Committee, the executive director, and director of Synodical Services have been implementing the decision. Unique to the format will be virtual sessions (e.g., prayer times, the convening session, and advisory committee introductory sessions) leading up to the in-person week of synod. The *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021* and the *Agenda for Synod 2022* will include marked sections to be approved as consent agenda. These decisions and more (see [crcna.org/synod](http://crcna.org/synod)) will provide opportunity for plenary deliberation time to address significant matters before synod in June.

3. Interim appointments

On behalf of synod, the COD has ratified the following classical appointments of synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies\*:

Appointment	Classis	Member	Alternate	Term
Synodical Deputies	B.C. North-West	Rev. Bradley A. Meinders	Rev. Mary-Lee Bouma	2024(2)
	Central Plains		Rev. Sheldon Starkenburg	
	Greater Los Angeles	Rev. Phillip T. Westra	Rev. David R. Koll	2024(1)
	Heartland			
	Lake Superior			
	Minnkota	Rev. Phillip A. Apoll	Rev. Jack Van Marion	2024 (1)
	North Cascades		Rev. Scott M. Muienburg	
	Northern Illinois		Pastor Bryan Lanting	
	Ontario Southwest	Rev. Richard E. Grift	Rev. John R. Huizinga	2024 (1)
	Toronto		Rev. Samuel Cooper	

\*Terms of alternate synodical deputies run concurrent with those of the synodical deputies.

4. Classes that have declared that women officebearers (ministers, elders, deacons) may not be delegated to classis

In accordance with the instructions of Synod 2007, the executive director keeps a list of classes that, in keeping with their understanding of the biblical position on the role of women in ecclesiastical office, declare that women officebearers (ministers, elders, deacons) may not be delegated to classis. Although some of these classes have developed their own regulations regarding the permissibility of women officebearers participating in classis meetings, some classes have adopted a decision to declare that women officebearers may not be delegated to classis. A list of these classes may be obtained by contacting the office of the executive director.

5. Annual report on gender and ethnic diversity on denominational boards

Data for the board diversity report (with regard to gender and ethnic diversity) for the 2021-2022 year has been received from the denominational boards (Council of Delegates, Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin University, and World Renew). In addition, data from the World Renew Joint Ministry Council (JMC) is included along with data from the World Renew Board of Delegates. *Note:* The JMC is elected from the membership of the World Renew Board of Delegates.

There are presently 164 denominationally appointed board members (not including the JMC count), and the JMC, elected from the World Renew Board of Delegates, has 15 members. So, among a total of 179 members, 56 (31%) are women, and 30 (17%) are people of color. The data received from the boards for the 2021-2022 board term reflects a *decrease* of 4 percent in women delegates and an *increase* of 2 percent in delegates who are people of color, as compared to the 2020-2021 reporting year.

The diversity on individual denominational boards is also reported in light of synod’s goal of having *at least 25 percent ethnic minority membership*. The board membership of Calvin Theological Seminary is 25 percent ethnic minority; Calvin University, 16 percent; World Renew (JMC), 27 percent; and the COD, 15 percent.

6. Annual report on denominational efforts to address ethnic diversity and racial justice

At the instruction of Synod 2013, each CRC agency and ministry, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Calvin University are asked to submit to the executive director, as part of their strategic plan, diversity

goals and timelines in their leadership, administrative, and regional ministry teams. This annual report was received by the executive director, and the compliance and progress were reported to the Council of Delegates in February.

In addition, the director of synodical services regularly reminds and encourages stated clerks and denominational boards to seek ethnic diversity in nominating people to serve on denominational boards and as delegates to synod. We need to be diligent in continuing to increase diversity.

7. Advisers to Synod 2022

a. Young adult representatives

Since 2009 synod has welcomed the engagement of youth and young adults (18- to 26-year-olds) in the current issues faced by our denomination and has sought to raise up leadership within the church through the appointment of young adult representatives to participate in the deliberations of synod. These individuals bring a valuable and unique perspective to the issues we face as a denomination by listening, engaging delegates during advisory committee meetings, and offering input on matters that arise in plenary.

The COD has reappointed the following persons to serve as young adult representatives to synod (\* indicates service in this capacity in 2019). Several of these individuals were appointed to serve in 2021, but synod was canceled. We express gratitude for their commitment and gracious willingness to serve the denomination in this way.

- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| * Rebecca Bokma   | Leah Sweetman       |
| Daniel Choi       | David VanDokkumburg |
| Amy DeJong        | Hope Zigterman      |
| * William Krahnke |                     |

b. Ethnic advisers

Determination of the need for the appointment of ethnic advisers to synod is based on a rolling three-year average (greater than 25) of ethnically diverse delegates appointed to synod. Due to a decrease in the diversity of synod delegates, the Council of Delegates appointed the following as ethnic advisers to Synod 2022: Hyung Jun Kim, John Sideco, and Darlene Silversmith. We are grateful for their willingness to offer their unique perspectives to the issues before synod.

8. Convening churches of Synods 2023 and 2025

a. Convening church for Synod 2023

The COD recommends that synod accept the invitation of Church of the Servant CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2023, to be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the campus of Calvin University.

*Ground:* Church of the Servant CRC will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2023.

b. Convening Church for Synod 2025

The COD recommends that synod accept the invitation of Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2025, to be held in Sioux Center, Iowa, on the campus of Dordt University.

*Grounds:*

- a. Covenant CRC will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024 and had originally asked to host Synod 2024; however, the Dordt University campus will be under construction that summer.
- b. Synod 2021 was planned to be held on the campus of Dordt University in Sioux Center but was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

9. A forum for voices of the LGBTQ+ community to be heard by delegates to synod

In response to an overture submitted in 2021, the COD, on behalf of Synod 2021, instructed the executive director “to develop and implement a mechanism or forum that would allow LGBTQ voices to be heard by the delegates to Synod 2022 with regard to the human sexuality report and present the proposal to the COD . . . for approval (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 676). Following consideration of the proposal brought before the COD in February, the COD decided (1) to encourage all delegates to read the human sexuality report and to come prepared to discuss it; (2) to instruct the executive director to curate an appendix of diverse LGBTQ+ voices to be made available to synodical delegates; and (3) to strongly encourage delegates to engage local LGBTQ+ voices in their contexts, with humble attention to Scripture in the process. The compiled stories of LGBTQ+ voices are included in Appendix A of the COD report.

10. COD Communication to Synod re Neland Avenue CRC

The COD, acting on behalf of Synod 2021, adopted the following motion: “That the COD send a ‘formal communication’ to Synod 2022, reaffirming the COD letter of admonition and grave concern to Neland Avenue CRC and urging Synod 2022 to be mindful of the three marks of the true and vital church” (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, pp. 629-30). In response, the COD adopted the communication in Appendix B for synod’s consideration.

11. Denominational structure and senior leadership

The Council of Delegates and its corporations continued work to respond to structure and leadership matters made evident in 2019 with regard to compliance to the Canada Revenue Agency. The Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report—adopted by the COD and before Synod 2022 for consideration (see *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*), provides background to the following:

a. Nominee for general secretary of the CRCNA

In anticipation of the acceptance by synod of the new structure proposed in the SALT report, the COD appointed two search

committees: one for general secretary of the CRCNA and a second for chief administrative officer (CAO). In addition, the CRCNA Canada Corporation appointed a search committee for a transitional executive director-Canada, who will be identified in late March. A candidate for CAO will be interviewed by the COD in May. A candidate for general secretary was presented to the COD in February so that the candidate can participate in the selection process of the CAO.

With thanksgiving to God, the Council of Delegates recommends that synod, upon a successful interview, appoint Dr. Zachary J. King as general secretary of the CRCNA, effective July 1, 2022. The curriculum vitae of Zachary King is available in Appendix C.

b. Senior leadership transition

The COD is preparing for leadership changes, given the upcoming retirements of Colin P. Watson, Sr., executive director of the CRCNA, and John Bolt, deputy executive director and chief financial officer. A transition plan for senior leadership is in place in preparation for the anticipated general secretary and chief administrative officer.

c. Joint Ministry Agreements (JMAs) and Management Committee

In response to the SALT report, the CRCNA Canada Corporation and the CRCNA U.S. Corporation have created a Joint Ministry Agreement and Joint Ministry Agreement Approval Documents. This agreement and its supporting documents describe and define the ministries to be performed in collaboration between the two corporations, as well as the resources of each partner that will be applied to these ministries. The partners have also established a Management Committee to create and monitor these agreements going forward. The membership of the Management Committee includes three persons from each of the two CRCNA corporations, in addition to a convener appointed by the Office of General Secretary and approved by the two CRCNA corporations. In the interim structure at present, the convener has been named by the office of the executive director of the CRCNA, and the appointment has been ratified by the two corporations.

d. Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter

Under the advisement of legal counsel for CRCNA Canada, an *ecclesiastical mandate letter* was created to help account for CRCNA Canada's ecclesiastical mandate, accountability, and function as a CRCNA member corporation. It is important that synod issue a renewed Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter to CRCNA Canada, given the added role responsibilities (permissions) outlined in the SALT report presented for consideration by Synod 2022. The Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter therefore underscores that CRCNA Canada has ecclesiastical obligations and accountability alongside its legal requirements as a registered charity in Canada. The COD therefore recommends the Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter in Appendix D to synod for adoption.

12. Update on Calvin University president search and bylaw changes  
 The COD included several Calvin University bylaw changes for adoption in the Council of Delegates Supplement report to Synod 2021 (which was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic). One of the bylaw changes includes a new process for how the president of Calvin University is appointed. Subsequent to the recommended bylaw changes, the COD learned that Michael LeRoy, president of Calvin University, plans to resign, effective June 30, 2022. It was noted by the COD that the proposed bylaw changes were not approved by synod because Synod 2021 did not meet to approve them. Because the current Calvin University bylaw changes do not require synodical approval, it was decided to allow Calvin University to move forward with a presidential search and appointment to prevent them from being without a president for an extended period of time.

13. Inspire 2022  
 In response to an extensive survey and consideration of concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, Inspire 2021—the biennial denominational gathering—was postponed for a year until August 2022. Registration is open. Inspire 2022 will be a time for our full denomination to come together to share ideas, collaborate, and celebrate. Visit [crna.org/Inspire](http://crna.org/Inspire) for more information and to register.  
 The COD also endorsed that subsequent biennial Inspire gatherings will pick up in 2024 (rather than as previously planned for 2023) due to the extensive planning required for venues, speakers, travel, and more.

14. Historical Committee mandate  
 Organizational stakeholders of the archives in Heritage Hall—Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, and the CRCNA (including but not limited to the CRC’s Historical Committee)—were instructed by Synod 2019 to clarify the role of the Historical Committee in providing “shared oversight” of the archives. Following some delays created by the pandemic and the difficulty this presented in gathering for meetings, the COD endorsed an updated Historical Committee mandate, as found in Appendix E, and recommends it to synod for approval.

15. Ministry presentations at synod  
 For presentations to synod by CRC ministries, a rotation schedule reflecting the denomination’s five ministry priorities was implemented by synod in 2018. Delegates to Synod 2022 will receive presentations on Mercy and Justice from the following ministries: Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation, Centre for Public Dialogue, Disability Concerns, Indigenous Ministries, Race Relations, Office of Social Justice, Safe Church Ministry, and World Renew. (See also section II, B, 5 of this report regarding ministry evaluations.)

16. Judicial Code Committee  
 The Judicial Code Committee (JCC) hears appeals from a decision made by a council, a classis, or an agency of the Christian Reformed Church if it is alleged that an action violates the Church Order or the agency’s mandate. The procedures followed by the Judicial Code Committee are set forth in Church Order Supplement, Article 30-c.

The committee’s members from both Canada and the United States include people with legal expertise, clergy, and nonclergy.

a. Membership

Synod 2014 adopted guidelines stating that the composition of the JCC reflect the diversity of the denomination and provide balance in expertise among its members (trained in law, ordained as minister of the Word, nonordained/nonlaw background). In addition, terms have been staggered to provide continuity to the work of the committee.

Aldon Kuiper, by way of exception, served an additional year with the JCC to fill an unexpected vacancy on the committee, and he is now concluding his service. Duane Bajema is completing a second term in 2022 and is not eligible for reappointment. It is recommended that synod express gratitude for their years of service to the denomination.

The COD Nominating Services Committee, on behalf of the COD, solicited nominees for the anticipated vacancies of a minister of the Word and a nonordained/nonlaw position on the JCC. Nominations will be presented to synod for appointment by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

b. Reappointments to second term

The Council of Delegates recommends the following JCC members for reappointment to a second term of three years: Dexter W. Young and Amy Vander Vliet.

17. Addressing Abuse of Power—responses to Synod 2019 directives (see *Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 794-99)

a. Dignity Team

The Abuse of Power Ad Hoc Committee report, adopted by the COD in lieu of Synod 2021, included a proposal for the creation of a denominational Dignity Team (see *Agenda for Synod 2021*, pp. 63-68). The proposed constitution, term limits, nomination process, and reporting for this nonstaff team was endorsed by the COD in February. Nominations for membership are currently being received for consideration and appointment by the COD in May.

b. Implementation of Code of Conduct

1) CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

In June 2021 the Council of Delegates adopted the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and instructed “the COD to devise a plan for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches per the instruction of Synod 2019” (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633). A proposed implementation plan for the Code of Conduct was presented to the COD by the executive director in February and was subsequently endorsed. The COD recommends the proposal in Appendix F regarding implementation of the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders to Synod 2022 for adoption.

2) Implementation of CRCNA staff and COD Code of Conduct

At the instruction of Synod 2019, following adoption of the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders in June 2021, the current Code of Conduct for CRCNA staff is being amplified to reflect the newly adopted code.

In addition, the Council of Delegates decided to include a COD Code of Conduct in the Council of Delegates Handbook and to require its members to sign it upon being appointed to the COD. Subsequent to adoption of this code of conduct for its members, the COD has developed a process for addressing allegations regarding violations of the COD Code of Conduct.

c. Continued implementation and monitoring

The COD is committed to continually monitoring the progress and ensuring implementation of the decisions of Synod 2019 to aid in the prevention of abuse of power in CRCNA leadership. This is a standing agenda matter for the COD's Mercy and Justice Ministries Committee. At its February meeting, the COD received the following updates with regard to addressing the abuse of power:

- The appeal process is under review. There is a need to build safeguards in the system that help to avoid retraumatizing victims of abuse, including education efforts that are being developed. Recommendations for improving the appeal process are coming by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.
- Discussions between Safe Church Ministry and CRCNA Human Resources are under way to address restorative practices resources and training for staff.
- Abuse of Power training has been rolled out to new candidates for minister of the Word. Other measures for this preventative training are being developed, including a pre-Inspire 2022 conference opportunity.

18. Establishing a culture of civility

The COD Mercy and Justice Ministries Committee, through the work of an ad hoc team, developed a plan, as requested by the COD executive committee, to be implemented by staff that will ensure that our denomination encourages Christ-centered, macro-CRCNA, discernment action plans that build respect and love throughout the leadership and administration of the church as well as the church at large to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). The COD endorsed the report and instructed staff to develop action and funding plans.

19. CRCNA Child Safeguarding Policy

The Council of Delegates adopted a CRCNA Child Safeguarding Policy after noting the need for and advantage of including such a policy in its records. Though some CRC ministries have had their own policies and procedures in place, the COD and the previous Board of Trustees had not articulated a denominational policy. The policy is now readily available for public perusal at [network.crcna.org/safe-church/crcna-child-safeguarding-policy](http://network.crcna.org/safe-church/crcna-child-safeguarding-policy).

## 20. Publications and services

### a. *Yearbook*

Following an extensive process to gather ordained personnel and local-church information each fall (data effective as of August 31), staff within the Synodical Services Office produce an annual “snapshot” each February as the CRCNA *Yearbook*. The *Yearbook* is made available in print, as a downloadable PDF (available at [faithaliveresources.org](http://faithaliveresources.org)), and in online format ([crcna.org/Yearbook](http://crcna.org/Yearbook)). In addition, data received from the churches, classes, and ordained personnel throughout the rest of the year is continually updated in the online *Yearbook*, often making the most current information available within a few days. The online format includes the Church Finder feature ([crcna.org/church-finder](http://crcna.org/church-finder)), which provides maps, church service times, membership information, and links to church websites, among other helpful information. Minister service history, special days to be observed in the church calendar, and denominational ministry-share information are all linked via the online *Yearbook*.

In addition, classis and denominational statistics can also be accessed or downloaded at [crcna.org/Yearbook](http://crcna.org/Yearbook). Among some of the statistics available in the online *Yearbook* are the total number of members (baptized and confessing) in a local congregation, number of families, number of professing members over eighteen years of age, number of professing members, number of baptized members, number of membership transfers from other CRCs, and number of members received through evangelism and from other denominations. This data continues to present a historical record of our church and ministry together through the years.

The *Yearbook* data collection process is currently undergoing an extensive review to implement streamlined processes and to simplify the submission of information for our churches and ordained personnel, in addition to other considerations.

### b. *Church Order and Its Supplements and Rules for Synodical Procedure*

The *Church Order and Its Supplements 2020* reflects revisions to Supplements adopted by the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA in June 2020, meeting on behalf of synod. Synod 2019 also adopted proposed changes to the Church Order, and those will await adoption by synod before implementation. The latest version of the *Church Order and Its Supplements*, published by the Office of Synodical Services, was distributed to the churches in early fall 2020 and has been translated into Korean and Spanish. No additional changes were made in 2021. The *Rules for Synodical Procedure*, last updated following decisions of Synod 2019 and translated for Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking churches, is available in digital format only. Both the *Church Order* and the *Rules for Synodical Procedure* are available for download at [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources).

### c. *Agenda for Synod and Acts of Synod*

The publication of the *Agenda for Synod and Acts of Synod* is the responsibility of the director of synodical services under the direction

of the executive director. From time to time some decisions need to be made by the executive director about which material properly belongs in the *Agenda for Synod*. At times, the executive director consults with the COD or Program Committee for advice and input when materials are in question. In many cases, erring on the side of grace seems more appropriate than erring on the side of rigid regulation. Synod itself will finally decide in all cases whether material is properly on its agenda.

Because Synods 2020 and 2021 were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, significant parts of the agendas for Synods 2020 and 2021 have been deferred to Synod 2022. As noted earlier in this report, sections of the deferred agenda constitute a consent agenda by way of exception this year. These sections are clearly marked in the published *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*.

Synod 2019 decided that in order to improve the connection between synod and classes and churches, a summary of the *Agenda for Synod* should be sent to delegates and church council clerks with an encouragement to pass it along to church members. The summary document is usually available for distribution in mid-spring.

d. *Manual for Synodical Deputies*

The *Manual for Synodical Deputies* is distributed to synodical deputies, their alternates, and the stated clerks of classes. The latest revision of the manual was completed in summer 2020 by the Office of Synodical Services, reflecting suggested clarifications and updates from the Candidacy office. Anyone desiring to access or download a copy of this tool for the classes may do so by going to the stated clerk and synodical deputy webpage at [crcna.org/SynodicalDeputies](http://crcna.org/SynodicalDeputies).

e. *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*

A very helpful tool for churches and classes, the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* was updated by Henry DeMoor in fall 2019 to reflect changes made to the Supplements through Synod 2019 that have been incorporated into the Church Order. We are grateful to Dr. DeMoor for his contribution of providing a tool for use by classes, churches, and many others working and advising on polity matters. This resource is intended as a companion to the CRC's Church Order, offering commentary and explanation of guidelines set forth and decisions made by synod over the years. The manual is available for viewing in the CRC Digital Library ([crcna.org/DigitalLibrary](http://crcna.org/DigitalLibrary)), and print and downloadable versions are available through Faith Alive ([faithaliveresources.org](http://faithaliveresources.org)).

f. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*

Also updated in 2020 was Henry DeMoor's *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, previously printed in 2010. This invaluable resource, providing context for the rules of the church—the "why" behind the rules—is available for viewing in the CRC Digital Library ([crcna.org/DigitalLibrary](http://crcna.org/DigitalLibrary)), and print and downloadable versions are available through Faith Alive ([faithaliveresources.org](http://faithaliveresources.org)).

## B. Program matters

A significant part of the Council of Delegates' work relates to the ministry programs, personnel, and finances of the denomination. The program and personnel details are reported to synod by way of the reports of the agencies, institutions, and ministries and via this section of the COD's report in this agenda. Additional information regarding financial matters is contained in Appendix H to this Council of Delegates Report as well as in the *Agenda for Synod 2022 – Financial and Business Supplement* that will be distributed in late May. The final budget approved by the COD, including the allocation of ministry-share pledges by churches, will be presented as information to synod by way of the COD Supplement report through synod's financial matters advisory committee.

The COD provides denominational oversight on behalf of synod throughout the year. The office of the executive director serves as the primary link between the COD and the denomination's ministries. Currently serving within the office of the executive director are the deputy executive director/ chief financial officer, the acting Canadian ministries director (CMD), the director of ReFrame Ministries, the director of Resonate Global Mission, the director of synodical services (DSS), and the director of communications and marketing (DCM). With the change of leadership structure from an executive director of the CRCNA model to the proposed Office of General Secretary (OGS), the new Office of General Secretary will not directly include ministry directors; however, the OGS will be responsible for ensuring that all ministries and legal entities are appropriately implementing synodical decisions and ecclesiastical mandates through the use of a reconfigured Ministries Leadership Council (MLC, referenced below) and an Office of Governance.

The Ministries Leadership Council (MLC), convened by the executive director of the CRCNA, has responsibility for implementing the Ministry Plan of the Christian Reformed Church (*Our Journey 2025*), for the collaboration of the ministries, and for the review of program matters. The binational membership of the MLC is made up of executive leadership, directors of agencies, presidents of the educational institutions (or their designees), and others representing specific offices and functions. The Canadian Ministries Team, convened by the Canadian ministries director, provides leadership to the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Canada.

The program and financial matters processed by the COD from July through February are presented to synod as information. Any matters that require action by synod are identified within the body of this report.

### 1. 2021 denominational survey summary report

With the rollout of *Our Journey 2020* (denominational Ministry Plan) in 2015, an *annual* denominational survey was implemented to help track progress of the Ministry Plan, in addition to metrics recorded along the way. Synod delegates are invited to read an executive summary of the 2021 denominational survey at [crcna.org/survey/survey-results](http://crcna.org/survey/survey-results).

### 2. Implementation of *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

The denominational Ministry Plan, *Our Journey 2025*, following the endorsement of the COD acting on behalf of Synod 2020, is well under way (see [crcna.org/OurJourney](http://crcna.org/OurJourney)). There's something about a *journey* that's exciting and invigorating—a promise of new horizons, new possibilities,

new challenges. The Christian Reformed Church is on such a journey. It's called *Our Journey 2025*. "Our" because we are on it together as CRC people from congregations across the United States and Canada. "Journey" because we are moving ahead in our shared mission to express the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide, while also striving toward specific goals that our congregations and leaders have identified. And "2025" to remind us that this is just one stage of a journey that will see us living and growing together in new ways and new places by the year 2025.

For this five-year period, we have identified four "milestones" that we wish to work toward. We desire to become congregations and communities that do the following:

- Cultivate practices of prayer and spiritual disciplines, transforming our lives and communities by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Listen to the voices of every generation, shaping us for ministry together.
- Grow in diversity and unity by seeking justice, reconciliation, and welcome, sharing our faith as we build relationships with and honor the cultures of our neighbors and newcomers.
- Share the gospel, live it missionally, and plant new churches in our neighborhoods as we discover how to connect with our local and global ministry contexts.

Churches can request resources including visuals, conversation cards, and other tools that can help congregations and members feel excitement and ownership of the ministry plan in more than a theoretical way. Visit [crcna.org/OurJourney](http://crcna.org/OurJourney) to learn more about sharing in the excitement!

### 3. Our Calling

Proposed by the Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture to Synod 2014, the term *Five Streams*—changed to "Our Calling" in 2016—became a focus of the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in its collaboration, programs, and reporting. Synod 2015 adopted the five themes of Our Calling of the Christian Reformed Church (included below) to function as "ministry priorities to strategically focus and adaptively organize the work of the Christian Reformed Church in North America while respecting and building on our previous mission efforts, history, and legacy of relationships and member support" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 680).

#### **Faith Formation**

As a community of believers, we seek to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to nurture their faith through all ages and stages of life.

#### **Servant Leadership**

Understanding that the lifelong equipping of leaders is essential for churches and ministries to flourish, we identify, recruit, and train leaders to be servants in the kingdom of God.

#### **Global Mission**

Called to be witnesses of Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth, we start and strengthen local churches in North America and around the world.

## Mercy and Justice

Hearing the cries of the oppressed, forsaken, and disadvantaged, we seek to act justly and love mercy as we walk humbly with our God.

## Gospel Proclamation and Worship

Believing that faith comes through the hearing of God's Word, we proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ and seek to worship him in all that we do.

Consistent with prior actions of both adopting the five streams and then relabeling them as "Our Calling," we note that these ministry priorities are being utilized to communicate more effectively what the CRC members and ministers, congregations and classes, and ministries and agencies are called to do. The *Annual Ministry Report* (see [crcna.org/MinistryReport](http://crcna.org/MinistryReport)), the *Agenda for Synod*, and introductory brochures all utilize this categorization. Further, the Council of Delegates committee structure and committee mandates reflect these priorities.

### 4. CRC agency, institution, and congregational services reports

The Council of Delegates is responsible for submitting a *unified* report to synod composed of individual segments provided by the agencies, educational institutions, and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. The individual reports of the CRC ministries appear in the following pages of this *Agenda for Synod*.

These reports portray the ministry of the Christian Reformed Church both locally and around the world. As you read these materials, we invite you to give thanks to God for ministry opportunities and for the thousands of staff and volunteers throughout the church who are living and sharing the gospel.

### 5. Ministry evaluation

Synod 2018 instructed the COD and the executive director "to continue the important work of evaluation and prioritization by working together to implement a robust evaluation strategy whereby in a five-year cycle all agencies and ministries will be continually evaluated through the framework of the five ministry priorities" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 455).

In response to this directive, the COD adopted a policy to ensure continual evaluation of all agencies and ministries over a four-year cycle according to the five ministry priorities. The agencies and ministries are required to have comprehensive and strategic program goals and objectives and, by means of fitting evaluation and assessment approaches, to provide annual outcomes in their reporting year.

Synod will be asked to review and approve evaluation reports with regard to Mercy and Justice from the following ministries: Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation, Centre for Public Dialogue, Disability Concerns, Indigenous Ministries, Race Relations, Office of Social Justice, Safe Church Ministry, and World Renew (Appendix G).

The Council of Delegates has asked the executive director to review all the reporting requirements for CRC ministries and institutions to help eliminate any repetitious reports (e.g., to the COD, to synod, re program evaluation, ministry highlights, etc.), especially given recent added requirements that accompany Joint Ministry Agreements.

6. Appointments of ministry directors

a. Update on Office of Social Justice/Race Relations director

A COD-appointed team conducted a search to fill the vacancy in the Social Justice/Race Relations director position, and the search team reported that it is not appropriate to hire for this position at this time. Mark Stephenson has agreed to extend his interim term as director, and the COD is grateful for his willingness to do so. The COD intends to start up the search again after Synod 2022.

b. Appointment of director of Disability Concerns

The COD had the privilege of meeting with and ratifying the appointment of Lindsay Wieland Capel as director of Disability Concerns. Lindsay began her new role on November 15, 2021. She will be introduced to synod during the address of the Mercy and Justice ministries report.

7. Creation of board-designated fund

The COD asks synod to take note of the recent creation of a board-designated fund to provide funding for the following costs and expenses related to the current or former ministry of Resonate Global Mission, Christian Reformed Home Missions, and Christian Reformed World Missions regarding (1) Investigations related to sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse; (2) legal costs related to sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse (including possible settlements); (3) counseling and support of survivors of such abuse; and (4) the costs of administering and coordinating an effective response to such abuse.

8. Ministry Support Services

a. Shared ministry services

The staff of Ministry Support Services (MSS) is responsible for *The Banner*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Libros Desafio (Spanish-language resources), and a number of professional services that support CRC ministries. These services include marketing, order and subscription processing, call center, editorial services, translation, rights and permissions management, design and web services, purchasing, and distribution. At any one time, more than 100 projects are in process, and thousands of words are being combined with design elements for publication via paper or pixels. The call center handles about 20,000 phone calls per year, in addition to processing online orders, email, and live chats on various CRCNA websites.

In the interest of consistent style, branding, and quality presentation, MSS has supported CRC communications staff in creating guides for Brand Standards and Editorial Style.

Ministry Support Services staff recently completed the migration of all of the Congregational Ministry websites into the new [crcna.org](http://crcna.org) web platform, overhauled the internal staff intranet, and introduced a new learning management platform for CRC ministries. They are now in the midst of upgrading *The Banner* and Network websites.

b. *The Banner*

*The Banner*, the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church, currently prints and distributes about 70,000 copies of its paper version. Website pageviews average more than 85,000 per month, and more than 8,000 people have signed up to receive the weekly *Banner* email. Our efforts on social media also help to ensure that *Banner* content is available to anyone in a variety of forms.

*The Banner* app is available for free download on iPhone and Android devices ([thebanner.org/App](http://thebanner.org/App)); monthly, the app is receiving more than 8,500 pageviews.

We are most thankful for a huge show of support from *Banner* readers, as nearly 6,000 donors gave more than \$450,000 for the annual appeal fundraiser in 2021.

c. Faith Alive and Libros Desafío

Although Synod 2013 approved the dissolution of the Faith Alive Christian Resources board and noted the necessary transition regarding critical functions of Faith Alive to MSS, we continue to sell and reprint resources that were already published. As those products grow older, and without new products to take their place, sales continue to decline. Further, the pandemic radically reduced sales of Sunday school and other materials. Those sales have bounced back somewhat, especially for the *Dwell* curriculum, but we are still waiting to see what the new normal looks like. Faith Formation Ministries and MSS continue to pour energy into the *Dwell* curriculum, including the recent introduction of *Dwell Flex* (for smaller churches and multi-age contexts) and the continued development of *Dwell Digital* (to which 416 churches have active subscriptions).

It's been nearly ten years since the decision of Synod 2013, so many other product lines are being phased out as they grow older.

Similarly, Libros Desafío has ceased publishing new titles but continues to sell and reprint backlisted titles when economically viable. We recently completed an initiative to clear excess inventory of Libros Desafío products by offering them at no cost to every Christian Reformed church that could put them to good use. As a result, we gave away 19,000 copies of 60 different titles to 59 churches across the United States and Canada.

Christian Reformed congregations continue to receive a special "CRC discount" in comparison to what churches of other denominations pay. In addition, the CRC Digital Library allows anyone attending a Christian Reformed congregation free access to most Faith Alive titles online. When the pandemic hit, we also provided CRCs with free, online access to *Dwell Digital* (other churches pay up to \$500 per year to access these Sunday school curriculum resources). All of these initiatives are intended to help Christian Reformed churches make full use of these resources that they helped to publish.

d. The Network

Over the past decade the Network has become one of the CRC's most-visited websites where people involved in their local church can connect—with each other and with denominational staff—about

the “nuts and bolts” of ministry. Ministry Support Services oversees the site with a half-time community manager. Launched in 2010, the Network ([crcna.org/Network](http://crcna.org/Network)) celebrated its 12-year anniversary in February.

When the pandemic hit, churches turned to The Network to support each other as they reinvented nearly every aspect of congregational life and ministry. As well, denominational ministries were able to support churches by posting resource lists, how-to articles, and blog posts about doing ministry during COVID-19. That settled down in 2021, but traffic to the site still averaged over 91,000 pageviews per month during the year.

### C. *Financial matters*

#### 1. Introduction

In order to assure that synod has the most up-to-date and accurate financial information, detailed financial data will be included in the *Agenda for Synod 2022 – Business and Financial Supplement*, which will be made available to the delegates at the time synod convenes. This supplement will include financial disclosure information and agency and ministry budgets for fiscal year 2023 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023). In addition, synod will be asked to approve a schedule for one or more above-ministry-share offerings for the ministries of the denomination, a quarterly offering for World Renew (in lieu of ministry-share support), and a listing of requests for accredited organization status for recommendation to the churches. Additional financial information and/or recommendations will also be included in the Council of Delegates Supplement report later in May.

#### 2. Reimagining Ministry Shares update

Since the adoption of the new ministry share system in June 2020, churches have received tools and information to educate them about the new system. In this second year since implementation of the new pledge system, staff have implemented communication efforts with classes and churches across the denomination. The COD was informed of significant changes in giving levels, both reductions and increases.

### III. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Andy de Ruyter, chair of the Council of Delegates; Michael L. Ten Haken, vice chair of the Council of Delegates; Colin P. Watson, Sr., executive director; and members of the executive staff as needed when matters pertaining to the Council of Delegates, ReFrame Ministries, or Resonate Global Mission are discussed.

B. That synod grant all requests for privilege of the floor by the COD, agencies and ministries, educational institutions, standing committees, and study committees of synod contained within the reports to Synod 2022, including deferred reports.

C. That synod approve all requests for special offerings for the agencies, ministries, and educational institutions of the CRC that are contained within the reports to Synod 2022.

D. That synod by way of the ballot appoint Nathaniel Van Denend, previously appointed as interim COD classical delegate, to a modified first term (I, D).

E. That synod thank COD members who are retiring from or concluding service on the Council of Delegates for their faithful service and significant contributions to the denomination (I, D).

F. That synod by way of the ballot elect new members to the COD from the nominations presented to a first term of three years and reappoint members to a second term (I, D).

G. That synod ratify the Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021, acting in lieu of Synod 2021 (II, A, 1).

H. That synod approve the interim appointments made by the COD for synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies (II, A, 3).

I. That synod accept the invitation of Church of the Servant CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2023, to be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the campus of Calvin University (II, A, 8, a).

*Ground:* Church of the Servant CRC will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2023.

J. That synod accept the invitation of Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2025, to be held in Sioux Center, Iowa, on the campus of Dordt University (II, A, 8, b).

*Grounds:*

a. Covenant CRC will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024 and had originally asked to host Synod 2024; however, the Dordt University campus will be under construction that summer.

b. Synod 2021 was planned to be held on the campus of Dordt University in Sioux Center but was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

K. That synod consider the COD's communication regarding Neland Avenue CRC when it takes up the matter (II, A, 10; Appendix B).

L. That synod, upon a successful interview, appoint Dr. Zachary J. King as general secretary of the CRCNA, effective July 1, 2022. (II, A, 11, a; Appendix C).

M. That synod adopt the Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter to underscore that CRCNA Canada has ecclesiastical obligations and accountability alongside its legal requirements as a registered charity in Canada (II, A, 11, d; Appendix D).

N. That synod take note that the COD permitted Calvin University to move forward with a presidential search and appointment prior to Synod 2022, in compliance with their current bylaws (II, A, 12).

O. That synod approve the revised Historical Committee mandate as presented in Appendix E (II, A, 14).

P. That synod express gratitude to Duane Bajema and Aldon Kuiper for their service to the Judicial Code Committee (II, A, 16, a).

Q. That synod reappoint members of the Judicial Code Committee to a second three-year term (II, A, 16, b).

R. That synod adopt the following recommendations regarding implementation of the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (II, A, 17, b, 1; Appendix F):

1. That synod adopt the following revisions/ additions to the Church Order and Its Supplements (indicated by *italics*):

- a. Add the following new Article 5-b and Supplement, Article 5-b to the current Church Order Article 5 and its Supplement (the existing Article 5 and its Supplement would become Article 5-a and Supplement, Article 5-a).

*Church Order Article 5-b*

*All officebearers and ministry leaders, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the expected behavior of leadership in the church by signing the Code of Conduct.*

— Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

**\*Supplement, Article 5-b**

**Preamble**

*In Philippians 2 the apostle Paul brings to his Philippian readers the words of a hymn in which Christ Jesus is acknowledged as being, in his very nature, God. Among other things, this means that Christ is the one to whom all power belongs.*

*The hymn goes on to say that Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage. In fact, he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and humbling himself toward a life-sacrificing kind of obedience. In other words, he used his power for the thriving of others.*

*All of us who are united to Christ by faith and who serve in the life of the church are called, in this passage and others, to this way of being. Jesus himself, in response to the desire for power expressed by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to serve people, a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.<sup>1</sup>*

*Not only do we have this call from Christ, but we actually have Jesus living and growing within us (Gal. 2:20). As a result, we find ourselves being transformed into the kind of people who hold and use power in a Christlike way.*

<sup>1</sup> See Mark 10:35-45. Note that there are other Scripture texts that address the use of power to bless, such as 1 Peter 5:1-4. In addition, there are texts that describe abuses of power and the damage that such abuses cause (see, for example, 2 Sam. 11 and Ezek. 34).

*That being said, until Christ returns and brings us to perfection, we will continue to wrestle with the urge to misuse power and abuse others. Ugly realities such as verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse are found among us. The power that we hold by virtue of our person or our position can always be twisted into the project of building our own kingdoms at the expense of others. This is true for pastors, lay ministry leaders, and church members alike.*

*In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies.<sup>2</sup> It emerges out of a response by Synod 2018 to patterns of abuse that had been brought to its attention<sup>3</sup> and is aimed at preventing such abuse in the future. May God's peace be among us.*

### **Code of Conduct**

*Abuse of power is a misuse of position, authority, or influence to take advantage of, manipulate, or control. Abuse of power occurs when a person with power, regardless of its source, uses that power to harm and/or influence another for personal gain at the other's expense. All abuse by faith leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. (For more background, see Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 587-615).*

*As a ministry leader, I commit to the following:*

#### **Confidentiality**

*I will use confidentiality appropriately, which means I will hold in confidence whatever information is not mine to share.*

*I will not use information shared with me in confidence in order to elevate my position or to depreciate that of others.*

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<sup>2</sup> See Belgic Confession, Article 28, and Heidelberg Catechism, Q. and A. 55, 107, 111. See also the statement in the Confession of Belhar that says, "We believe . . . that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others" (Confession of Belhar, Article 4). Further, in *Our World Belongs to God* we read that the church is a "new community," gathered by God, in which "all are welcome" (para. 34); that the church's mission in this broken world is a mission of proclaiming the gospel and its implications for life today (para. 41); and that, "restored in Christ's presence, shaped by his life, this new community lives out the ongoing story of God's reconciling love, announces the new creation, and works for a world of justice and peace" (para. 39). Such statements describe the mission of the church in general and provide foundation for the specific code of conduct presented here.

<sup>3</sup> Bev Sterk's overture to Synod 2018, titled "Address Patterns of Abuse of Power That Violate the Sacred Trust Given to Leaders and Recognize How These Hinder Due Process and Healing," and appendices specifically related to it, can be found in the Agenda for Synod 2018, pp. 282-307 (see [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources)). The subsequent action of Synod 2018 was to form an "Abuse of Power Committee" to study "how the CRCNA can best address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination" (Acts of Synod 2018, pp. 523-24). The work of Synod 2019 related to this overture can be found in the Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 794-96 (see [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources)). The particular recommendation calling for a code of conduct is recommendation 3, c (p. 795).

*My use of confidentiality will also be guided by mandatory reporting as required by law.*

### **Relational**

*I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve (1 Pet. 5; Mark 10; Phil. 2; 2 Tim. 4:2).*

*I will conduct myself with respect, love, integrity, and truthfulness toward all—regardless of position, status, race, gender, age, or ability.*

*To the best of my ability, I will contribute to an environment of hospitality.*

### **Financial**

*I will ensure that funds are used for their intended ministry purposes.*

*In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.*

*I will appropriately use accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits.*

### **Intimate Relationships**

*I will maintain standards and appropriate boundaries in all relationships, which are informed by the Scriptures.*

*I will keep all of my professional relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors. This includes not engaging in inappropriate intimate contact or a sexual relationship, unwanted physical contact, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes.*

### **Safety**

*I will actively promote a safe environment where all persons are respected and valued, where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.*

*I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors to the proper government authorities.*

*I will support adults who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that appropriately empowers the person who has been victimized.*

### **Spiritual**

*I will acknowledge the use of Scripture and the Spirit's work in the community of the church and, therefore, refrain from presuming to be the sole "voice of God."*

*I will use my position as a way to serve the body of believers, rather than myself, for the common good and the cultivation of the gifts of the Spirit.*

### **Additional Commitments**

*I will work within my professional competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate.*

*I will promote truthfulness, transparency, and honesty in all of my work.*

*I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.*

*In all that I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly and in nonexploitive ways.*

*In the event that I misuse my power, either intentionally or unintentionally, as a ministry leader, I will acknowledge the harm that has been caused and the trust that has been broken, and I will actively seek restoration with justice, compassion, truth, and grace. I will humbly submit to the insight and accountability of others to ensure that I use any power entrusted to me fully in service to Christ.*

(Minutes of the Special Meeting of the  
Council of Delegates 2021, p. 633)

*\*To be signed by . . . [a description of ministry leaders who will sign this Code of Conduct (similar to the notation following the Covenant for Officebearers)]*

- b. Revise Church Order Supplement, Article 13-c, section c as indicated by the following addition in *italics*:

**Supplement, Article 13-c, section c**

- c. The duties of the minister are spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling, and such duties do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church as required by one's signature to the Covenant for Officebearers *and the Code of Conduct*.
- c. Revise Church Order Article 83 as indicated by the following addition in *italics*:

*Article 83*

Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers *or the Code of Conduct*, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.

2. That synod adopt the following guidelines related to the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders:

- a. Who signs the code?

- CRCNA staff members
- Council of Delegates members
- Churches and classes should implement the code for council members and employees as part of an annual review.
- The Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is referenced in the Abuse of Power Training. It would also be included in the Calvin Theological Seminary Church Order course after the adoption of proposed Church Order changes. The Candidacy Committee will recommend that all Article 8 candidates be required to take the Abuse of Power training.

- b. Who is responsible for ensuring it is signed (e.g., councils, classes, and CRCNA ministry staff)?
- Councils, classes, COD, and denominational leadership
  - Safe Church Ministry has been encouraging churches to include a reference to the Code of Conduct in their policy. It is reviewed as part of the Safe Church training.
- c. What are the implications if individuals refuse to sign or deviate from the code?
- There are guidelines in the Supplement to Church Order re gravamina.
  - Each governing body would decide the ramifications.
  - Another team is discussing ramifications for Council of Delegates members for consideration by the COD.
  - Discipline would be tied to their *position* (not *membership* in the church).
  - Discipline is a local matter (for church or classis).
- d. Suggestions for incorporating the Code of Conduct include the following:
- Require all ministry staff in classes and churches to sign the Code of Conduct when they sign their contract upon hiring.
  - Conduct annual performance reviews with questions related to abuse and the code of conduct (see Addendum below) to ensure meaningful conversations. It is suggested that an elder, human resources professional, or personnel committee conduct the review so that an employee may freely share any potential forms of abuse. Or consider holding a separate conversation at another time of year to review the sample questions—an employee may not be as forthright in a performance-review conversation, considering the possibility of promotion/demotion/raises.
  - Incorporate into council training and orientation.
  - Include in church visitor training (also with the Healthy Church Executive survey from Pastor Church Resources).
  - The current CRCNA staff Code of Conduct can incorporate new elements from the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and be reviewed at the annual performance review.
5. That synod take note of the updates provided within the COD report on addressing directives of Synod 2019 regarding the abuse of power (II, A, 17, c):
1. Current review of the appeal process
  2. Development of restorative practices resources and training for staff
  3. Abuse of power training for candidates for ministry
  4. Ongoing implementation and monitoring of synod's directives
- T. That synod encourage classes and churches to make use of the *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan) resources, including visuals, conversation cards, and other tools to aid in engaging in the excitement and ownership of the ministry plan (II, B, 2).

U. That synod approve the evaluation reports with regard to Mercy and Justice from the following ministries: Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation, Centre for Public Dialogue, Disability Concerns, Indigenous Ministries, Race Relations, Office of Social Justice, Safe Church Ministry, and World Renew (II, B, 5; Appendix G).

V. That synod take note of the COD's ratification of Lindsay Wieland Capel as director of Disability Concerns, welcome her in her new role, and express gratitude on behalf of the denomination to Mark Stephenson for his work as the previous director of Disability Concerns and for his ongoing service as interim director of Social Justice/Race Relations (II, B, 6, a-b).

W. That synod receive as information the condensed financial statements of the agencies and educational institutions (Appendix H).

Council of Delegates of the  
Christian Reformed Church in North America  
Andy de Ruyter, chair

## **Appendix A**

### **Listening to the Voices of our LGBTQ+ Brothers and Sisters**

#### **I. Introduction**

Recognizing that Synod 2022 would be the first CRCNA synod to gather after an interruption of three years (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), and that the *Agenda for Synod* would contain a *significant* amount of consequential material, the Council of Delegates (COD) made two important decisions in spring 2021.

First, the COD called for a "Year of Prayer." The resulting initiative, *Together Seeking God's Face*, pulls together prayer groups from every corner of the denomination to seek God's face together in this critical season. We pray in the words of 2 Chronicles 20:12: "We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." This posture of prayer recognizes that whatever decisions we make will only flourish to the extent that they align with, and submit to, the leading of our good and faithful God.

Second, the COD asked for synodical delegates to listen to persons who have direct experience with some of the issues addressed in the Human Sexuality Report. What follows are two means of hearing the stories of diverse LGBTQ+ voices associated with our denomination: (1) a word of advice and best practices to help people engage local LGBTQ+ voices in their own contexts; and (2) a collection of curated stories representing some of the diverse experiences of people within our denomination, trying to live faithfully in light of our church's teaching on human sexuality.

I am grateful for the willingness of these individuals to share their stories, and I thank you, the reader/listener, in advance, for your willingness to hear them. When these stories are combined with the many other stories in the Human Sexuality Report, elsewhere in the agenda, and within our congregations and communities, we are reminded that our biblical and theological convictions are never doctrines to which we merely assent, but they are

guides for living faithfully in this real world. Whatever decisions we make in the months and years ahead, those decisions will be better if they can speak clearly and helpfully to the sincere questions and experiences expressed by voices like these.

Colin P. Watson, Sr., executive director  
Christian Reformed Church in North America

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## Part 1: Best Practices for Engaging LGBTQ+ Voices

### Engaging local LGBTQ+ voices in their context

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:10,15).

#### I. Recommendations

- Assign one or two council members, with whom congregation members might feel especially at ease, as story-listeners.
- Communicate to the whole congregation your council’s desire to hear stories from LGBTQ+ members or families, using the questions below as possible prompts. Make clear that the stories will be told in confidence. Invite members to contact the story-listeners.
- When each person comes to share their story, explain before they begin that you will not reference or retell their story in any way without their permission.
- If permission is given to share the story with the council, consider having two reflection rounds to hear in turn from each council member: (1) *How did you feel and/ or what did you think as you listened to these stories?* (2) *Do you have any initial suggestions regarding practical next steps the church might take to better pastorally care for our members?* Pray for members who shared stories and for your church as a whole.
- As a witness of Christian concern and an act of humble learning, consider contacting a local LGBTQ+ organization on behalf of the church and inviting some members of that organization to share with your council or other story-listeners.

#### II. Reminders

1. Although every congregation includes people with various stories, not all congregations are perceived as safe places for those stories to be told.
2. Assume that there will be stories you haven’t heard before and that there will be unexpected aspects to stories you thought you knew.
3. Unless told otherwise, assume that the people telling their stories, like you, love Jesus, love the church, and seek to live faithfully.
4. Unless told otherwise, assume that those who come from a traditional perspective also love their LGBTQ+ neighbor.

### III. Possible questions

1. What was your experience of realizing your sexuality or gender identity and being part of your congregation (or the CRC)?
2. How has the church been hurtful or helpful?
3. What was your response to the Theology of Human Sexuality report?
4. What resonated with you, and/or what troubled you about the Theology of Human Sexuality report?
5. Tell us about a person who really journeyed well with you.
6. Tell us about a person/situation that still hurts.
7. What do you hope for the CRC?
8. What do you see your future with the CRC to be?
9. What are some practical steps that your church can take now to make it a safe place for you?

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### Part 2: Stories from some LGBTQ+ members of the CRCNA

**Name:** Anonymous

**Gender:** Male

*In my era, sharing about one's sexuality would have led to ridicule, disgust, isolation, and perhaps even expulsion. I saw this happen to one of my friends, who shared his story with his congregation. The church was condemning and pushed him away. My friend turned to the only place that embraced him, and within a decade he had died from AIDS.*

*As a result, I chose to keep my struggle to myself—mourning my lack of intimacy and deep friendships, even as my classmates got married and started having children. Each one of their joys intensified my secret struggle.*

*To be honest, I did not want to be identified as gay. I knew what the Bible said. God did not create me to be gay. If I opened that "gay door," it would become easier and easier to walk down that road and eventually justify it.*

*Instead, I fought my sexuality—preferring to be celibate instead of what I understood to be sinful. It was a difficult struggle, especially when I met a kindred spirit. Our friendship developed into a relationship that lasted over a year. The entire time, I was in extreme turmoil. The love was real, the bond was deep, but I could not accept what I was doing. I eventually broke it off.*

*I had no safe place to turn to for advice or support. I knew that because of my convictions the gay life was not one I could sustain, but I had NO ONE to talk to about it.*

*To fill this gap, I started dating the opposite sex to see if I could find a mate. Whenever I shared my history with a girlfriend, the relationship fizzled out. My fear of "outing myself" extended to my family as well. They are all devout believers, and I did not want to disappoint them. Instead, I hid it from everyone and turned it off as best I could.*

*The temptation to ease back into a gay relationship and jump into the lifestyle never stopped—it was there that I could find more acceptance than the church. I struggled alone for decades.*

*I eventually found a woman with whom I could share my story. We got married. I can say that I am bisexual, with leanings toward the same sex. I have been redeemed by the truths of Scripture and the love of God the Father, which allow me to be in a heterosexual relationship.*

*Even so, the CRCNA is not a safe place for me to be open about this part of me. I have seen other adults “come out,” only to get shot down and eventually leave the church.*

*I do NOT understand why this is the case. One can have just about any other “sin” and be welcome in the church. One can get divorced, or drunk on a regular basis. One can lose their house because of gambling, or cheat their business partner out of a lot of money. In all of these cases, the church will gradually enfold you.*

*Similarly, church leaders and council members can be addicted to pornography, not pay their fair share of taxes, cheat on their spouse, not be kind and compassionate, ignore the poor/widow/orphans, be gluttonous, and still be accepted. But to those who are gay, the message “Sorry, you are not welcome here!” is still the norm.*

*I can imagine a scenario when a young man could talk with someone in their church about their struggles with homosexuality. A friendship would develop—Scriptures explored, acceptance granted, and guidance given when the storms approach.*

*We are not there as a denomination. Just a few years ago a young person in our church expressed his sexual confusion. Some were graceful, but far too many were judgmental. Within a half a year, he entered a same-sex relationship and turned his back on the church and the Savior he so much needed. Church, we need to wake up!*

**Name:** Anonymous

**Gender:** Female

*I became a Christian during my freshman year in college, not having gone to church before that. I became involved in an interdenominational, evangelical Christian group that gave me a strong foundation in the Christian faith.*

*When I was a graduate student and seeing a counselor, she said, “I think you are attracted to me.” I replied with confusion. I couldn’t understand how I could be sexually attracted to someone without being aware of it. This discussion ended with lots of shame. I spent the next 10 years of my life feeling shame every time I liked or cared about someone.*

*Interestingly enough, I became a professional counselor. I even led a support group for lesbian, bisexual, and other women. As part of this, I conducted an interactive workshop on “Christian and Gay?” and sought out a female minister to help with that program. She was affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church. I benefited greatly from my interactions with her, and it made me curious about the church, various denominations, and their beliefs.*

*This pastor told me that it was OK to love a woman, and encouraged me to explore what the Bible had to say about relationships and sex. I was affirmed in the idea that God could help me understand his word and his will. I didn’t need to blindly accept the views of another person or denomination.*

*About a decade earlier, lesbian friends had invited me to an event where I met a woman named Cheryl. As I was leaving that night, one woman brought me a piece of paper with Cheryl’s phone number on it. A week later, I called her for a movie date. I was open to exploring being friends or becoming more than friends. I did not think of myself as a lesbian, or even as being sexually attracted to her.*

*Slowly a relationship developed. I prayed and struggled about whether homosexuality was a sin and, specifically, whether I could be in a relationship with a woman.*

*Yet I felt strongly led by God to get involved with Cheryl. Physical intimacy with her required adjustment on my part. Emotional intimacy was so much more important. I knew that my primary reason for getting in a relationship with a woman was because I didn't want to be alone. I asked God to show me what he wanted. He confirmed several different times that he intended for Cheryl and I to be together.*

*Several years later, Cheryl experienced a spiritual rebirth, became a Christian, and questioned whether sex between us was OK with God. As a result, we stopped having a sexual relationship but continued in a strong bond that developed with Christian faith as a basis. Both of us grew independently in our walk with Christ.*

*When I was going through the process to become ordained as a deacon in my Evangelical Presbyterian church, I talked in-depth with my pastor about all of my experiences. I was accepted for who I am.*

*I've always felt "different." I've always tried to seek God and understand his will for my life. I've long wondered what he has in mind for Cheryl and I as we approach 28 years together. A friend recently asked me why we didn't get married, particularly with all of the benefits that married couples have. I replied that we don't have that kind of relationship. I said we are "Christian Life Partners," that we love the Lord and are sharing a life together.*

*I really liked the Banner article "Six Steps to Walk Well Alongside Your LGBT+ Friends." My hope for the CRC is summed up by the following:*

- 1. Love the people who are "different" in whatever way they are.*
- 2. Encourage them to seek God and his will and to develop a relationship with him.*
- 3. Don't judge.*
- 4. Don't try to "fix" them.*
- 5. Focus your efforts on the people who need to know Christ.*

**Name:** Anonymous

**Age:** 50s

**Gender:** Male

**Geographical Region:** Ontario, Canada

*I grew up in a small farming community in Ontario. Every Saturday, I'd carry my disgruntled attitude outside to slog manure, paint fences, and sweep barn floors. Attending church twice on Sundays was also a must—as were catechism classes, Tuesday night youth group, and potluck dinners. My small, tight-knit, Christian Reformed community was my life as an adolescent. I never fit in.*

*Unlike other boys who played hockey or built treehouses, I wanted to read books, write plays, create art, or bake cookies. I was afraid of what the boys would say if I got too close. I gravitated instead to befriending girls. That did not help address the inner turmoil I started to feel in my teenage years. Not only was I different from other boys; I was having a physical response when looking at them.*

*Never did I hear any sermon or teaching about sexuality in the church; nor did I learn anything about sex from my parents. I was silently afraid to talk to anyone. I believed I was a mistake, an unlovable freak because of my same-sex attraction.*

*One time, I got the courage to talk to the lead pastor of the CRC I attended. A few months later, he was ousted from the church for sexually abusing women in the congregation. The first church leader I trusted turned out to be an untrustworthy fraud. I retreated back into myself.*

*At this point, a wise, caring and thoughtful friend suggested I reach out to a Christian counselor. I reluctantly did, and I enrolled in a small group discipleship ministry. That is where I met Jesus for the first time and found a God I had never experienced before.*

*Within the safety of an authentic group of men, I received healing prayers. I confronted the lies I believed about myself. I understood some of what caused me to have same-sex feelings and attractions. I sought Jesus, who spoke to me in ways that touched my tattered heart. He redeemed and restored me and declared his love for me.*

*I eventually shared my story with trusted friends from my Christian Reformed community. They listened to me and embraced me. They did not pat me on the back and offer woeful platitudes. They did not leave me or encourage me to explore homosexuality. They stood with me in what Jesus was doing in my life. That was a turning point for me.*

*Do my parents know? I told them my story many years ago, and our relationship is now stronger and healthier than ever.*

*Did my same-sex feelings go away? No. However, they do not define who I am as an imagebearer and child of the heavenly Father.*

*Did I ever get discouraged? Absolutely, but I know I belong to God and he has something more and better for me.*

*Was I tempted? Yes, just like every other Christian. Yet I stay true to being the man he has created me to be.*

*In my late thirties, I put aside my desire to be married and become a father. I committed to being a single man, a faithful son and uncle, a good friend, a church leader, and a child of God. What I did not know or see was that he had other plans in store for me. Through events only he could orchestrate, I married an amazing woman who loves me for who I am. I am a father to two young boys.*

*I have not been “fully healed or cured” of my same-sex attraction. That was never the goal. Knowing Jesus, encountering his Spirit, and hearing the Father—this is the spiritual journey I have and continue to be on. My brokenness is not who I am. My life, in body and soul, belongs to my faithful Savior. That is the journey I am on.*

**Name:** Adelynn Campbell

**Age:** 26

**Gender:** Female

**Ethnicity:** European American

**Geographical Region:** Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with gender dysphoria. I hope it will give a unique viewpoint to consider as we continue to discern the proper approach to helping church members who may be struggling with it.*

*My name is Adelynn Campbell. I grew up attending a URC church in Hudsonville, Michigan, and continued in this tradition when I left to attend The King’s College in New York City. I loved the Reformed tradition and joined the CRC church when I returned to Grand Rapids in 2019.*

*Although I grew up abiding by the church’s teachings, there was always a disconnect for me regarding my gender identity. From a young age, I felt disconnected from my male body. This was expressed in the form of severe anxiety, chronic stomach pain, and stunted growth compared to my twin brother.*

*I aimed to be obedient to the church's teachings, so although I knew that I struggled with gender dysphoria, transition was off the table for me. Thus, I graduated from high school and went off to college as a young man.*

*Unfortunately, my gender dysphoria would only get worse from there. It eventually led me to temporarily drop out of college, bedridden with mystery symptoms. Most people do not understand the physical effects of dysphoria. By that time, I was experiencing vertigo, insomnia, mystery GI issues, and such severe nausea that I would throw up 4-5 times a day. I was severely underweight and was hospitalized multiple times.*

*I had been attending Christian counseling for a number of years to resolve my dysphoria without any success. I was finally diagnosed with gender dysphoria by Mark Yarhouse in 2016 after an eight-hour psychological examination. It was noted that my case was particularly severe.*

*This diagnosis felt right, but I couldn't help feeling sadness about my diagnosis and my faith. I spent many months in prayer before considering transitioning later that year. I had spent much of my life wrestling with dysphoria, and it was ultimately my increasingly significant health issues that convinced me that transitioning was the only option. There was no way for me to function physically or emotionally without the life-saving hormone replacement therapy.*

*My symptoms subsided soon after starting on this medication, as my body finally had the correct hormones it so badly needed.*

*I thought that with the severity of my physical symptoms and my lifelong dedication to the church, I would be met with openness to my transition. I was wrong. It pained me when the church I had grown up with sent me a letter that I was in violation of church teaching, was dishonoring my parents, and was not living up to my profession.*

*I was just short of excommunication when my home church stated that if I didn't "align myself with a Bible-believing church (one that taught it was a sin to transition)," my expunged membership would leave me "out of the communion table" and my very salvation would be called into question.*

*I understand that gender dysphoria has become increasingly common, especially in young children. I also know that the validity of gender dysphoria has been called into question as it has reached mainstream culture. In some cases, gender dysphoria is something that can be resolved with talk therapy. In other cases, such as my own, it is not able to be resolved without medical intervention.*

*My hope is that the church will approach gender dysphoria with an open mind and exercise extreme caution when making doctrinal statements.*

*I pray for caution, wisdom, and Spirit-filled pastoring in the coming decade. I pray that we will neither abandon the endeavor of clearly articulating a healthy sexual ethic, nor proclaim doctrine that will unnecessarily heavy the burden and yoke of my transgender brothers and sisters who are truly suffering.*

**Name:** Frank DeBoer

**Age:** 50s

**Gender:** Male

**Ethnicity:** Dutch Canadian

**Geographical Region:** Leduc, Alberta

*I grew up in a part of the CRCNA that was very familiar with the CRC's stance on homosexual activity, but not so familiar with the CRC position on homosexual*

orientation. I also wasn't aware that the CRCNA had expressed penitence of its treatment of homosexuals over the years. Hence, when I realized in my teen years that I was interested in boys rather than girls, I didn't think that I could discuss that with anyone—and certainly not with anyone in the church.

All I knew about sex was what I had been taught by my parents (that this was something that took place within marriage) and what I had gleaned from a few sermons in church and at weddings. I knew that sex was something beautiful, created by God to be part of a beautiful marriage.

Since none of this applied to my attraction toward boys and men, I fervently believed that this was a phase I was going through. In fact, I knew that doing anything sexual with boys was a total taboo in my church-dominated community, and thinking about it seemed to be evidence that I was a totally perverted young man.

By the time I entered my twenties, I was certain that I too would be a happily married heterosexual man with a family of my own by the time I was thirty. After all, others that might have flirted with sexual perversions (so I thought) had also been able to be happily married.

My church had taught me that all of us were sinful from birth (from the time of the fall), and that we were all atoned for by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sanctification, on the other hand, was something that took time and would never be a completed process this side of heaven. Hence, all of us, including those with sexual sins, were being cleansed in a process of sanctification. I was hoping and praying that I would be cleansed of my sexual perversions sooner rather than later.

My own study of God's Word seemed to confirm my hopes. My favorite, but also one of the scariest, passages of the Bible was from Romans 1. Here it was clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ was necessary for all.

*"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20).*

This echoed everything that I had always known. God was the awesome creator of the world. All of us knew this. But this passage was also scary because it spoke of human resistance to this knowledge, and that this idolatry led to all sorts of sin—most clearly in human homosexual acts (vv. 26-27) with one another.

There was no way I could ever discuss that with anyone in the church. It was simply too scary.

I only learned later that the CRCNA was aware that there were homosexuals (like me) among us, and that we didn't consider homosexual orientation sinful, let alone idolatrous. My fear is that if this report is implemented teens and young adults will continue to live in fear of their own homosexuality or reject the church altogether. Maybe we should spend more of our efforts on ministering to people where they're at rather than on getting our doctrinal positions right.

**Name:** Fred Heerema

**Age:** 70+

**Gender:** Male

**Ethnicity:** European Canadian

**Geographical Region:** Toronto, Ontario

*I grew up in the CRC and accepted God's gracious gift of salvation through Christ's sacrificial love at a young age. I professed my faith publicly before the First CRC of Thunder Bay, Ontario, in July 1969.*

*Since my earliest sexual awakenings, I have been same-sex attracted and hence felt "different" from most others around me. While I had various relationships with women when I was younger, I have never found a significant sexual desire there, and I believe my involvements were driven mostly by the desire to fit in with societal expectations, including those coming from the church.*

*From my earliest recollections I sensed from my church and society that it was not OK to be same-sex attracted. I was led to believe that to acknowledge or act on such inclinations would result in rejection by God, church, family, and society. Hence, for many years I had much difficulty reconciling my sexual orientation with other aspects of my life. Any sexual involvement I had with other men was covert and laden with significant guilt.*

*I realized this tension within could not go on. In my thirties I changed through personal psychotherapy and my involvement with a gay affirming non-CRC church. What a liberating message it was to know that God loved me fully just as I was. I matured and grew in confidence. This was also the place where I met my life partner, Lyle, more than thirty years ago now.*

*Lyle is also a Christian, and both of us decided to return to the CRC as I missed the richness of the Reformed worldview. We have attended First CRC of Toronto together for the past thirty years.*

*I believe that our presence and the congregation's welcome became mutually beneficial over time. First CRC Toronto hosted meetings of AWARE, a support group for gay and lesbian persons of CRC background, which was of assistance to us. The congregation and AWARE wrestled through many issues. There were periods of sharp pain in that journey—particularly when there was deep division within the congregation about the possibility of calling a gay pastor and also when the congregation later was perceived to be moving beyond acceptable CRC boundaries regarding officebearers.*

*For some time now the congregation has sought to extend God's love to all and come to embrace people of different sexual orientations. The congregation laments the lack of progress in the denomination toward fuller acceptance of sexual diversity—hence the current discussions before Synod 2022 are critical for our congregation and the denomination.*

*Recently I was asked to describe what I felt was evidence of God's grace in my life. I answered that God has held on to me by his grace despite the odds. As a gay man, I have been particularly blessed and sustained by my spouse, despite the general unwillingness, to date, of the CRC to proclaim and live out the reality that God's love and grace extends to us.*

**Name:** Vina Hendra

**Age:** 39

**Gender:** Female

**Ethnicity:** Asian

**Geographical Region:** Calgary, Alberta

*I come from a church-going family. The “good news” is something that I learned by attending church week in and week out. Jesus and church became a habit to me—something I did because I had always done it.*

*At 15 years of age, I had to leave home due to civil unrest. It was around that time that I started questioning what I actually believed and why I believed it.*

*In Calgary, throughout my university studies, I was involved in a Bible-believing, Jesus-loving church. It was in that church that I truly got to know Jesus, and my faith grew deeper. The value of discipleship, evangelism, and having nondisposable relationships became carved in my heart. This period of time lit a fire in my spirit and left me wanting to save the world for Christ.*

*This was also the time of my life when I began to discover that I was attracted to women. I prayed. I read everything I could get my hands on. I repented. I wrestled with God. And yet my same-sex attraction remained. I couldn’t reconcile that a God who loved me could leave me with something supposedly so abominable that my salvation was threatened.*

*My own guilt and anger—coupled with the unspoken, indirect responses that I received and heard from those around me—drew me away from church. It was a time filled with anger, disappointment, hopelessness, and apathy.*

*After a number of years, I began to miss having a church family and the close relationship I had with Jesus. I started attending Lantern Community Church (Calgary, Alta.) around 2014. There I found myself in a community of people who try to ask each other, “What can we do to live more like Jesus?” Their answer includes compassion, thirst for social justice, and being God’s hands and feet for the greater good.*

*Although Lantern’s pastors were not able to officiate our wedding due to CRCNA regulations, we had the privilege of one of them giving our marriage blessing. I don’t have words to describe what these few words felt like to my parched soul: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you . . . and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-26). It was like a refreshing rainstorm after a long period of drought.*

*In this 40th year of my life, I am thankful that (I think) I’m finally in a place where I am peacefully at home, deep in my spirit, with this part of my identity. Yes, it is only a part of it. And I have an internal at-home-ness with who God made me to be.*

*Throughout my time at the Lantern, I have always been aware that the topic of LGBTQ acceptance within the CRCNA is still in discussion. Personally it has not been an issue or hindrance for me. My family is welcomed at the Lantern. Our voices matter. I am able to serve in a leadership capacity.*

*But just because something is working, does it mean that it’s thriving? I wonder, is the CRCNA a place where I would want to invite others in the LGBTQ community to safely explore and experience the goodness of God?*

*Will the LGBTQ community hear loud and clear from the CRC the real hope of the “good news”: We are the beloved of God. It is not up to us to earn God’s love. Jesus’ work on the cross is enough.*

*Can the CRC be a place where differences of opinion are not a cause for deep divides, and where such a difference of opinion will not potentially cost someone their livelihood or their calling as pastors?*

*Will the CRCNA be a community of imperfect people filled with and striving toward peace, grace, and love, even in the midst of tension? I recognize these qualities with a local group of people called the Lantern. Will I also find it within the CRCNA?*

**Name:** Joey and Dana Hulst (sisters)

**Age:** late 20s

**Gender:** Female

**Ethnicity:** European American

**Geographical Region:** Michigan

*Before we dive into our more personal stories, we wanted to provide a bit of context about how we grew up and what our family was like. Probably one of the most significant things to note is that we grew up in a Christian family with the traditional view of same-sex marriage being sinful. Straight relationships were really the only type of relationship that we saw or perceived as “normal.” Because of that, we never considered that we might not be straight.*

*We also want to emphasize that we grew up in a wonderful and loving family. We have two parents who are amazing people. They have invested in us and loved us deeply. We have an older sister who is a gem and a fabulous human being. The three of us are very close, and we are still very close to our parents. We have never questioned their love for us, even though we know that they have a different biblical interpretation than we do about marriage.*

*It is also important to note that our Christian faith is very important to us. Often, LGBTQ individuals who were raised in traditional Christian households experience a lot of confusion and shame as they begin to self-identify. Both of us have clung tightly to our Christian faith and our love for Jesus. Our faith is still central in our lives.*

*I (Dana) realized that I wasn’t straight somewhere around my sophomore year of college. Looking back, I can see there were times, maybe even as early as fifth or sixth grade, when I had crushes on both guys and girls, but I had no idea how to frame those. It was just a fleeting thought and nothing I would seriously consider.*

*This lasted all the way through high school and was similar for Joey as well. We weren’t boy crazy and were very focused on school and sports. We were both extremely naive about our own sexualities.*

*Our time at a Christian university was when we both began to interrogate our understanding of sexuality and the biblical perspective about it. We were growing and learning for the first time about the reality of LGBTQ people and their experiences. We also attended a sexuality and gender awareness group that put on events to discuss LGBTQ matters. They brought in a diversity of speakers and content for students to discuss and learn from.*

*During university, we had some friends come out to us, and having those friendships helped us understand the challenges LGBTQ people face in the church. We began to think, “It’s possible to be an LGBTQ Christian who loves and follows Jesus!”*

*Within this environment, we each, in our own way, met girls that we would develop feelings for. Our stories are different, but for both of us it took us a long time*

to admit, and recognize within ourselves, that we were not straight. For me (Dana), that was coming to terms with being bisexual.

For me (Joey), what it took to realize that I am gay was kissing a girl. It was a moment of awakening and confusion! I thought, "Oh no, is this bad?" And then thought, "Wait, this explains so much. This is great!"

That relationship lasted about a year, but we did not label anything or tell anyone. We didn't label ourselves as gay, and we didn't label our relationship. Unfortunately, I think that secrecy and hiding is very common among Christian people.

I felt ashamed because I thought it was sinful to be in a relationship with a woman, and I feared that my family and friends would reject me if they knew. That relationship ultimately ended because of several challenges. My next relationship lasted for about six years, and that was also in the closet.

When I finally started to come out, I had major anxiety about going to church with my girlfriend. I was afraid people would ask me who she was, and I'd be forced to either lie or face potential backlash. It's disturbing that I felt safer lying to the people around me than to be openly out in my church.

Up until a year ago I (Dana) had never been out at church. That changed when I started attending an affirming Reformed church with my girlfriend. Before then it was as if my bi identity didn't exist at church. That's really not how it should be. We're taught we should bring our whole selves to church—that's what makes the church beautiful—but I never felt comfortable doing that at my home church.

We both are so grateful to be living authentically. We came out because we believe that in life God calls us to be honest and genuine about who we are. Integration in our lives has been key to feeling joyful and whole.

We are sharing our story here because we believe the church needs to hear stories from LGBTQ people. Too often the church has not listened or created safe spaces for LGBTQ people to share in the past. We strongly feel that the church must reckon with the harm they have done to LGBTQ people and begin to move forward with more grace and love.

To LGBTQ people, we hope our stories are an encouragement to you that you don't have to leave your faith behind. There are LGBTQ Christians who love Jesus and also think that it is perfectly fine to be who you are. Jesus loves you.

**Name:** Neil and Virginia Lettinga

**Age:** 60s

**Gender:** Male and Female

**Ethnicity:** White

**Geographical Region:** Victoria, British Columbia

Nineteen years ago, our son was a Calvin College student with the muscles to let him march Drum Corps, playing the euphonium in the summer. He was a soccer enthusiast and in love with a young woman he'd met at Calvin.

About six years ago, he bought a wig and began to ask people to use female pronouns for him, unless one is talking about him as a young person. In those situations, "he" remains the appropriate pronoun.

This is not easy territory for parents to traverse! We'll admit that we often fumble as we talk about "him" as a child and "her" in the present. And still, we are deeply aware that our situation is nowhere near as complicated and painful as the situation that many parents of trans people experience!

*She is an adult who understands and discusses her gender identity issues as “gender dysphoria.” She has been considerate in avoiding outing herself in ways that would trouble elderly relatives. We feel grateful for this.*

*At this point, she is not particularly unhappy with her body, though she now dresses in faintly feminine tropes—pink T-shirts or scarves. This means that we are not flinching over hormones or voice changes. We are not parents who feel like our child is rewriting the past or was warped by a gender identity that we should have recognized decades ago. We know parents whose hearts have been torn and tangled in the midst of these sorts of scenarios.*

*Instead, in the midst of switching to female pronouns, this has been a season in which she has rooted her identity in Christ. We find this too a bit bewildering. At the same time, it is impossible not to be glad for this. She has found community in a local Anglican church, which is loving if not precisely affirming. She has also become part of an online, Reformed worship gathering of great inclusivity. She has also helped trans and LGBTQ+ friends and acquaintances consider Jesus and reconsider churches. It is impossible for us not to be glad for this too.*

*Last fall we shared our experiences via a written note to the congregation with whom we currently serve as specialized transitional staff. In the midst of the discussions about the Human Sexuality Report and local responses to LGBTQ+ members, we wanted them to understand some of our personal situation.*

*We have received warm and supportive responses from many in the congregation—particularly the elderly. For many of them, our sharing was the green light to let them tell the stories of the gender or sexual identity issues of their children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren.*

*We continue to be questioned and grilled by a few members of the congregation. Sometimes this is tiresome, but we choose to not see this as aggressive and troubling.*

*We long for all believers to root their identity in Christ. Not in being male or female. Not in being old or young. Not in our careers or hobbies. We feel grateful for the tentative approach that the HSR authors took toward the muddy, and very contemporary, questions of gender identity. We regret the lack of good bridges that exist between the more pastoral portion of the report and the executive summary of the report.*

**Name:** Ryan Struyk

**Age:** 30

**Gender:** Male

**Ethnicity:** White

**Geographical Region:** Washington, D.C.

*One night in seventh grade, I remember writing the single word “PROBLEM” in big capital letters in my secret bedroom journal.*

*As the son of a CRC pastor, I grew up in local Christian schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan, attending Sunday school and youth group hangouts with friends and family who loved Jesus and loved the church like I did.*

*But in that moment I began to grapple with a new and unsettling realization: I’m gay.*

*I never thought I would say those words out loud to anyone. Being attracted to men is not a choice I made, and it’s never something that I would have chosen at the time.*

*It took almost another decade for me, as a student at Calvin University, to force out my deepest, darkest secret for the first time. I remember several late nights leading up to that day, sitting in my car, crying and begging God to let me be attracted to just one girl, and hoping that one day I'd suddenly want a girlfriend, 2.5 kids, and my white picket fence.*

*My attraction to men, much like any heterosexual attraction, is so much more than the physical. It's a deep emotional draw, a desire to have a best friend, to know what makes a man smile, to know his fears and his dreams, and to love him well.*

*The Christian Reformed Church is my home.*

*From sitting on mom's lap while she played piano in worship, to taking a whipped-cream pie to the face at vacation Bible school, to changing the church sign in the freezing Michigan winter snow, it's hard to overstate the way the church has shaped my life.*

*I launched my journalism career at The Banner, earned my bachelor's degrees from Calvin University, and served its members on a synodical panel. Many of my dear friends are ordained in this denomination. The Reformed idea that Jesus Christ cries "Mine!" over every square inch of creation animates my career.*

*My baptism, also in the Christian Reformed Church, has rooted my life in turbulent times. My baptism tells me that, with full knowledge of all the ups and downs of my life, and full knowledge that I am gay, God promised me that I belong in God's family.*

*Integrating my faith and sexuality remains one of the most difficult and complicated journeys of my life. There are no easy answers, and I am far from finished.*

*But my deep desire is to be able to engage with these questions at home.*

*That's why I have grave concerns about elevating our current position on homosexuality to confessional status. Multiple synods have warned against this for a half century: Do not single out same-sex marriage as more important than any other issue.*

*Synod 1975 said our denomination's positions on same-sex marriage and other issues are "settled and binding." To enshrine this position as confessional is not only unnecessary; it would effectively show the door to baptized children of the Christian Reformed Church, like me, who love Jesus, love this denomination, and still have questions about how God is calling them to navigate a very complicated area of their lives.*

*I'm confident that every single congregation in our denomination has at least one child—once baptized at our font, now sitting in our pew—who is hiding the same secret that I once did. And, no matter what, I deeply want our denomination to remain home for them, and for me too.*

**Name:** Kat

**Age:** 32

**Gender:** Trans\*

**Ethnicity:** European American

**Geographical Region:** Midwestern U.S.

*I was born and raised in a Christian home, going to church every Sunday morning. I often questioned why I had to wear uncomfortable, frilly Sunday dresses that would inhibit my movement to dive for a football, or would restrict my ability to shoot a basketball. Moments like these left me discouraged and feeling far away from God's love.*

*As I entered middle school, I started to see other ways in which I did not fit in with girls my own age. I struggled to relate to the ways they talked about boys, but I was also drawn to them. I wanted to understand what made other girls tick. I wanted to get them to laugh, think I was funny, and be interested in who I was.*

*When in our girls' Bible study at church, we discussed what it meant to honor God with our femininity—that we should be modest, and dress for God . . . —I looked down at my skirt that felt ALL wrong, my disdainful girl-fitted shirt, and those clunky shoes that were not doing anyone any favors.*

*“How can I honor God with this femininity,” I wondered. “I hate everything feminine about me.”*

*I concluded that because I did not perceive myself as feminine that I must be dishonoring God. When I turned 18, I found myself in a same-sex relationship. It was not a hard decision to leave the church. I thought I was not only doing myself a favor, but also one for those around me. I just wasn't the “Christian type.”*

*I looked to fill the open spaces in my heart with relationships and discovering who I was. After ten years of this frantic filling, I was still just as lost, lonely, and unfulfilled.*

*I was looking to move forward with the woman I had been dating for three and a half years. I felt that marriage was the logical next step. As I started to envision what I wanted my life to look like as a married person, church was always part of that picture. I thought to myself, “Well, God didn't work out for me, but maybe it will work out for my wife and kids.”*

*I convinced my girlfriend to go back to church. We attended a megachurch where we could breeze in and out. After a month or so, God gave me language for something I didn't understand before. He showed me all the fear I was living in, and he revealed to me that the discomfort I had going into public women's restrooms was actually fear. I feared being an imposter in those spaces.*

*God showed me the fear I was living in, but he also showed me that he didn't want me to live there anymore. He was speaking to my soul, calling me back to himself.*

*“Let me break the bondage that you have around you,” he seemed to say.*

*I sought out a more intimate church experience where I was continuously wrecked by God's overwhelming love for me. It was here that I met someone that would journey with me through the questions I had about God and what he thought about my sexuality and my gender identity questions.*

*She unveiled who Jesus was and how he saw me. We walked through what it would cost me to follow him.*

*The theology of suffering and surrender was undeniable to me. Jesus lived a perfect life, died a death that I deserved to die. He is in the suffering. He is in the surrendered places. If that is where he is, that is where I want to be.*

*Because his love, his promises, his presence is real and worthy of our sacrifices. I surrender my life because that is what he did for us. I do it out of love for the Savior, not for fulfillment of law.*

**Appendix B**  
**COD Communication to Synod 2022 re Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan**

To: The Delegates of Synod 2022 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America  
From: The Council of Delegates (COD)  
Date: September 17, 2021  
Re: Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Greetings in the Lord,

The decision of Neland Avenue CRC to ordain a deacon who is in a same-sex relationship to active service as an officer of the church has generated broad discussion within the CRCNA. Because the synod of the CRCNA has not met since 2019, the Council of Delegates has sought to balance the need to act in lieu of synod while also respecting the limits of our polity and the appropriately assigned roles of our respective assemblies.

On October 29, 2020, the COD sent a letter of concern to Neland Avenue CRC expressing regret and disappointment regarding their action. As the COD met again in lieu of synod in June 2021, and in response to a number of letters and overtures, the members of the COD discussed the matter and continued to lament the fact that, except for providing a rationale via communication, Neland Avenue CRC took no action to reverse their decision. The following motion was therefore adopted by the COD:

That the COD send a “formal communication” to Synod 2022, reaffirming the COD letter of admonition and grave concern to Neland Avenue CRC and urging Synod 2022 to be mindful of the three marks of the true and vital church.

*Grounds:*

1. The COD Governance Handbook states that “the COD itself may judge that synod would be well served by a formal communication in response to a matter on synod’s agenda.”
2. In a time of denominational turmoil, it is incumbent on the COD to reaffirm our denominational commitments and to add further weight in hopes of preventing other churches from taking independent actions that bypass Church Order.

*(Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021, pp. 629-30)*

In that spirit, we remind all synodical delegates of our shared confessional understanding that “the true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head” (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

We continue to regret that we as a denomination are at this point of fissure, and we pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit the deliberations of Synod 2022 in this matter will bear fruit and begin to restore biblical unity within the body that is the CRCNA.

Chair – Council of Delegates  
Andy de Ruyter

Vice Chair – Council of Delegates  
Michael Ten Haken

**Addendums:**

Addendum 1: Letter to Neland Avenue CRC, October 29, 2020

Addendum 2: Excerpt from *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021* regarding the Neland Avenue CRC matter

**Addendum 1**

October 29, 2020

Dear Members of Council of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church,

On behalf of the Council of Delegates (COD) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, we express deep concern for the recent action taken by the Council of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. In the COD's judgment, your action to ordain a deacon in a same-sex relationship "break(s) covenant" with the denomination. This is a serious matter that has caused deep pain and concern to many, and regarding which we have received letters and various communications. In addition, it has been reported in *The Banner* and in the *Chimes* and continues to impact the church and its witness.

At a time when the world needs to see the church unified, it grieves us that we continue to experience divisions and record actions that are antithetical to Jesus' command and prayer for unity as recorded in John 17. May he continue to cover us with his healing spirit.

At its meeting October 14-16, the Council of Delegates adopted the following motion:

That the Council of Delegates send a letter to Neland Avenue CRC council, grieving Neland's decision to break covenant with the CRC and ordain a deacon who is actively involved in a same-sex relationship before Synod 2021 has addressed the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

We acknowledge the complexity of the process for addressing this issue—specifically regarding the role of the COD, its relationship to the churches, and the possibilities for the matter to come before synod. It is true that the COD does not have governance over Neland's council. However, we would remind you of the current CRCNA synodical position statements on human sexuality and ordination—and that the proper way to go about changing synodical positions is via an overture to synod.

Since the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality will be published soon, we hope that you and other churches and classes use the report as an opportunity for engaging with synod on this issue via overtures.

The apostle Paul calls us in Ephesians 4:2-3 to "be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love," and to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

May God lead us through this difficult time as we continue to seek his face and direction.

With you, in his service,



Colin P. Watson, Sr.  
Executive Director of the CRCNA



Paul DeVries  
President, Council of Delegates of  
the CRCNA

## **Addendum 2**

Excerpt from *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, pp. 629-30

On the Neland Avenue matter, the COD has already acted. A letter of admonishment was sent to the council on behalf of the COD. It acknowledged our disappointment in their actions and lamented the breaking of community that resulted. Going further than that would be outside the scope of our mandate. The COD cannot discipline a local council. Anything we do would be an interim action until synod is able to meet and act.

As a COD we urgently request that all congregations prayerfully maintain unity and seek to live within the procedures of our covenant. This includes taking a posture of listening to each other and to those with whom we disagree.

### *C. Recommendations*

1. That the COD, on behalf of synod, defer action on overtures and other communications regarding the Neland Avenue CRC matter (Overtures 4-10) and refer them to Synod 2022 for action, while pleading with all congregations in the denomination to maintain covenant with each other and respect proper procedure with regard to these matters.

#### *Grounds:*

- a. The COD has already addressed this matter in previous response and communication.
- b. The report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, which will be received and acted upon by Synod 2022, will provide a natural opportunity to deliberate and make decisions regarding this matter. In fact, the actions of Synod 2022 in regard to this report will heavily influence a proper response to Neland Avenue CRC's actions.

— *Adopted*

The following negative votes are registered: Wendell Davelaar (Northcentral Iowa), Bruce DeKam (Northern Michigan), Sherry E. Fakkema (Pacific Northwest), Jose Tony Lara (Arizona), Roger W. Sparks (Minnesota), Drew Sweetman (Muskegon), Mark Vande Zande (Heartland), Tyler J. Wagenmaker (Zeeland), Ralph S. Wigboldus (Huron), and George R. Young (Hudson).

A delegate presents the following motion:

That the COD send a "formal communication" to Synod 2022, reaffirming the COD letter of admonition and grave concern to Neland Avenue CRC and urging Synod 2022 to be mindful of the three marks of the true and vital church.

*Grounds:*

- a. The COD Governance Handbook states that “the COD itself may judge that synod would be well served by a formal communication in response to a matter on synod’s agenda.”
- b. In a time of denominational turmoil, it is incumbent on the COD to reaffirm our denominational commitments and to add further weight in hopes of preventing other churches from taking independent actions that bypass Church Order.

— *Adopted*

2. That the COD, on behalf of synod, not accede to Overture 11.

*Grounds:*

- a. The COD, in its previous letter to Neland Avenue CRC (Oct. 29, 2020), acted in accordance with the denomination’s position.
- b. Any COD actions, by their very nature, are received and evaluated by the next synod. It would be better for Synod 2022 to evaluate the appropriateness of the letter than for the COD to do so while meeting in lieu of synod.

— *Adopted*

## **Appendix C**

### **Curriculum Vitae: Dr. Zachary J. King**

#### **Objective**

To discern whether God could be calling me to leadership in the Christian Reformed Church as general secretary.

#### **Education**

**Bachelor of Arts** in Religion and Theology, December 1998

**Bachelor of Science** in Geology, August 1998, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan

**Master of Divinity**, May 2003, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

**Master of Theology** in New Testament, May 2005, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

**Doctor of Philosophy** in New Testament, February 2017, Free University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

#### **Ministry experience**

**Seminary professor** with Resonate Global Mission at Veenstra Seminary in Donga, Nigeria (2002-2003). Reason for termination: end of agreed-upon term.

- Taught adult students courses in theology, biblical interpretation, and ministry skills
- Administered essential ministries of the seminary with other staff
- Cared for the spiritual well-being of students and their families
- Led in worship at the school chapel and local church services

**Interim pastor** of Second CRC, Allendale, Michigan (2004-2005). Reason for termination: end of agreed-upon term.

- Provided preaching and worship leadership
- Helped congregation to discern mission and vision after retirement of the former pastor and before the calling of a new pastor
- Taught catechism, Bible studies, adult education, etc.
- Provided pastoral care for congregants

**Field leader and church and leadership developer** with Resonate Global Mission, Haiti (2005-2017). Reason for termination: promotion.

- Administered the work of Resonate and coordinated the combined ministry of Resonate, World Renew, and ReFrame Ministries in Haiti
- Provided support and mentoring to pastors, lay leaders, and church planters to strengthen their congregations in worship, evangelism, teaching, discipleship, administration, pastoral care, etc.
- Led and organized the strategic planning process for the ministries of the CRCNA, including the development of mission, vision, strategies, etc.
- Supervised Resonate international and local staff and shared local staff of the CRCNA agencies in Haiti
- Designed and led a process of evaluation for Resonate ministry partners and the combined CRCNA ministry team
- Managed and resolved conflict between staff members of denominational agencies
- Promoted the work of Resonate to a network of churches and donors in order to raise support through preaching, worship leading, and personal visits

**Director**, Resonate Global Mission (2017 to present)

- Nurtured a culture of listening, care, accountability, binationality, and learning within an organization of 150 employees scattered around the world
- Provided spiritual leadership to staff members through times of devotion, reflection, retreat, and rest
- Shepherded a team of 6-8 Canadian and American departmental leaders in growing trust and commitment to each other and Resonate's vision
- Advocated for the integration of ethnic minorities in Resonate ministry and support departments
- Organized and led evaluation and change management strategy that integrated the ministries and processes of Christian Reformed World Missions and Christian Reformed Home Missions, each over one hundred years old
- Strengthened the partnership and integration of Resonate's U.S.-based and Canada-based staff and ministries
- Supported CRC governance such as the Global Missions Ministries Committee and Resonate Subcommittee (Council of Delegates) and synodical advisory committees through reporting, meetings, vision casting, etc.

- Engaged American and Canadian congregations and donors to support Resonate’s budget of \$20 million USD through regular preaching, personal visits, donor appeals, videos, correspondence, etc.
- Managed crises including interpersonal conflict (between and within agencies), security (kidnapping and evacuation), sexual and physical abuse by staff, etc.
- Communicated Resonate’s vision, mission, priorities, and postures to staff regularly through a variety of media
- Stewarded a culture of networking within the CRCNA between agencies and ministries of the CRCNA (such as World Renew, ReFrame Ministries, Raise Up Global Ministries, Calvin Theological Seminary, etc.) and outside (Reformed Church in America, other parachurch, and denominational organizations)
- Prioritized my own growth as a leader through spiritual direction, coaching, peer mentoring, and retreats

### **Additional experience**

**Vice-president** of the Board of Adoration Christian Centre in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (2010-2017)

- Assisted in the development of vision, mission, and policies for the Reformed Christian day-school (K-6)

**Board member** of the Consortium for the Reinforcement of Christian Education in Haiti (2014-2017)

- Assisted in the development of vision, mission, and policies for the organization and its staff
- Provided oversight and encouragement for the director and other key employees

**Founding member** of Timothy Leadership Training (TLT) Coordination Team in Haiti (2009-2017) and master trainer

- Developed TLT small groups in local churches as a means to equip lay leaders in basic ministry and leadership skills
- Mentored pastors and lay leaders in pastoral care, stewardship, preaching, teaching, and community outreach

**Elder** of Quisqueya Chapel in Port-au-Prince Haiti (2011-2013)

- Assisted church board in staff supervision
- Regular preaching and occasional teaching of Sunday school (2010-2017)
- Provided guidance as a pastoral adviser in challenging situations

**Internships** in church planting in Bayamón, Puerto Rico (2000) and in established church ministry in Paw Paw (Mich.) CRC (2002) as part of the requirements for my master of divinity degree

### **Languages**

- English: Fluent in speaking, comprehension, and writing
- Spanish: Intermediate speaking, comprehension, and writing
- Haitian Kreyol: Fluent in speaking, comprehension, and writing
- French: Intermediate in reading

## **Theses and dissertations**

- *The Delay of the Parousia and Gentile Inclusion in the Synoptic Parables*, Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation for the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
- *The Ethical Admonition of Watchfulness and the Timing of the Parousia*, Master of Theology Thesis for Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005

## **Appendix D**

### **Ecclesiastical Mandate Letter**

#### **Christian Reformed Church in North America - Canada**

*Note:* The following document is being reviewed by legal counsel. An updated version will be submitted to synod by way of the COD Supplement.

#### **Preamble**

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) is a Reformed denomination composed of approximately 1,100 congregations that operates in both the United States and Canada. The CRCNA values being a binational denomination for the opportunity it provides to combine pursuit of a common mission with an intentional and meaningful engagement with different national, regional, and local contexts for ministry.

#### **Background**

While Reformed churches historically have been organized by national boundaries, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in the United States began to work with churches in Canada in the early 1900s. As more immigrants arrived in Canada after World War II, the CRC helped to organize and support the formation of Christian Reformed churches across Canada. These early efforts contributed to the development of the CRC as a binational church. The sense of its binational identity became official when a statement of its character as one church in two countries was adopted by Synod 1997 of the CRC (*Acts of Synod 1997*, pp. 625-29).

#### **The Place of Canada**

Historically, the organizing center of the Christian Reformed Church has been in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since its establishment in 1857, the headquarters of the CRC and most of its ministry agencies, institutions, and organizations have been located there. Over time, however, a number of influences framed the need to establish and affirm Canada's place within the CRC.

*Identity:* As citizens of Canada, members and their congregations felt called to participate, plan, manage, and support its mission and ministry in Canada. They wanted to own and be engaged in what the church was doing in Canada.

*Mission and ministry:* Canadian members and congregations began to address and/or be involved in social-justice issues, ministry with the poor and with Indigenous peoples, interchurch relations, and interaction with

governments. They also wanted the church to be positioned in Canada to make a difference for the sake of God's kingdom.

*Governmental:* As a registered charity, the CRCNA Canada Corporation (CRCNA Canada) is required to comply with Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) regulations as well as other federal and provincial laws that regulate privacy and employment standards and labor relations. These regulations are different from United States federal and state law.

### **CRCNA Canada**

In 1985, the CRCNA established the CRCNA Canada Corporation (CRCNA Canada) to serve as a legal registered charity. CRCNA Canada is organized and operated exclusively for religious purposes in compliance with Canadian federal and provincial law, and in accordance with the fundamental principles of Reformed doctrine and government as expressed in Article 32-d of the CRCNA Church Order.

CRCNA Canada is governed by a Board of Directors whose membership is constituted by synod from every CRC Classis in Canada, from whom the directors as well as directors-at-large are elected. The Board hires and supervises an Executive Director who is responsible to manage the day-to-day affairs of the CRCNA Canada Office. Among some of those responsibilities are ensuring compliance with the Canada Revenue Agency regulations regarding registered charities; managing Joint Ministry Agreements (JMAs) with other CRCNA organizations; working cooperatively with other organizations, institutions, and agencies to implement the CRCNA Ministry Plan; and, in concert with churches and classes, identifying and addressing ministry priorities and initiating ministries in Canada.

### **Ecclesiastical mandate and partnership**

The Christian Reformed Church in North America established CRCNA Canada to serve in ecclesiastical partnership with its synod, its Council of Delegates, and the Office of General Secretary.

The CRCNA partnership is animated by key values:

*Shared mission:* We share a similar passion for God's kingdom work, and we work together for one purpose. The CRCNA has a shared sense of its mission, expressed in congregations and ministries in Canada and the United States and through partnerships around the world.

*Culture:* We recognize that the CRCNA is one denomination in two countries in North America, and it has national identities and many distinct cultural contexts applicable in different geographies. We recognize the cultural context of each location and how the distinct political and legal realities shape each context and influence how we engage together in ministry.

*Mutual accountability:* We serve together as partners to advance the mission and ministry of the CRCNA. As partners, CRCNA Canada leads ministry in Canada and CRCNA United States leads ministry in the United States. As partners, we serve together to advance the joint ministries of the CRCNA. As equal partners, we are ecclesiastically accountable to synod

and its Council of Delegates, and we are in partnership with the Office of General Secretary.

*Gracious organizational space:* We take a posture of making gracious organizational space that provides freedom of expression, local agency, and decision making. We recognize the variety of ministry contexts internationally, nationally, regionally, and locally. Developing that space involves discerning how to develop and do ministry in each context.

As an ecclesiastical partner, CRCNA Canada is responsible to fulfill the following:

1. Agent of synod

The synod is governed by the Church Order and by its rules of synodical procedure. The mandates of synod guide the ecclesiastical organization of the CRCNA. CRCNA Canada will transact matters assigned to it by the synod to further its mission and ministry in Canada.

2. CRCNA Ministry Plan

CRCNA Canada will contribute to the formation, development, implementation, and evaluation of the CRCNA Ministry Plan. The CRCNA Ministry Plan will include ministry programs and activities that are culturally appropriate to Canada and will identify opportunities to establish ministry partnerships to further its mission and ministry in Canada.

3. Canada Office

CRCNA Canada will establish and operate the Canada Office of the CRCNA. The Canada Office will be led by an Executive Director. Among some of the responsibilities, the Canada Office will do the following:

- Manage the affairs of CRCNA Canada as a registered charity
- Develop, contextualize, implement, and evaluate the CRCNA Ministry Plan to ensure ministry is culturally appropriate
- Partner with local churches and classes to identify and address ministry priorities
- Develop and manage the JMAs with CRCNA organizations and ministry partners
- Represent and maintain ecumenical and ecclesiastical relationships in Canada in partnership with the General Secretary

4. Ministry organizations, institutions, and agencies

CRCNA Canada will enter into Joint Ministry Agreements with ministry organizations, institutions, and agencies in Canada, the United States, and internationally to advance its mission and purpose. Some CRCNA organizations include CRCNA US, Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, ReFrame Ministries, and World Renew.

5. Dissolution

The mandates of synod shall regulate the ecclesiastical organization of the CRCNA, including CRCNA Canada. In the event of division, liquidation, dissolution, or winding up, Church Order Article 32-d and its synodical supplement material provides a guide and model to be followed.

## Appendix E Proposed Revised Mandate of CRCNA Historical Committee

By synodical decision, the Historical Committee and the executive director of the CRCNA are responsible for<sup>1</sup> the official Archives of the Christian Reformed Church and its agencies, while administrative oversight is provided by the Hekman Library of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary. The Historical Committee ordinarily communicates with the Hekman Library through the Hekman Library Archives Advisory Council. The Historical Committee also cultivates within the Christian Reformed Church, the wider church, and the academic world,<sup>2</sup> knowledge of and appreciation for the CRCNA's history, heritage, and legacy by, among other things, identifying and assisting in accumulation of resources.<sup>3</sup>

*Note:* This proposal is accompanied by two recommendations from the Historical Committee:

A. That the executive director of the CRCNA serve as an ex officio member of the Historical Committee.

<sup>1</sup> "Be responsible for denominational archives and historical documents and administer the right of access to such documents" is the exact wording of the job description of the CRCNA executive director adopted in 2004 (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, p. 93; *Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 552-53). This statement was repeated verbatim in the executive director's 2017 revised position description (*Agenda for Synod 2017*, p. 96). The expression "responsible for" was not specifically stated in the revised 1969 Mandate of the Historical Committee but is an accurate summary statement of the mandate:

The Historical Committee shall gather, preserve and supervise the official Archives of the Christian Reformed Church and cultivate in the Christian Reformed Church knowledge of and appreciation for the church's history. (*Acts of Synod 1969*, p. 74)

However, synod failed to clarify how these two "responsible" agents of synod related to one another. This oversight led to jurisdictional uncertainty that could have been avoided if the executive director had been made an ex officio member of the Historical Committee as is done in the other standing committees of synod.

This proposal ends the potential conflict and honors previous synodical decisions.

By using the expression "are responsible for," this revision also clarifies a potential misunderstanding in the 1969 mandate: the active verbs in the 1969 mandate—"shall gather, preserve and supervise"—had to be changed because they suggest that the actual work of "gathering, preserving, and supervising" (i.e., managing) the archives is the responsibility of the Historical Committee. While this may have been true in the very beginning of the Historical Committee's existence (after 1934), it has not been true for many years—this activity, including management (supervision) is done by the curator and staff of Heritage Hall. Today the Historical Committee's synodically mandated responsibility for the denominational archives does not mean that it serves as a kind of "super-management team," directly involved in every detail of the archives. The archives are administered on a day-to-day basis by the staff of Heritage Hall under the administration of the Hekman Library. To encode this important distinction in the mandate of the Historical Committee by adding the reference to *administrative oversight* by the Hekman Library seems prudentially wise.

<sup>2</sup> This expands the horizons of Heritage Hall's educational mission beyond the CRC and more accurately reflects what is happening in the world of scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> "Heritage" and "legacy" were added (a) to suggest that the CRC's history is more than merely a matter of antiquarian interest but a vital part of its current mission, and (b) to include the wider impact of the Christian Reformed Church in North America on its surroundings, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

*Ground:* This brings the Historical Committee into alignment with the other standing committees of the CRCNA synod.

B. That the president of Calvin University (or a designee) and the president of Calvin Theological Seminary (or a designee) serve as ex officio members of the Historical Committee.

*Grounds:*

1. It is appropriate that all three financial stakeholders in Heritage Hall (which includes the denominational archives) have a significant role in the work of the Historical Committee's responsibility for the archives.
2. The ongoing involvement of all three financial stakeholders in the work of the Historical Committee is the best way to avoid any potential conflict between the stakeholders and the Historical Committee.

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### **Memorandum of Understanding between the Historical Committee and the Archives Advisory Council**

A. The Historical Committee (HC) participates in the work of the Archives Advisory Council (AAC) by appointing two of its members to serve on the AAC. These two members and the chair of the AAC bear chief responsibility for maintaining clear and open lines of communication between the AAC and HC.

B. The Historical Committee will receive and review the agenda and minutes of all AAC meetings.

C. The Historical Committee is to be consulted and its advice sought on all major proposals before the AAC, including the following:

1. annual budget and major budget expenditures
2. major strategic policy initiatives
3. key staff positions

D. In cooperation with the staff of Heritage Hall, the Historical Committee will seek to live into the second half of its mandate by means of the following:

1. Maintaining contact with regional (classical) representatives, encouraging them to keep alive the need to preserve the stories of their churches, their mission outreach, and their social engagement.
2. Encouraging and supporting the use of the archives by CRC members, students, and scholars outside the CRC.
3. Encouraging and soliciting gifts to the *Origins* endowment fund.
4. Cultivating, maintaining contact with, and actively participating in networks of people interested in the content of our archives, including scholars within and outside the CRC, other church archives (such as those of the RCA), archives of educational institutions (particularly colleges and universities in the Reformed tradition), and organizations such as the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies (AADAS).

E. The Historical Committee will ask synod to expand its membership as follows:

1. By including the executive director of the CRCNA, *ex officio*; this will bring the Historical Committee into alignment with other standing committees of the CRCNA (already in process).
2. By including the curator of Heritage Hall, *ex officio*; this has been the practice for many years and needs to be regularized by synod.
3. By including the president of Calvin University (or a designee) and the president of Calvin Theological Seminary (or a designee), *ex officio*. This would bring all three financial stakeholders into the standing committee of synod that shares responsibility for the denominational archives.

*Grounds for all the above:*

1. It honors previous synodical decisions, mandates, and current structures.
2. It clearly distinguishes (without separating!) synodically mandated *responsibility* for the denominational archives from *administrative oversight* of the archives.
3. It provides an established process by which the Historical Committee can exercise its responsibility on behalf of synod in relation to the Archives Advisory Council.
4. It provides a way for the Historical Committee and the three financial stakeholders to work together in cooperation for the best interests of the Christian Reformed Church and its archives.
5. It brings to an end the jurisdictional uncertainties of recent years.
6. It addresses concerns raised at the joint virtual meeting of August 30, 2021, involving the following:
  - the Historical Committee (John Bolt, James De Jong, Herman De Vries)
  - the COD Ad Hoc Committee (Michael Koetje, Laurie Harkema, Victor Chen)
  - three financial stakeholders (CRC executive director, Colin Watson; Calvin Theological Seminary president, Jul Medenblik; Calvin University provost, Noah Toly)

## **Appendix F**

### **Proposed Implementation for the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders**

#### **I. Background and mandate**

Synod 2019 adopted the following recommendation from the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee:

That synod mandate the committee [formed by the COD to develop a training program on abuse of power] to draft a code of conduct for all employed ministry staff within the CRC. The draft code of conduct will be presented to Synod 2020 for approval. The code of conduct shall be

- signed by all ministry personnel who are employed by the CRCNA, local churches, and classes.

- reviewed annually, as part of annual evaluations.
- included in the Supplement to the Church Order, with links to relevant Church Order articles.

(*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 554)

Subsequent to receiving a proposed Code of Conduct by the mandated committee noted above, the COD recommended the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders to Synod 2020 for adoption and implementation (see *Agenda for Synod 2020*, p. 78-80). However, the Code of Conduct was not addressed until the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates in June 2021 due to the cancellation of Synods 2020 and 2021. Acting on behalf of synod, the COD adopted the following recommendation:

That the COD, on behalf of synod, adopt the proposed Code of Conduct report . . . and instruct the COD to devise a plan for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches per the instruction of Synod 2019.

(*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633)

In response to the COD decision in June, the following actions were taken by the office of the executive director:

- The Code of Conduct was posted to the Synod Resources webpage ([crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources)) and translated into Korean and Spanish.
- A summary letter to the churches and classes regarding decisions of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates in June 2021 includes the full text and reference to the decision for implementation of the code.
- The executive director wrote a Network post to the churches, highlighting the “New CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders” ([network.crcna.org](http://network.crcna.org)), noting that the Council of Delegates (in lieu of synod) approved it, and requesting additional ideas on how it may be contextually implemented.
- The letter from the executive director, along with a link to the Code of Conduct, was highlighted in the *For Pastors* weekly email to the congregations.

In addition, tasked by the executive committee of the COD, the executive director convened the following team in fall 2021 to devise a plan for implementation of the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders for consideration by the COD: Amanda Benckhuysen, Dave Den Haan, Susan LaClear, and Dee Recker. The team reviewed the steps already taken to implement the Code of Conduct, and the team proposes the following to further implement the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

## II. Recommendations

A. That synod adopt the following revisions/ additions to the Church Order and Its Supplements (indicated by *italics*):

1. Add the following new Article 5-b and Supplement, Article 5-b to the current Church Order Article 5 and its Supplement (the existing Article 5 and its Supplement would become Article 5-a and Supplement, Article 5-a).

*Church Order Article 5-b*

*All officebearers and ministry leaders, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the expected behavior of leadership in the church by signing the Code of Conduct.*

—Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

**\*Supplement, Article 5-b**

**Preamble**

*In Philippians 2 the apostle Paul brings to his Philippian readers the words of a hymn in which Christ Jesus is acknowledged as being, in his very nature, God. Among other things, this means that Christ is the one to whom all power belongs.*

*The hymn goes on to say that Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage. In fact, he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and humbling himself toward a life-sacrificing kind of obedience. In other words, he used his power for the thriving of others.*

*All of us who are united to Christ by faith and who serve in the life of the church are called, in this passage and others, to this way of being. Jesus himself, in response to the desire for power expressed by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to serve people, a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.<sup>1</sup>*

*Not only do we have this call from Christ, but we actually have Jesus living and growing within us (Gal. 2:20). As a result, we find ourselves being transformed into the kind of people who hold and use power in a Christlike way.*

*That being said, until Christ returns and brings us to perfection, we will continue to wrestle with the urge to misuse power and abuse others. Ugly realities such as verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse are found among us. The power that we hold by virtue of our person or our position can always be twisted into the project of building our own kingdoms at the expense of others. This is true for pastors, lay ministry leaders, and church members alike.*

*In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies.<sup>2</sup> It emerges out of*

<sup>1</sup> See Mark 10:35-45. Note that there are other Scripture texts that address the use of power to bless, such as 1 Peter 5:1-4. In addition, there are texts that describe abuses of power and the damage that such abuses cause (see, for example, 2 Sam. 11 and Ezek. 34).

<sup>2</sup> See Belgic Confession, Article 28, and Heidelberg Catechism, Q. and A. 55, 107, 111. See also the statement in the Confession of Belhar that says, "We believe . . . that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others" (Confession of Belhar, Article 4). Further, in *Our World Belongs to God* we read that the church is a "new community," gathered by God, in which "all are welcome" (para. 34); that the church's mission in this broken world is a mission of

a response by Synod 2018 to patterns of abuse that had been brought to its attention<sup>3</sup> and is aimed at preventing such abuse in the future. May God's peace be among us.

### **Code of Conduct**

*Abuse of power is a misuse of position, authority, or influence to take advantage of, manipulate, or control. Abuse of power occurs when a person with power, regardless of its source, uses that power to harm and/or influence another for personal gain at the other's expense. All abuse by faith leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. (For more background, see Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 587-615).*

*As a ministry leader, I commit to the following:*

#### **Confidentiality**

*I will use confidentiality appropriately, which means I will hold in confidence whatever information is not mine to share.*

*I will not use information shared with me in confidence in order to elevate my position or to depreciate that of others.*

*My use of confidentiality will also be guided by mandatory reporting as required by law.*

#### **Relational**

*I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve (1 Pet. 5; Mark 10; Phil. 2; 2 Tim. 4:2).*

*I will conduct myself with respect, love, integrity, and truthfulness toward all—regardless of position, status, race, gender, age, or ability.*

*To the best of my ability, I will contribute to an environment of hospitality.*

#### **Financial**

*I will ensure that funds are used for their intended ministry purposes.*

*In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.*

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*proclaiming the gospel and its implications for life today (para. 41); and that, "restored in Christ's presence, shaped by his life, this new community lives out the ongoing story of God's reconciling love, announces the new creation, and works for a world of justice and peace" (para. 39). Such statements describe the mission of the church in general and provide foundation for the specific code of conduct presented here.*

<sup>3</sup> Bev Sterk's overture to Synod 2018, titled "Address Patterns of Abuse of Power That Violate the Sacred Trust Given to Leaders and Recognize How These Hinder Due Process and Healing," and appendices specifically related to it, can be found in the Agenda for Synod 2018, pp. 282-307 (see [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources)). The subsequent action of Synod 2018 was to form an "Abuse of Power Committee" to study "how the CRCNA can best address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination" (Acts of Synod 2018, pp. 523-24). The work of Synod 2019 related to this overture can be found in the Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 794-96 (see [crcna.org/SynodResources](http://crcna.org/SynodResources)). The particular recommendation calling for a code of conduct is recommendation 3, c (p. 795).

*I will appropriately use accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits.*

### **Intimate Relationships**

*I will maintain standards and appropriate boundaries in all relationships, which are informed by the Scriptures.*

*I will keep all of my professional relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors. This includes not engaging in inappropriate intimate contact or a sexual relationship, unwanted physical contact, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes.*

### **Safety**

*I will actively promote a safe environment where all persons are respected and valued, where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.*

*I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors to the proper government authorities.*

*I will support adults who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that appropriately empowers the person who has been victimized.*

### **Spiritual**

*I will acknowledge the use of Scripture and the Spirit's work in the community of the church and, therefore, refrain from presuming to be the sole "voice of God."*

*I will use my position as a way to serve the body of believers, rather than myself, for the common good and the cultivation of the gifts of the Spirit.*

### **Additional Commitments**

*I will work within my professional competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate.*

*I will promote truthfulness, transparency, and honesty in all of my work.*

*I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.*

*In all that I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly and in nonexploitive ways.*

*In the event that I misuse my power, either intentionally or unintentionally, as a ministry leader, I will acknowledge the harm that has been caused and the trust that has been broken, and I will actively seek restoration with justice, compassion, truth, and grace. I will humbly submit to the insight and accountability of others to ensure that I use any power entrusted to me fully in service to Christ.*

(Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021, p. 633)

*\*To be signed by . . . [a description of ministry leaders who will sign this Code of Conduct (similar to the notation following the Covenant for Officebearers)]*

2. Revise Church Order Supplement, Article 13-c, section c as indicated by the following addition in *italics*:

**Supplement, Article 13-c, section c**

- c. The duties of the minister are spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling, and such duties do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church as required by one's signature to the Covenant for Officebearers *and the Code of Conduct*.

3. Revise Church Order Article 83 as indicated by the following addition in *italics*:

*Article 83*

Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers *or the Code of Conduct*, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.

- B. That synod adopt the following guidelines related to the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders:

1. Who signs the code?

- CRCNA staff members
- Council of Delegates members
- Churches and classes should implement the code for council members and employees as part of an annual review.
- The Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is referenced in the Abuse of Power Training. It would also be included in the Calvin Theological Seminary Church Order course after the adoption of proposed Church Order changes. The Candidacy Committee will recommend that all Article 8 candidates be required to take the Abuse of Power training.

2. Who is responsible for ensuring it is signed (e.g., councils, classes, and CRCNA ministry staff)?

- Councils, classes, COD, and denominational leadership
- Safe Church Ministry has been encouraging churches to include a reference to the Code of Conduct in their policy. It is reviewed as part of the Safe Church training.

3. What are the implications if individuals refuse to sign or deviate from the code?

- There are guidelines in the Supplement to Church Order re gravamina.
- Each governing body would decide the ramifications.
- Another team is discussing ramifications for Council of Delegates members for consideration by the COD.
- Discipline would be tied to their position (not membership in the church).
- Discipline is a local matter (for church or classis).

4. Suggestions for incorporating the Code of Conduct include the following:
- Require all ministry staff in classes and churches to sign the Code of Conduct when they sign their contract upon hiring.
  - Conduct annual performance reviews with questions related to abuse and the code of conduct (see Addendum below) to ensure meaningful conversations. It is suggested that an elder, human resources professional, or personnel committee conduct the review so that an employee may freely share any potential forms of abuse. Or consider holding a separate conversation at another time of year to review the sample questions—an employee may not be as forthright in a performance-review conversation, considering the possibility of promotion/demotion/raises.
  - Incorporate into council training and orientation.
  - Include in church visitor training (also with the Healthy Church Executive survey from Pastor Church Resources).
  - The current CRCNA staff Code of Conduct can incorporate new elements from the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and be reviewed at the annual performance review.

CRC Code of Conduct for  
Ministry Leaders Implementation Team  
Amanda Benckhuysen  
Dave Den Haan  
Susan LaClear  
Dee Recker  
Colin P. Watson, convener

## **Addendum**

### **Suggested Questions for Annual Review**

#### *Questions Related to the Employee's Use of Power*

1. How are you stewarding the trust and authority that have been given to you in your work?
2. What are some of the key ways in which you have been able to use your position, authority, and influence to build others up over the past year?
3. Are there any ways in which you have used your position, authority, and influence to marginalize or mistreat others? Please describe.
4. In what ways might you need to grow in fulfilling your commitment to elements of the Code of Conduct? How might we help you in doing that?

#### *Questions Related to the Employee's Experience of the Power of Those in Supervision*

1. In what ways are you experiencing your supervisor(s) as being faithful in the ways we steward trust and authority over you?
2. In what ways have you experienced the positions, authority, and influence of those who supervise your work in ways that have helped you to flourish?

3. Are there any ways in which you have felt marginalized or mistreated by those who supervise you? Please describe.
4. In what ways might we need to grow in fulfilling our commitment to elements of the Code of Conduct? How might you help us in doing that?

*Questions Related to the Code of Conduct*

1. In what ways might we further develop or adjust the current Code of Conduct and its implementation so that it helps us to maintain a working environment in which all of us can flourish?
2. Are there new ways in which you have been able to envision the connection between the Code of Conduct and the kingdom of God? Please describe.
3. What Scripture texts, characters, or stories come to mind as we think about these things together?

## **Appendix G** **Justice, Inclusion, Mercy, and Advocacy Evaluation Report**

The ministries of Justice, Inclusion, Mercy, and Advocacy (JIMA)—the Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation Office, the Centre for Public Dialogue, Disability Concerns, Indigenous Ministries, Office of Social Justice, Race Relations, Safe Church Ministry, and World Renew—are deeply committed to our common call to pursue justice and mercy in a broken world. At the heart of all our ministries we strive to protect the dignity and value of each person uniquely and wonderfully made by God. While at times it may feel as if we live in a world of never-ending turmoil and crisis, our ministries trust in God’s promise to restore creation.

When we consider what the restoration of creation would encompass, we understand that there would be an end to suffering, hate, and feelings of isolation; we would live in a world where all flourish and all feel welcomed. This is a world of shalom—a world of peace; it is a world of *tov*—goodness. In our work, our ministries have all seen glimpses of God’s peace and goodness. We have seen this goodness in the hearts of people who give generously so that we can continue our mission, and we have seen peace in the faces of the people this generosity has touched, extending the peace that hope brings.

In Canada, the Indigenous peoples have endured decades of violence, forced assimilation, and abuse. This history of anguish includes more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children who were placed in residential schools across Canada from the early 1870s until 1996—often against their parents’ wishes. As early as the 1990s, bodies—believed to be those of children who attended these schools—have been found in unmarked graves. It was only with the discovery of an estimated 3,200 bodies—belonging to children as young as three—at former residential school sites across Canada in 2021, that public awareness of the trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples began to increase. God’s call for justice and reconciliation rings loud and clear.

Hearts Exchanged is a learning and action journey for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. This beautiful community journey is inspired by the call of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission for churches to play a key role in the sacred journey of reconciliation, justice, and belonging. Under the vision of the Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee and with the support of the Committee for Contact with the Government, Hearts Exchanged has been developed and animated by the Justice and Reconciliation Team in Canada. Pilot cohorts began in late 2020 in eastern and western Canada. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully in those first cohorts, setting a beautiful table for fifteen 2021-22 cohorts (and roughly 250 people) to grow in heart, mind, and action for God's call to reconciliation. Participants commit to an eight-month journey with a community of ten or more colearners on themes such as the doctrine of discovery, truth and reconciliation, the connections of gospel and culture, and diversity-and-belonging in the body of Christ. This is unsettling and beautiful work.

One pilot participant reported, "This experience has not been easy, but it's given me hope. Hope for something better. And not only that, but tangible ways in which we can move in the direction of reconciliation."

A current leader reported, "Our sense was that something special happened last night: a humble, vulnerable, trusting community emerged, shaped by deep grace and love and a longing for shalom. It was a very moving evening." We have been moved to see spiritual community being shaped in these Hearts Exchanged groups.

One participant explained, "Hearts Exchanged has been such a blessing to me spiritually. . . . With our hearts bare, we were able to share our hidden pain, accept correction, remove callous apathy, and begin a journey toward healing. I pray that our time together would continue to inspire us to glorify our Servant King Jesus in our relationships with our Indigenous brothers and sisters."

The Justice and Reconciliation Team of the CRC in Canada is incredibly blessed to participate in and encourage this unsettling and beautiful journey as a shalom-seeking community of Christ! Cohorts will continue to meet in 2022-23, and with Hearts Exchanged in mind the Church in Canada will consider Creator-God's call to justice and reconciliation at a planned National Gathering in summer 2023.

Ephesians 4:22-24 delivers the message, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Taking this call for change to heart, the ministries of JIMA spend time in self examination—so that we can recognize and make the necessary changes within our ministries that will help us better live out our mission—and we invite churches into this practice. In the U.S., we recently heard one participant say, "I would love to go to a church like that," as we were preparing for the webinar *Ways of Creating a Culture of Goodness*, hosted by Safe Church Ministry. This December 2021 webinar was the final part of the Safe Church webinar series *On Being a Safe Church* and was a collaborative effort of the Office of Social Justice, Race Relations, Disability Concerns, the Centre for Public Dialogue, and Safe Church Ministry.

Throughout 2021, through webinars, articles, and a book club, Safe Church invited congregations to reflect on themes in the book *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing*, by Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer. The book describes a toxic church culture in which abuse, misconduct, and mistreatment of others goes unchecked in contrast with a culture of *tov* (Hebrew for “good”) where relationships and interactions, particularly between and by the leadership, are characterized by Christlikeness, empathy, grace, truth, justice, humility, and putting people first. As the year unfolded, it became clear that Safe Church was not the only ministry interested in McKnight and Barringer’s tantalizing vision for healthy (*tov*) churches; this is a vision that all those engaged in ministries associated with justice and mercy could get excited about. As one person noted, “Churches that have cultures of goodness are places where people with disabilities can seamlessly find their way.” Another commented, “Good cultures create space for people to come as they truly are and not act like they have it all together.” Still others recognized the way cultures of goodness create space to be honest about and address systemic injustices and inequities.

It has been said that a vision takes root in an organization not so much by being taught but by being caught. Based on the feedback that the JIMA ministries received in response to the webinars and book study, the vision for a *tov* church is being caught by people in the CRC. After reading *A Church Called Tov*, one CRC pastor in the U.S. told us, “This was the most important book I read this past year.” Some who participated in the webinars and/or book study expressed a deep sense of gratitude for the ways they have seen goodness reflected in their church communities and have been energized to continue leaning into this vision, to living out goodness as a way of more fully embracing the redemptive and transformative work of Jesus Christ to make all things new. For others, the conversation was more difficult as they realized how far their own congregations were from embodying the goodness that God intended for his people. But this grief and regret over what they didn’t experience in their church communities became an opportunity for lament, for reflection, for prayer, and even for curiosity and hope toward what God would yet do in their churches. What seems clear is that many in the CRC community are open and eager to explore more fully what it means to become churches characterized by God’s divine gift of goodness, where everyone feels seen, valued, and loved—and that is very good!

World Renew’s work in international community development demonstrates how living out shalom and *tov* can have a ripple effect that radiates to foster flourishing and a sense of belonging for others. In many of the villages where World Renew works, there still exist very patriarchal communities, and it is commonplace for men to abuse their wives, forbid them to work, and not involve them in decision making. As part of World Renew’s gender justice work, survivors of gender-based violence have opportunities to take part in trauma healing, but trauma healing does not change the behaviors of the perpetrators, so World Renew shares God’s Word, emphasizing that we are all equal and loved in God’s eyes. Women are also given the opportunity to participate in training in conservation agriculture, join village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), take on leadership roles, and more, in an effort to encourage gender equality within communities.

Loyce and Sandress Nyirenda, participants in World Renew’s Free A Family® program in Zambia, sank deep into poverty after the droughts of 2017 and 2018 destroyed their crops. Each new day dawned with the Nyirendas worrying about how they would feed their children. But Sandress, the sole breadwinner of the family, did not see his wife as his partner in the family’s struggles.

Through Free A Family®, both Loyce and Sandress learned about conservation agriculture and started growing crops that were better able to thrive in drought-prone Zambia. Loyce also joined a VSLA where she was able to get a low-interest loan to help the family pay school fees for their school-aged children and invest in supplies for their farm. The couple also learned to work together and make decisions together. Sandress says, “I feel part of the burden I was carrying has been lifted off my shoulders. . . . I don’t have to worry anymore because I know for sure [Loyce] will fill that gap.”

Today the Nyirendas are food secure. Leonard, one of their eight children, says, “My parents have changed greatly. . . . Their faces are no longer wearing worries about what the family will eat as they have plenty of food now.” And, Loyce notes, “Our family’s spiritual life is much stronger now, as we are better able to wholeheartedly dedicate time for Bible study and prayer without having to worry about what we are going to eat.”

While World Renew’s community development work helped the Nyirendas to flourish—to become food and income secure—this work also helped the family to become more united, establishing a sense of belonging for Loyce. The family also grew stronger in their faith.

Belonging happens not only at a societal level; it happens on a spiritual level too. As the family began to journey to food security, they began to trust in God’s love and abundance, and the reminder that they belong to God’s family opened their hearts to share God’s hope with other families. The Nyirendas now donate a portion of their seeds to help their neighbors struggling with food insecurity—opening doors for others to flourish and feel that sense of belonging. They are sharing hope and extending shalom and *tov* to their neighbors.

Sharing hope with others is not always easy, and it can require months, even years, of time and effort; but as we work to pursue God’s justice and mercy, we are also working to expand the circle of belonging and flourishing—we are working, with God, to restore creation.

In the following report we will summarize the work of our ministries, reflecting on how, in our pursuit of God’s peace and justice, we are blessed with shalom and *tov* moments that inspire us not only to stay strong in our mission but also to invite others in. We will also share our goals for the future as we continue to pursue justice and mercy.

### **Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue**

The Centre for Public Dialogue’s core calling is to seek justice and speak hope in Christ’s name in Canadian public affairs. It’s a blessing to do this work with our steering group, the Committee for Contact with the Government (CCG), a grassroots group of CRC and CRC-connected Christians from across Canada who gather for prayer and discernment on justice and reconciliation research, advocacy, and citizenship empowerment. The CCG was established in 1968 as a ministry of the Council of Christian Reformed

Churches in Canada. Today the CCG and the Centre for Public Dialogue work from a synodical mandate in accountability to the CRCNA Canada Corporation through the office of the Canadian Ministries Director.

### I. Reflecting on Our Calling

The CCG and the Centre for Public Dialogue pursue an active liturgy of salt and light in public witness in Canadian public affairs. Liturgy is public service and a seeking of public good. In the context of justice and reconciliation this approach to public dialogue, as a seeking of public good, is an integration of prayerful discernment, attentive listening, and persistence over the long term.

1. Our *prayerful discernment* is shaped in part by a living expression of Romans 13: 4. We take the call to respect governing authorities as *God's servants for our good* as an active and prayerful matter. Canada is a complex and diverse society with overlapping demands and justice requirements that political leaders are required to balance. This is a challenging task for leaders, and it includes many obligations (for example, legal and fiscal) that must be addressed. For this reason, in our prayerful discernment on issues, the CCG and the Centre for Public Dialogue seek to provide constructive ideas that honor leaders' obligations and opportunities in exercising God's call to seek the public good.
2. *Attentive listening*: Some time ago a CRC-Canada leader was asked by an Indigenous church leader why we were eager to engage in Indigenous justice and reconciliation activity. The leader appealed to Proverbs 31 using the maxim, "We'd like to be a voice for the voiceless." The Indigenous leader responded respectfully and clearly, "With respect, I'm not voiceless; you're deaf." In that moment we were reminded that no one is voiceless if we take the time to listen. In Canada, the importance of listening and humility has been made clear in the testimony of Indigenous peoples in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry, and the revealing of thousands of unmarked graves at residential school sites since summer 2021. Residential schools are but one example of the devastating colonial idea that settler governments know what is best for Indigenous peoples and their communities. We have been blessed and disturbed in receiving these testimonies and have learned that a core disposition in justice and reconciliation work is in *bearing witness*: through listening to and honoring the perspectives of communities who experience injustice, we strive to seek justice with and alongside dear neighbors who are imagebearers of God.
3. *Persistence*: Constructive efforts to bear witness for justice and reconciliation require long-term efforts in listening, relationship building, related research, and corresponding action in advocacy and the encouragement of engaged citizenship among CRC members. Therefore, while we know that a wide spectrum of justice issues are important, the CCG and the Centre for Public Dialogue deliberately focus on a small set of issues for a long period of time—following a strategy of *centimeter-wide, kilometer-deep*. This long persistence gives perspective on the complexity of issues and builds credibility with affected communities, partners, and policy makers—and

is deeply integrated with our commitments to prayerful discernment and attentive listening.

## II. Connecting with churches

The Centre for Public Dialogue is blessed to engage with CRC congregation members. Communications, which is intended to inform and inspire, and citizen mobilization and education are central to this work. This work is most often shared with our colleagues in the Justice and Reconciliation Team in Canada.

1. Communications tools: We're blessed to produce the *Do Justice* blog and podcast with our partners at the Office of Social Justice. A highlight of *Do Justice* is the consistency of contributions from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color authors and columnists. Social media and online action tools are also used to connect congregation members to learning and citizenship opportunities.
2. Mobilization and citizen education: CRC Canadian Ministries collaborate in a justice mobilization program led by Cindy Stover. Cindy develops and animates resources for hopeful and faith-filled justice seeking that congregations access regularly—in person or through online webinars. This excellent collaborative work is supported by World Renew (Canada), Resonate Global Mission (Canada), Diaconal Ministries Canada, the Centre for Public Dialogue, and the Canadian Ministries office.
3. Hearts Exchanged: CCG and the Centre for Public Dialogue are honored to partner with the Canadian Indigenous Ministries Committee (CIMC), the Justice and Reconciliation Team, and Canadian Ministries in support of Hearts Exchanged. This congregational journey on reconciliation and decolonization has been running since 2019 and is proving to be a profound spiritual and learning journey for almost 300 participants to date. Hearts Exchanged is a beautiful opportunity for the church to engage in the calls to action of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For this reason the CCG supports this major effort of the Justice and Reconciliation Team under the leadership of CIMC.

## III. Looking forward

The CCG has advocated for the development of new Canadian Ministry supports for Indigenous Ministry and antiracism and intercultural conciliation. Deeper support for these important elements of contextual gospel witness are helping the CRC in Canada on the journey of becoming a beautifully diverse, unified, justice-seeking family of God—a community of shalom and belonging. As the CCG, we are eager to work with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color leaders in CIMC and in the new National Advisory Committee for Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation (AIC). Troubling racial tensions and the ongoing trauma of the colonial legacy have been ever present in public discourse over the past several years. As salt and light in this reality, the church embodies hope in Christ as a body that celebrates diversity and confronts the realities of systemic racism and injustice. In this light, as both CIMC and the AIC transition to leadership from Indigenous, Black, and People of Color members, the CCG will seek regular opportunities for

collaboration, mutual support, and accountability with these leaders in our efforts for prayerful discernment, attentive listening, bearing witness, and persistence in our calling to joyfully seek justice and speak hope.

### **Disability Concerns**

In 2022 CRC Disability Concerns (DC) will celebrate its 40th birthday. We celebrate what churches and volunteers have done to break down barriers and create places of belonging for people of all abilities, and we celebrate the gifts that people with disabilities bring to our congregations. Yet far too many people with disabilities still experience difficulty engaging in the life of the church. There is much work yet to be done.

#### **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

The tagline of Disability Concerns is *Everybody belongs, everybody serves*. The imagery of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 is helpful in understanding the work of Disability Concerns. The church is the body of Christ, each person is given the same spirit, each person brings gifts that are essential to the health of the body, and each part of the body cares for the others. Disability Concerns' mission is to bring about the full participation of people with disabilities in the life of the church, and the full participation of the church in the lives of people with disabilities.

Since 2009, DC has been working in close cooperation with the Disability Concerns office of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Together we assist churches to think and act in keeping with the biblical call regarding people with disabilities; break barriers of communication, architecture, and attitude; and establish ministries with, for, and by people with disabilities and their families.

The work of DC requires both a responsiveness to the gifts and barriers experienced by individuals in our churches and a proactive approach that creates a sense of welcome and accessibility that doesn't require a person with disabilities or their family members to advocate for it. We are keenly aware that people with disabilities are underrepresented in churches, and we often nudge churches to consider who is not represented in their church and what the reasons might be. We seek to be a denomination where people with disabilities who have experienced exclusion and hurt in churches might be told, "Look for a Christian Reformed Church; they are known to be accessible, intentional, and welcoming of the gifts of people with disabilities."

#### **II. Connecting with churches**

Connecting with churches is a vital part of the work of Disability Concerns so that each church reflects the diversity of abilities in the body of Christ. We connect with churches through our network of Disability Advocates at the classis and church levels, through consultation with churches, and through sharing stories and resources with Christian Reformed members.

Ultimately Disability Concerns invites each church to imagine what it would look like for people of all abilities to feel like they belong and how their church can experience the blessing of each person using their gifts. A vital strategy for bringing about the vision of *Everybody belongs, everybody serves* is to raise up volunteers who encourage needed changes. Our goal

as Disability Concerns is to find, support, and educate regional disability advocates in each classis who recruit and train church disability advocates in the churches within their classis. Church advocates are well positioned to determine what barriers in their church need to be removed in order for people with disabilities to fully participate. This may mean working with the building committee to add a railing so that Henry can continue to lead prayer from the pulpit as he ages; or maybe it means working with the worship committee to ensure that gluten-free communion is offered so that Carmen can participate in the Lord's supper; or it may mean asking the worship leader to use the phrase, "Please rise in body or in spirit" rather than "Please stand." As well as considering people in the congregation and what their needs are, we also encourage churches to proactively create buildings, worship, and programming with universal design in mind and with an awareness of who is not in their church because they have not been able to fully participate.

In addition to equipping volunteers at the regional and church levels, Disability Concerns provides consultation to churches. Sometimes this consultation revolves around a particular church member and what support they or their family may need to successfully participate. At other times Disability Concerns may be consulting on broader topics, such as helping to ensure that a building renovation is taking into account people with disabilities.

Much of the work of Disability Concerns is focused on educating congregations and leaders about the barriers that can keep people with disabilities from involvement. Disability Concerns has multiple communication strategies to raise awareness such as social media, our award winning *Breaking Barriers* newsletter, and the Disability Concerns Canada newsletter. All of these efforts have the end goal of churches in which *Everybody belongs, everybody serves*.

### III. Looking forward

There is much work for Disability Concerns and for Christian Reformed people to create churches where people of all abilities truly belong and serve their congregation. Disability Concerns is looking forward to using strategic planning, engaging the next generation of disability advocates and developing new ways of training and supporting volunteers.

With a new director of Disability Concerns on board, Lindsay Wieland Capel, there is new energy to evaluate and strategize on the mission of Disability Concerns. Strategic planning sessions with CRC and RCA Disability Concerns staff focus on how we can best raise awareness and make positive change in churches so that *Everybody belongs, everybody serves*. We plan to look at our current strategies and future opportunities for areas such as communication, events, training, and how we support volunteers.

Disability Concerns is excited to raise up the next generation of disability advocates. With that in mind, we have begun using a planning framework called the Horizon Storyline to establish a process to recruit, train, and mentor a cohort of young adults in disability advocacy.

Disability Concerns will be rolling out a digital training platform to help current and future volunteers learn information and strategies that can help them do their work more effectively. As we roll out these training modules, Disability Concerns staff will invest in one-on-one meetings with each

regional disability advocate to support them and help them establish goals and a plan as they work within their classes to help churches become places of belonging for people of all abilities.

Disability Concerns is grateful for the support of congregations through ministry shares and offerings and for the faithful work of our volunteers so that together we can create Christian Reformed churches that truly reflect the body of Christ where *Everybody belongs, everybody serves*.

## **Indigenous Ministries**

Indigenous Ministry is made up of the three Urban Indigenous Ministries, the Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee, and the justice and reconciliation mobilizer.

### **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

The Urban Indigenous Ministries in Edmonton, Alberta; Regina, Saskatchewan; and Winnipeg, Manitoba, are culturally safe and respectful places for Indigenous community members to receive nourishment in areas of spiritual, mental, physical and emotional health—all four parts of the medicine wheel. Community members also have opportunities to reciprocate by participating in serving others.

The Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee is devoted to the work of justice and mercy. Mercy is central in facilitating the response of Indigenous people to the healing power of Christ within the context of Indigenous culture. The committee intentionally responds to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action<sup>1</sup> through educational programs targeted at institutional and congregational systemic change. Additionally, we are committed to the collective effort of reconciliation, including supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples,<sup>2</sup> and we serve in a key advisory role actively supporting intercultural ministry in the CRC.<sup>3</sup> Our justice work is reflected in the goals listed in our mandate:

- 1. Awareness and education** of CRC members and communities in the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, the present lived reality of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the need for reconciliation and renewed relationships
- 2. Engaging and building relationships** with Indigenous neighbors to better understand each other and journey down the path of justice and right relationships
- 3. Advocacy and seeking justice** with Indigenous peoples  
The Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee (CIMC) has worked with the Centre for Public Dialogue on advocating for implementation of the

<sup>1</sup> Calls to Action 59 and 60, Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action: [quakerservice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Interpreting-the-Declaration-June-2018-Declaration-Coalition-1-1.pdf](http://quakerservice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Interpreting-the-Declaration-June-2018-Declaration-Coalition-1-1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: [quakerservice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Interpreting-the-Declaration-June-2018-Declaration-Coalition-1-1.pdf](http://quakerservice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Interpreting-the-Declaration-June-2018-Declaration-Coalition-1-1.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> These changes reflect the CRC's commitments to the U.N. Declaration (2016) and synodical decisions on the Doctrine of Discovery (2016).

legislation to bring Canada’s laws into harmony with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. CIMC also creates resources for learning and worship for churches to use nationally.<sup>4</sup> CIMC encourages members to grow in their leadership and to live into the mandate.

A current Indigenous member of CIMC recently shared her deep life-changing appreciation for the existence of our committee and the work of Indigenous Ministry in the CRCNA. She notes that when she married into this church and culture, she had no expectations to be seen. Being seen and valued as a minority person of color in a white-dominated space like the CRC church is a commonly shared desire but not an expectation. Being Indigenous and Christian was a conundrum, according to this member. She spent most of her life assimilating as much as possible into white Christian culture, until one day she saw an invitation pamphlet to the Canadian National Gathering. She joyfully expresses that at this moment she knew she was being called into living fully into her identities—Christian and Indigenous. A pivotal spiritual moment for her occurred as she was walking toward the building where the plenary session of the gathering was being held in Toronto. The faint heartbeat of the drum guided her in. With tears interrupting her storytelling and quiet pauses of recounting that memory, this CIMC member emphatically declared that her heart found its home in the drumbeat. The rest is history. Her presence on CIMC is inspiring. She is living out her calling to be God’s servant in the church and to all God’s people through her dedication to the CIMC’s work. She works so hard in her classis to patiently advocate for decolonization. Her dedication extends beyond her church community, and she truly brings the gospel wherever she goes. The drumbeat and the Spirit guide her.

## **II. Connecting with churches**

Assimilation is not a gospel teaching. The Bible does not teach for all of us to assimilate and become, for example, the arm of the body. We are taught that each part of the body is needed. God created us so that we may know him. We live in a world that is in the throes of assimilation, where Indigenous people are still being treated as “less than.” This shows when Indigenous approaches to worship are questioned and dismissed; it shows when Indigenous people are invisible in the pews; it shows when Indigenous reality is not taken into account in each facet of life. This is why we do the work we do. The justice and mercy work we do in Indigenous Ministry is to create a world in the image of God, counter to assimilation.

## **III. Looking forward**

CIMC and Hearts Exchanged work with the intention to dismantle the structures of racism and historical oppression and to create space for intentional community across intercultural barriers. The deliberate bridging between Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and settler communities is a shared practical and spiritual journey. CIMC is mandated to creatively find ways to continually implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action among the churches in Canada. The Hearts Exchanged

<sup>4</sup> [crcna.org/indigenous/resources](http://crcna.org/indigenous/resources).

four-year, four-phase rollout is a direct response to CIMC's mandate and the commission's calls to action. The Hearts Exchanged Phase 2, 250+ participants national rollout is currently in progress and over the planned halfway mark. Preparations for engagement with BIPOC communities and pastors in the CRC are being prayerfully discerned as we continue to envision the expansion of Hearts Exchanged for Phase 3 in fall 2022. Additionally, we are celebrating the upcoming hire of a full-time senior leader for the justice and reconciliation mobilizer position, projected for spring 2022.

### **The Office of Social Justice**

From start to finish, the Bible tells the story of God's relationship with the world he has created. It speaks of the creation of all things, the fall of all things into sin, the renewing of all things through Jesus Christ, and the eventual reconciliation of all things in the kingdom of God. The Bible includes stories that illustrate this good news—stories about a loving and powerful God who cares for sinful people who are weak and powerless and who brings justice by restoring a right relationship with him and with his creation (for example, see Jer. 9:24).

The Bible includes many commands for living as one of the members of God's creation, teaching us to live in a way that honors and models the way of Jesus. Repeatedly, Scripture calls us to treat other people and creation with love and justice and to act in a way that restores right relationships and honors our loving, powerful, and restoring God. When we do justice, we reflect God's restorative work in us, and we live more fully as the people whom God created us to be. In the words of a 2005 synodical report, "Pull on the string called 'justice' in the pages of the Bible, and soon enough you will get the whole book" (*Agenda for Synod 2005*, p. 543).

In obedience to this scriptural call for justice, the CRC created and supports the Office of Social Justice (OSJ) to encourage and assist CRC leaders, agencies, institutions, and members to better "live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Mic. 6:8). OSJ focuses primarily on the root causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, particularly in social injustices as directed by synod and/or the Council of Delegates. OSJ staff help Christians, especially CRC people and congregations, to develop a deeper understanding of and faithful response to God's call to let justice flow like a river in our personal, congregational, and communal lives. We advocate for systemic change and equip the church to listen to and center the voices of people most afflicted by injustice.

### **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

Our primary calling is to assist CRC members, congregations, and ministries to love mercy and do justice. By "social justice," we mean God's original intention for human society: the flourishing of humankind and all creation, a world in which basic needs are met and God's shalom reigns. God calls us, the church, to participate in the renewal of society so that all—especially people made vulnerable by oppressive structures—can enjoy God's good gifts. To engage in this work of renewal, the church rightly emphasizes the administration of mercy. But acts of mercy do not address the root causes that keep people poor, hungry, and powerless. The vast web of structural factors that perpetuate social injustices cannot be overcome without broad sys-

temic reform. Therefore we Christians witness and work to remove systemic injustices. If we avoid the issue of structural change, we consign ourselves to fighting the symptoms of poverty, hunger, and injustice instead of getting at the disease itself. We would then be guilty of proclaiming a truncated gospel that fails to proclaim our radical liberation through Jesus Christ from every configuration of sin and greatly limiting the stature of our deliverer. While the church cannot provide relief to every hungry person, we can advocate for systemic reforms that would make significant improvements for millions of people experiencing injustice and living in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

The OSJ's unique role within the CRC is to ensure that advocacy—pressing for political action on the laws, policies, and systems that contribute to injustice, hunger, and poverty—is one of the spectrum of ways that CRC congregations respond to God's call to love mercy and do justice. In addition, we offer education, worship resources, and opportunities for engagement through social media feeds, blog posts on *Do Justice*, action alerts, resources on our website, and congregational workshops and learning opportunities that focus on the role of policy making in eliminating root causes of injustice.

## II. Connecting with churches

All of the OSJ's work focuses on churches—connecting with individual members, groups, or church leaders to better provide the resources needed to steward our power in ways that honor the dignity of people who are poor and marginalized, and to serve as faithful stewards of creation. Our most popular workshops, developed at synod's request and regularly offered throughout the denomination, continue to help congregations seeking to take steps to engage in justice and advocacy. We create weekly prayers and other worship resources. We regularly receive feedback on these resources, such as this message from a reader: "Thank you for assisting me in my prayers—with just the right words—Holy Spirit words."

In addition, OSJ has initiated various opportunities for Christians to proclaim Christlike love in our local communities. For example, OSJ encouraged the church to consider how to speak in ways that reflect the economic, social, and spiritual blessings that immigrants bring to the U.S. by sharing the message "Immigrants Are a Blessing, Not a Burden." Many church members took the step of setting up yard signs, wearing fair-trade t-shirts, and taking up advocacy opportunities for immigration reform. One person wrote to us that their yard sign provided opportunities for conversations with delivery drivers and neighbors about immigration justice.

In addition, OSJ sometimes speaks on behalf of the denomination as a whole. When the CRCNA articulates a view on a social or political matter (or when it is silent on those matters), it does so as an institution, not as a collection of individuals who all agree on everything. These views are voiced after a position has been formed, based on thorough study, discussion, and / or decision by synod. Not all members will agree with every public position—statement or silence—taken by its church. The OSJ has not been tasked with representing the majority of members' views on issues. Instead, it has been tasked with determining how to raise the CRCNA's collective voice

<sup>1</sup> See "Report 36: Task Force on World Hunger," *Acts of Synod 1979*, pp. 610-41.

by interpreting the positions of the denomination, guided by Scripture and mandates from synod, to advocate for and with people who suffer injustice.

### **III. Looking forward**

Over the years, the CRC synod has assigned specific work for the Office of Social Justice to do on its primary focus issues: creation care, refugees and immigration, religious persecution, sanctity of human life, and restorative justice. Work on other issues stems from the calling that brought OSJ to life: addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty. Because of the broad and complex ways hunger and poverty can be addressed, a discernment process has been outlined and approved by synod for the OSJ to use when selecting areas to engage in. It asks about an issue's biblical grounding and significance to the integrity, faith, and life of the church; the CRC's connection to grassroots expertise and its relationship with those affected by the situation; alignment with CRCNA ministries and values; and the ability for OSJ to partner broadly, especially with marginalized people who are most affected, or as part of a larger Christian movement. In addition, Synod 2018 created a committee for the guidance and support of the Office of Social Justice to address "all relevant levels of U.S. government on significant and pressing issues of the day from an integrally biblical, theological, and confessional perspective, expressed in terms of a Reformed worldview, emphasizing whenever possible the official positions of the CRCNA as adopted by synod" (*Agenda for Synod 2019*, p. 45).

The pandemic continues to reveal preexisting disparities in our society and disproportionately affects people who are most vulnerable. Following the guidance of Scripture, of the CRC synod, in dialogue with CRC members, and with the guidance and support of the OSJ guidance and support committee, OSJ staff will continue to equip the church to advocate for policies that create shalom for our local and global neighbors based on priorities as they arise.

## **Race Relations**

### **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

*Much of what is written in the following paragraphs is quoted directly from or inspired by God's Diverse and Unified Family ([crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf](http://crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf)) and follows the same outline: creation, fall, redemption, restoration.*

We remember, we profess, we know that God brought together as one the diversity of flowers, leaves, burning stars, planets, mountains, meadows, fish, and fowl that are all so far apart yet are one creation. All are diverse in form and function yet connected and interdependent, all enriching the world as God created it. Each one of us humans individually and humanity corporately crown this good creation; we are God's imagebearers. As God's imagebearers, everyone, without exception, is endowed with a royal dignity over all creation.

This dignity does not end but is passed on to all descendants, a royal dignity conditioned to seek a loving relationship with God, with fellow imagebearers, and with creation.

Our differences enrich and bring joy (Gen. 2:23). God's fingerprints mark his creation. Every person uniquely reflects God. Each is different from the

other and from the rest of creation. However, the noble characteristics are common in everyone. We were created “very good” to respond with care and affection toward God and toward others, especially in times of need. The unity of all things in Christ implies a radical unity and equity among all people, but sin has created a legacy of errant faith that segregates the free and the slave. To be Christian is to refute as heresy a race hierarchy or belief that some people reflect God’s image less than others.

Let us confess the genocide of Native Americans, Jews, Sudanese, Rwandans as the work of the devil, lest we do it again. In Christ crucified we stand. We are ready for times of healing. We are hopeful of God’s beloved community in which people flourish through just, graceful, and equitable relationships. Some decisions of church councils, of synods, and of agencies tell hopeful stories of repentance for corrupting the church’s mission—for example, in Sudan and at the Timothy Christian School. The courage by synodical delegates to stand in the gap in condemning apartheid in South Africa and kinism in the United States inspires a courageous faith to name racism in our past and to stop its harm on our neighbors now. We have hope in the good news of the Christ-led church, which shapes attitudes of gratitude, repairs the social fabric, and increases the economic well-being of all people.

In spite of sin, the diversity of God’s imagebearers is sustained as the order of creation. In this way, the dignity of all is maintained. This dignity highlights God’s grace toward all people. Every human, though fallen, deserves protection and respect in reverence to God’s authority as their creator.

## II. Connecting with churches

In response to the racist actions at Timothy Christian School, the Christian Reformed denomination created the office of Race Relations in 1971. The office of Race Relations currently has the following mandate (approved by the CRCNA U.S. Corporation in October 2021 as a temporary, U.S.-only mandate):

CRC Race Relations staff will create and provide effective and collaborative training programs and organize actions with congregational, classis, synod, and agency leaders to increase their commitment and competence in addressing racism. With the guidance of Scripture and in a commitment to living into *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* (Synod 1996), staff will seek opportunities to engage leadership and to field inquiries for collaborative learning programs and organizing actions that

- envision intercultural conciliation throughout the CRCNA.
- mobilize congregants and staff members to help lead them into greater awareness of racialized injustice.
- engage them to stand against racism in their personal lives.
- work to dismantle racism in all its forms.
- experience true biblical reconciliation as a diverse and unified people of God.

All of our work with churches and ministries reflects the spirit of collaboration emphasized in our mandate. Race Relations also desires to work and collaborate closely with the Office of Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation in Canada. Given the evolving nature of this collaboration, the office

expects that a new mandate for the CRC's work in antiracism in Canada and in the United States will emerge from this shared work.

*Ministry mission integrity:* Working collaboratively with leaders from congregations such as New Life Church in Grand Rapids (Mich.), with the Council of Delegates, and with the antiracism teams of World Renew, Resonate Global Mission, Reframe Ministries, and Congregational Ministries, along with CRC Human Resources-sponsored conversations, Race Relations staff work to increase awareness and commitment to adapting ministry practices and congregational life to better welcome community neighbors, promote diversity of leadership and staff, and create diverse resources.

*Creating a shared narrative:* Through content creation such as Racism: Looking Back, Moving Forward, Cultural Intelligence Building, and other workshops, webinars, and resources, Race Relations staff provide training and education for Christians to engage in dismantling racism. We train and support a cohort of antiracism facilitators to lead these workshops along with Race Relations staff, finding and documenting people's stories of positive and negative faith formation experiences that name racist behaviors and moving people toward racialized healing, reconciliation, and liberation from the bonds that racism creates for people of every ethnicity.

The apostle Paul says that in Christ "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). The unity among different peoples and different things is not alien to our nature of things but endemic—just as when putting a puzzle together, we assume that all the pieces were cut in such a way that they fit together. The puzzle was designed that way. Conversely, puzzle pieces thrown together from ten different puzzle sets will never all fit together. God created a world in which each piece belongs and fits with the others. When we seek the unity of diverse peoples, we are not seeking something alien to God's goal for his creation but the fulfillment of his creation.

*Church and community:* Staff working with World Renew, Resonate Global Mission, the Office of Social Justice, Pastor Church Resources, and other ministries find that community events like the Martin Luther King Celebration, YWCA's Stand Against Racism, and other collaborations bring together lay leaders and pastors in addressing racialized violence and economic inequity.

### III. Looking forward

Jesus Christ died and rose again to bring into being not a new unity created for the first time, unknown and untested, but to restore creational unity, a unity recreated. When the world is reconciled through Jesus Christ, it goes back to a world that has already been and is becoming through the One by whom and in whom and through whom all things were created in unity. This vision gives us as Christians hope and direction in our work.

In Genesis 1:26 (NRSV), God is revealed as a community of triunity: "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'" In John's gospel, the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father (John 10:38; 14:11). The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he does (John 5:20). The Father knows the Son, and the Son knows the Father (John 10:15). When the Son returns to the Father, the Father will send another Counselor, the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-18). The Son prays that his followers will be one just "as [the Father and the Son] are one" (John 17:22). The triune God, in the mutual giving and receiving of intratrinitarian fellowship, is the first

model for human society. As a reflection of God’s unity in diversity, God calls us to unity in our diversity. In God’s threeness, human diversity is affirmed and confirmed. The communion in which God created us and to which God calls us is already displayed in the triune God.

Theologian Miroslav Volf<sup>1</sup> reminds us that “God sees each human being concretely, the powerful no less than the powerless. God notes not only their common humanity but also their specific histories, their particular psychological, social, and embodied selves with their specific needs.” What might this reality look like in doing theology, writing sermons, engaging in Christian action, and writing and thinking about our history as nations and as a denomination? Christian teaching is about human dignity, not about the nationalistic narratives dominating and influencing us today. A history grounded in belief in the *imago Dei* will not neglect the elite and privileged members of society but will demand a fundamental reordering of the stories we tell about the human actors we meet from the past.

God has already given the vision for humankind: “. . . a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9). We who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb are cleansed of our sins and retain the wonderful diversity with which we have been created. When we Christians reimagine God’s church embracing everyone as imagebearers, we can lament our horrific past and join in the work of Christ who is dismantling the walls of hostility and uniting people in multicultural/ethnic congregations that bring God’s good news of reconciliation to their communities.

### **Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation**

The work of antiracism has been marginal in the Christian Reformed Church within Canada, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BI-POC) members express a struggle with a sense of belonging in the church. Canadian Ministries therefore hired Pablo Kim Sun in June 2021 to lead in significant new efforts to facilitate a systemic and cultural change in the denomination—change that deliberately wrestles with the sin of racism, challenges institutional defaults conditioned by racism, and takes steps of radical repentance in accountability with BIPOC siblings in ways that honor commitments, as in *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* and the Belhar Confession. As Christ’s church, we must lean into a vision of community that is an intercultural tapestry of love, respect, reciprocity, justice, and equity. Moreover, antiracism cannot be done by one leader or office in isolation, so it will work closely with the National Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation advisory committee formed and approved by the CRCNA Canada Corporation in October 2021.

In this new role and direction, Pablo and the committee will develop and propose to the CRCNA Canada Corporation a mandate for antiracism and intercultural conciliation for the CRC within Canada that includes measures for internal culture change, institutional accountability to articulated antiracism commitments, and congregational mobilization. They will also draft

<sup>1</sup> [patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2012/10/the-historian-and-imago-dei/](http://patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2012/10/the-historian-and-imago-dei/).

and implement corresponding action plans, strategies, staffing, and programming for the church as a whole. Over the medium to long term this could include but is not limited to education, awareness, theology, policy, advocacy for racial justice, healing from racial trauma, and more.

This office also desires to work and collaborate closely with the Office of Race Relations in the United States. Given the evolving nature of this collaboration, the office expects that a new mandate for the CRC's work in antiracism in Canada and the U.S. will emerge from this shared work.

## **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

Our local churches, denomination, and society are filled with people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Diversity is a fact. The main question is, *How are we going to love one another and build up the body of Christ in the midst of our diversity?* As stated in *God's Diverse and Unified Family*, "from the time of its birth in western Michigan in 1857 and for nearly one hundred years to follow, the congregations and members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America remained almost exclusively white ethnic Dutch [Canadian and] American. . . ." Because of this past reality, the denomination's institutional policies and practices were and still are centered on the dominant group and require non-Dutch members to assimilate into the existing structure and culture. Now that the church has become much more diverse than ever before, this new reality is requiring a new wineskin (Matt. 9:16-17) by which people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are fully welcomed and can flourish as CRCNA members so that "the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13).

The office's calling is primarily based on the biblical understanding that we as the church are the body of Christ and that if "one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). The office strives to equip and empower the church to be antiracist and intercultural so that no member suffers from racism and ethnocentrism and every member is honored so that all can rejoice and worship God together. This calling is directly connected to the biblical vision of Revelation 7:9-10. In this passage, we see people from every nation, tribe, people, and language gathered before the throne and the Lamb and worshipping God in their own languages and ethnocultural forms in full unity, where no one language or culture is dominant. And God, hearing these diverse ways of worship and praise, fully accepts them. It is this "already but not yet" eschatological vision that the office encourages and calls the denomination to embody here and now.

At the same time, the office's calling is well aligned with the denomination's vision of being "a diverse family of healthy congregations, assemblies, and ministries expressing the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide." By guiding the denomination to be more antiracist and intercultural, we are challenging and empowering our congregations, assemblies, and ministries to be free from the sin and the practice of racism and to empower people to transform their lives and communities to reflect shalom, justice, and the love of God's kingdom.

## **II. Connecting with churches**

Our mandate focuses on a strategy for antiracism that includes measures for internal culture change, institutional accountability to articulated antiracism commitments, and congregational mobilization for antiracism and intercultural community. On the basis of dialogue with the National Antiracism and Intercultural advisory committee, we lead the implementation of strategy, staffing, and programming for antiracism in institutional, ecclesial, and congregational contexts.

## **III. Looking forward**

Our strategies begin with a journey of antiracism and intercultural conciliation with denominational and agency leaders and boards. This approach (from the center and out) was suggested by BIPOC key informants with deep knowledge and experience related to the antiracism ministry in Canada. As our work with denominational leadership matures, we expect to extend toward classes and local church engagement as well. Eventually, the work will broaden to all ecclesial structures within Canada over the course of three to five years.

As part of the endeavor to bring systemic and cultural changes from the center and outward, the office plans to offer a training program that will equip, inform, and empower the Canadian Ministries Team (CMT). Active participation in the work of antiracism and intercultural conciliation of CMT members is crucial for modeling and embodying hopeful and resolute antiracism and intercultural conciliation. Moreover, since HR plays a crucial role in shaping and forming the system and culture of the Burlington Office, the senior leader will work closely with the director of Human Resources of CRCNA-Canada.

## **Safe Church Ministry**

Safe Church Ministry equips churches and ministries of the CRC with the resources needed to become safer and healthier communities where people can worship God and grow in faith free from abuse. Additionally, we help churches respond to situations of abuse in ways that promote justice and healing. We do this work primarily through a network of safe church coordinators and teams across the denomination for whom we provide resources, training, support, and guidance. In a culture where 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men are victimized by sexual or physical abuse, and where over 50 percent of people have been harmed by emotional abuse, our work is energized by a vision of the church that not only safeguards against abuse but is a balm, an oasis from the cruelties of the world, a place where those who have been abused can experience healing and shalom, goodness and restoration.

## **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

“Nobody should experience harm from going to church.” These were the words of one survivor as she reflected on her long journey of healing from the sexual assault of a youth pastor in her church. How true. Nobody should be hurt from gathering with God’s people to worship God or seeking to deepen their understanding of the gospel or joining with God’s people to serve in mission and ministry. When people experience harm through the church, the very message of redemption and reconciliation that we are called

to proclaim is compromised. This is why Safe Church ministry is so important. The CRC's effectiveness in bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ is directly related to the safety and health of our church communities, to our ability to cultivate congregations where the value of every person is protected.

Three key values shape the way we engage this calling: *alongside churches and ministries*, through a *survivor-centered approach*, characterized by *courage, wisdom, and grace*.

1. *Alongside*: Safe Church is largely a ministry of support, and, as such, our work is one of partnership with or coming alongside churches and ministries as they seek to cultivate a safe and healthy ministry environment. We are here to help the church in the work of becoming a safe place for all persons. Moreover, when claims of abuse are brought forward, we come alongside the church to provide resources and support to help the church do the right thing and provide care and support to those most deeply affected. To do this work effectively and to make our resources and expertise more accessible and impactful on CRC ministries and churches, we work in close collaboration with other denominational ministries, including Pastor Church Resources, Resonate Global Mission, Women's Leadership Ministry, and, more recently, Faith Formation Ministries.
2. *Survivor centered*: As a ministry, we take a survivor-centered approach to abuse prevention and response. This means that in all our work we seek to empower survivors by prioritizing their rights, needs, and voice. This value is especially reflected in our collaboration with organizations like the following:
  - Dove's Nest, a nonprofit organization that empowers children by teaching children how to create safe environments for themselves and for others from a Christian perspective (*Circle of Grace* curriculum)
  - Shalem Mental Health Network, with whom we work to catalyze restorative practices that provide opportunities for survivors to give voice to the impact of abuse and what they need to support their healing
  - Selah Empowers, a ministry that offers online classes to equip, empower, and encourage women experiencing domestic violence for the next step in their journey
3. *With courage, wisdom, and grace*: Matthew 10 recounts how Jesus sent the disciples out to do the ministry of the kingdom of God, commissioning them to heal the sick and to cast out demons. Among other words of instruction, Jesus counseled the disciples to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves (v. 16). The work of abuse prevention, awareness, and response requires us to do the same, having the courage to advocate for survivors, especially at times when the church is conflicted about doing the right thing or is tone-deaf to the pain and suffering of survivors—and to do so with wisdom, grace, and love for the church and for God's people.

## II. Connecting with churches

The ministry of Safe Church is centered on connecting with churches to fulfill its calling and mandate of equipping churches in abuse prevention, awareness, and response. There are four main ways in which we connect with churches:

1. *Safe church coordinators and teams*: First, we connect through coaching, training, and creating networking opportunities for safe church coordinators and teams. Classical safe church coordinators and teams engage in the work of abuse prevention, awareness, and response in contextualized ways with the churches in their region. We are grateful for all the work they do to promote safe and healthier churches, and it is our privilege to support them in that work.
2. *Resource development*: Second, we generate resources to help the church in its work of abuse prevention, awareness, and response. In addition to our webinar series, book studies, and Network articles, key resources include material for Abuse Awareness Sunday, a Safe Church Policy Toolkit, a Responding to Abuse Toolkit, a new Safe Church Assessment Tool, and, more recently, facilitation of restorative conversations. We are excited to see more and more churches make use of these resources in their own communities.
3. *Responding to abuse*: Third, we regularly consult with church leaders and survivors on situations of abuse, providing counsel and support. This continues to be a substantial part of our work.
4. *Abuse of power training*: Finally, since spring 2020 we have been offering Abuse of Power training, which is required for all candidates for ministry. We hope to make this training available to all pastors and ministry leaders in the near future.

## III. Looking forward

As we look ahead, we envision that one of the primary ways we can help the church in this work of cultivating cultures that resist abuse is to develop resources and training that make abuse prevention and awareness easier. Many churches, especially smaller ones, simply don't have the resources or expertise to invest in this important work. We want to increase our capacity to resource safe church coordinators and other church leaders by providing webinars, online training, and tools that they can contextualize for their own congregation. We also hope to expand our work in restorative practices, catalyzing the regular use of restorative conversations in congregations across the denomination so as to cultivate church cultures increasingly characterized by empathy, humility, respect, repentance, and love—spaces where each person is seen and heard and feels valued.

### World Renew

World Renew is compelled by God's deep passion for justice and mercy, and we join with communities around the world to renew hope, reconcile lives, and restore creation. For 60 years, hundreds of thousands of people have shared in this calling: staff, local partners, global communities, churches in North America and beyond. World Renew reaches out in Christ's

name to people who live in extreme poverty, hunger, and disaster to bring his renewed hope where it is most needed.

In the countries where World Renew works, we intentionally seek out like-minded partners who value the equal, considerate, and just treatment of all participants in our programming. Through these partnerships, World Renew has the ability to reach more people and respond more effectively in disaster response, in transformational community development, in justice-seeking, and in advocacy.

World Renew's community development work focuses on achieving systemic, generational change in communities around the world struggling with hunger, poverty and injustice in the key areas of food security, economic opportunity, community health, and peace and justice.

Globally, warming temperatures and changing weather patterns have resulted in an increase in natural disasters. World Renew's disaster response work (domestic and international) involves not only addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable families affected by natural disasters but also supporting communities through the rebuilding process and offering resources to train communities in disaster preparedness and in rebuilding homes to withstand future storms.

## **I. Reflecting on Our Calling**

Through World Renew's community development and disaster response work, we not only help transform lives—helping families journey from poverty to flourishing—but also share Christ's hope. Often we hear people say, "I didn't know anyone cared." The traumas of hunger, poverty, and disaster can leave people feeling isolated and without hope. We give praise to God that through our work we help to renew hope.

While community development and disaster response are two umbrellas under which World Renew's work can be classified, we have shifted our programming to focus more on other areas of injustice under these umbrellas—for instance, gender-based violence and the refugee crisis.

In our mission, World Renew encourages individuals within a community to come together and use their collective skills and resources to create long-term solutions to address issues such as food security. While this can bring about transformation, it also fosters togetherness and a sense of belonging for all. Our village savings and loan association program, for instance, allows groups of ten to fifteen people to work together to improve the livelihoods of all members—and in this endeavor, group members often form long-lasting bonds.

World Renew recognizes that true transformation cannot happen by simply providing support and training. For true belonging and flourishing to be achieved for all, every member within a community needs to be embraced as an equal. World Renew firmly believes that we are all imagebearers of God (Gen. 1:26) and thus are all entitled to basic human rights. Gender justice is one area of our peace and justice programming in which we share this message while helping women to recognize their rights and men to better value women.

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in lockdowns, travel restrictions, and rising unemployment. But with COVID-19 also came a global increase in gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is rooted in unequal and unfair power relationships between men and women. It is one of the

most prevalent, isolating, and undignifying forms of abuse globally. In the past two years, GBV has become a fundamental part of World Renew's work and a Gender Working Group has been formed to help raise awareness and seek out solutions. The group has led various initiatives across the CRCNA, including the annual 16 Days of Activism campaign. For the 2021 campaign, World Renew hosted webinars and created training content, advocacy materials, and an advocacy guide. In addition, we developed a website to host these materials and provide information about World Renew's gender justice work in communities around the world ([sites.google.com/crcna.org/16daysofactivism/contact](https://sites.google.com/crcna.org/16daysofactivism/contact)).

The refugee crisis presents another area in which the pandemic has made a bad situation worse. The United Nations estimates that over 82 million people have been displaced worldwide by conflict, persecution, or disaster. World Renew's International Disaster Response team provides assistance to refugees and displaced people worldwide who have been affected by these crises, including people affected by the Syrian civil war. (At the time of this writing, statistics on the war in Ukraine are not yet available.) The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected refugee families' ability to access food and find jobs, leaving many facing acute hunger. In 2021, through social media and the sharing of stories with our donor base, World Renew brought attention to the ongoing civil war in Syria that has forced 6.8 million Syrians to flee their homeland to seek refuge in other countries, and has left another 6.7 million people displaced within Syria. Donors have been a bedrock of generosity and have made it possible for us to continue to work with onground partner MERATH to provide food, shelter, medicine, and other necessities to the most vulnerable refugees and displaced people.

The pandemic also hindered the global refugee population by preventing the resettlement of thousands of refugees waiting to rebuild their lives in other countries, including Canada. Through the Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program, World Renew Canada provides support to churches through the refugee sponsorship process. Sponsorship makes it possible for qualifying refugees to leave behind the fears and injustices of refugee life and to rebuild their lives in Canada with hope for the future. World Renew is very thankful to the many churches that seek justice for refugees through sponsorship. Strong bonds between resettled families and sponsors help facilitate the flourishing of the resettled families—and, by working together to make sponsorship possible for individuals or families, church members get the opportunity to develop and strengthen bonds within their community, fostering a sense of belonging for all.

Angie Bonvanie, a member of Georgetown (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church, shared her experience from when Georgetown decided to sponsor two brothers, Ambes and Kidane, from Eritrea. At the time, she was a teacher at the Halton Hills Christian School, and when she told her grade 5 and 6 students about the brothers, her students were eager to help raise funds to cover the costs involved in sponsorship. Angie admitted, "It was exhausting . . . mentally, physically, and emotionally draining. . . . But anything that's worthwhile . . . is exhausting." Angie and her students also created a newcomers guide for the brothers, and she explained that while the children had the opportunity to learn about Georgetown, "the real learning was the connection to the people and knowing that your world is much bigger than

your world.” Angie said she reminded her class, “God calls us to be a light to the nations, and maybe that means your neighbor or someone in another country. . . . It is about others; it’s not all about yourself.” Angie believes that children should be encouraged to answer God’s call to serve—now—not when they are older. She sees this as necessary for helping them to live up to their full potential. World Renew feels blessed to meet people like Angie who are passionate about sharing shalom, teaching *toiv*, and fostering belonging. Georgetown CRC went on to sponsor Kidane’s wife and children, and the members of the sponsorship committee agree that the real joy was in the collaboration to reach a common goal and in the opportunity to welcome new members into their community.

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

It is never easy witnessing the suffering of others: a mother watching her child slowly die of starvation; a father desperately packing what few belongings he can salvage from the rubble of what was his family’s home; or the bruises on the face of a battered woman. But with all of the injustice we witness, we give praise for the many ways God has allowed us to step in and witness his peace as he reminds us of his promise to restore creation: in tears of joy shed by a refugee family taking their first steps on Canadian soil; in the gratitude of a woman whose husband no longer beats her; in the embraces of community members who have worked toward a common goal; and in countless other ways.

## II. Connecting with Churches

As we do the work we are called to, World Renew invites churches within and outside the CRCNA to join us in our mission. Despite COVID restrictions, World Renew continues to build on existing relationships with churches.

World Renew’s Global Volunteer Program (GVP) gives individuals and groups opportunities to seek and explore God’s plan for their lives. GVP offers volunteers two opportunities to learn about and contribute to the transformative work God is doing through partnerships with churches and communities worldwide: the Global Partnership Program and the Global Associate Program. As the lives of volunteers in the ministry of World Renew intersect with others’ lives, God meets people at the crossroad and changes their stories for good.

In 2021, GVP signed on a group of five interns who completed their placements virtually with staff teams. GVP engaged students in virtual learning events such as the “Justice and Global Relationships Learning Event” in partnership with The King’s University, the “Seek Beyond Youth Weekend Virtual Event,” and “The Youth Justice Project.”

Because of COVID travel restrictions, World Renew’s global partnership churches in Canada and the U.S., who would have traveled for an annual visit to the communities they partner with, used technology to visit those communities online. Each church and community worked to stay connected through Zoom—visiting, checking in with each other, and praying and worshiping together. Many of these partnership churches were eager to support communities financially in response to downturns caused by the pandemic and attended virtual learning events, including “Partnering Well Beyond the

Pandemic.” In our commitment to increasing diversity and equity in volunteering, our GVP program and our onground teams have been facilitating national volunteer placements within country offices where World Renew works. In 2021 we had placements of local volunteers in Kenya, Uganda, and Honduras.

World Renew’s Global Engagement Opportunities (GEO) program seeks to bring the work of World Renew to life for congregations in a meaningful way. There are currently many active GEO partnerships in North America. GEO can be a great first step toward considering participation in the Global Partnership Program, in which congregations in Canada structurally interact with, learn from, and serve congregations and communities in global locations.

World Renew continues to develop its strategic planning and research initiative to increase denominational diversity among constituents and partners. Our church and community engagement teams in both the U.S. and Canada each have a full-time staff-person devoted to increasing participation among “Beyond CRC” (bCRC) churches. In addition, World Renew continues to partner officially with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Covenant Order of Evangelical (ECO) Presbyterians. The goal for World Renew’s bCRC program is to identify, connect, and engage bCRC churches with the mission and vision of World Renew.

### **III. Looking forward**

Romans 12: 2 teaches us that renewal comes through learning and trusting in God for discernment: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” World Renew will continue to lean on God for direction in answering the call to pursue mercy and justice for the world’s most vulnerable people. We will reflect on and learn from mistakes we have made and open our hearts to receive new knowledge.

World Renew is committed to fostering a sense of belonging and to extending God’s love and shalom to our staff, our partners, the churches who walk alongside us in our mission, and all participants in our programming.

Self-reflection is necessary for growth—looking inward and acknowledging strengths and weaknesses. As such, we have recently received a Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) audit of our organization to help us better recognize our areas of weakness so that we can improve the quality and effectiveness of our work and build on our strengths.

Through processes like the CHS we aim to remain accountable not only to our donors but also to ourselves. In regard to gender and diversity, the recent CHS audit found that while World Renew strives toward gender equality and nondiscrimination throughout our programs, there is room for improvement in our collection of data regarding age and disability. We also need to improve our efforts to make communities aware of the expected behavior of World Renew and partner staff so that there is no risk of any program participant enduring discomfort or harassment. We will work on these and other areas of weakness to better foster a sense of belonging for all.

We have already established a group that has put together an action plan to address the areas of our work where improvements are needed, and we

have started implementing some items on the action plan and will continue to make more changes in the next two years. As we work towards these changes, we will continue to build new relationships and improve existing ones with our partners and with churches within and outside the CRCNA, inviting them into our mission. We look to the future with faith in God’s guidance, love, and abundance.

**A shared vision for the future**

As the ministries of JIMA look to the future, we are buoyed by each other’s successes and each other’s commitments to pursue justice and mercy. We continue to answer God’s call, believing firmly in his unfailing love and his promise to restore creation. We give praise for the lives we have been able to extend God’s hope to, and we are grateful for the peace that comes from extending love and hope to people who have been marginalized and have felt the unwelcoming, painful, and alienating impacts of hate and discrimination. We will continue to work toward finding ways to be more Christlike by examining our practices and embracing opportunities to learn and grow—and to change where God guides us to do so. We embrace the challenges of our calling, and we continue to eagerly invite others into our mission, knowing that God is with us and hoping that together we can do more to foster belonging, flourishing, shalom, and *tov* for people who suffer injustice.

**Appendix H**  
**Condensed Financial Statements of the Agencies and Institutions**

**Schedule 1**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary**  
**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 6,643
Investments	\$ 63,546
Other	\$ 12,256
Total Assets	<u>\$ 82,445</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 747
Other Payables	\$ 1,525
Total Payables	<u>\$ 2,272</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 56,589
Unrestricted	\$ 23,584
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ 80,173</u>
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 82,445</b>

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ 2,277	\$ 2,143	\$ 2,208
% of Total Income	30.6%	27.5%	27.4%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 1,365	\$ 1,330	\$ 1,386
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 171	\$ 198	\$ 300
Total Gift Income	1,536	\$ 1,528	\$ 1,686
% of Total Income	20.7%	19.6%	20.9%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	\$ 2,526	\$ 2,413	\$ 2,230
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 1,092	\$ 1,699	\$ 1,926
Total Other Income	3,618	\$ 4,112	\$ 4,156
% of Total Income	48.7%	52.8%	51.6%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>7,430</b>	<b>\$ 7,783</b>	<b>\$ 8,051</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ 5,139	\$ 5,274	\$ 4,877
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	5,139	\$ 5,274	\$ 4,877
% of Total \$	76.8%	73.7%	68.9%
<b>Support Services:</b>			
Management & General	\$ 995	\$ 902	\$ 1,162
Plant Operations	\$ 555	\$ 482	\$ 594
Fund-raising	\$ 573	\$ 494	\$ 447
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	1,550	\$ 1,878	\$ 2,203
% of Total Expenditures	23.2%	26.3%	31.1%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 6,689</b>	<b>\$ 7,152</b>	<b>\$ 7,080</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 741</b>	<b>\$ 631</b>	<b>\$ 971</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	32	32	32
Total Support Service FTE's	16	16	16
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Fiscal Year: 21-22**

**Agency: Calvin University**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	20-21
	<u>Actual</u>
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 10,174
Investments	\$ 346,519
Other	\$ 229,681
Total Assets	<u>\$ 586,374</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 3,860
Other Payables	\$ 131,477
Total Payables	<u>\$ 135,337</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 177,219
Unrestricted	\$ 273,818
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ 451,037</u>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<u>\$ 586,374</u>

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Calvin University**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>INCOME:</b>				
Ministry Share	\$ 2,221	\$ 2,075	\$ 2,436	\$ 2,102
% of Total Income	2.1%	2.1%	2.3%	2.4%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 3,451	\$ 3,678	\$ 3,481	\$ 5,825
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	3,451	3,678	3,481	5,825
% of Total Income	3.3%	3.8%	3.4%	6.6%
Other Income:				
Tuition & Sales	\$ 92,175	\$ 82,887	\$ 93,626	\$ 75,976
Grants	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Miscellaneous	\$ 5,803	\$ 8,411	\$ 4,256	\$ 4,674
Total Other Income	97,978	91,298	97,882	80,650
% of Total Income	94.5%	94.1%	94.3%	91.1%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>103,650</b>	<b>\$ 97,051</b>	<b>\$ 103,799</b>	<b>\$ 88,577</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>				
<b>Program Services:</b>				
Education	\$ 85,342	\$ 80,841	\$ 78,992	\$ 64,780
Interenational	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 85,342	\$ 80,841	\$ 78,992	\$ 64,780
% of Total Expenditures	82.8%	82.8%	76.6%	78.7%
<b>Support Services:</b>				
Management & General	\$ 2,105	\$ 2,302	\$ 8,326	\$ 2,327
Plant Operations	\$ 7,491	\$ 6,862	\$ 7,603	\$ 7,035
Fund-raising	\$ 2,817	\$ 2,298	\$ 2,898	\$ 2,898
Debt Service	\$ 5,355	\$ 5,326	\$ 5,300	\$ 5,300
Total Support Service	17,768	16,788	24,127	17,560
% of Total Expenditures	17.2%	17.2%	23.4%	21.3%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 103,110</b>	<b>\$ 97,629</b>	<b>\$ 103,119</b>	<b>\$ 82,340</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 540</b>	<b>\$ (578)</b>	<b>\$ 680</b>	<b>\$ 6,237</b>
	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Budget	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
Total Program Service FTE's	528	528	520	517
Total Support Service FTE's	143	143	135	132
<b>TOTAL FTE'S</b>	<b>671</b>	<b>671</b>	<b>655</b>	<b>649</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Central Services**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales		\$ -	\$ -
Agency Services	6,989	\$ 7,143	\$ 8,219
Grants/Miscellaneous		\$ -	\$ -
Total Other Income	6,989	\$ 7,143	\$ 8,219
% of Total Income	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>6,989</b>	<b>\$ 7,143</b>	<b>\$ 8,219</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 5,569	\$ 5,662	\$ 7,112
Total Program Service	\$ 5,569	\$ 5,662	\$ 7,112
% of Total Expenditures	79.7%	79.1%	86.5%
Support Services:			
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	\$ 1,420	\$ 1,496	\$ 1,107
Fund-raising	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	1,420	\$ 1,496	\$ 1,107
% of Total Expenditures	20.3%	20.9%	13.5%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 6,989</b>	<b>\$ 7,158</b>	<b>\$ 8,219</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ (15)</b>	<b>\$ -</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	45	43	41
Total Support Service FTE's	3	4	2
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>43</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Congregational Ministries**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ 4,960	\$ 4,812	\$ 4,926
% of Total Income	43.9%	46.1%	69.1%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 1,442	\$ 2,105	\$ 882
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 2	\$ -	\$ 20
Total Gift Income	\$ 1,444	\$ 2,105	\$ 902
% of Total Income	12.8%	20.2%	12.7%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	\$ 4,730	\$ 3,525	\$ 559
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 164	\$ -	\$ 742
Total Other Income	\$ 4,894	\$ 3,525	\$ 1,301
% of Total Income	43.3%	33.8%	18.2%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$ 11,298</b>	<b>\$ 10,442</b>	<b>\$ 7,129</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ 11,429	\$ 11,771	\$ 6,312
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 11,429	\$ 11,771	\$ 6,312
% of Total Expenditures	96%	100%	88%
<b>Support Services:</b>			
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 560
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 523	\$ -	\$ 294
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 523	\$ -	\$ 854
% of Total Expenditures	4.4%	0.0%	11.9%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 11,952</b>	<b>\$ 11,771</b>	<b>\$ 7,166</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ (654)</b>	<b>\$ (1,329)</b>	<b>\$ (37)</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	54	55	51
Total Support Service FTE's	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>51</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

Year: 2021

Agency: Employee's Retirement Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)

Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 361
Investments	\$ 6,408
Other	\$ -
Total Assets	\$ 6,769.00
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ -
Other Payables	\$ -
Total Payables	\$ -
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ -
Unrestricted	\$ 6,769
Total Net Assets	\$ 6,769.00
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	\$ 6,769.00

Schedule 2

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Year: 2021

Agency: Employee's Retirement Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)

Operating Budget (000s)

	2019 Actual	2020 Actual	2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 501	\$ 505	\$ 525
Participant Contributions	\$ 83	\$ 103	\$ 128
Investment Earnings	\$ 788	\$ 620	\$ 490
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<b>\$ 1,372</b>	<b>\$ 1,228</b>	<b>\$ 1,143</b>
<b>DEDUCTIONS:</b>			
Distributions	\$ 714	\$ 524	\$ 969
Management & General	\$ 24	\$ 29	\$ 29
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<b>\$ 738</b>	<b>\$ 553</b>	<b>\$ 998</b>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<b>\$ 634</b>	<b>\$ 675</b>	<b>\$ 145</b>

TOTAL FTE's

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Year: 2021**  
**Agency: Employee's Savings Plan - (US)**  
**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ -
Investments	\$ 46,337
Other	\$ -
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$ 46,337</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ -
Other Payables	\$ 24
<b>Total Payables</b>	<b>\$ 24</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 46,313
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 46,313</b>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 46,337</b>

Schedule 2

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Year: 2021

Agency: Employee's Savings Plan - (US)

Operating Budget (000s)

	2019 Actual	2020 Actual	2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 2,536	\$ 2,242	\$ 2,243
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 7,166	\$ 5,356	\$ 6,053
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<b>9,702</b>	<b>7,598</b>	<b>8,296</b>
<b>DEDUCTIONS</b>			
Distributions	\$ 4,529	\$ 4,701	\$ 3,126
Management & General	\$ 131	\$ 136	\$ 139
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<b>4,660</b>	<b>4,837</b>	<b>3,265</b>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<b>5,042</b>	<b>2,761</b>	<b>5,031</b>

TOTAL FTE's

-

-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Grants**  
**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 3,412
Investments	\$ -
Other	\$ -
Total Assets	<u>\$ 3,412</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	
Other Payables	
Total Payables	<u>\$ -</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 3,412
Unrestricted	
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ 3,412</u>
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 3,412</b>

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Grants**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>		
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:		
Gifts & Offerings	\$ -	\$ 3
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	\$ -	\$ 3.00
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.2%
Other Income:		
Tuition/Sales	\$ 3	\$ -
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ 314
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 1,674	\$ 1,003
Total Other Income	\$ 1,677	\$ 1,317
% of Total Income	5.8%	0.0%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$ 1,677</b>	<b>\$ 1,320</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>		
Program Services:		
Education	\$ 1,798	\$ 1,644
International	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 1,798	\$ 1,644
% of Total Expenditures	100.0%	100.0%
Support Services:		
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ -	\$ -
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total \$	0.0%	0.0%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 1,798</b>	<b>\$ 1,644</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ (121)</b>	<b>\$ (324)</b>
Total Program Service FTEs	2	2
Total Support Service FTEs	-	-
<b>TOTAL FTEs</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

**Schedule 1**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Loan Fund**  
**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 6,350
Investments	
Other	\$ 15,400
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$ 21,750</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 40
Other Payables	\$ 16,000
<b>Total Payables</b>	<b>\$ 16,040</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 5,710
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 5,710</b>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 21,750</b>

**Schedule 2**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Fiscal Year: 21-22**

**Agency: Loan Fund**

**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Income:			
Tuition & Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Miscellaneous	\$ 852	\$ 831	\$ 771
Total Other Income	\$ 852	\$ 831	\$ 771
% of Total Income	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$ 852</b>	<b>\$ 831</b>	<b>\$ 771</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>			
Program Services:			
Education	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 400	\$ 1,017	\$ 521
Total Program Service	\$ 400	\$ 1,017	\$ 521
% of Total Expenditures	51.5%	81.6%	68.6%
Support Services:			
Management & General	\$ 376	\$ 230	\$ 238
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 376	\$ 230	\$ 238
% of Total Expenditures	48.5%	18.4%	31.4%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 776</b>	<b>\$ 1,247</b>	<b>\$ 759</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 76</b>	<b>\$ (416)</b>	<b>\$ 12</b>
Total Program Service FTEs			
Total Support Service FTEs	2	2	2
<b>TOTAL FTEs</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

**Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Year: 2021****Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 1,814
Investments	\$ 86,038
Other	\$ 81
Total Assets	<u>\$ 87,933</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	
Other Payables	\$ 216
Total Payables	<u>\$ 216</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 87,717
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ 87,717</u>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	\$ 87,933

**Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

Year: 2021

Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)

Balance Sheet (000s)

	MPF 2019 Actual	MPF 2020 Actual	MPF 2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 2,582	\$ 2,592	\$ 2,547
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 11,125	\$ 8,664	\$ 13,420
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<b>13,707</b>	<b>11,256</b>	<b>15,967</b>
<b>DEDUCTIONS:</b>			
Distributions	\$ 2,943	\$ 3,018	\$ 3,098
Management & General	\$ 891	\$ 952	\$ 1,086
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<b>\$ 3,834</b>	<b>\$ 3,970</b>	<b>\$ 4,184</b>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<b>\$ 9,873</b>	<b>\$ 7,286</b>	<b>\$ 11,783</b>
TOTAL FTE's	1	1	1

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Year: 2021**

**Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US)**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 4,128
Investments	\$ 138,124
Other	\$ 240
Total Assets	\$ 142,492
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	
Other Payables	\$ 70
Total Payables	\$ 70
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 142,422
Total Net Assets	\$ 142,422
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	\$ 142,492

Schedule 1

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Year: 2021

Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US)

Balance Sheet (000s)

	MPF 2019 Actual	MPF 2020 Actual	MPF 2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 5,117	\$ 5,037	\$ 4,914
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 21,122	\$ 15,010	\$ 23,995
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<u>26,239</u>	<u>20,047</u>	<u>28,909</u>
<b>DEDUCTIONS:</b>			
Distributions	\$ 10,271	\$ 10,570	\$ 10,636
Management & General	\$ 1,176	\$ 1,223	\$ 1,545
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<u>\$ 11,447</u>	<u>\$ 11,793</u>	<u>\$ 12,181</u>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<u>\$ 14,792</u>	<u>\$ 8,254</u>	<u>\$ 16,728</u>
TOTAL FTE's	2	1	1

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Fiscal Year: 21-22****Agency: Raise Up Global Ministries****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 75
Investments	\$ -
Other	\$ 85
Total Assets	<u>\$ 160</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 85
Other Payables	\$ 717
Total Payables	<u>\$ 802</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 73
Unrestricted	\$ (715)
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ (642)</u>
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 160</b>

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Raise Up Global Ministries**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @ .7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697
<b>INCOME:</b>		
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:		
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 223	\$ 446
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ 77
Total Gift Income	\$ 223	\$ 523
% of Total Income	28.1%	48.9%
Other Income:		
Tuition/Sales	\$ 211	\$ 156
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 359	\$ 391
Total Other Income	\$ 570	\$ 547
% of Total Income	71.9%	51.1%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$ 793</b>	<b>\$ 1,070</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>		
Program Services:		
Education	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ 308
Domestic Ministries	\$ 915	\$ 517
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 915	\$ 825
% of Total Expenditures	71.8%	72.1%
Support Services:		
Management & General	\$ 274	\$ 239
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 85	\$ 80
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 359	\$ 319
% of Total Expenditures	28.2%	27.9%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 1,274</b>	<b>\$ 1,144</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ (481)</b>	<b>\$ (74)</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	8	6
Total Support Service FTE's	2	1
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Fiscal Year: 21-22**

**Agency: ReFrame Ministries**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 2,750
Investments	\$ 8,350
Other	\$ 663
Total Assets	<u>11,763</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 183
Other Payables	\$ 450
Total Payables	<u>633</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 1,418
Unrestricted	\$ 9,712
Total Net Assets	<u>11,130</u>
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	<u>\$ 11,763</u>

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: ReFrame Ministries**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	CNS Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	CNS Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ 2,795	\$ 2,611	\$ 2,709
% of Total Income	28.8%	29.8%	26.7%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 3,259	\$ 3,365	\$ 3,598
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 3,280	\$ 2,035	\$ 2,188
Total Gift Income	6,539	\$ 5,400	\$ 5,786
% of Total Income	67.5%	61.6%	57.0%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 357	\$ 750	\$ 1,664
Total Other Income	357	\$ 750	\$ 1,664
% of Total Income	3.7%	8.6%	16.4%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>9,691</b>	<b>8,761</b>	<b>10,159</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ 165	\$ 120	\$ 75
International	\$ 3,093	\$ 3,130	\$ 2,774
Domestic Ministries	\$ 2,257	\$ 2,400	\$ 2,299
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 5,515	\$ 5,650	\$ 5,148
% of Total Expenditures	69.5%	69.0%	70.7%
<b>Support Services:</b>			
Management & General	\$ 880	\$ 990	\$ 887
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 1,538	\$ 1,545	\$ 1,246
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	2,418	\$ 2,535	\$ 2,133
% of Total Expenditures	30.5%	31.0%	29.3%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 7,933</b>	<b>\$ 8,185</b>	<b>\$ 7,281</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 1,758</b>	<b>\$ 576</b>	<b>\$ 2,878</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	21	20	18
Total Support Service FTE's	10	10	12
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Fiscal Year: 21-22**

**Agency: Resonate Global Mission**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 6,415
Investments	\$ 18,376
Other	\$ 556
Total Assets	\$ 25,347
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 1,388
Other Payables	\$ 773
Total Payables	\$ 2,161
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 4,456
Unrestricted	\$ 18,730
Total Net Assets	\$ 23,186
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	\$ 25,347

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-23**  
**Agency: Resonate Global Mission**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ 6,792	\$ 6,343	\$ 6,606
% of Total Income	32.9%	30.3%	30.1%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 9,923	\$ 10,196	\$ 10,183
Disaster Gifts			
Estate Gifts	\$ 3,135	\$ 2,701	\$ 1,727
Total Gift Income	13,058	12,897	11,910
% of Total Income	63.3%	61.6%	54.2%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	\$ 75	\$ 38	\$ 21
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 715	\$ 1,651	\$ 3,433
Total Other Income	790	1,689	3,454
% of Total Income	3.8%	8.1%	15.7%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<u>20,640</u>	<u>20,929</u>	<u>21,970</u>
<b>EXPENSES (FTE = Full Time Employee):</b>			
Program Services:			
Education	\$ 846	\$ 770	\$ 636
International	\$ 10,119	\$ 9,459	\$ 8,902
Domestic Ministries	\$ 4,262	\$ 4,122	\$ 2,331
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,528
Total Program Service	\$ 15,227	\$ 14,351	\$ 13,397
% of Total Expenditures	79%	77%	78%
Support Services:			
Management & General	\$ 1,641	\$ 1,796	\$ 1,819
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 2,338	\$ 2,439	\$ 1,973
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service \$	\$ 3,979	\$ 4,235	\$ 3,792
% of Total \$	20.7%	22.8%	22.1%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<u>\$ 19,206</u>	<u>\$ 18,586</u>	<u>\$ 17,189</u>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<u>\$ 1,434</u>	<u>\$ 2,343</u>	<u>\$ 4,781</u>
Total Program Service FTEs	77	81	81
Total Support Service FTEs	25	23	23
	102	104	104

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Year: 2021**

**Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars)**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 417
Investments	\$ -
Other	\$ 1
Total Assets	<u>\$ 418</u>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	
Other Payables	\$ 10
Total Payables	<u>\$ 10</u>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 408
Total Net Assets	<u>\$ 408</u>
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	<u>\$ 418</u>

Schedule 1

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Year: 2021

Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars)

Balance Sheet (000s)

	SAF 2019 Actual	SAF 2020 Actual	SAF 2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 85	\$ 87	\$ 63
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 6	\$ 5	\$ 4
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<u>91</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>67</u>
<b>DEDUCTIONS:</b>			
Distributions	\$ 23	\$ 28	\$ 107
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<u>\$ 23</u>	<u>\$ 28</u>	<u>\$ 107</u>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<u>\$ 68</u>	<u>\$ 64</u>	<u>\$ (40)</u>
TOTAL FTE's	-	-	-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Year: 2021**

**Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US)**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 290
Investments	\$ -
Other	\$ 37
Total Assets	\$ 327
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	
Other Payables	\$ 28
Total Payables	\$ 28
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	
Unrestricted	\$ 299
Total Net Assets	\$ 299
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	\$ 327

Schedule 1

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Year: 2021

Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US)

Balance Sheet (000s)

	SAF 2019 Actual	SAF 2020 Actual	SAF 2021 Actual
<b>ADDITIONS:</b>			
Employer Contributions	\$ 162	\$ 159	\$ 137
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 2	\$ -	\$ -
<b>TOTAL ADDITIONS</b>	<u>164</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>137</u>
<b>DEDUCTIONS:</b>			
Distributions	\$ 105	\$ 92	\$ 74
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1
<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<u>\$ 105</u>	<u>\$ 92</u>	<u>\$ 75</u>
<b>NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)</b>	<u>\$ 59</u>	<u>\$ 67</u>	<u>\$ 62</u>
TOTAL FTE's	-	-	-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1**

**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Fiscal Year: 21-22**

**Agency: Synodical Services/Cong Min**

**Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 6,905
Investments	\$ 1,062
Other	\$ 6,492
Total Assets	\$ 14,459
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 582
Other Payables	\$ 2,722
Total Payables	\$ 3,304
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 377
Unrestricted	\$ 10,778
Total Net Assets	\$ 11,155
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	\$ 14,459

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: Synodical Administrative Services**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ 2,300	\$ 2,283	\$ 2,694
% of Total Income	54.5%	34.1%	44.7%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 306	\$ -	\$ 150
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 3
Total Gift Income	306	-	153
% of Total Income	7.2%	0.0%	2.5%
Other Income:			
Tuition & Sales	\$ 63	\$ 1,592	\$ 24
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ 1,573	\$ 1,131
Grants/Misellaneous	\$ 1,554	\$ 1,246	\$ 2,026
Total Other Income	\$ 1,617	\$ 4,411	\$ 3,181
% of Total Income	38.3%	65.9%	52.8%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>4,223</b>	<b>6,694</b>	<b>6,028</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ 1,670	\$ 1,169	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 199
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 35	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 1,705	\$ 1,169	\$ 199
% of Total Expenditures	52.7%	16.6%	4.5%
Support Services:			
Management & General	\$ 1,304	\$ 3,768	\$ 4,236
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	\$ -	\$ 1,822	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 224	\$ 293	\$ -
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 1,528	\$ 5,883	\$ 4,236
% of Total Expenditures	47.3%	83.4%	95.5%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 3,233</b>	<b>\$ 7,052</b>	<b>\$ 4,435</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 990</b>	<b>\$ (358)</b>	<b>\$ 1,593</b>
Total Program Service FTE's	11	11	9
Total Support Service FTE's	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL FTE's</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

**Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Fiscal Year: 21-22****Agency: World Renew****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual
<b>Assets</b>	
Cash	\$ 4,886
Investments	\$ 27,908
Other	\$ 3,299
Total Assets	\$ 36,093
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Trade Payables	\$ 1,133
Other Payables	\$ 259
Total Payables	\$ 1,392
<b>Net Assets</b>	
Donor Designated	\$ 12,948
Unrestricted	\$ 21,753
Total Net Assets	\$ 34,701
<b>Total Liabilites and Net Assets</b>	\$ 36,093

**Schedule 2**  
**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**Fiscal Year: 21-22**  
**Agency: World Renew**  
**Operating Budget (000s)**

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697
<b>INCOME:</b>			
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	-	-	-
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 12,093	\$ 12,226	\$ 13,588
Disaster Gifts	\$ 12,318	\$ 13,897	\$ 13,918
Estate Gifts	\$ 5,397	\$ 2,877	\$ 3,480
Total Gift Income	29,808	\$ 29,000	\$ 30,986
% of Total Income	90.8%	88.9%	84.1%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 3,035	\$ 3,625	\$ 5,862
Total Other Income	\$ 3,035	\$ 3,625	\$ 5,862
% of Total Income	9.2%	11.1%	15.9%
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$ 32,843</b>	<b>\$ 32,625</b>	<b>\$ 36,848</b>
<b>EXPENSES:</b>			
<b>Program Services:</b>			
Education	\$ 1,443	\$ 1,993	\$ 1,924
International	\$ 11,273	\$ 11,765	\$ 11,339
Domestic Ministries	\$ 312	\$ 372	\$ 254
Disaster	\$ 13,974	\$ 15,614	\$ 14,784
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 27,002	\$ 29,744	\$ 28,301
% of Total Expenditures	84.7%	83.9%	82.2%
<b>Support Services:</b>			
Management & General	\$ 1,892	\$ 1,982	\$ 2,048
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 2,974	\$ 3,710	\$ 4,083
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service \$	4,866	\$ 5,692	\$ 6,131
% of Total Expenditures	15.3%	16.1%	17.8%
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 31,868</b>	<b>\$ 35,436</b>	<b>\$ 34,432</b>
<b>NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)</b>	<b>\$ 975</b>	<b>\$ (2,811)</b>	<b>\$ 2,416</b>
Total Program Service FTEs	69	78	56
Total Support Service FTEs	36	37	19
<b>TOTAL FTEs</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>75</b>

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

# REPORTS OF AGENCIES, INSTITUTIONS, AND MINISTRIES

## Introduction

It is the responsibility of the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA to submit a *unified* report to synod composed of ministry updates provided by the agencies, educational institutions, and congregational ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. The reports of the ministries are organized and presented in alignment with Our Calling—five ministry priorities endorsed by synod (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 610; *Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 563): Faith Formation, Servant Leadership, Global Mission, Mercy and Justice, and Gospel Proclamation and Worship. Supplementary reports will be provided by denominational boards and standing committees of synod, if necessary.

These reports provide helpful information for local churches. Much of the material also supplies significant background for decisions that synod will be asked to make. The content also provides the transparency necessary to enhance our life together as a denomination.

Together these reports present the story of how God is blessing and guiding our work through the agencies, institutions, and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church as we covenant together. As you read the material that follows, I encourage you to respond with gratitude for what God is doing through the Holy Spirit, transforming lives and communities worldwide, by means of the Christian Reformed Church.

Colin P. Watson, Sr.  
Executive Director of the CRCNA



**Calvin University****I. Introduction**

Throughout its nearly 150-year history, Calvin University has remained steadfast to its bold mission of equipping students to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world.

With more than 65,000 alumni living out this mission around the world, we believe that our graduates are making a difference in their efforts to renew all things for the glory of Christ.

By offering more than 100 majors and programs, including expanded graduate-level offerings in education, accounting, speech pathology and audiology, business administration, exercise science, geographic information science, media and strategic communication, and public health, Calvin is preparing students to redeem every square inch of God's creation.

Despite the challenging terrain of the past decade generally, and (at the time of this writing) the past 22-month pandemic specifically, Calvin is operating from a position of strength based on its sound foundation and forward-looking preparedness:

- Calvin knows who it is—it has a strong mission and identity;
- Calvin knows where it is headed—it has a compelling vision;
- Calvin is financially stable—its assets have doubled in ten years, while its debt has been cut in half.

**II. Reflecting on Our Calling**

In all we do at Calvin—in our teaching and learning, in athletics and the arts, in campus life and community activities—we aim to live *coram Deo*, "before the face of God." At Calvin we do this in community, rooted in the historic Reformed tradition of Christianity. As people who belong together as members of Christ's body, we are grateful to partner with the CRCNA in living out the denomination's five ministry priorities.

**A. Faith formation**

The de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development's platform of online learning, "Reflecting Faith: Resources for Christians in the Academy," has added four new modules, now available for pilot use. The content advisory teams for these modules include participants from Zambia, South Korea, Uganda, South Africa, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Calvin University faculty, and partner institutions across the United States.

The Campus Ministries team launched a new monthly campus-wide communion service that includes faculty, staff, and students partaking together in the sacrament of communion, served by elders from a local congregation.

Through the support of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Campus Ministries invited three off-campus guest artists to work with students and to lead in worship. Guest artists included Kathleen Turner (liturgical dance), Eric Lige (multicultural worship), and Jeff Baker (biblical storytelling).

Campus Ministries partnered with the Center for Intercultural Student Development to host an International Worship service that included international student groups leading from their own worship cultures.

Discipleship happens through small groups, worship events, Bible studies, and other gatherings in the residence halls, many of which are facilitated by Barnabas students and discipleship assistants. We are grateful to seminary interns Sarah VerMerris and Becky Wieggers, who began overseeing this ministry this past fall.

Pastoral care appointments are once again happening in person, and numbers are higher than last year simply due to access to staff.

#### *B. Servant leadership*

The Service-Learning Center (SL-C) is experimenting with a new approach to more effectively connect students to meaningful, developmental service-learning opportunities. While still maintaining a community-wide database of opportunities, the SL-C has entered into a unique relationship with five nonprofit organizations for partnership and programming: Community Food Club, Home Repair Services, Alpha Grand Rapids, Grandville Avenue Arts and Humanities, and Refugee Education Center.

With spring break 2021 canceled, SL-C staff opted to reconfigure traditional spring-break trip efforts into five local “service-learning days,” with 8-16 students each day joining one partner organization for four to six hours of learning and service. The experiment was very successful, and plans are under way to continue these service-learning days in the future.

More than 900 students participated in service-learning in 2021, partnering with more than 75 nonprofit organizations, churches, and schools.

The Ministry Leadership Cohort, an initiative of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, welcomed a record-high 27 students to the program last fall. The two-year program is open to incoming students from any major who show potential for all kinds of leadership in the local church. The program seeks to help participants build community, practice leadership, and love the church.

#### *C. Global mission*

Working alongside world language faculty, the Global Campus team helped with the instructional design and marketing of online world language courses, which were offered to students at Calvin and other schools through the course-sharing site Acadeum.

Calvin faculty and staff hosted in-depth conversations with experts in a range of fields, including adoption, faith, politics, racism, sport, and worship available as podcasts. Intellectually curious listeners from around the world are able to enjoy these stimulating conversations.

The Clean Water Institute, which seeks to improve the availability of clean water around the globe, supported six projects last year, from water disinfection in Ecuador to water filter distribution in Liberia.

#### *D. Mercy and justice*

The Center for Intercultural Student Development (CISD) focused its efforts this year on helping students apply principles of justice to their vocation. Whether welcoming new students to campus through specialized orientation programming; developing student leaders through the Multicultural Student Advisory Board, the CISD Ambassadors, and International Student Association Committee; or planning for Unlearn Week, CISD continues to be a hub of cultural competency and inclusive excellence at Calvin.

The Education Department, with support from the Global Campus, has expanded Calvin's Ready for Life program, which serves students with intellectual disabilities. The expansion is partly the result of a \$1.2 million five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Graduates of the program now earn a certificate from Calvin and the Ready for Life Academy. In addition to the life-skill courses, students are able to choose Calvin classes in an area of interest such as ministry, creation care, or helping professions such as social work, public health, international development, and more.

Graduates of the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI), which provides a Christian liberal arts education to inmates at the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, were awarded bachelor's degrees for the first time in 2021. This five-year program results in a Calvin University degree in Faith and Community Leadership. Each year since 2015, a cohort of 20 students has been accepted into this transformative program.

Rachael Denhollander was awarded the Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life, which was cosponsored by the de Vries Institute at Calvin University. Denhollander is an attorney, author, advocate, and educator recognized as a leading voice on the topic of sexual abuse.

#### *E. Gospel proclamation and worship*

Worship continued daily at 10 a.m. in person and was also broadcast via the Calvin YouTube channel around the world. Pastor Mary Hulst preached every Wednesday throughout the academic year and led worship at various other events.

We are also grateful to have had local pastors Rev. MoonBae Kim, Rev. David Sung, Rev. Byron Salguero, and Rev. Darrell Delaney on campus weekly to meet with students and to lead studies in Korean and Spanish.

Calvin welcomed their annual cohort of six student worship apprentices, who are tasked with planning daily chapel services and other worship opportunities that arise throughout the year. This intensive program trains and challenges students to grow in their leadership skills and faith.

The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship hosted the 2021 Symposium on Worship online. The three-week event featured flexible learning options available to people around the world.

### **III. Academic initiatives**

Calvin offers a bold, transformative education that is grounded in Christian conviction. We challenge students to be inspired by innovation, leadership, and artistic expression. We are passionate about helping students discover and live out their calling by responding to the world's needs. The following list details academic initiatives that affirm our commitment to equip students to think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world.

#### *A. Accolades and awards*

*U.S. News & World Report* ranked Calvin fourth overall among all Midwest regional universities in its 2022 *Best Colleges Guidebook*. In addition, Calvin is ranked third among Midwest regional universities for "Best Undergraduate Teaching," and 15th among "Most Innovative Schools."

The Princeton Review selected Calvin for their annual guidebook featuring the top 14 percent of America's 2,700 four-year colleges. Calvin's Health Services was also recognized as one of the top 20 in the nation for the tenth year in a row.

The *Fiske Guide to Colleges 2022* recognized Calvin for its affordability and for the strength of its engineering program. Calvin was on the short list of inexpensive private colleges and universities and "small colleges and universities strong in engineering."

Three 2021 graduates were selected for Fulbright awards. Maggie Backus and Ravyn DeWitt received English Teaching Assistantships, and Juliana Knot was selected as an alternate for this highly competitive award. Backus was selected to teach in South Korea; DeWitt in the Canary Islands; and Knot as an alternate in Germany.

Calvin young alumnus Nathanael Kazmierczak was awarded a Hertz Fellowship. The generous and prestigious award is designed to empower extraordinary innovators at a pivotal point in their career, helping to shape their scientific pursuits and accelerate real-world impact.

Calvin students Fenton Lawler and Willem Hoogendam were named Goldwater Scholars, widely considered the most prestigious award for undergraduate students in the natural sciences, mathematics, and engineering in the United States.

Alex Raycroft, a 2021 graduate, was awarded a Lilly Fellowship to pursue graduate work in philosophy. The Lilly Graduate Fellows Program supports outstanding students who want to explore the connections between Christianity, higher education, and the vocation of the teacher-scholar.

Professor Jolene Vos-Camy was admitted to the French Order of Academic Palms by the Consul General of France. She was awarded the rank of chevalier, one of the oldest and more prestigious honors given by the French Republic.

### B. Academic offerings

Calvin launched new graduate programs in public health, business administration, exercise science, and geographic information science, bringing the total number of graduate programs to 11. We also developed two existing graduate programs—speech pathology and audiology, and media and strategic communication—in an online mode. The incoming graduate enrollment rate was up 50 percent this year compared to last year.

Funded by a \$15 million donor gift, the new Calvin University School of Health will support academic programming in health sciences by funding leadership and academic personnel, developing state-of-the-art laboratories, and expanding opportunities at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The university established the School of Business, hired its first dean for this school, Jim Ludema, and broke ground on a building to support the new school.

Implementation of the new core yielded positive results, including the rewarding experience for faculty who participated in interdisciplinary groups preparing to teach a foundational new humanities course, "Community and Commitments"—which focuses on learning together how to teach on Augustine's *City of God*, sustainability, diversity and difference, and global regions and cultures.

The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded Calvin \$500,000 in relief funding as part of the American Rescue Plan passed by Congress last year. The funding will help retain tenure-track faculty, freeing up some of their time so that they can envision and implement strategic initiatives to reenergize the humanities across campus.

#### C. *Living and learning spaces*

The social science departments (economics, political science, and sociology and social work) moved into a shared space that will promote collaborative synergy and bring more visibility to the social sciences as an area of study.

Wireless capabilities in the residence halls were upgraded to help meet student demand, which increased dramatically as these spaces were needed for classes and remote learning during the pandemic.

The implementation of a new campus metering system is helping to measure improvements in our heating and cooling of campus buildings. These improvements are necessary to move Calvin toward the goal of becoming carbon neutral over the next three decades.

The media agency space renovation, designed for the new graduate program in media and strategic communication, was completed in the DeVos Communication Center.

#### D. *Spotlighting faculty and students*

Noah Toly was named the university's next provost. Toly came to Calvin from Wheaton College, where he served as executive director of the Center for Urban Engagement, chair of urban studies, and professor of urban studies and politics and of international relations.

Calvin professor David Smith's book *On Christian Teaching* won the Lilly Fellows Program's Book Award. This prestigious award recognizes works that animate the vocations of Christian teaching and theory in university settings.

The work of Calvin professor of engineering emeritus Rich DeJong on how to reduce wind noise in an automobile led to a patent for Toyota Motors Company. Many Calvin students over the years contributed to the research that resulted in this patent.

Michelle Loyd-Paige, executive associate to the president for diversity and inclusion, coauthored *Diversity Playbook: Recommendations and Guidance for Christian Organizations*. The book aims to help people striving to lead or enhance institutional diversity efforts.

Under the guidance of engineering professor Matt Heun, Calvin engineering students helped Habitat for Humanity to find ways to reduce carbon emissions by 20 percent throughout the home-building process. This problem-based approach to education has been rewarding and confidence-building for students at Calvin.

Calvin sophomores Abigail Ham and Brooke Adelman had works published in literary magazines this past year. Ham's short story "The Tree in Harvey Park" was published in *Blue Lake Review*, and Adelman's poem "A Fault Finder Contending with the Almighty" found a place in the *Albion Review*.

Clarence Joldersma, director of Calvin's master of education program, was asked to contribute to a major international project for the United

Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative aims to rethink education and help shape the future.

#### IV. Finances

Despite unprecedented pressures facing higher education, Calvin University is planning not merely to survive these challenges on a year-to-year basis but to thrive through them. Recognizing impending declines in revenue due to lower numbers of expected high school graduates, Calvin has been preparing for nearly a decade to work through these changes by means of financial stewardship and strategic investments. The pandemic ushered in unforeseen pressures, but Calvin's foundation has prepared it to withstand and has primed it to pursue a compelling vision for the institution—creating a strategic, coherent, multiyear financial plan that moves Calvin forward.

As a result of strong investment returns, Calvin's endowment closed the fiscal year at more than \$250 million. The endowment supports ongoing operation of the university and scholarship support for students. This is an essential resource, given that denominational ministry shares have declined by more than 30 percent over the past ten years.

A lead gift of \$15 million helped to establish the Calvin University School of Health.

Calvin's Named Scholarship Program continued to be a draw for donors, raising more than \$4 million and awarding more than \$4.5 million annually to 1,200 students. Fifteen new scholarships were created last year.

Driven by increased government funding from COVID relief, lower than expected financial aid (COVID related), and lower than expected operating costs (COVID related), we closed the budget year with a surplus of \$6.2 million.

We initiated a Strategic Budget Review to analyze and make structural changes to Calvin's financial situation to ensure its long-term financial viability.

The Annual Fund surpassed its goal by raising more than \$3.3 million. Several initiatives were effective in reengaging with former donors of the Annual Fund.

Calvin alumnus Greg Elzinga was named the new vice president for advancement, after serving as a major gift officer for the university since 2018.

Calvin alumnus Tim Fennema was named the new vice president for finance and administration.

#### V. Board matters

##### A. Board officers

Board officers for the 2021-2022 year are Bruce Los, chair; Mary Tuuk Kuras, vice-chair; Rhonda Roorda, secretary; and Tim Fennema, treasurer (vice president for finance and administration).

##### B. Board membership

The following nomination for a new delegate is presented to the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

1. Region 5

Jonathan Kuyers will be completing his second term. The board presents the following nominee to the classes in Region 5 as the trustee to be voted on at their spring classis meetings:

*Kathleen Ridder* is a 1991 graduate of Calvin University with a bachelor of science degree in psychology, sociology, and social work. She received her master's degree in health administration from Governors State University in 1999. She spent 17 years in the long-term care industry and is currently the president of Health Resource Management, Inc. (also known as TAMES). TAMES is a third-party billing system serving as liaison between the state and federal levels to allow public schools to receive funding to support the needs of their students. She is a licensed nursing home administrator and certified OPTAVIA health coach. Some of her prior experience includes serving as chair of the local Bethany Christian Services board and being involved with Stephen Ministries. Kathleen is actively involved in her children's school and participates in GEMS, Operation Christmas Child, Frontline Ministry, and Coffee Break at First Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

2. Additional board membership updates will be included in the Calvin University supplemental report to synod.

**VI. Recommendation**

That synod by way of the ballot elect new members, reappoint members for subsequent terms, and ratify the result of the classis elections for membership on the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

*Note:* Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

As I finish ten years of service to Calvin University and the CRCNA, I wish to express my deepest gratitude for the support I have received from so many who serve the church in the world. Soli Deo gloria!

Calvin University  
Michael K. Le Roy, president

## Faith Formation Ministries

*“Helping churches grow faith for life”*

### I. Introduction

Since Synod 2015 established Faith Formation Ministries as a new denominational ministry, our work within the denomination has emerged from our mandate:

Faith Formation Ministries joins and continues God’s mission of transforming lives and communities worldwide by encouraging and equipping local CRC congregations and their leaders in their calling to practice intentional, lifelong, intergenerational, holistic, missional discipleship and faith formation with an emphasis upon children, teens, and young adults.

*(Acts of Synod 2015, p. 467, 589)*

During this past year, Faith Formation Ministries has placed a significant emphasis on faith practices, intergenerational faith formation, and walking alongside congregational ministry leaders as they continue to grapple with pandemic-related impacts on ministry in their contexts. Our team members are based in Alberta, British Columbia, California, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ontario, and Pennsylvania. Though we have a strong regional presence, we serve the whole denomination. We engage our mandate through three primary activities:

1. Consultations and workshops: These are short-term engagements with churches and ministry leaders, often through facilitations of retreats, presentations at classis meetings, and other one-time gatherings on a specific topic, question, or resource.
2. Coaching, cohorts, and networking facilitation: These longer-term relationships (typically four months to one year in duration) allow FFM team members to walk alongside congregational leaders as they design and implement a vision for an aspect of faith formation in their context. These activities usually take shape around a broader theme—such as the Building Blocks of Faith, intergenerational ministry, or the third-third of life—or around a particular set of ministry leaders such as the CRC’s Youth Ministry Champions network.
3. Resource curation and creation: Our resource team curates relevant resources for faith formation from a variety of publishers, parachurch organizations, and other denominational sources. We also create ministry toolkits; *Ten Ways* topical resources; blog posts and other resources on The Network; the *Dwell* children’s ministry curriculum; articles for *The Banner*, *Christian Courier*, and *Reformed Worship*; and some books such as *Dear Parent* and *Everyday Family Faith*.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

COVID-19 has affected our North American churches for two years now. The circumstances connected to the pandemic have often been disruptive to the ways we do church. Worship, discipleship, outreach, care, and fellowship have all faced significant challenges as we have collectively attempted to navigate personal freedoms alongside our responsibilities to care for one another, particularly those who are the most vulnerable in our communities.

As one would expect, these circumstances have altered Faith Formation Ministries' normal approaches to serving churches. Retreats and workshops have been canceled. Opportunities to speak in classis meetings have been more limited than in previous years. Children's and youth ministry leaders experienced higher than normal levels of burnout and turnover. The audiences engaging with our resources have shifted from primarily ministry leaders to a more dispersed group that includes parents and people looking to grow their own faith apart from local church structures and programs.

One of the more evocative questions that has surfaced for our team during the pandemic is this: How can CRCNA ministries and local church leaders best equip people to proactively engage their own faith formation beyond church programs and paid ministry staff? While we desire that churches will be able to offer robust organized faith formative opportunities for all ages and stages of life, the pandemic has also helped us see that we need to give more attention to helping people engage faith formation beyond official church gatherings.

Without denying the importance of communal worship, we have wondered whether the high emphasis on worship gatherings during the pandemic has come at the cost of our imagination for how other ministry efforts (discipleship, care, outreach) could be adapted to virtual and limited in-person realities. At the same time, we also observed how underprepared many lifelong disciples felt toward engaging in foundational spiritual disciplines in their own homes. This combination (putting significant extra resources into communal worship and the inability of many Christians to practice their faith apart from the programmatic supports of their local congregation) led us to ask if our current approach to ministry and church is in fact cultivating the life of Christ among God's people. We continue to look for examples of churches who are navigating these challenges well.

While engaging with questions that have surfaced because of our current circumstances, Faith Formation Ministries is thankful for the opportunity to continue serving the denomination. We have launched a year's worth of resources through the Faith Practices Project and have more plans to assist churches, families, and individuals to engage spiritual disciplines in the coming year. We updated and revised our *Building Blocks of Faith* toolkit, developed pandemic-specific resources for engaging with children and youth, and focused on home-based faith formation, including several new *Dwell at Home* resources. FFM team members also coordinate a network of classis-based youth ministry champions (currently 26) and facilitate groups for *Dwell* curriculum leaders and for people involved with children's ministry.

Our team has also invested significantly in training this past year, sharpening our skills for online facilitation, attending to our ongoing need for intercultural competency and antiracism training, and exploring best practices associated with adult learning. We have also attended to our own participation in spiritual disciplines, recognizing that our leadership in faith formation is intertwined with our own intentional, lifelong patterns of discipleship. The team has responded well to the opportunities that emerged during the pandemic, and we feel better positioned and equipped to lead the denomination in faith formation during 2022.

We have also prioritized collaboration with other ministries this year. We are working closely with Worship Ministries on resources related to the Faith

Practices Project and on engaging children in worship. We are collaborating with Safe Church Ministries on resources for best practices related to inter-generational mentoring. Additionally, FFM staff are involved with cross-ministry teams focusing on servant leadership development, cohort facilitation, church planting, and emerging adult ministry. FFM staff also serve on three of the four *Our Journey 2025* milestone guiding teams.

We continue to work closely with Therefore Go Ministries (formerly Youth Unlimited), particularly around intergenerational mentoring, SERVE opportunities, and emerging adult conversations. In partnership with the Reformed Church in America's Next Generation Ministry team, we have launched Generation Spark and we received a \$1.3 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Foundation to support this work for the next four years. This intergenerational mentoring initiative equips churches to nurture a sustainable mentoring culture that increases engagement of young people (15-25 years old) within the church and more broadly in God's kingdom. We are also a collaborating partner with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada on their study of family faith formation in Canada, and we are anticipating the public release of research in summer 2022.

### III. Connecting with Churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

During the 2021-22 ministry year, we have intentionally engaged the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan. Examples of these engagements have included the following:

#### A. *Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline*

- Continuing to develop the Faith Practices Project, including a free, online collection of resources related to twelve spiritual disciplines and publishing a booklet that introduces people to faith practices.
- Serving on the Together Seeking God's Face coordinating team, including facilitating the forty days of prayer initiative leading into Synod 2022.

#### B. *Listening to the voices of every generation*

- After receipt of a grant, launching Generation Spark with the RCA to serve ten pilot churches last summer and seven churches in the first formal cohort this past winter.
- Continuing to revise and develop *Dwell*-related resources, including two years of *Dwell Flex* and several *Dwell at Home* pieces.
- Facilitating several conversations related to engaging children in worship, including a cohort of five churches.
- Facilitating two intergenerational mentoring cohorts, focused on mentoring teens and emerging adults, with a total of nine churches.

#### C. *Growing in diversity and unity*

- Diversifying the variety of materials we include in our curated resources.
- Amplifying voices of people of color through the *Open to Wonder* podcast.
- Having FFM staff participate in the IDI assessment to grow our cultural competencies.

#### D. *Sharing the gospel and living it missionally*

- Coordinating the collaborative church planting team, which discerns how all CRCNA ministries can contribute to a holistic vision and action plan for church planting.
- Revising and expanding the *Building Blocks of Faith* toolkit.

In addition, FFM staff have written over thirty articles and blog posts related to faith formation this year, contributing to *Reformed Worship*, *The Banner*, and the *Christian Courier* as well as online resources for The Network and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. We launched the *Open to Wonder* podcast, including season 1 and a couple of bonus episodes. Season 2 is slated for release in spring 2022. We hosted four Around the Table discussions (interactive webinars) in 2021, and another five are scheduled for the winter and spring of 2022. As classis meetings begin to take place in person again, FFM staff look forward to engaging as a supportive, responsive presence with regional leaders and ministries.

#### IV. **Final remarks**

The Faith Formation Ministries team is grateful for the opportunity to continue serving the CRCNA and the broader Christian church. The pandemic has highlighted the need for more resources that can be adapted to home and personal use, as well as for developing strategies that will equip people to engage in sustainable faith practices and formation throughout the week. We have noted the increased toll that current circumstances have taken on ministry leaders, particularly those involved in children's and youth ministry contexts. We anticipate continued shifts in the way FFM engages with churches and ministry leaders as we all adjust to new ways of engaging with each other amid evolving needs for contextualized faith formation.

Faith Formation Ministries  
Christopher J. Schoon, director



## Chaplaincy and Care Ministry

### I. Introduction

Eighty years ago, in 1942, synod officially recognized and approved the ministry of chaplaincy in the CRC. Today over 153 endorsed chaplains (10% of ordained ministers) bring the presence of God into institutional settings. Equipped with specialized training, chaplains on behalf of the church provide exceptional pastoral care to people beyond the walls of the church. In addition to more than 80 years of providing ministry to the United States and Canadian armed forces, chaplains minister in health care, hospices, prisons, long-term care facilities, workplaces, and community organizations. In 2021 chaplains marked another year of having to continuously adapt to changing policies and safety precautions in order to provide ministry in these institutional settings. During the pandemic, chaplains have continued to be able to minister in places that have been restricted to outside visitors such as family members and community clergy. Chaplains also ministered to staff and workplace leaders dealing with burnout and strained resources.

Chaplaincy and Care Ministry (CCM) endorses, trains, supports, and advocates for our chaplains who extend the CRCNA's ministry into their institutions and organizations. CCM completed its restructuring by bringing in its new director, Rev. Timothy Rietkerk, in January 2021. Rev. Rietkerk was first endorsed as a chaplain candidate in 1991 and has over thirty years of chaplaincy ministry experience, having served within active duty and reserve, Veteran Affairs hospital, and hospice settings. Rev. Sarah Roelofs previously served as director and now has transitioned to working part-time as a ministry consultant. Carol Vander Ark Champion serves as a part-time executive administrative assistant. (Combined, our staff now work at 2.2 FTE.)

#### A. Mandate

Chaplains are called by the church to extend the ministry of Christ to persons in institutional and specialized settings (*Acts of Synod 2003*, pp. 685-87).

#### B. Mission

Chaplaincy and Care Ministry's mission, overseen by the Council of Delegates, is to implement, regulate, and develop the denomination's commitment to chaplaincy. We carry out this mission in the following ways:

1. Overseeing the denominational endorsement process for chaplains
2. Providing pastoral support and advocacy for endorsed chaplains
3. Facilitating the shared supervision with chaplains' calling churches
4. Informing and educating the CRCNA on chaplaincy and related ministries
5. Administering training grants
6. Recruiting chaplains
7. Conducting training
8. Promoting the development of chaplaincy
9. Participating in national endorsement-related organizations

## II. Reflecting on Our Calling

### A. *Servant leadership*

CCM equips chaplains to serve as servant leaders. Utilizing a brief window of permitted travel, we made twelve in-person visits to chaplains and attended several college and university fairs promoting chaplaincy. Through these connections, CCM guides diverse individuals from a variety of backgrounds, ministry experiences, and vocational goals as they apply for endorsement, complete specialized training, and connect with others working in their field of interest.

Chaplain servant leaders are specially trained for their ministry. CCM shares the stories and resources of our chaplains, through whom the church makes a direct impact in those chaplains' communities and institutions. To work in clinical settings, chaplains complete a minimum of 800 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or equivalent training. This is in addition to formal master's level theological and biblical training. CCM supports these new and future chaplains through a donor-driven development fund. In 2021, CCM granted a total of \$5,090 (\$1,090 US and \$4,000 CDN) to seven individuals (3 U.S.; 2 Cdn.) for specialized training.

Chaplains display leadership in a variety of settings. Endorsed chaplains continue to lead in their organizations and communities and have taken on a variety of new tasks to meet the dynamic needs of their organizations and the people they serve. Chaplains provide pastoral care to staff and people who are homeless, disabled, and elderly and people who have lost hope. Chaplains provide guidance, advocate for people's spiritual needs within many institutions, and serve on ethics committees within their organizations. Thirty-nine CRC chaplains are board certified through several professional chaplaincy organizations, demonstrating their advanced skills and enabling them to step into leadership and specialized roles in their workplaces. Three chaplains are clinical educators (2 U.S.; 1 Cdn.), training dozens of new chaplains annually. Many more serve in important roles on ethics committees, managing and advocating for people's spiritual needs and rights serving their local community. Ten military chaplains are field-grade officers who have significant responsibility leading others and advising their commanders in matters of spiritual wellness and moral responsibility. One Navy chaplain serves as Coast Guard Chief of Chaplains.

### B. *Gospel proclamation*

Every day, chaplains proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ as they minister to a diverse group of people in crisis, bringing the peace, healing, and grace of Christ to many who are outside the church. Chaplain ministry is a specialized ministry that has unique challenges, requires specific skills, can be isolating, and provides rich opportunities to minister. Chaplains are trained to provide care to people in difficult situations. The year 2021 again stretched our chaplains, exposing them to repetitive trauma and fatigue during this pandemic—and yet they have continued to rise to the challenges and provide meaningful pastoral ministry.

This year CCM continued to provide support to our chaplains mainly by virtual means. The pandemic limited our ability to provide in-person visits, but it created an opportunity to develop and deepen our ministry through our 941 interactions with our chaplains. Throughout the past year CCM has

focused on supporting our chaplains through individual interactions (by phone, video call, and email), weekly prayer video meetings (an average of 10-15 chaplains attend per week), encouragement letters and gifts, our annual conference, and social media.

Our annual conference is foundational to our ministry. In September we hosted our second virtual conference, “Rest. Sabbath. Hope.” In addition to including our CRC chaplains, we invited the Reformed Church in America chaplains to participate in three days of learning, worshiping, and reflecting. The 144 attendees (120 U.S.; 22 Cdn.) spent three days together to learn, worship, reflect, and be refreshed. Though the impact of not being in person was felt, chaplains adapted to the virtual gathering and found wonderful opportunities to share about the joys and challenges of ministry in a very difficult time. Time was also set aside to allow for spiritual practices and to address in a brief way the cumulative toll of ministry during the pandemic.

Through our increased social media engagement, we were able to effectively connect chaplains with one another and share resources. CCM provided regular updates through a bimonthly newsletter, sent out encouraging postcards and letters, and worked closely with *CRC News* to highlight many chaplains’ stories. Through these ministry activities, CCM supports chaplains as they proclaim the gospel in culturally appropriate ways to the people God has entrusted to their care.

### **III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)***

CCM aids churches and communities that cultivate practices of prayer and spiritual disciplines, grow in diversity and unity, listen to the voices of every generation, and share the gospel, living it missionally through the work of our chaplains. CCM facilitates the relationship between the chaplain and his/her calling church, enabling chaplains to get much-needed support in their ministry and connecting churches with important spiritual resources. Our 153 chaplains represent 100 individual CRC churches. Through this covenantal relationship, the church can effectively extend their mission into unique areas of their surrounding community.

Through the milestone of cultivating spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, and fellowship, our ministry transforms the lives of our chaplains and communities by the power of the Holy Spirit. This milestone is developed in our weekly prayer meetings, weekly devotions, and worship and prayer opportunities throughout our programming. Our chaplains foster cultivating spiritual disciplines in the church through active engagement with their local churches and providing spiritual care resources on social media and in CRC publications.

CCM is focused on growing diversity and unity by seeking justice, reconciliation, and welcome by supporting our chaplains who provide this essential ministry to persons of diverse ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. CCM seeks to increase diversity within our chaplain community by providing on average \$22,000 in training grants to ensure that everyone is able to get the necessary chaplain training and to connect all newly endorsed chaplains (regardless of their age or ministerial experience) with a chaplain mentor. CCM seeks to identify gifted leaders from diverse backgrounds and ministry experiences to serve in leadership roles on our advisory council, at our annual chaplain’s training, and by sharing their

story through social media and CRC publications. CCM collaborates with professional chaplaincy organizations in the U.S. and Canada to advocate for religious liberty, expression of religion, and train our chaplains to meet the spiritual needs of diverse populations.

Listening to the voices of every generation and sharing the gospel are at the heart of chaplain ministry. CCM supports chaplains who connect the church to the local and global ministry contexts through the pastoral care they provide. They are a rich resource for the church. CRC chaplains provide pastoral care to over 2 million people per year, mostly to people who are not associated with the CRC and to a growing number of people who are not affiliated with any religion. Our ministry is working on building relational networks and resources within our community to provide meaningful and appropriate pastoral care. Chaplains are equipped by our churches to serve as frontline workers and to minister to people who are isolated, feel abandoned, are in crisis and pain, and have experienced overwhelming loss and grief. Chaplains' education, specialized vocational training, and unique gifts have prepared them to respond to the call to "be there in moments that matter" in their local communities and institutions.

#### IV. Chaplaincy statistics

The Chaplaincy and Care Ministry Advisory Council and the Office of Chaplaincy and Care Ministry present the following statistics:

1. Total CRCNA endorsed chaplains: 153 chaplains (in the United States: 130; in Canada: 23).
2. Five chaplains were newly endorsed in 2021: Timothy Kimbel, William Roelofs, Daniel Roels, Don Shinn, Hannah Smele.
3. The CRCNA supports 26 military chaplains: 14 active duty in the United States; 1 active duty in Canada; 6 in the U.S. National Guard and Reserves; and an additional 5 military chaplain candidates.
4. In the past year the following 8 military chaplains have served, or are currently serving, overseas: Israel Alvarado, Jon Averill, Richard Hill, Peter Hofman, Joseph Kamphuis, Raidel Leon Martinez, Cornelius Muasa, and Lloyd Wicker.

Chaplaincy and Care Ministry  
Timothy Rietkerk, director

## Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.

### I. Introduction

The CRC Loan Fund was established by Synod 1983 with a directive to assist organized Christian Reformed churches in the financing of capital improvements. The Loan Fund operates exclusively in the United States. The board of directors of the Loan Fund oversees the loan approval process, the determination of loan interest rates, and the setting of Loan Fund policies. The board also establishes interest rates for Investment Certificates sold—primarily to members, churches, and agencies of the CRCNA.

### II. Board of Directors

Loan Fund board members are eligible to serve for two three-year terms. Current members of the board of directors are Barbara De Boer (2022), Jeffrey Feikens (2022), Layla Kuhl (2024), Jack Meyer (2023), Howard Van Den Heuvel (2024), and Nancy Wiesman (2023).

The board requests that synod reappoint Jeffrey Feikens to a second three-year term and appoint one board member from the following slate of nominees to a term of three years, eligible for reappointment to a second term:

*Rev. Carl Kromminga*, a graduate of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary, is the senior pastor of New City CRC in Long Beach, California. He serves on the finance team and the leadership development team of Classis Greater Los Angeles. He is a member of the De Forrest Park Neighborhood Association and Good Neighbors of North Long Beach.

*Mr. Norlyn Compaan* is a member of Harderwyk CRC in Holland, Michigan, where he is employed as church administrator, facilities director, and construction manager. He was previously employed as a project manager at Fifth Third Bank. He has served as a board member of Honduras Orphans Missions Education and as a mission trip leader to Honduras.

### III. Financial operations

The Loan Fund is eligible to sell Investment Certificates to investors in twenty-three states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Additional states could be added as needed to benefit the fund.

At the close of the 2021 fiscal year (June 30, 2021), a total of \$15,653,694 in interest-bearing Investment Certificates and accrued interest held by investors was outstanding. Interest rates vary from 0.50 percent to 2.00 percent. The variances in interest rates reflect the terms of the certificates and market conditions at the times the certificates were issued.

Since its inception in 1983, the Loan Fund has originated more than two hundred loans totaling over \$75 million to churches across the United States. As of June 30, 2021, the Loan Fund had \$16,541,010 in gross loans and accrued interest outstanding. Loan delinquencies do occur from time to time, but they are closely monitored and are very low. The Loan Fund maintains

a loan loss reserve to help cover potential losses. The fund is blessed to have experienced only minimal loan losses throughout its history.  
 Financial operations are also reflected in the following data:

	2021	2020	2019
Cash and equivalents	\$5,199,045	\$6,346,923	\$5,407,381
Net loans and interest receivable	16,140,937	15,893,278	15,943,762
Other assets	1,659	6,635	11,611
Total assets	\$21,341,641	\$21,362,754	\$21,362,754
Certificates and interest payable	\$15,653,694	\$16,569,556	\$15,270,398
Net assets	5,687,947	5,677,280	6,092,356
Total liabilities and net assets	\$21,341,641	\$22,246,836	\$21,362,754

A summary of the audited financial report as of June 30, 2021, appears in the *Agenda for Synod 2022 Financial and Business Supplement*.

**IV. Sources of funding**

Funds for the Loan Fund’s operations are derived from the following sources:

- The sale of Investment Certificates in states where legal approval to offer them has been obtained.
- Gifts and bequests made to the Loan Fund.

**V. Staff**

The Loan Fund is staffed by Alice M. Damsteegt, program coordinator, and David E. Veen, director.

**VI. Recommendations**

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the Loan Fund’s director or any members of the board of directors of the CRC Loan Fund when matters pertaining to the fund are discussed.
- B. That synod reappoint Jeffrey Feikens to a second three-year term and appoint one board member from the slate of nominees to a first term of three years on the board of directors of the Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.

Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.  
 David E. Veen, director

## Office of Diversity

### I. Introduction

The Office of Diversity, which began in February 2020, provides leadership to the Christian Reformed Church's globalized leaders and ministries as they engage in contextual congregational ministry. In addition, we encourage, support, and resource the CRC's globalized leaders through crucial partnerships with other denominational ministries, aiming for collaboration toward thriving and success. This is the first synodical report to synod from this office.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

#### A. *Servant leadership*

- Mentored three globalized leaders through Zoom conversations.
- Co-led and facilitated five listening sessions with Korean, Latino, and African American leaders via Zoom with Resonate Global Missions' Diaspora and Ethnic Guiding Team.
- Conducted ministry visits of Black leaders.
- Wrote four leadership devotions for Vibrant Congregations ([vibrantconversations.org](http://vibrantconversations.org)).
- Assisted the executive director in conversation with Grant CRC leadership via Zoom.
- Attended Consejo Latino regional meeting in Holland, Michigan.
- Developed and distributed four newsletters of great stories on leaders and churches.

#### B. *Mercy and justice*

- Consulted four multiracial and African American churches with advice as they crafted white supremacy overtures to Synod 2021.
- Participated in thirteen webinars and podcasts on race with Worship Ministries, the Antioch podcast, the Wesley Foundation, and the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship.
- Co-led a twelve-week Color of Compromise Zoom book study for Madison Square Church (Grand Rapids, Mich.) members and leaders.
- Wrote four Do Justice blog posts as a regular columnist for the Office of Social Justice.
- Was interviewed for a *Reformed Journal* podcast on racism.
- Had conversations with two white pastors on kinism and racism.

#### C. *Gospel proclamation and worship*

- Preached twenty times in person, via Zoom, or on video in several churches in the United States and Canada.
- Led a Black church planting conversation via Zoom with five leaders.

#### D. *Faith formation*

- Conducted a Sanfoka lessons workshop at the online Children's Spirituality and Intergenerational Conference.
- Wrote November 2021 *Today* devotions for ReFrame Ministries.

- Recorded a podcast for Faith Formation’s *Open to Wonder* series on personal formation stories.

E. *Global mission*

- Participated in developing the Urban Missions Design Team structure with Resonate Global Mission.
- Conducted a workshop at the online Glocal Summit (Resonate).
- Participated in a Church Now panel conversation with vibrantconversations.org.

**III. Conclusion**

I am grateful, as diversity director, to have a front-row seat in the most exciting part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, where Latino leaders and churches gave voice that they wanted to become a part of this denomination by choice. I am honored to listen to the joys and challenges of African American and First Nations pastors who have navigated difficult conversations and pastored during a devastating pandemic. I am witnessing the fast-growing edge of the Christian Reformed Church in which over three hundred churches (and counting) are changing the face and tenor of this little corner of the North American church landscape. To God be the glory!

Office of Diversity  
Reginald Smith, director

## Pastor Church Resources

### I. Introduction

Pastor Church Resources (PCR) serves pastors, churches, and classes as they seek to promote healthy relationships, encourage one another in ministry, and discern next steps in seasons of growth, transition, or challenge. Our efforts aim toward the well-being of pastors and churches and providing the context for individual programs, personal interactions, resources, and consultations. Our desire to resource pastors, churches, and classes is an attempt to reflect God's work to provide the church with all the gifts necessary for flourishing (Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12).

### II. PCR and Our Calling

In the desire of the CRCNA to see congregations flourish, the ministry of Pastor Church Resources plays a role in supporting, training, encouraging, and equipping congregational pastors and ministry leaders. That ministry sometimes takes the form of responding to an emerging season of growth, transition, or challenge. Sometimes it takes the form of resourcing leaders or systems (such as a classis or council) to be more resilient before such seasons of growth, transition, or challenge arise.

Whether that ministry is responsive or proactive, the premise is the same: when people (such as pastors and ministry leaders) or systems (such as a classis or council) know their calling and are sufficiently encouraged and equipped to pursue it, we will see more creative and faithful ministry. In other words, equipped and encouraged leaders and systems will be better able to pursue the kind of wide and deep ministry the CRCNA so strongly values: a ministry able to form deep faith, develop servant leaders, witness widely to Christ's kingdom, love mercy, and do justice—all while proclaiming the saving message of Jesus Christ and worshiping him in all we do.

In PCR, we believe that when leaders and systems are clear on calling and sufficiently equipped and encouraged, the sometimes disruptive dynamics of growth, transition, and challenge need not derail faithful ministry. In fact, PCR seeks to help such leaders and systems recognize and cooperate with the ways God often uses such disruptions as ministry and discipleship opportunities—for example, recognizing that the way pastors engage in continuing education can help them form faith more deeply; that the way a council conducts a retreat can develop a new generation of servant leaders; that the way you handle a conflict can witness to God's kingdom; that the people you include in critical decision-making can express your commitment to mercy and justice; and that the joyful lives of faithful leaders can point others to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### III. Connecting with Churches: *Our Journey 2025* (the Ministry Plan)

Pastor Church Resources is committed to serving CRC congregations through the lens of *Our Journey 2025*. Throughout the past year, we have taken time monthly to review our work in light of all four of the milestones of this ministry plan, identifying areas of alignment and encouraging deeper alignment. This has led to a significant focus on two milestones.

Throughout the past year, our team has worked with Race Relations to deepen our alignment with the milestone of growing in diversity and unity. This has taken the form of a sustained process of (1) giving attention to representation and equity in our programming, (2) increasing competency to interact with diverse CRC communities, and (3) sustaining internal learning about race and cultural competence.

We also recognized a deep alignment between PCR's work and the practice of listening well. This connects explicitly with the milestone of listening to the voices of every generation, and it is a foundational practice that advances all of the ministry plan's milestones. Since PCR already orients so much of its work toward helping Christians listen well together, we launched a new project, Quick to Listen. Through this initiative, PCR is encouraging, educating, and equipping congregations and classes to try one of our favorite tools for encouraging better communication: listening circles. By teaching this simple practice widely, we expect to reinforce a culture of better listening throughout congregations and across the denomination at a moment when cultural and denominational divisions seem to be making listening most difficult.

#### A. *Ongoing ministry initiatives*

##### 1. Serving pastors

###### a. Consultation and intervention

In 2021 PCR again engaged churches and pastors in times of growth, transition, and challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be a significant feature of the situations into which PCR staff members were called. It often formed an unhelpful backdrop in conversations about controversial subjects, relationship tensions, and the poor functioning of ministry leaders. Sometimes it generated its very own difficult conversations related to COVID protocols and responses to government restrictions. We have observed high degrees of pastoral burnout and significant experiences of congregational trauma and grief, as we note elsewhere in this report. During the past year PCR's consulting staff participated in seventeen intensive engagements (with more than ten interactions per engagement) with CRC congregations in Canada and the United States, as well as in many other formal and informal engagements, to encourage, advise, equip or otherwise support churches, classes, and pastors experiencing challenges together.

###### b. Continuing education

Grants of up to \$750 are awarded to pastors and staff to engage in learning opportunities that enhance their work in the local congregation. Over the past year PCR awarded twenty-seven grants on topics such as biblical interpretation, clinical pastoral education, specialized transitional ministry training, and spiritual formation/direction. The Continuing Education Advisory team decides on grants and provides input for PCR's ministry to support pastors' ongoing formation for ministry.

###### c. Promoting flourishing in ministry

PCR provides grants for pastor peer groups and biennial conferences for pastors and pastors' wives. During another very difficult

year of pandemic, the support and encouragement pastors received in peer groups was needed more than ever. Almost eighty pastors joined a PCR peer group in 2021, bringing the total number of participating CRC pastors to 975 since the program began in 2003.

The November Pastors' Conference went from an in-person event to a virtual event. There were a number of additional opportunities for pastors to engage in learning, including book and movie discussions and conversations around specific topics—all via Zoom. The Pastors' Wives Conference will take place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in October.

Pastor Restoration Grants provided funds to thirty-eight pastors for much-needed time off and renewal. Churches were encouraged to give their pastors two weeks of paid leave for restoration and to design a personalized well-being plan, as well as to engage a professional helper (spiritual director, therapist, or ministry coach) and take a Birkman Assessment.

d. Financial Shalom

In 2021, Financial Shalom (FS) distributed grants to 32 pastors to support them with critical financial needs and student loan relief (including a special grant program to help eligible pastors complete their student loan payments). Beyond these grants to pastors, FS conducted its first cohort of the Bivocational Growth Fellowship, which provided 17 pastors with transitional funding and vocational support. Financial Shalom financially supported and collaborated on PCR's new Pastor Restoration Grants (above). The program also completed distribution of remaining monies in the COVID-19 Church Engagement Fund, which was used to sustain congregations financially impacted by the pandemic. Building on the success of this fund and the Pastor Restoration Grants, FS applied for and was awarded an additional \$250,000 in funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help pastors most harshly impacted by the pandemic. This funding comes with matching funding—up to an additional \$250,000—for new monies raised by the CRCNA (bringing the total possible grant size to \$750,000). In 2021, FS deepened its work to alleviate some of the key financial challenges facing CRCNA pastors and responded to the acute, changing challenges they face.

e. Bivocational ministry resources

In tandem with Financial Shalom, PCR remains committed to the goal to normalize and support healthy bivocational ministry. PCR staff have worked with other ministries and the Study of Bivocationality Task Force to learn about bivocational ministry in the CRC. In addition to contributing expertise to the Bivocational Growth Fellowship—Financial Shalom's yearlong, funded program for pastors seeking a sustainable bivocational arrangement—PCR has begun developing resources to assist pastors and churches who are pursuing bivocational arrangements.

f. Vocational discernment

PCR equips pastors to clarify their most effective and unique ministry strengths. A primary tool for this work is the Birkman Assessment, through which pastors discover how God has wired them to flourish in ministry. Since this program began, nearly one quarter of active CRC pastors have taken the assessment, increasing their self-awareness and strengthening their ability to communicate with leadership, identify blindspots, and discern ministry fit. PCR's goal is to provide the Birkman Assessment and assessment debriefing to every pastor in the CRC.

2. Serving churches

a. Pastor transitions and search

PCR helps churches navigate the logistics of pastor searches. During 2021, staff connections with search team leaders increased over previous years. We recently completed a major revision of our primary resource for these transitions, *More Than a Search Committee*. The newly published second edition includes the same practical advice that search committees have appreciated, and it provides more encouragement and support for churches wishing to take advantage of the unique discernment opportunities afforded by pastoral transitions. PastorSearch, a database of searchable minister profiles, remains a vital resource providing direct access for up to 100 search teams at any given time. A list of supply pastors available to serve congregations during periods of vacancy is also maintained.

PCR seeks to connect with churches in transition in order to make their councils aware of the ways their classis and denomination can help them navigate the changes ahead. As a ministry, we provide encouragement and support to search committee members, many of whom are leading a search process for the first time. We also survey those who have recently served as a search committee chair to help us understand how the search process is working for local churches and where it may need improving. We soon expect to release a new virtual training so that search committees are aware of the impact of unconscious bias in a search process. We have also completed revisions to the Letter of Call template and are working on the Church Profile template.

b. Resources, tools, and toolkits for churches

PCR provides resources for churches, including *More Than a Search Committee*, *Evaluation Essentials*, and *Effective Leadership in the Church*. Congregations can access all of these resources by downloading them at the PCR website ([crcna.org/pcr](http://crcna.org/pcr)) or by ordering printed copies through Faith Alive ([faithaliveresources.org](http://faithaliveresources.org)). We also have developed substantial web-based resources for a variety of needs.

The *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* is a resource for small groups to listen deeply to the synodical human sexuality report and to one another as the church considers what to do next. It is based on some of the best practices recommended by PCR for helping to turn conflicts into opportunities for discipleship and witness. In the past year nearly 400 facilitators have been trained to lead listening circles in their congregations.

A congregational post-trauma toolkit is being developed to help congregations process and move through significant group trauma and its resulting grief. The occasion for this project is the trauma and grief that we have observed in congregations across the denomination because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We envision this toolkit as helpful for addressing other experiences of trauma and grief as well, such as the death of a prominent church member, the moral failure of a church leader, or the ending of a significant ministry.

An Article 17 resource webpage was designed with input from congregations and classes and shaped in light of PCR's ongoing consultations to be a comprehensive resource to help a pastor, council, or classis walk through the process of discerning, averting, or facilitating a pastor's release from call.

PCR has also launched a clergy grief webpage. Based on numerous interviews with pastors who experienced significant losses (the death of a spouse, child, or dear friend) and with ministry leaders who served alongside them, this resource helps pastors and churches understand each other during an otherwise often disorienting experience. It provides guidance for how councils, classis functionaries, and ministry colleagues, in particular, can support grieving pastors.

The *Crossroads Discernment Process* is a resource for churches who sense that the status quo cannot continue and that even closure or another major intervention may be required. In the past year, PCR has trained and supported over 26 facilitators and has been helping 17 churches engage in a season of intentional, Spirit-led, group-engaged, mission-oriented discernment of where they have been, where they are, and where God is leading them. Crossroads is a joint PCR/Resonate resource.

c. Healthy Church Discernment Process

Healthy Church (HC) is a data-driven, Spirit-led discernment process that gives a reliable snapshot of health using eleven Healthy Church Indicators through the Healthy Church Survey. HC positions church leaders to plot a way forward toward greater health. It is also undertaking a review of its effectiveness and seeking ways to more effectively provide support to the coaches and churches involved in renewal. HC began to collaborate with Vibrant Congregations, which uses a version of the Healthy Church Executive Survey with churches engaging in their renewal process. A grant from Vibrant Congregations is providing financial support for this work.

d. Specialized Transitional Ministers (STMs)

PCR endorses and supports a number of experienced ministers who are trained to help congregations during transitional seasons brought on by the departure of a pastor after a long tenure and/or congregational conflict. The program is growing, both with more pastors becoming endorsed (now 23 active STMs, up from 20 in 2020) and with more congregations seeking transitional support. Yet, particularly because of the pandemic and significant cultural unrest in the United States and Canada over the past two years, there are more congregations seeking an STM than there are STMs available. We are grateful that several

more ministers are preparing to begin this important work in 2022 and that, in the meantime, classes have been willing to work creatively with PCR to support churches searching for an STM.

e. Women’s Leadership Ministry

The Women’s Leadership Ministry assists congregations in developing a theology and practice for identifying, cultivating, and releasing women to use their gifts in the church. In 2021 the ministry hosted two interactive webinars with leadership expert Ellen Duffield. Women clergy and leaders, numbering approximately sixty in each webinar, expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn with, network among, and encourage their peers. The fall webinar welcomed women clergy from the Reformed Church in America and the Evangelical Covenant Church. In spring 2022 we partnered with the Women’s Transformation and Leadership of the RCA to host a learning journey for the full inclusion of women in the church using the *Building God’s Church Together* Bible study resource. Recognition events for the CRC’s 25th anniversary of ordaining women in ecclesiastical offices were postponed to summer 2022. A banquet followed by a workshop on “planning ahead” will take place in advance of Inspire 2022.

3. Serving classes

a. Classis renewal

The work of classis renewal continues to encompass two broad categories: direct engagement and supportive infrastructure. PCR has worked indirectly with multiple classis leadership teams in the past year to help them better understand their organizational structure and how their activities best fit with the purpose of classis. We also continue our support for a variety of functionaries, such as being involved in leading a conference for stated clerks and continuing engagement with church visitors. In the past year we have started offering more one-hour introductory workshops by video on topics such as leading classis meetings, serving on overture committees, and affiliation/disaffiliation processes.

b. Regional pastors and mentoring

PCR extends its work through regional pastors at the classis level—providing support, encouragement, and counsel to pastors and spouses. Regional pastors also assist in setting up mentoring relationships for new pastors and encourage the development of support mechanisms when there are multiple staff persons within a congregation. Among other supports, PCR facilitated a spiritual direction cohort for regional pastors in 2020 and 2021, and we will be hosting a similar cohort in 2022. The key mentoring resource, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*, will be updated and revised in 2022.

B. *Special ministry initiative projects*

1. Thriving Together program

Thriving Together is in its fourth year of a five-year program. It is funded through a nearly one-million dollar grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. The initial goal was to create a stronger, more vital culture of mentoring

around three under-supported, almost “invisible” pastoral transition moments: early in a second call, in late career, and while privately wrestling with the question “Should I stay or go?” More recently we have begun shifting toward supporting pastors in transition more generally both in the initial discernment and when “starting anew.” This happens through developing resources, hosting gatherings, individualized mentoring, and group mentoring opportunities (these are different from the peer groups mentioned earlier).

## 2. Council/elder/deacon training

Our work to develop focused support for church councils continues. We are creating orientation resources for those entering a church office as well as resources that provide ongoing training and support for elders and deacons once they are in office. In partnership with the Thriving Congregations project (funded by a Lilly Endowment Inc. grant), we are developing a specific curriculum that can be used by church councils in a variety of settings and timeframes.

## IV. Conclusion

2021 proved to be another year of tremendous disruption in all of our lives. For a second year in a row, every aspect of Pastor Church Resources’ ministry experienced some turbulence and disappointment. Yet, as pastors, councils, and classes felt the strain of another pandemic year, PCR also felt continued confirmation that synod’s mandate for our ministry remains as important as ever. 2022 will, no doubt, bring new challenges. Changes will come. Plans will be derailed. Leaders will be stretched. Yet it is precisely because ministry is so challenging that synod created PCR. So we remain focused on equipping and encouraging pastors, churches, and classes with tools, resources, and networks of support so that we might face these seasons of challenge in the confidence that we are not alone. In fact, the Lord we serve is with us “always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Pastor Church Resources  
Lis Van Harten, director

## Pensions and Insurance

### I. Introduction

The Christian Reformed Church in North America maintains employee benefit programs that provide retirement, health, life, and disability benefits for employees of the denomination in its ministries, agencies, local churches, and other CRC organizations.

### II. Board matters

The ministers' pension plans, special-assistance funds, and the employees' retirement plans are governed by the U.S. Board of Pensions and the Canadian Pension Trustees. These boards meet several times per year, usually in joint session. Separate meetings of the boards are held as needed.

Alan Van Dyke is completing his first term on the U.S. Pension Trustees board in 2022 and is eligible and recommended for a second three-year term. Thomas Dykhouse (after serving an additional year) and Rev. Joel Sheeres will be concluding service on the U.S. Pension Trustees board. (*Note:* John Bolt was previously elected to serve on the U.S. Pension Trustees board, but his first term was delayed to begin on July 1, 2022.) The board recommends the following single nominee for election to a three-year term beginning July 1, 2022:

*Rev. Drew Sweetman* is the pastor of First CRC in Fremont, Michigan, and he previously served Spring Lake (Mich.) CRC. Rev. Sweetman has served the denomination in a number of ways, including as a delegate to Synods 2011, 2013, 2016, and 2019 (three times as an advisory committee reporter). He also served on the Task Force on Financial Sustainability and currently is a member of the Council of Delegates (CRCNA). He is the stated clerk of Classis Muskegon and serves on its classical interim committee. Prior to entering ordained ministry, Rev. Sweetman worked for a consulting firm and financial institution in Chicago as an administrator and consultant with defined contribution and defined benefit (pension) plans.

Dick Vreugdenhil is completing his first term on the Canadian Pension Trustees board in 2022 and is eligible and recommended for a second three-year term. Kathy Wassink is completing her second term on the Canadian Pension Trustees board and is eligible and recommended for a third three-year term.

### III. Benefit-program activities

#### A. Ministers' pension plans

The ministers' pension plans are defined-benefit plans. Benefits paid by the plans are defined by formula, and the required funding of the plans is determined by actuarial calculations. The primary purpose of the plans is to provide retirement benefits to plan participants. The plans also provide benefits to the surviving spouses of participants as well as to any dependent children who are orphaned. In addition, long-term disability benefits are provided through an insurance product to all full-time, active participants in

the plans who have furnished the information concerning compensation and housing as required by the insurance carrier.

The following is a summary of participant counts as of December 31, 2021, for each plan and in total. Participants having an interest in both plans (generally the result of having served churches in both the United States and Canada) appear in the column where they have residence.

	United States	Canada	Total
Active ministers	661	268	929
Ministers receiving benefit payments	619	154	773
Spouses and dependents	194	45	239
Withdrawn participants with vested benefits	<u>102</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>126</u>
Total	1,576	491	2,067

Independent actuarial firms are employed to prepare valuations of the plans. These actuarial valuations furnish the information needed to determine church and participant assessment amounts. Both plans are required to have a valuation every three years. Information regarding church and participant assessment amounts will be presented later in this report.

1. Portfolio balances and performance

Plan assets are invested in diversified portfolios under the management of professional investment-management firms. These firms are required to adhere to the denomination’s investment guidelines, and their performance is measured against established benchmarks and regularly reviewed by the trustees.

The plans’ actuaries have informed us that as of the date of the plans’ last valuation, the actuarial liability totaled approximately \$134.7 million for the U.S. plan (as of December 31, 2019) and approximately \$48.2 million for the Canadian plan (as of December 31, 2019). These amounts reflect the present value of the plans’ future obligations to all participants including active, disabled, and retired pastors, widows, and dependents.

Market value of the portfolios is summarized as follows:

	December 31, 2021	December 31, 2020
United States (U.S. \$)	\$141,110,000	\$124,890,000
Canada (Can. \$)	86,654,000	74,657,000

Dividends, interest, and appreciation in the value of the plans’ holdings along with contributions to the plans provide a significant portion of the resources needed to meet the plans’ obligations to the active participants and to fund payments to retirees and beneficiaries.

2. Plan review

The pension plan has undergone several changes since separate plans for the United States and Canada were established in 1983. While the basic defined benefit form of the plan was not altered, changes were made to benefits provided by the plan, to clarify how the plan is administered, and to improve the protocols used to obtain funds needed to pay costs.

### 3. Funding

All organized churches are plan sponsors and thus are expected to pay church assessments determined by an amount per active professing member age 18 and older or, if greater, the direct costs of their first or only pastor's participation in the plan. The amount of the assessment for 2022 is \$37.20 per member in both Canada and the United States, and direct costs have been set at \$7,704 for both countries as well. These amounts are collected by means of monthly billings to each organized church, based on reported membership statistics.

All emerging churches and other denominational ministries that employ a minister as a missionary, professor, teacher, or in any other capacity, including organizations that employ endorsed chaplains (with the exception of chaplains serving in the military who are not yet entitled to receive any military pension benefits) are required to pay the annual cost of participation in the plan. All pension assessments, however determined, are billed monthly, and the grant of credited service for pastors is contingent on timely payment of amounts billed.

#### *B. Employees' retirement plans*

The employees' retirement plans are defined-contribution plans covering most employees of participating denominational agencies and ministries who are not ordained as ministers of the Word. Beginning January 1, 2020, the denomination introduced an additional defined-contribution plan for commissioned pastors and staff at U.S. churches. The plan is a 403(b)(9) plan that offers a housing allowance tax benefit for pastors upon retirement. Commissioned pastors in the denominational agencies and ministries have become participants in this new plan. In the United States, contributions are paid to the plans by participating denominational agencies and ministries in an amount up to 6 percent of compensation. An additional employer contribution of up to 4 percent of compensation is made to match employee contributions of a similar amount. U.S. churches with staff participating in the 403(b)(9) plan set the contribution rates independently. In Canada, contributions of up to 9 percent are paid to the plan by participating employers. In Canada, there are no contributions made to the plan relative to matching employee contributions. In both plans, participants may make additional contributions up to the limits determined by federal or provincial regulation. Participants receive periodic statements indicating the dollar amount credited to their accounts, the value of their accounts, and the vested percentage.

Individual participants direct the investment of their account balances among several investment alternatives, including fixed-income and equity funds. The investment alternatives are currently managed for U.S. participants by Empower Retirement and Envoy Financial, while Great-West Trust serves as custodian of the plan's assets. For Canadian participants, Sun Life Financial Group manages and serves as custodian of the plan's assets.

As of December 31, 2021, the balances in these plans totaled approximately \$47,625,000 in the United States and \$6,769,000 in Canada. As of that date, there were 356 participants in the U.S. plans and 89 in the Canadian plan, categorized as follows:

	United States	Canada
Active	229	87
Inactive	127	2

*C. Nonretirement employee benefit programs*

Oversight of the denomination’s nonretirement employee benefit programs is provided by the Council of Delegates.

Consolidated Group Insurance is a denominational plan that offers health, dental, and life coverage in Canada to ministers and employees of local congregations and denominational agencies and ministries. Currently there are 339 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 232 pastors and employees of local churches, 106 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and one retiree. The plan in Canada is a fully insured plan with coverage purchased through a major health-insurance provider and is supplemental to health benefits available through government health programs.

In the United States, the denomination offers health, dental, and life coverage to ministers and employees of local congregations and denominational agencies and ministries. Currently there are 471 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 157 pastors and employees of local churches, 199 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and 115 retirees. The plans are provided by the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) through a trust established to fund benefits and expenses of the plan. RBA was established in July 2013 by the Board of Trustees of the CRCNA and the Board of Benefit Services of the Reformed Church in America to provide nonretirement benefit programs for both denominations.

Premiums charged by the plan in Canada are set by the insurance carrier. The premiums for the U.S. plan are set by RBA based on overall expectations of claims and administrative expenses for the coming year.

*D. Financial disclosures*

Audited or reviewed financial statements of the retirement plans and of all of the agencies and institutions are made available each year to the treasurer of each classis with the request that they be made available to any interested party. In addition, summary financial statements are included in the *Acts of Synod*. Individualized statements are furnished to active members of the ministers’ pension plans and the employees’ retirement plans.

**IV. Recommendations**

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to members of the Canadian Pension Trustees and the U.S. Pension Trustees and to John H. Bolt when insurance matters and matters pertaining to insurance and retirement plans for ministers and employees are discussed.

B. That synod designate up to 100 percent of a minister’s early or normal retirement pension or disability pension for 2022 as housing allowance for United States income-tax purposes (IRS Ruling 1.107-1) but only to the extent that the pension is used to rent or provide a home.

C. That synod designate up to 100 percent of an ordained pastor’s distributions from their CRC 403(b)(9) Retirement Income Plan in 2022 as housing

allowance for United States income-tax purposes (IRS Ruling 1.107-1) but only to the extent that those funds are used to rent or provide a home.

*D.* That synod by way of the ballot reappoint one member to a second three-year term on the U.S. Pension Trustees and elect one nominee to a first term beginning July 1, 2022.

*E.* That synod reappoint one member to a second three-year term and one member to a third three-year term on the Canadian Pension Trustees beginning July 1, 2022.

Pensions and Insurance

John H. Bolt, deputy executive director,  
chief financial officer

## Raise Up Global Ministries

### I. Introduction — Vision

The programs of Raise Up Global Ministries equip global church leaders by

- developing biblically based interactive materials.
- training leaders to facilitate learning and support change in their lives and communities.

Raise Up is a partnership of Global Coffee Break, Timothy Leadership Training, and Educational Care. Each program has a long record and unique mix of supporting the shared direction of Our Calling.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Each program equips a different set of servant leaders of the global church.

A. Global Coffee Break equips global and local small group leaders and groups in which faith develops and the gospel is proclaimed.

Global Coffee Break (GCB) began more than 50 years ago in Peace CRC in South Holland, Illinois, as a way to reach neighbors with the good news of Jesus. Today GCB continues to equip churches and small group leaders in more than 26 countries around the world with vision, training, and resources for relational, small group Bible discovery so that people develop faith in Christ and together grow in him. GCB creates and distributes the *Discover Your Bible* study series and trains, coaches, and networks small group and church leaders for effective leadership and outreach.

COVID-19 closed the door to most in-person events, but GCB persevered by moving online.

- Engaging in Spiritual Conversations online workshops saw an increase in interest and participation. The new workshop, in partnership with Resonate, became very relevant. Participants shared that because of the pandemic they now have more access to their neighbors.
- Korean Global Coffee Break groups continue to see active participation in online training and coaching. Staff helped to host an online conference for leaders in Korea that was attended by 450 participants.
- The Connect Conference, a new Global Coffee Break conference for North American leaders, pivoted to an online event. Leaders joined by Zoom from churches across the U.S. and Canada, learned from well-known speakers such as Dave Ferguson and Cindy Bultema, and engaged with others in multiple breakout sessions.
- Program manager Juan Sierra and other staff continue to support CRC churches by connecting with leaders through coaching, training, and networking events. In fall 2021 Juan met pastors at a classis meeting. The pastors were excited about the new *Discover Revelation* study. A pastor in Classis Central Plains saw the quality of the study and was so impressed that he took twelve copies for his group to start right away! Juan discovered that pastors were learning about the extent of the work of Global Coffee Break for the first time and made commitments to start

groups in their churches or to continue to support the ongoing efforts in their congregations.

New growth and initiatives include the following:

- *Discover Your Bible* sales increased over that of last year as groups reengaged and new studies were released.
- *Discover Revelation 1-3* and *Discover Revelation 4-22* study guides and leader guides became available to groups in fall 2021. Jan Matthijs van Leeuwen, from our Dutch ministry partner Verre Naasten, found the Revelation study a joy. He added, “[The Revelation study] has a sound biblical base and an inviting method.” *Discover Micah* will be released in fall 2022, and *Discover 1 & 2 Timothy* in spring 2023.
- Global Coffee Break launched two new partnerships with mission organizations in Nicaragua and Thailand.
- Global Coffee Break will complete nineteen translations of various *Discover Your Bible* studies into Korean, Spanish, Nepali, Hindi, Japanese, and Russian.
- As Global Coffee Break invites new audiences to use *Discover Your Bible* studies to serve outreaching small groups, we recognize the need to update older studies. GCB received a generous gift to bring all studies into alignment with the best practices for adult learners and outreach.
- MOPS, GEMS, and Alpha have begun exploring Global Coffee Break training and studies. Alpha US has begun to recommend *Discover Your Bible* studies as a natural next step for Alpha groups.

B. Timothy Leadership Training furthers global mission by equipping pastors and leaders with skills and training so that through effective churches faith is formed, mercy and justice are enacted, and the gospel is proclaimed.

Twenty-five years ago the Anglican Church of East Africa asked professors from Calvin Theological Seminary for help to develop resources for pastoral training. An interactive, action-oriented curriculum called Timothy Leadership Training (TLT) was developed. TLT continues to serve the under-resourced global church through the development and stewardship of biblically rooted and contextually relevant training resources, equipping leaders for faithful and flourishing ministry. TLT develops and delivers accessible training resources for church leaders who need it most.

By the grace of God, TLT continued to pursue more global and denominational ministry partnerships characterized by mutual respect and shared learning.

- The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted TLT’s global training activities. The year prior to the pandemic, 6,200 participants around the world took Timothy Leadership Training, but restrictions on in-person gatherings over the past year caused that number to plummet to 3,400. Illustrative of the challenge is this note received from a group in El Salvador: “Currently churches, pastors, and leaders are not dedicating time to TLT training; they are now focused on . . . meetings on Sunday; most churches are at 50 percent compared to before the pandemic.” Other emails indicate that TLT trainers engaged in care for church members who lost their jobs and helped to provide basic humanitarian assistance in their communities.

- Several active TLT trainers—notably from Zambia, Liberia, and Peru—died from COVID-19 complications.
- International training groups have shown great resilience in the face of the pandemic’s challenges. In addition to turning their attention to basic pastoral and diaconal care, several groups offered TLT training via Zoom, while many moved their training activities outdoors.
- TLT’s partnership with the mobile technology ministry The Relay Trust continues to yield positive results and meaningful relationships. The first three core TLT manuals are now available in microvideo format for Whatsapp delivery. The *Fear Not* manual is also formatted for microvideo delivery. The distribution of these resources by phone allows people with low internet bandwidth or little access to print materials to engage with the interactive studies.
- The TLT microvideo resources developed last year (*Loving Your Neighbor in the COVID-19 Pandemic* and *God’s Unfailing Love*) were widely distributed on Whatsapp, with many participants engaging the material with their families or individually.

New growth and new initiatives include the following:

- We continued to revise and develop new resources. Four of the seven core TLT manuals were revised with international input. These revisions were done so that the manuals are easier to facilitate, are standardized in their length, and encourage greater contextual reflection and responsible Scripture engagement.
- Translation of these revised manuals has begun in eight languages, and TLT is aiming for a longer-term goal of translation into 30+ languages.
- The newest TLT manual, *Fear Not: A Christian Attitude to Spiritual Powers* was field tested, revised, and is now available to training groups around the world.
- A 12-lesson microvideo resource called *Faithful and Fruitful Ministry* was developed in collaboration with the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and in response to requests from church leaders from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The requests were specifically for resources to help church leaders address issues of ministry burnout related to the pandemic.
- TLT has continued to forge new global ministry partnerships, often in collaboration with Resonate Global Mission, World Renew, or ReFrame Ministries. New training groups were initiated in Senegal, Togo, Central African Republic, and Burundi with these collaborations. Additional groups were initiated in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia with other collaborative partnerships.
- A Calvin Theological Seminary student has been appointed to a TLT cross-cultural internship in India in summer 2022.

C. Educational Care strengthens global mission by resourcing teachers and churches to develop children in faith through holistic, Christian education practices.

Educational Care (EC) grew out of the CRC’s longstanding commitment to Christian education. Early mission strategies included generous contributions to start and maintain Christian schools. Synod 2005 encouraged

greater indigenous ownership of Christian education efforts in the context of world missions, guided by a vision of Christian discipleship within families, schools, and churches (*Acts of Synod 2005*, pp. 773-74). In response to that vision, Educational Care was formed to equip school communities and teachers around the world who have little or no access to Christian education training. Educational Care develops interactive learning modules and trains facilitators. Resonate Global Mission uses the EC program extensively in its educational ministries: equipping schools, developing teachers, and disciplining students.

Educational Care pivoted to support Christian education while schools were deeply affected by COVID-19:

- In Uganda schools closed, and teachers lost their jobs. In other parts of the world, teachers continued under great stress with little time or resources for teacher training.
- Educational Care staff invested in updating studies, using feedback from diverse groups. They completed the revisions of five interactive learning modules:
  - *A Biblical Worldview*
  - *Preventative and Corrective Discipline for Discipleship*
  - *Helping Students Learn and Develop their Gifts*
  - *Leadership in a Christian School*
  - *The Purpose and Value of Your School*
- Facilitator’s guides were developed to include information to personalize the learning to the needs of various groups, and facilitation training was developed for trainers.
- The translation process into French and Korean is under way for EC manuals 1-3.

### III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

Raise Up Global Ministries is directed by core values that align with the milestones of *Our Journey 2025*. Each program engages the milestones in various ways, as the following stories illustrate.

#### A. *Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline*

Burlington, Ontario: “Watch out what you ask for, because this group’s prayers are answered.” That is how an Ontario Coffee Break group cautions each other as they turn to prayer after their Bible study. In response to prayer, group members have received jobs, apartments, and even babies. They wonder if their God-shaped, Bible-discovery conversations simply result in more faith-filled prayers. It can’t easily be explained, but they rejoice together in answered prayers.

#### B. *Listening to and caring for the voices of every generation*

Brookfield, Wisconsin: Four households have moved from Coffee Break to membership at Brookfield CRC since August 2021. Coffee Break director Barb Britton sees young women from their community join MOPS for relationships and time away from toddlers. As their kids grow, some women make the transition from MOPS to Coffee Break, where they meet in intergenerational groups. Young mothers learn together with grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Barb notices that the intergenerational groups seem to

create a safe next step into the life of their church and into other learning opportunities for their growing children.

Uganda: Jamila teaches at a child development center in northern Uganda. Jamila attended the first Educational Care module, *A Christian Worldview*, in January 2022. Simply hosting and attending this event brought challenges—travel, accidents, broken-down cars, COVID-19 concerns, and more. Once together, the teachers explored questions like “In what ways does your treatment of students honor the image of God in them?” Participants had the opportunity to think about their jobs and the children they serve through a biblical lens. Many were convicted. Their classrooms had often caused groaning rather than joy. By the second day, teachers were already making plans to handle children with love and care rather than inflicting pain. Educational Care supports this type of learning by developing manuals and methods to equip teachers with a holistic, God-centered approach to teaching so that students can become salt and light in the world.

*C. Growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships*

International Zoom Group: Robert Edmondson from Global Training Network launched a TLT group on Zoom with participants from several countries. The highlight of the training experience was more than learning together, group members said. The group developed unity as they shared about their trials from persecution. One pastor asked the group to pray for three families in his church who had been ordered to leave their homes under threats of violence. Another church leader from a country with restrictions on Christian faith reported on increasing hostilities from high levels of government. The group, though small, has become tightly knit and has launched a very active WhatsApp prayer group. Though they have never met face to face and are from different countries and cultures, the participants have come to love one another through their TLT sessions.

*D. Sharing the gospel and living it missionally; planting new churches as we connect with our local and global ministry contexts*

Rwanda: Several Rwandan pastors had just completed the TLT manuals *Caring for God’s People* and *Christian Stewardship* before the pandemic struck. Immediately they put learning into practice by dividing their congregations into “house churches” and leading them through the studies. As a result, 242 individuals were equipped to lead small groups and minister in creative ways in their communities. They applied action plans to plant more acreage, give food away, and redirect their tithes to assist others affected by pandemic restrictions. The churches are stronger and more effective than ever before. TLT develops materials available in video and print formats so that leaders and pastors—even in remote areas—have access to high-quality training.

Raise Up Global Ministries  
Sam Huizenga, director



## ReFrame Ministries (formerly Back to God Ministries International)

### I. Introduction—Mission and mandate

ReFrame Ministries serves as the worldwide media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Our ministry looks much different than when it launched as a single English radio program, *The Back to God Hour*, in 1939. Today our vision is that the lives and worldviews of *all people around the globe* will be transformed by God's gospel message.

Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we create contextual media resources that proclaim the gospel, disciple believers, and strengthen the church throughout the world using ten major languages. This work takes place through four core strategies:

- Church rooted: We believe the Holy Spirit works through the church, so we partner with churches to build and strengthen the body of Christ.
- Major languages: We strive to reach the widest possible audience, so we create content in the world's most-spoken languages.
- Context driven: We work with local partners who faithfully contextualize the gospel message and use the most effective media for connecting with diverse audiences.
- Relationship focused: Following the example of Christ, we seek to build long-term, discipling relationships with individual members of our mass audiences.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

The focus of ReFrame Ministries is primarily global mission. All of our work is guided by the Great Commission in Matthew 28. Much of our work also naturally aligns with other parts of the CRCNA's fivefold calling as we seek to work alongside churches and ministries worldwide.

#### A. Global mission

ReFrame carries out ministry in ten major world languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

Using media, ReFrame is uniquely positioned to provide gospel outreach in nearly every country of the world, even in places where Christian missionaries are not allowed. By proclaiming the gospel through radio, television, Internet, mobile apps, and social media, we are able to reach people who may not otherwise have access to a community of believers or a safe way to ask life's difficult questions. We regularly receive responses from people around the world who testify that they heard about Jesus for the first time through the media resources produced by ReFrame.

1. ReFrame works with about 150 Indigenous staff members around the world. Through its partnerships, ReFrame has a ministry presence in 55 countries through production and discipleship centers, broadcast locations, and resource distribution. ReFrame and its partners reach people in nearly every country through internet and mobile application resources.

2. ReFrame’s international partnership ministry teams have developed 28 ministry websites in 10 languages supported by 69 social media sites. ReFrame produces 48 radio/audio programs and 45 TV/video programs.
3. Together with our partners, we distribute nearly two million printed devotional booklets each year in six languages. In general, the distribution of print daily devotions has decreased as we are able to reach more people in more places digitally through email, Facebook, and phone apps. We send more than 315,000 devotional emails every day—and this number keeps increasing.

*B. Faith formation on the global mission field*

ReFrame provides faith formation resources in the English language, primarily for North American audiences. To learn more about these resources, see section III of this report or visit [ReFrameMinistries.org/English](http://ReFrameMinistries.org/English).

Culturally relevant discipleship resources are also available in the other nine major languages in which ReFrame works with media ministry partners. Produced and distributed in print, online, on social media channels, and through phone apps, devotions and faith formation resources are bringing God’s Word to people around the world.

1. Audio programs apply God’s Word directly to people’s lives through Bible teaching programs, offering Reformed and biblical perspectives on current cultural issues within the context of the nations where we do ministry.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, each of our ministry partners have adapted their core messages to talk about what God’s Word says about pandemics, death, and hope in Christ.

2. ReFrame and its partners offer print resources including devotional guides in nearly every language ministry. In total, ReFrame and its partners mail or hand out about 2.1 million devotional guides and other gospel-centered materials every year. Much of this content is also available online. In all ten language ministries, we regularly hear from people who are grateful to have a meaningful reflection on God’s Word.

For example, one reader of our *Today* devotions recently shared how *Today* helped a reader named Jackie, who found comfort in the daily messages after leaving her 33-year career for a new one. “I knew God had heard my knees knocking!” Jackie wrote. “Thank you so much for the blessing of these daily devotions.”

3. As video-based programs become increasingly popular and accessible, ReFrame and its partners now have 36 different video programs around the world. These programs range from daily, two-minute devotional reflections to hour-long church services for people who prefer to tune in remotely. No matter the length, each video program offers the hope of God’s truth in an easily accessible format. Most of the programs are available on social media sites like Facebook as well as YouTube.

After watching a video from our partner Portuguese ministry team, Edinete wrote, “Praise God! What wonderful words—God is wonderful! Be blessed and may God give you more and more wisdom to teach us to understand God’s Word.”

### C. *Servant leadership on the global mission field*

ReFrame Ministries is blessed to work with Indigenous leaders gifted in both ministry and media. These leaders and their teams provide culturally relevant outreach in each of the ten language ministries we work with.

1. International ministry leaders include Martin Nathan (Arabic); Pastor Jerry An (Chinese); Robin Basselin and Justin Sterenberg (English codirectors); Rev. Masao Yamashita (Japanese); Rev. Arliyanus Larosa (Indonesian); Rev. Hernandez Lopes (Portuguese); Rev. Sergei Sosedkin (Russian); Rev. Huascar de la Cruz (Spanish), and Rev. Marc Nabie (French).

We praise God for these leaders as well as the partnerships they represent—partnerships with on-the-ground media ministry workers, denominations, and organizations.

2. Pastor Jerry An facilitates symposia for Chinese-speaking church leaders in both Asia and North America to promote the use of media for gospel outreach.
3. The goal of all ReFrame-related training events is to equip leaders for sharing the gospel in the context to which God has called them.
  - a. French ministry leader Rev. Marc Nabie expanded Timothy Leadership Training events in several West African nations.
  - b. In India and nearby countries, ReFrame’s Hindi ministry leader facilitated leadership training events for pastors, church leaders, media producers, and vacation Bible school teachers.
  - c. Rev. Sergei Sosedkin and his team provided leadership seminars for Russian-speaking students and future church leaders who are attending universities in Russia and Ukraine.
  - d. Rev. Hernandez Dias Lopes led online courses for church leaders and pastors in Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries.

### D. *Mercy and justice on the global mission field*

While the mission of ReFrame is primarily global media missions, ministry teams and partners have opportunities to provide comfort and assistance to people who are oppressed, brokenhearted, and disadvantaged. Many programs ReFrame and its partners produce are messages of hope for people who are living in incredibly difficult circumstances—questioning their beliefs in places where it could be dangerous to do so, living in physical poverty, or suffering from sickness. In these ways we also address issues of social justice through our various programs in several languages.

1. Our ministry partners in India practice a holistic approach, providing for physical as well as spiritual needs. The team made a special effort to distribute food and sanitary equipment, for example, since many of their listeners are in the society’s lowest castes.
2. Our English ministry’s *Family Fire* staff have been producing materials for people who are experiencing pain and brokenness in their lives.
3. With the goal of teaching and encouraging Christ-followers to live out their faith, ReFrame also produces the *Think Christian* online blog and

the *Groundwork* audio program, regularly offering discussions on issues related to biblical justice.

For example, in June 2021 *Groundwork's* blog offered an answer to the question "What does Jesus say about justice?" The post stated, "There's a clamor for distributive and retributive justice in our world. Governments indeed have a responsibility to provide these types of justice, but too frequently, because humans are sinful, justice is dispensed imperfectly. Jesus' crucifixion would be the greatest miscarriage of justice of all time if it were not for the fact that God the Father willed it so that we may . . . be freed from the slavery of sin and death."

*E. Gospel proclamation and worship*

The core mission of ReFrame and its partners is gospel proclamation through a variety of media, sharing the gospel with people wherever they are in the world. ReFrame continually seeks out culturally relevant and effective ways to proclaim the gospel and to call people into relationship with God.

1. We have increasingly moved to a model of partnership with local denominations and organizations in our international ministries. This provides a greater opportunity for local ownership and sustainability. In Brazil, for example, we partner closely with congregations in the Presbyterian Church of Brazil to distribute biblical content for church members and the communities where they serve in missions—including communities as far away as Angola in southern Africa.
2. As our world aims to decrease the use of paper, a trend that has only increased during the pandemic, ReFrame expands the CRC's use of digital outreach for sharing the gospel: developing new apps, growing email and social media audiences, and sharing almost all content online, even if it's also available offline.

**III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)**

ReFrame offers a variety of programs and resources to help congregations and individuals work toward the milestones named in our denominational ministry plan, *Our Journey 2025*.

*A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline*

1. Our English ministry team has grown a network of more than 7,500 prayer partners in North America and throughout the world who pray for people responding to our media outreach programs.
2. Our *Today* devotions, produced since 1950, are available in print, at TodayDevotional.com, by email subscription, on podcast websites, and through mobile applications. We print and distribute about 210,000 *Today* booklets six times each year, and more than 300,000 people have signed up to access *Today* emails. In addition, about 75,000 people use the *Today* devotional app on their mobile devices.
3. *Groundwork* is a 30-minute audio program and podcast that builds biblical foundations for life. *Groundwork* guides listeners in casual but thoughtful

conversations about practical applications of God’s Word in today’s world. You can listen on the air or online at [GroundworkOnline.com](http://GroundworkOnline.com).

4. *Think Christian* is a collaborative online magazine that invites readers to practice seeing God in all things—particularly popular music, movies, television, and other forms of pop culture. Rooted in the Reformed tradition, *Think Christian* recognizes that all of culture falls within God’s sovereignty and that by his common grace believers and unbelievers alike are capable of creating beautiful things.
5. *Family Fire* is an online community (through Facebook and the website [FamilyFire.com](http://FamilyFire.com)) that provides resources to spiritually strengthen families through articles, devotions, email and social media interaction, and live retreat events.

B. *Listening to voices of every generation*

1. *Kids Corner* is a children’s program especially geared toward children ages 6-12. This program has transitioned from a single audio program to a growing collection of online resources for children’s spiritual growth across North America. *Kids Corner* launched a new website in 2020, making all 20 seasons of its audio series more readily available and—using online episode guides—more interactive.

*Kids Corner* launched new videos in 2019 along with a graphic novel that tells the story of the Bible. A video series called *Kids in Action* gives kids opportunities to share their own stories of how they are living out God’s Word.

2. People of all ages respond to messages in our *Today* devotions. A class of high school students responded to the December 2021 devotions (written by Rev. Bryan Kuyper of First CRC, Taber, Alberta) with a photography project. The students read the devotions, looked for everyday reminders of topics in the messages, and snapped photos related to those topics. The students also wrote reflections about their discoveries.

C. *Growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships*

1. ReFrame’s global outreach is strengthened through crucial networks of North American and international partners. Strong collaborations create effective partnerships for mission and allow resources to be invested wisely. In addition to our connections with various ministries in the CRCNA, ReFrame works cooperatively with the following Reformed denominations worldwide: the Reformed Church in America, the Reformed Church in Japan, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, the Indonesian Christian Church, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt, Synod of the Nile. In addition, we partner with evangelical congregations in Eastern Europe, in Africa, and in India and surrounding countries—and with house churches and Christian ministries in China.
2. ReFrame Ministries has also partnered with the CRC’s Korean Council since 2008 to publish a bilingual Korean-English version of the *Today* devotions.

*D. Sharing the gospel, living it missionally, and planting new churches as we connect with our local and global ministry contexts*

1. *Church Juice* helps churches be intentional about how to use the wide variety of media tools available to them in order to effectively communicate with their congregations and communities.

*Church Juice* offers virtual and in-person opportunities for church communicators to come together, learn, and encourage one another. If you have questions about how your church can improve its communications, start a conversation with *Church Juice* producer Bryan Haley. Email him anytime at [bryan@churchjuice.com](mailto:bryan@churchjuice.com).

2. ReFrame’s English ministry produces ebooks as downloadable PDF files. Several are also available in print for group discussion or personal growth. Topics from the newest resources include Taylor Swift (*Think Christian*), bullying (*Kids Corner*), seeking God in suffering (*Today*), and “How do I pray?” (ReFrame’s prayer ministry).
3. ReFrame’s Japanese ministry partners offer videos to churches that are part of the Reformed Church in Japan. These videos help to introduce the church to prospective visitors and seekers and offer a glimpse of what a Sunday is like in a typical church. In this way ReFrame helps to grow the global church in Japan using media resources.
4. ReFrame’s Hindi ministry team supports the work of church planters in northern India. The team hosts radio-program listener gatherings and offers resources to communities of believers. These gatherings often take place at house churches that are growing into church plants.

**IV. Recommendations**

A. That Rev. Kurt Selles, director of ReFrame Ministries, *be given the privilege of the floor when ReFrame matters are discussed.*

B. That synod encourage congregations to use ReFrame’s materials to support their own local ministries and outreach.

*Note:* Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

ReFrame Ministries  
Kurt Selles, director

## Resonate Global Mission

### I. Introduction

This year marks five years since Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Missions joined together in order to respond and adapt to a changed and changing world.

As we brought these two agencies together in the summer of 2017, we could not have anticipated the amount of change ahead of us in the years to come. And Resonate has not just survived but thrived—thanks to our faithful God, prayerful listening to the Holy Spirit, and the prayers and support of churches like yours. We’ve accomplished a lot together!

Around the world, your Christian Reformed missionaries, church planters, and other ministry leaders are encountering people who are searching for meaning during difficult times. Through your support for Resonate, you help introduce people to the true source of meaning—and hope.

In North America we are walking with our congregations as they seek to respond to the needs in their communities, discover God’s plan for their community, and join in. Each congregation and each one of us has a role to play in God’s mission, and Resonate wants to help everyone respond to God’s call.

We are grateful to you, the members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, for your continued support for ministry throughout the changes experienced in our countries, churches, and communities. Thanks to your support, the good news of Jesus is going out like an expanding, amplifying sound around the world!

No matter what the future brings, we are committed to continuing our work as Resonate: to deepen your passion for mission, strengthen your capacity to follow God on mission, and amplify the impact you and your church have in your neighborhood and around the world.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Of the five ministry priorities that guide the CRCNA’s work, Resonate’s primary focus is global mission. In this area Resonate’s growing impact on the Christian Reformed Church is most apparent in three main areas: forming leaders, sending congregations, and connecting networks.

These broad categories are essential in the mission work of this denomination, work that spans the globe and stretches across more than a century of passion for God’s mission. Here is how the work in these three areas help mobilize Christian Reformed churches to participate in God’s mission and proclaim the gospel worldwide.

#### A. *Forming Leaders*

Missional leaders live out, influence, invite, and equip others to join God’s mission. Your partnership with Resonate is working to see an increasing number of Christians formed to engage and lead others on God’s mission. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Campus ministry: Resonate engages universities and colleges in ministry on more than forty campuses across North America. Resonate is investing

in training and supporting campus ministers to be a faithful presence on campuses and to help students discover God’s will for their lives.

2. Leadership development: We are all missionaries, and our mission field is all around us! Resonate is investing in identifying and equipping individual leaders and teachers worldwide through initiatives like seminary education and training leaders to work alongside others in their communities—whether in North America or overseas.
3. Global mission education: Our staff walks alongside congregations to encourage them in fulfilling God’s mission. Resonate is investing in training mission committees, forging partnerships, and working with young adults whom God is calling to mission work.

*Example and Story: New Leaders for a New Model of Church*

You’re equipping campus ministry students to start and lead churches with a missional edge.

Every year, Resonate Global Mission partner campus ministries send out hundreds of students who graduate with leadership skills.

“Campus ministry students are trained leaders,” said Mark Wallace, Resonate’s campus ministry leader. “They’re often trained at leading large groups. They’re good at . . . having conversations about God with friends who don’t believe.”

But after graduating, many of these students have trouble finding opportunities to use their leadership skills in church. Some go on to seminary, but many become leaders in businesses and nonprofits—which is good, and something campus ministries want to see. It’s just that those graduates often have trouble finding a place in the local church where they can continue to grow as leaders.

So, what if these students were trained to plant churches?

That’s exactly what Campus Ministry at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Calvin Theological Seminary, Resonate Global Mission, and local CRC congregations in West Michigan are working together to accomplish.

“We’re creating another pathway for students who have a calling, and who have training and gifting from the Lord, to lead in ministry,” said Scott Stark, a campus minister at GVSU.

Read the rest of the story at [resonateglobalmission.org/students](https://resonateglobalmission.org/students).

*B. Sending congregations*

Jesus sends all his followers into the world as his witnesses. Your partnership with Resonate is working to see an increasing number of diverse, locally rooted, and globally connected congregations and ministries sent to faithfully proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Church planting: Starting new churches is a vital part of Resonate’s ministry and is a priority in the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan. New churches are the most effective tool we have to reach new groups of people. Resonate is investing in recruiting, training, coaching, encouragement, and resources for new churches.
2. Strengthening churches: Our local congregations are one of the richest resources for mission. Resonate helps established churches to discover

and unleash God’s plan for their time and place. Resonate is investing in strengthening churches for mission both locally and globally.

3. **Discipleship:** The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of Christians worldwide, calling them into a deeper life of faith. Resonate is investing in discipling and training Christians who are discovering God’s plan for their lives.
4. **Evangelism:** The work of church planters and missionaries has grown the global church in amazing ways, but more than 1.5 billion people still have not heard the gospel! Resonate is investing in training people to witness and proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ.

*Example and Story: The House for All Saints and Sinners*

One day Sean Taylor got a call from Sonlight Community Church in Lynden, Washington. They wondered if he had ever considered planting a church.

“Sonlight has its own unique strengths . . . but we are aware of the fact that there are people who are probably not going to walk into the doors of Sonlight,” said Mike Slofstra, community life pastor at Sonlight.

So Sonlight partnered with Sean to start the House for All Saints and Sinners.

Nicknamed “The House,” the church plant is a community of house churches. They gather weekly in small groups of people from all walks, stages, and ages of life. Their sanctuaries are living rooms, kitchens, and yards. Once a month, all of the house churches come together for a larger worship gathering.

And yes, the church plant reaches people who may never step foot inside Sonlight’s building.

“Of the house churches that we currently have, a lot of the participants are ‘nones’ and ‘dones’—people who have given up on church or have never given church a shot,” said Sean.

Clarence Presley, Resonate’s regional mission leader for the Western USA region, said he’s hearing that’s especially true when it comes to young adults—but he also said that churches shouldn’t be afraid or discouraged.

He notes that while people might be leaving the church, they aren’t necessarily giving up on their faith. They may be looking for different expressions of church or new rhythms of ministry. It’s a challenge the church is facing, but it’s also an opportunity to share the gospel and disciple people in new ways.

Read the rest of the story at [resonateglobalmission.org/thehouse](https://resonateglobalmission.org/thehouse).

### C. *Connecting networks*

As more people join God on mission, we want to see people working together for spiritual and social transformation in their neighborhoods and around the world. Your partnership with Resonate works to foster an increasing number of networks of leaders connected in relationships of mutual learning, trust, and influence. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Coaching leaders of holistic mission networks to help local churches come together and accomplish more than they could if working alone.

2. Sending holistic mission network developers and community chaplains in partnership with local congregations.
3. Developing new experiments and methods of mission work so that networks around the globe can learn from one another.
4. Connecting pastors, church planters, and ministry leaders who need support with those who have vital resources to offer, such as experience, coaching, and encouragement.

*Example and Story: On Earth as It Is in Heaven*

“So, what kind of Christians are you guys? Are you the ones who only care about people’s souls?”

The question came from a neighbor. Sam Kamminga, who works with Resonate Global Mission and the Trellis Collective as a community chaplain in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was helping another neighbor move. “You tell me,” he said. “What do you see?”

Sometimes global mission work is treated separately from justice and mercy work, and Christians get a reputation of caring only for people’s souls and not whether they have enough food, clean drinking water, or a safe and comfortable place to live. As a result, Sam often meets people who are wary of Christians.

So in working with the families in his community—many of whom came to the city as refugees—Sam and his neighbors organized around projects such as ensuring that every apartment had heat and rallied young adults to work with students who struggled in school.

Starting from the ground up in relationship with one another, they work together for neighbors’ well-being. They invite one another into their homes, share meals together, and often talk about how they see God present and at work.

“I find that when we are seeking the right relationship of all things—this *shalom*—then along the way . . . we’re going to find Jesus in really unique and surprising ways,” said Sam.

Read the whole story at [resonateglobalmission.org/halifax](https://resonateglobalmission.org/halifax).

### III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)*

Resonate aims for its work to bring a ray of hope, an encouraging way to work together across our denomination. We’re blessed to be able to see courageous Christian Reformed missionaries, church planters, and other ministry leaders making gospel mission their priority around the world!

The vision of a single, global mission agency that first brought Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Missions together five years ago has proven to be essential in approaching our present challenges of political and ecclesiastical division—all in the midst of a global pandemic.

In partnership with churches like yours across the United States and Canada, Resonate helps churches respond and adapt to new ministry needs. Resonate is an extension of your church, and we exist to serve you and walk with you as you join God’s mission in your own neighborhood and around the world.

Our Christian Reformed congregations are our most important ministry partners. In light of *Our Journey 2025*, the ministry plan for the denomination, Resonate has resolved to prioritize four main ministry areas that align with the milestones of *Our Journey 2025*. In these four areas we can help stir the imagination at your church, or walk alongside you in mission. (To contact the local Resonate mission leader in your area, visit [resonateglobalmission.org/leadership](https://resonateglobalmission.org/leadership).)

*A. Develop young adults and lay leaders for mission*

We open space for diverse groups of young adults and lay leaders, equipping, mentoring and discipling them so that together we may share the good news and live out the gospel in all areas of life.

*Example and Story: Walking with Christ in the Middle East*

What does it look like to walk with Christ? That's one of the questions five young adults are exploring together through Cohort Middle East, a Resonate Global Mission discipleship opportunity for adults ages 18-30.

Each week, the cohort gathers around a table in a flat in a Middle Eastern city. Outside, the city streets are noisy with people shouting and car horns blaring. But inside, things are more peaceful. Conversation and laughter fill the air as the group members enjoy a meal together. After a day of classes, studying, and working, the young leaders can rest a little and share with one another what God is teaching them.

"Cohort is a community that grows together spiritually. We use that time to deepen our relationship with God and to explore God's purpose for our lives," said Emily (name changed to protect identity), a Resonate missionary who leads Cohort Middle East. She and her husband host the cohort participants for dinner each week, teach and disciple them, and travel with them to historic sites.

Many of the Cohort Middle East participants, called "fellows," joined because they want to be part of a faith community where they can learn and grow in their walk with Christ.

Cohort Middle East has provided an important opportunity for Delia, Margot, Eric, Ereny, and Timothy—young adults who are not just exploring ministry opportunities for the future but are also involved in ministry in their everyday lives.

Read the whole story at [resonateglobalmission.org/cohortmiddleeast](https://resonateglobalmission.org/cohortmiddleeast).

*B. Plant churches that participate in broader church planting movements*

We catalyze the planting of diverse churches locally and globally that seek spiritual and social transformation in their communities.

*Example and Story: Discipleship and a Tale of Two Men*

The Table, a Resonate Global Mission church plant partner that you support in Thorold, Ontario, is celebrating a young man's new life in Christ—thanks to a discipleship encounter this past spring that seemed to echo one six years ago.

Terence Schilstra, your church planter who started The Table, first met Brian six years ago. They crossed paths outside of the school gym where The Table hosts community dinners. Terence smiled and introduced himself to Brian, but Brian didn't respond. He simply stared back at Terence—and then walked away.

But over the next few weeks, Terence kept running into Brian. Terence listened to Brian's story. He came from a broken home, was addicted to drugs, was part of a gang, and had been to jail a few times.

It wasn't an easy process, but The Table supported Brian every step of the way as he overcame his addiction and some of his past hurts. And today Brian is free from addiction.

But that's really just the beginning of the story. Your support of church planting through Resonate continues to help make it possible for Brian to grow as a disciple.

And now God's work in and through Brian is having resonating effects.

Six years after Brian and Terence first met, Brian had a similar discipleship encounter with one of his neighbors: a young man named Solly. Brian crossed paths with Solly while walking up the stairway to his apartment. He introduced himself, but Solly didn't respond. He simply stared back at Brian—and then walked away.

But over the next few weeks, Brian persisted. He kept thinking about Solly, so he greeted Solly whenever he saw him and then invited Solly over for dinner. It didn't seem like Solly really wanted to come for dinner, but he came. Brian listened to Solly's story and then continued to find ways to connect with him. Brian shared his faith with Solly and invited him to The Table's gatherings. As Solly learned more about Jesus, he became more captivated by the grace, hope, and love of the gospel.

And then one day Solly decided to follow Christ.

Read the rest of the story at [resonateglobalmission.org/brianandsolly](https://resonateglobalmission.org/brianandsolly).

### C. *Equip and encourage congregations in gospel witness*

We challenge, encourage, and equip communities of disciples locally and globally to discern the Holy Spirit's work in their neighborhoods and to boldly follow the Spirit into relationships that concretely demonstrate the love of Christ and grow the church.

#### *Example and Story: Introducing 'Witness: Equipped to Share the Good News'*

How do we share the gospel story? How do we tell people about Jesus Christ? How exactly can we share this good news with our neighbors in a society that's uncomfortable or uninterested in faith? Is there a formula that we can teach our churches?

The challenge is that there is not a formula. But there is a recipe.

The ingredients for being a gospel witness today are now available in a free curriculum from Resonate called *Witness: Equipped to Share the Good News*. This downloadable resource provides five sessions with short videos, small group guides, and a participant journal. As your small groups, adult education class, youth group, or other community go through these sessions together, you'll learn about how ingredients such as Prepare, Be Present, Proclaim, Participate, and Power come together to help us be gospel witnesses.

We are excited to provide you with this vital resource, and we pray that the Holy Spirit will use it to change hearts and lives in your congregations and communities.

You can download *Witness* free of charge at [resonateglobalmission.org/witness](https://resonateglobalmission.org/witness).

#### D. Minister with diaspora communities

We mobilize believers inside and outside communities of immigrants, migrants, refugees, and international students in a way that welcomes and embraces them, communicates God's love, and calls them to faith in Christ.

##### *Example and Story: A Heart for Haitian Immigrants in the Dominican Republic*

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, ten members of Exeter (Ont.) CRC traveled to the Dominican Republic to partner with Ponton CRC there and a passionate ministry leader.

Together they all constructed a building that would serve both as a place of worship and as classroom space for a new Christian school.

"The local church purchased the land, put up a temporary wooden building, and [began] putting in concrete footings, columns, and walls for a permanent building," said Steve Brauning, a Resonate missionary who serves with the Christian Reformed Church in the Dominican Republic (CRC-DR). "What we did as Resonate was to come alongside and assist with the building that will serve both the church and the school."

Juan Ortiz had planted Ponton CRC. When Juan was 14, he emigrated from Haiti to the Dominican Republic. He moved in search of better opportunities, but Haitians living in the Dominican Republic face a long history of prejudice from many of their Dominican neighbors. They struggle to find jobs and an education for their children, and they often live in some of the poorest conditions in the country.

Juan, who has a heart for his fellow Haitian immigrants, planted his first church in his 20s—but he still couldn't escape discrimination within his denomination. When he learned about the CRC-DR, a Resonate partner, he found a home.

"In the classis that he became a part of, there were pastors of both Haitian and Dominican descent. He felt that there was a good rapport and fairness," said Steve Brauning.

Resonate and the CRC-DR worked alongside Juan for several years as he planted two more churches and started two Christian schools. Almost a decade ago, Juan planted Ponton CRC. And when he saw a strong need for education in Ponton, he also started a Christian school. Nearly fifty students now attend the school—studying math, science, and the Bible—in the church building.

But the church and school needed more space and a stronger building in which people and students could safely gather. That's when Exeter CRC stepped in.

Read the rest of the story at [resonateglobalmission.org/pontonandexeter](https://resonateglobalmission.org/pontonandexeter).

#### IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the director of Resonate Global Mission, Zachary King, the privilege of the floor when matters pertaining to Resonate Global Mission are addressed.

B. That synod, along with the Council of Delegates, encourage all Christian Reformed congregations to recognize the following Sundays as significant opportunities to pray for and to receive an offering for Resonate Global Mission: Easter, Pentecost, and the second and third Sundays in September.

*Notes:*

1. Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.
2. Resonate Global Mission and ReFrame Ministries prepared a comprehensive evaluation of the Global Mission ministry priority for Synod 2021. See this evaluation for an overview of ministry results since 2017 and key growth areas identified by both agencies.

Resonate Global Mission  
Zachary King, director

**Committee for Contact with the Government/Centre for Public Dialogue**

**I. Introduction**

The Committee for Contact with the Government (CCG), operating as the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue, is a justice and reconciliation ministry of the Christian Reformed churches in Canada. The Centre for Public Dialogue works to encourage active Christian citizenship, studies critical issues facing Canadian society from a Reformed perspective, and interacts with policy makers and shapers in a constructive manner. Our focus issues are currently refugee rights and resettlement, Indigenous justice and reconciliation, and climate justice. We also strive to be nimble and responsive on critical issues that come up—for example, responding to Medical Assistance in Dying legislation.

**II. Reflecting on Our Calling**

*A. Faith formation*

We seek to work with local churches in an effort to live into the call to seek God’s justice and peace in every area of life. We do this in the following ways:

1. Providing liturgical and devotional resources connected to Indigenous justice, refugee rights, and climate care via our website and social media. We support binational efforts like the CRCNA Day of Justice (August) and provide devotional resources in connection with our Lenten challenge and offering Sunday. This year, around 100 churches across Canada marked our offering Sunday (Justice and Hope Sunday in March).
2. Gathering local church members to tell stories and think together about Christ’s call to justice through our *Do Justice* blog ([dojustice.crcna.org](http://dojustice.crcna.org)). Through our *Do Justice* columnists’ initiative, CRC and RCA writers from across North America have regularly shared the ways that they are wrestling with the call to do justice in their own local contexts. Our fourteen regular columnists (including seven people of color) focus on specific issues from poverty to climate change to Reformed theological reflections to refugee sponsorship. *Do Justice* has further expanded into a podcast format. This year a variety of guests were asked to reflect on the question “We’ve been in a season that is unsettling, a time in which many injustices came into collective center focus—in what ways has this spotlight on what is broken had impacts on your work?”
3. Working closely with the Canadian Ministries justice mobilizer, Cindy Stover, to develop and animate learning opportunities on justice and reconciliation. We continue to adapt to churches’ needs by way of virtual learning sessions, online advocacy webinars, recorded video presentations, and longer-term engagement projects with groups like Act Five at Redeemer University.
4. This year marked the 44th Canadian general election. We encouraged church members to think about their approach as candidates canvassed.

These interactions provided a great opportunity to seek justice and speak hope in the public sphere. Our series “At the Front Door” explored questions we planned to ask candidates, and this encouraged church members to prepare their own questions.

*B. Mercy and justice*

We assist local churches in loving mercy and doing justice as follows:

1. Communicating with government, through direct interaction with policy makers and shapers from our office in Ottawa, Ontario, and through mobilizing Christian citizens to interact with their elected representatives. We continue to work closely with partners to help local churches respond to urgent issues of justice and reconciliation. These partnerships include World Renew, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, KAIROS, and Citizens for Public Justice. This year we encouraged and supported church members on a number of significant advocacy issues including the support and welcome of refugees through the Continuing Welcome campaign. We continue to work with the Climate Witness Project to encourage local responsibility and citizen advocacy for climate justice.
2. Responding to requests for information from churches and members on current issues of concern. This has included requests for information on human trafficking, refugees, defunding charities, and responding to graves uncovered at Kamloops.
3. Working with CRCNA partners to bring justice-themed learning experiences to churches. We have worked with World Renew and refugee service providers to refresh our *World Refugee Day Toolkit*, with specific emphasis on refugee travel restrictions. *Faith in Action: Practicing Biblical Advocacy* is a practical citizen planning and action tool that has been relaunched with updated materials in Canada and newly launched in the United States in partnership with the Office of Social Justice. In addition, the Hearts Exchanged program continues to be an important pillar of work in collaboration with Indigenous Ministries. Cohorts are taking place across Canada with over 250 participants.
4. Advocacy continues on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action. We are building on churches’ understanding of the importance of community involvement in education through the Education Together campaign. We advocate with them to support the essential right of education for Indigenous youth. Additionally, this year we give thanks to see the passing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples through Bill C-15.

*C. Gospel proclamation and worship*

Doing justice and reconciliation is gospel proclamation—we know and celebrate that Christ is renewing all things and that he calls us to be collaborators in this task. When the church does justice, our witness is stronger and has more integrity. As such, the work and partnerships mentioned above are an element of gospel proclamation and are motivated by a conviction that justice and worship are integrated.

### III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

#### A. *Engaging younger members*

Young people make up the largest portion of our *Do Justice* blog audience: just under one-third of our readers are under age 34, and more than 50 per cent are under age 44. Additionally, a quarter of our social media followers are under age 44. We continue to seek new ways of connecting with younger members, including through the *Do Justice* podcast and our Instagram channel.

#### B. *Assisting churches within their local contexts*

We regularly connect with churches across the country to help them seek justice. Our Faith in Action workshop was delivered across the country virtually this year. We continue to connect with churches on climate change through partnership with the Climate Witness Project in connection with events like the binational screening of the film *There's Something in the Water* and subsequent Zoom discussion groups. We regularly respond to requests for workshops and to email inquiries.

Committee for Contact with the Government /  
Centre for Public Dialogue

Mike Hogeterp, research and communications manager

## Disability Concerns

### I. Introduction

#### A. *Mandate*

The Office of Disability Concerns (DC) strives to promote and foster relationships, communities, and societies where everybody belongs and everybody serves by assisting churches, agencies, institutions, and leadership within the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America to

- think and act in keeping with the biblical call regarding people with disabilities.
- break barriers of communication, architecture, and attitude.
- establish ministries with, for, and by people with disabilities and their families.

#### B. *Vision*

Since 2009, CRC DC has been working in close cooperation with the Disability Concerns office of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Our vision together can be summarized briefly: “In healthy churches, ministries, and communities, everybody belongs, and everybody serves.”

#### C. *Mission*

DC’s mission is to bring about the full participation of all people with disabilities in the life of the church, and the full participation of the church in the lives of people with disabilities. We have four areas of focus.

1. Network – Recruit and train disability advocates at the classis and church levels who work in their communities to foster belonging and reduce barriers.
2. Awareness and education – Educate volunteers, church leaders, and Christian Reformed church members about disabilities, ableism, experiences of people with disabilities in the church, and the barriers that need to be removed.
3. Consultation – Provide support and information to churches, agencies, and church leaders as they navigate how to break barriers to full participation and create a greater sense of belonging for people with various abilities.
4. Ministry sustainability – Enhance the future growth of Disability Concerns by cultivating and appreciating donors and by creating a thriving network of young adult disability advocates.

As of January 2022, DC had two employees: Lindsay Wieland Capel, LMSW, director, working 30 hours per week in West Michigan; and Becky Jones, volunteer and communications specialist, working 30 hours per week in Burlington, Ontario, sharing her time between Disability Concerns and Safe Church Ministries (20 hours/10 hours).

## II. Reflecting on Our Calling

The work of Disability Concerns is reflected in all five of the CRC's ministry priorities (Our Calling).

### A. Faith formation

At the heart of the work of Disability Concerns is the belief that churches are called to the faith formation of people of all abilities. Disability Concerns encourages churches to intentionally remove barriers that keep people from being able to participate in the church's efforts at faith formation for its members. Sometimes that means reducing barriers that keep people from even coming into the church building, such as not having an accessible restroom, doors that someone can open, or an elevator. It also includes challenging churches to make changes for those already in the church, such as adding support so that a child can attend Sunday school or asking if people have food allergies before an event with food.

Disability Concerns has multiple communication strategies to raise awareness among Christian Reformed members and leaders, such as book clubs, social media, our award winning *Breaking Barriers* newsletter, and the *Disability Concerns Canada* newsletter. All of these efforts press toward the goal of having churches that intentionally invest in the faith formation of people with varying abilities.

### B. Servant leadership

The tagline of Disability Concerns is *Everybody belongs, everybody serves*. Inherent in our work is the belief that people with all abilities are an essential part of God's body and have gifts to contribute. Our work is focused on a sense of mutuality, that when all of God's people are present and using their gifts, it benefits the whole body. In our work we invite churches to consider the untapped gifts that people with disabilities bring to the table.

A vital strategy for bringing the vision of *Everybody belongs, everybody serves* to fruition is to raise up volunteers at the regional and church levels to help raise awareness and make needed changes. Our goal is that each classis have a regional advocate who recruits and trains church advocates in the churches within their classis. In January 2022, 407 church disability advocates and 29 regional disability advocates were serving Christian Reformed churches and classes. We support and educate Disability Concerns volunteers through multiple strategies, including our volunteer newsletter, annual leadership training, one-on-one meetings, regional volunteer meetings, and a new online training program.

One area of servant leadership that we have emphasized is in creating the next generation of disability advocates within our churches. In collaboration with the Reformed Church in America we are using the Horizon Storyline process to strategize how to engage young adults in disability ministry. Out of that we created the Disability Advocacy Journey, recruiting a cohort of young adults to grow as disability advocates. The Disability Advocacy Journey includes training, coaching, and mentoring young adults to create a future where *everybody belongs and everybody serves* in CRC and RCA churches.

DC volunteers and staff help to equip church leaders by doing webinars and other training events online and by consulting with church leaders about engaging people with disabilities in church life. The CRC DC Advisory Committee and the RCA DC Guiding Coalition serve as one team that

advises both ministries through meetings several times per year. DC staff also provide advice and assistance to other CRC staff on issues related to disability and ministry.

### C. *Global mission*

Our website ([crcna.org/disability](http://crcna.org/disability)) provides resources for inclusion in worship and for encouraging the belonging of people with disabilities in churches throughout the world. Analytics show that our website is being accessed in 58 countries across the globe. Our writing through our newsletters (with an audience of 1,738 people), social media (with followers from 13 countries), and through the Network.org also have a global reach. A primary Disability Concerns educational tool is our resource *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*, which helps church leaders and members welcome and engage people with disabilities in the life of the church. This tool is being made available in Korean, Spanish, French, and audio versions. Our newsletter *Breaking Barriers* is also translated into Korean and Spanish.

In addition, Disability Concerns staff regularly consult with other ministries. Agency disability advocates, who are CRC agency and educational institution staff, meet several times per year to discuss ways in which all CRC ministries worldwide can engage with people who have disabilities.

### D. *Mercy and justice*

The mercy and justice aspect of our denomination's calling animates and drives the day-to-day work of Disability Concerns. The call to mercy means that churches must care about the experience of each person, including people with disabilities. The call to justice means that churches are called to come alongside people with disabilities to work with them to remove barriers to participation and to celebrate the gifts of each person. Helping churches see the need for this, empowering them to do something, and educating them about how to do it is the work of Disability Concerns.

Disability Concerns partners with deacons, who are also called to the work of mercy, to "be compassionate to those in need and treat them with dignity and respect." When DC works with deacons, it helps to create churches that are enriched and strengthened by people who have disabilities. Deacons also play an important part to ensure that churches provide for the spiritual, social, emotional, and physical well-being of persons with disabilities and their families.

Disability Concerns asks Christian Reformed churches to have compassion for the lived experiences of people with disabilities in church and the world, and to notice who may not even be there yet. We pray and work toward Christian Reformed communities in which our hearts go out to others in ways like Jesus showed, from his compassionate care and healing to his teaching in the parable of the persistent widow who needed justice (Luke 18). Through our volunteer network and educational and communication efforts we seek to raise up people who listen to the experiences of people with disabilities and who say, "What matters to you, matters to me."

An equitable and just church is one in which all members thrive, where they can not only get in the building and access all spaces but can also participate and lead in worship and programming. As one way to measure progress in this work, we look at numbers in the accessibility section of the annual *Yearbook* survey. For example, 311 CRC congregations (31 percent)

worship in barrier-free facilities, and another 631 (63 percent) have partially accessible facilities; so a total of 94 percent of CRC church buildings are fully or partially accessible. In addition, 575 churches (57 percent) have barrier-free sound, and 478 (47 percent) have barrier-free books/materials in print. Further, 534 churches (53 percent) offer transportation for people who cannot drive themselves, and 384 churches (38 percent) of congregations have adopted a church policy on disability. Disability Concerns loves to tell the stories of churches who are intentionally creating belonging. We do that through our newsletter *Breaking Barriers*, our Network pages and social media, and in CRC Communications and *Banner* articles.

RCA and CRC Disability Concerns ministries also work toward justice by partnering with other faith and disability organizations as members of the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition. Together these organizations work toward related public policy priorities in Washington, D.C.

#### *E. Gospel proclamation and worship*

Part of the gospel call to spread the good news is to realize that there are some people groups underrepresented in churches, including people with disabilities. Ableism and barriers in buildings, worship, and general thinking have not always sent the message that the good news is for everyone. To address this in part, this past year's Disability Concerns leadership conference focused on the theme "Who's Missing from my Church?"

Much of the work of Disability Concerns is focused on educating congregations and leaders about the barriers that can keep people with disabilities from involvement—especially barriers related to worship. Things like offering gluten-free communion, a hearing loop, large-print bulletins, or a ramp to the pulpit can make a huge difference for someone being able to engage in worship in their church. In addition to providing written materials and investing in volunteers, Disability Concerns consults with worship leaders on the best ways to include people who have disabilities in worship services.

Synod has asked CRC congregations to celebrate Disability Awareness Week on the third Sunday in October each year to raise awareness about the gifts of community members who have disabilities and about barriers that can keep them from participation. DC provides worship leaders with a variety of online resources, including litanies, prayers, and sermons that can be used for that Sunday and throughout the year. The hope is that Disability Awareness Sunday provokes changes that are incorporated into the full life of the church throughout the year.

### **III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)***

#### *A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline*

See section II, A above for more information about how DC cultivates practices of prayer and spiritual discipline.

#### *B. Listening to the voices of every generation*

DC provides a variety of resources for congregations to engage children and young people with disabilities in all of congregational life. During the past year, we have particularly emphasized raising up young adult leaders who can push us toward an accessible future in Christian Reformed churches. In collaboration with RCA NextGen, Disability Concerns has established strategic planning around this goal. One program that rose out of that work

in 2021 was the Disability Advocacy Journey, in which we recruited and trained a cohort of young adults in disability advocacy.

*C. Growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships*

One area of diversity often forgotten is diversity of ability. Disability Concerns prompts churches through our volunteers, events, social media, and written materials to listen to the voices and cherish the gifts of people with disabilities, to remember them and intentionally invite them into the life and leadership of the church. As we think about diversity, it's important to remember that people with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, but, rather, each person comes with their own experiences in the world and the church, as well as their own experiences of barriers.

*D. Sharing the gospel, living it missionally, and planting new churches as we connect with our local and global ministry contexts*

DC places the highest priority on a network of church and regional disability advocates, connecting our work directly to churches and classes by identifying and equipping local people to minister within their local context. These ministry leaders help churches and classes better reflect the body of Christ, especially as described in Luke 14:15-24 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Congregations that do this well are much better equipped to connect with members of their community, 15 to 20 percent of whom live with disabilities.

Through our work with RCA Disability Concerns and other ministries, through the Network, through regular gatherings of disability advocates, and through direct connections with churches, Disability Concerns seeks to foster collaboration that will enhance the ministries of congregations and advance the work of God's kingdom.

Disability Concerns  
Lindsay Wieland Capel, director

## Indigenous Ministry (Canada)

### I. Introduction

The Indigenous Ministry is made up of a national committee (Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee), three Urban Indigenous Ministry Centres, and a justice and reconciliation mobilizer, each using their strengths to support healing and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

#### A. Faith formation

1. Hearts Exchanged is a learning and action journey designed to equip Reformed Christians to engage with Indigenous peoples as neighbors and fellow imagebearers. This colearning setting models the sacred journey of reconciliation, preparing us as Christians to build relationships with Indigenous communities that are marked by mutual respect and reciprocity. Participants are transformed in their minds and hearts as they are invited into honest dialogue about the harms of colonialism and as they encounter “hearts broken” stories and experiences. Since September 2021 over 250 people representing each Canadian classis have participated in Hearts Exchanged.
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministry Centres continue to support growth in their local communities. For example, the Indigenous Family Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, engaged families in Circle of Security Parenting training.

#### B. Mercy and justice

1. Resources, studies, and other tools are available as reconciliation becomes a stronger theme in CRC churches—not just reconciliation with God through Christ but also with people in Canada. Given the history of the church in Canada, the process of reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples is an important part of the way the Canadian CRC has made real the work toward shalom. One example of these resources is *The Inconvenient Indian* book club developed in the past year. This is designed to be run in local churches, and we are receiving feedback like this: “We just wrapped up two *Inconvenient Indian* groups spanning three countries, six churches, and seven cities. It was great! Thank you for creating this resource for us to learn from and grow together.”
2. Together with the Centre for Public Dialogue and KAIROS, the KAIROS Blanket Exercise is a workshop we continue to share throughout Canada. It has provided many people with an opportunity to understand the injustices faced by First Nations people in the history of Canada, especially with regard to land claims.
3. Advocacy for Indigenous rights is another important component of Indigenous ministry in Canada. The work on Indigenous education reform carried out by the Committee for Contact with the Government/Centre for Public Dialogue ([crcna.org/publicdialogue](http://crcna.org/publicdialogue)) involves working with a

broad coalition of churches and Indigenous organizations to encourage public awareness and action in Indigenous education. This year advocacy work included implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

4. Creative and winsome programs continue at each of the Urban Indigenous Ministry Centres. The Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan, and the Native Healing Centre in Edmonton, Alberta, served as vaccination locations this year. Meals were served in the thousands, and other opportunities such as beading circles and online exercise classes were offered.

C. *Gospel proclamation and worship*

1. Resources were created for Indigenous Ministry Sunday. The bulletin insert this year featured a celebration of the Edmonton Native Healing Centre's 30th anniversary. Prayer and liturgy resources were also developed.
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministry Centres in Winnipeg, Regina, and Edmonton help to meet the spiritual and social needs of Indigenous Canadians. These ministry centres are highly regarded by the communities in which they serve. Ministry participants value the dignity and respect they experience as they attend and participate in the programs and community activities. Chief Cadmus Delorme of the Cowessess First Nation noted this about the Indigenous Christian Fellowship (ICF), "ICF is at the front lines of healing and helping others."

### III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)*

A. *Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline*

The Indigenous Ministry regularly offers prayers and devotions for churches. These are available in print form and on our growing YouTube channel. This year a devotional series for Holy Week, paired with the Creator's Sacrifice art series, was also shared. Each of the urban ministry centres regularly host culturally appropriate prayer.

B. *Listening to the voices of every generation*

The Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee currently has a mix of ages and backgrounds serving on the committee, including two members under the age of thirty. Resources are shared to engage kids in Indigenous justice, and the urban ministries offer programming for kids such as music classes and bike exchanges.

C. *Growing in diversity and unity*

The justice and reconciliation mobilizer regularly responds to community requests asking for regional support for reconciliation. The Indigenous Ministry also supported churches in responding to the uncovering of graves in Kamloops, British Columbia. This included prayer and action materials. A special episode of the *Do Justice* podcast was released for the first National Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canada.

*D. Sharing the gospel*

We echo the words of our justice and reconciliation partners at the Centre for Public Dialogue: “Doing justice and reconciliation is gospel proclamation—we know and celebrate that Christ is renewing all things and that he calls us to be collaborators in this task. When the church does justice, our witness is stronger and has more integrity.” As such, the work mentioned above is an element of gospel proclamation and is “motivated by a conviction that justice and worship are integrated.”

Indigenous Ministry (Canada)  
Priya Andrade, interim justice and  
reconciliation mobilizer

## Office of Race Relations

### I. Introduction

In 2021, CRC Race Relations (RR) ministry celebrated its 50th anniversary, and the work has continued to evolve over this past half century. The U.S. RR staff are thankful for the work happening in Canada with the hiring of Dr. Pablo Kim Sun, senior leader for antiracism and intercultural conciliation, and with the creation of a Canadian advisory team for this ministry. As the nature of the relationship continues to evolve, staff on both sides of the border desire and work at deep collaboration. Given the evolving nature of this collaboration, we expect that a new mandate for the CRC's work in antiracism in Canada and the United States will emerge from this shared work. The mandate approved in 2004 required Race Relations to initiate work with CRC leaders. Although this may have been appropriate seventeen years ago, the approach needed today is collaboration. Race Relations staff and volunteers in the United States plan to continue working with congregations by leading workshops, training facilitators for those workshops, doing consultations, mobilizing people for justice work, providing opportunities for taking action, and providing worship and other resources. However, ownership for the work of antiracism in our denomination must not rest with a few people associated with one denominational ministry. Instead, we all need to share ownership for working against racism and for racial reconciliation. Until a new mandate is approved for racial reconciliation work in both countries, the U.S. staff have requested that the Mercy and Justice Ministries Committee (MJM) of the COD recommend a new temporary mandate for the work of Race Relations in the United States to reflect this important shift in emphasis. At the COD's October 2021 meetings, the CRCNA U.S. Corporation directors approved the following U.S.-only, temporary mandate for Race Relations:

CRC Race Relations staff will create and provide effective and collaborative training programs and organize actions with congregational, classis, synod, and agency leaders to increase their commitment and competence in addressing racism. Staff will seek opportunities to engage leadership and to field inquiries for collaborative learning programs and organizing actions that envision intercultural conciliation throughout the CRCNA, mobilize congregants and staff members to help lead them into greater awareness of racialized injustice, engage them to stand against racism in their personal lives, work to dismantle racism in all its forms, and experience true biblical reconciliation as a diverse and unified people of God.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Race Relations is called to work with churches, classes, the COD, and CRC ministries to increase our competence as individuals and as an organization in dismantling racism and building racial reconciliation.

#### A. *Faith formation*

Race Relations staff confer regularly with the staff of Faith Formation Ministries to identify areas for collaboration and to help Faith Formation staff make racial justice part of their work with congregations. In addition,

RR has trained and supports a team of RR facilitators who, with RR staff, lead workshops, including RACISM: Looking Back, Moving Forward, Church between Borders, Cultural Intelligence Building, Leadership and Race, The Ideology of Whiteness, and the Blanket Exercise. First developed in Canada and contextualized for the United States, the Blanket Exercise is an interactive telling of the shared history of Indigenous peoples, a perspective that is rarely heard and speaks to the profound urgency of reconciliation. We are in the process of incorporating a trauma-healing component into all of our workshops because racialized trauma is a common experience among people of color in the United States and Canada.

#### *B. Servant leadership*

Race Relations' church and community engagement coordinator, Idella Winfield, chairs the denominational Antiracism and Reconciliation Team, which created a new charter for antiracism work to be used by denominational staff as an assessment and guidance tool in their work and as an evaluation tool for the annual diversity report mandated by synod.

We engaged with leadership teams of ReFrame Ministries, Resonate Global Mission, and World Renew through the antiracism and reconciliation teams, and worked with Congregational Ministries to help establish the Antiracism and Reconciliation Team in 2021.

Race Relations staff consult with church and classis leaders throughout the United States on leadership development, minority candidate assessments, strategic planning, and antiracism. We consult with ethnic ministry leaders, including Consejo Latino and the Black and Reformed Leadership Network on multiethnic leadership development. RR facilitates a consultation process on antiracism each year with the Council of Delegates. We collaborated with Pastor Church Resources staff to help them assess their awareness of systemic racism, develop cross-cultural competence, and generate an equal connection with pastors and church leaders from all the ethnicities in the CRCNA. Race Relations hosted a Race Relations facilitator retreat in August 2021 in New Mexico to build facilitators' capacity in hosting workshops, this year focusing especially in trauma healing.

#### *C. Global mission*

Race Relations collaborates with Vibrant Congregations ([vibrantcongregations.org](http://vibrantcongregations.org)) to help them ensure that racial reconciliation is a part of all their consultation work with CRC and Reformed Church in America congregations. In addition, each year RR sponsors students from various countries with Race Relations Scholarships ([bit.ly/rrscholarships](http://bit.ly/rrscholarships)) toward their education at CRC-endorsed institutions.

#### *D. Mercy and justice*

All of Race Relations' work revolves around loving mercy and doing justice. Begun in the wake of the racial awakening of many people after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Race Relations Roundtables (webinars) engaged over 600 people in 2021 on topics such as "Stand Against Racism: White Work," "White Work 2.0," "Black History/White Memory," "Diversity Playbook," "Teaching and Preaching Antiracism," and "Power Sharing: A Conversation about Working Interculturally." Similarly, after the death of George Floyd, RR staff initiated and continue to facilitate "Living Room

Conversations” to provide CRC staff with a safe place for dialogue on race and racism. Via Zoom and face-to-face, Race Relations staff consulted with churches and classes on resources for education and dismantling racism and led various workshops. We distribute the Race Relations electronic newsletter with articles that inform, challenge, and give ideas for subscribers to dismantle racism in their nation and the church, including recommendations for reading and events. Most articles are presented in English and Spanish for our subscriber base of nearly 1,000 people—an increase of over 35 percent since the beginning of 2021.

#### *E. Gospel proclamation and worship*

Race Relations cosponsored the virtual 2021 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Celebration, viewed by 465 people on Facebook and YouTube in January 2021. With Antioch Podcast, Calvin University, ReFrame Ministries, and World Renew, RR sponsored the virtual Stand against Racism event in April, attended by 200 people via Zoom and viewed by over 2,000 on Facebook. We provided bulletin inserts and covers for All Nations Heritage celebrations scheduled for the first Sunday in October.

### **III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)***

Milestone 1 (cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual disciplines) and Milestone 2 (listening to the voices of every generation) are addressed especially as described under “Faith formation” above.

Milestone 3 (growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships) is a focus in all of our work.

Milestone 4 (sharing the gospel, living it missionally, and planting new churches as we connect with our local and global ministry contexts) is especially as described under “Global mission” above.

### **IV. Conclusion**

The denomination as a whole and as individual members, congregations, classes, and ministries continues to face the challenge of placing a high value on the dignity of all persons and on the inclusiveness of multiple cultures in life together as a church. Having integrity in our identity as the people of God chosen by God is challenged in a racially and politically toxic climate. But God is powerful, and the witness of the gospel is vital. The RR office is grateful to have helped in denouncing kinism as heresy. Synod promised to work hard to eradicate such teachings from all of our churches. We pray that all congregants and congregations continue to abandon racist practices and perspectives. To that end, the ministry of Race Relations continues to lead and encourage throughout the whole denomination. Race Relations is committed to its mandate to work with CRC members and leaders so that the CRC grows as a truly diverse and unified family of God. We continue to attribute all the progress that has been made in this ministry to the grace and goodness of God. To this end, we covet your prayers.

For more information on Race Relations matters, please visit our website ([crcna.org/race](http://crcna.org/race)), Facebook page ([facebook.com/crcracrelations](https://facebook.com/crcracrelations)), and social platforms Twitter ([@crcnaORR](https://twitter.com/crcnaORR)) and Instagram ([instagram.com/racerelations](https://instagram.com/racerelations)).

Office of Race Relations

Mark Stephenson, interim director

## Safe Church Ministry

### I. Introduction

Safe Church Ministry equips congregations in abuse prevention, awareness, and response to help build communities where the value of each person is protected, where people are free to worship and grow in their faith free from abuse, and where the response to abuse is compassion and justice, which foster healing.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

#### A. Faith formation

Scot McKnight, coauthor of the popular book *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2020) notes that the issue of abuse by Christians is a discipleship issue ([christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2022/january/church-abuse-is-discipleship-concern.html](http://christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2022/january/church-abuse-is-discipleship-concern.html)). When a follower of Jesus uses their power to control, harm, demean, or oppress another person, they are being driven by the impulses of the flesh and not by the power of Spirit. Thus, when Safe Church comes alongside a council to help them deal with a situation of abuse, we are supporting the council in its responsibility to oversee the spiritual life of the congregation in calling people who have sinned to repentance and reconciliation with God and with the community of believers. In addition to contributing to faith formation in times of crisis, Safe Church continues to contribute to the faith formation of children and youth through its support of the use of *Circle of Grace*, a K-12 education program for churches that teaches children and youth how to create safe environments for themselves and others.

#### B. Servant leadership

Safe Church participates in the formation of servant leaders in three key ways:

1. Safe Church invests in coaches and supports a network of Safe Church coordinators and volunteers to lead their classes and congregations in safe church initiatives, fostering greater abuse awareness and encouraging best practices in abuse prevention and response.
2. All candidates for ministry in the CRC are required to take Abuse of Power training, an online course offered by Safe Church Ministry that invites participants to reflect on the use and misuse of power by spiritual leaders. Our hope is that this training will help pastors and ministry leaders to have greater awareness and be more intentional about stewarding well the trust and authority that has been given them and using their power in ways that serve the well-being and benefit of others. We hope to make this training available to all pastors and ministry leaders later this year.
3. This year Safe Church also hopes to develop a shorter version of the Abuse of Power training for elders and deacons. A major theme of our abuse awareness work this year has been that church cultures contribute to the prevalence of abuse. By training elders and deacons in abuse of

power, we hope to create greater awareness of the systems, behaviors, and unspoken assumptions that contribute to cultures where abuse can thrive. Our aim is to foster the kind of church culture that resists abuse.

### C. *Global mission*

As Christians, we live out our faith before a watching world. How the church responds to abuse when it happens has a significant impact on how those outside the church think about the church, about Christians, about the gospel, and even about God. In this sense, our work of equipping churches to respond to abuse with justice and compassion has a missional thrust, helping churches bear witness to the gospel by doing the right thing and living out God's redemptive work by denouncing evil and caring for those who have been harmed. In addition, Safe Church is working with Resonate Global Mission to develop an abuse prevention program for their missionaries and families as a way to reduce the risk of abuse and to contribute to the calling of living and sharing the good news with others.

### D. *Mercy and justice*

The Safe Church office was formed as a response to the cries of oppressed people, who have experienced the tragic and traumatic wounding of being sexually, physically, emotionally and/or spiritually violated in their bodies, minds, and/or spirits. Recent statistics suggest that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men in North America experience abuse in their lifetime. Unfortunately, studies done on church populations suggest that the statistics within the body of Christ are no different. The work of Safe Church Ministry continues, then, to be a response to this grievous reality and a testimony to the denomination's commitment to do all that we can to come alongside people who are vulnerable to protect and care for them.

### E. *Gospel proclamation and worship*

Through safe church policies and practices, Safe Church Ministry equips congregations to foster safe environments for children, youth, and adults to worship and grow in faith free from abuse.

## III. **Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)**

Safe Church Ministry contributes to *Our Journey 2025* by working with churches to cultivate the necessary conditions and culture that enhance the church's effectiveness. When a church is not safe, when abuse, misconduct, or mistreatment of others goes unchecked, the people who are a part of that church are not able to participate freely in prayer and other spiritual disciplines. Youth and children feel too vulnerable to raise their voices. Persons outside the majority culture do not feel welcome. As a result, our very witness to the gospel is compromised. In other words, our ministry-plan milestones of cultivating spiritual practices, listening to the voices of every generation, growing in diversity and unity, and sharing the gospel can only be realized when our churches attend to protecting the value of each person and putting in place policies and practices that prevent abuse.

Safe Church Ministry fulfills its mandate of equipping the church in abuse prevention, awareness, and response by training and supporting a network of Safe Church Coordinators across the denomination, developing resources and trainings in abuse prevention and awareness, and consulting with churches to

help them respond to abuse in ways that are just and compassionate and foster healing. This past year, our abuse awareness Sunday theme was “Not Just a Policy, a Way of Being the Church.” This theme was reflected not only in our bulletin inserts but also in our webinar series “On Being a Safe Church,” which featured conversations on topics like being restorative congregations, forming a goodness culture in our churches, being a trauma-informed congregation, and establishing a coordinated community response to domestic violence. In addition to seven webinars, Safe Church staff

- hosted or helped to facilitate thirteen training events on restorative practices, abuse of power, the circle of grace, and making a safe church policy.
- facilitated or consulted on six restorative circles.
- held a denomination-wide book study on Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer’s *A Church Called Tov*.
- launched a new Safe Church Assessment tool.
- consulted in fifty situations involving sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse.

Updates of our trainings, resources, and ministry are published across our social media platforms and in our monthly newsletter, which currently has 821 subscribers (up from more than 600 subscribers last year).

Synod 2018 asked Safe Church to keep track of and report on the efforts of churches throughout the CRCNA to implement Safe Church protocols. The data below is based on the responses of 659 congregations to the annual *Yearbook* survey in 2021 (718 responded in 2020).

- 88.5% have a written safe church or abuse prevention policy (85.5% reported in 2020).
- 65.4% have protocols in place for responding to church leader misconduct (58.5% in 2020).
- 42.5% have a safe church team or committee (40.7% in 2020).
- 32.6% require training for pastors, elders, and deacons regarding the use and potential abuse of power associated with their position (29.7% in 2020).
- 16.5% use a prevention program with children and youth (15.5% in 2020).

Synod 2018 also requested annual reporting on the number of classes that have safe church teams. According to data received from the *Yearbook* questionnaire and input from our coordinators, we can report the following:

- 39 of 49 classes have a safe church team and/or a safe church coordinator.
  - 10 of 11 Canadian classes have teams.
  - 10 of 38 U.S. classes have teams.
  - 19 of 38 U.S. classes that do not have a safe church team have a safe church coordinator.
- 10 classes appear not to have either a coordinator or a safe church team.
  - 1 of 11 Canadian classes
  - 9 of 38 U.S. classes

Following are lists of the classes that have or do not have a safe church team:

Classes that have a safe church team:

Alberta North	Iakota
B.C. North-West	Kalamazoo
B.C. South-East	Muskegon
Chatham	Niagara
Columbia	Northern Illinois
Eastern Canada	Northern Michigan
Grand Rapids North	Pacific Northwest
Hamilton	Quinte
Heartland	Rocky Mountain
Huron	Toronto

Classes that do not have a safe church team but do have a coordinator:

Arizona	Holland
Atlantic Northeast	Hudson
California South	Illiana
Central Plains	Lake Erie
Chicago South	Minnkota
Georgetown	Southeast U.S.
Grand Rapids South	Wisconsin
Grandville	Yellowstone
Greater Los Angeles	Zeeland
Hackensack	

Classes that do not have a safe church team or coordinator:

Alberta South/Saskatchewan	Lake Superior
Central California	North Cascades
Grand Rapids East	Northcentral Iowa
Hanmi	Red Mesa
Ko-Am	Thornapple Valley

Safe Church Ministry also oversees the Abuse of Power training for ministry leaders. In 2021, twenty-one people took the training in preparation for candidacy.

Safe Church staff includes three employees: a full-time director, Amanda W. Benckhuysen, who began her work at the end of January 2021; Eric Kas, a full-time ministry consultant; and Becky Jones, a volunteer and communications specialist who works ten hours per week for Safe Church and twenty hours per week for Disability Concerns. Staff time has increased to meet demands of the adopted directives related to abuse of power and of renewed efforts in catalyzing restorative practices throughout the CRC. We are thankful for every effort made in leading the church to prevent abuse in all of our congregations.

Safe Church Ministry  
Amanda Benckhuysen, director

## Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action

### I. Introduction

The Office of Social Justice (OSJ), in collaboration with the agencies and institutions of the CRC, looks back with gratitude on a rewarding and productive year in spite of challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Office of Social Justice was created and works to help Christian Reformed people put Christ’s love into action around the world and in our own communities. The short version of our mandate says, “The OSJ is mandated to encourage and assist the CRCNA—its leaders, agencies, institutions, and members—to better ‘live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God’ (Mic. 6:8). It focuses primarily on the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, as well as those social injustices to which synod or the Board of Trustees [now Council of Delegates] has directed it” (*Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 75). We help churches by raising awareness and educating members, providing resources for worship that reflect a yearning for justice as a core value of our Reformed faith, and raising the voice of the CRCNA in advocacy for and with people who suffer injustice. We work with individuals or groups in congregations, collaborate with existing denominational agencies and institutions, and cooperate nationally through ecumenical efforts and partnerships.

We assist the CRC in responding to social justice issues identified by synod—primarily climate change, immigration and refugees, sanctity of human life, religious persecution, hunger and poverty, and restorative justice. Following new momentum in 2020, the Committee for Guidance and Support of the Office of Social Justice has assisted OSJ in “effectively addressing all relevant levels of U.S. government on significant and pressing issues of the day from an integrally biblical, theological, and confessional perspective, expressed in terms of a Reformed worldview, emphasizing whenever possible the official positions of the CRCNA as adopted by synod” (*Agenda for Synod 2019*, p. 45). Mark Stephenson continues to serve as interim director of OSJ and of Race Relations after retiring from his position as director of Disability Concerns, in which he served for fifteen years.

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

A. Our primary calling area is mercy and justice, and our instructions from synod have focused on several primary issues to organize this work.

1. Hunger, poverty, and biblical social justice

- a. OSJ’s primary partner is World Renew. Together we seek to ensure that concern for and solidarity with people who are poor is an integral part of the calling, worship, community, and identity of the Christian Reformed Church. We also partner with Bread for the World, Canadian Food Grains Bank, and other ecumenical organizations that specialize in a Christian response to hunger and poverty.
- b. OSJ’s unique role ensures that advocacy—pressing for political action on the laws, policies, and systems that contribute to injustice, hunger, and poverty—is one of the spectrum of ways that CRC congregations

respond to God’s call to put the gospel’s call into action. We offer education and opportunities for engagement through social media feeds, blog posts on *DoJustice* ([dojustice.crcna.org](http://dojustice.crcna.org)), action alerts, and congregational workshops and other learning opportunities that focus on the role of policy-making in eliminating root causes of hunger and poverty.

- c. OSJ joined other CRC ministries in the United States and Canada (Centre for Public Dialogue, Canadian Indigenous Ministry, Safe Church Ministry, Disability Concerns, Race Relations) for regular reflection and discussion on our shared callings and values. These regular check-ins have fostered increased opportunities for collaboration (e.g., contributing to Safe Church’s webinar “Creating a Culture of Goodness” and contributing to the Office of Race Relations’ webinar “Talk Is Cheap: Antiracism Is Work,” which had over 500 registrants). Additionally, we began work on “Congregational Post-Trauma Conversations” with Safe Church Ministry.

## 2. Climate change

- a. Our Climate Witness Project—a joint project with World Renew—has ten regional organizers across the United States and Canada to help equip CRC members in their region to learn about the realities of climate change, take steps to better steward resources, and advocate to their elected representatives.
- b. More than 125 churches are Climate Witness Partner churches.
- c. CRC members in the United States and Canada contacted their representatives over 560 times to urge strong action on climate change, as a matter of creational stewardship and love for our communities and fellow humans around the world.
- d. Over the past year more than 350 people participated in virtual events hosted by the Climate Witness Project. Events included a Lenten challenge, an educational film screening of *There’s Something in the Water*, and a lecture from Prof. Finis Dunaway.

## 3. Immigration and refugees

- a. In 2021 we partnered with congregations across the United States in educating and equipping their communities to engage on matters of immigration and refugee justice. We mobilized students at five Christian schools and universities across the United States, including facilitating several sessions of Church between Borders workshops and inviting students to stay involved through our newsletters and our advocacy campaigns.
- b. In the United States we joined coalition partners in advocating for a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants, including Dreamers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) holders, farmworkers, and other essential workers, in addition to advocating other policies working toward just and humane immigration reform. CRC members responded enthusiastically to action alerts in support of refugees and immigrants, with

more than 3,200 online advocacy actions taken by people in the United States.

- c. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, we mobilized the church to respond with welcome through prayer resources and practical opportunities to support incoming Afghan evacuees by connecting folks with our partners at Bethany Christian Services.
  - d. More than 2,500 subscribers from CRC and RCA congregations across the United States received OSJ's monthly *Immigration Newsletter* in 2021, which gave them updates on worship resources, educational opportunities, advocacy actions, immigration news, and regional mobilizing of congregations on the topic of immigration, refugees, and biblical advocacy.
4. Sanctity of human life
    - a. This year's Sanctity of Human Life Sunday materials, which focused on the intersection of racism and abortion, were used in 242 churches.
    - b. We share regular posts, advocacy opportunities, and discussion about ending abortion and supporting those vulnerable to abortion via social media and our newsletter.
  5. Religious persecution
    - a. We provided materials for congregations to honor the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, which focused on the plight of Chinese Christians this year.
    - b. We share regular posts and discussion about persecuted Christians and other religious minorities via social media.
    - c. Through partnering with Churches for Middle East Peace, we publish quarterly blogs on conflict and peace in the Middle East.
  6. Restorative justice
    - a. We share regular posts and discussion about mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, and restorative practices via social media.
    - b. OSJ partnered with Safe Church Ministry to begin work toward a systemic framework of "restorative congregations" to develop and establish a grassroots congregational network to harness the power of restorative practices in their congregations.

*B. OSJ contributes to other CRC ministry priorities*

1. Faith formation

OSJ naturally engages younger generations. This year we engaged in strong connections with young adults through immigration workshops in Christian elementary and middle schools, consulting with Christian high schools for engagement in social justice issues, growing youth engagement with *Do Justice*, building young-adult leadership in the Climate Witness Project, and covering timely issues through social media. Young people make up the largest portion of our *Do Justice* audience: just under

one-third of our readers are under age 34, and more than 50 percent are under age 44. In addition, 25 percent of our *Do Justice* podcast listeners are under age 27.

Our regular e-newsletter, *OSJ News*, has over 7,500 subscribers, and interest continues to grow. In this newsletter we offer ways to integrate justice and advocacy into the faith commitments of Christians—from worship and prayer to advocacy and education.

This year we released the third season of the *Do Justice* podcast! This podcast is intended as a conversation starter for people wishing to pursue justice in and through the Christian church. Together we're finding new ideas and perspectives, sharing better ways to engage in justice work, remembering our motivation, and growing in our faith.

## 2. Servant leadership

*Do Justice*, a blog in partnership with the Centre for Public Dialogue, is a diverse, Reformed space for thoughtful voices in the denomination about issues of justice and faith today. The blog specifically elevates the voices of marginalized people on justice issues. Of our fourteen regular columnists, seven are people of color. Overall, 34.9 percent of *Do Justice* writers are people of color.

The Climate Witness Project regional organizers continue to connect with congregations about opportunities to add solar and other energy-saving measures to their buildings. In addition, free energy audits and assessments were made available to churches.

## 3. Global mission

We continue to partner with Resonate Global Mission and World Renew on our Advent devotional series. Contributors from all over the world shared their reflections on the names of Jesus for the series.

In November 2021, Climate Witness Project partners met together virtually with people around the world for a climate vigil. Participants prayed for representatives from around the world as they left the COP26 meetings in Glasgow in the hope and expectation of continued action together.

## 4. Gospel proclamation and worship

Our annual Advent devotional series continues to be our most widely read and shared publication, with over 4,150 subscribers.

We offer fresh content for worship every week through OSJ Prayers, a weekly post on our *Do Justice* blog that highlights pressing justice issues from around the world, with written prayers appropriate for individuals, small groups, and congregations. These posts have a subscription list of more than 3,200 people and are viewed on the web by scores more.

### III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)*

Our work focuses on churches—connecting with individual members, groups, or church leaders to provide the resources needed to steward our power in ways that honor the dignity of people who are poor and marginalized. We do this through individual coaching and conversations, providing unique resources for unique requests, and through connecting with partners

on a myriad of issues. In this work OSJ contributes to all four milestones of *Our Journey 2025*.

Milestone 1: Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline, especially through the various worship and prayer resources we produce.

Milestone 2: Listening to the voices of every generation, especially through the faith formation work described above.

Milestone 3: Growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships, especially through workshops, webinars, and public policy advocacy work. Our most popular workshops, developed at synod's request, are regularly offered throughout the denomination and continue to be helpful to congregations seeking to take steps to engage in justice and advocacy.

We offered our Church between Borders workshops to U.S. congregations, providing opportunities for education about the process of immigrating, the history of immigration policy, Scripture's guidance in considering the issue of immigration, and how to raise a collective voice for justice.

Our Climate Witness Project, conducted in partnership with World Renew, worked with more than 200 congregational members in more than 40 CRC churches across the U.S. and Canada to respond to the biblical call to love others and be good stewards of creation through a variety of events and communications.

We also provide focused training and leadership development through the Faith in Action workshop, Justice 101 workshops, and restorative justice consultations and trainings.

Milestone 4: Sharing the gospel and living it missionally, we connect with our local and global ministry contexts through all of our work, which is rooted in and an expression of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We look forward to continuing to assist members of the CRC to become salt and light in the service of God's justice and mercy.

Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action  
Mark Stephenson, interim director

## World Renew

### I. Introduction

#### A. *Mandate*

In 1950 the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) was formally asked to “consider the advisability of appointing a Synodical Diaconal Committee” (*Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 63). And by 1962 synod approved the formation of the denomination’s diaconal agency. Its mandate was “to minister in the name of our Lord to those distressed by reason of the violence of nature, the carnage of war, or other calamities of life, and to relieve the suffering of the needy in the world.”

Our mission speaks to this mandate: World Renew is compelled by God’s deep passion for justice and mercy, and we join with communities around the world to renew hope, reconcile lives, and restore creation. For nearly 60 years, hundreds of thousands of people have shared in this calling: staff, local partners, global communities, churches in North America, and beyond.

World Renew reaches out in Christ’s name to people in need around the world. In its essence and existence, World Renew works to respond to God’s call for justice and mercy, for those who live in extreme poverty, hunger, and disaster. Because we serve a God whose heart is most concerned with those who are oppressed, we seek to bring his renewed hope where it is most needed.

#### B. *Mission and ministry*

In 2021, World Renew continued to seek and find strength in the Lord as we continued to learn how to help work in communities despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. We partner with local churches and Christian organizations to bring holistic programs that transform communities in the long term. Through this partnership model of support, we were able to connect with hundreds of thousands of people in disaster response, in transformational community development, in justice seeking, and in advocacy. Through this model, we have been able to continue to provide support and counseling to vulnerable communities and help them recognize and utilize their God-given resources to move forward in hope. We give glory to God for providing enlightenment so that communities can see that through him, all things are possible. This is true for participants beyond North America and for participants in North America (victims of disasters) as well as members of churches partnering with us, experiencing the grace that God pours out through his people. The impact of World Renew is ultimately reciprocal; both sets of participants are givers and receivers.

With your prayers, involvement, and support, World Renew was able to partner globally in 2021 with 73 Christian churches and outreach partners, for a total of 1,129,101 participants in 35 countries who changed their stories of need, vulnerability, and limitation to stories of new-found strength and hope. We give glory to God for these transformations.

Through community development programs in 1,275 communities, 263,943 participants experienced improvement in the key areas of food security, economic opportunity, community health, and peace and justice. They were able to build new health, agriculture, livelihood, and leadership skills that improved their lives for the long term. Additionally, 865,158 survivors

of violence, drought, flooding, storm, and COVID-19 benefited from World Renew's disaster response programs in 2021.

When COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020 and carried on throughout 2021, World Renew was uniquely positioned to assist families who were already living in extreme poverty through on-ground partners and strong relationships with community leaders. The pandemic brought more hunger and hopelessness as jobs dried up, income stopped, and food became scarce. But our God is loving and merciful, and his love has been reflected in the generosity of our supporters whose gifts made it possible for World Renew to pivot quickly to provide resources for the most vulnerable. Last year in disaster situations we were able to distribute 101,421 bars of soap, 170,122 lbs. of food, 46,165 masks, and 5,098 bottles of sanitizer. We equipped 46 community health centers and 865 community health workers and distributed 4,309 handwashing kits. World Renew is grateful to God for putting us in a position where we could share the love and hope of Jesus Christ with his people. Through God's answer to the prayers and generosity of his people, World Renew reached 774,601 people with programs specifically designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We mobilized COVID-19 disaster response work in 21 countries during 2021. For example, in Malawi, when Nkhoma Hospital was overwhelmed with cases, we provided funding to hire staff and purchase oxygen concentrators. We supplied local health monitors with prevention and treatment for communities in Malawi, Kenya, and Sierra Leone, including brochures, banners, and WhatsApp and Facebook messages. In Solai, Kenya, World Renew provided face masks, handwashing stations, and soap to 3,000 people. In Sierra Leone, 680 families received COVID-19 support kits, and we set up handwashing stations in 76 schools and public areas. World Renew also supported radio broadcasting of prevention and safe distancing information to community groups.

During the pandemic we have also seen a pronounced shift in the way our ministry performs. Smaller groups, distancing, and masking have become basic requirements for all programming as we seek to protect and care for program participants.

World Renew has never received CRC ministry shares but rather, depends primarily on the generous donations and offerings of God's people to support its mission in communities of poverty. In 2021, despite economically challenging times, World Renew received more than \$43 million (CDN) in gifts from generous-hearted individuals, foundations, and churches. This work was supported by 184 volunteers from many church denominations who donated their time and gifts to people in need, totaling 8,218 hours of time, or the equivalent of about five full-time employees. Seventeen international relief managers continued remote-location work during the pandemic.

In 2021, as we continue to support many people worldwide within COVID safety protocols, World Renew continued to fulfill its mission to "engage God's people in redeeming resources and developing gifts in collaborative activities of love, mercy, justice, and compassion." While the stories of men, women, and children around the world were touched by poverty, disaster, and injustice, the practical ministry of World Renew presented people with opportunities for renewed hope. This past year was again truly a year when the world as a whole needed to hold on to God's certain hope.

The prayers, involvement, and financial gifts of God’s people through World Renew have provided the opportunity for men, women, and children living in poverty to change their lives for the better. Through your support you have shared the hope of the Father. That hope knows no bounds, and the people whose lives you change can now share that hope and influence others in their communities to make positive, permanent changes to their lives as well. Thank you for your contribution to making these changes—and so much more—possible.

“Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isa. 40:31).

## II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Compelled by God’s deep passion for justice and mercy, World Renew works alongside partners and communities, building programs that focus on every area of need and that allow participants to tap into God-given resources and talents to find renewed hope for the future. This holistic approach to World Renew’s mandate, mission, and ministry contributes in various ways to each of the Christian Reformed Church’s ministry priorities: faith formation, servant leadership, global mission, mercy and justice, and gospel proclamation and worship.

Because of the integrated nature of the work of World Renew in addressing the whole person, this ministry not only touches all five of these areas but also focuses intently on mercy and justice and servant leadership development. World Renew’s work is not only integrated but also fully collaborative with Christian partners who help people in need, advocate for justice, train local leaders, and develop biblically based community values that strengthen the message of the local church as well as the full church of Christ around the world.

### A. Faith formation

#### 1. North America

##### a. Church and family education and classical support

In 2021, World Renew continued to build on existing relationships with churches and schools and created new connections with educators and church members. Building and expanding on the necessary and valuable learning of 2020, connections were made virtually (and sometimes in hybrid formats) through the use of many platforms: Zoom, Facebook, phone, text, and email. Sometimes the messages were recorded; sometimes they were live. Through the ongoing pandemic in 2021, World Renew focused intently on continuing God’s work of disaster response, development, mercy and justice. World Renew also continued to build on previously developed relationships with deacons across North America.

In Canada, World Renew and Diaconal Ministries Canada continued to work together on a number of planned projects.

In the United States a church with community coordinator works to network and equip congregations and church leaders in the diaconal work of the church—mercy and justice—primarily toward how to

understand and work with their communities for their transformation. This year saw expansion in the networking of leaders and diaconal practitioners, increased education among churches on working with their communities, and consulting/coaching with churches for community ministry.

A network of diaconal leaders across the United States and Canada is growing. Meeting bimonthly, these leaders continue to support, encourage, and learn from one another and from other community development leaders with the hope of enlivening their community transformation efforts in their neighborhoods and communities. This year approximately fifteen leaders met eight times, and their discussions included conversations with influential church community leaders such as Mike Mather, D’Amon Harges, and Mary Nelson; understanding Indigenous leadership and community development; and creating better partnerships. They also shared ideas, resources, and encouragement.

A second networking group, Faith in Action, formed, hosting bi-monthly meetings open to all diaconal practitioners—deacons, organizational leaders, church leaders, and more—doing the work of mercy and justice in their church and community. The meetings focused on sharing resources, learning new practices, encouraging one another, and building a movement. Starting in September, about twenty leaders met and discussed creating spaces where all belong and developing innovative giving opportunities that build on the strength and dignity of others.

In addition, two meetings brought together leaders across the western part of the United States who are engaged in mercy and justice. Seventeen people participated at each meeting, and these were collaborative efforts of Race Relations, the Office of Social Justice, and World Renew. As a result, interest grew in learning more about immigration, antiracism, community development, and climate justice. More work will be done to continue to find ways to work together and make progress on these issues.

Education took place primarily through webinars, discussions, and training.

The Welcome to the Neighborhood series—a seven-session series of discussions—led churches and leaders in innovative approaches to working with their neighborhoods. Guests included Peter Watts/Deacon Charles, Mike Mather/D’Amon Harges, Al Santino/Nikki Johnson, Tom Sine, Sarah Rinsema-Sybenga/Kimi George, Ron VandenBrink/Jodi Koeman. For this series 324 people registered (including one from the Netherlands, one from Uganda, and one from Honduras), and 51 additional inquirers requested video recordings of the sessions. This series continues to be used and requested by church leaders across the United States and Canada as well as in Australia, the Netherlands, and Honduras as an introduction to learning how to listen to and learn from your congregation’s neighborhood.

Our Mercy/Justice Series included three webinars that explored Micah 6:8’s call to be people of mercy and justice. Each event provided

practical tools to help individuals and their congregations learn, care, and act:

- “Climate Justice,” led by Cameron Kritikos, a Climate Witness Project leader—25 participants
- “Immigration,” led by Melissa Stek, social justice consultant—35 participants
- “Poverty,” led by Mark Mulder, sociology professor—20 participants

Forty-seven people have since requested the video recording of the webinar led by Mark Mulder, and this video is an excellent resource for understanding poverty and the role of the church.

Staff further developed our Transformation framework and curriculum to be used with churches as they seek to work *with* their community. Based on the idea of shalom, this tool explores principles of community development and suggests building blocks that churches can use.

At a conference of CRC churches in Delavan, Wisconsin, more than twenty-five participants attended two workshops: “Deacons/Elders,” co-led with Chris Schoon of Faith Formation Ministries; and “Becoming Community Focused.”

Diaconal consulting took place in in-person and online meetings with individual churches, groups of churches, or classes to envision new opportunities and structures for the diaconal work of mercy and justice, and to engage and participate with neighborhoods and communities. Group consultation was provided for five classes, representing over forty churches. Individual consultation was provided to nineteen churches as they explored an asset- or strengths-based approach to community ministry.

Diaconal coaching took place in partnership between Diaconal Ministries Canada and World Renew (U.S.), with thirteen churches across the United States and Canada participating in “Becoming a Community-Focused Church Learning Group.” In six sessions this workshop leads congregations to become inspired and mobilized to love, listen to, and engage with their neighbors and local organizations as they seek to cultivate a place of flourishing. It is for churches who are compelled to participate in their neighborhoods and communities so that they become a great place for *all* to live in, to be proud of, and to thrive in—particularly people who have been marginalized. Each weekly session features an educational presentation, stories, small-group breakout discussions, and follow-up work. Participating churches include eight in Canada and five in the United States.

Since meeting in person was generally not possible during the pandemic, the Church and Community Engagement (CaCE) team of World Renew-Canada found other ways to connect with churches, deacons, pastors, and constituents. The CaCE team pivoted well to an online engagement strategy that provided accompanying digital devotions for our major campaigns. During 2021 we provided these online devotions:

- Advent Devotional Series 2021, featuring Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo, Dena Nicolai
- World Hunger Devotional Series 2021
- Vaccine Equity Devotions
- Canadian Foodgrains Bank Devotions, featuring Andy Harrington

These devotional series, hosted on the World Renew Community Facebook page, have yielded about 4,000 views and have served as an incredible engagement booster for our major campaigns.

In addition, the CaCE team has partnered with the Office of Social Justice in the production of the *Do Justice* podcast. These podcast conversations are 30-40 minute episodes focused on a particular theme. They are designed to equip and encourage believers to engage in advocacy and justice work from a uniquely Christian perspective:

- “Advocacy: It’s More than Social Media,” with Mae Elise Cannon
- “Resisting a Violent World,” with Dennaë Pierre
- “Talking with Kids about Justice,” with Lisa Van Engen
- “Creating Reconciling Communities,” with David Bailey
- “Putting Truth and Reconciliation into Action,” with Leah Gazan and Steve Henrichs
- “It All Starts in a Garden: Joining God at Work in a Creation That Groans,” with Sylvia Keesmaat
- “Reflections for National Truth and Reconciliation Day”
- “Peacemaking/Protestifying,” with Shane Claiborne | Season 3 Bonus
- “Chris and Cindy Geek Out About Shalom”

Season 4 episodes can be accessed at [dojustice.crcna.org/categories/podcast](https://dojustice.crcna.org/categories/podcast).

Regarding church and family education binationally, World Renew’s annual gift catalog continues to create new resources that both churches and families can use. These resources not only increase support for World Renew’s work but also provide educational tools for Sunday schools and families. The Church and Community Engagement team also supported a number of churches and schools in developing ways to use the gift catalog for the edification of both the givers and receivers of gifts.

b. Christian schools, colleges, and universities

Dynamic, vibrant, and growing connections between Christian Schools International(CSI) institutions and World Renew continue to form and bear fruit educationally, spiritually, and financially. In the absence of face-to-face conversations and presentations during the pandemic, World Renew presented webinars and video conferencing in and with elementary, middle, and high schools and universities/colleges.

World Renew reached out to schools primarily in three ways this past year: with resources for World Hunger, with resources and ideas for engaging students in the gift catalog, and with ideas and resources on curriculum development. Several schools were interested in further development of curriculum ideas: Whitinsville (Mass.) Christian

School (PK-12), Timothy Christian School in Illinois (PK-8), Highland (Ind.) Christian School (K-8), Cambridge (Ont.) Christian School (PK-8), Surrey (B.C.) Christian School (PK-12), Sheboygan (Wis.) Christian School (PK-12). In addition to these schools several others were interested in deeper curriculum ideas for the gift catalog.

World Renew works with five universities in terms of internships, learning, and serving opportunities and other manifestations of partnerships: Dordt, Taylor, Calvin, The King's, and Redeemer.

Students, particularly in the senior elementary and high school grades, are involved in implementing justice and advocacy initiatives as they work through *Live Justly*, a study guide available in U.S. and Canadian versions. World Renew will continue to deepen these partnerships and facilitate more learning opportunities in the years ahead.

In addition, Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo, serving as director of World Renew-Canada, taught a course on community development at Redeemer University in Ancaster, Ontario. She also taught a new course on conflict transformation.

Carol Bremer-Bennett, director of World Renew-U.S., facilitated a master's course at Wheaton's Humanitarian Development Institute and was featured on podcasts such as "Environmental Racism with Grassroots," "Walk, Talk, Listen with Church World Service," and "The Next Normal with ExecuBalance." She was a panelist on a "Following Christ in a Pandemic" presentation with Philip Yancey and Biologos, on the Humanitarian Disaster Institute's "First Aid Summit," and on "From Disaster to Hope: Stories of Resilience from Central America" with Growing Hope Globally. Carol was also noted in two *Christianity Today* articles: "Tears on Red Soil: Navajo Evangelical Leader Hears Her Homeland Crying Out" and "This Land Is Your Land, Say More Churches in Canada Than in U.S."

c. Refugee Office, Canada

In Canada, World Renew's Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program (RSRP) provided support to churches and sponsoring groups from coast to coast. In 2021, 30 sponsoring groups submitted 53 new refugee sponsorship applications to Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for a total of 115 refugees.

In 2020 the pandemic significantly limited refugee movements. However, in 2021 World Renew and partnering churches and sponsors welcomed nearly twice the number of refugees in comparison to the previous year. Between January 1 and December 31, 2021, 97 refugees arrived in Canada and were welcomed by 27 sponsoring groups. The top three countries of origin for arrivals in 2021 were Syria, Eritrea, and Iraq. For all arrivals, World Renew must confirm with IRCC that refugees are ready to travel, that the sponsors are ready to welcome the newcomers, and that a quarantine plan is in place. All newcomers to Canada must quarantine for fourteen days upon arrival unless they qualify for the fully vaccinated traveler exemption per Canadian health regulations. Churches provide financial and nonfinancial support for the quarantine period as well as for the sponsorship year. We are grateful for the ways churches have been creative and have demonstrated

adaptability in providing settlement support to newcomers in line with public health guidelines.

As the Taliban took control in Afghanistan, the Canadian government announced in August 2021 its commitment to resettle 20,000 Afghan refugees to Canada. One month later the government announced the allowance of an additional 20,000, for a total of 40,000 Afghan refugees to be resettled to Canada. Although Canada has not confirmed plans on how all 40,000 Afghans will be resettled, the government has confirmed that 7,000 of the 40,000 will be resettled through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP). World Renew and sponsoring churches are now actively engaged in the support and resettlement of Afghan refugees.

We are thankful to the many churches that seek justice for refugees through an effective resettlement program in which church members take an active part in support of housing, language, and familiarization for refugees. The staff of World Renew's Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program continue to be inspired by the generosity and commitment that churches provide to refugees, taking important time to learn about their lives and stories. In the midst of a global pandemic in which there continues to be much uncertainty, we are encouraged by the compassionate engagement of so many.

## 2. International volunteer opportunities

In 2021, as travel restrictions brought international placements and group visits to a halt, volunteers and churches stepped into the gap to learn, pray, serve, and donate to partner communities. The Global Volunteer Program (GVP) hosted virtual church visits to communities with our on-field partners, worked in partnership to bring virtual learning events for young adults and youth, hosted a cohort of interns, and placed high-capacity volunteers in the Global Associate Program.

GVP also placed highly skilled, virtual volunteers through the Global Associate Program. They supported World Renew with financial audits and training for international program staff in several countries, developing a gender-based curriculum and supporting our donor relations team and refugee placement office.

So, in 2021, World Renew's service opportunities placed people in relationships where they can build each other up, learning and sharing together. By relating to people who live in poverty as God's fellow image-bearers, Christ-followers truly serve others. While serving, they grow in Christ, who changes stories by his power and grace.

### B. *Servant leadership*

World Renew seeks to address the pain of a hurting world as the corporate expression of the office of deacon in the church. Servant leadership is considered a key outcome of World Renew's activities. As such, World Renew raises up and equips servant leaders locally and globally to develop and exercise their gifts so that they can minister in their community, nation, and world.

## 1. Global Volunteer Program

World Renew's Global Volunteer Program (GVP) gives individuals and groups opportunities to seek and explore God's plan for their lives. GVP offers volunteers two opportunities to learn about and contribute to the transformative work God is doing through partnerships with churches and communities worldwide: the Global Partnership Program and the Global Associate Program. As the lives of volunteers in the ministry of World Renew intersect with others, God meets them at the crossroad and changes their stories for good.

In early 2021, GVP signed on a group of five interns who completed their placements virtually with staff teams during the winter semester. GVP engaged students in virtual learning events such as the "Justice and Global Relationships Learning Event" in partnership with The King's University, the "Seek beyond Youth Weekend Virtual Event," and "The Youth Justice Project." World Renew's global partnership churches in Canada and the United States, who would usually have traveled for an annual visit to the communities they partner with, instead used technology to visit virtually. Each church and community worked to stay connected through Zoom to visit, check in with each other, and pray and worship together. Many of these partnership churches have been eager to support communities financially in response to downturns caused by COVID-19 restrictions and have attended virtual learning events including "Partnering Well beyond the Pandemic." In our commitment to increasing diversity and equity in volunteering, our GVP program and our Bridgers program have been facilitating national volunteer placements within country offices where World Renew works. Last year we had placements of local volunteers in Kenya, Uganda, and Honduras.

## 2. Disaster response volunteer programs

### a. International relief managers

Each year, individuals choose to serve Christ through volunteering with World Renew's International Relief Manager (IRM) Program. These volunteers have specialized skills and are able to provide crucial management support to World Renew and local partner organizations in the context of international disaster work.

World Renew has seventeen individuals on the IRM roster. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, IRMs were unable to be out on field assignments in 2021. IRMs have continued to support the work of World Renew by calling supporters, reviewing small response proposals, making virtual presentations, and providing desk support for projects in Cambodia and Haiti. The IRMs have continued to develop their skills by engaging in learning by completing an Intercultural Development Inventory assessment and growth plan, participating in quarterly conference calls, attending the International Disaster Response's "Caffeinate and Consider" webinars, and completing training through online training organizations such as Disaster Ready and Kaya Connect: the Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

Two long-serving couples retired from the IRM program in 2021: Tony and Mary De Koter and George and Toni Fernhout. Without their support throughout the years, many World Renew responses would

not have been possible. Overall, they served in nine countries on 24 different projects. We are incredibly grateful for their service and for the continued service of our IRM team members who help make this ministry of World Renew possible.

b. World Renew Disaster Response Services volunteers in North America

In 2021 World Renew Disaster Response Services (DRS) volunteers continued to respond to disasters throughout North America despite effects of the ongoing pandemic. Normally DRS sends out teams of up to twenty-four volunteers to help clear debris, assess needs, and rebuild homes after disasters. During the pandemic, DRS has sent volunteers to the field in smaller teams, guided by a vaccination policy, serving as Jesus' hands and feet and caring for vulnerable homeowners.

It is important to begin responding to a disaster with a needs assessment, in which DRS conducts community-wide surveys to identify vulnerable survivors who need help with recovery. Local long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) then walk alongside these identified survivors, connecting them with needed resources in their community. Normally DRS sends volunteers to designated sites to do needs assessments. During the pandemic, DRS has instead been virtually training local community members to do their own needs assessments.

For example, DRS's reconstruction site in Rio Grande Valley, Texas, was a result of a needs assessment done by local community members. In response to Hurricane Hanna, DRS volunteers repaired three homes in Rio Grande Valley, and this work has continued into 2022. In 2021 DRS worked at four sites in Texas after various disasters, including hurricanes and winter storms. Work at a Victoria, Texas, site was completed at the end of 2021, after DRS volunteers repaired twelve homes in response to Hurricane Harvey. In response to winter storms in Texas, DRS sent volunteers with plumbing skills to fix freezing pipes in damaged homes. Additionally, DRS sent volunteers weekly on one-day assignments to Detroit, Michigan, to repair homes damaged by ongoing flooding.

Although DRS has had to adapt its work processes during the pandemic, abnormal circumstances did not deter volunteers from serving the Lord and the people he deeply loves.

3. International development programs

World Renew's international development programs are strengthened through their implementation by servant leaders from Christian partners and churches in local communities. World Renew works alongside these partners in ways that strengthen their capacity to lead transformation in their communities. This includes strengthening organizational and board capacity, coaching in nonprofit management and governance, facilitating monitoring and evaluation, and promoting accountability and transparency.

Leaders who follow Jesus Christ, reflecting a servant's heart in their work in their churches and communities, mobilize local congregations to become catalysts for change. World Renew works to empower its partners, pastors, and laypeople so that they are equipped to organize and

implement their own community development, following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

World Renew offered opportunities of hope to 263,943 participants in nineteen developing countries who participated in our long-term community development programs, making positive, permanent changes in community health, food security, economic opportunity, and peace and justice.

### C. *Global mission*

Amid all of the ministry activity of World Renew in 2021, God’s gracious provision in changing times stands out. When life is uncertain, God is steadfast and generous. He is working powerfully through World Renew with people who live in poverty worldwide, and, as a result, we are all changed for good.

Cecelia Naveia is one woman who was changed for good last year through World Renew. Cecelia lives in Milange, Mozambique, where she raises vegetables to feed her family. After joining a World Renew savings group in her village, Cecelia bought two additional fields and planted corn and soybeans in them. Her efforts paid off—Cecelia earned \$190 in profit, or about six months’ income, from her work. Cecelia’s success not only increased her skills and income but also boosted her confidence. She now prays aloud during worship at her church and helps other families in her community, just as she was helped by World Renew. As Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

God has prepared work for Cecelia and for others who live in poverty. Your support for World Renew in 2021 helped people to see themselves as imagebearers of God and to live into the plans God has for them to glorify him. In this report you will see people who have been changed for good through God’s community—his church—in 2021. Join with us in prayer and service as we look forward to the year ahead and to “Imagine More” during World Renew’s sixtieth anniversary year in 2022!

In virtually every place where World Renew works, we partner with Christian denominations and community organizations to reach out to communities in the greatest need. We are grateful to work with these partners to improve ministry capacity and to create opportunities for people to lift themselves out of poverty. During the pandemic, our partnerships have become crucial to reaching the most vulnerable people with accurate information, emergency supplies, and renewed hope.

### D. *Mercy and justice*

The CRCNA formally acknowledges mercy and justice as integral to its mission, vision, and calling. In World Renew’s global ministry of community development and disaster response, mercy and justice are inseparable in experiencing the wholeness that God intends for all people, and particularly for those who are burdened by extreme poverty, hunger, and the effects of disaster.

As an agency that firmly believes we are all imagebearers of God (Gen. 1:26), we made gender justice a fundamental piece of our work in both 2020 and 2021. 2021 was a very transformational year for gender justice within the organization. The Gender Working Group, which has members from

all of our ministry teams and functional teams, led various initiatives. This included four gender forums in which ministry teams developed initiatives to share with the wider organization regarding their best practices. We heard from partner and country staff in the Latin America Ministry Team, South Africa Ministry Team, West Africa Ministry Team, and East Africa Ministry Team. The East Africa Ministry Team also produced a documentary sharing their best practices. In collaboration with other CRCNA agencies the team also led the annual global campaign on gender-based violence (GBV) in “16 days of activism.” Between November 23 and December 11 the campaign created awareness, provided training content, and shared advocacy materials through webinars on the various ways GBV presents itself, noting how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated occurrences and highlighting ways in which the church can play a preventative and responsive role regarding GBV. A variety of the rich materials of this campaign are accessible at [sites.google.com/crcna.org/16daysofactivism/contact](https://sites.google.com/crcna.org/16daysofactivism/contact).

### 1. International community development

In 2021, World Renew was able to touch the lives of more than 263,943 people in communities around the world. World Renew’s community-based programs in food security, community health, economic opportunity training, and peace and justice helped families and individuals improve their way of life in locations where the basic essentials of life, such as food, healthcare, and education, are scarce or out of reach. Several examples of the impact of World Renew’s work of walking alongside participants show the impact that God is making in people’s lives.

In Bangladesh, the power of working together developed to enable and enhance community health. Four years ago eighteen women in a remote village in Bangladesh started a group that they named the Beautiful Women’s Health Group. In a joint effort by World Renew and our partners, we began to support food security and improve maternal and child nutrition in the region. The women’s group met to talk about their lives and to contribute to a shared savings fund. A community health volunteer, Jarina Begum, taught health lessons for pregnant women and mothers. During a COVID-19 outbreak in early 2021, Jarina’s husband suddenly became very sick and passed away. Although she couldn’t afford to bury her husband, her neighbors were concerned about offering their support because of the risk of contracting the virus. When Jarina’s health group heard that her husband had died, they immediately planned how to support her safely. Using pandemic protocols, they brought food and firewood, and they dipped into the group’s emergency fund to support her financially. Seeing their support, Jarina’s neighbors also began to pitch in. Together they helped Jarina with arrangements for the funeral. The group also continued to support her emotionally as she mourned, and she is now back to leading the group health lessons. Jarina is thankful for the support she received from these beautiful women. She said, “It was a blessing that I will never forget.”

In Sierra Leone, God worked through World Renew to enable economic opportunity. After losing her husband, Maria was raising seven children with little help from her relatives. She was too poor to qualify for a loan to invest in her home business or her farm. “I had to take my oldest

son out of school to do the farm work," she said. "He had to help if we were going to survive. His earnings paid to send the rest of the children to school. I gathered firewood and made charcoal to sell so that we had something to eat." When Christian Extension Services, a World Renew partner, began working in her village in Sierra Leone, Maria was selected by her community to participate in an agriculture and micro-loan project. The participants received improved rice seeds through a community seed bank and were trained in sustainable farming. They also had access to small loans and a place to safely save their extra income. "I'm sure my neighbors knew I needed help more than anyone in the village," Maria smiled. She used her new opportunity to start baking bread, to raise ducks, and to grow her charcoal business. Maria said, "Without help, our family would still be hungry, and some of my children would be out of school. I thank God for World Renew."

World Renew's economic opportunity and community health programs help to empower participants to make decisions for themselves. Through the coaching and training they receive from World Renew, they can gain the financial know-how, the encouragement to collaborate, and the confidence to better provide for their families. Most importantly, participants learn their own value as children of God as they grow in their skills and faith.

## 2. Disaster response

### a. International disaster response

During the second year of the global pandemic, needs continued to grow in the developing world. Although the rollout of vaccines and the continued strengthening of new ways of working brought moments of hope, there were also many challenging moments and continual reminders of injustice, with many situations worsening because of the pandemic. Humanity is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. The United Nations estimates that 82 million people were displaced worldwide by conflict, persecution, or disaster. World Renew's International Disaster Response team provided assistance to many communities worldwide that were affected by these disasters. Disaster frequently affects people who are already vulnerable and living in poverty. World Renew exists not only to meet immediate needs but also to implement a long-term approach that helps prepare families for future disasters. Thanks to God's compassion and the generous support of churches, individuals, organizations, and institutions, World Renew provided assistance to over 500,000 people in 26 countries through its international disaster response programs.

Although there is much upheaval in the world, some things remain constant: compassion, collaboration, and commitment. Through the following stories we can glimpse how World Renew helps to bring the justice and mercy of Christ to families in crisis.

The constant of compassion: In Haiti last year, when gang violence, followed by the assassination of the president, forced families to seek shelter in schools and churches, World Renew was there to provide cooked meals to people seeking shelter from violence. Our supporters' compassionate generosity only widened when the earth shook in

August. A devastating earthquake in southern Haiti left thousands of residents homeless. Very quickly the World Renew team provided emergency food, seeds, tarps, and water purification tablets to over 3,000 families in a remote area. Both gang violence and the earthquake in August affected Monique and her four children. She was left without a home and without a way to support her family. She said, “Now, I am 100 percent dependent on God’s will; I live by faith waiting for God. Where we are in Morcou, it is difficult to have visits from organizations. We are so far away, and people have to walk to reach us. We are so grateful that World Renew was able to travel the extra miles by foot to visit and to serve families with important items, including hygiene kits and sanitary pads. I am so glad to be served by World Renew today.” Compassion was multiplied when the Canadian federal government matched our supporters’ generosity and also when World Renew peers, such as Tearfund Netherlands, stepped up to provide further support.

Compassion has also been the bedrock in World Renew’s longest running humanitarian response—to the conflict in Syria. For over ten years churches have been extending Christ’s compassion by providing food, diapers, milk, and other essentials to families displaced by war in both Syria and Lebanon. Yesma is married and has two young sons, and she is expecting her third child. Although her husband works, over half his wages go toward rent, and there is little left for food and personal items. Yesma explained, “The situation here in Lebanon is not easy at all. The challenges are very severe. We don’t go to the doctor because it’s too expensive—even if I will need a C-section. We borrowed a heater, but we only use it at night when it is too cold for us to bear.” She is grateful for the support she receives from World Renew through our partner MERATH. She said, “Thankfully, God has been providing for us, and the church is great! The church has been a huge help because I do not receive any other assistance. I now wait for and rely on the milk and diapers each month.” This constant support, year in and year out, ensures that such needs are not forgotten. Compassion has no end when suffering remains and the news media move along to cover other stories. In situations like this one, World Renew also remains, alongside our partner MERATH.

The constant of collaboration: When the Delta variant of COVID-19 emerged in April, the news coming out of India was alarming. Images of overwhelmed hospitals and the search for oxygen dominated daily news reports. World Renew has been programming in India since 1993, and our partner EFICOR has a presence across the country, even in very rural and remote areas. Quick collaboration with the World Renew country office in Bangladesh enabled scaled-up prevention efforts in Jharkhand, helping families to shelter in place during this peak period in the pandemic.

Further, collaboration enabled World Renew to do more. By working in ecumenical partnership with another partner, ADRA, World Renew was able to provide desperately needed oxygen to hospitals in India and then also across the border in Nepal.

Through active collaboration in ACT and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, World Renew has avenues to support needs in many places—from Afghanistan to Yemen, Ethiopia, and Palestine. In addition, our ongoing partnership with ZOA, through the Integral Alliance, has ensured ongoing assistance to displaced people in Colombia, Nigeria, and South Sudan.

The constant of commitment: This year World Renew has also witnessed deepening commitment in partnerships and programming. Global Affairs Canada signed a \$75 million agreement with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), which will allow us to continue to access funds to feed people in times of crisis. Through CFGB and a further \$10 million in funding from Global Affairs Canada, World Renew was able to make two-year commitments to programming in Nigeria and Madagascar. Now, rather than just focusing on emergency food needs, we are able to work with communities to imagine their long-term future. This is not without challenges, but the commitment is strong. Rukaiya's story is an example of how investment in people helps them to develop skills to support themselves. Rukaiya was displaced because of an insurgency in the Borno State of Nigeria. Her husband was attacked and killed, and she had to relocate to a village to live with her mom and her five children. Through World Renew, she received financial support, seeds, tools, and training to develop her own backyard garden. Her children are now able to go to school, and she has become a member of a village savings and loan group and is now able to start saving for the future.

Commitment also extends to efforts to strengthen the International Disaster Team's collective work. This year team members completed extensive training on recognizing and responding to gender-based violence. New tools and templates were developed to help design and implement more effective projects.

Change is also a constant. The IDR team saw considerable change this past year with the retirement of their senior program coordinator, Grace Wiebe. Grace served for fifteen years, and her energetic and tireless response to sudden disasters allowed her to coordinate 220 projects worth 75 million dollars for World Renew and its supporters.

World Renew completed long-term programs in Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines. A four-year nutrition project with PARI recently ended. One beneficiary shared his experience with working on this project. After receiving masonry training, Azizul was able to help install sanitary latrines for 86 families and to share through drama and story how unhealthy latrines increase the incidence of water-borne diseases and malnutrition. As part of this team, he helped present this sanitation message to 18,000 people. He said, "I am proud to be able to be involved in helping our communities as a member of the Jhinuk Development Association. Through this, I have been able to earn extra income, my family has returned to solvency, and many families now have latrines. Water-borne disease in the area has decreased. All in all, I have been able to contribute to the nutrition development of my neighbors, thanks to Jhinuk Development Association and the PARI Development Trust and World Renew."

Even though COVID-19 continues to present new challenges, World Renew has worked tirelessly to strengthen the ministry of hope we have in Christ. We enter 2022 with that hope in our hearts. Our commitment to walk alongside people in crisis remains the same. As the number of hungry people increases as a direct result of the pandemic, World Renew's work is even more important.

b. Disaster Response Services in North America

Although COVID-19 restrictions such as social distancing and quarantine put up barriers to serving others in 2021, Disaster Response Services (DRS) continued to provide volunteer work in 15 communities affected by disaster in North America. More than 250 volunteers faithfully served communities on facilitated and groups program sites. Together they compiled over 17,500 volunteer hours towards DRS work, working on projects for 156 households.

While the ways in which volunteers respond to disasters looks different than in the years before the pandemic, DRS gives glory to God for all his work done in 2021.

3. Mobilizing churches for justice

As a CRC agency, World Renew shares in the calling to mobilize congregations to faithfully and effectively pursue "God's justice and peace in every area of life." World Renew collaborated closely with the Centre for Public Dialogue and the Office of Social Justice (OSJ) to support churches in addressing justice issues in relation to community outreach, poverty alleviation, equity and reconciliation, climate adaptation, peace building, and refugee and immigration policies. In 2021, 238 churches in both Canada and the United States were involved in justice activities with World Renew. And World Renew partnered with 122 churches in the United States and Canada on the creation-care-focused Climate Witness Project.

a. United States

In the United States, World Renew worked to support churches to do justice, especially in the areas of understanding biblical justice, energy stewardship, creation care, gender-based violence, and COVID vaccine access—deepening one another's understanding of systemic causes of poverty and advocating on behalf of people who suffer injustice worldwide.

On the topic of creation care, the Climate Witness Project (CWP) supported churches across the United States and Canada to learn more about the impacts of environmental racism on North American communities. Regional organizers for the Climate Witness Project hosted a series of film-viewing parties and online discussions to learn more about the topic. Regional organizers in five regions also put what they learned into action by participating in training opportunities in faith-based advocacy and then holding advocacy meetings with their elected officials, pressing for action to end environmental injustice. World Renew's justice mobilizing and global volunteer programs also partnered to offer a virtual justice trip to Honduras for high school students. The students met with partners from Honduras, learning

about environmental justice issues and how climate change is affecting agriculture there. They also learned how World Renew is supporting communities to adapt to the realities of climate change in Honduras, and they learned how U.S. policy affects the lives of people in Honduras and how they can use their voices to bring change. In addition, World Renew worked with churches to reduce their energy footprints throughout the United States, including a project in Philadelphia—the Hunting Park Community Solar Initiative—which trains people in the community for jobs in the solar industry and supports lower-income homes and churches to access energy and cost-saving resources.

World Renew also highlighted the need for greater access to COVID-19 vaccines globally through a series of webinars and online learning resources. Participants learned how to add their voices to the global movement calling for a more equitable distribution of vaccines. In addition, World Renew mobilized leaders in U.S. faith-based NGOs to join in the advocacy efforts and contributed to the Washington Interfaith Office on Trade Coalition’s direct advocacy efforts by sharing stories with lawmakers about how World Renew work was being affected by COVID-19 in India and around the world. The lawmakers responded with communications to President Biden, urging him to speak out and take action for vaccine equity.

#### b. Justice mobilization in Canada

World Renew in Canada works with the CRC Office of Social Justice, the Centre for Public Dialogue, Diaconal Ministries Canada, and Canadian Ministries to jointly support a justice mobilizer position. The justice mobilizer maintains a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with World Renew that outlines a plan to pursue justice through the intersection of World Renew’s vision/mission and the shared areas of justice ministry within the CRCNA in Canada’s agencies.

Justice mobilization continued to adapt to the COVID-19 reality in 2021. Most justice learning opportunities and awareness campaigns pivoted online, and some in-person or group activities were held in contexts where it was safe to do so in the summer and fall.

Through the Climate Witness Project, Canadians had the opportunity to learn about and take action on environmental racism this year. A binational film screening of the Canadian documentary *There’s Something in the Water* was held in the spring, outlining the repeated instances of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities’ being exposed to pollutants and toxic sites. Two of our CWP regional organizers held a post-film discussion with over thirty participants. An action alert was then developed to advocate for the creation of a national strategy to address environmental racism, and this was communicated throughout the Canadian CWP audience.

This year the Faith in Action: Practicing Biblical Advocacy Workshop was adapted for use as a webinar and as an online learning module. World Renew’s Refugee Sponsorship Team and Diaconal Ministries cohosted webinars in early 2021, advocating for the removal of travel restrictions for refugees who were preapproved for travel prior to the pandemic, in hopes of reducing backlogs and helping people

arrive in Canada safely. These webinars were well attended, and many participants connected directly with their Members of Parliament as a result. A U.S. version of the webinar was also developed in the summer months and used in partnership with the Climate Witness Project to train Canadians and Americans to meet with their elected representatives on climate justice during the summer recess. In fall, the Centre for Public Dialogue supported an intern from Trinity Western University's Laurentian Leadership Program, and the justice mobilizer worked with them to develop Faith in Action into an online, self-paced workshop on the CRCNA's learning platform, Thinkific. The learning module will be available in both a Canadian and U.S. version in 2022.

The long-term decolonization and Indigenous reconciliation project, Hearts Exchanged, continued and expanded through 2021. The initial two cohorts (in Eastern and Western Canada) completed their pilot programs in May 2021, resulting in diverse and locally contextualized action plans from participants. The curriculum was updated on the basis of evaluation feedback and was adapted for use on an online learning platform over the summer. The next phase involved fourteen cohorts, with approximately 250 participants from every classis in Canada. The justice mobilizer and the justice and reconciliation team that are staffing this project are deeply grateful to the many World Renew staff who have joined Hearts Exchanged as facilitators and participants in this second phase.

#### c. International justice

World Renew's mandate to alleviate suffering in the world is based on principles of biblical mercy and justice. In justice education we create opportunities for teaching and learning that are implemented through existing church networks and advance the rights of each person. This includes advocacy action, servant leadership, peace building, and trauma healing. The following demonstrates World Renew's efforts in Nigeria and Malawi to provide trauma healing and support to people who have suffered injustice.

A mother of six children, Aisha understands the challenge of making sure her children grow up healthy and strong. She lives in northern Nigeria, where ongoing conflict means that essentials like food are in short supply. Despite the dangers of conflict and upheaval, Aisha still needs to provide for her family.

World Renew is working in Aisha's community to meet the immediate needs of families in crisis while also helping to create lasting change. Our current work in the region began by providing hungry families with cash to purchase food from local markets. That gave Aisha and her neighbors the autonomy to choose for themselves what they most need, and it stimulated the local economy.

World Renew also began to hold workshops for mothers to ensure that their children are properly nourished with enough calories and a variety of foods. Next we encouraged community members like Aisha to form savings and loans groups to access funds to start small businesses, pay school fees, and buy medicine.

Farah is a member of a savings and loan group started through this initiative. She was approved for a loan to purchase a sewing machine, and she began to earn income by sewing clothes for women and children. With the money she made, Farah expanded her business and bought a cooler from which she sells zobo, a local drink made with dried flowers.

Many women and girls who live amid civil unrest in northern Nigeria are victims of gender-based violence. World Renew has begun to offer workshops and activities aimed at reducing their exposure to such violence.

In addition to regional conflict, local disputes tend to break out over access to scarce resources, such as farmland. In 2022, World Renew plans to offer training to improve livelihoods and to decrease conflict within communities.

By providing people like Aisha and Farah with opportunities for meaningful work and with access to and control over their livestock, farmland, and other resources, World Renew's initiatives in northern Nigeria can bring lasting change. Empowering women to increasingly express themselves both at home and in community decision making has a lasting impact on families. It is a privilege to offer assistance to Aisha, Farah, and others while also working toward a future of economic security and peace so that lives are changed for good.

Another example involves Levesta, age 66, who moved in with her mother, Natalia, in Chwantha, Malawi, when other family members could no longer take care of her. Natalia, age 98, was blind and unable to walk, had dementia, and needed constant care. "It was difficult because my mother needed me all the time," Levesta said. "I don't have children to help me with my business, and I couldn't get day jobs because I had to be at home."

World Renew and our partner in Malawi offer local congregations Church in Community training. The participants learn about community development, study the Bible, and set up an action plan to care for needy neighbors.

When they visited Natalia, the training participants in Chwantha saw that Levesta was carrying a heavy burden. They prayed with her and brought groceries and household supplies. With ongoing support from the local church, caring for her mother is now less difficult for Levesta, and her situation has changed for good.

"I was alone and tired," Levesta said. "They encouraged me never to give up. They built up my hope again, and now I can care for my mother with joy."

In Nigeria, in Malawi, and in many other countries around the world, World Renew seeks to encourage community development based on peace, justice, and equity for every person. Overcoming the trauma, violence, and injustices of the past is essential for individuals and communities to heal, become whole, and move forward with hope.

#### *E. Gospel proclamation and worship*

In communities where the gospel can be preached freely, World Renew openly integrates its Christian faith into its work. In contexts where Chris-

tianity is not recognized or welcomed, World Renew establishes common ground through values training that is rooted in biblical faith, often bringing the first glimpse of salvation into hearts, homes, and communities where hope seems lost.

By working with churches and partners globally, World Renew strengthens both local churches and their denominational structures through essential training that increases ministry outreach capacity and the proclamation of the gospel. In some communities, World Renew works collaboratively with Resonate Global Mission and other CRC agencies worldwide, opening the door to a greater ministry presence through community outreach in development and disaster-response programming. The following not only illustrates the teaching of God’s Word but also demonstrates the preaching of the full gospel and the strengthening of faith even in the face of injustice and persecution. This account of Grace in Uganda tells the story of living in community and trusting in God’s work, of experiencing and believing the full gospel lived in community.

Grace married a loving man named Charles. Soon afterward, they discovered that she couldn’t become pregnant, so Charles took a second wife to bear his children. Years later, Charles died, and his adult children harassed Grace in attempts to get her to move out of the house she had inherited from Charles’s estate.

The stepchildren destroyed Grace’s crops, tried to evict her, damaged her house, and threatened her life. Grace went to the mayor, government officials, and police, but received no help. Then she approached her pastor, who is part of a leadership group through a World Renew partner in Uganda. Pastor Moses went with her to the police department, registered her case, and advocated for her rights.

Pastor Moses and the leader’s group members had received training and support to handle community issues and to help people get justice through public services. As a result, Grace is now a legal property owner with title to her land. “It is my daily prayer that God will continue to keep and protect me,” she said.

World Renew’s integrated programs and its work with partners represent the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, helping people in need through practical interventions in key areas such as food security, economic opportunity, peace and justice, disaster response, and community health, and they point participants to the saving grace of the Savior who loves them.

### **III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)**

#### *A. Cultivating practices of spiritual discipline*

These are noted above in various sections describing World Renew’s emphasis on justice, listening to partners and participants, living a life of supporting others, and prayer.

#### *B. Listening to voices of every generation*

These are noted above in various sections describing World Renew’s emphasis on bringing younger and older folks together on ministry trips and encouraging conversations on justice, gender, and equity.

### C. *Growing in diversity and unity*

This has long been a pillar of World Renew's activities. This agency partners with many NGOs from around the world and collaborates with them.

### D. *Sharing the gospel and living missionally*

The full gospel is preached and lived through World Renew, as shown in a number of examples above. Congregations in North America are encouraged to live missionally through their connections with churches and partner agencies around the world. In particular, the World Renew Church and Community Engagement Program shares the full gospel through (among other things) enabling churches to join Christ's mission through several offering Sundays designated by synod, through reaching out to churches beyond the CRC, and through the Global Engagement Opportunities program.

#### 1. Offerings

World Renew does not receive ministry shares from Christian Reformed churches but depends on the generosity of members and congregations who give toward five synodically designated Sunday offerings each year. In 2021 these denominationally approved offerings included the following:

- March 7: Canadian Foodgrains Bank (Canada)/Disaster Response Services (U.S.)
- April 11: Refugee Sunday (Canada)/Growing Hope Globally (U.S.)
- May 9: Mother's Day/Maternal and Child Health/Free a Family®
- June 27: Human Trafficking Awareness (Canada)
- October 11 (Canadian Thanksgiving): "World Renew"
- November 7: World Hunger Sunday
- November 25 (American Thanksgiving): "World Hunger"
- December 25: "World Renew"

#### 2. Reaching and growing into constituency beyond the CRC

In 59 years of ministry, World Renew has engaged with and blessed many people around the world, from participants to constituents to others involved in the work. As World Renew has grown in vision and scope, it is necessary that the work of this CRC agency is shared, structurally and intentionally, with people beyond our denomination, in order to bless them as well.

In 2021 World Renew continued to develop its strategic planning and research initiative to increase denominational diversity among its constituents and partners. The Church and Community Engagement teams in both the U.S. and Canada each have a full-time staff person devoted to increasing participation among "Beyond CRC" (bCRC) churches. In addition, World Renew continues to partner officially with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Covenant Order of Evangelical (ECO) Presbyterians.

The goal for World Renew's bCRC program is to identify, connect, and engage bCRC churches with the mission and vision of World Renew, thereby creating long-term church partners in DRS and international program ministries. In the American context, CaCE is working to achieve this goal by doing the following:

- identifying and qualifying partners in the Reformed Church in America, ECO (in the U.S.), independent churches in both the U.S. and Canada, and churches with a history of World Renew Disaster Response Services involvement
- finding networks and partnerships that would lead us to churches and denominations with at least similar organizational structures
- looking for “cluster groups” of receptive churches where our efforts will be most efficient
- creating awareness through marketing, personal contacts, meetings, and conferences of partner denominations and groups
- sharing resources, curriculum, presentations, and access to speakers that provide avenues for education and advocacy for churches that share this affinity

In the Canadian context, World Renew continues to forge ahead making meaningful connections. Highlights include the following:

- the creation of two justice cohorts in partnership with The HUB network within the United Church of Canada
- partnership discernment with Red Deer Lake Church in Calgary, Alberta, as well as a Christmas “Angel Tree” fundraiser
- a Calgary-based Justice cohort with a focus on discernment toward long-term partnership
- a continued nurturing of established relationships with individual donor “bCRC” churches, including RCA, URC, Baptist, United, and nondenominational congregations
- a movement toward deeper partnership with the Newleaf Church Planting Network, deepening future relationships toward cultivating volunteers, advocacy, and donors
- a continued partnership between World Renew and the RCA Canadian Synod

As World Renew encourages people who live in the deepest levels of poverty to flourish through local Asset-Based Community Development partners, and as we work with local partners to provide a necessary response to victims of disaster, we want to expand these resources to like-minded churches outside the CRC base.

World Renew is also a member of several international collaborative networks, including the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, Growing Hope Globally, ACT Alliance, and Integral Alliance. These networks provide access to funding and grants from donors beyond the CRC who also support other member organizations in these networks.

### 3. Church engagement highlights

The Global Engagement Opportunities (GEO) program seeks to bring the work of World Renew to life for congregations in a meaningful way. There are currently many active GEO partnerships in North America. With regard to countries and projects in which World Renew works, the GEO program offers churches in-depth information in the following ways:

- GEO offers opportunities for groups to learn more about geographical, political, and other relevant issues in a country they support.

- GEO helps to explain how donated funds are put to work.
- GEO updates groups regularly on their chosen region by way of newsletters, encouraging a more personal relationship with staff in the field and ongoing prayer for the team.

Throughout 2021, the GEO program pivoted to create, support the creation of, and collect an increasing (and desired) amount of video content for churches and (other) constituent groups. These resources assist in constituent learning about God’s work overseas, indicating how churches and constituents can support that work.

The GEO program has arranged several (virtual) “Meet and Greet” opportunities for staff in places away from North America.

In 2021, GEO arranged ways and means for churches to receive first-hand information and “visits” from field staff regularly and virtually.

GEO can be a great first step toward considering participation in the Global Partnership Program, in which congregations in Canada structurally interact with, learn from, and serve congregations and communities in global locations.

#### IV. Board matters

The World Renew Board of Delegates is a key support of World Renew’s ministry. The board’s primary function is to set the vision and mission of World Renew and to encourage and track the accomplishment of that vision.

World Renew’s governance structure is made up of delegates from each CRC classis, in addition to as many as sixteen members-at-large, who together constitute the Board of Delegates of World Renew.

The delegates serve as a vital communication link with CRC classes and churches. They select member national governing boards, with up to seven members on the U.S. board and up to nine members on the Canadian board. The two boards together form the Joint Ministry Council, which provides governance for World Renew as a whole.

##### *Board of Directors of World Renew-Canada*

Andrew Geisterfer, president; Edmonton, Alberta

Dennis DeGroot, vice president; Langley, British Columbia

Darryl Beck, treasurer; Grimsby, Ontario

Margaret Van Oord, secretary; Jewetts Mills, New Brunswick

Sheku Koroma, member at large; Brampton, Ontario

Ray Anema, member at large; Simcoe, Ontario

Rev. Joseph Hamilton, pastoral advisor; Sarnia, Ontario

Echo MacLeod, member at large; Ottawa, Ontario

##### *Board of Directors of World Renew-U.S.*

Charles Adams, president; Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Rebekah Vanderzee, vice president; Bellflower, California

Jeff Banaszak, treasurer; Holland, Michigan

Monika Grasley, member at large; Merced, California

Shanti Jost, member at large; North Haledon, New Jersey

Rev. Bonny Mulder-Behnia, pastoral advisor; Bellflower, California

Charles Ude, member at large; Kentwood, Michigan

A. *World Renew board nominations, reappointments, and term completions*

1. Canada board delegates

The Nomination Committee is currently in the process of actively recruiting for current and upcoming vacancies.

2. Reappointment of Canada members

The following Canadian delegates are completing their first term on the board and are recommended for a second three-year term: Dennis DeGroot (B.C. South-East), Mary Blydorp (Huron), Sheku Koroma (member-at-large).

3. Canada members completing terms

World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board members on completing a second term of service: Joseph Hamilton (pastoral advisor), Dave Mayer (B.C. North-West), Dave Muthui (member-at-large).

4. U.S. board delegates

The Nomination Committee is currently in the process of actively recruiting for current and upcoming vacancies.

5. Reappointment of U.S. members

The following U.S. delegates are completing their first term on the board and are recommended for reappointment to a second three-year term: Marvin Faber (Arizona), Darryl Switzer (California South), Chadd Huizenga (Columbia), Michelle Falk (Grand Rapids North), Stephen Na (Holland), Shanti Jost (Hudson), Dave Hoekstra (Kalamazoo), Rev. SungJin Kim (Ko-Am), Carl Bergman (Muskegon), Doug Kallemeyn (Northcentral Iowa), Jean-Louise Winouze (Southeast U.S.), James Boldenow (Thornapple Valley), Tim Kuperus (Yellowstone).

6. U.S. members completing terms

World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board members completing their service on the board: Mike Hendriskse (Atlantic Northeast), Monika Grasley (Central California), Marc Faasse (Grandville), Rebekah Vanderzee (Greater Los Angeles), Karen Walker (Hackensack), Charles Adams (Wisconsin).

B. *Financial matters*

1. Salary disclosure

In accord with synod’s mandate to report executive salary levels, World Renew reports the following:

Job level	Number of positions	Number below target	Number at target
E2	2	1	1
E3	1	1	0
H	12	11	1

2. Detailed financial information

Detailed financial information and budgets will be submitted to synod by way of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

### C. *Human Resources management*

World Renew continually evaluates the excellence of its programs and relies on its human resource (HR) systems to provide support to its teams. World Renew's diverse, professional, skilled staff is expected to meet the goals set around its vision and mission.

World Renew has a rigorous recruiting process. We continually expand our recruitment activities to ensure that we meet our diversity and professional learning goals. To that end, we promote professional development and learning, and we continue to develop competencies across the organization.

World Renew is also committed to gender mainstreaming, with the goal of gender equality across our structure and in our staffing processes. As part of its gender plan, World Renew regularly tracks goals for the number of both men and women in leadership positions, staff perception about their team's commitment to gender equality, and the participation of men and women in decision making. In terms of World Renew's leadership positions (those with a job level of H or higher) over half are held by women.

Annual performance reviews are routine for all World Renew staff. This practice gives staff an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and critically review their growth areas. World Renew is thankful for all of its human resources, who are essential to providing program excellence in communities in need around the globe.

### D. *Resource Development report*

For the 2020-2021 fiscal year, World Renew was blessed to receive over \$33.2 million (USD) from all sources in the United States and Canada. These funds were then leveraged into greater ministry dollars through grants, partnerships, and collaborations. In the 2020-2021 fiscal year, 80 percent of each gift World Renew received benefited people in need. The other 20 percent supported World Renew's core mission through administration and fundraising. Seven percent helped to administer our programs effectively, and 13 cents of each dollar provided donors with communication and accountability about how their gifts were used.

World Renew directed approximately \$11.3 million (USD) of its 2020-2021 financial resources toward our core international development programs, and over \$11.0 million (USD) went to disaster response. Over \$0.2 million (USD) was used for community development in North America, and just under \$2.1 million (USD) was directed to constituent education.

World Renew's connections to international organizations such as Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), ACT and Integral alliances, and Growing Hope Globally provided technical and financial resources that expanded our reach to more people and communities. For example, in 2021, as a member of CFGB, World Renew committed \$7 million in resources to food-related programming in eleven countries, while Growing Hope Globally supported World Renew with \$427,000 (USD) for food security programs in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Nicaragua, Niger, and Uganda.

World Renew's fundraising efforts in 2021 resulted in just over \$1.5 million (USD) from grants, and more than \$3.7 million (USD) from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank for disaster response and food security programs internationally.

At the end of fiscal year 2020-2021 World Renew had an income surplus over expenses of almost \$2.5 million (USD). This surplus generally increased overall unrestricted reserves.

World Renew has made great strides in building up its Comprehensive Impact Campaign (CIC). The CIC is intended to grow World Renew's fundraising capacities, strengthen its relationships with CRC congregations, and acquire new churches and donors beyond the denomination. The overall goal is to raise \$200 million to reach 6 million participants in five years to increase ministry impact and change even more lives. The CIC focuses attention on the "five keys" of World Renew's programs; disaster response, food security, community health, economic opportunity, and peace and justice. To prepare for the launch of this CIC, World Renew is expanding and improving its marketing reach to acquire new donors. One example of this effort is World Renew's development of an automated proposal system. It provides proposals that link country program funding opportunities with church and donor engagement teams to ensure a coordinated fundraising effort for the highest areas of need. It helps churches and donors connect more to specific World Renew programs so that they can better understand the impact of their gifts.

World Renew was audited against the Core Humanitarian Standards in 2021 and is now independently verified. A team of auditors completed extensive interviews with staff and partners and made virtual visits to two country programs. An extensive report was provided, and this has informed World Renew's continued efforts toward greater accountability. In the coming year considerable efforts will be undertaken, including hiring a global safeguarding director to strengthen our complaints handling. Another major initiative will be to develop a learning policy that informs our learning and knowledge management systems. A summary audit report can be found at [hqai.org/en/network/audited-partners/independently-verified-partners/world-renew/](http://hqai.org/en/network/audited-partners/independently-verified-partners/world-renew/).

In 2021, World Renew continued to receive accolades from nonprofit monitoring organizations for its financial and management practices, including being ranked among Canada's Top 100 Charities in the International Aid category in the Canadian national publication *MacLean's*. Each year the publication assesses Canadian charities based on data provided by Charity Intelligence. They look at how each charity spends the money they receive, and how transparent they are in providing this information. World Renew received five stars. In 2021, World Renew was also rated as one of Canada's Top 100 Charities by *MoneySense* magazine. This rating includes financial efficiency and transparency.

In the United States, World Renew has achieved a Gold Star of Transparency from GuideStar. We continue to maintain excellent standing with Christian monitoring organizations—CCCC in Canada and ECFA in the United States. World Renew is committed to our mission and to carefully stewarding with absolute integrity the financial gifts we receive, and we thank God for these recognitions of its values: faith, people flourishing, effectiveness, and stewardship.

## V. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Charles Adams, president of World Renew-U.S.; Andrew Geisterfer, president of World Renew-Canada; Carol Bremer-Bennett, director of World Renew-U.S.; and Ken Kim, interim director of World Renew-Canada, when World Renew matters are discussed and need to be addressed.

B. That synod commend the work of mercy carried on by World Renew and urge the churches to take at least four offerings per year in lieu of ministry-share support.

C. That synod, by way of the ballot, reappoint members to the World Renew Board of Delegates.

*Note:* Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

World Renew

Carol Bremer-Bennett, director, World Renew-U.S.

Kenneth Kim, interim director, World Renew-Canada

**Calvin Theological Seminary****I. Introduction – Mission Statement**

The Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees presents this report to Synod 2022 with gratitude to God for his provision in the past year. The seminary has experienced God's faithfulness and looks toward the future with hope and anticipation.

Calvin Theological Seminary has been involved in the training and teaching of students for ministry for 146 years since 1876 and was the first agency or institution developed by the Christian Reformed Church.

*Mission statement:* As a learning community in the Reformed Christian tradition that forms church leaders who cultivate communities of disciples of Jesus Christ, Calvin Theological Seminary exists to serve the Christian Reformed Church in North America and wider constituencies by preparing individuals for biblically faithful and contextually effective ministry of the Word and by offering Reformed theological scholarship and counsel.

**II. COVID-19 update: Recalling the impact in 2020-21 and 2021-22**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has affected and is continuing to affect us all, including Calvin Theological Seminary. In March 2020 we went completely online with hopes of being able to return to some level of residential instruction at some point in the spring semester, but we could not. We even had to hold a virtual commemoration for our 61 graduates.

The fall 2020 semester brought us to a "flex" delivery system of education in which we had asynchronous online courses as well as synchronous residential courses so that students could be present via Zoom or in person. Then in November we again moved instruction entirely online. From using an outdoor tent in warm weather to turning our chapel into a classroom space later in the fall, we aimed to adapt to the circumstances that kept changing through the semester.

The spring 2021 semester brought us a reverse image of the fall; we started in flex mode again and then moved to more face-to-face residential instruction during the course of the semester.

COVID-19 has obviously affected our global village as well as our ongoing formation and education programs at Calvin Theological Seminary. We are grateful for the investment made many years ago in an online delivery system of education, which became necessary as we moved back and forth from offering in-person classes to online options—all in addition to our usual "online" distance-learning courses throughout the entire academic year.

On May 21, 2021, Calvin Theological Seminary conducted a 2020 and 2021 Commencement Program to honor the 61 graduates from 2020 along with 89 graduates from 2021, including 27 students who graduated through our certificate programs offered in Spanish. A viewing of the ceremony is available at [vimeo.com/554417377](https://vimeo.com/554417377).

The international reach and scope of the ministry of Calvin Theological Seminary was again illustrated by our 2020 and 2021 graduates from the following locales: Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Hong Kong,

Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, the Netherlands, Rwanda, South Korea, and the United States.

We are glad to report that in the academic year of 2021-22, at the time of this writing, we were able to maintain face-to-face instruction (even using classrooms at Calvin University during our construction period, for which we are grateful) along with our online educational delivery system. We were also able to offer an intensive period of face-to-face instruction for our online students for the first time in two years.

We would like to commend all who worked on providing and supporting IT functions and programing support, especially Daryl Boersema, technology support manager, and Chris De Man, organizational systems and strategic initiatives manager. We also have been blessed by the team leadership of Margaret Mwenda, chief operations officer, and Jeff Sajdak, dean of students, who have led our COVID-19 Response Team.

While we have also seen a pause in prospective enrollment as students decide whether to attend school during a pandemic, we have also been blessed by a summer 2021 session (similar to what we had in summer 2020) in which we partnered with Calvin University and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship to offer “COVID courses” online. In these courses over 100 individuals from across the globe took part to focus on some aspect of responding to and ministering in the midst of the pandemic. We continue to experiment with an online format for continuing such courses, and invite everyone to look for those offerings on our website ([calvinseminary.edu/](http://calvinseminary.edu/)).

We also want to acknowledge and give thanks for the ongoing and faithful support from the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination and from individuals, churches, and classes. We are blessed by this community that continues to care for and encourage us—board members, faculty, staff, and students.

### III. Reflecting on Our Calling

Over the past number of years, Calvin Theological Seminary faculty, with input and final approval from the seminary’s Board of Trustees, produced a “Vision Frame” document that includes our mission statement (*What are we doing?*) and continues as follows:

#### Values—*Why are we doing it?*

*Reformed theology*—All our teaching and formation grow from a shared understanding of God’s Word as articulated in the Reformed confessions.

*The church*—We are formed by and serve the church, God’s agent of hope for the world.

*Cultural context*—We give our students tools to sow the gospel in a multicultural world. We challenge one another to have hearts that engage the broader world God so loves.

*The whole person*—We cultivate meaningful relationships with our students to foster personal and spiritual growth throughout our learning community.

**Strategy—How are we doing it?**

Through the power of the Holy Spirit,

- we are known for academic excellence and scholarship.
- we provide innovative learning environments.
- we pursue synergy with our graduates and other ministry leaders.
- we nurture a community of hospitality.
- we enrich the student experience through vital partnership.

**Measures—When are we successful?**

When graduates of Calvin Theological Seminary

- preach and teach the Bible (message).
- grow in their pastoral identity (person).
- discern and engage ministry contexts (context).
- cultivate and lead communities of disciples (goal).
- equip the church to renew communities for the glory of God (purpose).

A scan of this material shows significant convergence with the ministry priorities of the Christian Reformed Church in North America:

**Faith Formation**—Calvin Theological Seminary seeks to train disciples who become the trainers of disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Servant Leadership**—Calvin Theological Seminary is seeking to identify, recruit, and train leaders to be servants in the kingdom of God. From resident and online education programs followed by continuing education programs and resources, Calvin Theological Seminary is training leaders.

**Global Mission**—The world is at our doorstep. Every year around 25 different nations (this past year nearly 40 percent of our degree-seeking students came from outside the U.S. and Canada) are represented in the student body of Calvin Theological Seminary. The training for global mission takes place not just in classrooms but also over lunch in the Student Center.

**Mercy and Justice**—Calvin Theological Seminary trains students through cross-cultural internships and exposure to environments that help form the hearts of Christian disciples. For example, experience with prison ministry through Calvin Theological Seminary has led students to witness the need for ministry to prisoners and to understand the structures of society that need to be addressed.

**Gospel Proclamation and Worship**—Along with the priority of Servant Leadership this is probably our leading edge within the CRC ministry priorities. Our core degree is the master of divinity, which helps to form preachers and teachers of the gospel. In 2019 we were able to secure long-term funding for our Center for Excellence in Preaching and gained authorization to launch a doctor of ministry (D.Min.) degree in 2020 that continues this formation process for practitioners in ministry.

**IV. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025 (Ministry Plan)***

Making and maintaining connections with churches is a foundational component of education for Calvin Theological Seminary. Whether this involves church-based internships or assignments related to the local church

environment, the local church is the key partner for nurturing, developing, and training students.

In fall 2017, Calvin Theological Seminary set up a new way for M.A. and M.Div. students to fulfill a significant part of their contextual learning requirements. From early on in their program, students are placed in a church or ministry organization where they serve for two years, concurrent with their course work, through internship hours coordinated with churches during the ministry year. The office of Vocational Formation continues to develop partnerships to help bridge the classroom and the church. The following organizations and churches are part of this concurrent, contextual learning approach:

Ada Community Church, Ada, Michigan  
 Bethel CRC, Brockville, Ontario  
 Caledonia CRC, Caledonia, Michigan  
 Calvin CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
 Church of the Servant, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
 Disciple Making Church, Bayside, New York  
 Encounter Church, Kentwood, Michigan  
 Fuller Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
 Kentwood Community Church, Kentwood, Michigan  
 Long Beach CRC, Long Beach, California  
 Meadowlands Fellowship CRC, Ancaster, Ontario  
 Mountainview CRC, Grimsby, Ontario  
 River Rock Church, Rockford, Michigan  
 The River CRC, Redlands, California  
 Shanghai Luke Church, Shanghai, China  
 Shawnee Park CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Because internship hours may now occur during concurrent internships throughout the academic year, we have opened a new way of connecting students to churches for summer service. We appreciate the number of churches that have served as “additional” places of formation, including these cross-cultural and international sites:

A Christian Ministry in the National Parks (Yellowstone)  
 Mel Trotter Mission, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
 Saint Mary Magdalen Church, Berkeley, California  
 Third Way Farm, Havre De Grace, Maryland

We also continue to welcome the opportunity to connect our students with churches in need of summer ministry leadership—as a result of pastoral vacancy, sabbaticals, or new ministry initiatives. Please contact the Vocational Formation office for more information about this process at [vocationalformation@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:vocationalformation@calvinseminary.edu) or via [calvinseminary.edu/church-resources](http://calvinseminary.edu/church-resources).

Calvin Theological Seminary also offers continuing education opportunities throughout the year that are open to pastors and lay leaders alike. Many of these opportunities are presented through the Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) led by director Rev. Scott Hoezee. You will find a refreshed website for CEP as it continues to serve as one of the premier Reformed preaching sites in North America ([cep.calvinseminary.edu/](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/)).

Since 2005, the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary has provided busy preachers with the resources they need to create and deliver fresh, compelling, and vibrant sermons from God’s Word. CEP strives to jump-start every pastor’s creativity in engaging God’s Word, inspiring them to produce lively sermons of power and beauty. CEP offers weekly, quarterly, and liturgical season newsletters and resources.

In fall 2021, CEP launched a new website—[cepreaching.org](http://cepreaching.org)—restructuring its high-quality content and making available an immersive experience with easy-to-find sermon commentary for all preachers. It also includes a new Preaching Connections section allowing pastors to search for relevant illustrations and quotes to fit preaching topics and themes. The new site offers expanded native-language content in Spanish and has begun adding sermon commentaries translated into Korean. CEP continues to offer summer seminars and regional workshops to give preachers a concentrated opportunity to refine the preaching craft. Soon after it launched, the new website had as many as 17,000 different visitors in a month!

In January 2020, Calvin Theological Seminary called Rev. Shawn Brix as its first Canadian church relations liaison (CCRL), a “pastor-ambassador” who builds and strengthens bridges between Calvin Theological Seminary and Canadian churches and ministries. This position is a part of the seminary’s strong commitment to serving churches in Canada, and it reflects our desire to imagine and build new partnerships and initiatives. This connecting, listening, and serving role will help Calvin Theological Seminary be more present and available to serve leaders and churches in Canada. Rev. Brix has served congregations in Acton and Burlington, Ontario, and in Peterborough, Ontario.

#### **V. Additional program and ministry highlights**

Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) moved forward into the following new key initiatives:

1. The seminary underwent a major renovation/remodeling project that had been planned before the pandemic, focusing on classrooms, the Student Center, and the chapel to upgrade technology, to provide flexibility in use of space, and to develop collaborative learning environments.

This project resulted in updating parts of the building that had not been changed since 1959. Our last major renovation of a part of the building was in 2004. We give thanks for the support we have received above and beyond our annual operating fund. Pictures of the remodeling process are available at [kudoboard.com/boards/TRN5DiMx](http://kudoboard.com/boards/TRN5DiMx).

2. Lilly Endowment Inc. recently opened a grant program called “Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative” to aid seminaries in these changing times as they look toward an uncertain future. CTS is one of 234 schools to receive a planning grant and one of 84 schools (out of around 234) to receive a one-million dollar grant in response to a planning request. This affirmation of all we have been developing at CTS is coupled with our vision and desire to see our educational programs and ministry formation expand to meet the needs of the church.

The purpose of the project is to serve adult learners who need innovative educational support in order to take the next steps in their ministry leadership development. Specifically, the Next Steps Initiative will

- prepare and equip adult learners who might not desire to complete a full seminary degree, such as commissioned pastors and ministry leaders seeking continuing education.
- make ministry training more accessible to adult learners with diverse family situations, schedules, languages, and income levels.
- develop a network of “teaching congregations” with whom we will collaborate to facilitate innovative and customizable learning opportunities for those congregations’ adult learners and ministry leaders.

Calvin Theological Seminary still trains church pastors, but it is also providing theological education for the church. Consistent with our Reformed heritage, we will be able to do more for the “priesthood of all believers.” CTS is called to serve the church, and this Lilly Endowment award helps us take more and even new steps forward in that service! A press release listing funded proposals is available at [lillyendowment.org](http://lillyendowment.org).

We invite you to follow the unfolding implementation of this grant. Dr. Aaron Enfield (formerly CTS director of admissions) has taken up responsibilities as director of lifelong learning and partnerships, which includes his work as project director of the Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow – Next Steps implementation. He holds a Ph.D. in higher, adult and life-long education from Michigan State University, and his doctoral research was on adult learning and development in online environments.

We are grateful as well for the education and expertise of Ms. Annie Mas-Smith, who, along with being our director of communications, will now serve as interim director of admissions.

3. CTS began the process of curriculum revision under the capable leadership of associate dean of Academic Services and registrar Joan Beelen and incoming dean of faculty and chief academic officer David Rylaarsdam.

The curriculum revision has identified outcomes aligned with the understanding that Calvin Seminary seeks to form graduates who will discern, together with those they serve, answers to the following questions:

- What is our Ministry CONTEXT?
- How does the GOSPEL engage our context?
- What is God CALLING us to in this context?
- What is the PERSON and role of a servant leader in this context?

These four program goals are intimately and necessarily connected because every ministry situation occurs in a particular CONTEXT where the GOSPEL of God’s redemptive activity is communicated, where God is CALLING people to participate in his mission, and where God is forming the PERSON and role of a servant leader.

4. We launched two *fully* online master of arts programs: one in ministry leadership and one in Bible and theology. These streamlined degrees are designed for emerging Christian leaders who want to focus their training in a key area of ministry. Students can choose from a variety of delivery formats, including online access so that students can enjoy the

life-changing benefits of a Calvin Theological Seminary education without having to leave their home community, work, and ministry. This new delivery system will also be helpful in developing certification programs that will expand the scope of theological training to church workers and church leaders. More information is available at [calvinseminary.edu/ma](http://calvinseminary.edu/ma).

5. We recently expanded our Ph.D. program into New Testament studies as a result of gaining key funding for the Deppe Family Doctoral Chair in New Testament as well as scholarships for Ph.D. students. The Ph.D. program began in 1992 and has served in the formation of leaders for the global church.
6. In addition, CTS launched a doctor of ministry (D.Min.) degree that focuses on applied, contextual learning for a diverse community of practitioners to develop advanced ministry leadership skills and spiritual formation. The webpage for this program is [calvinseminary.edu/academics/doctor-of-ministry](http://calvinseminary.edu/academics/doctor-of-ministry).

In fall 2021 the Latino/a Ministry program under the continued direction of Calvin Seminary professor Mariano Avila and his wife, Rosy Avila, launched a new cohort in our certificate programs—Family Care. There is even a pathway to a master of arts degree in family care for students who complete both certificates along with Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) through a partnership with Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services.

We continue to be blessed by strong support for our hybrid education master of divinity degree program. The launch of the distance-education M.Div. degree has created significant interest in Calvin Theological Seminary, and we can now add this to our distance delivery format, which includes our M.A. and M.T.S. degree programs. As an example of the shift, over half of our incoming M.Div. degree students receive their education through a hybrid (distance and online) or completely online format.

The seminary is grateful for degree-seeking students and nondegree-seeking students enrolled in the 2021-22 academic year. At the same time, we urge churches to continue to encourage and support women and men who seek additional training for ministry to consider Calvin Theological Seminary. With the advent of online education, we have the opportunity to provide theological education to people who choose to continue to live and minister where they currently reside.

On September 8, 2015, Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary were blessed to open prison doors by beginning classes at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, as part of the Calvin Prison Initiative. Twenty new students from within the prison system came together to begin a five-year bachelor's degree program accredited through Calvin University. A total of 91 students are now enrolled in the program. This program began in response to a request from the State of Michigan and is a coordinated effort of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary. It is our hope that this "seminary behind bars" program will be used by God to transform not only the students in the classroom but also the prison system as these students are deployed within it. In addition, we testify that professors and students at Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary are changed and affected by their involvement in the lives of students

at Handlon. To date, 29 students have earned bachelor's degrees, and 71 students have earned associate's degrees in faith and community leadership. Program graduates will serve prison communities across Michigan as peer mentors, providing leadership to faith communities behind bars, supporting academic programs as tutors and teaching assistants, and leading life skills and addiction recovery classes for fellow prisoners.

We are grateful for partnerships with congregations and pastors in the training of our students. Ten of our sixteen formation group leaders are pastors, and the other six are seminary faculty / administration members. They include Gary Burge, Samantha DeJong McCarron, Chris DeMan, Aaron Einfeld, Marc Holland, Dorothy Jenkins, Layne Kilbreath, Jessica Maddox, David Poolman, Sarah Roelofs, David Rylaarsdam, Chris Schoon, Heather Strooboscher, Albert Strydhorst, Elizabeth Vander Haagen, and Corey Van Huizen.

We appreciate all the support of the church and alumni for their encouragement to expand our offerings for academic and ministry leadership for local churches and the global church.

## **VI. Administration**

The seminary administration includes Rev. Julius Medenblik, president; Dr. Margaret Mwenda, chief operating officer; Dr. Gary Burge, dean of the faculty; Ms. Joan Beelen, associate dean of academic services and registrar; Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, director of vocational formation; Mr. Robert Knoor, director of development; Chris Dinh, director of finance; Rev. Jeff Sajdak, dean of students; and Ms. Sarah Chun, dean of international students and scholar services.

## **VII. Faculty**

The seminary faculty continues to serve the church in numerous ways. Although teaching and preparing students for various forms of ministry continues to be central to their work, members of the faculty also provide education and counsel to many local congregations and broader assemblies, preach regularly, publish scholarly books and articles, participate in significant conferences, and in various ways seek to stay attuned to developments in ministries in the Christian Reformed Church and the church of Christ worldwide.

We are involved in two faculty searches due to the move of Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen to become director of Safe Church Ministry and the retirement of Dr. Lyle Bierma. We hope to present a nominee for professor of Old Testament and a nominee for professor of history of Christianity and Reformed theology for synod interviews this year.

## **VIII. Board of Trustees**

The board met in plenary session online in October 2021 and via conference call in February 2021. It hopes to hold an in-person / flex plenary session in May 2021.

The board officers are Dave Morren, chair; Keith Oosthoek, vice-chair; and Susan Keesen, secretary.

Trustees Hessel Kielstra (first term) and Heather Garretson (second term) are at-large members eligible for three, three-year terms and are eligible for

reappointment. The board recommends that synod reappoint each of these board members to an additional three-year term.

Completing an additional requested year following completion of a second term on the board is current board vice-chair Keith Oosthoek (Region 4). Also completing a second term on the board are Victor Chen (Region 1), Rev. Dan Brown (Region 3), and Henry Lane (Region 12). We are very grateful for their service and wise counsel to the seminary and to the church. Dr. Eric Lintner, appointed to the board in June 2021 as the Region 5 delegate, has resigned from the board due to moving his membership to a non-CRC congregation.

#### A. *Regional nominees*

The following nominees have been submitted to the classes in their respective regions for a vote. The results of those elections will be presented to Synod 2022 for ratification.

##### 1. Region 1 - Clergy

*Rev. Timothy Sheridan* is the senior pastor at Maple Ridge (B.C.) CRC, and he has served there since 2011. Before that, he served for over seven years at First Hamilton (Ont.) CRC. He also serves as professor of congregational studies at the Missional Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona. In addition, he has served on the B.C. Leadership Development Network Team and the 1 Life Transition Team. Tim earned his master of divinity degree at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and a Ph.D. from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He has coauthored *Becoming a Missionary Church* with Michael Goheen (to be released summer 2022 by Baker Books).

*Rev. E. Alan van der Woerd* is a retired pastor who served with Christian Reformed World Missions in Mexico for twelve years and as a campus chaplain and university professor at the University of Northern British Columbia for eight years. He currently serves as a recovery counselor at the B.C. New Hope Recovery Society and is a member of Prince George (B.C.) CRC. Alan is a graduate of Dordt College (B.A.), earned master's degrees in divinity and theology at Regent College, and completed a Ph.D. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

##### 2. Region 3 – Non-clergy

*Louise Boutin* is a member of Calvin CRC in Ottawa, Ontario. She is senior manager at the Bank of Canada with extensive experience in innovation, strategic planning, risk management, employee engagement, communications, and administration services. She obtained a bachelor's degree in industrial design from Carleton University and a master of business administration degree from the University of Ottawa. She has served as chair of her local church council and as cochair of a pastoral search committee. In addition, she currently serves as chair of the Safe Church Committee for her church.

*A. Henry Eygenraam* is a retired professional financial services advisor who has held designations for being a chartered life underwriter (CLU), chartered financial consultant (CFC) and certified financial planner (CFP). He continues to consult with business families in succession planning. He served as president of the local professional association for two terms. He

served as executive director of Christian Stewardship Services for fifteen years and on the CRC board of Canadian Pension Trustees for nine years. He has also served on the boards of two elementary Christian schools and a Christian high school (as chair). He has been a four-time delegate to synod, serving the Finance Matters advisory committee as chair and reporter. He has served on the council of and is a member of Willowdale CRC, Toronto, Ontario, and he currently serves on the Council of Delegates (CRCNA) and on the Classis Toronto finance committee and as executive committee chair of Classis Toronto.

### 3. Region 4 – Clergy

*Rev. Michael Bootsma* is a copastor at Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ontario, and has served as a pastor since 1993. He previously served churches in Blenheim, Ontario, and Frankford, Ontario. He currently serves as pastor of outreach and pastoral care and has served on a classis ministry team and a classis home missions committee and as a church visitor and alternate synodical deputy.

*Rev. Mark Verbruggen* is a pastor at Ancaster (Ont.) CRC and has served as a pastor since 1995. He previously served at Georgetown (Ont.) CRC; First CRC, Sioux Center, Iowa; and Living Hope CRC, Sarnia, Ontario. He has served on the University of Toronto Campus Ministry Committee, London Campus Ministry, and a classis interim committee. In addition, he has served as an adjunct professor of theology at Dordt University (2008-2017). He recently completed a term of service on the CRCNA Council of Delegates.

### 4. Region 5 – Non-clergy

*Ralph Akin* is a retired businessperson who has held various sales training and management positions. He received a master in business administration (MBA) degree from City University, Bellevue, Washington. He has served as an elder and as president of council for Crossway CRC in Battle Ground, Washington. He has also served on the board of directors for a local food bank and has been involved in other community groups such as rotary and lay ministry commitments. He enjoys teaching and leading small groups of all ages, whether five-year-olds or adults.

*Sue Imig* is a retired elementary education teacher. She received her education degree from Calvin University. She has held various denominational board positions, including service for CRC Publications, Faith Alive Christian Resources, the Reformed Worship Advisory Team, and the Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees. She is a member of Sunnyslope CRC in Salem, Oregon.

### 5. Region 12 – Clergy

*Rev. William G. Vis* is a retired pastor who currently attends Pleasant St. CRC in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. He received his M.Div. from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1979 and served at Bethel CRC, Marion, South Dakota; Archer Avenue CRC, Chicago, Illinois; Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) CRC; Pleasant St. CRC, Whitinsville, Massachusetts; Pine Grove CRC, Howard City, Michigan; and Trinity CRC, Anchorage, Alaska. He has also served on the boards of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary, Christian Reformed World Missions (four years as U.S. president),

and the U.S. Pension Trustees (four years as president) and has been a nine-time delegate to synod.

*Rev. Kris Vos* has served as the campus pastor of Sunlight CRC, Lake Worth, Florida, since 2015 as part of the broader Sunlight CRC ministry. He received his M.Div. from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1993 and is currently completing a doctor of ministry degree in church renewal. Prior to becoming the campus pastor at Sunlight, he served as the church planter and then as senior pastor of Crossroads Community CRC in Schererville, Indiana. He is also serving as a key trainer and coach in the Church Renewal Lab as part of the Center for Church Renewal and 222 Discipleship Ministry. He served as president of the Classis Illiana home missions committee and served with the Chicago Christian Counseling Center. He currently serves on the Classis Southeast U.S. leadership team and participates in leadership in various ministry and community organizations.

*B. At-large nominee*

Synod has approved that Calvin Theological Seminary may have five additional at-large nominees as trustees to enable the board to pursue additional balance with regard to diversity and skill sets. We are very grateful for the service and wise counsel of Dr. Yudha Thianto, who has completed nine years of service as an at-large board member. We plan to present one nominee to synod for appointment to the open at-large position.

## **IX. Students 2021-2022**

The composition of the seminary's student body indicates a growing national and ethnic diversity. The following statistics from fall 2021 indicate the impact the seminary is having beyond the Christian Reformed Church:

*A. Denominational affiliation*

Christian Reformed: 89 (43%)  
Presbyterian: 46  
RCA: 13  
Other Reformed: 9  
Baptist: 4  
Other/None listed: 38  
(26+ total denominations)

*B. Geographical information:*

U.S. students: 116 (56%)  
Canadian students: 18 (8%)  
Korean: 38 (18%)  
Chinese: 10 (4%)  
Other: 27 (13%)  
Total countries represented: 25

*C. Student body*

Male students: 146 (70%)  
Female students: 63 (30%)

*D. Programs and students enrolled*

M.Div.: 78

Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy: 17

M.A. (English): 33

M.A. (Spanish): 8

M.T.S.: 16

Th.M.: 28

Ph.D.: 33

Hybrid/Distance Learning: 72 (this number does not reflect residential students who also take a hybrid/distance class)

Certificate/diploma: 3

Unclassified: 7

*E. Non-degree students*

In addition, we have 91 students who are part of the joint Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary program known as the Calvin Prison Initiative. We also have a total of 13 students registered in our Spanish-language certificate programs.

**X. Recommendations**

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Dave Morren, chair, and Julius Medenblik, president, when seminary matters are presented.

B. That synod, by way of the ballot, ratify the election and reappointment of trustees from the slates of nominees presented.

*Note:* Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees  
Susan Keesen, secretary

## Worship Ministries

### I. Introduction

Worship Ministries desires that every worshipping community may experience Spirit-filled worship and preaching—being called each week to worship that is biblical, Reformed, creative, and inspired; that helps to form faith in all generations; and that equips us to be sent into God’s world to worship in spirit and in truth. Worship Ministries’ task is to support the work of worship leaders and pastors by strengthening networks of learning and encouragement and by helping to equip them for their priestly task.

At the time of writing this report, our 2.6 FTE staff includes Joyce Borger (director of Worship Ministries and senior editor of *Reformed Worship*, 1 FTE), Laura Meyering (administrative specialist for Worship Ministries and subscription manager for *Reformed Worship*, 0.8 FTE), and Katie Roelofs (resource and communications coordinator and associate editor of *Reformed Worship*, 0.8 FTE). We also continue to be grateful for the work of Kai Ton Chau (associate editor, *Reformed Worship*, 0.2 FTE), who does this work as an employee of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. In late 2021 Jeremy Simpson, who had been working with us as a worship catalyzer (.25 FTE), began another church position.

We continue to be blessed by our engagement with our U.S. advisory committee: Gary Brouwers (pastoral advisor, chair), Joyce Jackson (U.S. Eastern), Darlene Silversmith (U.S. Western), April Jackson (African-American representative), Christian Sebastia (Consejo Latino representative), Benjamin Hoekman (Calvin Theological Seminary student representative), Ahnna Cho Park (Korean representative), and Chris Walker (Great Lakes). The committee has been meeting several times a year to speak into our work. In addition, we have fifteen individuals willing to serve congregations in the area of worship as endorsed coaches ([crcna.org/worship/endorsed-coaches](http://crcna.org/worship/endorsed-coaches)).

### II. Reflecting on Our Calling

#### A. *Gospel proclamation and worship*

##### 1. Networking

Knowing that there is great knowledge and expertise residing in the local church, we believe it makes sense to create places where worship leaders can connect and support each other. Creating these spaces has been particularly important during the pandemic as worship leaders have continued to adapt and have been asked to go above and beyond. This past year our staff led weekly virtual roundtables. Oftentimes there was no set topic other than what was on the hearts and minds of those gathered; other times there were particular guests helping us focus on topics like technology and worship and planning for Lent. Some of the roundtables were recorded and are available via Worship Ministries’ YouTube channel; others became helpful for Network posts in which insights and ideas could be shared with readers unable to attend.

A sometimes overlooked demographic within our denomination are pastors of small congregations. Worship Ministries staff, along with the Midwest region’s Connections and Faith Formation staff member, hosted

a number of conversations with pastors of small churches in that region. These were great opportunities to build connections and to learn more about what God is doing in and through these vibrant congregations amid the unique challenges they face.

CRC Worship Ministries' Facebook group (553 members) continues to provide a place where worship leaders can ask questions of each other and share resources. In addition, we have created a public Facebook page that allows us to share announcements and resources more broadly. In the past year we also joined Instagram.

In total, Worship Ministries directly interacted with 207 individuals and 155 different churches, not including the many connections made through our work with *Reformed Worship*.

## 2. Equipping

Worship Ministries continues to work to equip CRC worship leaders in a variety of ways. Recognizing the strain that COVID-19 has placed on our pastors and worship staff, we aim to be intentional about creating resources that make their work easier and feed their souls. To that end we provided the opportunity for a Sunday off for pastors and worship leaders by making available a video sermon by Rev. Meg Jenista Kuykendall that worked with resources created by Washington, D.C., CRC and published in *Reformed Worship*. That particular sermon received 200 views, and it is part of a larger sermon-video library that we collaborated with Pastor Church Resources to provide for churches who are vacant or whose pastor is on vacation or ill. These sermon videos serve as sort of a virtual replacement to sermons for reading services. Currently 15 sermons are available for download at [youtube.com/c/WorshipMinistriesCRC](https://youtube.com/c/WorshipMinistriesCRC), and together these have been viewed 1,437 times.

The same YouTube link will bring you to our growing library of webinars and video conversations, 36 of which are currently available. This year we added a *Technology Q&A* webinar, Kevin Adams's book *The Gospel in a Handshake*, and conversations on multicultural worship and keeping the Sabbath. From live attendees to views of recorded material, these resources have reached over 400 individuals in the past year.

Another way we equip worship leaders is through the Network ([Network.crcna.org](https://network.crcna.org)), where we post a calendar with helpful resources particular to each Sunday as well as other events for worship leaders, and an index to all the worship resources available by topic. In 2021 we created 47 posts, which had 7,500 total views. Among those resources are ones created for Lent and Easter with COVID realities in mind, as well as Advent and Christmas resources including sheet music and a video recording of a newly written contemporary Christmas song and a piece of artwork available for churches to download.

We continue our partnership with Samford University, which allows us to register a cohort of CRC worship leaders for their Certificate in Worship Leadership at a discounted rate. This year's group was smaller than in previous years but still represented a diverse cross-section of the CRC. Of the six persons who completed this certificate in 2021, two came from Canada.

This year we added two new endorsed coaches, Sean Saunders (Cambridge, Ont.) and Ahnna Cho Park (Denver, Colo.) for a total of 15

individuals who are willing to serve worship leaders and congregations across the denomination in processes of discernment, practical how-tos, and theological thinking related to worship. More information on the endorsed coaches program is available at [crcna.org/worship/endorsed-coaches](http://crcna.org/worship/endorsed-coaches).

One of the main ways Worship Ministries connects is through our e-news, sent out to 2,000 subscribers every month.

### 3. *Reformed Worship*

For years *Reformed Worship*, a quarterly journal published in print and digitally by Worship Ministries, has been asking churches one important question: “How has the Holy Spirit blessed you in your worship?” The many articles and resources in this journal are a reflection of the answer given by churches and individuals from various traditions around the globe.

*Reformed Worship’s* audience continues to be diverse. The journal currently has 1,800 subscribers. While the majority are from the United States, there are 355 Canadian subscribers, as well as subscribers from Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.

In addition to our print and digital editions of *Reformed Worship*, many resources from the journal are available free at [ReformedWorship.org](http://ReformedWorship.org). This website’s visitors increased in 2021, with 429,423 unique visitors from over 266 different countries. Outside of the U.S. and Canada the countries providing the most visitors were the United Kingdom (33,758), the Philippines (22,201), and Nigeria (17,373).

This past year we contracted with a direct digital marketing firm to help us assess our current reality; survey past, current, and potential customers; and help us arrive at a marketing strategy. As a result, we have begun implementing some new strategies and have updated both our website and the design of our monthly *Reformed Worship* e-newsletter, for which the mailing list increased by 3,000 recipients since last year for a total of over 13,000 subscribers.

## III. Connecting with Churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

### A. *Spiritual practices*

*Reformed Worship* issue #140 (June 2021) is a theme issue on spiritual practices as they relate to worship. We continued to explore that theme in the following issues. Just a few of the key articles included the following:

- “For All God’s Children: Nine Practices for Engaging God’s Word and Forming Faith” by Karen DeBoer
- “Keep These Words in Your Heart: The Spiritual Discipline of Scripture Memory” by Jeff Barker
- “Q&A: The Lenten Practice of Entrusting” by John D. Witvliet
- “Formed Together When We’re Not Together: An Everyday Rule of Life” by Phil Reinders
- “Tracing God’s Footsteps: A New Year’s Service Using the Ignatian Examen” by Summer Mohrlang
- “Prayer, Loyalty, and Sacrifice: Learnings from Korean Worship” by Ahnna Cho Park

Recognizing the need for worship leaders to be nourished spiritually—especially during the Advent and Christmas season—we offered a series of online devotions that were held via Facebook live on Monday mornings and then posted for viewers who couldn't attend at that time. We also continued to make the Moments Retreat ([reginajupp.com/retreat](http://reginajupp.com/retreat)) available. Since the time it was posted, 88 people have signed up to attend this fully online retreat created by CRC artist Regina Jupp.

Staff have also supported denominational prayer initiatives and were involved in the creation of a “Refresh Day” for denominational staff.

*B. Listening to the voices of every generation*

We continue to collaborate with Faith Formation Ministries in this area, particularly with their Faith Practices project and conversations around engaging children in worship. We have also been involved in conversations with Worship Woodworks and representatives from a couple of denominations to find a way to provide ongoing training and support for the Children and Worship programs that many of our congregations use.

*C. Growing in diversity and unity*

Worship Ministries is dedicated to learning and growing more aware of the unique challenges faced by ethnic minorities and appreciating their many gifts for the church. To that end we hosted two conversations this past year—one on the Black church and another on multicultural worship. Staff also presented a workshop on creating “Welcoming Spaces” at the Hymn Society of the U.S. and Canada’s annual conference, and we completed the Intercultural Development Inventory assessment and are working to increase our intercultural competence.

*D. Missional living and church planting*

Worship Ministries is part of the church planting cross-functional team and continues to look for ways to connect with and support people who plan and lead worship in church plants. Staff have also been involved in conversations around the intersection of mission, faith formation, and worship, believing that having encounters with God on Sundays must affect how we live during the rest of the week.

In these challenging times with spirits of discontent, mistrust, and fear brooding below the surface, we need worshipful encounters with the God of peace so that we may work with God to be agents of shalom wherever we go. We need worship services that help us give voice to our honest laments and assure us that we follow the God who hears and who one day will set all things right. We need worship that proclaims God is in control so that we can release our fears. We need to gather again and again to be reminded that while the world wants to accentuate our differences in Christ, we are one body united in Christ. May the Holy Spirit infuse our worship, lifting up our prayers and praises to Christ the perfecter, our holy high priest sitting at God’s right hand.

Worship Ministries  
Joyce Borger, director

# STANDING COMMITTEES



## I. Introduction

Synod 2004 established the concept of the Synodical Ministerial Candidacy Committee, which is now known as the Candidacy Committee. The committee began meeting in late 2004 and was provided with a full-time staff person in late 2007. The committee mandate is available in a document titled *Journey Toward Ordination*, accessible on the Candidacy Committee website ([crcna.org/candidacy](http://crcna.org/candidacy)).

## II. Committee membership

The members of the committee meet three times per year. As with other synodical standing committees, Candidacy Committee members serve a potential of two three-year terms.

The following people currently serve on the Candidacy Committee: Rev. Mark Hilbelink (2022/2), Rev. Andrew Vander Leek (2022/2), Judy Cook (2022/1), Rev. Felix Fernandez (2022/1), Rev. Ashley Bonnes (2023/2), Rev. Moon Kim (2023/1), Pastor Caleb Dickson (2024/1), Pastor Debra Chee (2024/1), Rev. Susan LaClear (staff), Rev. Jul Medenblik (ex officio, as the Calvin Theological Seminary representative), and Colin Watson, Sr. (ex officio, as executive director).

Judy Cook and Felix Fernandez are completing their first term on the committee and are willing to serve a second term. Mark Hilbelink and Andrew VanderLeek are completing their second term and are not eligible for reappointment. Therefore, the Candidacy Committee presents to synod the following slates of nominees for appointment to fill these two vacancies:

### *Position 1*

*Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink* is the pastor at Grace CRC in Cobourg, Ontario. She also served Ancaster (Ont.) CRC for seven years, and Lucknow Community CRC (Ont.) for five years. Before going into pastoral ministry, she worked in administration and development at Redeemer University for twelve years. She is also a graduate of Redeemer. Rita studied for one year at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and she completed her M.Div. at Calvin Theological Seminary. She has served on the board of World Renew and on multiple classical committees, including the ministerial leadership team of Classis Huron, the interim committee of Classis Hamilton, and the ministries committee of Classis Quinte.

*Rev. Henry Kranenberg* serves as lead pastor of West End CRC in Edmonton, Alberta. He has been at West End for five years after serving at Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ontario (2000-2017), and at Bethel CRC in Brockville, Ontario (1987-2000). He completed undergraduate studies at Calvin University (degree in psychology) and at the University of Toronto. He earned his M.Div. and later a Th.M. in pastoral care and counseling from Calvin Theological Seminary. Henry has served on the boards of Back to God Ministries International (now ReFrame Ministries) and Dordt University and has been a delegate to synod nine times. He currently serves on the Healthy Church Task Force of Classis Alberta North and as a regional pastor.

## *Position 2*

*Rev. Eric Dirksen* is the founder and current lead pastor of Christ Church of Davis, California. He holds a B.A. from Dordt College, an M.A. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, an M.Div. from Calvin Theological Seminary, and is currently doing part-time doctoral work at Durham University in England. He has served on the new church development team of Classis Central California.

*Rev. Andy Sytsma* grew up in Japan as a missionary kid, came back to the United States for college, and now serves as pastor of New Life CRC in Spring, Texas, where he has served since 2009. Prior to moving to Texas, he served in New Jersey (Bridgeway Community CRC) and Seattle, Washington (Emmaus Road CRC). He received his training at Calvin Theological Seminary (M.Div., 1997) and Calvin University (B.A. in psychology, 1993). In addition to previously serving on several regional and classical committees, he currently serves as a local mission leader with Resonate Global Mission and has worked with over twenty church planters and leaders from various cultural backgrounds in the Church Order Articles 6, 8, and 23 credentialing processes.

### **III. Report on the ongoing development of the Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy**

The Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy (EPMC) is designed for potential candidates who earn their M.Div. degree at an institution other than Calvin Theological Seminary. The elements of the program are integrated into the M.Div. at the seminary and afford participants the opportunity to receive required orientation into the CRC as they prepare for candidacy. The Appendix to the Candidacy Committee report in 2020 describes the history of recent discussions regarding the further development of this program, initiated by an EPMC Review Task Force (made up of Candidacy Committee members and Calvin Theological Seminary staff) in 2019. In the course of that review, a survey was offered to synodical delegates and former EPMC participants to determine the areas of desired improvement. Based on that feedback and the combined wisdom of task force members with hands-on experience in the program, the following objectives were determined:

1. To increase the flexibility of the program, allowing individualization in each participant's learning plan based on their previous experience and knowledge.
2. Greater attention to the value of well-formed character, heart, and leadership for ministry.
3. A clearer delineation of the lines of authority and responsibility for administration of the program.

Because Synod 2020 was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Candidacy Committee considered its proposals to Synod 2020 related to the EPMC (see recommendations E and F in the *Agenda for Synod 2020*, p. 240). In summer 2020 the committee judged that it would be wise to proceed with the appointment of an EPMC Facilitation Team because the concerns were significant and ought not wait another year. This team is a subcommittee to the Candidacy Committee and provides reports regularly. The committee currently includes the following members:

Rev. Al Gelder, general member from Classis Grand Rapids East  
Rev. Ernesto Hernandez, general member from Classis Arizona  
Rev. Steve Hull, general member from Classis Thornapple Valley  
Rev. Kang Won Kim, general member from Classis Central California  
Rev. Daniel Mouw, general member from Classis Grandville  
Rev. Jen Rozema, general member from Classis Holland  
Rev. Emily Vanden Heuvel, general member from Classis Grand Rapids South

Rev. Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy

Rev. Shawn Brix, staff adviser from Calvin Theological Seminary and Canadian church relations liaison for the seminary

Joan Beelen, staff adviser from Calvin Theological Seminary

Rev. Rob Toornstra and Rev. Darrell Delaney also served on this committee throughout 2021 but have transitioned off the team due to new ministry roles and service they have undertaken. We are deeply appreciative of their valuable contributions to the development of this program.

The EPMC Facilitation Team began meeting monthly in November 2020 to strategize around the desired outcomes. In summer 2021 the team began to implement planned changes regarding the program's desired outcomes.

The team developed a revision of the written statement of the program's desired outcomes that (1) gives greater emphasis to the value of well-formed character, heart, and leadership; (2) gives greater emphasis to the value of connection to the CRC; and (3) expresses the outcomes more succinctly.

The previously stated desired outcomes follow:

1. Competency in knowledge of "Reformed standards" (CRC creeds and confessions)
2. Competency in CRC polity
3. Knowledge of CRC history and culture
4. Knowledge of the flow, themes, and content of Scripture
5. An understanding of a Reformed hermeneutic
6. A proficiency in studying the Bible with use of digital tools that access the biblical language
7. A sufficient degree of skill in preaching
8. A sufficient degree of skill in pastoral care and leadership, expressed through a sufficiently well-formed character
9. The development of a peer support network within the CRCNA
10. An ability to access a rich tradition of general, theological, and ecclesiastical thought

The revised version of the desired outcomes for the EPMC program follow:

We desire to present candidates who . . .

- have established a deep sense of call, commitment, and connection to the CRC (includes and expands previous #2, 3, 9, 10).
- embrace and apply a confessionally Reformed, biblical hermeneutic that shapes their preaching and teaching ministry (includes previous #1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10).
- exhibit spiritual and emotional readiness for pastoral ministry (expands on previous #8).

- demonstrate competency in a range of areas of pastoral ministry (expands on previous #7, 8).

The committee has since worked to align all strategies and elements of the program around the following five stated outcomes:

1. The establishment of deeper relational connectedness for participants  
Each participant who has entered the program since summer 2021 has been assigned to a two-member EPMC Facilitation Team. This team conducts an initial interview to establish relational connection and gain a thorough understanding of the participant’s background, experiences, and previous knowledge of Reformed creeds and confessions. They then work to design an individualized learning plan that contains elements most relevant and necessary to the participant’s growth toward the desired outcomes. This team then continues to walk alongside the participant throughout the program to give guidance and help, committing to check in every six months until candidacy. The two-person team will conduct a final interview at the completion of the program in order to assess the participant’s learning and vocational formation experiences and to make a recommendation to the Candidacy Committee regarding the person’s readiness for ministry in the CRCNA. So far, four two-person teams have engaged in this work with over twenty-one entering EPMC participants.
2. In-person connection trips for participants  
In recent years, two in-person connection trips to Grand Rapids, Michigan, have been a requirement in the program. Recognizing the need for Canadian EPMC participants to connect to denominational staff in their own country, the committee hosted one of these trips in Burlington, Ontario, in November 2021. The program will continue to offer Canadian participants one connection trip in Grand Rapids and one in Burlington.
3. Strategies for development and assessment of “spiritual and emotional readiness for pastoral ministry”  
The committee determined that the two in-person connection trips that are part of the EPMC program could present an opportunity to engage more deeply in conversation about soul care and mental/emotional health for pastors. To that end, an element of “spiritual retreat” was incorporated into those connection trips. Over this past year, participants engaged deeply in these retreats under the leadership of Rev. Shawn Brix, Rev. Zach Olsen (Pastor Church Relations), Dr. Geoff Vandermolten (director of vocational formation at CTS), and Rev. Susan LaClear (director of Candidacy).
4. Clarity established regarding roles and responsibilities of shared program administration  
The EPMC program is a denominational program jointly administered by the Candidacy Committee and the faculty/staff of Calvin Theological Seminary. The Candidacy Committee gives oversight to the program contents and candidacy records (through the EPMC Facilitation Team and director of Candidacy), and the seminary provides the EPMC coursework as well as seminary-specific elements of administration and hospitality.

It was determined that this shared administration process was in need of review so that a clearer and streamlined process could be developed.

5. The director of Candidacy and CTS faculty involved with the program contracted the help of Tim Schipper—Agile and Lean expert, teacher, and coach from Steelcase Corp.—to engage the team in a “Lean” process. The outcomes of this work include the following:
  - A streamlined process for documentation and information sharing.
  - Redefined roles for each administrator with responsibilities more aligned with their strengths and areas of authority.
  - Clearer communication to students about processes and expectations.
  - A joint application for the EPMC program (to replace three existing applications: seminary, denominational, licensure).
  - Revamping of database and reporting forms to increase accessibility.
  - Greater satisfaction on behalf of administrators and participants in the program.

Our hope is to receive the affirmation of synod regarding the developments of the EPMC program included in this report.

#### **IV. Conversations regarding the continued development of Spanish-speaking pastors**

The Candidacy Committee has been in discussion with various classis leaders regarding strategies for raising up Spanish-speaking pastors for existing and emerging congregations. The denomination’s Consejo Latino ministry group has also been involved in these conversations.

#### **V. Recommendations**

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy, and to an additional member of the Candidacy Committee, if one is present, when the Candidacy Committee report is discussed.
- B. That synod by way of the ballot appoint two new members to the Candidacy Committee from the slates of nominees presented, and reappoint Felix Fernandez and Judy Cook to a second three-year term.
- C. That synod note with appreciation the extensive work of the EPMC Facilitation Team in implementing changes to the EPMC program.

Candidacy Committee  
Susan LaClear, director

**I. Introduction**

Throughout this year the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) has heard of many challenges within the denominations and organizations we have ecumenical fellowship with. Yet even in those challenges God provides hope, guidance, and blessing. Despite another unusual year due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and related changes to the schedule and form of EIRC meetings, the significant work of this committee has continued. There are two distinct and important aspects to our work: *ecumenical* relationships with other Christian denominations and organizations and *interfaith* interactions between the CRC and non-Christian faith traditions. According to our Ecumenical Charter, “the CRC recognizes its ecumenical responsibility to cooperate and seek unity with all churches of Christ in obedience to the gospel.”

To guide the work of the EIRC relative to the ecumenical directive in bilateral (denomination-to-denomination) relationships, we have continued to use synodically approved categories. First is the category of *churches in ecclesiastical fellowship*—those with whom the CRC has a particular affinity or history. For denominations with which the CRC is in a stage of exploration for a closer relationship, or maintaining the status quo of certain valued relationships that are not intended to progress to the level of *churches in ecclesiastical fellowship*, we have used the category *churches in dialogue*. The third category is that of *churches in other ecumenical relationships*, where a relationship is important to the CRC as part of the global Christian family but does not fit the criteria of the previously listed categories. Anticipated changes to the Church Order at Synod 2022 (delayed due to the cancellation of Synods 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic) resulting from the actions of Synod 2019 are expected to lead to modified categories in the future. In addition to bilateral relationships, we pursue our ecumenical work with organizations that allow for numbers of denominations to come together in unity (sometimes known as multilateral relationships).

Interfaith efforts between the CRC and non-Christian faith traditions are led by a subcommittee of the EIRC. As a result of decisions by the Reformed Church in America’s General Synod 2019 and the CRCNA’s Synod 2019, we have continued to work together to spur on this work, particularly as it relates locally between and among Reformed congregations and those whose house of worship may be a synagogue, mosque, or temple.

**II. Membership and meetings**

The members of the EIRC for the current year ending June 30, 2022, are Lyle Bierma (2022/1); Joy Engelsman (2024/1); InSoon Hoagland (2023/2); Ruth Hofman (2024/1); James Joosse (2024/2); William Koopmans, chair (2024/2); Lenore Maine (2022/2); Ruth Palma (2023/2); Yvonne Schenk (2023/1); and Michael Wagenman (2022/1). The executive director and the Canadian ministries director (acting executive director – Canada) serve as ex officio members of the EIRC.

The EIRC met virtually in both October 2021 and February 2022. Another virtual meeting is scheduled to be held in April 2022.

### III. Nominations for membership/protocols

Lenore Maine is concluding two terms of service on the EIRC. The EIRC recommends that synod express its gratitude to her for her faithful service.

Lyle Bierma and Michael Wagenman are completing their first terms on the EIRC, and, given their contributions and willingness to continue, the EIRC recommends that synod reappoint each to a second three-year term.

In keeping with the synodical guidelines and requirements for diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and ordination among the membership of the committee, the EIRC presents a slate of two nominees for the Great Lakes position.

#### *Great Lakes position*

*Shirley Roels* is the executive director of the International Network for Christian Higher Education. Prior to this work, she served as academic dean and professor of business at Calvin University. She is currently an elder at Shawnee Park CRC. Previous experience includes being a former member of the EIRC, a former pension and insurance trustee, a board member of Christian Schools International, and a CRCNA consultant on governance restructuring.

*James Jones* is a commissioned pastor at Oakdale Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has served on various boards and committees, including the Christian Reformed Home Missions board and the Candidacy Committee. For Classis Grand Rapids East he has served on the Christian education committee and currently serves on the Starting and Strengthening Churches committee.

The current EIRC membership distribution/nomination process, approved in 2008, contains outdated language regarding where nominees are solicited from. To bring the process into alignment with the regions listed on the CRCNA website, the EIRC recommends that synod receive the following update for information (noted in strikethrough and italics):

That five members be from Canada and five members be from the United States, with every effort made toward the following regional balance:

- a. That two Canadian members be elected from the *Canada West region* ~~classes Lake Superior, Alberta/Saskatchewan, Alberta-North, B.C. South-East, and B.C. North-West.~~
- b. That three Canadian members be elected from the *Canada East region* ~~classes east of Classis Lake Superior.~~
- c. That one U.S. member be elected from the *USA East region* ~~Eastern regions.~~
- d. That two U.S. members be elected from the Great Lakes region.
- e. That two U.S. members be elected from the *USA Central and USA West regions* ~~west of the Mississippi River.~~

### IV. Bilateral relationships

The CRC maintains a relationship of *ecclesiastical fellowship* with 23 denominations and partners with 13 *churches in dialogue*. In addition, we have four partners in the category of *churches in other ecumenical relationships*. Of these three categories combined, we have 22 partners on the African continent; five partners in Central and South America (including the Caribbean);

two partners in Europe; six partners in Asia and the Pacific Rim; and five partners in North America. A complete list is available on the “Relationships” page of the EIRC website ([crcna.org/EIRC](http://crcna.org/EIRC)).

#### A. *Activities with bilateral partners*

Interchanges with two bilateral partners call for specific mention. In addition, CRCNA representatives had communications with several other partner churches.

##### 1. Reformed Church in America

Our *ecclesiastical fellowship* arrangement with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) as well as the accord we struck together in Pella, Iowa, in 2014 leads us to many collaborative efforts. The most recent of these is the Vibrant Churches effort led by Rev. Larry Doornbos ([vibrantcongregations.org](http://vibrantcongregations.org)). In addition, the general synod of the RCA and the synod of the CRC both adopted a plan in 2018 to combine our interfaith efforts. That work continues; the Interfaith Subcommittee of the EIRC met with the RCA’s Interreligious Committee two times in the past year to share updates and ways to collaborate.

The outcomes of the general synod of the Reformed Church in America in October 2021 included the following:

- to create a committee that will look at the structure of the RCA moving forward (possibility of affinity classes and reassessing regional synods)
- to create a way for churches to have graceful separation by allowing them to have five years to leave the denomination and keep their assets

So far, two groups have split from the RCA: the Alliance of Reformed Churches (ARC) and Kingdom Network, totaling at least 80 churches.

Mark Stephenson has been appointed to the RCA’s Commission on Christian Action.

##### 2. Christian Reformed Church in Cuba

Pastor Yordanys Díaz, president of the CRC in Cuba (a denomination in *ecclesiastical fellowship*), met with CRCNA staff and EIRC representatives in September 2021 for a time of prayer and sharing. There are continued conversations within Resonate Global Mission about how we can better support their pastors.

#### B. *Formal exchanges*

Throughout the past year, our formal exchanges and engagements have been curtailed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, many letters and communications with our *churches in ecclesiastical fellowship* have been received and sent. Colin P. Watson, Sr., was able to attend the general synod of the Reformed Church in America in October 2021.

### V. **Multilateral relationships – ecumenical organizations and dialogues**

We belong to a number of ecumenical organizations, including the Canadian Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the Global Christian Forum, the National Association of Evangelicals, the World Communion of Reformed Churches,

and the World Reformed Fellowship. We also participate in important dialogues among those of various Christian faiths. The organizations and dialogues with which we have made specific connection this past year are highlighted in the following:

*A. World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)*

The WCRC is divided into nine regions, six of which are represented by regional councils. One such group is the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC). As executive director of the CRCNA, Colin P. Watson, Sr., continues to serve on the Steering Committee of CANAAC.

The WCRC currently has three acting general secretaries (called the Collegial General Secretariat) who are taking on additional responsibilities over the next fiscal years, due to a significant drop in funding. The Collegial General Secretariat visited in November 2021 as part of a listening tour to discuss the realities of the CRCNA denomination and future engagement with the WCRC. Follow-up meetings have continued to discuss the implications of that listening tour and how the WCRC will move forward.

*B. Canadian Council of Churches*

Canadian ministries director (acting executive director – Canada) Terry Veldboom as well as other EIRC members (see section V, D) routinely participate in gatherings and initiatives of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) and represent the CRCNA on the council’s governing board. Denominational leaders within Canada met in January 2022, noting a desire to work ecumenically, especially on Indigenous matters.

Jim Rusthoven, CRCNA representative to the Faith and Life Sciences Group of the CCC, resigned because of a perceived theological shift within that working group. After expressing appreciation to Dr. Rusthoven for his work, the EIRC sent a letter to the CCC’s governing board, expressing concern about the theological shift within the group. A formal response has not yet been received, and a new CRCNA representative to the Faith and Life Sciences Group has yet to be identified.

*C. Other multilateral organizations and dialogue*

We benefit from partnership with the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and we participate in the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. The ninth round of dialogue for the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue begins in March 2022 on justification and justice.

*D. Appointed representatives and observers*

The EIRC appoints representatives and observers to many of the aforementioned multilateral ecumenical organizations and to other ecumenical efforts; often Christian Reformed Church members are asked by these organizations to serve as well.

1. Colin P. Watson, Sr., serves as the CRCNA’s representative on the board of directors of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and on the Steering Committee for the WCRC’s Caribbean and North American Area Council.
2. Terry Veldboom and Michael Wagenman serve on the Governing Board of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). The Christian Reformed

Church also has a number of representatives who serve on various standing committees, reference groups, and commissions of the CCC. Michael Wagenman is a member of the Youth Involvement Committee, and Anthony Elenbaas is a member of the Nominations Committee. Greg Sinclair serves on the Christian Interfaith Reference Group. Jessica Joustra represents the CRC on the Commission of Faith and Witness. Working groups associated with the Commission of Faith and Witness are served by Zachary DeBruyne (National Muslim Christian Liaison Committee) and Elly Boersma (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity). Dayna Vreeken represents the CRC on the Commission on Justice and Peace. Bruce Adema serves as chair of the board of Project Ploughshares, a Canadian peace research institute that seeks to advance policies and actions to prevent war and armed violence and to build peace.

3. Mike Hogeterp serves on the board of KAIROS; a number of CRC members serve on KAIROS's partnership circles.
4. Terry Veldboom represents the CRCNA to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).
5. Matthew Lundberg serves as the representative on a commission of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A.
6. Steven Timmermans serves on the board of World Reformed Fellowship.
7. Ronald Feenstra is the ecumenical staff officer representative of the CRCNA to the United States Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. Two additional representatives are forthcoming.

## VI. Interfaith activities

The Interfaith subcommittee of the EIRC continues its work. Membership includes Bernard Ayoola, Zachary DeBruyne, Michael Kooy, Sarah Gibes, Greg Sinclair, Eric Verhulst, Mark Wallace, Cory Willson, and the executive director. The subcommittee met in September 2021 and January 2022. Another meeting is scheduled for April 2022.

The Ecumenical Charter that guides the EIRC states that our "responsibility is expressed locally (between and among neighboring congregations), regionally (among churches in a given geographical area), and denominationally (among churches nationally and internationally)." For interfaith efforts, the EIRC and its Interfaith subcommittee emphasize regional and local engagement. To that end, they seek to highlight regional groups that are open to CRC members and to publicize local efforts.

Zachary DeBruyne serves on the National Muslim Christian Liaison Committee. Greg Sinclair, chair of the Interfaith subcommittee, leads Resonate Global Mission's Diaspora project. Eric Verhulst is a military chaplain, and Mark Wallace leads Resonate's campus ministry efforts. Cory Willson, professor of missiology and missional ministry at Calvin Theological Seminary, organizes interfaith gatherings for seminary students. Including these leaders on the subcommittee provides ample evidence of the interfaith opportunities in a variety of settings.

The RCA Interreligious group and the CRC's Interfaith subcommittee met on June 1, 2021, and October 5, 2021. Another meeting is scheduled

for March 2022. Members of the RCA Interreligious group are drawn from many different ministries and regions of their denomination. Collaboration between CRC and RCA leaders continues with Peer to Peer Interfaith Network and Journeys into Friendship. Possible new joint activities continue to be discussed, such as developing joint web resources, creating a joint mission statement and related values, building a network of champions to guide local congregations into interfaith engagement, and/or developing regional contextual learning experiences that include the interfaith dimension.

## VII. Synodical assignments

### A. *U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue*

Synod 2018 instructed the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee to make the report of the most recent round of the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue, *The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World*, accessible to the churches, along with study materials; and synod asked the EIRC to consider the recommendations in the report for their applicability to the CRCNA and to report its conclusions to Synod 2019. The final report was released in February 2022, so work on these assignments will begin shortly.

### B. *Categories of affiliation*

As mentioned in the Introduction of this report regarding changes to our categories of affiliation as proposed to Synod 2022, the EIRC has been discussing the implications of these changes on our work.

## VIII. Additional updates

### A. *Establishment of a CRC in Venezuela*

There are a number of ethnic groups within the CRCNA who look for ways to do ministry together. One such group is Consejo Latino, led by Harold Caicedo. He became aware that there are several churches and organizations that would like to be somehow affiliated with the CRCNA. After discussion, the EIRC endorsed a continued conversation between Consejo Latino and the CRC in Venezuela. A memorandum of understanding between the two groups was signed at the regional congress of Consejo Latino in November 2021. Three phases of the continuing conversation are reflected in the memorandum:

1. Gospel proclamation and partnership in ministry
2. Church planting and leadership development
3. Future aspiration, including securing a designation as a *church in dialogue* with the CRCNA

The EIRC will continue to be engaged in the development of this relationship.

### B. *Inspire 2022*

It is hoped that ecumenical guests can be included at Inspire 2022 by offering a pre-conference gathering and the opportunity to lead a workshop. Ecumenical guests will include some of those who would have been invited to Synod 2020 or Synod 2021.

C. *Kingdom Network, USA*

Kingdom Network, USA is one of the groups of churches that split from the Reformed Church in America. Originally it was part of a classis within the RCA (New Thing Classis) that focused primarily on church planting. There is one church within this new denomination that was affiliated with both the RCA and the CRCNA. Because of this, Kingdom Network would like to have an ecumenical relationship with the CRCNA so that this church can continue to be dually affiliated. It is noted that the relationship the CRCNA has with the RCA will not automatically transfer to the Kingdom Network. The depth of the relationship will be different. It is recommended that synod recognize Kingdom Network, USA as a *church in dialogue* for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a *church in ecclesiastical fellowship*, and, by way of exception, that while designated as a *church in dialogue*, Faith Church – Highland (Ind.) Campus maintain its dual-affiliation status.

D. *World Council of Churches*

A request was received by a CRCNA member to reassess participation in the World Council of Churches (WCC). Historically, the CRCNA has not participated in the WCC due to a lack of Reformed presence; however, synod or its ecumenical committee has, in the past, appointed members to observe WCC assemblies. Since that time, consensus procedures have been implemented, and the CRCNA attitude toward ecumenism has changed, resulting in a broadening of the ecumenical and interfaith charter and mandate. The EIRC will continue to research participation and perhaps appoint someone to attend the next WCC Assembly in September 2022 as an observer. The theme for this assembly is “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”

**IX. Recommendations**

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to William T. Koopmans, chair, and Colin P. Watson, Sr. (ex officio), when matters relating to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee are discussed.
- B. That synod express its gratitude to Lenore Maine for serving the cause of ecumenicity for the CRC.
- C. That synod by way of the ballot elect one new member from the slate of nominees presented to serve on the EIRC for a first term of three years, effective July 1, 2022.
- D. That synod reappoint both Lyle Bierma and Michael Wagenman to a second three-year term.
- E. That synod receive the following update to the EIRC membership distribution/nomination process description as information (noted in strike-through and italics):

That five members be from Canada and five members be from the United States, with every effort made toward the following regional balance:

- a. That two Canadian members be elected from the *Canada West region* ~~classes Lake Superior, Alberta/Saskatchewan, Alberta North, B.C. South-East, and B.C. North-West.~~
- b. That three Canadian members be elected from the *Canada East region* ~~classes east of Classis Lake Superior.~~
- c. That one U.S. member be elected from the *USA East region* ~~Eastern regions.~~
- d. That two U.S. members be elected from the Great Lakes region.
- e. That two U.S. members be elected from the *USA Central and USA West regions* ~~west of the Mississippi River.~~

F. That synod recognize Kingdom Network, USA as a *church in dialogue* for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a *church in ecclesiastical fellowship*, and, by way of exception, that while designated as a *church in dialogue*, Faith Church – Highland (Ind.) Campus maintain its dual-affiliation status.

*Grounds:*

- a. The churches that make up Kingdom Network, USA share previous background with the Reformed Church in America.
- b. The new denomination intends to work toward the status of being a *church in ecclesiastical fellowship*, the status its congregations had when part of the RCA.
- c. This is a way to provide an opportunity to work out details as Faith Church – Highland (Ind.) Campus desires to remain part of the CRCNA.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee  
 William T. Koopmans, chair  
 Colin P. Watson, Sr., executive director (ex officio)

**I. Introduction**

The Historical Committee is the standing committee of the Christian Reformed Church established by Synod 1934. It is mandated to share in the oversight of the work of the denominational archives and to promote publication of denominationally related historical studies as well as appreciation for the denomination’s heritage and legacy. Current committee members are John Bolt, chair (2023/2); James A. De Jong, secretary (2024/2); Herman De Vries (2022/1); and Tony Maan (2022/1).

Herman De Vries and Tony Maan are both completing their first terms of service on the committee and are eligible for election to a second term. Since both are willing to continue serving, the committee so recommends.

Since its 2021 report to synod, the committee met via Zoom on July 20, 2021; October 6, 2021; and February 2, 2022. In collaborating with the COD “to review [our] mandate and clarify the continued relationship between the committee and all of the stakeholders” (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 761), the committee also met with the reconstituted COD ad hoc committee via Zoom on July 22, 2021, and on August 30, 2021. Executive director Colin P. Watson, Sr., participated in the July 22 and August 30 meetings, and representatives of the Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary stakeholders of Heritage Hall participated in the August 30 meeting.

**II. Committee Activities**

*A. Agreement on shared oversight of denominational archives*

In recognizing confusing and conflicting provisions that existed concerning the oversight of our denominational archives, Synod 2019 adopted the following directive: “That synod instruct the COD to work with the Historical Committee to review their mandate and clarify the continued relationship between the committee and all of the stakeholders” (*2019 Acts of Synod*, p. 761).

After a series of meetings with an ad hoc committee of the COD, followed by discussions with the three financial stakeholders (the offices of the CRCNA executive director, of the Calvin University provost, and of the Calvin Theological Seminary president), the following revised mandate was agreed upon unanimously and sent to the COD for approval. The Historical Committee encourages its adoption by synod.

By synodical decision, the Historical Committee and the executive director of the CRCNA are responsible for the official Archives of the Christian Reformed Church and its agencies, while administrative oversight is provided by the Hekman Library of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary. The Historical Committee ordinarily communicates with the Hekman Library through the Hekman Library Archives Advisory Council. The Historical Committee also cultivates, within the Christian Reformed Church, the wider church, and the academic world, knowledge of and appreciation for the CRCNA’s history, heritage, and legacy by, among other things, identifying and assisting in accumulation of resources.

The committee is grateful to the parties involved with it in formulating and adopting this clarification. Our representatives will answer any questions and provide background information regarding this clarifying statement for synod and its advisory committee, if necessary. The opening two sentences of this report have been modified to reflect this agreed-upon clarification and will be operative going forward.

#### B. Archives Advisory Council

Last summer James A. De Jong replaced Herman De Vries as one of the two Historical Committee representatives on the council. De Vries requested relief in light of other professional obligations.

The council met via Zoom on October 15 in a meeting devoted primarily to a preliminary consideration of curator Will Katerberg's second draft of a strategic plan for Heritage Hall. James De Jong attended. John Bolt, our other representative, was unable to be present.

#### C. Promoting the publication and appreciation of material

The directive to promote the publication and appreciation of material related to the denomination's history, heritage, and legacy is taken seriously by the Historical Committee. Much has been and is being done that is noteworthy in this regard.

Some of this material consists of **secondary sources** written about the past or building on the past. Writers, pastors, and scholars have produced much history about the denomination and the communities that support it. They also have built on its heritage and legacy in developing spiritual resources for Christians today. This material includes numerous journals and periodicals and books of various types.

- *The Banner* continues to depict the church's dynamic life and thought. The curator of Heritage Hall, Will Katerberg, recently wrote a series of six articles on past controversies in the CRC, published in the print and online versions of *The Banner*.
- Heritage Hall publishes *Origins*, a magazine about the history of the denomination and the communities that support it, and *Origins Online*, a blog that also provides back issues of the print magazine. Recent issues have included stories about Christian schools, Dutch Reformed immigration to Canada, Navajo leaders who worked with the denomination, and the 1957 centennial celebration of the denomination.
- Pastors' reflections on their ministries include contributions such as Roger E. Van Harn's recent *A Pastor's Memoirs: Black American History in Grace Church, 1960-2000*.
- Insightful biographies are represented by K.A. Van Til's *A Name for Herself: A Dutch Immigrant's Story* written about the author's grandmother Zwier and her experiences among Dutch immigrant communities in several Chicago suburbs, Wisconsin, and Montana.
- Reflections on being raised Christian Reformed are insightful, such as Jane E. Griffioen's candid *London Street: A Memoir*.
- A number of gifted novelists and storytellers continue offering fresh insights into what, why, who, and how we are as a church.
- Devotional material such as Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.'s new *Morning and Evening Prayers* continues a stream of moving devotions both reflecting and directing our hearts.

Of major significance is **primary, more academic source material** made available in English or other original languages.

- More than 125,000 works in Latin, Dutch, German, French, and other languages are now easily available electronically on The Post Reformation Digital Library created and maintained by the Junius Institute founded by Dr. Richard Muller and his graduate students. This institute is based at Calvin Theological Seminary, and the site is widely used and acclaimed internationally.
- A noteworthy new collection is *The Dordrecht Bible Commentary* (7 volumes), now complete, that began appearing in 2018 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort. The work is a reprint in modern format (not a facsimile) of the 1657 translation of the text and commentary of the Dutch *Statenvertaling* (“States translation”) of 1635 that was commissioned by the Synod of Dort. Impressed with this work, the Westminster Assembly in 1645 commissioned its translation into English. Dr. H. David Schuringa, a CRC minister, is the general editor and sponsor through North Star Ministry Press, LLC, of this reprint, to which he supplies a helpful foreword. The notes or comments on the biblical text in the *Statenvertaling* shaped Dutch Reformed preaching and family devotions for 350 years. Dutch immigrants carried this material with them in their family Bibles when immigrating. The work opens windows on our religious legacy and deserves thoughtful attention by those seeking to understand our denomination’s historic understanding of Scripture.
- The Dutch Reformed Translation Society’s translations of primary sources such as Herman Bavinck’s dogmatics, essays, and ethics; Abraham Kuyper’s meditations; Theodore Vander Groe’s commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism; and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors featured in its “Classics of Reformed Spirituality” series are additional noteworthy primary source material now available in English. This spring Geerhardus Vos’s Calvin Seminary lectures on *Natural Theology*, with a helpful introduction, was published by the society; in our report last year we noted its forthcoming appearance. The work is perceptive and demonstrates what was being taught at our seminary on this important subject in the 1890s. The society’s members are from Dutch Reformed denominations internationally, and a full listing of its titles appears on its website.
- The Abraham Kuyper Society, in collaboration with the Acton Institute, last year completed publishing through Lexham Press *Abraham Kuyper: Collected Works in Public Theology* (12 vols.). The series covers the Kuyperian societal waterfront. Christian Reformed pastor Dr. Melvin Flikkema served as one of the two general editors, and other academicians of our denomination contributed to this series as translators and editors of specific volumes. This publisher has also recently published a translation of Geerhardus Vos’s *Systematic Theology*, lectures he gave at our seminary prior to leaving to teach biblical studies at Princeton Theological Seminary.

- Academic theses and dissertations are important examinations of our legacy. A noteworthy example is Kyle J. Dieleman’s book *The Battle for the Sabbath in the Dutch Reformation: Devotion of Desecration* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2019), which examines the theology and practice of Sabbath/Sunday observance in the Dutch Reformed churches from the Reformation through the seventeenth century.
- Primary source material, of course, also includes synodical reports from the past to the present. Recent reports (1999-2021) are available on the CRCNA website. All of them, back to 1857, are available on the Heritage Hall website via the Hekman Library at Calvin University. They reveal our faith-heritage responsibly engaging issues of the day.
- This category also includes materials related to Reformed Christianity, Dutch immigrant history, and the history of the denomination, university, and seminary, archived in such places as our own Heritage Hall, the Van Raalte Institute, and other places in North America and abroad.

The committee notes a widening interest in these and other materials from our own legacy and commends them to our denomination today.

In general, we are impressed and gratified by the widely available and easily accessible existence of such primary and secondary sources. We heartily promote examining, understanding, and applying this work in our calling as leaders and church members in deepening and sharing our life in Christ.

Two areas mentioned in our previous reports we continue to address. The first has to do with doctor of ministry studies by pastors who have specifically examined ministry and church life in the Christian Reformed Church. Our goal has been to develop mechanisms for gathering, organizing, and sharing them and their insights. Collectively, they would make for a significant resource for understanding our developing legacy. We welcome the help of anyone interested, particularly our classical representatives, in gathering information on these materials and in offering suggestions on how they can be made accessible.

The second has to do with making studies of our history and legacy electronically available. An example is Dr. Ryan Faber’s doctoral study, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: A Church Juridical Inquiry into the Sacramental Liturgies of the Christian Reformed Church.* As reported last year, we have permission from the author to post this study. Our goal is to catalog and make available more studies like this.

Creating and maintaining such an independent site would require staffing and funding. We continue to examine the feasibility of doing so. Another option would be to collaborate with Heritage Hall and the Hekman Library at Calvin University, whether on the Heritage Hall website or in the library’s Digital Commons.

#### *D. Contacts with classical representatives*

Our committee, in conjunction with curator Will Katerberg, communicated with our classical representatives in February. In our joint letter we included (1) a reminder to solicit church minutes as well as church anniversary materials, and periodically church directories; (2) a suggestion to encourage people to submit historic photographs, family genealogies, biographical and autobiographical materials, specialized collections or studies, and other materials important for understanding our communal life

as a denomination; and (3) information on how to contact Heritage Hall to submit this material to the archives.

Heritage Hall staff are also happy to answer questions to help congregations with anniversary projects.

### III. Report of the Curator

#### A. *Heritage Hall Archives*

The past year was marked by transitions in staff and ongoing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite general challenges posed by the pandemic's continuation, the work of the past year has felt somewhat like a return to a normal.

Heritage Hall staff continued to serve the CRCNA, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Calvin University. While we have continued to limit the number of patrons working in Heritage Hall's reading room, collection of material and use of it by patrons increased significantly in the past year. No one was denied service due to this policy, but occasionally people had to wait a week or so to get an appointment that fit their schedule. Staff have continued to stagger shifts to meet the demands of COVID-19 safety protocols.

Staffing in Heritage Hall went through a notable transition. Hendrina Van Spronsen, the long-time office manager who also supported the production of *Origins: Historical Magazine of the Archives* and provided archival assistance in processing material related to the denomination, retired in June 2021. We are in the process of reconfiguring her position and hiring a person as an assistant archivist and digital specialist. Laurie Haan continued her work as an archival assistant who focuses on material related to the seminary and university. Emily Koelzer continued her work as an archival assistant who specializes in processing manuscript collections and digital archival projects. William Katerberg serves as curator of Heritage Hall and editor of *Origins*. Heritage Hall also has a student worker who helps with general work and two student workers focusing on projects—one on digitizing the collection of A.C. Van Raalte, founder of the first Dutch immigrant colony in West Michigan in the 1840s, and the other on diversity, race relations, and the history of the CRC.

Volunteers continue to be essential to the work of Heritage Hall. Phil Erffmeyer serves as Heritage Hall's denominational field agent, collecting and processing minutes from congregations and classes. He also processed new material, mostly related to the denomination. Clarice Newhof is working on a new catalog of photographs held in Heritage Hall.

#### B. *Archival activity during 2021*

##### 1. Collections

The amount of material accessioned by Heritage Hall in 2021 was larger than in 2020. Material continued to come in from various divisions of Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, and the Christian Reformed Church. We also received material from a variety of other sources. Examples include the following:

- Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church
- Dutch Reformed Translation Society
- photographs, pamphlets, Bibles, hymnbooks, and news clippings from a variety of individuals
- material from World Missions
- material related to Morris Greidanus and the Contemporary Testimony of the CRCNA
- material related to The King’s College (now University) in Edmonton, Alberta
- correspondence, scholarly work, and documents related to Ford Lewis Battles
- administrative material from several departments at Calvin University
- research material from Robert Swierenga related to Timothy Christian School
- material related to debates over creation and evolution from the 1980s
- minutes, reports, etc., from college/university and seminary committees related to the Hekman Library

## 2. Research and education

Heritage Hall supported the needs of the denomination, seminary, and university for institutional records. It helped several congregations with anniversary history projects. It served dozens of university and seminary students, scholars, and people interested in personal projects in Heritage Hall in 2021 who used published material in the reading room, documents in the archival collections, and books and magazines in various Rare Books Collections. It received hundreds of requests for information and digital scans (or photocopies) of published and archival material by email and phone from people around the country and the world.

The most requested material in 2021, as usual, was related to immigrant letters and memoirs, genealogy and family history, photo collections, congregational and classical minutes, the history of the denomination (in relation to a variety of topics), and rare books. Specific topics included Dutch ethnic communities and their relationship with North American Christianity; U.S. cultural relations with China, using missionary records; Leonard Verduin; race relations and the CRC; H. Evan Runner; Sidney Greidanus and preaching; J.C. Morgan, L.P. Brinks, and missions to Navajo peoples; Representative Paul Henry; Chris Overvoorde; Home Missions; Dutch immigrants and communities in Montana; Meindert and David DeJong; evangelism and race relations in Grand Rapids; Garrett Heyns and prison reform; Rev. Eugene Callender.

## 3. Digitization and indexing

Work in digitization continued in a variety of areas—creating a database of Heritage Hall’s photograph collections; continuing the process of making online finding aids for our collections; focusing on Calvin University records, the largest of the archive’s collections.

The most noteworthy digital project involved ongoing work in cooperation with the Van Raalte Institute at Hope College (VRI) and supported by the Dutch Consulate in New York City. It involves digitizing and

making publicly available the A.C. van Raalte and Dirk van Raalte collections in the two institutions. Doing so will aid scholars and local history researchers. Heritage Hall and the VRI also hope to curate some material for use by middle and high schools.

The work of indexing *The Banner* and other CRC-related periodicals continued. This indexing can be accessed via the CRC Periodicals Index hosted by the Hekman Library website.

#### 4. Promotion and outreach

Staff presentations were made to Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary classes via Zoom or Microsoft Teams and in Heritage Hall.

The curator, William Katerberg, regularly posted on *Origins* Online ([origins.calvin.edu](http://origins.calvin.edu)) history related to the CRCNA, the seminary, the university, and Dutch North American immigration and enclaves. The blog reaches thousands of readers each year. With a student researcher he continued work on a project on the history of race relations, diversity, and the CRCNA. He published a series of articles on church controversies in the CRCNA in the “Online Extras” section of *The Banner*, one of which was published in the print edition in January 2022. He wrote articles on Dutch Reformed history in Canada and on CRC missions and Navajo perspectives in *Origins*.

Other topics in *Origins: Historical Magazine of the Heritage Hall Archives* in 2021 included articles on Christian education, the evolution of Dutch Reformed enclaves in Canada, Dutch Reformed immigrants in New Jersey, migration in the American West, and the CRC Centennial of 1957. The spring 2022 issue will include essays on a Dutch grifter who committed fraud in South Africa and on the Dutch Reformed communities in Iowa and Kansas; a memoir piece by James Schaap; missionaries and U.S. relations with China; and more.

## IV. Regional Classical Representatives and Significant Anniversaries

### A. *Classical representatives*

The following is a list of classical or regional representatives for gathering archival material, particularly congregational and classical records and documents, and for encouraging use of archival material in understanding and appreciating our denominational legacy. The historical committee and the Heritage Hall staff would appreciate being updated on any changes that should be registered in this list.

Alberta North – Stated clerk Gary Duthler  
 Alberta South/Saskatchewan – Stated clerk Nelly Eyk  
 Arizona – Rodney Hugen  
 Atlantic Northeast – Stated clerk David Poolman  
 B.C. North-West – Anne Kwantes  
 B.C. South-East – Stated clerk Leonard Batterink  
 California South – Stated clerk Cornelius Pool  
 Central California – Stated clerk Larry Fryling

Central Plains – Stated clerk Jonathan Spronk  
 Chicago South – Stated clerk Jeremy Oosterhouse  
 Columbia – Stated clerk Roger Kramer  
 Eastern Canada – Jean Lauziere  
 Georgetown – Stated clerk Glenda Tebben  
 Grand Rapids East – Stated clerk Robert Arbogast  
 Grand Rapids North – Stated clerk Peter Byma  
 Grand Rapids South – Stated clerk George Vink  
 Grandville – Stated clerk Daniel Mouw  
 Greater Los Angeles – Stated clerk Joel Van Soelen, provisionally  
 Hackensack – Stated clerk Sheila Holmes  
 Hamilton – Vacant  
 Hanmi – Stated clerk Sang Myeun Moon  
 Heartland – Stated clerk Phillip Westra  
 Holland – Stated clerk Calvin Hoogstra  
 Hudson – Stated clerk Jeremy Mulder  
 Huron – Stated clerk Fred Vander Sterre  
 Iakota – Garry Zonnefeld  
 Illiana – Stated clerk Laryn Zoerhof  
 Kalamazoo – Stated clerk Diane Kiino  
 Ko-Am – Stated clerk NamJoong Kang  
 Lake Erie – Stated clerk Benjamin Van Arragon  
 Lake Superior – Stated clerk Henry Gunnink  
 Minnkota – Stated clerk LeRoy Christoffels  
 Muskegon – Stated clerk Drew Sweetman  
 Niagara – Stated clerk Wendy de Jong  
 North Cascades - Stated clerk J. Scott Roberts  
 Northcentral Iowa – Stated clerk Steven J. Mulder  
 Northern Illinois – Stated clerk Wendy Haack  
 Northern Michigan – Stated clerk Roger Hoeksema  
 Ontario Southwest – Stated clerk Ron Middel  
 Pacific Northwest – Matthew Borst  
 Quinte – Stated clerk Joan Crawford  
 Red Mesa – Stated clerk John Greydanus  
 Rocky Mountain – Stated clerk Mark Hilbelink  
 Southeast U.S. – Stan Workman  
 Thornapple Valley – Stated clerk Roger Bultman  
 Toronto – Stated clerk Richard Bodini  
 Wisconsin – Stated clerk Rodolfo Galindo  
 Yellowstone – Stated clerk Del VanDenBerg  
 Zeeland – Stated clerk Ronald Meyer

*B. Ordained ministers—anniversaries of service*

Names of ordained ministers that follow are listed according to years of ordained service in the CRCNA, although the date of prior ordination in another denomination is indicated in parentheses.

**50 years (1973-2023)**

Admiraal, Henry  
 Aupperlee, J. George C.  
 Bolt, John  
 Bosma, Carl J.  
 Broekema, Robert R.  
 Compagner, Calvin D.  
 Cooper, George D.  
 Corvers, Jacobus  
 De Vries, William C.  
 Evenhuis, Eric Franz (73/78)  
 Haagsma, Gerrit K.  
 Klop, Donald J.  
 Kobes, Wayne A.  
 Koornneef, Robert  
 Kuiper, Leslie J.  
 Leder, Arie C.  
 Mensink, L. Bryce  
 Pott, Frank E.  
 Stoel, James D.  
 Tigchelaar, Daniel R.  
 Van't Land, Thomas J.  
 Vander Berg, Edward  
 Vander Neut, Clair  
 Vander Vliet, Marvin J.  
 Van Houten, Siebert A.  
 Van Loo, Duane J.  
 Veenstra, Gerrit P.  
 Verhoef, William  
 Westra, Harold J.  
 Zylstra, Carl E.

**55 years (1968-2023)**

Brander, William  
 Den Haan, Edward  
 De Vries, Robert C.  
 Dreise, Albert  
 Groen, Allen C.  
 Heerema, Jacob P.  
 Heersink, A. William  
 Kerssies, John  
 Kramer, Roger D.  
 Oostendorp, Derk  
 Recker, Donald L.

Steigenga, John J.  
 Sytsma, Richard E.  
 Uken, Robert H.  
 Vander Wall, Kenneth J.  
 Vander Zee, Vernon G.  
 Van Wyhe, Arthur L.

**60 years (1963-2023)**

Bishop, Clarence  
 Boer, Warren J.  
 Breedveld, Peter  
 De Bruyne, Peter W.  
 De Waal, Sidney C.  
 Gritter, Evert  
 Hielema, Jack S.  
 Kok, James R.  
 Kwantes, Dick  
 Postema, Donald H.  
 Sheeres, Gerrit W.  
 Shepherd, Norman (63/83)  
 Stravers, Dick M.  
 Tamminga, Edward J.  
 Vander Griend, Alvin J.  
 Van Geest, Adrian A.  
 Walhof, Frederick J.  
 Wiegers, John J.

**65 years (1958-2023)**

Brinks, Raymond G.  
 Draayer, Sidney  
 Griffioen, Donald J.  
 Havert, Kenneth L.  
 Jongsma, Allan H.  
 Madany, Bassam M. (53/58)  
 Medema, Theodore  
 Meyer, Edward P.  
 Mulder, Bernard W.  
 Rignalda, Gerard  
 Van Eek, Arie  
 Jack VanderLaan

**70 years (1953-2023)**

Dokter, G. Bernard  
 Van Stempvoort, John W.  
 Verseput, Theodore

*C. Church anniversaries—at 25-year intervals*

The following is a list of CRC churches celebrating significant anniversaries in 2023:

**25th Anniversary (1998-2023)**

Darien, Illinois – Suburban Life Community  
 Lake Forest, California – Urim  
 Mission Hills, California – Korean Peace Church  
 San Marcos, California – Crossroads  
 Schererville, Indiana – Crossroads Community

**50th Anniversary (1973 – 2023)**

Binghamton, New York – Valley  
 Richfield Springs, New York – Trinity  
 San Francisco, California – Golden Gate  
 Burbank, Illinois – Immanuel  
 Grand Rapids, Michigan – Church of the Servant  
 Paterson, New Jersey – Northside Community  
 Smithville, Ontario – Smithville  
 Elmhurst, Illinois – Faith

**75th Anniversary (1948 – 2023)**

Hudsonville, Michigan – Immanuel  
 Jarvis, Ontario – Ebenezer  
 Kitchener, Ontario – Community  
 Owen Sound, Ontario – First

**100th Anniversary (1923 – 2023)**

Sioux Falls, South Dakota – First

**V. Recommendations**

The committee calls attention to recommendations still pending in the *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*. Additionally, we recommend the following:

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to John Bolt, chair, and to James A. De Jong, secretary, when matters pertaining to the mandate and work of the committee come before synod.
- B. That synod appoint Herman De Vries and Tony Maan to second three-year terms on the Historical Committee.
- C. That synod recognize with deep appreciation the outstanding work of Hendrina Van Spronson, longtime office coordinator of Heritage Hall, and gratefully remember Ed Gerritsen, a dedicated Heritage Hall volunteer who passed away in 2021.

Historical Committee  
 John Bolt, chair  
 James A. De Jong, secretary  
 Herman De Vries  
 Tony Maan



# DENOMINATIONALLY RELATED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS



## Dordt University

Greetings to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. We are grateful to God for the partnership of our mutually beneficial ministries.

We are excited and thankful to be experiencing momentum across campus in a variety of ways. This past fall we hit record enrollment numbers. Our overall enrollment for the fall semester was 1,786 students, the largest enrollment in the institution's history. This figure includes a record of 1,401 full-time undergraduate students, and a record of 238 students in our three graduate programs. We are also excited to continue to expand our dual-credit programs through partnerships with students and high schools around the country. Since 2012, Dordt University has grown by more than 25 percent by adding over 350 students, while the overall percentage for Americans seeking higher education has declined by about 10 percent during the same period of time. We praise God for this growth and for the opportunity to shape more lives for Christ's kingdom purposes.

We were also recognized this fall by several national publications. For the sixth time in a row, Dordt was ranked number one in the nation for student engagement according to the *Wall Street Journal* and *Times Higher Education*. The 2022 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings named Dordt number one for "Best Undergraduate Teaching (Regional Colleges Midwest)" and fifth best in the Regional Colleges Midwest category.

As a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, Dordt University is committed to Article 71<sup>1</sup> of the CRCNA's Church Order. Within that commitment, our faculty and salaried staff members' children are all educated at Christian day schools (or homeschooled from a Christian worldview). For children of all full-time and part-time salaried employees, Dordt also provides grade school and high school scholarships to local Christian schools, highlighting our commitment to Christian education. Further, in 2012 Dordt initiated a center to support the Christian school movement. The Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE) walks alongside Christian PreK-12 schools committed to teaching from a biblical perspective. CACE provides a variety of services, including operational consulting, leadership searches, and strategic road-mapping and implementation. CACE's pedagogy framework, Teaching for Transformation (TFT), empowers teachers and students to play their part in God's story through their everyday learning. TFT is practiced in over 100 schools worldwide and continues to gain in popularity. We are grateful for CACE and the blessing it serves in the lives of students, teachers, and administrators alike. We hope this encourages the CRCNA and all CRC churches to continue to support Article 71 of the Church Order fully and robustly.

In addition, Dordt has two other centers, the Thrive Center and the K&K Dooyema Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, which have also

<sup>1</sup> "The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ's lordship over all creation is clearly taught. The council shall also urge parents to have their children educated in harmony with this vision according to the demands of the covenant."

made a kingdom impact this year. The Thrive Center serves northwestern Iowa in the areas of behavior therapy and skills acquisition for children. Seeking to empower each person to develop their gifts to the fullest and to participate meaningfully in their local community, the Thrive Center employs therapies based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and takes a holistic approach in collaborating with schools, families, and agencies to achieve the best outcomes for each client. This center has been a popular choice for local families; there was a waiting list before the center launched last January. Additionally, the Dooyema Center provides students and alumni with best business practices and guidance rooted in a Reformed Christian context, preparing them for the challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurship and innovation in nonprofit, for-profit, and family business organizations. The Dooyema Center also offers an entrepreneurship minor and emphasis; since these offerings were launched this fall, more than 25 students have declared either an entrepreneurship minor or emphasis.

Throughout this growth, we have reflected on our resources, whether that involves our physical campus, our finances, or the services we offer to students. This has led us to embark on our largest capital campaign ever—Planting for the Future, which we launched this spring. This campaign will help to fund projects such as a new dining hall and much-needed upgrades to our auditorium, music building, gymnasium, and recreation center, as well as other spaces on campus. In addition, this campaign will fund further scholarships and additional research and development opportunities for students and faculty.

While the campaign will help to provide additional scholarship support, our students continue to look for ways to decrease their education costs. This focus has led us to establish a “Degree in Three” program. For certain majors such as history, social work, communications, and business, we have created specific course plans that allow students to graduate within a three-year period. This program is not easy; it is for students who are willing to put in the extra effort to pack more into a shorter time frame. It has also led to the development of a new option for our social work majors—what we call a 3+1 program. That means students studying social work as undergraduates have the option to complete their bachelor’s degree in three years, and in an additional fourth year (three semesters) to receive a Master of Social Work degree.

We continue to find that our students seek to be involved on campus beyond their academics, fulfilling our mission to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all areas of life. Music is a historically strong part of Dordt’s cocurricular program, with 21 percent of full-time students participating in music in some way, whether as a major or minor, taking lessons, or participating in an ensemble. This year, Dordt’s Wind Symphony will tour the West Coast over spring break, and our Concert Choir will tour Austria and the Czech Republic in May. The department has also seen a lot of growth and support from donors to our Church Music program, with scholarships and gifts supporting students who seek to lead in their churches. Our organ program is vibrant and growing, with nearly 20 students annually enrolled.

From a cocurricular standpoint, approximately 47 percent of our student body also participate in athletics. Having nationally ranked teams in football, women’s basketball, track, and cross country is a regular occurrence

for Dordt—and the GPAs of all our athletic teams are perennially among the top 10 percent in the country. Dordt athletics has developed “The Defender Way,” an integrated biblical framework for participating Christianly in athletics. Following the positive impact that we’ve seen at the collegiate level, we’ve developed a similar program for middle and high school athletics called “Coaching for Transformation” in conjunction with CACE.

Each of these areas, whether academic or cocurricular, helps to develop our students into kingdom citizens who serve their communities after graduation. Dordt’s class of 2021 had a 100 percent career outcome rate and a 98 percent knowledge rate, which means there were only six students from that class with whom we were not able to connect regarding their career outcome. Additionally, 93 percent of Dordt alumni self-report that they attend church on a weekly basis after they graduate.

Dordt University is blessed to be able to serve our students from 40 U.S. states and 34 countries, and we appreciate the support of the Christian Reformed Church as we invest in these students who will go on to make an international impact for the kingdom as they fulfill Dordt’s mission to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of life.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Dordt University  
Erik Hoekstra, president

## Institute for Christian Studies

We thank the CRCNA for standing with us as we continue to seek relevant and just ways to serve God faithfully in the arena of Christian graduate education. The faithful and generous commitment of our CRC churches and our larger supporting community has been a great encouragement to us at ICS as we seek to fulfill our educational mission amid the pandemic. This support helps us provide a learning context where students may freely explore and develop their Christian faith in dialogue with cutting-edge discussions in the disciplines of philosophy and theology.

In 2021-22 our scholarly community intentionally focused on issues of systemic racism in the academy and wider society, addressing concerns raised by the Black Lives Matter movement as well as by the ongoing call to reckon with Canada's historical and ongoing unjust treatment of Indigenous peoples. In so doing, we have added new courses to our curriculum that highlight the intellectual contributions made by racialized scholars to these discussions and have organized several public lectures, workshops, and podcasts on topics related to this special focus.

This academic year marked the second consecutive year that, due to the ongoing global pandemic, ICS delivered its programs remotely via video-conference. In total, we offered 19 courses in this mode—6 in the summer semester, 7 in the fall semester, and 6 in the winter semester. As I mentioned in last year's report, the challenge of switching to online learning has presented ICS with a unique opportunity to recruit students from across the globe. In 2021-22, students joined us from China, Indonesia, Texas, Oregon, Montreal, and Edmonton. In order to continue to extend the reach of ICS's programs, we are currently exploring the possibility of creating a classroom suitable for hybrid instruction that can combine in-person and physically remote participation.

Following are some highlights of the ongoing work of ICS in 2021-22:

Our M.A. and Ph.D. degree programs in philosophy continue to provide top-notch, uniquely Christian scholarly education, and the new Educational Leadership stream of our M.A. program (the M.A.-E.L.) continues to provide meaningful and relevant professional development to a growing cohort of Christian schoolteachers and administrators. We are planning to hold an in-person convocation ceremony in early June 2022, when we hope to celebrate the graduation of up to eight junior members (students), including two new graduates in the M.A.-E.L. program.

This year two students completed all the requirements of the Ph.D. program (one in the ICS-only stream, and one in the conjoint ICS/Vrije Universiteit stream). Last year I reported that Dean Dettloff's ICS/VU dissertation, *Christwreck: An Accidentsology of Christianity*, had been formally submitted for final defense. Supervised by Dr. Ronald A. Kuipers, Dr. Dettloff successfully defended his dissertation in early June 2021, receiving the rare *cum laude* distinction! In addition, Jonathan Andreas successfully defended his excellent ICS-only Ph.D. dissertation, titled *Education for Indigenization: Toward an Econormative Philosophy of Education*, supervised by ICS emeritus professor Dr. Douglas Blomberg.

At the time of writing this report, total course enrollments for the 2021-22 academic year are 109, down from 132 the previous year. However, when we combine this figure with the number of full-time students in the post-course-work stage of their programs, our full-time-equivalency rate is 31 students, slightly higher than the previous year's 29. There are 20 students registered in our M.A. program (12 of whom are in the M.A.-E.L.) and nine students registered in our Ph.D. program, for a total of 29 program students. This year ICS also served an additional 60 special students, for a total impact of 89 students. While this level of enrollment keeps our small faculty busy, we hope to increase enrollment sustainably in the coming years. To that end, in the summer of 2021 ICS hired a recruitment coordinator to develop and execute a recruitment strategy toward enrollment growth and student retention.

In addition to their teaching and graduate supervision duties, our senior members (faculty) continue to share their scholarly insights with a broader audience. This year ICS's six faculty members made ten presentations at academic conferences and six presentations at public events for a more general audience. They also published five articles in academic journals, four pieces in popular publications, and an edited book manuscript. Among these contributions, Professor Bob Sweetman, ICS's H. Evan Runner Chair in the History of Philosophy, was invited to give four lectures on the theme of gratitude in medieval Christian thought to the faculty of The King's University. In addition, Ronald A. Kuipers, ICS president and associate professor in the philosophy of religion, was invited to give the Canadian Theological Society's annual Jay Newman Lecture at their meeting held during the 2021 Canadian Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities.

ICS's junior members have been productive as well, giving nine presentations at academic conferences, 14 presentations to a more general audience, and publishing four articles in academic journals as well as four pieces in more popular publications. ICS's graduate students also taught 12 undergraduate courses at various institutions of higher education.

In 2021-22, ICS's Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics (CPRSE) cultivated and fostered collaborations that strengthened our public outreach and academic profile. Over this time, the CPRSE's most significant thematic thrust has been ICS's institutional response to systemic racism. The following is a summary of activities within this special focus:

1. May 2021—The CPRSE sponsored the workshop "Decolonizing Christianity in Canada Kenosis" as part of the "Seeking Justice Together" conference hosted by Citizens for Public Justice. This capacity-building workshop offered tools to enact antiracist, decolonized, and antioppressive expressions of Christianity within political spaces.
2. July 2021—In collaboration with the Centre for Religion and Its Contexts (Emmanuel College, University of Toronto), Trinity St. Paul's United Church, and the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, the CPRSE supported the second online Christian Left Conference, "Rethinking the Christian Left from the Belly of Empire: Charting New Paths Beyond Colonization." The conference explored the role of Christian left discourses and movements in postcolonial contexts.

3. November 2021—As the guest speaker for ICS’s Scripture, Faith, and Scholarship Symposium, the CPRSE welcomed Jonathan Hamilton-Diabo, the June Callwood Professor in Social Justice and Special Advisor on Indigenous Issues at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto. In his presentation “Fill the Earth and Subdue: Exploring Relationships with Land,” Hamilton-Diabo explored the use of Indigenous stories, experiences, and worldviews in the creation of a renewed relationship to the land.
4. November and December 2021—The CPRSE hosted the colloquium “Philosophy Otherwise: Relearning the Philosophical Craft.” This series offered a space for critical reflection about systemic oppression in ICS’s scholarly community and philosophical tradition. Participants dialogued about ways to integrate greater diversity, equity, and inclusion into our instruction, research, and public outreach. We invited four international experts to facilitate these conversations: Colombian philosopher Dr. María del Rosario Acosta (University of California, Riverside), South African theologian Ntandoyenkosi Mlambo (University of the Free State), American philosopher Dr. Elisabeth Paquette (University of North Carolina), and Canadian philosopher of music education and composer Dr. Lori-Anne Dolloff (University of Toronto).

In addition to supporting ICS’s institutional focus on addressing systemic racism in the academy and wider society, the CPRSE continues to bolster uniquely Reformational scholarship through its publications and outreach. In 2021-22, the CPRSE added two volumes to its *Currents in Reformational Thought* series: *Post-Truth? Facts and Faithfulness*, by ICS adjunct faculty and King’s University professor Dr. Jeffrey Dudiak; and *Dancing in the Wild Spaces of Love: A Theopoetics of Gift and Call, Risk and Promise*, by ICS emeritus senior member Dr. James Olthuis. The CPRSE also invited two scholars within the Reformational tradition to speak about their most recent publications. In October 2021, Dr. Jonathan Chaplin presented his book *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity*. In April 2022, Dr. Adrienne Dengerink-Chaplin presented her new book, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art, and Feeling*.

This academic year has been a blessing and a challenge on several fronts. In an increasingly polarized North American society, we at ICS have responded by curating safe spaces for both our students and our wider community to carry out difficult conversations about the current state of God’s good yet suffering world and our Christian responsibility to bring the gospel’s message of healing to it. Rather than adopt a defensive attitude to the increased critical scrutiny that historical Christianity is now receiving in the aftermath of European colonialism, we at ICS have chosen to host conversations that allow us to listen authentically to people who raise these concerns, and thereby discern where the Holy Spirit in our time may be calling for continued reformation. In that spirit, we have pursued our scholarly mission creatively, enthusiastically, and gratefully.

As you undertake the important work of Synod 2022, I pray that God grant you wisdom, discernment, and hearts to heed the all-too-many voices of suffering in our world today.

Institute for Christian Studies  
Ronald A. Kuipers, president

## The King's University

We continue to be managing well through the pandemic and are humbled by the way God and his people have continued to provide in marvelous ways for our university. Student enrollment has been relatively stable, and faithful giving from our supporting community and churches continues to provide for our students, underpin our operations, and allow us to pursue exciting visions for the future. God is good!

Amid so much change and uncertainty, we are thankful that we have been able to continue to serve students in person. While we are thankful for the technology to provide educational experiences for students remotely who are unable to attend classes on campus, students continue to express a strong desire for learning in person. Robust cleaning and safety measures have allowed us to maintain a safe campus environment and have enabled us to provide the best King's experience possible, typified by community, mentorship, support, and friendship. We are incredibly thankful for God's continued protection in keeping our community safe and healthy.

Over the past couple of years, we have shared our vision of developing a Centre for Excellence in the Sciences at King's. This vision includes the development of new facilities, enhancements to existing programming, and the launch of new programs. It is an ambitious dream that will dramatically alter the future of our university and position King's to continue to grow and thrive. To become a reality, the project requires significant investment from our supporting community, and fundraising efforts have been progressing. This past fall we were humbled to receive a \$20 million gift from a family in our community—the largest charitable gift King's has ever received. The gift will be used for the construction of a new facility that we anticipate will expand the campus by approximately 40,000 sq. ft. and will include classrooms, laboratories, study spaces, collaborative workspaces, and a common area for all students to use and enjoy. This is a momentous development for the future of King's. Our university was born from the vision of our community, has been sustained over the years through fervent prayers, generous giving, and active engagement, and we continue to realize the faithfulness, generosity, and commitment of our donor community. Pledges in support of the Centre for Excellence in the Sciences have now surpassed \$22 million, and we are continuing to connect with our community to secure gifts to provide for scholarships, academic programming, and other new initiatives. Our goal is to raise a total of \$29 million in charitable support for this initiative. Thanks be to God for the incredible support we have received so far—and we ask that you continue to pray for our work as we endeavor to raise the remaining support necessary for this project.

King's launched a new degree program in February 2021. Students can now study in our Interdisciplinary Science degree while choosing to specialize in any two concentrations that are available, including biology, kinesiology, chemistry, computing science, mathematics, physics, and psychology. This program provides excellent preparation for students looking to continue on to professional school, teach science at a grade-school level, or enter the workforce directly after graduation. Hands-on learning experiences and a focus on collaborations between disciplines in the natural sciences are hallmarks of this new program.

In the past year, King's welcomed five new professors. These scholars bring a wealth of diverse experiences and will further the university's dedication to Christian scholarship and commitment to building a more humane, just, and sustainable world. Dr. Ben Cameron completed his Ph.D. at Dalhousie University in 2019 and will join our Computing Science department with a background in mathematics. Dr. Shingirai Mandizadza is our newest sociologist; she completed her Ph.D. at the University of Alberta in 2020 and specializes in gender and land rights in her home country of Zimbabwe. Dr. Caitlynd Myburgh moved from South Africa to join our biology and kinesiology department. She specializes in cardiovascular physiology and oxidative stress in vulnerable cohorts. Dr. Andrew Rillera completed his Ph.D. at Duke University in 2021 and is a theologian specializing in the New Testament authors' attitudes and practices related to Jew-Gentile relations in the church, especially in Paul's work. Dr. Cassidy VanderSchee is a King's alumna who completed her Ph.D. at McGill University in 2021. She has returned to King's as a professor of chemistry with specialization in spectroscopy and training in X-ray techniques. We are extremely blessed to receive these new faculty members and their passion to live out the mission of King's through their work at the university.

Thank you for the faithful and generous support that King's continues to receive from various churches that are part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Your investment in our university is equipping students with university education that is underpinned by our Christian faith and is preparing them for lives of service in your communities. Together we are ensuring that Christian university education is available and accessible to all students.

Please continue to pray for our board of governors, the leadership team at the university, our faculty and staff, and the students we serve. Thank you for your continued partnership!

The King's University  
Melanie Humphreys, president

## Kuyper College

This year the Kuyper College community has experienced God’s favor and protection in small and large ways as we continue to navigate the coronavirus pandemic and the changes it calls for in our daily routines, decision making, and plans going forward. We take heart and have confidence that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And, with this conviction, we wholeheartedly pursue our mission as we demonstrate our end goal of education—to live faithfully for Jesus Christ in God’s good world.

I am pleased to share some updates about the initiatives and improvements we have accomplished this past year regarding our curricular and cocurricular programs, campus improvements, and community engagement.

1. Master of Ministry program—At our 2021 commencement ceremony we celebrated our first five graduates in this program, launched in January 2019. The Master of Ministry program engages adult learners who are concurrently serving in positions related to faith formation, youth ministry, chaplaincy, congregational care, or pastoral leadership. This program intentionally integrates the classroom experience with the students’ ministry contexts, recognizing that both are important learning communities.
2. KuyperWorks and Work College recognition—Last May, Kuyper College became the first institution of higher learning in Michigan, and only the 10th in the country, to be recognized by the U.S Department of Education as a Work College. Unique to Work Colleges is the commitment to learning through work by requiring all residential students to participate in a comprehensive work-service-learning program. The most visible display of Kuyper’s Work College initiative is our KuyperWorks program, built on a biblical and theological foundation of work and integrating classroom learning with the learning that students experience in their workplaces, either on or off campus. Seeing how God works, Christians are called to model faithful work in all areas of life. The work of Christian ministry is not more spiritual than the work of Christians in social work, business, education, or other venues. KuyperWorks is one way that our students can grow in appreciation of this reality, for this program instills in them the dignity of all work and a passion to join in with the work that God is faithfully doing in and through their various work placements. Timothy Keller, in his book *Every Good Endeavor*, which has guided our faculty and staff as we’ve developed KuyperWorks, points out, “The purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive” (p. 4). The five principles of KuyperWorks align with this purpose as we (1) encourage students to value work as learning; (2) develop students’ biblical perspective on work; (3) enhance students’ learning by integrating work and academics; (4) prepare students to be workplace ready; and (5) provide students with an affordable education. Ultimately we aim for our students to give glory to God in their work and learning as they love and serve their neighbor.
3. Partnerships with high schools and community colleges—This year, as we endeavor to extend our student body, we have solidified partnerships with area Christian high schools to offer dual enrollment programs on

their campuses for their students. We value these partnerships, for we share a common mission with these Christian high schools. As well, these students engage with our faculty and can readily matriculate into our programs once they graduate. We also are connecting with area community colleges to offer their graduates an affordable, streamlined process into our bachelor's degree programs at an additional urban location and our KuyperWorks off-campus work placements.

4. Student Success Coach program—Last academic year, and in virtual form only, we implemented the Student Success Coach program, which partners students with trained student success coaches to provide them with peer mentoring and accountability opportunities so that they can work through their academic, emotional, social, and spiritual challenges together. This year we've expanded this program and trained new student success coaches who have been able to meet in person with all of our first-year students and many other students. We are realizing very good results in student engagement and retention. The staff and faculty involved in this program had the opportunity to present our Student Success Coach program to other Bible colleges nationwide through our accrediting body, the Association for Biblical Higher Education, and we are assisting several of these colleges as they implement similar programs.
5. College-wide spiritual formation—One of our core values calls for being a caring community where mentoring, mutual care, accountability, and encouragement are characteristic of students, faculty, and staff. These past two years, this value has proven to be vital while enduring the strain of challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic. Our Student Development staff and faculty have meaningfully engaged our community in a variety of intentional spiritual formation opportunities, through the weekly public reading of Scripture, a shared daily prayer app, worship nights, chapel services, and a study on the book *Church Forsaken* as we consider the ministry of presence. These shared experiences have revitalized our spirits and strengthened our relationships with God, Scripture, and one another.
6. Campus improvements—Kuyper College's campus is both beautiful and functional. To ensure that it continues to be so, we have a short- and long-range facilities and maintenance improvement plan in place. Over the past year we have been able to accomplish a number of upgrades, some due to the COVID-19 related funds we received from the federal government. Significant investment has been made in technology and furnishings in classrooms, dorm rooms, and offices and in the launch of a new website to better support our students, faculty, staff, and broader community. As well, we replaced all our major HVAC systems and the roofs on our campus buildings and residences, and we resurfaced our parking lots. Additionally, a new campus-wide, camera-driven security system was installed to ensure that Kuyper continues to be a safe and secure college campus.
7. Community engagement—We are deeply thankful for the support and involvement of our board, alumni, and broader community. While we missed the opportunity again in 2021 to hold our annual Spring Gala, due

to the coronavirus pandemic, we were delighted to hold our first Carnival at the Ballpark, bringing together young and old from within our broader community to enjoy food, fun, and fellowship. This community validates our mission through their generous financial and prayer support, shown through successfully meeting our annual fund goals, providing scholarships to our students, and purchasing new Bibles for our chapel as a Giving Tuesday initiative.

At Kuyper College we are preparing students to be **ready** for their careers, **rooted** in a biblical, Reformed worldview, and **called** by God to serve every square inch within the church and the world. To accomplish these outcomes, we place a high value on providing our students with a solid biblical and theological foundation, relevant internship placements, student success coaches, positions in our KuyperWorks program, and numerous opportunities to develop leadership skills and cultural competencies. As well, we value being a college that is accredited at the highest levels, affirming our commitment to excellence and integrity. At the heart of our college is our authentic, caring community. We are intentional about providing extraordinary levels of personal attention in professional ways to our students, staff, and faculty so that together we can realize our end goal of education—to live faithfully for Jesus Christ in God’s good world.

As we focus on the book of Philippians this year as a college community, these words from Paul express our relationship with the CRCNA denomination and CRC congregations: “[We] always pray with joy because of [our] partnership in the gospel” (Phil. 1:4-5). Thank you for your continued affirmation of our mission and of the work we are doing, together, to serve Christ’s church and his world.

Kuyper College  
Patricia R. Harris, president

## Redeemer University

Greetings from Redeemer University! We are thankful for this opportunity to share with you the exciting ways that God has been at work at Redeemer this past year.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continued to play a significant role in the 2021-22 academic year at Redeemer University. Redeemer continued to offer a choice for students to participate in classes either in person or remotely. The decision to offer this choice for students between synchronous remote and in-person learning allowed for flexibility at a time when there was still uncertainty about the future of the pandemic. Additionally, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities announced in late August that all Ontario universities would be required to implement a vaccine policy to be able to operate in-person classes. Students who could not show proof of vaccination had to be tested weekly for COVID-19 in order to attend classes in person.

This fall, we welcomed the largest incoming class in Redeemer's history. A total of 1,014 students chose to enroll in Redeemer's unique offering of Christian university education that integrates faith, life, and learning. With the growth of Redeemer's student body, there are many opportunities ahead.

We also continue to move forward with Redeemer's Strategic Plan 2020-2025, "Learn. Forward."—and many of the plan's initiatives are being realized. For example, the Charis Live and Learn Centre is now open and being used for classroom space and student housing. The building will help to accommodate the steady growth in enrollment and will ensure that Redeemer can continue its mission on a modern and spiritually vibrant campus.

Another strategic initiative involved the renovation and rebranding of the Redeemer bookstore. The bookstore's new name, 21Five, and fresh brand link to the wider mission of the university, making it unique to Redeemer while still appealing to a larger community interested in merchandise and literature from the Reformed tradition. The new name is a reference to Revelation 21:5: "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new.'" This is fitting for an institution where faculty are engaged in teaching, research, and learning that reflects a Christian worldview. Faculty publications are at the heart of the store's new ethos, and they reflect Redeemer's mission to provide an education that prepares students to be kingdom-centered thinkers and innovators.

This academic year will see a second cohort of graduates receive the bachelor of business administration (BBA) degree. The BBA is more readily recognized as a business degree than as a bachelor of arts (BA) by employers, professional associations, and graduate schools. Seeing the first cohort of BBA graduates receive their degree is a fulfillment of Redeemer's strategic effort to expand degrees and accreditations in order to ensure student and graduate success. The expansion of degree offerings is a key component of the strategic plan. Students in Ontario now have the unique opportunity to study business from a Christian perspective grounded in a liberal arts and sciences approach, and to receive a BBA after successfully doing that.

While we look forward to a post-pandemic time in which students have the opportunity to engage fully in all the activities a university has to offer, we are not without immense gratitude for how God has led us and provided for us during this season. We remain ever thankful for the dedicated

financial and prayer support that the CRCNA denomination continues to provide to Redeemer University.

Redeemer University  
David Zietsma, president

## Trinity Christian College

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update to synod on behalf of Trinity Christian College, particularly during these remarkable times of great change, discord, and pandemic. Throughout our six-decade history, we have valued our relationship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Quite literally, without the CRC and key leaders within it, Trinity would never have come into existence.

Beyond those founding moments, Trinity remains grateful for support from CRC congregations to advance our mission of providing a distinctive Christian higher education experience at Trinity. We cherish the students from CRC families who select Trinity as their college. We relish the opportunities to be in partnership with the CRC in a variety of ways—from hosting classis and denominational meetings, to serving as a resource for local congregations, to preparing students to be leaders in the church. Trinity’s partnership with the CRC is valuable and, we believe, mutually beneficial!

We are a blessed and young institution, grateful to God (and to God’s people) for the providential hand that has guided us through good times and bad, over mountaintops and through valleys.

And what an impact Trinity continues to have! Consider, for example, these examples of external indicators of recognized excellence:

- Our nursing program is ranked number 1 among all college and university programs in the state of Illinois (with 100% passage rates in six of the past seven years on the national licensure exams).
- A top-20 nationally ranked education program
- Top CPA passage rates among Illinois universities
- A nearly 100 percent medical-school placement rate
- A 98 percent post-graduation placement rate for vocations or graduate study
- A partnership—along with six other institutions such as the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, the University of Illinois, and Loyola University—at North America’s largest and the world’s top-ranked technology start-up incubator, 1871

We are much more than a “historically denominationally affiliated” college. Rather, we cherish and seek to strengthen our fidelity to our historic mission. Our curricular offerings and faculty teach from a Reformed Christian worldview (as has always been the case). Our students are increasingly diverse—recognizing that the Reformed Christian perspective is not the province of any particular ethnic, socioeconomic, or national background. We seek to be a faithful institution translating a timeless mission into the contemporary vernacular.

We know that while the ultimate matters of faith and mission transcend time, the world in 2022 is very different than it was even a few years ago, let alone more than 60 years ago. Trinity needs to constantly pursue purposeful, intentional adaptations that allow it to be particularly attuned to its mission in our present time—just as Trinity has been particularly attuned to its mission at every point in its history. This calls for connecting the *who* and *why* we are with the *where* and *when* we are.

In a post-Christian and significantly polarized world, this task has never been more challenging—nor more necessary. If Trinity, and places like it, do not do this work, who will? Where and from whom will students learn breadth and depth of the Christian faith, how to engage with culture and transform it, or what a faithful witness in “every square inch” of the world looks like if not for Trinity and places like it?

These are the serious questions we wrestle with on a near-daily basis. Surely similar questions are being asked in denominational meetings and CRC congregational gatherings across the continent.

God can and will do what he chooses to do. I firmly believe, however, that God’s plan for places like Trinity is for a greater reach instead of a lesser one; it is for a larger impact, rather than a smaller one. In this I also believe that God is calling us all to a serious and earnest assessment of who we are, what we should become, how we travel that path, and where our priorities must lie. Every significantly impactful institution of higher education—from Yale to Stanford, Duke to Vanderbilt—was at one time young and earnest, just as Trinity is today.

Can you catch a vision for what our Reformed colleges and universities might do with a larger and thicker circle of faithfulness: faithfulness in mission, in education, in spiritual formation, in prayer, in resources, in support? Who among us is so bold as to limit God’s purposes for these places?

How might we, in our time and place, get in on a similar expansive God-given vision for Christian higher education—a vision that works in partnership with congregations and denominational partners? These are pivotal months and years for our churches and for our colleges. May those who come after us recognize our sacrificial commitment toward an effective and faithful witness to God’s good work in this world.

Now is the time, like never before, to invest in us and to pray for us. And, in return, we will endeavor to be faithful witnesses to the broader world, incubators for future leadership in our congregations and denomination, and places of serious Christian formation and teaching.

Thank you again for your partnership with and support of Trinity Christian College. We are a better and more faithful place because of our cherished relationship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Trinity Christian College  
Kurt D. Dykstra, president



# STUDY COMMITTEE



**Report Outline**

**I. Introduction**

**II. Preamble**

- A. *Good sex*
- B. *Current context*
- C. *The church's response*

**III. A biblical theology of human sexuality**

- A. *Introduction: Matthew 19*
- B. *Creation: Genesis 1-2*
- C. *Fall: Genesis 3*
- D. *Redemption: The Old Testament*
- E. *Redemption: The New Testament*

**IV. Note on science and general revelation**

**V. Pornography: Cultural Context**

- A. *Current context*
- B. *Effects of pornography*

**VI. Pornography: Scripture**

- A. *Violence*
- B. *Exploitation of the poor*
- C. *Racism*
- D. *Sexual sin*
- E. *Creation restored, relationships redeemed*

**VII. Pornography: Pastoral care**

- A. *Pastoral care for the whole congregation*
- B. *Practical next steps*
- C. *Mission*
- D. *In conclusion*
- E. *Selected resources*

**VIII. Gender identity: Cultural context**

- A. *Introduction*
- B. *Use of terms*
- C. *Questions of worldview*
- D. *Gender dysphoria*
- E. *Disorders of sex development*
- F. *Implications of worldview*

**IX. Gender identity: Scripture**

- A. *Genesis 1-2*
- B. *Matthew 19:11-12*
- C. *Testimony of Paul*

**X. Gender identity: Pastoral care**

- A. *What is pastoral care, and who is responsible for it?*
- B. *Goals of pastoral care*

- C. *Care for those with gender dysphoria or who identify as transgender and their families—adults and children*
- D. *Care for those with Disorder of Sex Development (DSD)*
- E. *Selected resources*

**XI. Homosexuality: Cultural context**

- A. *A word about language*
- B. *Context*

**XII. Homosexuality: Scripture**

- A. *Introduction*
- B. *The testimony of the Old Testament*
- C. *The testimony of Jesus*
- D. *The testimony of Paul*
- E. *Additional revisionist claims*
- F. *The testimony of progressive voices*
- G. *Conclusion of the biblical evidence*

**XIII. Homosexuality: Pastoral care**

- A. *A word to congregations*
- B. *A word to church leaders*
- C. *A word to church members who are attracted to the same sex*
- D. *Selected resources*

**XIV. Reflections on singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, and divorce**

- A. *Singleness*
- B. *Premarital sex and cohabitation*
- C. *Polyamory*
- D. *Divorce*
- E. *Selected resources*

**XV. Sexual desire: Bodies, bonding, and boundaries in the Song of Songs**

- A. *Song of Songs helps us recover a theology of the body rooted in creation and resurrection theology*
- B. *The poem addresses the intense longing we feel for a beloved when we are apart*
- C. *The song focuses on the uniqueness and value of the beloved one*
- D. *This poetry highlights equity between female and male lovers*
- E. *Exclusivity of sexual love*
- F. *In the song, God sings the intensity of God's love for us*

**XVI. Confessional status**

- A. *The confessional status of church teaching on sexuality*
- B. *Conclusion*

**XVII. Recommendations**

**Appendices**

Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications

## I. Introduction

Synod 2016, in response to multiple overtures, adopted the following:

That synod appoint a new study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin.

- a. In addition to these broad outlines, the study will include the following three components:
  - 1) Discussion outlining how a Reformed hermeneutic does or does not comport with readings of Scripture being employed to endorse what are, for the historic church, ground-breaking conclusions regarding human sexual behavior and identification.
  - 2) Dialogue with, and potential critique of, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies.
  - 3) Reflection and evaluation of whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider
    - changing the main text of Church Order Article 69 (see Overtures 18, 19, 20, 21, 31, 38).
    - declaring a *status confessionis* (see Overture 16).
    - appointing a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith, perhaps in the style of the Contemporary Testimony, on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the teachings and conclusions of the report (see Overture 28).

(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 919-20)

- b. The committee will be constituted of up to twelve individuals, CRC members who represent diversity in gender, ethnicity, binationality, and ministry location, and who adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships. These individuals will be gifted and suited for this task. . . .
- c. That synod provide the study committee with a five-year window to complete their task, such that the committee will present their final report to Synod 2021. In consideration of this extended time frame, a written summary of the committee's work will be provided by February 1, 2019, for inclusion in the *Agenda for Synod 2019* in order for Synod 2019 to dialogue with and provide feedback to the committee.

*Grounds:*

- 1) The scope of the task assigned to the committee needs more time to be completed than the typical three-year window allows.
- 2) The consideration of *status confessionis* is a weighty matter that requires extended and careful deliberation.

(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 926-27)

The following people were appointed to the committee: Rev. Mary-Lee Bouma, Pastor Charles Kim, Rev. Jose Rayas, Rev. Paula Seales, Dr. Matthew Tuininga, Dr. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (as *promotor fidei*), Dr. Mary Vanden Berg, Dr. Jim Vanderwoerd, Mr. Rick Van Manen, Dr. Jeff Weima, and Dr. Al Wolters. In an effort to represent the types of diversity noted in item b of the mandate, these eleven members include persons from the following groups: an African American pastor, a Hispanic pastor, a Korean pastor, three faculty members from Calvin Theological Seminary, a same-sex attracted person, a chaplain, a philosopher, and a social scientist.

At its first meeting in October 2016, the committee chose Drs. Weima and Wolters as cochairs, Dr. Tuininga as reporter, and Dr. Vanderwoerd as recording secretary. Mr. Van Manen resigned from the committee in February 2018 after accepting an academic position in South Korea. After consultation with the denominational executive director, the committee decided not to replace him.

In carrying out its mandate, the committee as a whole met on the following dates: October 21-22, 2016; February 3-4, June 2-3, October 20-21, 2017; February 16-17, June 15-16, October 19-20, 2018; February 1-2, June 21-22, October 25-26, 2019; January 31-February 1, 2020. With two exceptions, these meetings took place at Calvin Theological Seminary until February 2020. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee met by Zoom on June 13, July 30, August 20, and September 11, 2020.

At four of our meetings we set aside time to interact with people in specialized ministries or life situations whose input we sought. On October 21, 2017, we spoke with three CRC-related members of sexual minorities, as well as with Dr. Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, executive director of Generous Space Ministries. On June 18, 2018, we spoke with two representatives of the CRC's Chaplaincy and Care Ministry, and on October 20, 2018, with two CRC university chaplains. On May 28, 2020, we met via Zoom with a FtM (female to male) transgender person and his father.

In fulfillment of item c of our mandate, we submitted an interim report to Synod 2019 (see *Agenda for Synod 2019*, pp. 403-44; *Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 716-17). Three of our members (Mary-Lee Bouma, Matt Tuininga, and Jeff Weima) were present to facilitate discussions at table groups to solicit feedback. Each table group provided written feedback, which was collected and sent to our committee. In addition, we received email feedback from approximately forty-five persons. We reviewed this feedback as part of our work on the final report.

Dr. Tuininga participated extensively in the committee's work, but he withdrew from the committee before that work was complete. He affirms that the sections of the report summarizing biblical teaching on human sexuality and its confessional status are accurate. However, he believes the pastoral care sections fail to provide the church with much-needed guidance on how to discipline erring members with love and grace and incorporate them into the sacramental community of the body of Christ.

## II. Preamble

The following are specific stories of actual people in our churches, whose names have been changed to protect identity.

During Sunday worship, Lisa,<sup>\*1</sup> 45, wonders how church members would react if they knew she and her husband, Andrew,<sup>\*</sup> each have deep personal relationships with other people that include sexual intimacy, now that they practice polyamory. She and Andrew know that many biblical figures were polygamous, and the couple believe Jesus preached an ethic of love. They realize they cannot meet all of each other's needs and are happy to have discovered deeper love with more people.

<sup>1</sup> \*The names of the people in these stories have been changed to protect identity.

In another CRC congregation Rebecca,\* 36, thanks God that her pastor is preaching a sermon series on sex. She had heard only silence from the church about how to follow Jesus as a sexually healthy woman who is not married. Through seeing a counselor, Rebecca has finally experienced some healing from the shame she's felt about a strange childhood experience and her subsequent use of porn. Many of her single Christian friends of all ages are sexually active, whether never married, divorced, or in serially monogamous relationships. She wishes these things had been talked about in her CRC congregations.

From childhood Joshua,\* 13 (or Jessica,\* as Joshua identifies internally), liked dancing, singing, and pretty colors; found the games, clothes, and aggressiveness of most other boys unappealing; and was hurt by their mockery. People in church often separate boys from girls in activities and groups and seem nervous about Joshua's differences. Joshua/Jessica thinks God might have created the wrong body.

Olivia,\* 19, believes that most people in her church assume she is gay and knows that some are supportive of gay marriage. She would like to have a sexual relationship with a woman, but so far she has not done so because she has read Bible passages that seem to condemn it. She is confused about what the church and the Bible teach. She loves Jesus and wants to do the right thing. She has never met another gay Christian who is celibate.

Tomas,\* 48, is one of the few Christian men he knows who never use porn. Deeply respectful of his wife and daughter as fellow imagebearers of God, Tomas longs for the church to help his brothers in Christ reject the cultural expectation to treat women as objects for sexual pleasure.

Noah,\* 26, has always been sexually attracted to men. Most of his Christian university friends were not gay, but they supported each other to live faithfully with their sexuality. Noah discovered that these believers were also ashamed of many of their desires, and he had felt joy in encouraging them and in their praying for each other. Together they had learned about suffering for obedience. But it doesn't feel comfortable to talk about his sexuality in his new church, even though Noah chooses to be celibate. He thinks he could be helpful to other younger believers as they struggle with their sexual identity and hopes that will soon be possible.

Madison,\* 16, wants to have a boyfriend. But all the girls she knows who have boyfriends get pressured to send naked selfies and to have sex with them. One classmate has started threatening her that he will spread rumors about her if she does not give him a blow job. He is the one the parents like best because he is a leader in the church youth group. She knows that her teachers suspect some of these things, but her parents have no idea what these teens are doing or thinking.

#### A. *Good sex*

God made sex, and, like everything God made, sexual intimacy was designed as a very good thing. The two accounts in the Genesis creation narrative, along with the passionate Song of Songs, reveal God's intention for women and men to come together sexually to populate the earth and to enjoy each other deeply in exclusive physical intimacy.

We are physical creatures, and good sex is full of pleasure and play. Our desire for sexual satisfaction draws us to another, and God fashioned our bodies to respond to a lover's touch with delight, enjoyment, and amusement. In sex, our senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch are all engaged, and the intensity of arousal and release is unique to sex. The strongly positive response of our bodies to desired sexual stimulus is clear evidence that God meant for sex to feel good. In distinction from some other religious traditions, the Bible highlights the goodness of the body. After creating the earth and the first human beings, God proclaimed his creation very good. Jesus was born human, and in his glorified body he sits at the right hand of the Father as the incarnate God. The Bible teaches the resurrection of the body, and the church has confessed it ever since. God intended the physical sexual act to bring pleasure, and we can assume that God takes joy in our enjoyment of it.

Because God constructed human beings as body and spirit, the sexual act also has spiritual significance and emotional weight. Sex always creates a bond between those participating in it, whether they intend it to or not. This is why good sex is exclusive sex. Couples can open themselves fully to each other when there is no need for self-protection and no fear of abandonment or rejection. The vulnerability of exposing the naked body during sex creates trust and draws a couple into intimacy. An appreciative gaze and gentle caress heals the shame individuals might feel about their bodies or past sexual experiences. The response of a thrilled or welcoming lover encourages the exposure of the naked self. Mutually enjoyable sex helps in the rebuilding of broken relationships. Sexual release even brings relaxation and can result in renewed energy for work.

The exclusive bond that sexual activity engenders explains why God analogizes his relationship with Israel to that of a lover with the beloved and compares the marriage of a man and a woman to the union of Christ as the bridegroom of the church, his bride. Just as we are God's beloved and God is ours, so a woman and man in marriage are meant to belong to each other and only to each other.

#### *B. Current context*

But in a sinful world God's good gift of sexuality is tainted. Although God created women and men to be physically attracted to each other, throughout history humans have sinned and been sinned against sexually. Our selfish treatment of others or their treatment of us leaves us with shame, anger, hurt, or fear of intimacy, or it causes us to withdraw.

As powerful as sex is, its misuses can be brutally destructive. The past few years include ongoing international scandals of the Roman Catholic Church covering up for sexually abusive priests; the emergence of the #MeToo movement as women have begun to speak openly about violent assault and constant low-key sexual harassment in every arena; a #ChurchToo response in which prominent pastors are accused of sexual misconduct and systemic abuse of power; and a multibillion-dollar sex industry built on global sex trafficking that is steadily increasing, largely due to the ubiquitous use of online porn.

Perhaps nothing in North American culture has changed more rapidly and dramatically than sexual mores. The now common language of "hooking

up” and “friends with benefits” testifies to the common occurrence of casual sex between friends or acquaintances. The use of pornography by younger people is assumed, couples who marry without having had sex beforehand are deemed unusual, and most couples live together before marriage, if they marry at all. Gay relationships are accepted, and nearly everyone has friends or family members who are gay. Gay, lesbian, and transgender characters in TV and film are standard. Adults and children identify as transgender. Even the vocabulary describing sexuality and gender has changed from *biological sex*, to *sex* and *gender*, to *gender* only, with biological sex negotiable. New federal laws permit same-sex marriage (Canada, 2005; United States, 2015) and prohibit discrimination based on gender expression or identity (Canada, 2017). News constantly breaks regarding school policies, local laws, and personal stories from and about transgender children and adults.

At the same time, we swim in an ocean of sexual images. Sexual imagery, sexual language, and sexual comedy surround us. Wave after wave of sexual expectation and promise washes over us. The movies we watch, the books we read, and the media we consume feed expectations and assumptions about the enviable sex lives of others. They tell us that single people are having lots of sex and that married people constantly struggle to improve their sex lives. Yet some research shows that young people are having less sex than previous generations did, while numerous studies indicate that fully wired 21st-century humans feel increasingly lonely.<sup>2</sup>

In consequence, many of us have questions about sexuality or about the church’s response to changing realities:

- Why is the church so uptight about sex?
- If my boy / girlfriend and I are committed to each other, why do we need the church’s blessing on our relationship before we live together?
- Why doesn’t the church talk about sexual violence against women, since the news is full of it?
- How do I help my daughter, who says she is really a boy? Does the Bible say anything about being transgender?
- Can we trust church leaders about sex when the church has as much sexual abuse as every other organization?
- The gay couples I know seem happier than most of the straight couples I know, so how can their love not be from God?
- Why can’t the church just be loving and accepting, the way God is?

### C. *The church’s response*

Instead of being salt and light to the world, embodying for our neighbors joyful sexual wholeness in communities of loving marriages and friendships, we in the Christian Reformed Church have been as susceptible to the lures of the evil one as has the rest of the Western church. The more that culture disconnects sexual activity from marriage, the more quaint or even bizarre Jesus’ teaching on celibate singleness or lifelong monogamous marriage seems to us. The historic teaching of the church feels unnecessarily restrictive or difficult. Sexual relationships outside of marriage have become common in the church, whether before marriage or after divorce or widowhood.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Twenge, R. A. Sherman, and B. E. Wells, “Declines in Sexual Frequency among American Adults, 1989-2014,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46.8 (Nov. 2017), pp. 433-40.

Divorce, sexual abuse, and pornography use are only marginally less common in the church than they are outside.

Tragically, the church's response to the confusion, questions, and sexual turbulence of a desperate world, and even of its hurting members, has often been silence. Whether because we are caught in our own hidden sexual sins, unsure whether God's grace actually has power, or we are afraid to speak unpopular or unaffirming words, we have not offered the healing words of the gospel of grace to fellow sinners.

Although John 1:14 tells us that "grace *and* truth" came with Jesus Christ, when the church *does* speak about sex, it often abandons one or the other. Jesus told the judgmental and hypocritical Pharisees to go and learn mercy, saying, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17, NRSV). With words and by consistent example, Jesus taught his followers to seek out sinners and to welcome all who came to him to be his followers. Tragically, many in the church loudly denounce certain less-common sexual sins while overlooking those sexual sins commonly committed by the majority. Others of us show kindness and welcome to all, humbly acknowledging that all alike need God's forgiving grace, yet without calling confused and needy sinners to repent and follow Jesus in sexual holiness. Sometimes we then condemn one another for failing to demonstrate love or speak truth as we understand it. Our sin leads to division.

1. Yes, we have failed each other.

- a. We have not helped each other to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . . who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:1-2). We have neglected to confess our sins "to one another, and pray for one another," that we might be healed (James 5:16). We have forgotten to "let the Word of Christ dwell in [us] richly" and to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col. 3:16). The old have not modeled glorifying God with their bodies or taught the young how and why to resist temptation in their bodies. We have privileged sex and marriage, failing to encourage, support, or offer models of kingdom service to those of us who are single or called to celibacy.
- b. Instead, in our sexual practices, the church has frequently been indistinguishable from the world around us. Rather than honoring marriage and keeping "the marriage bed . . . undefiled" (Heb. 13:4), we have taken sexual partners casually or have not married those with whom we live in sexually intimate relationships. We have not helped the young reject the cultural norm of treating sexual intimacy as a skill to be practiced in dating relationships. We have ignored our ubiquitous pornography use, treating it as a personal problem for individuals, failing to see its complicity in systemic commercial endeavors that de-grade and exploit women, denigrate the human body, and destroy the possibility of sexual intimacy. Not daring to ask difficult questions of estranged spouses, nor caring enough to walk with couples experiencing marital struggles, we have made divorce common.

c. Meanwhile, the wider community has sinned against the few. Out of fear, discomfort or self-righteousness, we have grossly mistreated persons among us who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender with mockery, derision, or harsh denunciation. These attitudes and actions have driven many brothers and sisters out of the church. Much like the culture around us, the church has alternated between derision and condemnation toward these believers, making it impossible for those of us who are same-sex attracted or who experience gender dysphoria to learn how to follow Jesus while openly sharing our struggles. The time has come to publicly and privately admit the pain and the alienation that have resulted from these sinful actions and attitudes.

The church is facing a crisis of gospel proportions. Our failure to be salt and light through love, sexuality, marriage, friendship, and mutual accountability has deeply compromised our witness to the gospel. We are not facing just one problem, or even two or three. Our whole way of life has fallen out of step with the Spirit and with the teaching of Scripture, and all of us must be called to account. And yet in this very realization we have the opportunity, together, to repent. We have the opportunity to reexamine our lives and our communities, to confess the sins we have committed against each other, and to call one another back to the costly path of loving discipleship. By following this path, we once again can find hope and offer hope to a desperate, broken world.

Indeed, let us confess our sin together:

*Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you with our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, by what we have done and what we have left undone. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.*

*God, our Righteousness, we devalue the bodies you have created, and we exploit those made in your image for our own pleasure. We foster the lust that comes from our hearts by using pornography and closing our eyes to its use among others. We defile our bodies, which are your temple, Holy Spirit, by uniting sexually with those to whom we are not married. We have not fled sexual immorality, as you have commanded us.*

*We do not trust in your power, generous God, to reconcile our broken marriages, giving up on our spouses and on one another through divorce and re-marriage. We refuse to deny ourselves sexually, unwilling to undergo the cost of discipleship as you transform us by the renewal of our minds. We forget, Jesus, that you sympathize with us because you were tempted in all ways as we are and yet were without sin. We neglect to remind each other to go boldly to your throne of grace to receive mercy in our time of need. We do not hold one another accountable.*

*Formed by the culture around us, we put our individual selves, our careers, and our families above the kingdom of God. We make marriage a mechanism for our own pursuit of happiness rather than submitting to it as a calling from you for a man and a woman to unite together in reflection of Christ's union with his church. We neglect the good gift of community you have given us. Instead of being true family, we offer little or no support to single people, whether straight or gay, in living celibate lives. Instead of confessing our sins*

*and praying for each other, we live in unrepentant sin. Good Shepherd, we have let the little ones fall. We have not lived as one body.*

*Omniscient God, who sees what is done in secret, we recognize that we ridicule and fear the LGBTQ among us. We admit that we drive our sisters and brothers away. We acknowledge that, like the Pharisee with the tax collector, we scorn and criticize the temptations that are not ours. We confess that we overlook the sexual sins of the majority while harshly judging those of the lesbian and gay minority. We do not show the love and hospitality of Jesus to people whom we deem worse sinners.*

*Light of the world, teach us to walk from darkness into the light of communion with each other and with you. Take away our shame as you show us how to live in honesty and in mutual dependence. Enable us to unite truth and grace together once again.*

*Resurrected Christ, thank you for advocating for us with the Father. Thank you, Redeemer, that you repair the broken and you use repentant sinners to show others your ways. Will you now give us joy, Creator, in the goodness of the bodies you made?*

*Cornerstone of the church, we ask you to build these living stones into a family who love one another deeply from the heart, who remind each other of your commands and your rich promises, and who reflect your glory to the world. Heal our divisions. Make us one body.*

## 2. Historic opportunity

God assures his people, “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19, NIV). In today’s historic moment of great change and of questioning old realities, standards, and teachings, God’s Spirit can lead us as a pillar of fire in the darkness. When we are weak, vulnerable, or weary, the Shepherd tenderly picks up the lambs and “carries them close to his heart” while gently leading “those that have young” (Isa. 40:11).

*A new-old way.* It turns out that the new way is also the way of our spiritual ancestors. “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way lies, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jer. 6:16). What are the next steps as we journey toward sexual wholeness?

- a. If we intend to journey with all of our Christian Reformed brothers and sisters, the church will have to learn from those of us who are not attracted to the opposite sex or do not fit culturally determined gender roles.

These believers can often alert the church to the unbiblical notion that marriages and families are the core of the church. The first-century writers tell us that Christ’s church is not a collection of biological families but a new family of Jesus’ followers. Since more gay and lesbian people spend at least some portion of their adult lives single, they can help us live into this reality.

Helpfully, too, those who do not fit culturally prescribed male and female roles are more able to point out the falseness of the polarity our world assumes between men and women. They can help the whole church see where it wrongly follows the world in setting women and men against each other and slotting people into stereotypical

gender roles. Implicitly or explicitly, the church often teaches unbiblical models of manhood or womanhood, while God commands all to pattern themselves after Jesus, the one who is tender, strong, humble, bold, sacrificial, and courageous. Those who differ from the cultural norms have had to struggle to discover this on their own. Having learned to concentrate on following Jesus' example, they can now help the church be reminded of this truth.

b. Affirm our primary identity as brothers and sisters.

One body in Christ, we are united with each other in a bond of family. Our life circumstances vary significantly, and we are indeed poor and wealthy, wives and husbands, gay and straight, and of many different ethnicities. Yet, by the cross, "in his flesh," Jesus has "broken down the dividing wall . . . between us" (Eph. 2:14, NRSV), and we must live into our fundamental identity as saints, sisters and brothers, fellow citizens in God's kingdom. We must treat this family as family. Every believer must defend, help, assist, endure, and suffer with our spiritual sisters and brothers as we would with our family of origin.

c. Live as forgiven and forgiving sinners.

In his teaching about forgiveness in the prayer he taught us to pray, Jesus made clear that sisters and brothers would continue to be both sinners and sinned against, and that we should offer grace as freely as we receive it. As Reformed believers who confess the depravity of our natures, we know that every believer will not only be tempted but also succumb to temptation and sin. While supporting each other in the "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14), we should also treat each other as fellow sinners in constant need of encouragement, forgiveness, and mercy.

d. Take up the cross.

The narrow way that leads to life is the way of the cross, which means death to self. Peter, John, and Paul remind their hearers that although they once lived like the nations around them in sexual indulgence and abandonment, they have been made new. Repeatedly the apostles encourage the early church in a radical new way of living that was clearly just as baffling to their contemporaries as it is to ours. Choosing to carry the cross means choosing actions that are countercultural and frequently scorned or despised by the world around us. Doing what is right, whether standing up against injustice or being celibate except within the covenant of marriage, is risky and often costly.

e. Be physically present.

The church has erred, fallen, and failed. Wonderfully, however, it is through the church that God's healing power flows. The community of those being saved—variously pictured as the good shepherd's flock, living stones built on the cornerstone into a spiritual house, and the family of God—is one body. None of us follows Jesus alone but as a member of the family. And because the corporate body of Christ is also the corporeal family of God, sinners damaged by sexual sin done in or to their bodies can be healed as fellow sinners comfort, feed, house, embrace, or simply play with them on a regular basis. Spiritually

exploring sinners can walk with recovering sinners who follow Jesus as they volunteer in the neighborhood, pray before their dinner, or play with their children.

### 3. Hope

Since the Jesus way is the way of the cross, and it is the narrow way that leads to life, it is only in regular physical community that we can trust each other enough to be honest about our weaknesses and care enough for each other to help. Across the continent, CRC communities of Jesus-followers are supporting each other in following Jesus as celibate singles or monogamous married couples. Here are a few of their stories.

Brittany,<sup>3</sup> 29 (white), loves her Christian roommates but feels a bit lonely and baffled as they each begin to have sex with their boyfriends. A serious Christian, Brittany is also generous and spontaneous, and her work colleagues love to hang out with her. Her church encourages its members to spend time with friends and neighbors who are not yet Christians. With some church friends, she hosts dinners and invites friends from different religious traditions, and she encourages conversations about Jesus and life's questions. Her new friends respect her sexual ethics and often ask her to pray for them and give them advice. To stay spiritually strong, she finds herself gratefully relying on times of intimate prayer in pairs during Sunday worship and the close friendships she has built with other believers.

Newly divorced, William,\* 65 (white), is drawn to escorts whom he sometimes picks up when he drives for Uber to make some extra cash. He cares for them and prays for them but also gradually acknowledges that he really wants to have sex with them. In his church, people honestly share their temptations and struggles with each other during worship, in small groups, and when they are serving in their neighborhood. It is not easy for William to be honest about this, but when he is, other sisters and brothers pray for him and begin to call and text to support him. His church also raises money to stop human trafficking, and he learns to see how the women he has met on the street were groomed for the sex industry.

Various lesbian and gay individuals and couples (white, Asian, and Latino) participate in New Life CRC.\* Some are Jesus-followers; others are spiritually seeking. Meanwhile, longtime church member Michelle, 45 (white), has quietly lived with a female lover—a member of a different church. Michelle becomes friends with a new church member who left her own lover to follow Jesus. Amazed at the honest conversations they have about life and sexuality, Michelle finds herself cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus. To participate more fully in church life, Michelle rearranges her work travel schedule as a regional nurse; she begins introducing the pastor and others from church to friends and colleagues. Some months later, she tells her life partner that she can no longer be her lover but plans to stay in the relationship since her partner is now elderly.

<sup>3</sup> \*Name changed to protect identity.

When Walter,\* 61 (black), was in his thirties and one of the most faithful members of the church choir and the church adult education program, he dared tell only one person in church that he deeply longed for sexual intimacy with a man. Over the years, this woman listened as he expressed his rage, grief, and hopelessness. A few times, discouragement and hopelessness overtook him. Although not knowing the reason for his despair, friends from his Christian community brought him food and helped him shower when he was isolated in his house, too depressed to cope. Finally, Walter decided to move to a bigger city, to find a Christian man to marry. In that new city, where he joined another CRC, he instead found a woman who delighted in him and who chose to share his life. After good counseling, they married, and they surrounded themselves with other Jesus-followers with whom they share honestly but also reach out as others have reached out to them.

Desperate for someone to understand, and scared to death, new believer Emily,\* 22 (white), tells her pastor she wants to transition to being a man but doesn't know how she could fit into the church. Knowing that Emily has very little money and is looking for work, her pastor, Amanda,\* takes her to the thrift store to buy some pants and jackets she would feel more comfortable wearing. Some months later, Emily announces that she wants to go back to living as a woman. Amanda is puzzled and is not sure what Emily's future holds, but is glad that the church's acceptance of Emily communicated to her God's unconditional love and respect.

Joshua\* and Chloe,\* Korean Americans and new believers, were not raised in Christian families. But now that they are planning to marry, they want to live the Jesus Way together. It has not been easy remaining celibate before marriage or dealing with Joshua's ongoing commitment to resist the pornography that formerly dominated his life. But every year their church spends time in Sunday sermons and in more intimate settings discussing what it means to follow Jesus with regard to money, sex, and power. These discussions are lively because their church gatherings, large or small, are usually an interesting mix of believers, serious spiritual seekers, and people who just love the food and community. Unbelievers are initially surprised and baffled that Chloe and Joshua are not living together and in fact are not sexually involved with each other. But people are drawn to them, and Joshua and Chloe find that unbelievers are eager to talk with them about Jesus. Impressed by their openness for others, the trust between them, and their honesty about their own weaknesses, a few of their friends accept Jesus' invitation and join the Christian community.

#### 4. Mutual need

As individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination, the entire Christian Reformed Church has something in common. Despite the hurt, anger, division, and failure of the church, despite differences in perspectives and difficulties understanding and trusting each other, we have a mutual need for deep healing. The sexuality the Creator gave us, beautiful and intended for good, has brought sinful humans great pain. In great

compassion, Almighty God, our Wonderful Counselor, offers us not only forgiveness but also freedom from shame and restoration in holiness.

God provides that healing primarily through communities of people. By the God who lives in eternal loving community, we were created for the deep joy of physical human community. The whole Bible is a story of a community of people, whom God calls to show the world God's nature by living in just and loving relationships with God and each other. The Bible's writers reveal first to the nation of Israel and then later to their spiritual descendants how to live well in human community so as to reflect God to each other and the world.

For our own healing and for the sake of the world, God designed the church as a group of people who meet regularly to eat, play, and pray; who are honest about their failures and sins; and who therefore can sharpen each other "as iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17, NIV). As the church, we need to be people who meet not in homogeneous, segregated little groups but as single and married people together, young and old, rich and poor.

Mutually we need forgiveness and grace. Every one of us has been sinned against and has sinned sexually. All of us have exploited others and have been exploited sexually in some ways, whether through word, thought, or deed. Mutually we need sister-brother love to heal us of our distance and mistrust of each other. Mutually we need physical touch. Alienated from our bodies by living in the virtual reality of attention to our technological devices, we need the ordinary physical connections of eating with, playing with, and being affectionately touched by human sisters and brothers.

## 5. Mission together

Just as we have mutual need, the members of the CRC also have a mutual mission. Our physical communities are meant not only to heal the sin, shame, grief, and loneliness of believers but also to offer hope to skeptical and curious unbelievers. In a world where reconciliation is all too rare, the church should be filled with people in messy relationships with stories of hurt and forgiveness. In a culture of individualism, our churches can offer the hope of a different way, a way in which the older mentor the younger, single people and families enjoy one another, the poor and rich serve and learn together, and different ethnic groups seek to understand and appreciate one another. These relationships are unusual in our deeply divided world, and they model God's love to a world that yearns to believe true human community is possible.

The Christian Reformed Church has much to offer the millions who do not yet know Jesus. We are rooted in a tradition that gladly acknowledges the need to learn from the historic and global church as we seek to obey God in our sexuality. In each of our congregations, in various ethnic and economic contexts, the Christian Reformed Church has a living tradition of deep love for the Scriptures coupled with a willingness to engage courageously with the ideas of our time. Because we know the creator who made all things and the reconciler who brings all things together, we can create nurturing spaces for people wrestling with sexual identity, deep brokenness, long-term patterns of sin, and disconcerting cultural

changes. Resting in Jesus, our peace, we can provide safe harbor for restless explorers both within and outside the church.

The Holy Spirit leads. God pours out love and grace. May our desire to love one another and our neighbors increase, grounded in confidence that we “belong—body and soul . . . —to [our] faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1). May we learn anew to follow our Servant-King in the way of the cross, continually receiving and offering hope and healing.

### III. A biblical theology of human sexuality

#### A. Introduction: Matthew 19

Reformed theology reminds us that a good biblical theology follows the outline of the great moments of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Our Lord himself took this approach when the Pharisees asked him about what in their day was one of the divisive questions of sexual ethics. They asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3, NIV).

They were looking, perhaps, for a rule or a set of criteria. But Jesus’ response moved the discussion in an entirely different direction. He turned their attention to the creation account of Genesis 1-2: “Haven’t you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:4-6).

Jesus’ perspective, interestingly, does not begin with humanity in its fallen state. His mindset is not, first and foremost, one of accommodation of human sexual weakness. Rather, he grounds the ethic of marriage in the purposes of God from creation. It is just as significant that Jesus does not immediately point his hearers to the nature of human sexuality in the new creation. He understands sexuality in creational terms.

In fact, the Pharisees seem surprised by Jesus’ response. “‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’” (19:7). Jesus’ rejection of divorce rooted in his theology of creation seemed to call for a sexual ethic much more rigorous than that of the law. And he affirmed that this is, in fact, the case: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (19:8-9).

Jesus’ approach here is striking. He concedes that the law tolerated sinful behavior because of the *fall*. But he calls his disciples to a higher standard rooted in creation and redemption. The appeal to *creation* is found in his reference to the way it was at “the beginning.” The appeal to *redemption* comes in the form of Jesus’ assertion of his own messianic authority: “I tell you. . . .” The Lord of redemption and the Lord of creation are one and the same Lord.

The disciples, of course, quickly grasp that Jesus is calling them to practice a very difficult ethic. “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry,” they reason (19:10). And Jesus does not dispute the point. The cost of discipleship is high. The way of the cross is difficult.

It requires *grace*. He replies, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given” (19:11).

Jesus’ teaching here, it must immediately be observed, is difficult for conservatives and progressives alike. There is no deference to traditional ways of life. Jesus is not lifting up culturally accepted practices of marriage and family as the ideal for his disciples. On the contrary, he is calling his disciples to a kingdom ethic that is no less radical in the area of sexuality than it is in the area of wealth and poverty (see the story of the rich man in 19:16-26). But the reward—and here Jesus points to that ultimate moment of redemptive history, the *consummation*—is great. As he goes on to say later, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first” (19:29-30).

Who is willing to walk this path? All who would be Jesus’ disciples must count the cost. But we will not always have the luxury of choice. “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (19:12). The life of singleness—whether freely chosen or not—like that of marriage, requires one to depend on the grace of Christ.

Matthew 19 provides us with the outline of a biblical theology of human sexuality that comes from the lips of Jesus himself. It reveals the mind of Christ on a host of powerfully relevant questions ranging from the place of eunuchs (traditionally deemed sexually unclean) in the kingdom of God to the relationship between Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25 (which Jesus explicitly treats as one interdependent unit). It offers us a pattern for the renewing of our own minds, that we may “not conform to the pattern of this world,” but “be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2).

#### B. *Creation: Genesis 1-2*

The New Testament consistently points to Genesis 1-2 as the paradigm for human sexuality (see Matt. 19; 1 Cor. 6; Rom. 1; Eph. 5). Contemporary debates about evolution, the age of the earth, and the length of the days of creation often distract us from the central focus of the text, which is on God’s creative work of establishing order in the cosmos. By his word God divides those things that do not belong together: light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, water and dry land. The result is a creation that is good because it is orderly.

By his word God goes on to fill the heavens, the seas, and the dry land with governing lights, birds and fish, plants and animals. Ultimately he subjects all of this order to human beings, whom he calls to govern it on his behalf.

It is of the utmost significance that from the very beginning human beings are described in sexual terms as “male and female.” None of the animals are described in such terms. Within one sentence of God’s decision to create human beings in his image, that they might govern over his creation, we are told, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

The poetic structure of Genesis 1:27 indicates that humanity's creation as male and female is inextricably linked with humanity's creation in God's image. We image God not simply as generic human beings, who happen to be male and female, but as male and female human beings.

Indeed the designation of male and female points forward to the following verse: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Gen. 1:28). Here the humans are blessed with fertility and instructed to multiply, fill, and subdue. The humans are created in the image of God for the purpose of ruling the earth. The blessing of God will enable the realization of that rule.

It should be noted that the terms *male* and *female* clearly refer to biological sexuality, not merely to gender, although it is safe to say that the very distinction between sex and gender would be alien to the text in its ancient Near Eastern context. The point is that to be male is to possess male sexuality and to be female is to possess female sexuality, and that to exercise one or the other through procreation is essential to fulfilling God's creation mandate. In other words, it is quite clear, contrary to what some have more recently asserted, that God created human beings with binary, procreative sexuality. The suggestion that God created sexuality as a spectrum, with some human beings falling somewhere *in between* male and female, is not only foreign to the text but also contradicts the obvious meaning and significance of sexuality in the text. To read the notion of sexuality as a spectrum into Genesis 1:27 is to isolate that verse and rip it from its context.

While many biblical scholars point out that Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25 are separate creation accounts, their placement together at the beginning of Genesis requires us to interpret them in interaction with one another. Indeed, were we in doubt about this, Jesus' appeal to the two passages as one unit should lay our doubts to rest. It is not simply that Jesus quotes from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in the same sentence. It is that he explains the meaning of Genesis 2:24 by virtue of its relationship to Genesis 1:27. In Jesus' words, "At the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' [Gen. 1:27] and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' [Gen. 2:24]" (Matt. 19:4-5). Scripture interprets Scripture, and this is all the more the case when dealing with the same book of Scripture.

Human sexuality receives even more attention in Genesis 2 than it does in Genesis 1. God creates an isolated human being, *adam*. In contrast to the repeated "it is good" in Genesis 1, after placing the man in the garden in Genesis 2 God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18a). Drawing on Genesis 1, at least part of the problem is that on his own, the man cannot be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. So God determines to "make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18b). The word *helper* does not denote any sort of inferiority. God is quite often described as his people's helper with just this word. The word *suitable*, for its part, is a translation of the Hebrew word *kenegdo*, which is a compound of words meaning "like" and "opposite." In other words, the man needs a partner who is "like-his-opposite"—or *complementary*—to him.

While some prefer to emphasize the similarity of the partner, and others the difference, the text emphasizes both, and neither can be abandoned without doing damage to its basic purpose. Some scholars argue that the reason why it was not good for the man to be alone was that he lacked intimate companionship.<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2 certainly seems to strongly imply that need. But in the context of Genesis 1, the man is clearly lacking more than this. He cannot fulfill the creation mandate. Unlike the animals, he cannot procreate. He needs someone who is sexually “like-opposite” to him. Hence God creates the woman.

It is interesting that at this point, the Hebrew text first uses the gendered terms for *man* and *woman*. Now the man is *ish*, and the woman is *ishah*. The very words communicate similarity and difference, and the man exults when he sees the woman: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ [*ishah*], for she was taken out of man [*ish*]” (Gen. 2:23). This exultation appears in the context of the man and woman’s unabashed sexuality. The text goes out of its way to point out that they “were both naked, and they felt no shame” (2:25). Sexuality is good and rightly leads to exultation. It is only the fall that has rendered it a matter of shame, abuse, and suffering.

The text comments on Adam’s joyful exclamation with an explanatory verse that is quoted no less than three times in the New Testament (Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31): “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Sexual intimacy is intended for marriage. Just as a man is born from the marital union of his father and mother, so the man must now leave his parents in order to establish a new marital union of man and woman. This will be the ordinary means of propagating human life.

A few scholars have argued that the “one-flesh” union referred to in the text need not require sexual complementarity. At least one scholar claims that two partners might experience a one-flesh union in the sense of kinship rather than sexual complementarity. In other words, it is claimed that the text is merely saying that two persons might unite as one family.<sup>5</sup> However, this novel interpretation seems to be based on a misreading of the lexicographical and exegetical evidence.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the text does not say that the woman will leave her father and mother and be joined to her husband as part of his clan. That would reflect common ancient Near Eastern practice. Rather, Genesis 2:24 highlights the man as the one who leaves his family behind, and it emphasizes that the man and his wife will now constitute a new one-flesh union. In marriage,

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 29-31.

<sup>5</sup> See Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 32-34, 85-109.

<sup>6</sup> Brownson bases his exegetical proposal on two authorities: the Hebrew lexicon of Brown, Driver, and Briggs and the Genesis commentary of Gordon Wenham. The first refers to “flesh” (Hebrew *basar*) as meaning “kindred” in the sense of “blood relations,” but this does not apply to married couples after the first few generations following Adam and Eve. The second states that “just as blood relations are one’s flesh and bone, so marriage creates a *similar* relation between man and wife.” To say that the marriage relationship is in some ways similar to that of blood relations is not to say that it itself is such a relationship. It should also be pointed out that Wenham here explicitly speaks of the marriage relationship as one between man and wife.

it would appear that the man and woman find a new identity and a new purpose.

The theological significance of Genesis 2:24 runs far beyond its reference to the nature of marriage, however. As we shall see from the apostle Paul's discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5, "in Genesis 2:24 lies an unknown or not fully known intention of God which is now revealed in the relationship of Christ and his church."<sup>7</sup> Just as the significance of human sexuality is rooted in God's creation of human beings in his image, so human sexuality finds ultimate meaning in God's plan for human beings to be united in communion with him.

### C. Fall: Genesis 3

Genesis 3 describes the fall of the first man and woman into sin in terms of temptation, disobedience against the direct command of God, and the violation of boundaries established by God. The serpent, we are told, challenged the woman about her understanding of God's word. The initial challenge, "Did God really say . . . ?" (3:1) was followed by a stronger challenge, "You will not certainly die" (3:4). The temptation held out to Eve was that of becoming "like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5). The way to get there, however, was by disobeying God's direct command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17), thereby violating the boundary established by God at creation.

Given this rebellion against the created order and against God's commands received at creation, it is no surprise that the very first sign that creation has fallen from its first purpose is the corruption of sexuality. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (3:7). Sin immediately turns what was a source of joy and exultation into a source of shame and fear. Alienation from God immediately turns into the alienation of the man and woman from one another. The vulnerability of nakedness ceases to be a gift. Instead it becomes a threat. "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (3:10).

Fascinatingly, as it appears in the narrative, God draws the conclusion that the man has disobeyed his command from the fact that the man knows he is naked. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (3:11). The connection between disordered sexuality and the curse of disobedience runs like a thread throughout the passage.

The significance of sexuality also permeates the promises and curses that God begins to declare in verse 14. The enmity that stems from the curse will extend to the "offspring" of both the serpent and the woman, but the offspring of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head (3:15). From this time forward God-fearing men and women would be self-conscious of the way in which their participation in the bringing forth of children would be central to God's purposes for redemption.

On the other hand, childbearing would take place in the context of severe and painful labor. The intimate relationship between husband and wife would give way to conflict and domineering. Sexuality after the fall would

<sup>7</sup> "Marriage Guidelines," *Acts of Synod 1980* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Reformed Church, 1980), p. 470.

always be plagued with suffering and conflict, unfulfilled desires and exploitation. Oppressive patriarchy would take the place of purposeful marital communion. “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (3:16).

This is precisely the picture that we get in the rest of the book of Genesis and, indeed, in the rest of the Old Testament. In the lives of the patriarchs we see polygamy (including the favoring of one wife over another), the sexual exploitation of slaves (including servants made to serve as concubines), incest, rape, spousal abuse, adultery, divorce, prostitution, sexual harassment, and all manner of conflict, jealousy, and violence stemming from such sexual immorality. Neither the lives of the patriarchs nor the kings of Israel offer Christians a model of God’s purpose for sexuality as it was “from the beginning.” Indeed, as we have seen, the law of Moses itself permitted such abuse due to the hardness of human hearts, “but it was not this way from the beginning,” Jesus said (Matt. 19:8).

Just as it was immoral for the patriarchs to treat women in accord with the conventions of their culture, so it is immoral when Christians abandon God’s will from creation by acting in accord with the sexual conventions of our own culture. Premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, sexual assault, polyamory, and a host of other sexual practices increasingly tolerated by our culture are symptoms of a fallen world that is under the curse of sin. Christians are called to flee all such sexual immorality as we walk not according to the mind of this world but according to the mind of Christ.

#### *D. Redemption: The Old Testament*

##### 1. The law

For all of the corruption and misery that mars human sexuality throughout the Old Testament, from Genesis 3:16 forward sexuality is also the focal point of the hope of salvation. Every man and every woman is still expected to marry, to be fruitful and to multiply. Men and women seek to propagate godly children, that their descendants might share in the future hope of God’s people. Fruitfulness and salvation go hand in hand. Women who struggle to conceive children (such as Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah) virtually equate the blessing of children with salvation itself. It is no overstatement to say that in the Old Testament the failure to produce descendants is the greatest possible curse upon a man or woman. Indeed, a central part of the crisis facing the oppressed Israelites in Egypt was the Pharaoh’s policy of forced infanticide.

After God delivered his people from the oppression of Egypt, he gave them the law of Moses, which included an extensive sexual code and an array of regulations governing marriage and sexuality. It is important to distinguish between regulations that permitted various immoral practices due to the hardness of human hearts (such as divorce [Deut. 24:1-4], polygamy [Deut. 21:15-17], forced marriage of captive women [Deut. 21:10-14], and other practices of ancient Near Eastern patriarchy [i.e., Lev. 19:20-22]), which are not normative for Christians called to follow God’s purpose “from the beginning” (Matt. 19:8), and the sexual code that prohibited practices that the law declares to be “detestable” (Lev. 18:29) and therefore alien to God’s purpose from creation.

Scholars have debated the purpose and significance of the Mosaic sexual code. The key, most agree, is to view God's purposes for Israel as being a sort of microcosm of his purposes for creation. If Genesis 1-2 teaches that human beings are called to be rulers and priests within the temple of creation, Exodus and Leviticus were given to teach the people of Israel how to be rulers and priests within the promised land of Canaan. Thus the people of Israel were commanded to observe proper creational boundaries and so to be holy in reflection of their creator. Much like God's work of dividing and ordering during the six days of creation, the Levitical sexual codes reminded the people to observe the separations established by God that are essential to the goodness of the creation order.

Further, just as Genesis 1-2 called men and women to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, so the Levitical sexual code called men and women to engage only in forms of sexual activity that had the potential to result in the procreation of godly children. This helps to explain why the prohibition of child sacrifice is mixed in with prohibitions of homosexuality, bestiality, and having sex with a woman during her period, as well as prohibitions of incest (which produces illicit offspring).

The law warns the people that it was for these sorts of "detestable" practices that the Canaanites were purged from the land of Canaan. The Israelites were to be different from other nations. They were to be holy because their God was holy. "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:24-25). The laws were to apply to both native-born and foreigners. "Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people" (18:29). Hence already in Leviticus we have the clear association of sexual immorality with the idolatry of the nations who do not know God.

The integral connection between sexuality, fruitfulness, and holiness is also reflected in the law's declaration that bodily discharges associated with the reproductive system rendered a person unclean. Men or women experiencing such discharges had to undergo rites of purification (Lev. 12 and 15). Further, eunuchs and males with defective genitals were prohibited from entering the temple (Lev. 21:20; 22:24; Deut. 23:1). Because Israel was to be a microcosm of creation, Israelites were called to be orderly and fruitful in their sexual activity in reflection of the orderliness and fruitfulness of creation.

## 2. The prophets

While the law called the people to engage only in sexual relationships that were orderly and fruitful, the prophets highlighted the significance of human sexuality in an altogether different way. They used marriage as a metaphor for the covenant relationship between God and his people. For example, Isaiah 54:5-6 declares, "'For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,' says your God" (see also Isa. 62).

The prophets used this metaphor in both positive and negative ways. Often they described Israel as the bride of the Lord, only to go on to point out that Israel had become unfaithful. Often they went so far as to describe Israel in graphic terms as a prostitute who had committed adultery with all of the nations around Israel (Ezek. 16 and 23). The prophet Hosea, in fact, was even called by God to take an adulterous wife as a means of illustrating God's grace to adulterous Israel. Ultimately, as Hosea makes clear, God will forgive and cleanse his bride, redeeming her from all her adultery (Hos. 1-3).

The use of marriage as a metaphor for the covenant between God and his people gave rise to the additional use of prostitution, adultery, and sexual immorality as metaphors for the sin of idolatry. Just as a prostitute sells herself for money or protection, they argued, so Israel sold herself in idolatry to foreign gods (and foreign nations). Ezekiel 16 addresses Jerusalem as an adulterous wife, describing the people's idolatry with the gods of other nations as prostitution in shockingly graphic terms:

*"The splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect. . . . But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. . . . You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. . . . And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? . . . In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood."*

(Ezek. 16:14-22)

Ezekiel's description, which becomes all the more graphic in its use of prostitution as an allegory for idolatry, follows Leviticus in identifying Jerusalem's "detestable practices" with the typical practices of the nations around her, including the Canaanites and Sodom. For the prophets, as in the law and (as we shall see) the New Testament, sexual immorality and idolatry were the chief characteristics of the nations that did not know God. Yet when God redeemed his people according to his covenant, he would purify them from all of their sexual immorality and idolatry.

*"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. . . .*

*"In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD."*

(Hos. 2:14-20)

### 3. Wisdom literature

Israel's wisdom literature vividly described the evils of both adultery and prostitution (Proverbs) and the beauty and joyfulness of a healthy sexual relationship (Song of Songs; Psalm 45). In Proverbs 8-9, Wisdom is personified as a woman who is to be sought at all costs, in contrast to the adulterous woman, Folly (Prov. 7 and 9), who is to be avoided at all costs. Proverbs 7 graphically describes how an adulterous woman skillfully

seduces an unsuspecting young man: dressing as a prostitute, she takes hold of him and kisses him, using “persuasive words” and “smooth talk” (7:21) as she describes the allures of her bed. “Come let’s drink deeply of love till morning; let’s enjoy ourselves with love!” (7:18).

The text describes the young man’s destruction so as to elicit horror: “All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life. . . . Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death” (7:22-23, 26-27).

In Proverbs it is young men in particular who need to be warned to flee from the dangers of lust and adultery. The antidote is wisdom, especially the wisdom that comes from one’s parents and is rooted in the fear of the Lord.

In contrast, Song of Songs is particularly unabashed in the sensuality of its poetic imagery. The two lovers delight in one another’s kisses and physical embrace. The man exults in the beauty of his bride’s eyes, hair, teeth, lips, neck, and breasts. “You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you” (4:7). “How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights!” (7:6). Love is more pleasing than wine, he tells her. “Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue” (4:11).

The woman speaks of how she aches for her lover’s intimate presence. “My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand” (5:10). She relishes the appearance and smell of his head, eyes, cheeks, lips, arms, legs, and mouth. “His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem” (5:16).

And yet, the song warns its hearers repeatedly that when it comes to love one must tread carefully. “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (8:4). Love is dangerous because it is powerful. When it is the real thing, its value is without parallel: “For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one’s house for love, it would be utterly scorned” (8:6-7).

It is notable that Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted by the church not simply as a poem about love between a man and a woman, but as a prophetic allegory of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. This is consistent with the biblical theme of marriage as an analogy of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

## *E. Redemption: The New Testament*

### 1. Celibacy

When he pointed out that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of human hearts, Jesus called his disciples to a sexual ethic so demanding that it led them to question whether it might be better for a person not to marry (Matt. 19). It is telling that Christian teaching rarely elicits such a reply in our time. Has the 21st-century church simply accommodated cultural expectations regarding sex, marriage, and family to the point that we have lost sight of the radical path of Christian discipleship?

For the disciples to say that it may be better for a person not to marry was to say the unthinkable. As we have seen, to Old Testament Jews, marriage and procreation were deemed to be mandated by God from creation. To be single, to forgo the calling of procreation, was to ensure that one would not have any descendants who shared in the future hope of God's people.

Yet not only does Jesus affirm that his disciples are correct in their judgment that marriage may not be the best path of Christian discipleship. He goes so far as to identify eunuchs, who were prohibited from entering the temple, as exemplary Christian disciples!

Jesus appears to have three different kinds of eunuchs in view: (1) persons who are born impotent or who develop without properly functioning sexual organs; (2) men who have been castrated, either deliberately (often for service in a royal court or harem) or accidentally; and (3) people who "choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Most scholars agree that with the third type Jesus is speaking metaphorically (i.e., he is not suggesting that Christian disciples should castrate themselves).

Jesus' statement is best interpreted against the backdrop of the messianic promises of Isaiah 56:3-5, in which God promised that foreigners and eunuchs would no longer be excluded from his temple. Isaiah declared, "To the eunuchs . . . who . . . hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters" (56:5). These words anticipate the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

Thus understood, the words of Isaiah and Jesus and the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch all point to the good news that with the coming of the kingdom of God, broken or defective sexuality is no longer the obstacle to kingdom membership that it once was. Individuals whose sexual development and flourishing was impaired or incomplete, who had been excluded from God's presence under the law, are now included in the kingdom of God under the gospel. This truth is clearly of profound significance for Christians who experience disorders of sexual development or other forms of sexual dysfunction today.

Jesus' third category, speaking of those who choose to live a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, likewise points to a greater inclusivity in the kingdom of God and a liberation from Old Testament expectations regarding marriage and procreation. It is a way of life that Jesus and Paul, the two most prominent characters of the New Testament, would choose. Although it is not for everyone, it is clearly a way of honor, befitting special service for the kingdom of God.

In fact, Matthew 19:11-12 is only one of many passages in which Jesus speaks of the diminishing significance of marriage, family, and earthly households. We have already noted his promise that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (19:29). This promise suggests that those who forgo the blessings of marriage and family in this world will receive even greater blessing both in this age and in the age to come. Jesus appears to be thinking

of the bonds of communion that such believers will experience with their brothers and sisters in Christ who are fellow children of God.

A similar statement appears in Luke 14:26-27, where Jesus declares, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.<sup>8</sup> And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (cf. Matt. 10:37-39). Those who would be disciples must first count the cost, Jesus goes on to say. They must be willing to give up everything for the sake of the kingdom (Luke 14:33).

Jesus clearly applied this truth to his own life. When told that his mother and brothers were seeking him, he declared, “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt. 12:48-50). This did not mean that Jesus ceased to care for his mother, as we can see from John 19:26-27. But it does indicate that with the coming of the kingdom the familial bonds of discipleship begin to transcend natural familial bonds in significance.

Yet another declaration by Jesus confirms the diminishing significance of marriage in the coming kingdom of God. In Luke 20:27-40 (see parallel passages in Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27) the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, questioned Jesus regarding a woman who, during this life, married seven successive husbands (each dying before she married the next). Seeking to catch Jesus with an absurdity, they asked, “Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” (Luke 20:33).

Jesus’ reply undermines the assumption that the future resurrected life will be much like the present life. He said, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Luke 20:34-35). In other words, marriage for men and women and the production of offspring may be important parts of the present order, but they will not be part of the life to come. Sexuality is a positive aspect of God’s good creation, but the resurrection and power of God will change human existence such that marriage and procreation are not part of the coming kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

As much as Jesus affirms the creational order regarding marriage, therefore, he puts even stronger emphasis on the limited significance of marriage and family. This does not serve to undermine a creational sexual ethic. On the contrary, as we shall see, if anything, Jesus strengthens that ethic. Still, the good news of the kingdom of God creates a new reality for

<sup>8</sup> In biblical culture, the word hate was often used as a way of saying “love less.” To recognize this idiomatic use is in no way to downplay the demand made here. In a Middle Eastern culture where commitment to parents and family was ranked as the highest social obligation, the challenge for Jesus’ disciples was to be devoted more fully to Jesus than to one’s own family. For similar uses of hate as “love less” or “not love,” see Genesis 29:30-31; Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Judges 14:16; Proverbs 13:24; Isaiah 60:15; Malachi 1:2-3; Luke 16:13.

<sup>9</sup> Some exegetes and theologians make the case that Jesus’ words refer to the transformation, not the abolition, of marriage in the eschaton. See, for example, the Reformed theologian Hans Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics: The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin E. Gunton and Oswald Bayer* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), pp. 331-40.

all who, whether by circumstance or by choice, find themselves giving up the earthly blessings of marriage, family, and household. It is not only a way of life of unexcelled honor; it is a way of anticipating the glorious reality of the future kingdom of God.

Clearly the path of Christian discipleship is not an easy path, especially as it applies to the area of sexuality and marriage. The Christian's sexual life is necessarily a cross-bearing life filled with all kinds of suffering. This is true for all Christians. Although we each experience unique struggles and temptations, all of us are called to count the cost. If there is a part of our sexuality—a desire, experience, practice, or relationship—that we are not willing to give up for the sake of Christ, we have made that thing an idol. On the other hand, insofar as we are willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel, we are given Christ's own promise: "whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:25).

The apostle Paul embraced Jesus' teaching about celibacy both in his own life (Paul did not marry) and in his exhortation to young Christians: "I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do" (1 Cor. 7:7-8). In a world where the social pressures to marry, have children, and establish a household were not only immense but definitive and all-encompassing for a person's identity, Paul experienced the life of celibacy as freedom.

Paul's intent was not to negate the goodness of marriage. Rather, his purpose was to direct young Christians' attentions to the coming kingdom. Marriage, he says, is part of the world in its present form that is passing away, but the kingdom is eternal. "What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not. . . . For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29-31). Marriage, for Paul, is not a permanent union because it ceases with the death of either the husband or the wife, such that the surviving partner is free to marry again (Rom. 7:2-3).

Those who are married, Paul points out, are not able to focus on the work of the kingdom in the same way that single people can:

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

(1 Cor. 7:32-35)

But is Paul thinking only of those who have a special gift that enables them not to "burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9)? After all, he urges those who "cannot control themselves" to marry, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (7:9). If that is the case, how can Christians demand celibacy from those who lack this gift? This is a question of the utmost urgency for teenagers, persons who are exclusively same-sex attracted, and many others who find themselves unable to get married or unable to enjoy sex in their marriages.

This question has been helpfully explored by the 2002 report on pastoral care for homosexual members. Lewis Smedes, the report observes, defended same-sex marriage as a sort of concession or accommodation to gay men and women who “burn with passion.” Others have compared such an accommodation to Moses’ allowance of divorce in the Old Testament. The question, then, is what is the gift of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 7:7?

Although many describe the gift Paul is referring to as the gift of celibacy, Paul himself refers to a more specific gift: self-control. The question, therefore, is whether Christians can expect self-control to the point of celibacy from Christians who lack the gift of self-control. Yet, as the 2002 report notes, Galatians 5:22-23 describes self-control as a fruit of the Spirit that is given to all Christians, much like love, joy, patience, or kindness. While not all Christians bear such fruit to equal degrees, all are called to bear them.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 14:1 (NRSV) Paul commands Christians to “strive for the spiritual gifts.” While some gifts (such as tongues or prophecy) are given to some Christians only, the greater gifts are given to all, and all are commanded to seek them through prayer and effort. Thus Christians are not simply to wait for the gift of self-control, practicing it only when it has been given from above. Rather, as Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 (NIV), “each of you should learn to control your own body.” Similar commands appear in Titus 2:11-15; 1 Peter 1:13-15; and 2 Peter 1:5-6.

All Christians, then, must practice self-control when called to it by God. “Married people as well as singles need self-control, including self-control of their sexuality, for a well-disciplined life.”<sup>10</sup> Not all people who are called to a life of celibacy choose such a life. But all who are called to a life of celibacy are promised the grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit as they walk the path of obedience to Christ’s commands. Indeed, for those who give up the blessings of marriage and family out of devotion to him, Jesus promises a family of brothers and sisters in abundance, both in this life and in the life to come.

This reminds us that the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality should not be our cultural context, let alone our fallen sexual desires and intimate experiences as sinful human beings. Rather, the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality is our identity in Christ, in whom all of God’s purposes from creation have been fulfilled. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Our identity in Christ transcends all other identities, whether those that are consequences of the fall (such as slave and free, gay and straight) or those that are gifts of creation and redemption (such as male and female, married and celibate). First and foremost we are children of God, “heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29), and we are called to practice our sexuality in accord with this purpose.

For Paul, as for Jesus, the Christian’s identity leads one to conceive of suffering differently. Along with the creation we groan, yearning for our redemption. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its

<sup>10</sup> “Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members,” *Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 323.

own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21). We too groan as we experience frustration that does not stem from our own choice, and yet we have hope. We even “glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5).

## 2. Marriage

Jesus’ teaching regarding the kingdom of God proclaimed a new inclusion of people with broken or defective sexuality, legitimized and honored the life of singleness, and diminished the significance of marriage and family. However, it did not in any way weaken the Old Testament sexual ethic. On the contrary, all of the evidence suggests that Jesus called his disciples to greater sexual holiness in fidelity to God’s purposes from creation.

The most obvious expression of this calling has been skillfully explored in the 1980 synodical report on divorce and remarriage. As that report noted, Jesus speaks to the issues of divorce and/or remarriage in four places: Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9; and Luke 16:18. Although there are significant differences among these texts, their collective teaching is “unambiguously clear”: “Jesus stressed emphatically the permanence of marriage. Marriage is intended to be binding for life.”<sup>11</sup>

Of the four texts, Mark 10:2-9 and Luke 16:18 are the most comprehensive in their prohibition of divorce and remarriage, seeming to allow no exceptions whatsoever. In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, however, Jesus allows for an exception in the case of *porneia*, or “sexual immorality.” Even here, however, it is not entirely clear whether or not the legitimacy of divorce in cases of sexual immorality necessarily rendered remarriage appropriate for either of the divorced spouses. Matthew 5:32, taken by itself, implies that divorced persons may not remarry. Only the hotly disputed Matthew 19:9 gives some hint that remarriage may be permissible in certain cases: “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The 1980 report concludes that the word *porneia* refers to sexual infidelity, including adultery, incest, homosexual intercourse, and similar forms of unchastity. However, it emphasizes that “the accent appears to fall on persistent and unrepentant unchastity rather than on the single act itself.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, while divorce is permissible in some cases of sexual immorality, that is only the case when such immorality is persistent and unrepentant. The report helpfully situates the Christian marital ethic in the context of the gospel of reconciliation, reminding Christians that reconciliation is always the goal when spouses have become estranged through sexual immorality or other causes.

The 1980 report also noted that the exception is best understood not as “a concession to an existing practice which violates the righteousness

<sup>11</sup> “Marriage Guidelines,” *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 473.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

demanded by the creational norm for marriage."<sup>13</sup> Rather, it reasserts the binding character of the creational norm against such concessions. Indeed, the report rejects the widespread notion that the exception clause is designed to offer "grounds" for divorce at all. Rather, "marriage *should* not be dissolved, for that is contrary to God's will; but by persistent and unrepentant unchastity people *can* put asunder what God has joined together. Where such has happened, Jesus does not apply his condemnation upon the subsequent remarriage of the one who did not commit adultery."<sup>14</sup>

Jesus did not simply condemn outward acts of unchastity, however. Like the book of Proverbs, he identified the root of sexual immorality as the lusts that come from the human heart (Matt. 15:19). Such lust, he declared in the Sermon on the Mount, is itself an inward form of adultery: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28).

The point of Jesus' teaching here is not to condemn the recognition of bodily beauty, nor the experience of being attracted to someone's bodily beauty. Such misinterpretations make a problem of bodily beauty itself. Inevitably they lead to all manner of legalistic regulations designed to hide the body and prevent interaction between men and women. The burden of such an interpretation has tended to fall upon women.

Jesus' purpose, in contrast, is to call his disciples to take responsibility for the way in which they gaze on or think about another person. One does not commit adultery in the heart by looking upon a woman, or even by being attracted to a woman. One commits adultery by looking "lustfully," or with lustful intent. The lustful gaze turns the other person into a mere object of desire and pleasure. It is a form of dehumanization that stems directly from the sinfulness and shame of the fall.

The net effect of Jesus' teaching is to call believers to reserve sex for marriage, as God intended from creation. Some believers may never marry, but all are called to avoid every form of sexual immorality and adultery, whether outwardly or in the thoughts of the heart and the gaze of the eyes. Christians are always to treat one another as brothers and sisters called to communion in the body of Christ.

The apostle Paul reinforces Jesus' teaching regarding sex and marriage by interpreting it in the context of Old Testament teaching. In 1 Thessalonians, thought to be Paul's earliest letter, Paul exhorts Christians, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

Paul's association of sexual immorality with "the pagans, who do not know God," is typical of Jewish assessments of the Gentiles. Paul, like most Jews, believed that the Gentiles were notorious for two kinds of

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 474-75.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 477.

sin in particular: sexual immorality and idolatry. As we have seen, the Old Testament prophets consistently associated sexual immorality with idolatry. Both sins were deemed to be distinctive expressions of rebellion against God. The same thought appears in Romans 1 and in 1 Corinthians, as we shall see.

Paul's antidote is to call the Thessalonian Christians, like the people of Israel of old, to holiness. Indeed, such holiness is essential to what it means to be God's people. To be God's people is to be different from the nations who do not know God. As God puts it to the Israelites in Exodus 19:5-6, "And now if you indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be to me a distinctive people out of all the nations. For the whole earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Septuagint). Similar exhortations appear in Deuteronomy 26:18-19 and in Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; and 22:32.

If the essence of holiness for the Israelites, therefore, was separation from the nations, Paul is urging Christians that for them too the essence of holiness consists in separation from the pagans who do not know God. To be sure, the wall between the nations has been broken down (Eph. 2:14), but God's will for his people has not changed: to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet. 1:16). What has changed is that God has now poured out his Spirit on all nations, such that disciples of every nation can walk in the way of holiness. Thus, as this letter to Gentile Christians in Thessalonica testifies, Paul expects from the Thessalonians the same sort of holiness with respect to sexuality as he expects from Jewish Christians.

Paul's instructions here therefore reflect the judgment of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, that although Gentile Christians are not obligated to keep the whole law of Moses, they are nevertheless called "to abstain . . . from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20).

Some scholars have argued that just as the early church had a hard time accepting the fact that the Spirit was working among Gentiles as well as Jews, so the contemporary church fails to see that the Spirit is working among those in same-sex sexual relationships as well. If such persons share in the fruit of the Spirit, it is argued, they should be considered members in good standing in the church as well.<sup>15</sup>

What that argument ignores, however, is that the Gentiles were embraced into the church on the condition that they submitted to God's will regarding human sexuality. Indeed, in his letter to the Galatians, the major purpose of which was to clarify that Gentiles are saved by faith and not by obedience to the law of Moses, Paul expressly called the Galatians to give up the obvious works of the flesh, including sexual immorality, and to walk in the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control (Gal. 5:19, 23). "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:24-25). The mark of the Spirit's work, in short, includes repentance from sexual immorality.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals," *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 (Winter, 2011), pp. 51-87. Cf. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 9-10, 190-91.

Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians, then, interpreted quite literally, is not that they should separate themselves from the Gentiles. Most of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles! Rather, he says, they should separate themselves from "sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3). Separation from sexual immorality, he is saying, is an essential part of Christian holiness. What does Paul mean by "sexual immorality"? Most scholars agree that the term *porneia* as used here by Paul refers in a general way to all kinds of sexual misconduct, no doubt against the backdrop of the sexual code of the law of Moses. To be holy, then, requires one to learn to control one's own body in obedience to the will of God.

Interestingly, for Paul, sexual immorality is not considered a victimless crime. On the contrary, Paul warns that to commit sexual immorality is to "wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister" (1 Thess. 4:6). Sexual immorality is not an expression of love for another human being. It is a corruption of love that wrongs another human being.

It's also worth noting that here, as elsewhere, Paul warns the Thessalonians, "The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before" (1 Thess. 4:6). Nor is this simply a word from Paul. "Anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit" (4:8). Paul seems to leave believers with a choice. They can reject God's call and live like the pagans do, according to the passions of their flesh, or they can embrace the call of God, knowing that he gives the Holy Spirit to those who seek him. This, ultimately, is the hope to which God calls them. God gives his Holy Spirit to all who seek him, as was once prophesied by the prophet Ezekiel, and the Spirit empowers all such disciples to live within the will of God.

Nowhere does Paul address questions of sexual immorality within the church more extensively or clearly than he does in 1 Corinthians, another of his earliest letters. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul commands the Corinthian Christians to expel from among them a man who was guilty of "sexual immorality"—specifically, a form of incest that was prohibited by the law of Moses. Paul says that the Corinthians "should have put out of [their] fellowship the man who has been doing this" (5:2), and Paul adds that he has "already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this" (5:3). Further, he says that when the Corinthians are "assembled . . . and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, [they should] hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (5:4-5). Paul supports his argument by warning the Corinthians that "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough"—and he urges them, "Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are" (5:6-7). The entire body is compromised by the failure of one person to repent of his sexual immorality.

Paul reminds them that he had already written to them in a previous letter (now lost) that they should not "associate with sexually immoral people" (5:9). His point, he says, was not that they should disassociate with nonbelievers who commit sexual immorality (or other sins like idolatry, greed, or swindling). Such would be impossible. "But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone *who claims to be a*

*brother or sister* but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler” (5:11). In other words, the focus here is on those who would seek to be members of the church. Paul quotes from the Old Testament: “Expel the wicked person from among you” (5:13; see Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7). Here, as in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul insists on repentance from sexual immorality as a definitive mark that distinguishes Christians from the world.

In the process of making the argument that the Corinthian church is to “judge those inside” the church (1 Cor. 5:12), Paul reminds the Corinthians that as saints destined by God to judge the world, believers need to learn to judge and arbitrate disputes for themselves (6:1-8). They are called to develop the wisdom necessary to judge among themselves, anticipating their future reality as those who will reign with Christ.

The point is not that Christians are perfect or do not themselves fall into sin. The point is that Christians, by definition, are those who have repented from their sin. Paul is well aware that believers may be deceived on precisely this point (what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call “cheap grace”): “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10). These sins had characterized the Corinthian Christians: “That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11). Here, as in 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Acts, and so many other passages, it is the Spirit of God who empowers believers to repent from the passions of the flesh and to walk in the fruit of the Spirit.

It is essential to observe that Paul’s argument in this section is not simply to show *that* sexual immorality is wrong. Rather, it is to show just *how* wrong sexual immorality is. Paul could not raise the stakes any higher than he does. Here again he treats sexual immorality much like he treats idolatry. He warns believers to “flee” two things: sexual immorality and idolatry. Like idolatry, unrepentant sexual immorality destroys one’s place in the church and kingdom of God.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul refutes the claim made by some Corinthians that Christians have sexual freedom because what Christians do with the body does not matter. Paul’s response is that the body does matter because it is destined for resurrection and communion with Christ, and sexual immorality is incompatible with this reality.

Paul begins by offering three specific rejoinders to claims being made by some Corinthians. The first two rejoinders are to the same slogan: “I have the right to do anything” (see also 1 Cor. 10:23). This slogan could be more literally translated as “All things are permissible.” Paul’s first response is that not all things are “beneficial” or “helpful” or “edifying.” His second rejoinder is “I will not be mastered by anything” (6:12). By making this argument, Paul brings the question of authority and ownership, as well as self-control, into the discussion. A Christian possesses liberty, but not so that she or he might once again become a slave to sin or to another human being. Rather, a Christian is given liberty so that she or he might be enslaved to God in Christ.

Finally, Paul addresses a slogan that at first glance has nothing to do with sexuality: “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both” (1 Cor. 6:13). The Corinthians were evidently arguing that the body—or at least its basic functions—is not eternal, so what we do in carrying out our bodily functions—such as eating—is irrelevant for our future in Christ. Paul’s response is to offer a statement parallel to the Corinthian slogan, undermining it at each point (6:13-14): “The body . . . is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,” and as “God raised the Lord from the dead . . . he will raise us also” (i.e., God will raise them both).

The body is not for sexual immorality in the way that food is for the stomach, Paul says. Rather, the body has a purpose more ultimate than sexuality itself. That purpose is the believers’ union with God in Christ. Thus sexuality is not an arena of Christian liberty like eating and drinking. On the contrary, sexuality has ultimate significance because the body is “for the Lord.” This significance is enhanced by the astonishing fact that not only is the body for the Lord, but, as most scholars interpret the second phrase, the Lord Jesus Christ laid down his own life in order to save the human body for communion with God.

Paul continues the argument by reminding the Corinthians that their bodies are members of Christ. Note the plural here. It is not simply that the church is corporately united to Christ. And it is not simply that believers are united to Christ in their souls. Rather, the individual bodies of believers are members of Christ. Each Christian body—including the dimension of its sexuality as male or female—is a part of the body of Christ. What we do with our bodies, therefore, we do with the body of Christ. Paul illustrates his point with the example of prostitution, but the argument itself applies to all forms of sexual immorality.

Like Jesus, Paul draws his argument from an appeal to creation, specifically Genesis 2:24. As appears from the structure of the argument, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, “The two will become one flesh,” to substantiate his claim that a man “who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body” (1 Cor. 6:16). In other words, sex is of profound significance because it establishes a one-flesh union. And that one-flesh union either is or is not consistent with the believer’s bodily union with Christ. Thus sexual immorality is not simply a violation of the will of God. Much more, it is incompatible with union with Christ.

To be sure, all sin is ultimately incompatible with our union with Christ, but Paul’s point here is that sexual immorality is *especially* incompatible with that union. Why? Because, as he has argued from Genesis 2:24, it involves the body in a deeply intimate one-flesh union that is of profound significance for human beings. In other words, sex has meaning—profound meaning. As we have seen, it is wrapped up with our creation in God’s image as male and female, and Paul is now teaching us that it also involves a level of bodily intimacy directly relevant to God’s purposes for us in communion with Christ.

This conclusion is reinforced by what comes next. Scholars do not agree on what Paul means when he says, “Flee from sexual immorality! All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). But the primary reason for their disagreement is that modern readers struggle with the

claim that sexual immorality is a particularly grave sin. Yet in context it is clear that this is precisely what Paul is saying. Sexual union is so significant, constituting two human beings as one body, that sexual immorality involves a particularly grave sin against the body that cannot be tolerated within the body of Christ.

This argument is reinforced by the logic in the next two verses: 1 Cor. 6:19-20. There Paul explains that the body is not just destined for resurrection and union with Christ. The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the bond of union with Christ. Paul reverses his typical word order here to emphasize the holiness of the Spirit, and hence the holiness of the body. His argument connects the New Testament rationale for sexual holiness to the Old Testament rationale: the presence of God must be manifest in sexual holiness!

Finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians that, having been united with Christ and inhabited by the Holy Spirit, they are no longer their own masters. This brings us back to the Corinthian slogan mentioned earlier: “I have the right to do anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). To drive his point home, Paul uses the metaphor of slavery (or is it prostitution?) to remind the Corinthians that they were “bought at a price” (6:20). Instead of being their own masters, they are slaves of God and slaves of righteousness, and the price was nothing less than the body and blood of Christ, with whom they have been united. At the heart of Paul’s concern, then, is a question of ownership and authority. In the way that they exercise their sexuality, human beings demonstrate whether or not they are servants of God.

This is the context for Paul’s discussion of marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, which we partially considered earlier. Paul advises some Christians not to marry, but he instructs those who struggle with self-control to marry. The main point is that all Christians, whether married or single, are called to honor God with their bodies. Those who are married are called to sexual faithfulness and to mutual submission in their sexual relationship. “The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife” (7:4).

Paul also reminds believers that while it is good not to marry, once they are married a husband and a wife may not separate from one another. As he puts it, “A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife” (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The 1980 report on divorce and remarriage rightly concludes that “Paul commands that if the wife does separate from/divorce her husband, she should either remain single or be reconciled to her husband.”<sup>16</sup> Paul says nothing, at least in the case of two believing Christians, about a potential right to remarry.

However, Paul goes on to consider the case in which a Christian is married to a nonbeliever. It is a testimony to the inviolability of marriage within a creational ethic that unbelief on the part of one of the spouses is not considered grounds for divorce. On the contrary, the unbelieving spouse is considered holy by virtue of his or her union with the believing spouse! The same is true for the children of such a union (1 Cor. 7:12-14).

<sup>16</sup> *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 477.

It could not be clearer that God does not want human beings to tear apart those whom he has joined together.

Here, however, Paul does offer an exception, although even in this case there is dispute about what exactly he means to allow. Paul declares that if the unbelieving spouse abandons the believing spouse, the believing spouse is “not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). Here too Paul seems to have the goal of reconciliation in view. He reminds the believing wife or husband that God may use his or her faithfulness and peace as a means of saving the unbelieving spouse (7:16).

### 3. The ultimate meaning of marriage

All of this is evidence enough that Paul, like Jesus, took marriage seriously as an institution established by God at creation. However, in one respect Paul went beyond Jesus, and even beyond the Old Testament, in articulating the supreme significance of marriage. Building, perhaps, on the Old Testament prophets’ tendency to use marriage as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his people, Paul argues that, as the report on marriage and divorce puts it, “What has happened in Christ unfolds the meaning of the creational institution of marriage.”<sup>17</sup>

The context of Paul’s declaration about the ultimate meaning of marriage is his instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33. In a manner that was at most implied in the Old Testament, Paul appeals to the union between Christ and the church as a means of elevating the purpose and conduct of men and women within marriage. It is striking that he explicitly invokes the relationship between Christ and the church as the model for marriage in virtually every verse of this passage (see vv. 22, 23, 24, 25-27, 28-30, 31-32).

Paul writes that wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but he says a lot more about the ways in which husbands should love and serve their wives as Christ loved and served the church. Interestingly, Paul describes Christ’s love for the church—the model of husbands’ love for their wives—in terms of forms of service generally associated with the work of women or servants.

And yet, Paul does not invoke the relationship between Christ and the church as a mere analogy for marriage. In one of the most profound comments on marriage found in Scripture, he points to a meaning of marriage deeper than that found in creation itself, though ultimately foreshadowed from creation. Speaking of Christ’s love for the church as a model for a husband’s love for his wife, Paul writes, “For we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:30-32).

The report on divorce and remarriage summarized the point this way: “The basic purpose of God for marriage was especially illumined and enriched by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declares that the creational institution of marriage, which affirms that husband and wife become one flesh (Eph. 5:31), contains a mystery (Eph. 5:32). This mystery has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church. . . . Thus

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 470.

marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church.”<sup>18</sup>

The report rightly explains the meaning of the word *mystery* in the context of Paul’s other uses of the word in the letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul writes that God has “made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” By *mystery*, the 1980 report explains, “Paul refers to that which was not previously known or fully known but which has now been revealed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

The word appears again in Ephesians 3:3-4, 6, 9. Paul refers to “the mystery made known to me by revelation . . . which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets . . . that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:3-6). Here again the word *mystery* refers to something that was for a long time not understood but that was finally revealed through the gospel. And here again the mystery points to God’s purpose of bringing unity out of division, in this case unity between Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ.

Against this background, it is impossible not to see the same theme in Ephesians 5. Here again we have two different things being brought together in a unity that is identified in a certain sense with the body of Christ. “For we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (5:30-32).

The mystery, then, is that in the union of male and female in marriage, described in Genesis 2:24, God intended to reveal something about his purpose of uniting humanity with Christ. People could not have known this before it was revealed through Christ, but now it has been revealed. And now believers are called to practice this meaning in their marriages. As the 1980 report puts it, “By ‘mystery’ Paul means that in Genesis 2:24 lies an unknown or not fully known intention of God which is now revealed in the relationship of Christ and his church. . . . Thus in the relationship (or marriage) of Christ to his people, *God actually fulfills the basic goal or purpose of the institution of marriage*”<sup>20</sup> (emphasis added).

It is therefore no accident that in its culminating passages the New Testament describes the ultimate union of God with his people as a wedding feast. John describes the new Jerusalem as “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband,” Christ (Rev. 21:2). The angel describes the city descended from heaven as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:9). Outside that city, John tells us, are “the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:15). Indeed, “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (22:17), because they know that this is the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 470.

wedding for which human beings were created, and for which they have been yearning all along.

This truth is of the profoundest significance for a biblical theology of sexuality and marriage. God's creation of human beings in his image as male and female (Gen. 1:27) was designed to point toward his ultimate purpose for human beings in communion with God in Christ. Thus sexuality was designed all along to reflect this communion. Marriage itself will pass away, but its ultimate meaning will endure in the kingdom and family of God. One need not be married in this life in order to enjoy this ultimate reality.

As the 1980 report puts it, "Scripture indicates that marriage is not necessary as a Christian obligation, nor is it necessary for personal fulfillment. All that is necessary for discipleship and fulfillment is membership in the family of God by which one participates in the marriage between Christ and his church."<sup>21</sup> It might even be said that those who choose the path of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, such as Jesus and Paul, are able to anticipate this ultimate reality in a particularly focused way (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

This does not mean that marriage and family are in any sense less worthy of Christians. It does mean, however, that they find their "highest goal and ultimate purpose" in serving "the establishment and welfare of the family of God"; thus "marriage and family are not ends in themselves. When marriage and family become ends in themselves or serve only personal goals, they have become idols."<sup>22</sup> This serves as a rebuke to people who are tempted to view marriage as the best life for Christians. It likewise serves as a rebuke to those who are tempted to view marriage as an entitlement that cannot be withheld from those who desire it. It reminds us that marriage cannot be altered at human whim because it is a gift from God grounded in God's purposes from creation and fulfilled in God's purposes in Christ.

#### IV. Note on science and general revelation

Our mandate includes "dialogue with, and potential critique of, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). In fulfillment of the second part of this point regarding scientific knowledge, we surveyed the available scientific evidence regarding various matters of sexuality addressed in the following sections (and in the appendices). Readers should note that our review and interpretation of the scientific evidence in the following sections of this report on pornography, gender identity, and homosexuality is not "objective" or "neutral" but, rather, viewed through the lens of Scripture.

In discussions about the relationship between science and biblical interpretation it is important to remind ourselves of the Reformed understanding of the relationship of general and special revelation. As Article 2 of the Belgic Confession reminds us, God reveals himself in two ways: through his written Word and through creation. These two revelations of God, special and

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 471.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

general, must be read in the light of one another, but *special revelation has a cognitive priority* because it is couched in human language that can be readily understood. To borrow a strikingly helpful image from John Calvin, the special revelation of Scripture functions as a pair of eyeglasses without which we cannot properly read the book of creation.

In a landmark report to Synod 1972 on “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority” the matter is put plainly:

In both creation and Scripture God addresses us with full authority. The conflicts that sometimes arise are due to discrepancies in our responses to these two modes of revelation. As Reformed Christians we must take both revelations seriously. Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing science as a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate. Therefore we must seek to profit from and make thankful use of the findings of science as seen in the light of Scripture. Motivated by these convictions we often discover that the results of scientific investigation become the occasion for reviewing and sometimes, upon further biblical reflection, even revising certain standing interpretations of the Bible. When in faithful obedience to God’s full-orbed revelation we are led to a re-evaluation of certain biblical data, we should not resist such insights as lead us to a clearer understanding of both Scripture and creation in their revelational unity.

(*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 540)

This forthright acknowledgement of the value of science is then immediately followed by an equally forthright warning against giving science as much weight as Scripture:

The church may not, however, allow its message to be made dependent upon the scientific enterprise, nor allow scientific findings to dictate its interpretation of the Bible, nor allow the claims of science to call into question its confession of biblical authority, nor allow any science, including theology, to determine what is believable and what is not believable in the Bible. For such concessions to science would mean reversing the right order of Christian thinking. Scripture itself is the lamp to our feet and the light upon our path as we walk through the various fields of academic inquiry.

We find a similar balanced treatment of the relationship between the claims of science and Scripture in the study report to Synod 1991 on “Creation and Science.” Against the reservations of Reformed theologians like G. C. Berkouwer, who was skeptical about linking science and general revelation, that report reaffirms that science (and human knowledge in general) can be understood as a legitimate cultural *response* to general revelation, but it warns against identifying the two. Instead it stresses that science itself is “at bottom a religious affair,” governed by presuppositions and control beliefs that may be quite alien to God’s revelation (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, pp. 374-76).

Unfortunately, the mistaken idea that science can simply be equated with general revelation continues to appear in Reformed circles. We find a striking example in the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage.” It cites the above-mentioned 1972 report as follows: “Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing science as *a form of revelation given by God and a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate*” (*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 540). Significantly, the words here italicized are not found in the original synodical report but were added to the original sentence (see [classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf](http://classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf), p. 43). To thus equate science with God’s revelation, thereby giving it divine authority, is a

serious error and makes a mockery of the Reformation teaching concerning *sola Scriptura*.

Rather than investing science with divine authority, it is better to stress that science is provisional, that its theories involve various levels of uncertainty, that its authority is that of the consensus of the scientific community, and that it focuses strictly on physical processes. These cautionary attributes of science are rightly stressed by the study report to Synod 2012 on “Creation Stewardship” (see *Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 292-94). If these qualifications apply to the physical sciences, they apply even more to the social sciences and humanities. As Reformed Christians, we have long recognized—indeed, stressed—that science is not a religiously neutral affair. Although we may speak of a general revelation (and even divine authority) which comes through in the data and phenomena with which the sciences deal, those data and phenomena are to be sharply distinguished from the consensus theories that scientists develop about them.

## V. Pornography: Cultural context

### A. Current context

Pornography is widely used and accepted in contemporary North American culture. Comedians, TV shows, and films refer to online pornography as a normal part of everyday life. People can consume it in any private or public setting through phones or other small devices. Porn has become accessible, anonymous, and affordable.

Studies suggest that most men and growing numbers of women and children regularly use pornography. Empowered by staggering profits, the porn industry funds constant development of innovative and persistent lures to potential consumers, including unsuspecting children. Some free porn sites produce pop-up ads after viewers click on their links in order to turn new or casual users into regular viewers. Although children are often exposed to pornography without their own intent, by puberty many boys and some girls are regular pornography users. Although church attenders are less likely to use porn than the general population, porn has permeated the church. For example, in a 2016 Barna study, the majority of pastors reported being former or current porn users, most practicing Christians felt no guilt about their porn use, and few of those had made any attempts to stop using porn.<sup>23</sup>

As prevalent as porn usage is, so are the attendant painful or unjust consequences for virtually every segment of society. Pornography hurts everyone.

What is pornography? The word itself comes from the Greek words *porne* (prostitute) and *graphein* (drawing or writing) and was used to describe words or pictures depicting prostitution. Many dictionaries define pornography as the portrayal of sexual activity with the design of producing sexual arousal. For example, the Oxford online dictionary defines pornography as “printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings.” It is therefore important to note that artistic expressions or depictions of nudity are not necessarily pornographic.

<sup>23</sup> “Porn in the Digital Age: New Research Reveals 10 Trends,” *Barna*, April 6, 2016; barna.com/research/porn-in-the-digital-age-new-research-reveals-10-trends.

Pornography has evolved over the years, from the paintings, carvings, drawings, and literature of the ancient world to the photographs and films of the modern era. However, today's internet pornography is unique in several important ways.

First, actual people engage in sexual activity with actual other people in online porn. Sexually explicit pornography—what used to be referred to as hardcore pornography—is now the standard, while less graphic material—once known as softcore pornography—surrounds us in ads, films, and TV shows. All such pornography commodifies human beings made in God's image. It entails the physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse of the women and men involved.

Second, almost all online porn is sexualized brutality toward women. The most frequently watched online pornography is men using women (or women made to look like girls) and could best be described as sexual assault or torture.<sup>24</sup> Nearly all the most commonly viewed porn scenes contain physical abuse of a woman, including vomit-inducing oral sex, choking, and hitting, often with multiple men using one woman at the same time. Usually women are called vulgar names throughout. Rape is common, including child rape and incest themes, and women raped by animals.<sup>25</sup> Googling the phrase "rape porn" brings up more than 300 million results.

Third, online pornography reinforces racist stereotypes. Porn users can order the kind of woman they want based on her ethnicity, bodily characteristics, and hair color. Women of various ethnicities are referred to with the crudest of racial slurs and depicted acting out racist tropes. Black men are filmed enacting racially stereotypical violence against women.

Fourth, online pornography is designed to create habitual users. Although porn addiction is not a recognized addiction by the American Psychological Association, addiction treatment centers report increased numbers of clients seeking help for compulsive porn use. Psychiatrist and researcher Norman Doidge explains part of what happens when we watch porn:

Pornography, by offering an endless harem of sexual objects, hyper-activates the appetitive system. Porn viewers develop new maps in their brains based on the photos and videos they see. Because it is a use-it-or-lose-it brain, when we develop a map area, we long to keep it activated. Just as our muscles become impatient for exercise if we've been sitting all day, so too our senses hunger to be stimulated. . . . The men at their computers compulsively looking at porn are uncannily like the rats (fitted with brain-stimulating electrodes) pressing the bar to get a shot of dopamine or its equivalent. Though they don't know it, they have been seduced into pornographic training sessions that meet all the conditions required for plastic change of their brains' maps.<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, pornography is a multibillion dollar industry and also fuels other industries. The industry monetizes free porn with ads for paid websites and by selling email addresses to spammers and others. Deriving enormous revenues from pornography, many persons and institutions have a vested

<sup>24</sup> A.J. Bridges, R. Wosnitzer, E. Scharrer, C. Sun, and R. Liberman (2010), "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update," *Violence Against Women*, 16, 16.1065-1085; DOI: 10.1177/1077801210382866.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (London: Viking, 2007), p. 80.

interest in keeping the profit machine healthy. They shape not only the sexual practices of our culture, but our politics and law as well.<sup>27</sup>

Christopher,\* 20 (white): “Even though I started using porn so compulsively and regularly that I was in physical pain, I didn’t stop. The university health center psychologist and the campus pastor I approached wanted to make sure I did not feel guilty about my porn use. I told them what I really wanted was help quitting.”

## B. Effects of pornography

### 1. Harms to women filmed

Most women filmed in the pornography industry do so for no more than six months to a year, often because of the great damage done to their bodies.<sup>28</sup> Because of the no-condom industry standard, these women routinely contract sexually transmitted diseases, including in the mouth and eyes, and develop dental abscesses. They experience tearing of tissues and damage to joints in necks, backs, and knees due to painful positions during the sex acts.<sup>29</sup>

The reputations and job prospects of women used in pornography are jeopardized because images of their faces and bodies are publicly available online. They are sexually harassed and bullied. They experience severe emotional trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder. They suffer from depression and other mental illnesses.<sup>30</sup> Many women used in porn report abusing drugs and alcohol to cope with the trauma. Some die prematurely from suicide and drug overdoses.<sup>31</sup>

It is also important to note the close relationship between pornography and human trafficking. The pornography industry exploits women made vulnerable by homelessness, sexual abuse, and trafficking. Those used in porn are often themselves prostituted. When children are groomed for prostitution, porn is used to break down their resistance. Prostituted women and youth are taught to perform the acts buyers will expect of them by watching porn. To coerce prostituted people to remain in the industry or to advertise their services, pimps often make pornography of

<sup>27</sup> Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), p. 51. See also Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 62-75.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Jay, “Gonzo: Taking a Toll,” XBIZ News; Sept. 10, 2007; [xbiz.com/features/83870/gonzo-taking-a-toll](http://xbiz.com/features/83870/gonzo-taking-a-toll). See also Ashley Soley-Cerro, “Former Porn Star and CSUN student Jennie Katcham Discusses”; Mar. 13, 2013, Sundial; [sundial.csun.edu/staff\\_profile/ashley-soley-cerro/](http://sundial.csun.edu/staff_profile/ashley-soley-cerro/).

<sup>29</sup> As recounted by various porn industry survivors. See Jenna Jameson, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* (New York: It Books, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Seiya Morita, “Pornography, Prostitution, and Women’s Human Rights in Japan,” *Not For Sale*, ed. Christine Stark, Rebecca Whisnat (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex, 2004), p. 69. See also Melissa Farley, “Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress,” *Woman and Health*, 3 (1997); [doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03\\_a](https://doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03_a).

<sup>31</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 30.

those they prostitute. Prostituted girls and women report that men ask them to replicate porn scenes with them when their partners will not.<sup>32</sup>

In its essence, internet pornography is filmed prostitution and modified sexual violence. The sex traffickers and pornography producers actually commit the crimes, but pornography is created to satisfy the demands of its consumers. Our pornography use directly supports the exploitation of the vulnerable women who are abused by it, even though it may cost us nothing, because ads pay for it.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Harms to children

The average child sees internet pornography for the first time by age 13. Many are exposed to it much earlier than that. Often this first exposure is unintentional on the part of children. According to one commonly cited study, 70 percent of children ages 7 through 18 have accidentally stumbled on pornography online. Reports from psychotherapists, teachers, childcare workers, and other professionals report the impact of children's use of pornography. Preschool-age children have been observed acting out pornographic videos, and children not much older are discovered downloading pornographic materials in libraries. Increasing numbers of children are asking for help.

When a boy keys in the word *porn*, he does not expect the images we have just described. Since on-screen women appear to enjoy the violent domination in porn, boys assume that it is an ordinary part of good sex. They think pornography reflects what women want done to them.

One therapist observed that pornography "doesn't show how a real couple negotiates conflict or creates intimacy" but too often is "rape-like . . . a brutal way to be introduced to sexuality."<sup>34</sup> As John Foubert puts it, "porn teaches boys to hit girls and tells girls they should like it."<sup>35</sup>

Increased interest in child porn and child prostitution puts all children at risk. Pediatricians describe a new phenomenon of preteen girls needing anorectal surgeries because boys are doing to them what they see in pornography. And pornography is used by children in assaults of other children.<sup>36</sup> A meta-analysis of 22 studies between 1978 and 2014 from seven different countries concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Melissa Farley, "Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress," *Woman and Health*, 3 (1997); doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03\_a.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Simonton, "Who Are Women in Pornography?" *Not For Sale*, pp. 352-61.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations* (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> John D. Foubert, "The Public Health Harms of Pornography: The Brain, Erectile Dysfunction, and Sexual Violence," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Art. 6 (2017); DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2017.02.03.06.

<sup>36</sup> Bridges, et al.

<sup>37</sup> Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, and Ashley Kraus, "A Meta-Analysis of Pornography: Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies," *Journal of Communication*, Feb. 2016, pp. 183-205; onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcom.12201.

### 3. Harms to girls and women

Boys who are used to pornography pressure girls into sending them nude photos. Girls and young women are pressured into participating in amateur pornographic videos. These photos and videos are then published online, where they are permanently accessible to the public, causing untold emotional, spiritual, and physical harm.

Porn fosters and nurtures a culture of rape and sadomasochism. Pornography tells the lie that women like to be debased or even assaulted, and that women should take whatever they are given. Girls and women are surrounded by pornographic images and by boys and men using porn on their devices. In this context, sadomasochistic books and movies such as the *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey* series have become mainstream among preteens, teenagers, and adults.

When a man hits a woman in pornography, she typically responds with pleasure or has no response at all.<sup>38</sup> Since women in pornography usually appear to happily consent to the abuse they endure, boys and men expect the same from their partners. And because women in pornography are raped or are assaulted without their consent, men assume that a woman's no doesn't actually mean no. Thus girls and women feel pressure to agree to all manner of destructive sexual behavior.

The frequency of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape on university campuses reveals a climate of sexual violence in which pornography plays an important role. All too often women are not believed when they make claims of sexual assault, as was painfully revealed by the #MeToo movement. In fact, when women make allegations of rape, the spotlight typically turns on them instead of on the man who assaulted them.

A rapidly growing percentage of girls and young women now consume pornography alone or are asked to do so by their male partners. Yet whether or not girls use porn, repeated exposure to hypersexualized messages and images leads them to objectify themselves, making them more vulnerable to depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and shame. Such images tell girls they should be thin, made up, have hairless bodies, and always be polished and groomed. If a girl finds herself differing from the "ideal" image, which most girls and women do, she may develop anxiety or hatred toward her own body. They suffer from depression, anxiety, bulimia, anorexia, and other mental and bodily disorders.<sup>39</sup>

Use of pornography is also correlated with greater insecurity among women with respect to their relationships and sexual activity. It reduces sexual satisfaction and promotes loneliness. The large numbers of rapes on campuses and the high incidence of hook-ups demonstrate both a climate of sexual violence toward women and an inability to have real-time physical-space intimacy and connection with their male peers, many of whom are using pornography.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Bridges, et al.

<sup>39</sup> D.E. Levin and J. Kilbourne, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (New York: Ballantine, 2008), pp. 155-56.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Now married and the father of a young son, Cameron,\* 40 (white), talks openly about his eureka moment. Cameron became a porn user in his early teens but didn't like how it affected his relationships, sexual abilities, and fantasies. Still, he couldn't seem to stop. Then his church community started seeking justice for trafficked women. "When I realized that the women I was watching are real people whose bodies are damaged by the violent treatment in most porn, I started advocating with women, for women. And quitting using porn was much easier. Once I understood that I was buying an on-screen prostitute (although it was free), my whole mindset changed."

#### 4. Harms to boys and men

Boys who are in the court system because they have sexually harassed or assaulted another child are more likely to have been porn users.<sup>41</sup> A substantial body of research on youth and adults shows that the visual combination of sexual arousal and violence raises the risk of misogynist attitudes and behaviors more than either of these alone.<sup>42</sup>

Boys exposed to pornography from a young age are more likely to have attitudes that support sexual harassment and violence against women. They have decreased empathy for rape victims, increasingly aggressive behavioral tendencies, and are more likely to pressure their partners to engage in the sort of harmful, painful, degrading, and aggressive sex they see in pornography. They experience difficulty in developing intimate relationships, develop sexual preoccupation and compulsive internet use, and have increased levels of erectile dysfunction. They experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. They struggle more in school.<sup>43</sup>

Gail Dines, a leading scholar of pornography, recounts the anxiety she hears from young men who recognize how pornography has shaped the way they think about sex. "Porn users are caught in the cross-hairs of this predatory industry, one that has a huge financial stake in habituating them to a product that dehumanizes all involved."<sup>44</sup> According to prominent psychiatrist Norman Doidge, the release of dopamine in sexual excitement causes users to crave porn. Doidge argues that as tolerance to sexual excitement develops, it no longer satisfies. Only by releasing an aggressive drive, can the regular porn user be excited.<sup>45</sup>

While doctors report that in the 20th century erectile dysfunction was virtually unheard of for men under 40, current studies show at least 30 percent of 15- to 40-year-old men experience erectile dysfunction.

<sup>41</sup> *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations* (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, eds., *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> "Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports," Brian Y. Park, Gary Wilson, Jonathan Berger, Matthew Christman, Bryn Reina, Frank Bishop, Warren P. Klam, and Andrew P. Doan, 10.3390/bs6030017; "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," Eric W. Owens, Richard J. Behun, Jill C. Manning, and Rory C. Reid, 10.1080/10720162.2012.660431; Pages 99-122 | Published online: 09 Apr 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Dines, xi-xii.

<sup>45</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain's Way of Healing* (New York: Penguin, 2007), pp. 102-24.

Dependent on arousal via technology, young men are increasingly unable to have real intimacy with women.<sup>46</sup> Like their female cohorts, they struggle with loneliness and an inability to enter into committed, sexual relationships.

Although Ryan,\* 34 (Chinese Canadian), tried to obey God in his sexuality by not having sex before marriage, he developed a serious pornography habit. A parachurch ministry helped him reduce his pornography use, but it was not until his church exposed him to the link between pornography and human trafficking that he understood what porn really was. Years later, when his pastor asked in premarital counseling about pornography's impact on him, Ryan responded, "I had to realize [that] what was going on [in] porn wasn't real. That those scenes are not actually what sex normally looks like or what a woman wants."

##### 5. Harms to marriages

The destructive effects of pornography extend to married relationships as well. As early as 2003, in a survey of several hundred U.S. divorce lawyers, 62 percent reported that the internet had been a factor in the divorces they had handled that year. More specifically, an average of 56 percent of their divorce cases involved one party (almost always the husband) having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites.<sup>47</sup> According to the president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, until the late 1990s, "pornography played almost no role in divorces. Today there are a significant number of cases where it plays a definite part in marriages breaking up."<sup>48</sup>

A 2014 study of data from 20,000 adults who had ever been married (from the U.S. General Social Survey) found that those who had watched any pornography in the previous year were more likely to be divorced, more likely to have had an extramarital affair, and less likely to be happy in their marriage or with their overall life. Based on successive waves of General Social Survey data, the study showed that the negative correlation between pornography use and marital satisfaction has become stronger as pornography becomes more explicit and more easily available online.<sup>49</sup> Consuming pornography can cause users to be less interested in sex with their actual physical partner. A significant percentage of male porn users experience erectile dysfunction or are unable to have sex without simultaneously consuming porn. Thus they deprive their spouses of sexual pleasure and the joy of physical and emotional intimacy.

The use of pornography often leads one spouse into a secret life in which deception becomes a way of life. People who hide their pornography use from their spouses bring darkness into their relationships. Once the sin is discovered, their partners often feel not only shock but

<sup>46</sup> John Foubert, "The Public Health Harms of Pornography."

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Pamela Paul, "From Pornography to Porno to Porn: How Porn Became the Norm," in Stoner and Hughes, *The Social Costs of Pornography*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Pamela Paul, "The Porn Factor," *Time*, Jan. 19, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Kirk Doran and Joseph Price, "The Effect of Pornography on Marital Intimacy," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2014), pp. 488-89.

also anger and shame. While the pornography user may convince him or herself that porn use doesn't affect his or her partner, the partner usually feels quite differently.

## VI. Pornography: Scripture

The Bible does not address pornography directly, and neither photography nor the internet existed in antiquity. However, Scripture has much to say about the lustful, sexually immoral, violent, racist, and abusive attitudes and actions fostered by online porn; about the bodies and spirits of the human beings affected by porn; and about the purpose of sex, which porn tragically mischaracterizes.

### A. Violence

God, who made all people in his image, makes it quite clear that he hates violence, especially when violence is done to the vulnerable. God flooded the world and drowned its inhabitants because "the earth [was] filled with violence" (Gen. 6:13). Proverbs frequently exhorts God's people not to choose violence (cf. Prov. 3:31). The psalmists often decry violence, even explaining that God's "soul hates the lover of violence" (Ps. 11:5, NRSV). The prophet Isaiah warns Israel that God is powerful enough to save them but that their violence erects a barrier between them and God (Isa. 59:1-2). God eventually allows the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of his people as punishment for their idolatry and their violent, unjust behavior (Isa. 59; Jer. 22; Ezek. 8; Joel 3; Amos 3). The early church is told not to put people in leadership if they are violent (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7).

We have noted that the most commonly consumed porn is filmed sexual violence. Although sex traffickers and porn producers actually commit the crimes, porn is created to satisfy the demands of its consumers. Each time we use porn, we participate in this violence against women and girls. And when we use porn, we tend more toward violence ourselves.<sup>50</sup>

### B. Exploitation of the poor

God advocates for the poor and the afflicted throughout Scripture. And God threatens anyone who threatens the poor (Prov. 22:22-23). The prophets specifically warn Israel against oppressing and abusing the needy and the vulnerable. To everyone who "trample[s] on the needy, and bring[s] to ruin the poor of the land," God promises judgment (Amos 8:4ff).

Yet our porn use directly supports the exploitation of the financially needy women who are physically abused in it, even though it may cost us nothing because ads pay for it.<sup>51</sup> Instead, God confronts the exploitative nature of a mostly male audience using anonymous poor and marginalized women for online sex with a call to be a people who practice both justice and mercy (Mic. 6:8). Just as 19th-century Christians worked to abolish the slave trade, so Christians today can work to abolish the sex industry and to offer support to those who are harmed by it. In so doing, we will love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18), defend the poor and weak (Ps. 82:3-4; Prov. 31:8-9), and treat others the way we would want to be treated (Matt. 7:12).

<sup>50</sup> Wright, et al., pp. 183-205.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Simonton, "Who Are Women in Pornography?" *Not For Sale*, ed. Rebecca Whisnant, Christine Stark (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2004), pp. 352-61.

### C. *Racism*

From the scattering of the peoples so that they would fulfill God's mandate to fill the earth (Gen. 11:1-9) to the entering of the Holy City of God by all the nations (Rev. 21-22), the Bible portrays God's design for an all-nations tapestry of language and tribes. God insisted on this inclusive vision when the first disciples hesitated to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10), and when the early church racially discriminated (Acts 6:1-7). Where alienation and brokenness continued to threaten the church, Paul made clear that Jesus, by his death, reconciled not only people to God but also warring and hostile nations and tribes to each other (Gal. 2:1-14; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 3:11). By cultivating the worst racial stereotypes, mocking and degrading men and women based on ethnicity, online porn dehumanizes people made in God's image and promotes division and contempt.

### D. *Sexual sin*

#### 1. Adultery

The Law, the Prophets, Wisdom literature, and the New Testament all condemn adultery. Additionally, Paul specifically enjoins believers from uniting with prostitutes because participation in the sexual act makes one flesh out of the man and woman involved (1 Cor. 6:15-20). While we might not ourselves commit adultery with another person physically while using porn, the product we consume is created by filming men and women copulating who are not married to each other, and online porn is itself filmed prostitution. Porn scenes also commonly include rape, orgies, and bestiality and portray scenes of incest—all acts strongly and repeatedly condemned in Scripture (Lev. 18; Gal. 5:19-21). We indirectly cause others to commit these sins when we consume such porn. Additionally, when we use porn, those of us who are married introduce other sexual partners into our marriage, destroying the oneness of our intimate physical union.

#### 2. Lust

Porn exists to foster lust. And Jesus says that it's not first of all the actions we take with our body but the evil desires of our hearts that are sinful: "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:20-23).

Jesus' proclamation that "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28) surprises and challenges us today just as it did his original audience. Jesus means that to even envision a sexual act with someone to whom we are not married is sinful because we have no marriage covenant with that person. By imagining sexual activity with people on screen, we reduce them to objects we use for our pleasure. Our lust also influences our marriages or other relationships because it affects the way we see and respond to our partners. Finally, the apostle James cautions us against lust when he analogizes the act of lust to the act of procreation. Then lust, "when it

has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death” (James 1:15, RSV).

### 3. Masturbation in the context of porn

The Bible does not forbid—or even mention—the practice of stimulating one’s own sexual organs to orgasm. However, masturbation is often accompanied by lust. Those who use porn to masturbate consciously choose to lust. Thus self-absorption and objectification of another replaces the sexual act designed to draw two people together in intimacy.

The apostle Paul counsels husbands and wives to satisfy each other sexually. “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. . . . Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again” (1 Cor. 7:3-5, NRSV). Masturbating while consuming porn can cause the user to be less interested in sex with their actual physical partner because they have already satisfied themselves. And since a significant percentage of male porn users experience erectile dysfunction or are unable to have sex without simultaneously consuming porn, they deprive their spouses of sexual pleasure and the joy of physical and emotional intimacy.

### 4. Deceit

Throughout the Old and New Testaments God’s people are repeatedly called to speak and live honestly to reflect the God of light and to build healthy relationships. “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7). People who hide the fact or the frequency of their porn use from their spouses or dating partners bring darkness into their relationships. And because of this darkness, their partners often feel not only shock but anger and shame. While the porn user may convince himself or herself that porn use doesn’t affect his or her partner, the partner usually feels quite differently. Entire websites exist for partners of porn users who feel the betrayal of adultery while their partner is oblivious to their pain.

#### E. *Creation restored, relationships redeemed*

### 1. The pattern of Creation

The bad news God gave to the woman after the fall into sin—that the man will “rule over you” (Gen. 3:16)—couldn’t be more painfully exemplified than in online pornography. But while our porn-saturated culture presents men and women as objects to be used sexually, and it encourages the violent domination of women for men’s sexual pleasure, Jesus came to restore our relationships to their creational intent. Genesis 1:26-31 tells us that men and women share God’s image as partners. God commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over all creatures. Together they reflected the image of God, and together they were sent to rule over it as God’s representatives. The second half of the creation story in Genesis 2:18-24 portrays a man lonely for company although he had animal companions and was intimate with God. A woman was created to be his help. Genesis 2:18 uses the Hebrew word *ezer*, which is ordinarily used to describe the rescuing God

in the Old Testament, as in “Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our *help* and shield” (Ps. 33:20).

God values human bodies and the sexual act. Humans are not only made in God’s image; the Creator described them as very good (Gen. 1:31; 5:1). When the first man and woman were together, they “were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Human bodies are so valuable to God that Jesus was born in a human body (Matt. 1:18ff; Luke 2:1-20), and after his death he was the first to experience the bodily resurrection that awaits all his sisters and brothers (1 Cor. 15). Sexual desire for a partner and enjoyment of sexual activity is alluded to at the creation of woman (Gen. 2:18-25). It is encouraged in Proverbs (5:18-19) and the first letter to the Corinthians (7:3-5). While most porn eliminates lovemaking activities such as kissing, stroking, and caressing—replacing them solely with penetration and orgasms—these tender touches are celebrated in the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs.

While porn trains us to view sex for our own pleasure, God designed sexual pleasure to push us toward the other. God intended the sex act to provide pleasure for both man and woman. For those Christians who will have a sexual relationship in marriage, the Song of Songs portrays a man and woman in equitable relationship. Their passion for each other demonstrates that while healthy, loving sex can be fun, joyful, deep, vulnerable, and playful, it will always be mutual, exclusive, and intimate.

## 2. The new community

Jesus presents a picture of human and human-divine intimacy the night before his crucifixion. In John 14-17 Jesus pictures the Trinity as God-in-community. He speaks of the loving communion that he, the Spirit, and the Father have had for all eternity, and he explains that his followers will now join into that intimacy with God and with each other. Rather than being objects to be used by each other, as in porn, God created each of us for human intimacy, whether sexual or not.

Jesus’ loving life and sacrificial death inaugurated a servant community. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). And he teaches his disciples that they should serve each other and the world in the same way. “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). Paul exhorts the Galatian church similarly, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:13). As sisters and brothers in a new spiritual family, God commands all believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21, NIV).

Although she’d watched porn since childhood, Megan,\* 30 (white), never heard about other women using porn. By her early twenties, she felt deep shame about it and about a sexual experience long ago with another child. But talking about it with a nonjudgmental believer released her of the shame and freed her, she said, “to look at myself and see how God sees me. God began to heal me from my past and give me hope for a positive sexual relationship.”

## VII. Pornography: Pastoral care

How staggering is the extent of God's mercy. Yet as great as the shame, exploitation, frustration, darkness, and violence from porn are, far greater is God's mercy and power to transform and heal. "All the wickedness in the world that man might do or say was no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped in the sea" (William Langland, 14th century).

### A. Pastoral care for the whole congregation

Since porn consumption is now so routine, no group or individual is untouched by its effects. Porn's victims are many:

- women prostituted into, and violently abused by, the porn industry
- children exposed to porn and trained by its violence to enact or receive violence
- baffled, angry and hurt parents and families
- intimates of porn users betrayed by their partner's virtual infidelity
- male and female porn users, many of whose brains begin to crave the stimulus of violence
- male porn users suffering erectile dysfunction
- women conditioned to be objects for men's violence and men primed to be sexually violent

Yet our churches only typically address the problem of porn, if at all, primarily as a problem of lust or of healing for porn users; only tangentially as a difficulty for wives, husbands, and others in relationship with porn users; and almost never as a concern for the women being violently mistreated in porn videos or the children and women in our churches suffering from the increase in male sexual violence against them. Therefore, although porn usage is a deeply personal issue, as churches we can no longer allow it to be a private issue.

The gospel of grace speaks directly to the pastoral needs of all who are harmed by the production and the use of porn. Offering the hope and power of God the healer and the great physician is an immediate necessity, yet this human damage will only increase until we confront the root of the problem. Why have we tolerated pornography use in our churches? We have tolerated it because the lusts of our hearts are dear to us. We have tolerated it because we are comfortable with the objectification and domination of women. The sins that lie closest to our hearts are those for which it is the most difficult to repent.

Members and leaders of the church will continue to treat porn casually until the church faces and repents of allowing objectification of women and male dominance to be part of the church culture. We objectify women's bodies when we imply that their primary purpose in life is that of mother or wife as much as when we tolerate comments about female bodies and disparaging jokes about women in sermons, classes, and small groups of all ages.

In his speech and actions with women, Jesus modeled a different path. He directly challenged his own patriarchal and lustful culture in three significant ways. Jesus invited all people to follow him and specifically encouraged women who did so (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; John 20:1-18); he corrected those who prioritized Mary's role as mother over that of other women as disciples (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 11:27-28); and he told men that even to gaze at a woman lustfully was to commit adultery (Matt. 5:26-27).

At this moment when pediatricians, psychiatrists, parents, and politicians identify North American porn use as a health crisis, and the #MeToo movement exposes the increasing numbers of women routinely experiencing sexual violence, the church can serve as a model of living in the light. Porn's primary power is in its hiddenness. God's children know the power of God's light to drive away darkness and bring freedom. Those filmed in porn, those using porn, and those in relationships with porn consumers are all harmed, though in different ways, and all experience shame.

If we expose the darkness to God's light, we can all be healed. In God's redemptive light, we can make the connection between porn and human trafficking and freely face the relationship of porn to the increasing numbers of women reporting male violence. We can admit that porn makes inequality sexually arousing.<sup>52</sup> And we can be honest about the extent of the harms to young and old porn users and to those with whom they relate.

## *B. Practical next steps*

### 1. Preaching and teaching

Pastors, teachers, and youth leaders: Regularly address the positive theme of sexuality as it pervades Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, including the generally ignored Song of Songs, with its beautiful depiction of a healthy sexual relationship. Explore the rich biblical teaching on the blessings and joys of celibacy. Constantly challenge us to exercise self-control, to put to death the lusts of the flesh. Far too much of the church's teaching in the area of sexuality has consisted of negative prohibitions against various sins, including pornography. Yet faithful gospel teaching and leadership points toward the rich calling that God has given to us as men and women made in his image. Encourage us to use our bodies in ways that reflect God's purposes for us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Since wife abuse is so common, and since the majority of all men as well as most young women now do or have used porn, we must address this regularly in our churches. The Bible speaks often and powerfully about God's perspective on violence and sexual sin, so our clear and frequent teaching will encourage the oppressed, as well as those who are willing to change, and it will confront the unrepentant sinner.

When the church fails to offer biblical, gospel-centered teaching on the sin of pornography, it is not able to offer hope to those who are devastated by it. If our pastors remain silent on Sunday mornings, those of us who use pornography or suffer from its use will remain silent as well. But this is not the way of the gospel. Instead, proclaim the good news as it relates to sexuality in order that all people, female and male, may once again enjoy the fullness of communion in him.

### 2. Public worship

Publicly and collectively acknowledge the many sins of pornography. Lament our guilt and the catastrophic consequences of our sin in the lives of so many people. Mourn with the victims of pornography, some of whom live and worship among us. Intercede regularly for porn users, their partners, parents, and those who suffer abuse because of pornography.

<sup>52</sup> [washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/05/25/how-porn-makes-inequality-sexually-arousing/?utm\\_term=.c491e7bf10c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/05/25/how-porn-makes-inequality-sexually-arousing/?utm_term=.c491e7bf10c)

### 3. Care for those abused in porn production

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people” (Luke 4:18-19, Good News Translation). Our churches likely include girls and women who currently or previously participated in porn videos or whose photos or videos to partners were uploaded onto porn sites, and some men or boys who have been used in these ways. The Christian community can help.

#### a. Model coming into the presence of God, who sees the sexually exploited and cares

Explain that a just and compassionate God understands the wrong that was done to those abused. “But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. . . . Call the evildoer to account for his wickedness that would not otherwise be found out. . . . You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” (Ps. 10:14-18, NIV).

#### b. Help with undeserved shame

Because what was done to their bodies—and the uses made of their images—was evil, people who have been involved in porn often feel guilty for having participated, even though others exploited their trust and in many cases coerced them into sending images or being filmed. And because those digital images might be permanently publicly available, they feel shame at their exposure. We can introduce them to Jesus, the Suffering Servant, who was also mocked, scorned, and rejected for sins he did not bear, who took away our shame, and in whose wounds we can be healed. “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and . . . one from whom others hide their faces. . . . Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:3-5, NRSV).

#### c. Nonjudgmental presence and support

In addition to loss of reputation because of permanent digital imagery, people who have been involved in porn might face long-term physical effects in the form of body memories, inability to sleep, and sexually transmitted diseases. They may need practical supports such as help to find childcare, paid employment, and medical/dental care. As their sisters and brothers, we can fulfill God’s call to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

#### d. Lament and pray with them

Introduce these people to the psalms—which cry out in sadness, anger, and betrayal—and be willing to suffer their pain with them. “Weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). Repeatedly the Bible tells us to pray for those who are sick, weak, suffering, persecuted, or tempted, and God’s Word promises healing. “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3). As prayer teams and as individuals, we can offer deeply wounded people the gift of approaching the Healer, Redeemer, Advocate, and Comforter on their behalf.

#### 4. Pastoral care for intimates of porn users

Partners of porn users are often lost in the recovery process. The porn user who chooses to confess and repent will likely receive support and encouragement. Their wives, husbands, and dating partners usually suffer alone and may be baffled by the trauma of betrayal. Loving individuals, supportive groups, and professionals can enable them to understand why they are so devastated by the shame, anger, and grief of realizing their partner has been repeatedly unfaithful with strangers online. Compassionate church members can help.

##### a. Words of comfort

Finding out that a partner has been using porn feels like betrayal and adultery because looking at another person with lust is a form of adultery, just as Jesus taught (Matt. 5:27-28). Studies find that explicit material can do far more harm than most people think. Porn use destroys intimacy in marriage and is one of the most frequent causes of divorce.<sup>53</sup>

##### b. Support to confront the porn user

Spouses and intimates can insist on having no-porn households and relationships. But spouses need encouragement by pastoral counselors, elders, and others that the history of their relationship usually provides a great deal of leverage. When churches support spouses who choose to give an ultimatum to porn-using spouses—because of this ongoing form of adultery—God can dramatically turn broken marriages around. In this way, we “admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col. 3:16) and obey Jesus’ teaching to hold accountable any member who sins against another (Matt. 18:15-20). Partners may also need help dealing with any violence the porn user may have brought into the relationship. For example, the most common behavior men ask female partners to do, based on their porn usage, is to engage in anal sex. Females describe this as painful, risky, and coercive.<sup>54</sup>

#### *How to Stop Using Porn*

- Solicit the prayers and support of a non-porn user. Confess your sin and ask to pray for their temptations as well.
- Immediately tell your spouse or girl/boyfriend.
- Take a 30-day porn fast. Historically Christians have fasted from food, sex, and other things.
- Learn about the relationship of porn to sex trafficking and tell someone else what you learned.
- Draw near to Jesus. Nourish a friendship with Jesus by talking to him, reading the Bible, singing songs of worship. God, who is your Help, loves you and wants to be with you.
- Block internet access on your devices. Try out various strategies until you find one that works.

<sup>53</sup> [psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/tech-support/201407/what-porn-does-intimacy-core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144149558.pdf](http://psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/tech-support/201407/what-porn-does-intimacy-core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144149558.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> C. Marston and R. Lewis, “Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK” (2014), *BMJ Open*, 4(8), e004996-e004996; DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-004996.

- Substitute enjoyable and healthy activities like physical exercise, a new hobby, regular time with good friends or family. Old habits get broken in part by filling the vacuum with new ones.
- Remind yourself that Jesus' death on the cross set you free from sin.
- Celebrate successes. Reward yourself by sharing your milestones with affirming others and by giving yourself a healthy treat.

#### 5. Pastoral care for porn users

After extended porn use, male and female porn users of all ages share some common needs that elders or other mature believers can help them address. Because porn often has such a grip on its users, they need real help from God and other believers.

##### a. Repentance

Many long-term porn users are unwilling to see porn use as harmful. Like David, who took Bathsheba for his own sexual pleasure and then killed her husband to cover up his own sin (like every other sinful human), porn users often need to be confronted by someone like the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 11-12). Although, as a consequence of his sin, David suffered the death of his infant son, wonderfully God later answered his prayer to be used to help others also come to repentance and to experience the joy of renewed relationship with God, who has the power to heal and forgive. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. . . . Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Ps. 51:10-14).

##### b. Intercessory prayer and hope for healing of compulsive behavior

While not every porn user is addicted, a greedy porn industry has designed porn to be addictive. "Neurons that fire together wire together," psychiatrist Norman Doidge famously said when discussing the sadomasochistic nature of most porn.<sup>55</sup> The good news is that while porn use actually changes the brains of men and women who use it, brain scientists describe brains as "plastic" with the ability to heal.<sup>56</sup> The Creator designed our physical bodies to heal and also made it possible for us to be delivered of sinful patterns, shame, isolation, anger, and hurt. God promises that when we confess our sins to each other and pray for each other, we will be healed (James 5:13-18). And when we live in the light of repentance and honesty, God's new community of fellow forgiven sinners will restore us (1 John 1:5-10). (A number of organizations also now offer support and practical help to those who want to stop using porn.)

##### c. Block access to internet porn on their devices

Just as a smoker will not quit smoking if she keeps cigarettes in the house or if he stands outside with his smoker buddies, so a porn user cannot have easy access to porn and expect to quit. (Various companies offer individual or family plans for their porn-blocking or accountability services.)

<sup>55</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), p. 117.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207ff.

d. Physical affection

While loneliness, stress, or boredom can drive people to porn, we have seen that compulsive porn use also isolates people and decreases their ability to build healthy relationships. If we have used porn excessively, we may feel disconnection from or hatred toward our bodies. For these reasons, communal recreational activities and physical affection in the form of hugs and encouraging pats on the back provide emotional nourishment to recovering porn users.

e. Biblically based teaching about sex and relationships

Because porn has been a primary source of sexual education for an entire generation, porn users need Bible studies, small group discussions, and sermons about mutual sexual relationships and healthy intimacy. Porn studies reveal that male and female porn users begin to believe that women are weaker and less intelligent than men, and that women are willing to be raped, assaulted, or dominated sexually. This coincides with the belief that men are more dominant, powerful, and have greater sexual needs than women.<sup>57</sup> Obviously this way of thinking can be and is problematic and harmful to both sexes. But where the culture of porn has malformed us, God can transform our minds. Paul calls us to present our bodies to God “as a living sacrifice. . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2). Additionally, when images displeasing to God persist in our minds, we are invited to think instead on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure . . . and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8-10).

Wilma\* and Henk,\* 70 (white), attend a film and panel hosted by a local church on internet porn’s impact on society. Horrified by what they learn about sex trafficking and kids’ easy access to porn, they begin to pray. They also get up their courage to ask their grandchildren some questions. Gradually, through their advocacy, parents in Wilma and Henk’s church discover their children’s porn use. Some are shamed and grieved to understand the reason for their children’s inexplicable changes in behavior. The church supports these families with prayer and with establishing mentoring relationships for parents and kids. With a friend, Wilma also encourages the church into seeking justice for sexually exploited girls.

6. Special word to parents of child and teen porn users

a. Understand the effects of porn use on your child

We saw earlier that boys exposed to porn from a young age are more likely to have attitudes that support sexual harassment and violence against women, and to pressure their partners to engage in porn-style sex (harmful, painful, degrading, aggressive, etc.). Research has also shown that exposure to porn leads girls to objectify themselves, hate their own bodies, experience depression and anxiety, and harm themselves. Child porn users may have lower academic performance,

<sup>57</sup> [projectknow.com/porn-addiction/women/?utm\\_term=p\\_addiction](http://projectknow.com/porn-addiction/women/?utm_term=p_addiction)

develop sexual preoccupation and compulsive internet use, and experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of intimacy.<sup>58</sup>

b. Compassionately confront

Although you may feel guilty, angry, or terrified about the effects of porn use on your child, what he or she needs is strong parental love filled with grace. Your child likely also feels great shame and fear, as well as anger that he or she is now struggling with an incredibly powerful temptation.<sup>59</sup> Model yourself on the God of Psalm 103, who knows our weakness, forgives our sins, is slow to anger, and has compassion on us, his children.

c. Deal with the technology

Since many young children and most teens carry a computer around with them via their smartphone, parents can get porn-blocking services and should be wise and consistent when denying or limiting access to phones and other devices. A number of organizations offer help to parents, beginning with identifying the signs that your child uses porn. (See resource listed below.)

d. Describe the reality of a healthy sexual relationship

Because porn has been their primary source of sexual education, young porn users need a new education. Uncomfortable as it may feel, contrast the actual physical details in a sexual intimate relationship with what goes on in porn. Explain how God designed sex for mutual pleasure, never for violence, and that it involves give and take (Song of Songs).

During a church council discussion about the porn use of certain young people in their church, one elder noticed the especially heartfelt and compassionate response of Mark,\* 60 (white). That elder later helped Mark to open up about his own porn use. Since then Mark's wife Karen told him, "I won't live with you until you stop using porn and you are able to understand the effect it's had on me and our marriage." There is hope for this marriage because the elders and their small group are church members backing Karen up, and Mark is facing what he's done.

7. Special word for women

Because many more men than women have traditionally used porn, and because the Christian community often suggests that men have more sexual desire than women, women who struggle to stop using porn often feel an additional burden of shame. Yet since porn has become normalized, a large minority of young women now use porn and need support to stop using it. Like their brothers, these women can be comforted by the fact that Jesus is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses . . . in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

<sup>58</sup> Eric W. Owens, Richard J. Behun, Jill C. Manning, and Rory C. Reid, "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," 10.1080/10720162.2012.660431, pp. 99-122; published online: 09 Apr 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## 8. Special word for men

Christian men who stop consuming porn describe a kind of eureka moment (see Cameron's\* story earlier) that impelled them to stop. Some realize how horrified, hurt, or angry their wives or girlfriends are by their betrayal; others make the connection between sex trafficking and porn and then understand what the filmed women suffer. Christian human rights and antitrafficking organizations report that men who join antitrafficking efforts find themselves able to give up their porn use. Focusing on advocating for women, many men are freed from the guilty rationalization, self-absorption, and shame of being a Christian who also uses porn.

## 9. Special word to pastors and teachers

Polls show that many North American pastors refer to themselves as porn addicts. If so, they cannot in good conscience help others while living in this sin. The time is now for us all to heed God's command to "lay aside . . . the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus. . . . Consider him who endured . . . so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children. . . . Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed" (Heb. 12:1-2, 4-5, 12-13).

Sarah,\* 30 (white), laments, "I would like to have a no-porn relationship. But every Christian man I have dated, all of whom were pastors or Christian leaders, used porn. Most of them refused to quit, either saying they'd already tried unsuccessfully or that it wasn't a big deal. All the women I know say the same thing about their boyfriends.

## C. *Mission*

Many health professionals, teachers, and parents in your community are deeply concerned about the impact of porn usage. Churches who begin to learn more about online porn's effects on society and its relationship to sex trafficking will find unchurched neighbors interested in your ministries of both care and justice. Whether you address youth groups, parents, or partners of porn users or you choose to educate your church and community on the links between pornography and sex trafficking, you will be encouraged to find that local health, counseling, and justice professionals will gladly participate. Hosting film nights with panels of such experts or lectures followed by small groups can benefit your church and connect your ministry with the needs of a hurting community around you. If you advocate for the poor and marginalized locally and globally, others will join you, and some will meet Jesus, the just and compassionate One.

The Holy Spirit, who "has compassion on all he has made" (Ps. 145:9, NIV) gives spiritual gifts in sufficient supply so that we can offer the love, healing community, and pastoral care that is needed. People affected by porn will be challenged, nourished, bolstered, and restored by our ministries of prayer, small groups, preaching, worship, potlucks, diaconal help, elder care, and much more. And those receiving care will be able to heal as they in turn are encouraged to use their spiritual gifts to serve others.

#### D. *In conclusion*

The porn industry flourishes while the church falters. If the church can courageously admit the ubiquity of porn, its far-reaching consequences on every demographic, and its nature as a purveyor of male violence against women, the Lamb of God who is the Lion of Judah can lead the way to healing for our churches and our society. May God's kingdom of shalom come.

#### E. *Selected resources*

##### 1. Books

- Dines, Gail. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2010).
- Foubert, John. *How Pornography Harms: What Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know* (Bloomington, Ind.: LifeRich Publishing, 2017).
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Jensen, Robert. *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 2007).
- Jensen, Robert. *The End of Patriarchy* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2017).
- Perrin, Benjamin. *Invisible Chains: Canada's Underground World of Human Trafficking* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2010).
- Struthers, William M. *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009).
- Tankard Reist, Melinda. *Big Porn, Inc.: Exposing the Harms of the Pornography Industry* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2011).

##### 2. Films

- Red Light, Green Light*. Documentary about sex trafficking and prostitution.
- Over18*. An examination of porn's effects on children, parents, and those filmed in porn.
- Pornland: How the Porn Industry Has Hijacked our Sexuality*.
- The Sex Trade*. A documentary on the sex industry. (National Film Board of Canada)
- Buying Sex*. (National Film Board of Canada)

##### 3. Websites

- [culturereframed.org](http://culturereframed.org); building resilience and resistance to hypersexualized culture; resources, tools for people of all ages
- [network.crcna.org/safe-church/pornography-awareness-supplemental-resources](http://network.crcna.org/safe-church/pornography-awareness-supplemental-resources); help for porn users, parents, and leaders
- [protectyoungeyes.com](http://protectyoungeyes.com); internet safety information
- [goforgreatness.org](http://goforgreatness.org); positive effects of quitting porn
- [nofap.com](http://nofap.com); community-based porn recovery
- [iitap.com](http://iitap.com); International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals
- [defenddignity.ca](http://defenddignity.ca); catalyst for individuals and churches to end sexual exploitation
- [endsexualexploitation.org](http://endsexualexploitation.org); National Center on Sexual Exploitation
- [fightthenewdrug.org](http://fightthenewdrug.org); antipornography nonprofit
- [cbeinternational.org](http://cbeinternational.org); Christian for Biblical Equality International

#### 4. Blog posts and articles

crcna.org/SafeChurch/about-us/1989-survey-abuse-crc  
pornharmsresearch.com/2011/12/internet-porn-stats-should-parents-be-concerned-news/  
cbeinternational.org/blogs/church-crisis-pornography-and-patriarchy  
cbeinternational.org/blogs/metoo-and-churchtoo-perfect-storm  
barna.com/fast-facts/porn-in-the-digital-age-new-research-reveals-10-trends/  
covenanteyes.com/2016/05/10/betrayal-trauma-the-side-of-pornography-use-no-one-is-talking-about/  
crcna.org/SafeChurch/about-us/1989-survey-abuse-crc

#### 5. Porn blocking or accountability services

covenanteyes.com; screen accountability  
netnanny.com; porn blocking for parents or adult users  
qustodio.com; porn blocking for parents or adult users

### **VIII. Gender identity: Cultural context**

We begin with some opening stories. The names of the persons in these stories have been changed.

Tee\*, an Afro-Latino, who presented as a gender-fluid person, was rejected by family, became homeless, and bounced around several emergency shelters before finding supportive housing. Since transitioning, it became difficult for Tee to find a job, and Tee was sexually harassed at work. When Tee asked to be referred to as male, the staff and counselors continued to use Tee's original pronouns, and Tee felt unsupported. Tee felt isolated and alone, suffered high levels of anxiety, and incurred other medical conditions after this experience.

When Colin's\* former work colleague Stephen,\* now Serena,\* began to transition, he shared this information with Colin. Colin wasn't sure what to think or how to respond, and he knew Stephen was not a Christian. Colin and his wife, Rachel,\* asked their church household group for advice. These other believers affirmed the couple's sense that they should build a stronger relationship with Stephen, if that was what he wanted. Initially Rachel and Colin felt awkward and uncomfortable with Stephen as he more publicly identified as Serena. Their believing friends prayed for them to be led by the Holy Spirit in their relationship with Serena. The couple realized that Serena was getting support from them that was not readily available from friends or family, so they worked to stay regularly in touch, even after they no longer worked together. They took great joy in learning to wait on God as they loved their new friend. They wondered if God might draw Serena into a Christian community and a relationship with Jesus.

#### *A. Introduction*

In our study of gender identity, our committee listened to stories from people identifying as trans, gender nonconforming, and queer, and from their families. We did research in theology, including queer theology, and in the biological and social sciences, including queer studies. Because gender

studies is such a new field and the science is still in its infancy, the body of reliable scientific research is smaller than in other areas pertaining to sexuality. Transitioning can include various medical treatments, many of which remain largely experimental. At the same time, few theologians have reflected deeply on questions surrounding gender identity or disorders of sexual development (DSD). Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature in all of these fields that can help the church discern how it should navigate questions of gender identity in a manner that is faithful to the gospel, consistent with the best science, and life-giving for persons who are struggling with questions related to gender identity.

### B. *Use of terms*

Barely half a century ago the notion of having a *gender identity* was virtually unheard of. Indeed, the concept of gender identity only makes sense if there is some idea of what *gender* means, and how that may or may not be different from *sex*. In our summary of a biblical theology of sexuality in section II, B of this report, we acknowledged that in the biblical text of Genesis 1:27 “the terms *male* and *female* clearly refer to biological sexuality, not merely to gender, although it is safe to say that the very distinction between sex and gender would be alien to the text in its ancient Near Eastern context.” How, then, can the Bible help us to make sense of contemporary questions about gender and gender identity?

Although it is generally accepted today that sex and gender are distinct from one another, this understanding is relatively new. It was only in the 1960s that people began to use the word *gender* to refer to something other than a person’s sex. John Money, a sex researcher who spent his career at Johns Hopkins University, is generally credited with popularizing this use of the term.<sup>60</sup> Money writes that he “needed a term that did not exist” to explain what people were doing when they took on the roles and identity of a sex different from their biological sex.<sup>61</sup> Hence he used the word *gender* to refer to those roles and sense of identity.

By the 1970s, psychologists had begun to consistently use the words *sex* and *gender* to differentiate between biological characteristics (*sex*) and “non-physiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to males and to females” (*gender*).<sup>62</sup> This distinction is foundational to the way in which a range of terms are currently being used in our culture. Many

<sup>60</sup> Money notes that gender did appear occasionally in the 18th and 19th centuries as a reference to male and female but was considered colloquial or satirical. John Money, “Gender: History, Theory, and Usage of the Term in Sexology and Its Relationship to Nature/Nurture,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1985), pp. 71-79. See also Margaret H. McCarthy, “Gender Ideology and the Humanum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 43 (2016), pp. 274-298 (retrieved from [communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum](http://communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum), p. 285); and L.S. Mayer and P.R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, No. 50 (2016), p. 91 and note 17.

<sup>61</sup> John Money, “The Concept of Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood and Adolescence after 39 Years,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1994), pp. 163-77.

<sup>62</sup> Rhoda K. Unger, “Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender,” *American Psychologist*, 34 (1976), p. 1086; see also Stephanie A. Shields and Elaine C. Diccio, “The Social Psychology of Sex and Gender: From Gender Differences to Doing Gender,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35(3) (2011), pp. 491-99. See also J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 13-16.

of these terms are contested, and we are aware that attempting to define them too rigidly risks alienating some persons, minimizing their experiences, or endorsing positions with which they disagree. This is not our intent. Rather, we define the following terms, listed in alphabetical order, to provide necessary clarity as to how we are using them in our report.

- *cisgender*: a sense of having a gender identity that matches one’s sex; understood as the opposite of *transgender*.<sup>63</sup>
- *desist*: to cease from gender dysphoria. This term is used by medical professionals to describe the response of children or youth who experience gender dysphoria but who no longer persist in wanting to be the other sex. It is also used by gender dysphoric youth or adults who resist pressure to transition.
- *detransition*: when a person transitions back to living in alignment with their sex, after having earlier transitioned to live as the sex that corresponds to their gender identity.
- *disorders of sexual development (DSDs)*: also referred to as *intersex*, and formerly referred to as *hermaphrodite*, DSDs are congenital (biologically based) conditions in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal, and /or external anatomical sex is atypical. Some DSDs are visible at birth. Others appear at later stages because of the malfunctioning of (estrogen or testosterone) hormones.
- *gender*: categorization of humans as male and female based on culturally sanctioned roles, behaviors, expressions (sometimes also labeled as masculinity and femininity).
- *gender dysphoria (GD)*: distress experienced by persons whose gender identity differs from their sex.
- *gender identity*: a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or other (see *gender nonconforming* below).
- *gender nonconforming*: when a person’s behavior, appearance, expression, or identity does not conform to cultural expectations associated with their sex. Some may also use the terms *queer*, *genderfluid*, or *nonbinary*.
- *physical transition*: when a person undergoes medical treatments such as hormone therapy and /or *sex reassignment surgeries* in order to bring their body into alignment with the gender with which they identify.
- *sex reassignment surgery (SRS)*: surgical procedures to alter a person’s existing sexual characteristics to resemble and /or function like those of the sex that corresponds to their gender identity.
- *sex*: categorization of humans (and animals) as male and female on the basis of physical, biological, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics.
- *social transition*: when a person makes nonmedical changes, such as in clothing, name, or personal pronouns, in order to live in alignment with their gender identity.

<sup>63</sup> This is perhaps one of the clearer examples of how terms are not neutral. As described by the *Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission*, “This term cisgender emerged in the 1990s as part of the development of transgender ideology. Although, in itself, it is a neutral descriptor, it is often employed in order to normalise transgender experience; i.e., to convey the idea that it is just as natural for some to be transgender as it is for others to be cisgender.”

- *transgender*: a broad term that includes persons who define themselves as a gender other than their sex, and who may or may not have socially or physically *transitioned* from *male to female* (MtF) or *female to male* (FtM).
- *transition*: when a person changes to live in alignment with the sex that corresponds to their *gender identity*.

### C. *Questions of worldview*

These terms might provide some clarity, but they cannot do justice to the complexities, pain, and difficulties of persons who experience the various conditions that these words attempt to convey. For even as we acknowledge that many of us are relatively comfortable with our sense of being male and female and do not experience incongruity between our sex and our gender, we recognize that some among us feel alienated, confused, or ashamed because something doesn't feel quite right. Some of us feel out of sorts with our bodies, for reasons we do not understand, and this is a situation we did not choose. Some of us experience bullying or are condemned for our choices or preferences for dress, occupation, hobbies, literature, food, recreation, and a host of other things, while others of us are judged for our mannerisms, our body shape, our behaviors, or even the sound of our own voice. For still others, a sense of being "trapped in the wrong body" has led to despair, hopelessness, even thoughts of suicide. These difficulties are often exacerbated by rigid cultural expectations about "proper" roles for women and men (and we must acknowledge what is often referred to as the double standard, in which women disproportionately have borne the brunt of condemnation for "violating" gender expectations). Though social scientists have demonstrated wide variations across cultures and throughout history in roles for females and males,<sup>64</sup> many humans have the stubborn tendency to cling to narrow understandings of the "right" way to live out one's maleness or femaleness. Gender stereotypes persist and are ubiquitous in media, entertainment, industry, sports, politics, religion, and the family. Paradoxically, as much as we celebrate freedom, those who do not conform to narrow gender expectations often find themselves marginalized or discriminated against. It is not so simple to "just be" male and female. The individual challenges we experience spill out beyond our homes and families and have become political and ideological battlefronts pitting various groups against one another. Trying to make sense of gender identity not only requires us to consider the challenges we experience as individuals but also pushes us to dig deeper to understand the assumptions behind various approaches to gender differences.

We are in a cultural moment in North America and Europe when long-standing beliefs and practices about sex and gender have been challenged

<sup>64</sup> See Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World* (1990); and *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us about Masculinity* (2002). The fact that social scientists have also found enduring patterns of general differences between males and females does not negate this observation. See Su, Rounds, and Armstrong, "Men and Things, Women and People: A Meta-Analysis of Sex Differences in Interests," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 135, No. 6 (2009), pp. 859–84; Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yanna J. Weisberg, Colin G. DeYoung, and Jacob B. Hirsh, "Gender Differences in Personality across the Ten Aspects of the Big Five," *Frontiers in Psychology | Personality Science and Individual Differences*, Vol. 2, Art. 178 (2011), pp. 1-11.

and questioned, by Christians and non-Christians alike.<sup>65</sup> *National Geographic*,<sup>66</sup> *Time* magazine,<sup>67</sup> and *The Atlantic*<sup>68</sup> have all featured recent cover stories on gender identity. In September 2019 Merriam-Webster announced the addition of the gender nonbinary use of *they* to its dictionary.<sup>69</sup> Soon after toy giant Mattel introduced “Creatable World,” which it claims is the first-ever line of gender neutral dolls.<sup>70</sup> The mainstream approval of such revolutionary changes would scarcely have been imaginable less than a generation ago. Nonetheless these changes continue to be resisted in other parts of the world, including Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>71</sup>

Ideas once considered radical and extreme permeate our societal consciousness. They are all around us in public policy developments such as gender neutral restrooms, third gender category options on birth certificates and driver’s licenses, requirements for gender neutral pronouns, access to publicly financed hormonal and surgical interventions for gender transitioning, and the demand for affirmation of multiple gender identities as a human right.

In addition to these public policy developments, health, education, and social services have had to adapt to complex dilemmas pitting the claims of persons who have transitioned against the safety and well-being of others, specifically women. For example, women’s shelters have been required to accept transwomen who have not physically transitioned, and who thus pose a threat to women attempting to escape the threat of violence from men<sup>72</sup>; men who have been convicted of sex crimes have changed their sex and been placed in women’s prisons, putting women inmates at risk of being sexually assaulted by these transwomen.<sup>73</sup> The idea of gender identity itself is a recent break from the conventional assumption that sex differences were fixed and normative.

Changes such as these do not occur in a vacuum. They reflect cultural, philosophical, and political developments whose origins go much further

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). We are living in what some have called the “transgender moment.” See also Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), p. 1, and note 1, p. 217.

<sup>66</sup> “Gender Revolution,” Jan. 2017; [nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/](http://nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/).

<sup>67</sup> “Beyond He or She,” Mar. 2017; [time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she/](http://time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she/).

<sup>68</sup> “Your Child Says She’s Trans,” July / Aug. 2018; [theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2018/07/](http://theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2018/07/).

<sup>69</sup> “A Note on the Nonbinary ‘They’: It’s Now in the Dictionary,” retrieved from [merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/nonbinary-they-is-in-the-dictionary](http://merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/nonbinary-they-is-in-the-dictionary).

<sup>70</sup> Eliana Dockterman, “‘A Doll For Everyone’: Meet Mattel’s Gender-Neutral Doll,” *Time* (Sept. 25, 2019), retrieved from [time.com/5684822/mattel-gender-neutral-doll](http://time.com/5684822/mattel-gender-neutral-doll). See also [mattel.com/en-ca/creatable-world](http://mattel.com/en-ca/creatable-world).

<sup>71</sup> “The Global Divide on Homosexuality,” Pew Research Center (June 4, 2013); [pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality](http://pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality). See also “African United Methodists Won’t Trade Bible for Dollars,” *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Blog* (Feb. 23, 2019); [juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#J](http://juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#J). See also John Anderson, “Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (2011), pp. 1589-1605.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, [out.com/transgender/2019/8/28/canadian-shelter-excludes-trans-women-was-vandalized](http://out.com/transgender/2019/8/28/canadian-shelter-excludes-trans-women-was-vandalized).

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, [quillette.com/2019/10/12/male-bodied-rapists-are-being-imprisoned-with-women-why-do-so-few-people-care/](http://quillette.com/2019/10/12/male-bodied-rapists-are-being-imprisoned-with-women-why-do-so-few-people-care/).

back than a few decades.<sup>74</sup> They are not simply rooted in science. They rest on assumptions about the nature of the world, how we know what is true, and how we should live and act—what philosophers call ontological, epistemological, and ethical categories. It is therefore impossible to negotiate competing claims about the relationship between sex, gender, and gender identity from any sort of objective, neutral, or scientific standpoint. We cannot escape questions of worldview.

It is arguable that the primary value of modern, Western society is the individual self. In part, this is due to the influence of Christianity.<sup>75</sup> Christianity cut through the social hierarchies of the ancient world, which philosophers like Aristotle considered natural, and insisted on the dignity and responsibility of every single human being, made in the image of God. Women, children, and men were invited to embrace the gospel regardless of the claims that their husbands, fathers, governments, or masters may have made upon them. In their baptism they were offered a new identity in Christ that transcended every other identity.

Over time, Christian convictions regarding the value of the individual led Western societies to advocate on behalf of the poor, abolish slavery, and establish democracy. Values like love and justice, liberty and equality, human rights and the rule of law became the foundations of the Western moral and political order. The moral order was said to consist in a set of rights granted to every human individual by their sovereign creator. These rights were to be exercised in accord with God's moral will as revealed in Scripture and as embedded in natural law—the created order—or what Abraham Kuyper referred to as God's creation ordinances.

Unfortunately, for far too long women were not given these rights. During the 19th century first-wave feminists, many of whom were Christians, insisted that women should enjoy the same rights as men.<sup>76</sup> In the course of the 20th century women were accorded many of the legal and civil rights that men enjoyed. Many Christians rightly embraced these developments, all the while assuming that women and men are called to exercise their freedom in a manner consistent with the moral will of God and with the moral order of creation.

At the same time, strands of the Western liberal tradition were beginning to argue for a much more extreme understanding of individual human autonomy. According to this understanding, human rights are inherent to each individual self without regard to a creator. Individuals are free to exercise their rights as they see fit, subject only to the requirement that in

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015); Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex, and Human Flourishing* (London: IVP, 2017); Scott Yenor, "Sex, Gender, and the Origin of the Culture Wars: An Intellectual History," Heritage Foundation (2017), retrieved from [report.heritage.org/fp63](http://report.heritage.org/fp63).

<sup>75</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" in A. Jaggar and P. Rothenberg, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984/1869), pp. 104-13; Elizabeth Clay Stanton and Elizabeth Cady, "Address before the U.S. Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage," in J. Kourney, J. Sterba, and R. Tong, eds., *Feminist Philosophies: Problems, Theories, and Applications* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992/1892), pp. 269-70; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co./Everyman's Library, (1992/1792).

the exercise of their rights they may not violate the rights of other persons. Appeals to religious authority, nature, or tradition are subordinate to the autonomy of the individual self.

Over time this logic has been embraced by a growing number of people and applied in increasingly extreme ways. For example, pro-choice advocates argue that women have the right to abort their unborn fetuses. Many gay rights advocates insist that a person has the right to marry any other person, regardless of sex. Some transgender advocates follow this logic by maintaining that a person has the freedom to choose whether or not they should identify as male or female. In the face of such claims, appeals to biology are no more persuasive than appeals to religion.

Christian political theorist David Koyzis argues that small-*l* liberal societies of the early 21st century have evolved into “choice enhancement” states that abandon all pretense to a consensus on what is considered good other than individual choice.<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor makes a similar point when he observes the mid-20th-century emergence of “expressive individualism.” He points out that “the sexual revolution . . . was moved by a complex of moral ideas in which discovering one’s authentic identity and demanding that it be recognized was connected to the goal of equality.”<sup>78</sup> Enhancing the freedom to establish one’s identity extends not only to one’s choices regarding sexual practices and partners but also to one’s identity as male, female, or something else entirely.

Nancy Pearcey demonstrates how this choice, which she associates with postmodernism, depends on a dualistic notion of personhood in which the mind is distinct from the body and more important to one’s identity than the body. She concludes that

Postmodernism is thus the latest, and most extreme version of the body/mind dichotomy—one that treats the body itself as infinitely malleable, with no definite nature of its own. . . . If the body cannot be defined, then it places no constraints on our gender identity. The goal is complete freedom to declare oneself a man or a woman or both or neither. The sovereign self will not tolerate having its options limited by anything it did not choose—not even its own body.<sup>79</sup>

The modern pursuit of human autonomy freed from all constraints to create one’s own identity is one of the radical strands of the sexual revolution. The sharp distinction between sex and gender emerged out of this context. It was not merely a neutral, objective, or scientific classification. It was part of an explicit project to undermine traditional understandings of sex and gender and to pave the way for individual choice and identity freed from the constraints of the body. As Catholic theological anthropologist Margaret McCarthy concludes,

The dominant idea of “gender” . . . has now become the vehicle for challenging *any* identity prior to choice (disordered or otherwise). “Gender” now belongs to the realm of the disembodied will, which stands over its body and chooses

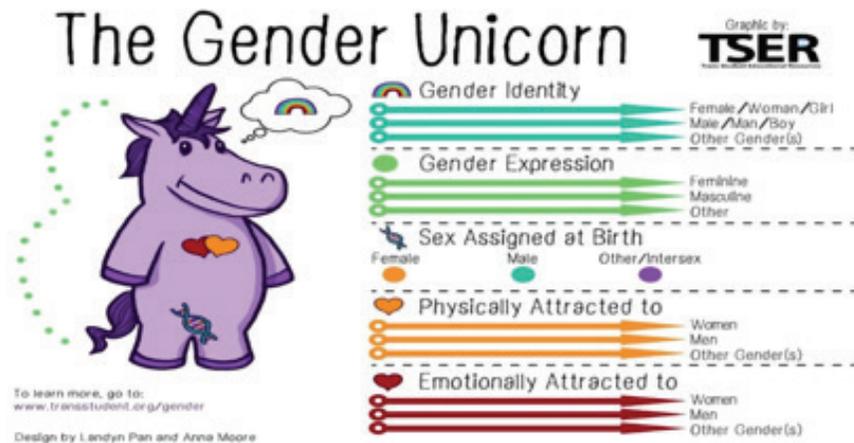
<sup>77</sup> David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2019), chap. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Self-published, 2007), p. 502.

<sup>79</sup> Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions About Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2018), p. 210.

(“assigns”) an “identity” without any need for justification, especially when such choice is in opposition to its given sex.<sup>80</sup>

Separating gender identity from biological sex and linking these to choice and identity reflects an underlying worldview of humans as creatures whose core sense of identity is not connected to their bodies. As Pearcey notes, this dualistic understanding gives rise to humans as beings who consist of fragmented bits of desires, expressions, and attractions. Such an understanding of gender identity is portrayed by the currently popular “gender unicorn” poster depicted below.<sup>81</sup>



The gender unicorn illustrates the range of choices available to individuals in five areas: identity, expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction. Even “sex assigned at birth” is seen as a choice: the choice of doctors or parents based on an assessment of the newborn baby’s reproductive organs as male or female. Since, of course, a baby cannot make this choice for her or himself, this “assignment” of sex is often viewed as an external imposition and an infringement of an individual’s freedom. In fact, the gender unicorn’s inclusion of “sex assigned at birth” was developed partly in response to the earlier “genderbread person” poster, which initially used the term “biological sex” but after enduring criticism was revised to refer to “sex assigned at birth.”<sup>82</sup> From this vantage point,

<sup>80</sup> Margaret H. McCarthy, “Gender Ideology and the Humanum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 43 (2016), pp. 274-298; retrieved from [communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum](http://communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum), p. 288. Michael Walsh similarly observes that shifting from sex to gender was part of the larger strategy of the “Frankfurt School” of critical theorists who sought to undermine the traditional ethics of Western civilization in the wake of World War II; see his *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015), esp. chap. 6, 11.

<sup>81</sup> *The Gender Unicorn*, Trans Student Educational Resources, [www.transstudent.org/gender](http://www.transstudent.org/gender).

<sup>82</sup> Mey Rude, “It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of “Biological Sex” to Defend Their Transmisogyny” (2014); [autostraddle.com/its-time-for-people-to-stop-using-the-social-construct-of-biological-sex-to-defend-their-transmisogyny-240284](http://autostraddle.com/its-time-for-people-to-stop-using-the-social-construct-of-biological-sex-to-defend-their-transmisogyny-240284). Note that there are other critiques leading to other attempts, for example, the “Gender Elephant,” [ccgds-ccdgs.org/gender-elephant](http://ccgds-ccdgs.org/gender-elephant).

“sex assigned at birth” might be more accurately phrased as “sex imposed at birth.” It is also notable that an individual’s perception of their gender is deemed more authentic and important than their biological sex.

As is clear from the various attempts to display gender diversity (e.g., the gender unicorn, the gender elephant, and the genderbread person), it is now widely accepted as self-evident that sex and gender are not simply male or female but, rather, exist on a continuum. In fact, so common is this understanding that challenging or questioning it is often attacked as discriminatory, bigoted, unscientific, or hateful.<sup>83</sup>

#### D. Gender dysphoria

Conversations about gender identity are often complicated by widespread confusion between two significantly different experiences: *gender dysphoria* and *disorders of sexual development (DSD)*.<sup>84</sup>

Mark Yarhouse, a Christian clinical psychologist and director of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute<sup>85</sup> at Wheaton College, defines *gender dysphoria* as, “the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female” that “does not correspond to your biological sex.” When a person experiences gender incongruence and it causes significant distress or impairment, they may meet criteria for a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria.<sup>86</sup>

Yet this understanding has become controversial. Yarhouse notes that changes were recently made to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) to “de-pathologize” gender incongruence and “shift the focus away from biological sex to assigned gender.”<sup>87</sup> This is in keeping with the broader cultural trends to legitimize and affirm gender fluidity and nonconformity and to deconstruct traditional sex and gender differences.<sup>88</sup> In addition, some scholars now reject the idea that sex is a fixed biological state. Instead, they argue that it is a product of social and cultural construction.<sup>89</sup> Others question whether the experience of incongruence is the problem, or whether it is only a problem when it causes anxiety, suffering, or depression.

Yarhouse provides a helpful framework for understanding the different ways in which Christians have responded to the complexity of gender dysphoria. He identifies three distinct frameworks, summarized in the table

<sup>83</sup> See for example, Margaret H. McCarthy, p. 276.

<sup>84</sup> Although some lump these two experiences together, Andrew Walker warns, for example, that “intersexuality and transgenderism are apples and oranges. Those who are pushing the gender revolution have an interest in confusing the categories”; Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 158.

<sup>85</sup> [wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-psychology-counseling-and-family-therapy/sexual-and-gender-identity-institute](http://wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-psychology-counseling-and-family-therapy/sexual-and-gender-identity-institute)

<sup>86</sup> Yarhouse, p. 19. Note that the diagnosis refers to what is specified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. [DSM-5], 2013, pp. 451-59. See also Zucker, “The DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for Gender Dysphoria,” in C. Trombetta, G. Liguori, and M. Bertolotto, eds., *Management of Gender Dysphoria* (Switz.: Springer, Milano, 2015), pp. 33-37.

<sup>87</sup> Yarhouse, p. 62.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Anderson, 2018; Pearcey, 2018; Mayer and McHugh, 2016; Walker, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> See Anderson, 2018, p. 31; Pearcey, 2018, pp. 194-96.

below.<sup>90</sup> The Integrity framework views gender as a created reality that is fixed and normative. This perspective regards male and female as categories that are essential to understanding the nature of humans. It views any deviation from these essential categories as disobedience or rebellion that is incompatible with human flourishing.

Three Contrasting Frameworks for How Christians Approach Gender Dysphoria		
Integrity (sacred)	Disability (compassion)	Diversity (identity)
“Identifies the phenomenon of gender incongruence as confusing the sacredness of maleness and femaleness and specific resolutions as violations of that integrity”	“Identifies gender incongruence as a reflection of a fallen world in which the condition is a disability, a nonmoral reality to be addressed with compassion”	“ <i>Strong form:</i> Deconstruction of sex/gender “ <i>Weak form:</i> Highlights transgender issues as reflecting an identity and culture to be celebrated as an expression of diversity”

The Disability framework recognizes the normative nature of male/female differences but acknowledges that in a fallen world an individual’s experience of gender or their physical characteristics (for persons who have a DSD) might be confused or ambivalent through no fault of their own. Whether addressing gender dysphoria or a DSD, the disability framework regards such conditions as evidence of the brokenness of creation, instances in which something has gone awry from God’s intent. Persons who suffer from them are to be regarded with compassion and sensitivity. They should be accommodated in such a way that they can cope with their “disability” as well as possible.

The Diversity approach regards variations of gender expression and characteristics as existing on a continuum that reflects a range of possibilities having no moral or normative foundation. From this point of view, persons whose experiences of their gender do not align with majority categories of male and female are regarded as variations reflecting the beauty and wonder of human possibility. As such, they should be supported and affirmed. In its strong form, the diversity framework insists on the deconstruction of sex and gender altogether.

Yarhouse points out that each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. He thus argues for what he calls an “integrated” approach in which the integrity of male/female differences is affirmed, but in which Christians respond compassionately in a way that validates the experiences of persons with gender dysphoria.

As difficult as gender dysphoria is for adults, it is even more difficult and controversial for children and youth. Rising public awareness of gender identity has revealed a fault line between those advocating a “gender affirming” approach and those who urge caution or defend traditional understandings of sex differences.

On the one hand, many professional groups and academics now advocate transition treatments for children and youth.<sup>91</sup> Many others, however,

<sup>90</sup> Yarhouse, Table 2.1, p. 52.

<sup>91</sup> See American Psychological Association, “Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People” (2015); [apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf](https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf). See also Jason Rafferty, “Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents,” *Pediatrics* (Oct. 2018), from the American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement; Hidalgo, et al. (2013).

point out that there is insufficient scientific evidence for the effectiveness and safety of these transitioning treatments.<sup>92</sup> Even worse, they argue, these treatments are intrusive, irreversible, and harmful.<sup>93</sup>

Further complicating the challenge of gender dysphoria in children and youth is the influence of popular media and entertainment. Affirming approaches are aided by mainstream shows like the popular reality TV series *I Am Jazz*,<sup>94</sup> which began in 2015 and as of 2020 was in its sixth season.<sup>95</sup> *I Am Jazz* follows Jazz Jennings, a boy who at the age of two identifies as a girl and pursues behavioral, hormonal, and surgical transition to become female. This sort of widespread attention to gender identity in popular media and entertainment has raised the question of the extent to which this is influencing children and teens to identify themselves as gender nonconforming as a solution to complex problems of depression, suicide, bullying, and anxiety.<sup>96</sup>

The possible influence of media publicity on the onset of gender identity raises questions about the causes and prevalence of gender dysphoria. As with many other conditions, social and health scientists identify both biological and environmental factors.<sup>97</sup> For example, “brain sex” theories claim that the development and anatomy of the brains of persons who are transgender are different from those who do not identify as transgender, or that transgender persons are born with the physical sex of one gender and the brain of the opposite gender.<sup>98</sup>

While such explanations have gained popularity, they have significant limitations that warrant caution with respect to certain treatment options.<sup>99</sup> The neuroscience of sex and brain differences, while still relatively young,<sup>100</sup>

<sup>92</sup> See Mayer and McHughes, pp. 105-107; Yarhouse, 2015, pp. 101-111; Yarhouse and Sadowsky, “A Christian Survey of Sex Reassignment Surgery and Hormone Therapy,” Pastoral Paper #10, Centre for Faith & Sexuality.

<sup>93</sup> American College of Pediatricians, “Gender Ideology Harms Children,” [acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/gender-ideology-harms-children](http://acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/gender-ideology-harms-children); Cretella, 2016; Michael Laidlaw, 2018; “The Gender Identity Phantom,” Pediatric and Adolescent Gender Dysphoria Working Group; [gdworkinggroup.org/2018/10/24/the-gender-identity-phantom/?fbclid=IwAR37c7N\\_zqtAec\\_RI\\_MTwaMHFiKAudqFLVeGMrUZKvq4AGbw2zZuELAmb0](http://gdworkinggroup.org/2018/10/24/the-gender-identity-phantom/?fbclid=IwAR37c7N_zqtAec_RI_MTwaMHFiKAudqFLVeGMrUZKvq4AGbw2zZuELAmb0).

<sup>94</sup> See [imdb.com/title/tt4523638](http://imdb.com/title/tt4523638).

<sup>95</sup> See [womenshealthmag.com/health/a30681082/i-am-jazz-jennings-season-six-premiere-clitoris-surgery](http://womenshealthmag.com/health/a30681082/i-am-jazz-jennings-season-six-premiere-clitoris-surgery).

<sup>96</sup> A recent journal article identifies this growing trend as “rapid onset gender dysphoria,” but it has been criticized for its alleged lack of sensitivity to transgender persons; Lisa Littman, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Study of Parental Reports,” *PLOS ONE* (2018); [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202330](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202330). See also Harriet Hall, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria and Squelching Controversial Evidence” (2018); [sciencebasedmedicine.org/rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-and-squelching-controversial-evidence](http://sciencebasedmedicine.org/rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-and-squelching-controversial-evidence).

<sup>97</sup> See also Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

<sup>98</sup> Michael K. Laidlaw, “Gender Dysphoria and Children: An Endocrinologist’s Evaluation of *I am Jazz*,” *The Public Discourse* (Apr. 5, 2018); [thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/04/21220](http://thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/04/21220).

<sup>99</sup> Joe Herbert, “Gender Identity Is in the Brain. What Does This Tell Us?” *Psychology Today* (Aug. 10, 2016); [psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/hormones-and-the-brain/201608/gender-identity-is-in-the-brain-what-does-tell-us](http://psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/hormones-and-the-brain/201608/gender-identity-is-in-the-brain-what-does-tell-us).

<sup>100</sup> Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, “Sex, Gender, and Transgender Experiences: Part 4—Brain Sex Theory” (Apr. 6, 2019); [centerforfaith.com/blog/sex-gender-and-transgender-experiences-part-4-brain-sex-theory](http://centerforfaith.com/blog/sex-gender-and-transgender-experiences-part-4-brain-sex-theory).

has demonstrated that although there are some detectable differences between male and female brains, such differences do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that the brains of males and females are of a different *type*. Rather, they differ in *degree* in various specific ways. As one commentator noted, “The brain is no more gendered than the liver or kidneys or heart.”<sup>101</sup>

Further, evidence of some differences between the brains of males and females does not provide any conclusive evidence about where such differences come from or what they mean.<sup>102</sup> Claims that persons are transgender or have gender dysphoria because their physical sex doesn’t match their “brain sex” often rest on cultural stereotypes of what constitutes “typical” male and female characteristics. Yet these cultural stereotypes have no basis in neuroscientific evidence, let alone in Scripture.<sup>103</sup>

Environmental factors are also posited as a cause of gender dysphoria. For example, some argue that rigid expectations of what it means to be masculine and feminine have created narrow cultural norms that impose restrictions and constraints on those who do not conform. Despite the claims made by various persons and groups, however, none of these theories, whether biological or environmental, has sufficient evidence to lend certainty. As Yarhouse repeatedly emphasizes, “*we do not know what causes gender dysphoria.*”<sup>104</sup>

Estimates of prevalence are also fraught with uncertainty, partly because the concepts of gender dysphoria and transgender are so recent and their meaning and categorization are constantly changing. Yarhouse’s review of the literature reveals that using the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) understanding of gender dysphoria yields estimates of 0.005 to 0.0014 percent of adult men and 0.002 to 0.003 percent of women, but he suggests that such estimates are likely too low. Estimates of those who identify as transgender range from 0.033 and 0.047 percent.<sup>105</sup> By contrast, based on surveys in 19 states and statistical probability estimates for the other states, the Williams Institute estimates that 0.58 percent of Americans identify as transgender.<sup>106</sup>

Parents often face substantial internal and external pressure to help their children transition to the opposite gender. These children are at risk. In a recent study, over 60 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth reported engaging in self-harm in the past twelve months. In addition, 40 percent of

<sup>101</sup> Lise Eliot, “Neurosexism: the myth that men and women have different brains,” *Nature* (Feb. 27, 2019); [nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00677-x](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00677-x).

<sup>102</sup> Cordelia Fine, Daphna Joel, and Gina Rippon, “Eight Things You Need to Know about Sex, Gender, Brains, and Behavior: A Guide for Academics, Journalists, Parents, Gender Diversity Advocates, Social Justice Warriors, Tweeters, Facebookers, and Everyone Else,” *Scholar and Feminist Online*, (15.2, 2019); [sfoonline.barnard.edu/neurogenderings/eight-things-you-need-to-know-about-sex-gender-brains-and-behavior-a-guide-for-academics-journalists-parents-gender-diversity-advocates-social-justice-warriors-tweeters-facebookers-and-ever/#](https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/neurogenderings/eight-things-you-need-to-know-about-sex-gender-brains-and-behavior-a-guide-for-academics-journalists-parents-gender-diversity-advocates-social-justice-warriors-tweeters-facebookers-and-ever/#).

<sup>103</sup> Mayer and McHugh, p. 104; Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015), p. 30.

<sup>104</sup> Yarhouse, pp. 61, 79 (emphasis in original).

<sup>105</sup> Yarhouse, pp. 92-93.

<sup>106</sup> A. Flores, J. Herman, G. Gates, and T. Brown, “How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?” (Los Angeles, Calif.: Williams Institute, 2016); [williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf](https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf).

transgender and nonbinary youth reported being physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their gender identity.<sup>107</sup> The parents of these children are struggling to discern what is best for their loved one.

Health and social service workers, as well as teachers, may tell parents that if their child “is consistent, insistent, and persistent about their transgender identity,” they should affirm and support that identity through social transitioning and later hormonal treatments and surgeries.<sup>108</sup> Respected organizations such as the AMA and Pediatric Endocrine Society have made statements affirming gender transitioning, even though very little research has yet been done on long-term effects of medical practices such as hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgeries.<sup>109</sup> In other words, the evidence on the long-term physical and mental consequences of these treatments is lacking. What is known is that a child who is given hormones to block puberty and who then later takes hormones to change their sex will become sterile.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, research shows that almost all children with gender dysphoria will become comfortable with their anatomical sex after puberty. Many gay adults describe childhood memories of believing they were the opposite sex, or of desiring to be, but attest that they came to accept their sex during adolescence.<sup>111</sup> At the very least the lack of evidence from long-term studies and the developmental flexibility most children exhibit suggests using caution before entering into any treatment option that is irreversible.

#### E. Disorders of Sex Development (DSD)

Unlike gender dysphoria, a condition that is characterized by stress and anxiety when one’s gender is perceived as not aligning with one’s biological sex, disorders of sex development (DSDs) are congenital (biologically based) conditions in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal and/or external anatomical sex is atypical. Most DSDs are relatively mild, but in some cases they are more severe. In these cases a person’s sex might appear ambiguous or even be misidentified.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> [thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020](http://thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020)

<sup>108</sup> [hrc.org/resources/supporting-caring-for-transgender-children](http://hrc.org/resources/supporting-caring-for-transgender-children)

<sup>109</sup> “Those advocating a psychological approach to treatment, as opposed to hormone and/or surgery-based protocols can point to research showing that while SRS [sex reassignment surgery] appears to alleviate mental health problems for some, for a sizable group of others psychological morbidity is unaffected by—or actually increases after—surgical transitioning.” Simonsen, Giraldo, Christensen, Haldi, “Long-term Followup . . .” *Nordic Journal*, as quoted in J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> [npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278](http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278); Norman Spacker, [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762/](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762/); Polly Carmichael GIDS. See Stephen B. Levine, “Ethical Concerns about Emerging Treatment Paradigms for Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 44 (2018), pp. 29-44; Stephen B. Levine, “Informed Consent for Transgendered Patients,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 218-29; DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1518885.

<sup>111</sup> T.D. Steensma, J.K. McGuire, B.P. Kreukels, A.J. Beekman, and P.T. Cohen-Kettenis, “Factors Associated with Desistence and Persistence of Childhood Gender Dysphoria: A Quantitative Follow-up Study,” *J Am Acad Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52(6) (2013), pp. 582-90; DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016.

<sup>112</sup> See Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications; DeFranza, chap. 1; Yarhouse, pp. 17-18.

People with DSDs are sometimes described as intersex, but we have chosen to use the term *disorders of sexual development* for several reasons. First, this is the medically accepted terminology that identifies the range of congenital conditions associated with sexual development.<sup>113</sup> Second, the term DSD makes clear that the various conditions included under this heading result from complications in one's sexual development. While some argue for the inclusion of an additional gender category (or categories) beyond male or female, we follow Preston Sprinkle's contention that persons with a DSD (he uses the term *intersex*) do not constitute a "third sex."<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Andrew Walker argues, "Intersex conditions do not disprove the sexual binary."<sup>115</sup> In other words, DSDs, like other disorders, are a consequence of the fallenness of creation, departures from God's creational design.<sup>116</sup> Like other biological or physiological disorders, DSDs in no way render a person inferior, less human, or less the image of God. Rather, they indicate that some physical aspect of a person is not functioning in a manner suited to its created, biological function.

A lot can go wrong in sexual development, ranging from conditions that pose relatively minor disruptions to those that have substantial and difficult repercussions. In medical terms, it is customary to divide these conditions between those that result from 'chromosomal anomalies' that occur before the zygote even becomes a developing embryo, and 'hormonal anomalies,' which occur in the post-conception stages of development (see Appendix B "Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications" for a more detailed description of these). There are more than twenty-two different variations of DSDs with many different causes. The *Handbook for Parents* from the Accord Alliance offers a good summary of potential causes:

Sometimes a DSD happens because the child has something other than either the XX or the XY chromosome pattern. So some children have XXY, and some children have different combinations in different cells of their body. (That's called a mosaic karyotype.) Another way a DSD can happen is if a child is missing a common gene (part of the DNA), or has an uncommon combination of genes that make his or her body develop differently from most boys or girls. This can happen because of genes passed down through families, or because of a genetic change that happens by chance. Much more rarely, something happens to the mother during pregnancy that leads to a DSD; for example, on rare occasions a pregnant woman may be exposed to chemicals that can affect the sex development of her child. Sometimes [doctors] just don't know why a DSD happened.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup> med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/did.htm. Although DSD is the medically accepted term at this writing, there continue to be debates about proper terminology. For example, the Intersex Society of America clearly does not find the term *intersex* offensive, as some have suggested.

<sup>114</sup> Preston Sprinkle, "A Biblical Conversation about Transgender Identities," Pastoral Paper #12, Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, p. 17. Also affirmed by Cretella (2016): "The 2006 consensus statement of the Intersex Society of North America does not endorse DSD as a third sex," p. 51.

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 158.

<sup>116</sup> Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 77.

<sup>117</sup> accordalliance.org/dsdguidelines/parents.pdf. For more detailed information on some of the more common DSDs, see Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications. See also med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/dsd.htm.

Whatever the reason for the disorder and regardless of the severity of the disorder, the church should surround parents of children with DSDs and persons with DSDs with love. The church should listen first to the needs of these brothers and sisters and offer them prayer and other support as needed.

#### *F. Implications of worldview*

The fact that these are worldview issues—not simply scientific, medical, or empirical matters—is made clear especially in the way some persons or groups are denounced, ridiculed, or attacked when they advise prudence or challenge the conclusions of gender-affirming approaches. A few examples illustrate this point. Michael Bailey’s 2003 book *The Man Who Would Be Queen* described autogynephilia, a theory of male-to-female transgender persons in which men are motivated to transition by being sexually attracted to the thought of themselves as a woman. This theory has been widely attacked and condemned by transgender proponents, and Bailey met a firestorm of controversy that nearly derailed his career, despite an investigation that revealed no basis for accusations leveled against him of malpractice and inappropriate conduct.<sup>118</sup>

In a more recent example, Dr. Kenneth Zucker was a widely respected psychiatrist and expert in gender dysphoria who worked for more than 35 years at the renowned Child Youth and Family Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. In 2015, Zucker was fired after an external review of the GIC at CAMH allegedly showed unethical practice. Why? Because Zucker, based on the empirical evidence, continued to advocate a “watchful waiting” rather than a “gender-affirmative approach.” An independent investigation later showed these allegations to be false, and CAMH publicly apologized and settled a wrongful dismissal lawsuit with Zucker.<sup>119</sup>

Another example (among many more that could be cited) is the reaction and resistance to the American College of Pediatricians (ACP) and its current executive director, Michelle Cretella. The ACP was established in 2002 as an alternative to the more liberal American Academy of Pediatricians and its endorsement of progressive approaches to children and families. A quick google search of the ACP and Cretella reveals numerous links to articles, videos, and blogposts with condemnations and accusations of the ACP with descriptions such as “exposes the lies,” “child abuse alert,” “anti-LGBTQ,” “wingnut,” and “hateful.”

It is clear that there is no neutral stance on questions of gender identity. In the global north and west, we find ourselves in a cultural moment where longstanding beliefs and practices about sex and gender have been challenged and questioned (by Christians and non-Christians alike<sup>120</sup>). At the same time, the liberalization on matters of sexuality has been resisted in the

<sup>118</sup> Carey Benedict Carey, “Criticism of a Gender Theory, and a Scientist Under Siege,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Jesse Singal, “How the Fight over Transgender Kids Got a Leading Sex Researcher Fired,” *The Cut* (2016); [thecut.com/2016/02/fight-over-trans-kids-got-a-researcher-fired.html](http://thecut.com/2016/02/fight-over-trans-kids-got-a-researcher-fired.html). See also “CAMH Reaches Settlement with Former Head of Gender Identity Clinic,” Oct. 7, 2018; [cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/camh-settlement-former-head-gender-identity-clinic-1.4854015](http://cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/camh-settlement-former-head-gender-identity-clinic-1.4854015).

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

global south,<sup>121</sup> revealing divisions in the global church between the north and south.<sup>122</sup> In North America, ideas once considered radical and extreme—sex as nonbinary, the separation of gender identity from biological sex, the elevation of individual choice over physical or cultural constraints—have now permeated our societal consciousness whether we like it or not.

In the face of these rapidly changing cultural realities, the church cannot look the other way. Persons experiencing either gender dysphoria or DSD are not “them” but us. Although the prevalence is relatively low, we must be just as prepared and ready to receive our sisters and brothers in Christ struggling with gender identity issues as with any other disorder, no matter what the numbers are. Yet we must also recognize that both gender dysphoria and DSD are a disorder: they are “not the way it’s supposed to be.”<sup>123</sup> Our understanding of and response to these disorders ought to be shaped by the two great commandments: to love God above all, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, in the next section we turn to Scripture to glean what God teaches about sex differences and gender identity in light of the reality that God created human beings “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). We will conclude this part of our report on gender identity by identifying pastoral guidelines for how the church should respond to persons who must deal in their own lives with the complexities of gender dysphoria or DSD.

“My son just told me he’s actually a woman,” Ji-ho,\* a 51-year-old Asian American, shares with a close friend and colleague during a pastors’ retreat. Baffled and heartbroken, the two men pray for Ji-ho’s adult child and for wisdom and love for Ji-ho in his relationship with his child.

Cheri,\* 19 (white), came home from her first year at a Christian college and told her parents that she did not feel comfortable being identified as a girl/woman. Cheri had felt different since puberty and had struggled with depression and anxiety. She had difficulty finding a group who accepted her at college until she got connected with the LGBTQ group on campus. With her friends’ support, she changed her name to Sam and was now dating a woman. The siblings of Sam’s parents were grieved but decided it was best to support Sam by using the name and pronouns (they) she had chosen. Unfortunately, when the church found out about Sam’s chosen identity and that Sam was dating a woman, the pastor told Sam (using her rejected name) that s/he was no longer welcome to sing with the worship team or to play her instrument. The council sent Sam a formal letter to that effect as well as one to Sam’s parents. Sam offered to come and talk to the pastor, but the conversation ended up being hurtful. Sam left the church into which she was born, baptized, and professed her faith. At a recent family gathering, Sam cried as they sang hymns together,

<sup>121</sup> “The Global Divide on Homosexuality,” Pew Research Center, June 4, 2013; [pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality](http://pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality). See also “African United Methodists Won’t Trade Bible for Dollars,” *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Blog*, Feb. 23, 2019; [juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#](http://juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#).

<sup>122</sup> John Anderson, “Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (2011), pp. 1589-1605.

<sup>123</sup> Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).

but s/he cannot reconcile the pastor and church's treatment of he/r with the love of God that Sam and he/r family sing about.

## IX. Gender identity: Scripture

Central to the discussion of sex and gender identity is the distinction between sex and gender. Yet, as we have seen, this distinction is a relatively recent one, and it is unknown to the Bible. For most of Western history, *male* and *female* would have included the biological realities of those terms as well as all of what is now included in the term *gender*.

Needless to say, there is very little that the Bible explicitly says about these issues. Consequently, when we seek biblical insight on questions pertaining to both gender identity and disorders of sex development, we must rely on the broad scriptural story that includes creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. With respect to humanity, we affirm that God created humanity as male and female in the image of God and declared creation "very good." Due to human disobedience, however, humanity, along with the rest of creation, is now distorted by sin. Thus whatever we observe about humans after the fall into sin is inevitably distorted by the fall in various ways (Gen. 3:14-23). Salvation in Christ entails restoration of all things, including humans, to God's creational intentions. We experience this restoration in part now, while awaiting full restoration at the second coming of Christ and the final judgment.

### A. Genesis 1-2

With this in mind, we will find a closer examination of several texts worthwhile. The first is Genesis 1-2. As already noted in section III of this report, focusing on the biblical theology of human sexuality, only humans are described in terms of their biological sex in the creation account. In Genesis 1 they are identified as "male and female," and in Genesis 2 as "man" and "woman." In Genesis 1 this male/female identification sets them apart from other creatures in the story. While a biological male/female distinction is assumed with the blessing of the fish and birds on day five (v. 22), it is not explicit. With the creation of humans, however, the male/female distinction is explicitly stated. In addition, the male/female binary is grammatically connected with the image of God, that is, with what is a central identifying biblical feature of being human (v. 27), something that is reaffirmed in Genesis 5:2. Paul Niskanen writes, "The statement 'male and female he created them,' far from being dissociated from the concept of the image of God, stands at the very crux of its interpretation."<sup>124</sup>

The Christian church has always recognized that Genesis 1-2 are paradigmatic texts. In other words, they describe God's purposes for creation in a way that is not simply descriptive, but normative—that is, the way God intended. Scripture itself teaches us to interpret these texts in this way. For example, it condemns murder and slander by appealing to the fact that human beings have been created in the image of God (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9).

Similarly, the New Testament repeatedly invokes Genesis 1-2 as the authoritative model for sexual relationships between men and women (Matt. 19; 1 Cor. 6; Eph. 5). In response to the Pharisees' question about divorce,

<sup>124</sup> Paul Niskanen, "The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אדם in the Image of מִיְהוָה אֱלֹהִים," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 128, no. 3 (2009), pp. 417-36 (specifically, p. 424).

Jesus says that “at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matt. 19:4), a direct reference to Genesis 1:27. He goes on to connect this to Genesis 2, saying that a “man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5). Jesus offers no indication that this binary is anything less than a creational norm despite the hardness of the human heart.

Some have pointed to other pairs listed in Genesis 1, suggesting that all of the pairs of this chapter, including the male-female pair, represent two ends of a created spectrum of possibilities. For example, light and dark are the extremes of the spectrum of daylight that also includes dawn, dusk, and various degrees in between. But this argument pushes the boundaries of analogy to the breaking point. Genesis 1-2 clearly and explicitly describes pre-fall human beings as created in only two forms: male/man (Adam) and female/woman (Eve). Unlike the degrees between dark and light which are found frequently in Scripture, nowhere does Scripture suggest that there is a spectrum of normative biological manifestations of humanity beyond male and female.

Although people suffering from disorders of sexual development may not unambiguously fit the creational norm outlined in Scripture, this does not alter scriptural teaching. The same is true for those suffering from gender dysphoria. These conditions are not the way things are supposed to be. Like other disorders and diseases, these afflictions are to be interpreted as a result of the fall, which in many ways has distorted God’s good creation. Of course, this does not in any way mean that the people suffering from these conditions are personally responsible for them. Rather they suffer the consequences of the post-fall groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22; John 9:1-12). The church must therefore reach out to them in compassion and love.

#### B. *Matthew 19:11-12*

A second important text that may shed light on the topic of gender identity and DSD is Matthew 19:11-12. This text has particular significance because of the reference to a eunuch. In Israel the eunuch, along with Gentiles, the lame, the disfigured, and others with various physical conditions, was not afforded full participation in the religious life of the community. Some conditions disallowed one from the priesthood (Lev. 21). Some conditions did not allow a person to enter “the assembly of the LORD.” Eunuchs fell into this latter category (Deut. 23:1). In the context of teaching about marriage and divorce, Jesus makes the following statement concerning eunuchs: “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made that way by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs [note: ‘or have made themselves eunuchs’] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Matt. 19:11-12, NIV). So who are these “eunuchs” to whom Jesus is referring?

The first thing to note about the Matthew passage is that it is an obscure saying, the meaning of which is not immediately clear. As Megan DeFranza notes: “Admittedly, it is difficult to know how Jesus’ audience interpreted his words about three types of eunuchs.”<sup>125</sup> For one thing, Jesus is using the

<sup>125</sup> Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 82.

term for “eunuch” in an unusual way. The term normally refers to a man who either occupies a high position in government or a man who has been mutilated by castration—or both.<sup>126</sup> Although the second meaning here, associated with mutilation or castration, most probably applies to the second kind of eunuch in Jesus’ saying, most exegetes are agreed that the term for “eunuch,” when applied to Jesus’ first and third kinds, is used in an otherwise unattested sense. A reasonable guess is that the first kind of eunuch refers to someone born with some kind of birth defect, and that the third kind refers (given the context) to a person who chooses not to marry, but we can’t be entirely sure. In both cases the term seems to be used by Jesus as a bold metaphor, stretching the normal use of the term for “eunuch” in Greek.

New Testament commentators have made various suggestions as to the meaning of Jesus’ first kind of “eunuch.”<sup>127</sup> Most seem to think of infertility or impotence, not intersexuality. An exception is Retief and Cilliers, who do think of “hermaphroditism” (that is, intersexuality) in this connection, but they base this on a poor understanding of the science involved and moreover think homosexuality may be involved as well.<sup>128</sup>

Many commentators read the first two kinds of “eunuch” in our text in the light of a distinction made in rabbinic literature.<sup>129</sup> This is a potentially fruitful source of insight, although rabbinic sources are notoriously difficult to date, and it is impossible to be certain that Jesus and his disciples would have been familiar with the distinction in question.

The rabbinic distinction referred to by commentators is between “eunuchs of the sun” [*sārîsê ḥammâ*] and “eunuchs of men” [*sārîsê ‘ādām*]. “Eunuchs of men” corresponds to the second sort of eunuch, one who was mutilated, “made that way by man.” The “eunuch of the sun,” the one “born that way,” is sometimes defined as a *saris*, a “sterile male.”<sup>130</sup> It should be noted, however, that the rabbis unambiguously referred to the “eunuch of the sun” as masculine. Further, there was a female counterpart to the “eunuch of the sun” called an *aylonit*.<sup>131</sup> It is therefore unlikely that the first kind of eunuch

<sup>126</sup> Francois P. Retief and Louise Cilliers, “Eunuchs in the Bible,” *Acta Theologica* (June 2005), p. 247; [journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2093](http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2093).

<sup>127</sup> The Greek church father Gregory of Nazianzus describes such eunuchs as “born without sexual desire” (DeFranza, p. 96). Modern commentators have different guesses. For example, in explaining the first kind of eunuch, Keener speaks of “those who were born without sexual organs” (1999:471); Luz, of “those who are naturally impotent” (2001:501); McKnight, of “males castrated . . . by birth defect” (2008:1617; 2015:1723); and Wilkins, of “those without the capacity for sexual relations” (2008:1861). A bit more delicately, Ellison writes: “For some men and women their physical make-up is such that marriage is at best a social convenience for them” (1986:1141).

<sup>128</sup> As they put it, “Modern science recognizes a group of syndromes caused by faulty descent or early disease of the testes, or by congenital defects in the sexual organs (particularly the testes). Sterility, impotence, and typical ‘eunuchoid’ body types develop, but without any mental incapacitation. . . . These conditions are very rare, and must have been scarce in antiquity, in comparison with eunuchism due to castration. Hermaphroditism (genuine bisexuality) is also extremely rare. . . .”; Retief and Cilliers, pp. 255-56.

<sup>129</sup> See for example, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 2001), p. 501; Retief and Cilliers, p. 255; and DeFranza, p. 71.

<sup>130</sup> Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 190.

<sup>131</sup> She is described as “a female eunuch/congenitally infertile female (*aylonit*), who was presented, for the most part, as the mirror image of a *saris* (*hamma*)”; Sivan, p. 192.

that Jesus had in mind was someone who was sexually ambiguous—that is, someone of whom it was unclear whether they were male or female.<sup>132</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that the rabbis did have other terms to describe such a person—namely, *androgynos* and *tumtum*—the former term refers to “a baby born with sexual attributes of both males and females (i.e., a hermaphrodite), the latter [to] a child born without clear sexual demarcation (i.e., with sexual organs covered: a cryptorchid).”<sup>133</sup>

It may be that Jesus was alluding to the rabbinic distinction between “eunuchs of the sun” and “eunuchs of man.” If so, then “eunuchs [who are] born that way” and “eunuchs made that way by man” probably correlate with the first two kinds of eunuchs mentioned by Jesus, setting the stage for the climactic third kind, which by common consent does not refer to physical disfigurement or mutilation but to persons who choose a life of celibacy in order to devote themselves to the kingdom of God.<sup>134</sup>

Although we cannot be sure what exactly is meant by “eunuchs who were born that way,” a significant clue is found in the adjectival use of the word *eunouchos* in extra-biblical Greek. According to the standard dictionary of classical Greek, the *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell-Scott-Jones, this word, when used as an adjective describing plants, means “without seeds.” That would suggest that Jesus’ first kind of “eunuch” is someone who from birth is “without seeds”—that is, infertile or impotent.

This description comports well with Isaiah 56:3-5, where the eunuch is exhorted not to complain, “I am only a dry tree.” This text is part of a beautiful promise to people who were formerly excluded from worship; “the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who . . . choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give . . . a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters’”—a sign of covenant blessing. This is surely a prophecy of hope for all who live with DSDs.

Despite the interpretive difficulties involved with the text in Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus’ overall argument is reasonably clear. The disciples were right to conclude that for many Christians it is better not to marry. Some Christians are unable to flourish within marriage because they are born with a sexual defect. Other Christians are unable to flourish within marriage because of a sexual injury. Still others decide to voluntarily abstain from marriage. Regardless, each of these types of Christians follows a path that is worthy of praise and that will lead, in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah, to great reward.

As Jesus himself declares shortly afterward, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:29). In Mark 10:30, Jesus even declares that those who give up such familial rewards will receive a new family even in this life, receiving “a hundred times as much *in this present age*: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

<sup>132</sup> This conclusion is also that of Susannah Cornwall, author of *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), as cited in DeFranza, p. 102.

<sup>133</sup> Sivan, p. 185.

<sup>134</sup> DeFranza, p. 71.

### C. Testimony of Paul

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 is affirmed by the apostle Paul, who declares in 1 Corinthians 7 that it may be better for Christians not to marry. It is also affirmed in a powerful story in Acts 8, in which Philip evangelizes and baptizes a prominent eunuch from Ethiopia. Acts 8 tells us that after his baptism the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" (8:39). All of these passages confirm the general truth that in the kingdom of God the powerful legal and social barriers that divide men and women and that exclude persons who suffer from various disorders collapse.

Paul celebrates this reality of equity in the kingdom of God in Galatians 3:26-29 as he declares, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Is the text suggesting that the male/female distinction is not normative and should be done away with? Most scholars do not claim that this is what Paul had in mind. Rather the emphasis falls on being in Christ. Paul is reminding his readers that our primary identity is grounded not in our place in society or our sex or our ethnic background, but in the fact that we are in Christ. St. Jerome (A.D. 345-420), in his commentary on Galatians, identifies these categories as social hierarchies that are negated in Christ.<sup>135</sup> Calvin's comments on verse 28 are similar. He writes, "The meaning is, that there is no distinction of persons here, and therefore it is of no consequence to what nation or condition any one may belong: nor is circumcision any more regarded than sex or social rank."<sup>136</sup> More recently, Nigerian scholar Adewale J. Adelakun<sup>137</sup> notes what he claims most understand about this text. The text is not about erasing distinctions but rather about emphasizing that all are equal—there is no hierarchy in Christ.

Paul's argument is that in Christ all legal, ethnic, economic, and gender barriers to membership in the body of Christ have collapsed. One no longer needs to be a circumcised Jew to enter the presence of God, any more than one needs to be a man or a free person, as was the case in Old Testament Israel. Now all persons have access to God by grace through faith in Christ alone. Paul's point is not that a woman is no longer a woman, that a slave is no longer a slave, or that a Jew is no longer a Jew. The instructions Paul gives in Ephesians 5-6 and other places make this quite clear. Diversity is not erased in the body of Christ. His point, rather, is that all believers are equal and all are one, because all are "children of God through faith" in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26).

In contrast to the Old Testament era, in which circumcision was a sign only for males, all are now equal recipients of the sign of the new covenant,

<sup>135</sup> St. Jerome, tr. Andrew Cain, "Book Two, Galatians 3.10–5.60," p. 152, in *Commentary on Galatians*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 129-202. Accessed April 10, 2020; DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt284xqj.7.

<sup>136</sup> John Calvin, tr. William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), p. 112.

<sup>137</sup> Adewale J. Adelakun, "Complementarian versus Egalitarian: An Exegesis of Galatians 3:28 from a Nigerian Cultural Perspective" in *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. XVII, 3 (2012), p. 77-95.

baptism. Through baptism, all are one in Christ. According to Adalakun, Paul “holds the view that this division into male and female established in creation is not relevant in references to baptism into Christ, since no one is baptized to be either a man or a woman”; rather, in Christ all “have equal access to God.”<sup>138</sup>

Working from a very different perspective and hermeneutic, Swedish scholar Marianne Bjelland Kartzow nevertheless comes to a very similar conclusion about Paul’s message in this text. While recognizing interpretive disputes about Galatians 3:28, she writes, “One possible interpretation is that the existing social hierarchy is of less importance in baptism, since all are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>139</sup> This is, in fact, the interpretation she chooses to work with. Building on work by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Kartzow is trying to show that social categories inevitably intersect with one another such that one never occupies just one category. She recognizes that the author of Galatians (whom she posits may not be Paul) is working with three prominent social hierarchies in his day. But she goes on to assert the author’s point that these categories are overcome by one’s status in Christ.

In summary, Paul’s point is clear: “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Diversity is not erased in Christ. But inequality is. The verse in its context is not about a meltdown of physical differences. It is not even about a meltdown of social differences. Rather, it points to the fact that in Christ, all are one, all are “children of God through faith” in Christ Jesus (3:26).

None of this takes away from the fact that believers and, in fact, all people will continue to experience the fallenness of creation in their own lives. Like a myriad of other disorders and disabilities, gender disorders are “not the way it’s supposed to be.”<sup>140</sup>

Similarly, the fall has corrupted the relations between men and women and the social expectations of each. This includes everything from social and societal structures that prevent or discourage women from developing and using their God-given gifts, to portrayals of women and men that not-so-subtly suggest that only certain clothes, mannerisms, and behaviors are truly masculine or feminine. The gospel promises an end to the oppression and hierarchy that has long divided men and women, uniting us as one body in Christ, but we remain male and female, created in the image of God.

Some people argue that there is no reason why a person’s gender identity should not be accepted as just as clear an indication of God’s will for them as their body. Why should we assume that the problem is with the mind, they ask? Why not consider whether the body is the problem?

The problem with this argument is that it is dualistic. At the heart of the biblical understanding of humanity is the teaching that our bodies matter. The Bible does not pit the soul against the body. It does not locate the true identity of a person in their soul or conceive of the body as the soul’s prison. Rather, Scripture presents the human being as a holistic, interdependent unity of body and soul. The biblical words often translated as “soul”

<sup>138</sup> Adalakun, p. 84.

<sup>139</sup> Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, “Asking the Other Question: An Intersectional Approach to Galatians 3:28 and the Colossian Household Codes,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), pp. 364-89.

<sup>140</sup> Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

(Hebrew *nephesh* and Greek *psuche*) or “body” (for which biblical Hebrew does not even have an equivalent, and Greek uses *soma*) usually refer to the whole person, including both their physical and biological aspects and also their emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects. Biblically speaking, a person does not *have* a soul but, rather, *is* a soul. Likewise, a person does not *have* a body, but *is* a body.<sup>141</sup>

This means that we cannot treat a person’s subjectively experienced gender as a fact of their existence independent of their biological sex. We cannot claim that a person’s true identity resides in their subjective sense of self, as distinct from the body with which they were born. As Kevin Vanhoozer writes, “One’s true self is not, therefore, hovering above or within one’s body. At the limit, the idea that we are men trapped in women’s bodies or women trapped in men’s bodies collapses the distinction between sex and gender and flirts with a gnostic, even docetic, disregard for bodily reality (he only *seems* [*dokeo*] to be male).”<sup>142</sup> Margaret McCarthy points out that extreme views of gender reject the body as “a problematic limit to freedom—freedom conceived as pure self-initiating self-determination.”<sup>143</sup>

As Christians, we believe that the body is a gift from God. Tragically, due to the fall, through no fault of their own, some people experience a disconnect between their gender identity and their sex. Nevertheless, there is no redemption in embracing this disconnect as a sign of God’s good intent. There is no redemption in trying to live as a male when God has given one the body of a female, or in trying to live as a female when God has given one the body of a male. We do not help people to flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another. To transition is merely to intensify the problem. No matter how hard a person tries, or regardless of what invasive procedures they undergo, they cannot change the fact that God has made them male or female.

As Vanhoozer puts it, “The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore not our own (1 Cor. 6:19).” For that reason, “in refusing one’s biology, the creature refuses what is ultimately not merely a natural given but a gift of God.” Our true vocation is not to reject our physical bodies. It is “to discern, deliberate on, and do those possibilities that are given to us with our biological sex.”<sup>144</sup>

All of that said, to emphasize that Scripture calls us to live in accord with our male or female sex is not to say that Scripture prescribes the precise roles that human beings often associate with each sex. All too often Christians have confused sex roles as they are *described* in Scripture with what God has *proscribed* as his normative will for men and women rooted in creation. Yet, as with issues like divorce and polygamy, we need to recognize that God tolerated all manner of sinful behavior that did not reflect his moral will.

<sup>141</sup> Christian materialists might deny the existence of an immaterial soul or have differing conceptions of that soul, but there is seemingly no one who would argue that the body is somehow unimportant.

<sup>142</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 151-99 (specifically pp. 195-96).

<sup>143</sup> McCarthy, p. 284.

<sup>144</sup> Vanhoozer, pp. 195-96.

Even worse, Christians have often assumed that traditional gender roles, whether described in Scripture or not, are ordained in nature. Yet in so doing we commit the fallacy of assuming that what we observe in nature or in human society is creational. Human society is fallen, and ever since the fall into sin we have practiced gender in ways that have been oppressive, self-serving, and sinful.

The problem is not necessarily with gender roles per se. The problem arises, at least in part, when we hold to these gender associations too rigidly, stifling the freedom to which God has called us in Christ. The problem perpetuates when we dogmatically impose our gender expectations, or the gender expectations of our culture, on other people. To do this is to turn our understanding of gender into an idol. And the problem is made all the worse by the fact that it imposes severe distress and pain on others. Throughout history women in particular have been prevented from doing many good things due to sinful impositions of gender—such as working for pay, owning property, voting, speaking in public, or wearing pants. Because of the influence of fallen cultural conceptions of gender, men too have been discouraged from certain behaviors, such as showing emotion—and not discouraged from aggressive behavior.

As Christians, we are not called to imitate cultural ideas of masculinity or femininity—not even those that were present during the time of the Old and New Testaments—but to imitate Christ. Jesus himself was both gentle and strong, humble and bold, submissive and a leader. The virtues of Christ are appropriate for both men and women, since both men and women have been made in the image of God and Jesus is the expressed image of God (Col. 1:15).

Properly understood, the gospel brings peace and freedom to us as sexual beings. God has created us in his image to express our maleness and femaleness with freedom and creativity. Although he made us with important, sexual differences, God does not dictate masculine or feminine traits that ought to accompany these differences. This is not to say that Scripture says nothing about what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman. It is simply to say that this biblical teaching is not nearly as specific or dogmatic as Christians have typically made it out to be. In many cases, we owe one another greater freedom than we have given in the past. Here we need wisdom and discernment that is rooted not primarily in the cultures of traditionalism or secularism but in the culture of the gospel.

As a committee, we understand that in the Christian Reformed Church there are differences of opinion on whether women should be ordained to the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon. As a denomination, we recognize that these differences arise from credible and sincerely held interpretations of Scripture. Nevertheless, we urge our churches to consider whether we have often imposed our own cultural prejudices on others as if they were the will of God, consequently exacerbating the difficulties of people who experience either gender dysphoria or disorders of sexual development.

#### **X. Gender identity: Pastoral care**

The readers of this report have various experiences and perspectives. Some of us have transitioned or have a DSD; others of us are family members of persons with gender dysphoria; many of us are pastors, health-care

providers, and congregational members who desire to serve well. How should we respond to each other's hurts, questions, bitterness, strong opinions, and great needs?

As noted at the beginning of this gender identity section of this report, in preparation for writing this report committee members listened to stories from trans and queer persons as well as their families, and we read literature from theology and the biological and social sciences, including queer theology and queer studies. The numbers of those identifying as transgender, especially youth and small children, has risen dramatically in recent times. Consequently, some medical treatments are new or being used on much younger people; and the body of scientific research is significantly smaller than in many other areas of sexuality. At the same time, relatively few theologians have studied and written about persons who experience gender dysphoria or are gender nonconforming. Thus, what we offer here with regard to pastoral care, we offer cautiously.

We also note that in its mission and pastoral care, the church should demonstrate great openness to people who experience gender dysphoria or who are gender nonconforming, and should be cautious in any pronouncements and policy making. "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:12-13).

#### *A. What is pastoral care, and who is responsible for it?*

Pastoral care should be modeled after the example of Jesus, the good shepherd, who feeds his flock, cares for the wounded, protects the vulnerable, carries the young close to his heart, strengthens the weak, brings back the straying, and seeks out lost sheep.<sup>145</sup> Thus, pastoral care involves nurture, healing, guidance, admonition, discipline, reconciliation, comfort, diaconal care, and support. It involves reaching out, visiting, listening, showing empathy, and working to restore relationships. It often includes reading Scripture, prayer, or simply being a compassionate, empathic presence.

The New Testament calls elders and pastors to love, feed, protect, admonish, comfort, and guide the sheep of God's flock (John 21:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). And the Bible describes shepherding or pastoring as a gift God has given to some for the sake of the church. Yet God also urges all believers to encourage the weak, show compassion, seek the lost, teach and admonish one another, pray for each other's spiritual and bodily healing, bring reconciliation, and mourn with those who mourn (Matt. 18:10-14; Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Gal. 6:1; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:14; James 5:16). So while gifted leaders and staff may give direction to the pastoral work of a congregation, every member has some responsibility to care for other sheep, whether in the flock or outside it, who are in need.

#### *B. Goals of pastoral care*

Pastoral care for people in the church with a sexual development disorder or gender dysphoria must include concern for the welfare of their bodies, minds, and spirits. As already noted, unlike much Greek philosophy, biblical writers view humans as a unity of body and soul, not as a soul located in a

<sup>145</sup> Ps. 23; 80:1; 95:7; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:11-16; Luke 15:10; John 10:1-18.

body. Yet for people struggling with their sense of identity, or whose bodies are sexually ambivalent because of an intersex condition, relationship with their bodies is potentially incredibly difficult.

Jesus' ministry included restoring people's physical health, their status in the wider society, and their spiritual health. In these ways, Jesus brought reconciliation where there had been brokenness or alienation from God, from others, or in their own bodies. In the same way, the main goals of pastoral care for those affected by gender dysphoria and disorders of sexual development must be to help people enter or regain healthy relationships with God and others, and to be at peace within themselves as whole persons: heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Because the Bible does not give explicit teaching on the issues raised by gender dysphoria and DSD, we believe that we must be tentative in formulating general guidelines. Nevertheless, on the basis of Scripture's clear teaching that humanity has been created as male and female, we believe the following constitutes wise counsel.

*C. Care for those with gender dysphoria or who identify as transgender and their families—adults and children*

1. Adults

Formerly transgendered people report isolating at home because they didn't want to be seen in their bodies. They were ashamed of or even hated their bodies. While there can be a variety of healthy ways to dress and act as a man or woman, to live comfortably in their bodies in the outside world, people who experience gender dysphoria, or who don't identify with their sex, need to see themselves as God sees them—as “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God (Ps. 139:14), as part of the restored “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). To receive God's love for their bodies and to be able to love their own bodies, transgendered believers need protection from the evil one's deception that God made a mistake when creating them. Therefore, those who are transgendered or are experiencing gender dysphoria should be encouraged to be reconciled to their created self. In all of this, be sure to recognize your limits and be willing to suggest that the person consult a professional psychologist.

a. Spiritual care

- With care and compassion, recognize the deep hurt, confusion, and estrangement from God and community that many parents, youth, and adults feel—and lament with them. This might include the baffled parent of a three-year-old who seems to reject his or her biological sex; a black trans person whose family and church rejected her; a middle-aged transperson who finally feels validation of their sense of self after beginning to identify as the opposite sex. If such feelings mystify you or make you uncomfortable, model yourself after the compassionate Lord Jesus.
- Consistently discuss, celebrate, and preach about the value of the created world and the dignity of the human body explained in the Christian teachings of creation, Christ's incarnation and ascension, and the resurrection.

- Help people enter into the presence of a loving God who comes to us by many names and images, such as the good shepherd, who provides guidance and protection, seeks the lost, and brings us to a peaceful place (Ps. 23; Luke 15; John 10); the light of the world, who comes into our darkness and confusion and drives away oppression and sadness (John 8:12); our refuge, the one in whom we can hide (Ps. 46); our powerful rescuer, who comes down from heaven when he sees we are in trouble (Ps. 18). This can happen one on one, with a prayer team, or in public worship.
- Confront any unbiblical gender expectations in your church community that could contribute to gender dysphoria. We noted earlier that transgendered people who believe their physical sex doesn't match their "brain sex" often rely on cultural stereotypes of typical male and female characteristics, which have no basis in neuroscientific evidence of sex differences in the brain. Our *culture* consistently values men specifically for their distinction from women and mocks them with female or gay epithets if they fail.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, the church often subtly or overtly exerts the same pressure on young men by promoting unbiblical stereotypes, relying on teaching from popular websites and books that promote a notion of manhood as displaying strength in comparison to women and of womanhood as utility and attractiveness to men.

In contrast, the gospel brings peace and freedom to us as sexual beings within gendered cultures. Instead of putting us in boxes, God has created us male and female in God's own image with freedom and creativity. Although God created men and women with physical differences, in the Scriptures God does not prescribe masculine or feminine traits.

Whether by identifying as gender nonconforming, transgender or genderqueer, an increasing number of our brothers and sisters find themselves desperately uncomfortable with gender expectations of them. We can care well for them by *acknowledging* that there is no one biblically prescribed way to live as male and female and by *repenting* of putting unnecessary gender expectations on boys and girls that can contribute to body-shaming, sexual violence, and gender identity confusion.

- Give long-term personal support for gender dysphoric or transgender people or their family members through a person or persons willing to accompany them on a journey of restoration, whether that journey is continuous or fragmented. Not only will support persons encourage them with a listening ear, prayer, and encouraging Scriptures; they will also be available for wise counsel about harms and outcomes of medical intervention, as well as for a kind, nonjudgmental perspective on the pressures the person may experience from the transgender community and others. Support people can also help to provide resources. (See Internet Resources below for a few good examples from the numerous websites of parents advocating for

<sup>146</sup> Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015), p. 30.

children’s physical well-being, of detransitioners telling their stories to encourage others, and of feminists concerned about pressure on young women to transition.)

- Also note that a review of studies of persisters and desisters shows that about half of those who detransition are same-sex attracted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many young people in the church and wider society, transitioning is seen as more acceptable than being gay.<sup>147</sup>

#### b. Hospitality

Individuals who identify as transgender or have gender dysphoria need to be received without judgment as persons made in God’s image, valuable to God as they are. In other words, they need to be welcomed with unconditional love.

- Treat every person as an individual. Like all of us, every trans person is unique and wants to be seen for who they are. Work against your ideas and biases of who transgender people are, and strive to know and love the person in front of you. To quote a common expression, “If you’ve met one transgender person, you’ve met one transgender person.”
- Acknowledge that having gender dysphoria is not a choice. Also understand that they may view surgery as a means of God’s healing to alleviate the anguish of gender dysphoria. The existence and persistence of such intense discomfort in some persons within the church is not a form of rebellion against God’s creation of us as male and female. No one chooses to experience such distress with their body that they would undergo physical treatments to radically and permanently alter it.
- Celebrate spiritual community with time spent together physically in meals, hugs, games, movie nights, etc. Human community in real time often serves as an antidote to confusion, pain, and loneliness!
- Decide what welcome and hospitality look like in regard to people’s names and pronouns. A recent study showed that “transgender and nonbinary youth [ages 13-24] who report having their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected.”<sup>148</sup> Reflect on Paul’s decision in 1 Corinthians 9:22 in reference to people’s identity and pronouns: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” Some congregations will decide that to be inclusive means that their community will refer to transgendered people with the names and pronouns they prefer. Other congregations may choose not to do that but should strive to avoid giving offense as much as possible.
- Be open to variety in people’s clothing. Just as a man in contemporary Scotland might wear a kilt, and just as men in many countries wear robes, so cultural expectations for male and female dress vary greatly by region or time period.

<sup>147</sup> [womanmeanssomething.com/half-of-all-desisters-are-same-sex-attracted](http://womanmeanssomething.com/half-of-all-desisters-are-same-sex-attracted)

<sup>148</sup> [thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020](http://thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020)

- Accept those who have already fully transitioned (i.e., have had hormones and surgery) as they are. If they later show interest and openness in exploring detransitioning or other ways of making peace with their biological sex, be ready to support them in that journey. Be willing to open yourself up as much as you hope they will.

We offer this case study (again, the names have been changed) as one example of a situation a church recently faced, along with possible pastoral steps:

Surita, who presents as female but was born male, and Surita’s partner, Lindsay, have been attending your church. They are both professing Christians and recently have asked your pastor to officiate at their wedding in your church building.

Desired outcomes:

- Deep intimacy with God and close relationship with God’s people for each of them.
- For Surita to be at peace with her created male body.

Obstacles:

- Their sense of themselves as a lesbian couple.
- Possible great pride in transition for Surita.
- If Surita has already fully transitioned, it may feel unlikely to the pastor that Surita would consider detransition. This will be a long, difficult journey with potential for lots of hurt.

Possible steps:

- Pray with them for the Spirit’s presence.
- Listen to their faith story and the history of their relationship, as well as Surita’s journey toward transitioning.
- Explain the biblical understanding of male-female union as God’s design for marriage, which reflects Jesus and the church. Explain why the marriage of two people who both live as females does not reflect that purpose of marriage.
- Ask if Surita would be willing to explore the possibility of making peace with the body they were born in?
- Offer support from an individual, and a small group, to accompany them spiritually on such a journey of exploration.
- Invite them to pray together for wisdom and next steps together.

## 2. Parents

Parents of children who say they are transgender, want to transition, or suffer harassment need practical support. Parents whose child identifies as trans not only feel great concern for their child’s physical and emotional well-being because of bullying but often also greatly fear the suicide of their child. At the same time, parents may be told by health and social-service workers as well as teachers that if their child “is consistent, insistent, and persistent about their transgender identity,”<sup>149</sup> the parents should affirm and support that identity through social transition and later

<sup>149</sup> [hrc.org/resources/transgender-children-and-youth-understanding-the-basics](https://hrc.org/resources/transgender-children-and-youth-understanding-the-basics); [apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/advocacy/transgender-children.pdf](https://apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/advocacy/transgender-children.pdf)

hormonal treatments and surgeries. For this reason, many wonder if they should help their child transition.

a. Spiritual care

Many of the spiritual care and hospitality suggestions offered above for transgendered and gender dysphoric adults will apply to parents of transgendered and gender dysphoric children. In addition, we offer the following:

- Offer prayer for and with parents in various settings such as intercessory prayer groups, small groups, and one-on-one meetings. Offer support and encourage parents to share their journey with their small group, if they feel safe doing so. Help them to know and feel they are not alone in this.
- Cultivate hope in a God who loves their child unconditionally and in a community that will respect, accept, and support their child no matter what.
- Whether one’s child is age 5 or 25, parents will likely be grieving over their child’s confusion about their gender. Offer space and time for parents to express their unique emotional experience over what is happening with their child. Offer psalms of lament to them as one outlet for expressing their anger to God.

b. Hospitality

- Work to educate your congregation to the realities of gender dysphoria, including the dismal statistics regarding self-harm in young people who identify as nonbinary.<sup>150</sup>
- Work to ensure that church is a safe place for children and young people in contrast to many areas of society in which these persons are at risk of physical harm and bullying. The Trevor Project notes that 40 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth (ages 13-24) report being physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their gender identity.<sup>151</sup> Think about how your congregation speaks about nonbinary persons.
- See internet resources below for a few good examples from the numerous websites of parents advocating for children’s physical well-being, of detransitioners telling their stories to encourage others, and of feminists concerned about pressure on young women to transition.

c. Support with decision making

- Be willing to share wisdom about medical treatment and support to resist cultural pressure.

Since the Bible teaches that being created male or female is part of how humans reflect the image of God, parents may well need help to protect their children from harms by medical interventions. For example, although respected organizations such as the AMA and the

<sup>150</sup> [thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020](https://thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020)

<sup>151</sup> [thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020](https://thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020)

Pediatric Endocrine Society have made gender-affirming statements, very little longitudinal research has been done on the effects of medical practices such as hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgeries.<sup>152</sup>

Research does show that almost all children with gender dysphoria will become comfortable with their anatomical sex after puberty. In addition, many adults, particularly gay and lesbian adults, have childhood memories of strongly believing they were the opposite sex but came to accept their sex during adolescence.<sup>153</sup>

At the same time, a child given hormones to block puberty who then later takes hormones to change their sex will become sterile. To enable them to resist pressure to move down a path leading to such potentially damaging and irrevocable changes, the church should give the family and the child strong support as the child goes through puberty.<sup>154</sup> Knowledgeable church members can serve as resources or support as families debate the wisdom or timing of surgeries, puberty blockers, or other medications.<sup>155</sup>

- As with adults, we suggest the internet resources below for a few good examples of the numerous websites of parents advocating for children’s physical well-being.

### 3. Mission

Outside your church community are many homeless transgendered people who are being prostituted. There is also a large and growing group of young people who share the transgender umbrella because they identify as gender queer, gender nonconforming, or gender fluid. They long for love, acceptance, and genuine mutual community.

- Rest in God and give God your fears and anxieties. Be with God in prayer. Receive God’s love. “Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). Ask the Spirit to help you fear God rather than people’s ideas, political agendas, or fears.
- Listen to a real person tell their story. Hear the hurts, fears, joys, concerns of a transgendered person, a gender dysphoric youth, a desperate parent whose adolescent child is suicidal, or a detransitioner.
- Consider how your church might reach out to the local trans community. Encourage members of your congregation who see themselves as gender nonconforming, who experience gender dysphoria, or who are

<sup>152</sup> “Those advocating a psychological approach to treatment, as opposed to hormone and/or surgery-based protocols can point to research showing that while SRS [sex reassignment surgery] appears to alleviate mental health problems for some, for a sizable group of others psychological morbidity is unaffected by—or actually increases after—surgical transitioning”; Simonsen, Giraldi, Christensen, Haldi, “Long-term Followup . . .” *Nordic Journal* as quoted in J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 22.

<sup>153</sup> Steensma, et al.; DOI:10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016.

<sup>154</sup> [npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278](http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278); Norman Spacker, [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762); Polly Carmichael GIDS.

<sup>155</sup> See Stephen B. Levine, “Ethical Concerns about Emerging Treatment Paradigms for Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 44 (2018), pp. 29-44; Stephen B. Levine, “Informed Consent for Transgendered Patients,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 218-29; DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1518885.

attracted to the same sex to advise or help give leadership to any outreach. Not only will this further their own discipleship, but the church will also benefit from the personal advocacy and compassion they will bring.

- Give thought to how your church might address the injustice of ethnic minorities and other marginalized people being prostituted.

#### *D. Care for those with Disorder of Sex Development (DSD)*

Some of the above-mentioned ministry the church offers to people who are transgender and gender dysphoric will also give great comfort to individuals with disorders of sexual development and their families. In addition, some of the societal issues noted above overlap for both groups. Nonetheless, the biological realities of persons with DSDs suggest that these people and their families also have unique needs that the church must address. Be sure to recognize your limits and be willing to suggest that they consult a professional psychologist.

##### 1. Spiritual care

- Since some of these conditions are identified at birth, the church should be prepared to support parents as soon as possible through prayer and a consistent empathic presence, especially in the first weeks but continuing for as long as is needed as parents adjust to the realities of this unexpected condition.
- Parents may feel some shame, fear, confusion, grief, or anger. Offer non-judgmental support for them. Encourage them to express their unique emotional experience. Offer psalms of lament as an outlet for letting them express their feelings to God. Suggest practical outlets such as keeping a journal of the medical and emotional journey or writing their own psalm of lament.
- For the person who has a DSD, be ready to be an empathic presence, to walk with them in their suffering. Acknowledge their feelings of shame, anger, or bitterness if they were bullied or mocked during childhood or adolescence. Encourage them to express their unique emotional experience. Offer psalms of lament and other Christian resources such as music as an outlet for letting them express their feelings to God.

##### 2. Hospitality

- Acknowledge that disorders of sexual development vary widely. They manifest at different ages, and some are visible while others are not. If and when someone shares their story with you, assure them of your support. Offer to connect them with a small group.
- Consider selecting a small group of interested people in your church who are willing to learn about Disorders of Sexual Development and who would be able to come alongside parents or persons with a DSD.
- Be aware that some persons with a DSD may position themselves under the transgender umbrella. Intersex conditions arise from biological disorders rather than as a matter of internal sense of identity. However, as public acceptance of trans identities and genderqueer culture has grown, some people with such congenital differences find a sense of

community. Of course, it is also the case that some persons with a DSD will not want to identify themselves in this way.

### 3. Support in decision making

Studies<sup>156</sup> suggest that those who discover early that they have a disorder of sexual development and who choose which sex they most identify with do relatively well. For this reason, the church can support such members and their parents as they decide how to live into the sex that seems most comfortable or natural to them. They should be helped as they make whatever surgical or hormonal alterations that will facilitate this.

To conclude, we offer a few stories that are pertinent to this report. As with other stories throughout the report, names have been changed to protect the persons involved.

Chelsey,\* 34, had served six years in a Canadian women's prison when a biological male (Terri\*) who identified as a transwoman was placed in her cellblock. Convicted of sexual assault against a woman, Terri\* wore a beard and had not begun any kind of physical transition. When Terri sexually assaulted Chelsey, she made a formal complaint. Although the prison authorities believed her, they told her they were unable to remove Terri because it would be a violation of Terri's human rights. Chelsey says, "I felt like I was going crazy because I knew he was a man."<sup>157</sup>

Max\* never took to "girly" things like dresses and makeup or playing with dolls. But she loved being outdoors and anything to do with exercise and sports. When men began to look at her developing body in puberty, Max dressed in loose shirts and baggy pants. At the same time, she realized she was romantically attracted to girls, not boys, and gradually came out to her friends and family. She began to feel she had "a Barbie body" but was not and could not be a Barbie, so she presented as very "butch." By her late teens, she started getting strong encouragement from transgender people to transition. She found complete acceptance in this new community, as long as she didn't question the values, and she began taking hormones and preparing to get "top surgery." For eight years she lived as a man and was engaged to a woman. Now a detransitioner, Max has withdrawn completely from the transactivist community because she regularly gets hostile social media posts and threats of violence for choosing to return to living as a lesbian. A Christian friend of Max's mother, a justice activist, offered Max support over coffee and meals. Since Max relocated, the new friend reached out, and they now correspond online about Jesus and the Bible and have even begun to pray together over the internet.

<sup>156</sup> See Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications.

<sup>157</sup> [sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/421/RIDR/54206-e; womenarehuman.com/the-alarm-has-been-sounded-whos-going-to-respond](http://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/421/RIDR/54206-e;womenarehuman.com/the-alarm-has-been-sounded-whos-going-to-respond)

## E. Selected resources

### 1. Books

- Beilby, James K., and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019).
- Fine, Cordelia. *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society* (New York: Norton, 2017).
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Melbourne: Routledge, 2014).
- Kivel, Paul. *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence That Tears Our Lives Apart* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).
- Pearcey, Nancy. *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions of Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2018).
- Rippon, Gina. *Gender and Our Brains: How New Neuroscience Explodes the Myths of the Male and Female Mind* (New York: Pantheon, 2019).
- Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Gender & Grace* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).
- Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Am I My Brother's Keeper? What the Social Sciences Do and Do Not Tell Us about Masculinity* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
- Yarhouse, Mark A. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

### 2. Websites and video

kelseycoalition.org; Working to Change the Systems That Failed Our Kids  
genderresourceguide.com; Educating and Equipping Parents  
4thwavenow.com; a community of people who question the medicalization of gender atypical youth  
piqueresproject.com; stories and info from four detransitioners  
med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/dsd.htm  
ted.com/talks/tony\_porter\_a\_call\_to\_men

## XI. Homosexuality: Cultural context

### A. A word about language

Currently many people in North America, including Christians, assume that the words *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* refer to unchosen aspects of one's personhood. Others, however, use these words to refer to a person's identity or behavior. Some Christians who are attracted to the same sex are comfortable describing themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Others do not use these labels to identify themselves because the Bible talks about behavior, not identity; or because they have chosen to live in obedience to the historically orthodox understanding of sexuality and thus do not want to be labeled with a word in any way connected with sinful behavior. Still others simply reject the notion of heterosexuality and homosexuality, believing that all of us are on a spectrum of sexual attraction. Out of respect for all of these perspectives, in this report we use the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* only to refer to persons who identify as such. Otherwise we simply speak of an attraction to the same sex or to same-sex activity or practice.

## B. Context

The Christian Reformed Church's 1973 synodical report on homosexuality broke ground by making a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. As the report put it, "We must distinguish between the person who is homosexual in [their] sexual orientation and the person who engages in explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex." It also noted that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person." In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.<sup>158</sup>

In the past few decades genetic research and brain chemistry studies have attempted to demonstrate definitive correlations between our biology and our sexual attractions.<sup>159</sup> Scientific studies have tried to establish empirically what many people feel: in childhood, puberty, or adulthood, they found themselves attracted to their own sex. They did not choose this same-sex attraction, nor could they suppress it.

However, no "gay gene" has yet been identified. Quite the opposite, the claim that attraction to the same sex has a biological cause has been seriously challenged by recent research. For example, a team of scientists from MIT and Harvard recently studied the genetic material of an extremely large sample group—almost half a million individuals.<sup>160</sup> Their findings affirm the results of previous research that strongly call into question the commonly held assumption that being gay is an innate condition which is controlled or compelled by one's genetic makeup. To put it in colloquial terms, this study weakens the contemporary cultural idea that people are born this way.

Charles,\* 55 (white), has loved Jesus since he was a small boy. Music and liturgy in worship have always been deeply meaningful to him. He is usually the most dependable member of church choirs and ensembles and liturgist and drama teams. Other than the obligatory talks in youth group about how to avoid intercourse before marriage, Charles heard little teaching about sexuality in church. Yet he always knew the church believed "homosexuality is wrong" and definitely understood that being gay was considered by church members to be one of the most shameful situations one could be in. As a faithful church member and believer, Charles regularly reads the Bible and prays, and he has agonized over his sexuality since he was very young. Since puberty, Charles has felt shame and hurt, and often anger too, toward God, himself, and the church. In the church, he has been desperately lonely both because congregational life is organized around families and because he's never experienced a safe place to talk about his deep longings for sexual intimacy with a man.

While others in their youth groups and university fellowships dated and explored sexuality, Derek,\* 30 (white), and Asta,\* 28 (East Indian), hid their sexual feelings. Each eventually met a potential same-sex partner and finally decided to live openly as a gay person. They left churches

<sup>158</sup> *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 612-613.

<sup>159</sup> See Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

<sup>160</sup> See "How Do Genes Affect Same-Sex Behavior?" *Science*, Vol. 365, Issue 6456 (Aug. 30, 2019).

that prioritized the biological family over the spiritual family and offered them no viable alternative to the intimacy they craved. After each making the transition from living alone, hiding part of what feels like their core self, and feeling ashamed, to living honestly, being accepted, and sharing a household with another person in a supportive, intimate relationship, Derek and Asta each feel freer and happier.

In contemporary North American culture, sexual expression is assumed to be a physical need like food or sleep. And the word *intimacy*, once defined as close familiarity or friendship, is often used to refer only to sexual and romantic closeness. For many people, increasingly, intimacy requires sex. Thus it has become difficult for many church members to imagine asking anyone to deny themselves a sexual relationship, thus depriving them of intimacy. They question whether a life without sexual intimacy is even worth living.

Indeed, humans need intimacy. Babies cannot thrive without physical affection, and elderly people who experience it live longer and are happier. Biological and social scientists tell us that regular human touch makes people healthier in every way and that people with strong social networks show greater physical and emotional resilience after suffering illness or trauma. Young and old, women and men—all of us long to be known, welcomed, and accepted as we are.

God designed the church community to meet the deep human need for intimacy (Heb. 13:1: “Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters”). While the nation of Israel was organized by families, with marriage expected for all, and children a sign of God’s favor, Jesus preached an astonishing new message. Women would be blessed not for child-bearing but for discipleship, and men could choose not to marry.<sup>161</sup> Jesus proclaimed that seeking the kingdom takes precedence over marriages and the natural obligations of biological families.<sup>162</sup> Traveling with both men and women,<sup>163</sup> some of whom had left spouses or families behind, Jesus modeled a radically new kind of community, in which those who do God’s will are sisters and brothers of Jesus and of each other.<sup>164</sup>

In this new tradition, New Testament writers described the reality that individual members are drawn into one interdependent community with other metaphors such as a household built of individual spiritual stones, branches tied in to Jesus as the living vine, and the body of Christ.<sup>165</sup> And every epistle includes wisdom for how these sisters and brothers can show each other love in practical ways.

Imagine the distress, then, if the family of God begins to shun or despise people who reveal that they are attracted to the same sex. Robbed of the intimacy to which God has called them in Christ, such persons will either die spiritually or turn elsewhere for support. Unfortunately, many people are in exile from the North American church because the church has ignored them and their needs for intimacy, or judged them as sexually immoral simply

<sup>161</sup> Luke 11:27-28; Matt. 19:12, 28.

<sup>162</sup> Matt. 8:18-22; 19:29; 22:1-14; Mark 10:29; Luke 9:59; 14:15-27.

<sup>163</sup> Luke 8:1-3.

<sup>164</sup> Mark 3:31-35.

<sup>165</sup> Rom. 8; 1 Pet. 2; John 15; Eph. 2; 1 Cor. 12.

because of their attraction to the same sex. Others have left one congregation or denomination for another that was more accepting. And many of us who remain in the church feel like outcasts because the church talks about us rather than with us, and portrays us as sexual sinners, agitators, or objects of pity. In addition, because church culture has been built around married couples and families, people who are single are denied deep Christian community, whether or not they have chosen the celibate life.

The church has also harmed people who are attracted to the same sex by promoting the false expectation of orientation change, as if believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to become attracted to the opposite sex as they are sanctified. The church has pressured some into programs of orientation change that inflicted tremendous psychological, emotional, and social harm upon them.

All of this is in stark contrast to the recommendations of the 1973 synodical report, which declared that those who are attracted to the same sex “must be accepted in [their] homosexuality, so that in the congregation [they do] not need to wear a mask and conduct [themselves like hypocrites], living in constant fear of discovery and exposure. . . . [They deserve] the same acceptance, recognition, compassion, and help that is given to any person.”<sup>166</sup>

It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex, making it very difficult for them to live a life of holiness.

The sin of homosexual practice is often singled out for condemnation while other sexual sins are ignored or minimized. For example, many people in our churches engage in premarital sex, use pornography, commit adultery, or divorce their spouses without a legitimate cause, but they are not disciplined in any way. In such a context any church teaching that condemns homosexual activity is naturally perceived as hypocrisy. For many people in the church, especially those who are attracted to the same sex, no repetition of biblical teaching on homosexuality will be persuasive unless the church repents of this hypocrisy and becomes the loving community that Christ has called it to be.

Indeed, the church has not been the supportive, grace-saturated community it is supposed to be. And if those who are not attracted to the same sex attempt to maintain traditional church teaching while refusing to repent of their own idolatry and self-righteousness, the church will be worse off than it was before.

Yet while the church has already failed persons who are attracted to the same sex for many, many years, there is hope. Followers of Jesus are appropriately moved and chastened by the stories of pain, isolation, ridicule, and even outright hostility experienced by many people who are attracted to the same sex. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church’s current controversy over homosexuality can become the moment we choose together to live anew as the nurturing family of God; to give and receive grace as we learn together how to walk in sexual holiness; to support each other in celibate singleness or faithful marriage; to help each other walk the narrow way—the way of suffering that is the only way to glory. Through a power not our own,

<sup>166</sup> *Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 626.

we can become willing to let the church be the body of Christ where women and men, girls and boys are being reconciled to God and to one another.

Kimberly,\* 45, and Jeffrey,\* 40, both single, along with Rob,\* Jen,\* and their three children share an old house in the downtown neighborhood of a medium-sized city. The church to which they all belong is committed to seeking the welfare of their city. In fact, several other households of church members are similarly sprinkled around the same neighborhood. These households began as a way to offer hospitality and show God's love to nearby city residents. The church members in these households quickly discovered that their unique living arrangements also provide the much needed support to live faithfully as celibate singles and monogamous married couples with children. Sharing meals and tasks, they experience the truth of the proverb "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (Prov. 27:17, NRSV) as well the encouraging wisdom "A friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:17).

## **XII. Homosexuality: Scripture**

### *A. Introduction*

The first-century church was notable because it taught and practiced a sexual ethic that encouraged people not to marry, praised celibacy, and limited sexual activity to marriage. Whereas the ancient pagan culture gave husbands tremendous power over their wives, held free women to a stricter sexual code than men and slaves, and permitted men to indulge in sex with female prostitutes, boys, and other men, the church called husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, held men to the same sexual code as women, and called them to abstain from sex with anyone other than their wife.

Jesus praised those who were celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:1-12). Jesus himself lived a celibate life in close intimacy with his disciples, male and female. Paul was also single, and he went so far as to suggest that the way of celibacy is preferable for women and men because it allows them to seek the kingdom of God unhindered (1 Cor. 7:7-9, 25-40). The result was that early Christians were free to marry, as their culture expected them to do, but they were also free to reject marriage, in sharp violation of cultural norms. Communities of celibate Christian women and men sprang up, ultimately giving rise to the phenomena of monasticism.

Following Jesus in celibate singleness or faithful marriage was just as shocking and baffling to the first-century world as it is to our secular neighbors today. Historians demonstrate that the early church's practice of sexuality was so different from that of the pagan Roman culture that it made no sense to nonbelievers. Today too, traditional Christian sexual practices are increasingly regarded as prudish, anachronistic, repressive, and even bizarre. Even many Christians have begun to share this perspective.<sup>167</sup>

The idea of suffering to follow Jesus has never been popular. The apostle Peter devoted his entire first epistle to teaching Christians how to suffer for

<sup>167</sup> Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018). See also Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), pp. 121ff.

Christ's sake, but he himself had once rejected the prospect out of hand. When Jesus had predicted his suffering and death on the cross, Peter rebuked him. Jesus dismissed Peter's aversion to suffering as a temptation of the devil. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Then he turned to the crowds and announced, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:31-34, NIV).

Peter and the other New Testament writers came to embrace this calling, in part because Jesus' death and resurrection taught them that suffering is the necessary path to glory.<sup>168</sup> Paul reminded Christians in Rome that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:3-4). The writer to the Hebrews wrote that just as the author of our faith had to be "perfect through what he suffered" (Heb. 2:10), so we too must expect to suffer as we become like Jesus. In doing so, we can rely on him to help us, because he has been tempted in every way, just like us, yet was without sin (2:17-18).

Regardless of whether they chose celibacy in community or pursued marriage and family, all early Christians sought to live into the intimacy of the body of Christ. Jesus described the life of his followers as a life of sustaining relationships (John 15). God has chosen to heal and redeem us as members of one body. In an age of radical individualism, we must "keep the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3) by sharing our lives together in practical and physical ways. If we do, we are promised, the light of this love will draw others to Christ as well.

It is within this countercultural context that we must grapple with the way Scripture addresses homosexuality.

## B. *The testimony of the Old Testament*

### 1. Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19

The first of the seven biblical texts that are typically cited in any discussion of Scripture's view of homosexual activity is the story of Lot and the men of Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29). Many of the observations about this passage also apply to the story of the Levite and his concubine (Judg. 19), since both texts closely parallel each other.

Some scholars, often called revisionists since they argue for changing the traditional position that the Bible condemns homosexual activity, claim that this passage does not, in fact, deal with homosexual conduct. In the text the men of Sodom learn that Lot has invited some men into his home as guests. They demand, "Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with [literally "know"] them" (Gen. 19:5). Some revisionist scholars assert that the verb for "know" here simply means "get acquainted" and has nothing to do with homosexual activity.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>168</sup> See Rom. 8; 2 Cor. 4-5.

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, Derrick Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1955), pp. 3-4; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 93-94; John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City, Kan.: Sheed, Andrews, and McMeel, 1976), pp. 54-55; K. Renato Lings, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (Bloomington, Ind.: Trafford Publishing, 2013), pp. 372-99.

This assertion, however, is clearly wrong, since the Hebrew verb for “know” (*yada*) commonly has the meaning “have sex with.” This meaning is recognized in all standard dictionaries of biblical Hebrew and is confirmed a few verses later in Lot’s statement: “Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man” (Gen. 19:8). Here the Hebrew is literally “who have not known a man.” Therefore, virtually all biblical interpreters—both traditionalists and the majority of revisionists—recognize that the story of Lot and the men of Sodom does involve homosexual activity.

Almost all of these interpreters also agree that the focus of the Sodom episode is not the sinfulness of gay sex but the violation of hospitality or the display of human depravity. Richard Hays, for example, who affirms the traditional Christian position on homosexual activity, states in his influential book on ethics: “The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. . . . The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”<sup>170</sup>

Robert Gagnon, a prominent defender of the traditional view on homosexuality, similarly concedes: “Traditionally, Gen. 19:4-11 has been regarded as the classic Bible story about homosexuality. However, to the extent that the story does not deal directly with consensual homosexual relationships, it is not an ‘ideal’ text to guide contemporary sexual ethics.”<sup>171</sup>

But although Genesis 19:1-29 is not first-and-foremost a statement against homosexual activity, it is legitimately read as illustrating the overall biblical association of homosexual conduct with human perversity. Kevin De Young recognizes that these two important points are both part of a right reading of this story:

To be sure, the scene in Genesis 19 looks very different from two men or two women entering into a consensual and committed sexual relationship. The case against same-sex sexual intimacy is less obvious from the Sodom and Gomorrah account than from the other passages we will consider. And yet, the destruction of these infamous cities is not irrelevant to the matter at hand. From the allusion in Ezekiel, to the perception of Sodom in other Jewish literature, to the mention of unnamed desire in Jude, we see that Sodom had a reputation for sexual sin in general and homosexual sin in particular. While the violence associated with homosexual behavior in Sodom certainly made the offense worse, the nature of the act itself contributed to the overwhelmingly negative assessment of the city. Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of a great many sins; we don’t have to prove that homosexual practice was the only sin to show that it was one of them.<sup>172</sup>

## 2. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The two remaining Old Testament texts that address the subject of homosexual activity are both from the book of Leviticus:

<sup>170</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 381.

<sup>171</sup> Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001), p. 71.

<sup>172</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015), p. 38.

- “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable” (Lev. 18:22).
- “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Lev. 20:13).

Both revisionists and traditionalists agree on two things about these texts. First, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are, in fact, referring to same-sex intercourse between men. Second, these texts are not referring to abusive forms of same-sex intercourse but consensual sex, since the same penalty for breaking these commands is applied to both men (20:13), something that does not happen in the case of rape (see Deut. 22:23-27). The two camps disagree, however, on whether and how these prohibitions apply today. Several types of arguments have been advocated either to reject (revisionists) or affirm (traditionalists) the abiding significance of these two Old Testament texts for contemporary believers.

Revisionists often argue that both Levitical commands are given in a very specific cultic context: they are part of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult in which God’s people were tempted to engage in idolatrous practices such as cultic prostitution. This means, they conclude, that the two commands do not address the ethics of modern same-sex relationships. James Brownson, for example, claims:

The first thing to note is that the immediate contexts of both of these prohibitions against ‘lying with a male as with a woman’ are closely linked to two other problems: injunctions against the practices of idolatry and the urgency of avoiding the practices of surrounding nations. . . . There is evidence linking same-sex eroticism, particularly among males, to cultic prostitution and other idolatrous practices in the ancient world generally. . . . So we can say with reasonable confidence that the activity envisioned in the Levitical prohibitions is assumed to be consensual, and that it is probably envisioned to take place in cultic contexts, with clear linkages to idolatry and other religious practices foreign to the nation of Israel.<sup>173</sup>

Traditionalists argue instead that the two key texts from Leviticus are still applicable for the church today, and they typically do so by appealing to creation order: the Levitical commands prohibit same-sex sexual acts because such behavior goes against the pattern for sexual relations given in the creation narratives. Robert Gagnon illustrates this common claim when he writes:

Thus there are good grounds for asserting that the primary problem with male-male intercourse is the more general concern that it “mixes” two things that were never intended to be mixed. . . . The refrain in 18:22 and 20:13, “as though lying with a woman,” is the best indication we have of what the primary concern was; namely, behaving toward another man as if he were a woman by making him the object of male sexual desires. That is an “abomination,” an abhorrent violation of divine sanctioned boundaries—in this case, gender boundaries established at creation. . . . All the laws in Lev. 18:6-23; 20:2-21 legislate against forms of sexual behavior that disrupt the created order set into motion by the God of Israel.<sup>174</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Brownson, pp. 270-71.

<sup>174</sup> Gagnon, pp. 135-36.

Revisionists additionally question why these two prohibitions against homosexual intercourse ought to be followed today when other surrounding prohibitions are freely ignored. For example, Christians do not typically feel the need to obey the commands against planting one's field with two kinds of seed or against wearing clothing made with two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19). Even a traditionalist like Richard Hays recognizes the force of this argument: "Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been deemed obsolete by the church. . . . In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel's traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus' followers. In order to see what decisions the early church made about this matter, we must turn to the New Testament."<sup>175</sup>

When one does turn to the New Testament, we see that many of the laws regarding sexual activity in Leviticus 18 and 20 are affirmed as still obligatory for the people of God. As Kevin DeYoung observes: "Apart from the question of sex during menstruation, the sexual ethic in Leviticus 18 and 20 is squarely reaffirmed in the New Testament. Adultery is still a sin (Matt. 5:27-30). Incest is still a sin (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Even polygamy is more clearly rejected (1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 3:2). It would be strange for the prohibition against homosexual practice to be set aside when the rest of the sexual ethic is not, especially considering how the rejection of same-sex behavior is rooted in the created order."<sup>176</sup>

In fact, as we will see, in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 the apostle Paul condemns homosexual activity in a way that draws directly on the prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20. He does so by using the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, which is a compound of the words used to condemn homosexual activity in the Septuagint version of the Levitical prohibitions. This confirms that Paul viewed the teaching of these Old Testament texts as still binding on Christians (for a more detailed discussion of this special Greek word and its link with the Levitical prohibitions, see below).

It is true that a few revisionists question this link between Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* and the Levitical texts, asserting that such a connection is "speculative and lacks external confirming evidence."<sup>177</sup> It is also true, however, that the vast majority of biblical scholars, including leading revisionists, find this connection to be obvious and beyond doubt.<sup>178</sup>

### C. *The testimony of Jesus*

When one turns to what the New Testament says about homosexual activity, revisionists typically separate the testimony of Jesus from the testimony of Paul. The result of such a distinction almost always is the same: there exists a conflict or contradiction between Jesus and Paul whereby Jesus reflects an attitude of love and tolerance, while Paul reflects an attitude of judgment and narrow-mindedness. The church has always rejected

<sup>175</sup> Hays, p. 382.

<sup>176</sup> DeYoung, p. 46.

<sup>177</sup> Brownson, p. 271.

<sup>178</sup> See, for example, William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 331 (for 1 Cor. 6:9), p. 334 (for 1 Tim. 1:10).

separating the words of Jesus from those of other biblical authors, as if the rest of the Bible were not also inspired by the Holy Spirit as a word from the Lord. What Paul has to say about homosexuality is just as much the “word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13) and thus authoritative as what Jesus says, or in this case, does not say.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented revisionists from appealing to the silence of Jesus on homosexual conduct, arguing: “If homosexual activity is so bad, why didn’t Jesus say anything about it?”

Careful reflection reveals how weak that argument actually is. First, Jesus was a Jew, and the Judaism of his day was unanimous in denouncing homosexual activity. All Jewish writings from the ancient world—those in the Bible as well as the many writings from that time period that were not included in the Bible—uniformly rejected homosexual and lesbian behavior.<sup>179</sup> Such widespread agreement in Judaism is quite remarkable, given the diversity of Jewish views on all kinds of topics. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Jesus would differ from that view, unless he explicitly stated that he did. Yet Jesus never even hints at an affirmation of homosexual activity.

Second, Jesus never says anything against several sexual sins. One looks in vain for Jesus to condemn prostitution, incest, pederasty, or bestiality. Yet no one concludes from Jesus’ silence that he was tolerant of such behaviors. This illustrates the danger of what is often called an “argument from silence”—the fallacy of drawing a conclusion not on the basis of what someone does say but rather on the basis of what that person does *not* say. Jesus is almost certainly silent about homosexuality because he lived at a time and in a culture where everyone agreed that homosexual activity, like prostitution, incest, pederasty, and bestiality, was immoral. He had no need to comment on the matter. As Preston Sprinkle has observed: “Why preach to the choir about something everyone agrees on? No mathematician spends time arguing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and no Jew came to Rabbi Jesus asking whether same-sex sexual relations were sin. The answer was self-evident within first-century Judaism.”<sup>180</sup>

Third, in Mark 7:21-23 Jesus lists several things that defile a person, and at the head of the list is “sexual immorality” (NIV 2011). This translation in English is a bit misleading because the Greek term used here, *porneiai*, is actually plural: “sexual immoralities.” This reminds us that Jesus, as a rabbi who knew the Torah (or Old Testament law) well, was referring to many different sexual sins forbidden in texts like Leviticus 18 and 20—texts that condemn all kinds of unlawful sexual relations, including homosexual relations (Lev. 18:22; 20:13).

Fourth, in answering a question from the Pharisees on divorce, Jesus cites both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24: “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate’” (Matt. 19:4-5;

<sup>179</sup> See, for example, Philo, *Special Laws*, 3:37-42; *Contemplative Life*, 59-60; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.11.3; *Against Apion*, 2.273-275; *Pseudo-Phocylides*, 190-192, 213-214; *Sibylline Oracles*, 3.184-187; 5.166; *Letter of Aristeas*, 152; 2 *Enoch*, 34:1-2; *m. San.*, 7:4; *t. Abodah Zarah*, 2:1; 3:2.

<sup>180</sup> Preston Sprinkle, “Why Didn’t Jesus Mention Homosexuality?”; [centerforfaith.com/resources](http://centerforfaith.com/resources).

also Mark 10:6-8). What is significant for our understanding of Jesus' position on homosexuality is the fact that he includes the quote from Genesis 1:27 ("made them male and female"), whereas only the quote from Genesis 2:24 was directly relevant to the Pharisees' question about divorce. Jesus could have easily omitted the quote from Genesis 1:27 from his answer. The fact that he included it reveals that Jesus considered sex difference ("made them male and female") to be important and that he did, in fact, expect marriage to be between a man and a woman.

The appeal to Jesus' silence on the issue of homosexual conduct and the portrayal of Jesus as someone who would be open to certain kinds of homosexual relationships, therefore, lacks any persuasive evidence, and is in fact contradicted by the available evidence. As Robert Gagnon puts it: "The portrayal of Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew who was open to homosexual practice is simply ahistorical. All the evidence leads in the opposite direction."<sup>181</sup>

#### D. *The testimony of Paul*

Paul, like Jesus, was a first-century Jew and thus would have been similarly influenced by the unanimous condemnation of same-sex acts found in the Jewish writings of his day. As David Garland observes, "Though homosexual acts were generally accepted in the ancient world, Hellenistic Jewish texts are unanimous in condemning them and treat them and idolatry as obvious examples of Gentile moral depravity. Not surprisingly, Paul shares this Jewish aversion to idolatry and homosexual acts."<sup>182</sup>

The apostle's position on sexual matters was generally strict. For example, he writes to the Thessalonians, "It is God's will . . . that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans" (1 Thess. 4:3-5). He strongly rebukes the Corinthian church for tolerating a sexual relationship between a man and his step-mother (1 Cor. 5:1-11). He further admonishes the believers in Corinth for tolerating certain members who were paying prostitutes for sex (1 Cor. 6:12-20), leading him to issue the strong command that they "flee from sexual immorality" (6:18). The first item in the apostle's list of vices for both the Galatians and the Colossians to put to death is "sexual immorality" (Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5). He exhorts the Ephesians, "Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph. 5:3).

In light of the apostle's Jewish background and his general statements on sexual conduct, therefore, it would be surprising if Paul were shown to be approving of homosexual activity. However, Paul does not leave us guessing. He deals explicitly with homosexual practice in three places: Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10.

#### 1. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10

We begin by looking at the two shorter texts first: 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. These two texts address homosexual activity by using two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

<sup>181</sup> Gagnon, p. 228.

<sup>182</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 213.

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Cor. 6:9-10)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality [*arsenokoitai*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

(1 Tim. 1:8-11)

Revisionists typically claim one of the following two things with respect to these texts. Some assert that it is impossible to determine the precise meaning of these two Greek words with certainty, and therefore we should not draw any conclusions about homosexuality from them. David Gushee, for example, asserts: “Very high-level scholarly uncertainty about the meaning and translation of these two Greek words . . . undermines claims to the conclusiveness of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* for resolving the LGBT issue.”<sup>183</sup> But although some revisionist academics have raised doubts about the origin and sense of these two key terms, it is nevertheless also the case—as demonstrated in the discussion below—that there exists a widespread scholarly consensus as to their meaning.<sup>184</sup>

Revisionists more often claim that these two Greek words refer narrowly to *abusive* forms of homosexual activity—namely, man-boy relationships (pederasty) and prostitution. According to this view, Paul is rejecting the exploitative nature of these specific kinds of homosexual acts that were common in his day. Thus, it is claimed, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 cannot be used to condemn the consensual, monogamous same-sex relationships characteristic of our contemporary age. Richard Horsley, for example, states: “The terms in question probably referred to ‘masturbators’ and ‘male prostitutes.’ Certainly the terms Paul uses here were not references to an ancient equivalent of modern homosexual relations. The list in 6:9 thus provides no indication that Paul considered such a relationship to be sinful.”<sup>185</sup>

Similarly, Martti Nissinen asserts:

The modern concept of “homosexuality” should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 “condemn all homosexual relations” in all times and places and ways. . . . Regardless of the kind of sexuality meant in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in their current contexts they are examples of the exploitation of persons. What Paul primarily opposes is the wrong that people do to others.<sup>186</sup>

<sup>183</sup> David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton, Mich.: David Crumm Media, 2015), p. 79.

<sup>184</sup> See especially the recent publication of John Granger Cook in *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019), pp. 332-52, arguably the most prestigious academic journal for issues related to the New Testament.

<sup>185</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1988), p. 89.

<sup>186</sup> Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 118.

One more example of this revisionist view of 1 Corinthians 6:9 is found in the recent book by Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh, who claim that “Paul is talking about some form of pederasty here, some form of sexual predation on prepubescent boys.” They conclude that this text does “not at all” apply to monogamous same-sex relationships today.<sup>187</sup>

This interpretation suffers from at least four major problems. First, if Paul had in view only exploitative same-sex relationships like pederasty, he could have easily made this clear by using any one of several Greek words that refer specifically to pederasty. For example, there is the word *paidērastês*, from which we get the English word “pederast.” Another good word choice to make this point would be the word-pair *erastês* (older man) and *erômenos* (younger man). The fact that Paul did not use any of these terms, all of which were commonly known and used in the writings of his day, suggests that he was not thinking only of abusive forms of homosexual activity but of any type of homosexual activity.

Second, it is helpful to let the longer and clearer text of Romans 1:24-27 clarify the meaning of the brief and less clear texts of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Paul refers in Romans 1:26 to women who have sexual relations with women (i.e., lesbianism). Since pederasty in the ancient world only involved sexual relations between an older man and a younger man or teen and never involved sexual relations between an older woman with a younger woman, it is highly unlikely that the apostle in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 has in view only the narrow and abusive form of same-sex sex involved in pederasty.

This is confirmed by Paul’s reference in Romans 1:27 to men who have sex with other men who “were consumed with passion *for one another*.” The phrase “for one another” indicates that the apostle is referring to consensual sex and that he finds fault with both persons involved in the same-sex act (note also the use of the plurals in the rest of the verse: “receiving in *themselves* the due penalty for *their* error”). This makes it impossible to believe, as revisionists claim, that Paul is referring narrowly in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 to the abusive aspect of pederasty in which an older man sexually exploits a younger man. As William Loader observes: “The reference to lesbian relations which does not fit pederasty, and Paul’s depiction in [Rom.] 1:27 of mutual desire (*eis allêlous* ‘for one another’) suggest that what he [Paul] has in mind is not primarily exploitative pederasty and certainly not limited to it.”<sup>188</sup>

Third, there is the Old Testament allusion to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Paul’s use of the special word *arsenokoitai* in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. This word is unique because the apostle is the first person known to have used it. In other words, there are no known occurrences of the word *arsenokoitai* before Paul’s use of it in two of his letters. This means that either it was a recently coined word or, as most scholars assume, Paul himself created it on the basis of the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

<sup>187</sup> Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh, *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2019), p. 331.

<sup>188</sup> William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 325.

Another instance of the apostle similarly creating a new word and doing so on the basis of an Old Testament text can be seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:9, where he coins the term “God-taught” (*theodidaktoi*) in a clear allusion to Isaiah 54:13 in the Septuagint: “And I will cause all your sons to be taught of God” (*didaktous theou*). The fact that Paul does not explain the meaning of the special word *arsenokoitai* and includes it in a vice list shows that he assumes his original readers would have no difficulty in understanding what he meant. The rhetorical force of such a list required that the vices listed were well known.

This special word, *arsenokoitai*, is a compound term made up of two parts: *arsên*, which means “male,” and *koitê*, which literally means “bed” but euphemistically refers to sexual acts that take place on a bed. On the basis of these two parts, the standard academic Greek lexicon defines the singular form *arsenokoitês* as “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex.”<sup>189</sup> Even the person who does not know Greek can easily see how the two parts of the compound word *arsenokoitês* comes from the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13:

Leviticus 18:22 *kai meta arsenos ou koimêthêsê koitên gynaikos*  
 “And with a male you shall not sleep as with a woman”

Leviticus 20:13 *kai hos an koimêthê meta arsenos koitên gynaikos*  
 “And whoever will sleep with a male as with a woman”

David Wright, who has written the definitive study on the origin and meaning of *arsenokoitai*, has described the link between this special Greek word and the two Levitical texts as “inescapable.”<sup>190</sup>

Why is it significant that the special word Paul uses in two key texts dealing with homosexual activity comes from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Since these Old Testament texts deal with *all* types of same-sex acts, not just exploitative ones like pederasty and prostitution (note Lev. 20:13 which explicitly states, “*both* of them have done what is detestable”), Paul’s use of this word indicates that he is thinking of the Mosaic law in which any kind of sexual relationship between two males is forbidden. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1:8-9, just before he mentions *arsenokoitai*, Paul refers twice to the “law,” suggesting yet again that he has the Old Testament comprehensive prohibition of homosexual intercourse in view.

Fourth, the pairing of the two words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is significant. There is wide-spread agreement among grammarians and New Testament scholars that the first term, which literally means “soft” or “effeminate,” refers metaphorically to males who played the female role in sex and allowed themselves to be penetrated by other males, while the second term refers to males who penetrate other males.

This consensus is reflected in the New International Version (2011) and the English Standard Version (2016) translations, which both have exactly the same textual note on this verse: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants

<sup>189</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>190</sup> David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes: The Meaning of *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1984), pp. 125-53.

in homosexual acts.” Paul, by pairing these two words, is referring not narrowly to pederasty or prostitution but comprehensively to both the passive and active partner in any same-sex relationship.

Paul’s pairing of the two words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* reveals his opposition to the contemporary Roman attitude towards same-sex sex. The key issue in the broader honor-shame culture of that day centered on whether a man played the active, penetrating “male” role in sex (with either a woman or a man), or if he played the passive “female” role of allowing himself to be penetrated. There was no shame connected with the active role, regardless of whether the partner in the sex act was female or male, but there was shame associated with the passive role. As Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner explain:

Romans did not think in terms of sexual orientation or identities, but that proper masculinity was to be expressed in taking the active, dominant role in any sexual act. To desire or willingly play a passive homosexual role was considered shameful, but it was expected that men of stature would penetrate people of lesser status (whether women or men) but not be penetrated themselves.<sup>191</sup>

Paul’s pairing of *malakos* with *arsenokoitai*, therefore, signals his rejection of the common Roman attitude of his day. The apostle makes clear to his first-century readers that it is not simply the hierarchy of a homosexual relationship that he condemns. Regardless of whether a person’s role is active or passive, their participation in homosexual intercourse is contrary to God’s will and to membership in his kingdom.

It is important to emphasize, however, that people who engage in homosexual activity are no worse than other people. The biblical texts list homosexual sex alongside of many other things that are equally forbidden for followers of Jesus. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9 lists the “greedy” shortly after “men who have sex with other men” as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. This suggests that the church should be just as concerned about people who pile up wealth yet fail to share with others in need as it is about people who engage in homosexual sex.

## 2. Romans 1:24-27

The third Pauline text that deals with homosexual activity is Romans 1:24-27. This passage is the most important because of its length, its explicit reference to both gay and lesbian conduct, and its argumentation. Whereas 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 demonstrate Paul’s strong opposition to homosexual intercourse, Romans 1:24-27 spells out the reason *why* the apostle rejects such behavior:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

<sup>191</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 241-42.

The larger context (Rom. 1:18-32) shows that Paul's primary goal in these verses is not to condemn homosexual sex but to show how homosexual sex is another example—in addition to idolatry (1:21-23, 25)—of the degree of human sin and of why God's wrath for such sin is justified. Nevertheless, the apostle's words here are pointed and clear: women having sexual relations with other women and men having sexual relations with other men are sinful acts deserving of God's wrath.

Revisionists typically argue that Paul's words ought to be understood according to what can be labeled the "excessive-desire interpretation." They claim that the apostle is not addressing all forms of homosexual activity but only a specific type of homosexual conduct characterized by excessive desire and a lack of self-control. Straight women were so filled with sexual desire—that is, lust, the argument runs—that they had sexual relations with other women. Similarly, straight men were so filled with lust that they had sexual relations with other men.

This argument appeals to such references in Romans 1:24-27 as "desires" (1:24), "shameful lusts" (1:26), and people being "inflamed with lust" (1:27) to support the claim that the apostle is not rejecting normal desire, whether homosexual or heterosexual, but excessive desire, or lust. James Brownson, for example, states: "It is not desire itself that Paul opposes, but excessive desire, which directs itself toward what is not rightly ours, overcoming self-control and obedience to God."<sup>192</sup> The corollary of this interpretation is that the apostle would not object to homosexual sex as long as it stems from normal desire and self-control, which is also required in heterosexual activity.

If the problem that Paul is addressing were, in fact, excessive sexual desire or lust in 1:24, Paul could have made this clear by adding the adjective "much" before the word "desire" (*epithumia*) as he did in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 ("in much desire," *en pollê epithumia*).

Further, the problem that the apostle identifies involves not one of wrong *degree* (excessive behavior) but of wrong *object*. The preceding verses of Roman 1:19-23 deal with the sin of idolatry, and Paul's argument here does not involve degree (as if normal idolatry is acceptable but excessive idolatry is wrong) but object: people worship created things rather than the Creator. Similarly, the sin of lesbian and gay sex discussed in 1:24-27 does not involve degree (the idea that normal desire for same-sex sex is acceptable but excessive desire or lust is wrong) but object: women are having sex not with men but with women, and, conversely, men are having sex not with women but with men.

Yet another key weakness of the "excessive desire" interpretation lies in the short but important phrase "against nature" (Greek: *para physin*) in Romans 1:26 (many translations render the phrase "unnatural"). Revisionists argue that this phrase refers to one's *sexual* nature—that is, one's sexual orientation: women, who have a natural heterosexual attraction for men, nevertheless were so full of passion that they acted in an unnatural ("against nature") way by having sex with other women; similarly, men, who have a natural heterosexual attraction for women, nevertheless also ("in the same way") acted in an unnatural manner by having sex with

<sup>192</sup> Brownson, p. 164.

other men. According to this construal, Paul is narrowly condemning “unnatural sex”—heterosexuals who ignore their natural desire for the opposite sex and are “inflamed with lust” for members of the same sex. Such a reading leaves the door open for the apostle approving of other, more noble forms of homosexual relationships in which lesbians and gays follow their “natural” same-sex orientation.

This nuanced and novel interpretation, however, assigns to the word for “nature” (Greek: *physis*) a meaning which it has nowhere else in Greek. It is doubtful whether people in the first century were familiar with the concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today (that is, as an involuntary disposition to be attracted to people of one’s own gender), and, in any case, the Greek word *physis* is never used to refer to it.

Further, this interpretation is contradicted by Paul’s key argument in these verses: homosexual activity is wrong because it violates God’s created order for male-female relationships. The word for “unnatural” refers not to heterosexuals acting against their natural desire for the opposite sex but to homosexual conduct that violates one’s *created* nature—God’s design for men and women established in creation. That Paul does, in fact, have the Genesis creation account in mind is obvious from his multiple allusions to it in Romans 1:24-27:

- 1:20 refers to “the creation of the world”
- 1:23 has the three-fold combination of “birds and animals and reptiles,” thereby echoing Genesis 1:30 (Septuagint)
- 1:25 refers to God not as a “God” or “Father” but as “the Creator”
- 1:26 and 1:27 refer to “women” and “men,” which in the Greek text literally are “females” (*thēleiai*) and “males” (*arsenes*), thereby alluding to Genesis 1:27, where we read “male and female he created them”

Paul’s argument, therefore, is clear: sexual acts between a female and another female or between a male and another male are “unnatural” and wrong, because such conduct goes against one’s *created* nature. It is contrary to the way in which God made each sex physically so that male and female fit the other in a “natural” way and can fulfill the Genesis command to be fruitful and multiply.

One additional point about Paul’s words to the Romans should not be overlooked. The apostle ends his discussion with the sober warning that it is not only those engaged in homosexual activity and other sins (such as greed, envy, gossip, slander, strife, disobedience to parents, and murder) who face divine judgment. It is also those who approve of these sins: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also *approve of those who practice them*” (Rom. 1:32). Homosexual activity is not something that Christians can simply ignore or tolerate.

#### *E. Additional revisionist claims*

Revisionists often make a number of additional claims as to why Paul’s statements on homosexuality ought to be interpreted differently or are no longer applicable for the church today.

1. Claim 1: Paul didn't know of any nonexploitative homosexual relationships.  
It is frequently claimed that Paul had no examples of a more "noble" form of homosexuality involving consensual, monogamous, long-term relationships. He only knew of exploitative relationships like pederasty and prostitution. This common assertion, however, is false. The existence of many different types of homosexual relations, including consensual and even monogamous, is well documented in the literature of the period.<sup>193</sup> Paul, as a well-educated and widely traveled man, would have had ample opportunities to know about these types of same-sex relationships.
2. Claim 2: Paul didn't know about same-sex orientation.

It is also often asserted that Paul did not have any understanding of same-sex orientation and that such ignorance relativizes his condemnation of homosexual activity. James Brownson, for example, states: "Writers in the first century, including Paul, did not look at same-sex eroticism with the understanding of sexual orientation that is commonplace today."<sup>194</sup> Keesmaat and Walsh similarly assert: "Paul would have had no idea of anything like a homosexual orientation."<sup>195</sup>

But while ancient writers like Paul did not have a scientific explanation of same-sex orientation, there is strong historical evidence that they did, in fact, recognize same-sex desires as being inborn and fixed. Bernadette Brooten, a leading scholar in feminist sexual ethics, asserts: "Contrary to the view that the idea of sexual orientation did not develop until the nineteenth century, the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation."<sup>196</sup> Preston Sprinkle reviews multiple ancient texts showing that writers in that day "explored and affirmed what could be considered as an ancient version of same-sex orientation."<sup>197</sup> William Loader similarly states, "It is very possible that Paul knew of views which claimed some people had what we would call a homosexual orientation, though we cannot know for sure and certainly should not read our modern theories back into his world."<sup>198</sup>

It is historically possible, therefore, that Paul knew of men who were born with a sexual desire for other men. Nevertheless, in the apostle's view, orientation makes no difference: same-sex acts violate the male-female relationship established by God at creation (Rom. 1:24-27) and are contrary to God's law (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, T. K. Hubbard, ed. *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003); L. Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>194</sup> Brownson, p. 166.

<sup>195</sup> Keesmaat and Walsh, p. 337.

<sup>196</sup> Bernadette Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 140.

<sup>197</sup> Preston Sprinkle, "Paul and Homosexual Behavior: A Critical Evaluation of the Excessive-Lust Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25.4 (2015), p. 505.

<sup>198</sup> Loader, pp. 323-24.

3. Claim 3: Parallelism with the significant church decision in Acts 15

Another argument advocated by some revisionists appeals to the decision-making process the early church used in Acts 15 to determine whether or not uncircumcised Gentiles should be welcomed into the church as Christians. Acts describes how the Holy Spirit came upon Gentiles, thereby prompting the early church to reexamine the Scriptures and determine that these uncircumcised believers ought to be accepted as full members. It is claimed that the decision-making process of Acts 15 is analogical for today. The experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of practicing gays and lesbians, it is asserted, makes it necessary for the contemporary church to reexamine the scriptural texts dealing with homosexuality and welcome such persons as full members.<sup>199</sup>

These are not parallel cases, however, so this revisionist argument faces several problems. First, the Acts 15 decision of the early church was prompted by special revelation from God: Peter experienced a vision in which God commanded him to eat animals that were unclean, thereby revealing the truth that certain elements of the Mosaic law were no longer morally binding. The church today does not have any special revelation from God that would require the acceptance of same-sex sex.

Second, when the early church reexamined Scripture, it discovered prophetic texts that promised the acceptance of the Gentiles into the people of God. James, the head of the early church in Jerusalem, bases his decision not merely on the experiences of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, or the Gentiles, but on the explicit teaching of Scripture. James quotes the words of Amos 9:11-12, in which God declares that he will restore his people in order “that the rest of humankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name.” In contrast, there are no scriptural texts that predict or even allude in a vague way to the acceptance of homosexual activity. As Richard Hays has observed, it is doubtful whether a comparison between the Jerusalem Council’s debate over accepting Gentiles and the contemporary debate over sexuality has the power to overturn the clear evidence in both the Old and New Testaments against accepting same-sex sexual practices.<sup>200</sup>

Third, the apostles at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, although not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, nevertheless prohibited them from four specific things (the so-called “Apostolic Decree”): “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). There is compelling evidence that these four prohibitions are based on Leviticus 17-18, with its recurring phrase, “any foreigner residing among you” (Lev. 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26). These occurrences explain what non-Israelite foreigners were required to do while living among the Israelites. Strikingly, the order of the four prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15:29 follows the same order in Leviticus 17-18:

<sup>199</sup> See, for example, Luke T. Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1983), pp. 95-97; Jeffrey Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Sylvia C. Keesmaat, “Welcoming in the Gentiles: A Biblical Model for Decision Making” in *Living Together in the Church: Including Our Differences*, eds. G. S. Dunn and C. Ambridge (Toronto: ABC Pub., 2004), pp. 30-49; Keesmaat and Walsh, *Romans Disarmed*, pp. 355-61.

<sup>200</sup> Hays, p. 396.

“abstain from food sacrificed to idols” ( Lev. 17:7-9)  
“blood” (Lev. 17:10-12)  
“meat of strangled animals” (Lev. 17:13-14)  
“sexual immorality” (Lev. 18:6-23)<sup>201</sup>

This strongly suggests that the Jerusalem apostles equated the fourth prohibition, against “sexual immorality,” with the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18, including the command of 18:22, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman.” If so, the decision-making process of Acts 15, rather than being an analogy for a process by which the church might reevaluate its prohibition of homosexual activity, actually confirms the nonnegotiable character of the church’s historic biblical teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual activity.

4. Claim 4: The Holy Spirit is leading the church to a new understanding.

Yet another common claim by revisionists is that as the Holy Spirit has led the church in the past to reinterpret Scripture on various social issues, so the Holy Spirit may be also leading the church today into a new understanding of same-sex sex. Classis Grand Rapids East, for example, in its study report on “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage” (January 2016), observes how the church reinterpreted Scripture in response to the evils of anti-Semitism, slavery, and racism. The report then concludes: “Through these various means, the church was led to better interpretations of parts of Scripture. Comparing the issue of same-sex marriage to these other historical cases suggests that this might be another occasion in church history when the Holy Spirit is prompting a re-examination of Scripture” (p. 7).

It is one thing to reexamine Scripture, but it is quite another thing to ignore the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture in order to reach an alternative reading of the key texts and then claim that this all happened through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Is it not equally possible that all this happened through the guidance of another “spirit”—the “spirit” of our secular age and contemporary culture (1 John 4:1-3)? Is it not equally possible that what the Holy Spirit is leading the church to do today is not to change its interpretation of Scripture (after all, it is the same Holy Spirit speaking to the church today as to the church of Paul’s day) but to challenge contemporary Christians to love better and minister more effectively to those who are attracted to the same sex?

F. *The testimony of progressive voices*

As a corrective “check” against the possibility that traditionalists might be stubbornly clinging to an interpretation of Paul’s writings that is determined by a biased perspective and not genuinely open to alternative plausible interpretations, it may be helpful to consider the perspective of certain scholars who, despite affirming that the church should accept homosexual relationships today, nevertheless agree that the apostle clearly condemns all forms of homosexual relations.

<sup>201</sup> See especially Richard Bauckham, “James and the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21)” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 154-84, esp. pp. 172-78; Bill T. Arnold, “Lessons of the Jerusalem Council for the Church’s Debate over Sexuality,” *Asbury Journal* 69 (2014), pp. 63-83.

William Loader is arguably the leading scholar in the world on the subject of sexuality in Judaism and early Christianity, having written eight academic monographs and dozens of articles on the subject.<sup>202</sup> He is a strong proponent of the church's need to accept same-sex behavior and marriage. Loader recognizes that many revisionists hold a high view of Scripture that requires them to treat Paul's discussion of homosexuality as authoritative. This makes it necessary for them to reinterpret that teaching to bring it into line with the affirmation of homosexual relationships, however implausible such reinterpretation might be. After reviewing the various arguments proposed by revisionists, Loader observes: "For those of us whose understanding of Scripture does not entail such belief [i.e., that the biblical writers were correct in what they wrote], we can only stand and wonder at the *extraordinary maneuvers* which have been undertaken to re-read Paul as not condemning homosexual relations at all."<sup>203</sup>

Another progressive voice comes from the late Louis Crompton, a gay scholar whose work pioneered LGBTQ studies. In his award-winning book *Homosexuality and Civilization*, Crompton writes: "Some interpreters, seeking to mitigate Paul's harshness, have read the passage [Rom. 1:24-27] as condemning not homosexuals generally but only heterosexual men and women who experimented with homosexuality. According to this interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems *strained and unhistorical*. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstances. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any Jew or early Christian."<sup>204</sup>

### G. Conclusion of the biblical evidence

This survey of relevant biblical texts has shown that Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful and not in agreement with God's will for his covenant people. The debate about same-sex sex, therefore, is not a situation in which there are two equal and opposing interpretations of the biblical evidence. Although a variety of revisionist arguments have been made, none of them are convincing but, rather, ought to be justly judged as "strained and

<sup>202</sup> See, for example, William Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004); *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005); *Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007); *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009); *Sexuality in the New Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010); *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011); *Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in the Writings of Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011); *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013); *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>203</sup> "Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of Its Time," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (2017), p. 120; emphasis added.

<sup>204</sup> Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 114; emphasis added.

unhistorical” and evidence of the “extraordinary maneuvers” involved in the attempt to reread Scripture.

It is important to conclude our consideration of Scripture’s teaching on homosexuality by emphasizing the fact that although Scripture condemns homosexual sex, it does not condemn people who are attracted to the same sex. Nor does it condemn all those who have engaged in homosexual activity. Indeed, Paul’s primary point in mentioning homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6 is to remind the Corinthian believers that because of God’s grace such sinful conduct belongs to the past: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

This is the gift of God that we have through faith. Through faith in Christ, all of us, whether attracted to the same sex or not, are adopted as the children of God, sons and daughters united in the intimate communion of the body of Christ. The good news of the gospel is that through his Holy Spirit God enables all his children—heterosexual and homosexual alike—to be freed from the destructive forces of sin and to live a life of holiness to God (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

This does not mean that people who are attracted to the same sex will lose their same-sex orientation this side of Christ’s return. Nor does it mean they will cease being tempted, even as Jesus himself was tempted. All believers can expect to battle our deepest temptations to selfishness, lust, pride, arrogance, violence, and all others sins until we see Jesus’ face.

What it does mean is that God has promised to restore us fully to himself at the resurrection on the last day, and that even in this life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be enabled to live in chastity and self-control as part of the justified and sanctified people of God. There are times when we will sin, but sin will not have mastery over us. And even when we do sin, God promises that if we confess our sin and turn from it, he will forgive us for Jesus’ sake (1 John 1:9; 2:1-2). And if he has granted us forgiveness in Christ, how will he not also give us all things? We can be confident, then, that the Holy Spirit will enable us to overcome even the most deeply rooted sin.<sup>205</sup> We can consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, because sin’s power over us has been broken (Rom. 6).

In the world’s eyes it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship, just as it is outrageous to refuse to use pornography or to refuse to have sex outside of marriage. This is why Jesus explains that in order to enter the kingdom of God a person must be born from above. He invites us to be born again by the Holy Spirit (John 3:1-21). Thus we join a new family of forgiven sinners, each of whom must rely on the power of God and the support of the community in holy living.

<sup>205</sup> Article 29 of the Belgic Confession says of those who belong to the church, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against [sin] by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.”

### XIII. Homosexuality: Pastoral care

Philip\* went to Sunday school as a child in the church his parents occasionally attended. Coming out in university, Phillip had no particular interest in Christianity until he became an activist for housing and other justice concerns in the city. Here he met some Christians who lived in a house together and routinely offered hospitality to their low-income neighbors. Through their faith, Philip met Jesus and experienced deeper friendships than he'd ever known. Philip was impressed by how these Christian friends supported each other in their marriages or in living celibate lives through prayer and honest conversations about their struggles. Eventually Philip's sexuality and his Christian faith were in real conflict. He ultimately broke up with his partner, realizing that their values were so different. Although some years are harder than others, Philip found community and has followed Jesus day by day for ten years now. Philip is one of the strongest leaders in his church.

Darrell,\* 32 (white), is an openly gay residence hall director at a large secular university. His staff of undergraduate resident assistants included two people who were part of a local Christian Reformed congregation. Darrell, who was unchurched, started visiting Sunday worship and soon developed a good relationship with the pastor and several other single adults, despite knowing about the church's sexual ethic of celibacy and opposition to same-sex marriage. While he continued to explore Christianity, Darrell, at his request, was added to the rotation of volunteers who read Scripture and made announcements during worship. Soon afterward Darrell told the pastor that he was getting the word out around the university campus that the congregation was gay-friendly. The pastor was surprised and urged Darrell to make sure any gay friends he invited were aware of the church's teaching about sex. Darrell explained that because the church was friendly and honest, he felt comfortable attending and thought that others would too.

#### A. *A word to congregations*

##### 1. Repentance

The church's response to homosexuality must begin with confession and lament. Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers. Congregations need to honestly examine their attitudes and actions toward people who are attracted to the same sex and need to repent when such attitudes and actions are sinful: treating homosexuals as if they are worse sinners than those who are caught up in pornography, premarital, or extramarital sex; overlooking them for positions of leadership, including those of pastor, elder, and deacon instead of considering whether they are, like all officebearers need to be, living holy and godly lives; keeping them physically and emotionally at a distance because they make some feel uncomfortable; failing to stand in solidarity with them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. For all of these and many other inappropriate ways the church has typically treated persons in its midst who are attracted to

the same sex, congregations must recognize their attitude and actions for what they are—sin—and ask God for forgiveness and healing.

## 2. Teaching

Congregations need to be clearly taught or reminded that the experience of attraction to the same sex is not sinful in itself. Some fifty years ago the first CRC report on homosexuality explained that sexuality is “the desire to give and receive in intimacy so that the ‘aloneness’ of a person is abrogated.” The report then made a clear distinction between longings for such intimacy and sexual activity. It also called on the church to welcome godly Christians who are attracted to the same sex into the use of their spiritual gifts and to include them in every way.<sup>206</sup> One of the great harms the church has done is to refer to anyone who is attracted to the same sex as a sinner simply because of the experience of this attraction. The fact that some church members are especially aware of and emotionally drawn to the same sex in the same way that most others are drawn to the opposite sex is not in itself sinful desire, nor is it even sexual temptation. Instead, the Bible teaches that to act upon that wrongful sexual desire is sin (James 1:13-15). Jesus says that to even look at someone lustfully is sin (Matt. 5:28). Indeed, it is sin to nourish sexual desire for someone to whom we are not married. Sexual attraction becomes sin when we allow ourselves to desire a specific person or sexual act, unless it is our spouse with whom we are entering into the sexual act. Martin Luther reputedly said, “You can’t stop the birds flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.” No matter how often they experience sexual attraction, mature believers learn to reject the initial temptation toward acting on their sexual desire. Peter repeatedly calls us to discipline our minds in this way.<sup>207</sup>

## 3. False expectations

Congregations need to recognize that promoting the idea that believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to experience attraction to the opposite sex as they mature spiritually is not just wrong but can be very harmful. When the “ex-gay” umbrella organization Exodus dissolved in 2013, they publicly apologized for promoting the idea that people could change their orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. The slogan of Exodus was “Change is possible.” Yet for decades many of its ministry leaders had hidden not only ongoing attraction to the same sex but even a return to gay relationships. At the same time, numerous believing men and women trying desperately to be heterosexual felt shame that they were not spiritual enough to change. Much of the church embraced and pushed this fallacious notion of change, wounding countless vulnerable children of the church.

The Bible talks about the sexual behavior of believers but does not describe an orientation to homosexuality or to heterosexuality. While most Christians describe a lessening of sexual temptations as they practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, mutual confession, worship, and meditation on the Scriptures, the Bible tells us that the evil one wages war

<sup>206</sup> *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 611-12, 631.

<sup>207</sup> 1 Pet. 1:13; 2:11; 4:1-2, 7.

against our souls. Thus all believers can expect to battle their deepest temptations to selfishness, lust, pride, arrogance, and violence. Yet the church community offers to all the grace of God to enable holing living. All believers can be confident that, like Jesus, the Holy Spirit will help to keep us from sexual sin. As children of our heavenly Father, we are now free to obey God because sin's power over us has been broken (Rom. 6).

#### 4. Practical advice

Congregations must create genuine fellowship and community for single and married people of all ages by practicing hospitality, holiness, honesty, and humility:

- Practice hospitality by welcoming both fellow believers and non-Christian neighbors into your living spaces and your lives (2 Cor. 6-7; Heb. 13).
- Seek sexual holiness for yourselves and encourage it in your sisters and brothers with your prayers and practical support (Heb. 12; Rom. 12).
- Honestly admit your own constant need of grace and ask fellow believers for support (James 5; 1 John 1-5).
- Humbly ask other believers for help with your deepest temptations (James 5; 1 Pet. 5).

Pastors, elders, and deacons should lead the way in this, serving by example. They should regularly confess their sins, acknowledge their struggles, and offer forgiveness and encouragement to others. They should talk about the ways in which God has enabled them to battle various temptations or besetting sins. This will encourage the members of the body to do the same, having the assurance that they too will be received with grace. The officers of the church and other mature Christians should seek out those who seem most vulnerable, praying with them and demonstrating hospitality and friendship. They should be prepared to offer spiritual and material support wherever needed.

In practical terms, congregations should seek to build intimacy among believers. This can take place in small groups who come together for prayer, worship, food, recreation, and mutual support. Such groups should consist of singles, couples, and families, including people of a broad range of ages. It might also come in the form of friendships in which two or more persons are committed to helping each other navigate the challenges and joys of life.

However supportive fellowship comes about, as congregations we must ensure that all believers are included in the network of such relationships. Make a concrete action plan to develop a loving community that includes people of every age and marital status. Encourage groups of believers to gather for meals in homes. Urge them to spend holidays or special occasions with people who do not belong to their family or network of friends, as Jesus commanded us to do (Luke 14:12-14). Mature Christians should model and encourage friendships between people of all ages and genders.

Congregations must also call people who are attracted to the same sex into recognized positions of service and leadership. Having been ostracized for so long, many will need support and encouragement in using

their gifts for the good of the body. They should be encouraged to use their unique experiences—including their attraction to the same sex—to help others. The church needs more godly people who are attracted to the same sex to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons.

Gay immigrant Han,\* 35, was so used to hiding his sexuality that he referred to his longtime boyfriend back in South Korea as his girlfriend when he first met some people from the local church. They had invited him to dinner and then to hang out with them and some church members. Han came to a couple of Sunday gatherings and noticed that the church was full of single people and that a good number of them seemed to be gay. This gave him courage to talk to one seemingly same-sex couple and show them a picture of his boyfriend back home. Han was surprised to find out that these two Jesus-followers lived together but were not romantically involved and that the church was not affirming of same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, Han soon became a regular participant in worship, social events, and prayer meetings, as he drew nearer to Jesus.

*B. A word to church leaders*

1. How to promote sexual holiness in the entire church

- a. Regularly talk about sex and the Christian life in various contexts. Give as many examples from single lives as from married lives. Preach and host discussions about the Bible's positive view of sexuality as well as the difficulties and temptations that all believers face in this area of their Christian life.
- b. As council members, develop a regular practice of sharing weaknesses and confessing sins to each other, and encourage this practice also among the congregation. This will enable you to be humble, honest, and helpful if you must initiate difficult conversations about sexual sin with individual church members.
- c. Foster life as a community of sisters and brothers. Encourage groups of believers to gather for meals together in homes on major holidays instead of just gathering together with your biological family. Implement small groups that are made up of both singles and couples, are mixed in age, or are arranged geographically instead of, or in addition to, small groups that are couple-oriented or geared specifically to youth, singles, or older adults.
- d. Offer healing prayer teams. Issues of sexual identity as well as past memories of sexual abuse, hurt, and sin often result in destructive feelings of shame, which in turn inhibit spiritual intimacy with God and others. Books and other resources are widely available to equip small, trained teams to help people work through these issues by offering both one-time and ongoing prayer support.
- e. Model and encourage intimate nonsexual relationships with people of the same sex and the opposite sex. Demonstrate and refer to friendships between people of all ages and both sexes. Such friendships can

be fostered by, but are not limited to, various small-group Bible studies, ministry teams, and prayer partnerships.

- f. Advocate for and give practical support to communal housing options in which families and singles live together. Christians from various denominations are learning from old and new monastic traditions how to support each other spiritually by sharing housing, meals, and prayer rhythms and by providing practical help with childcare.
  - g. As elders or mature believers, visit with singles to see if there are specific ways they would like help following Jesus in their sexuality.
2. How to minister well to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the church
- a. Listen to and learn from members who are attracted to the same sex or from the families of gay people who have left the church. Set up an evening gathering at which you can hear such stories. Seek to understand the realities of your sisters and brothers. Assume that many of us have wrestled with the Scriptures and may know far more than you about what the Bible teaches and about what support we would like to find in the church. Know that we are individuals who have different opinions and needs. Some of us would like to live in a community of other believers; others want to live with an intimate friend; still others hope to marry, or already have married, someone of the opposite sex. Some of us identify as gay or lesbian because we find freedom in our same-sex attraction being known; others of us prefer not to be labeled because we think that God made us male or female but not homosexual or heterosexual; still others of us define ourselves in additional ways.
  - b. Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who affirm same-sex marriage. Take time to hear their story, their hurts, and how they came to their decision. Know that they may have become spiritually and emotionally weary of trying to live celibately in a church community that prioritizes marriage. Ask if the church or you in particular have hurt them; if so, be ready to apologize. Encourage their relationship with Jesus and affirm them for continuing in their faith.
  - c. Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who obey the historically orthodox teaching on sex and thus reject same-sex marriage. Listen to their story, their hurts, and their explanation of their position. Encourage them to use their spiritual gifts in and outside the church. If they desire to live celibately, explore with them possibilities such as living in intentional community or committed friendships (celibate partnerships). If they hope to marry someone of the opposite sex, help them to be realistic about ongoing sexual temptation and encourage their honesty with dating partners.
  - d. Be proactive. As church leaders, work through potential scenarios so that you are ready to respond honestly and lovingly when a gay couple wants to join your church or have their newborn baby baptized; when a lesbian couple attending your church asks to be married or wants prayer for adopting a child; when members of your church ask you to

participate in or simply attend their same-sex wedding; when a member of the church tells you they are sexually active.

- e. Actively call all members of the congregation and people interested in membership to the standard of sexual holiness taught in the Scriptures and exemplified by Christ.

### 3. Practical ways to make the church inclusive

- a. Use language that describes the church community as the *family* of God. The church is a new community of Christ's followers who are single or married, heterosexual or homosexual, and from all varieties of backgrounds. In other words, ensure that the language used to describe the church clearly reflects the truth that it is not merely a collection of biological families but a gathering of a spiritual family united together through a common relationship to Christ. Since the church is a new community, it needs to provide a home—a safe haven—for all its members.
- b. Model leadership by godly single members. Seek out for service as elders, deacons, and pastors those who are single and/or who are known to be attracted to the same sex and celibate.
- c. Foster confession of sin and prayer for healing in which willing members talk publicly about battling specific temptations to deception, idolatry, slander, greed, and sexual sin.
- d. Encourage faith stories of God's power at work in our various weaknesses and in healing us from lifelong patterns of sin.
- e. Consider holding a special service to acknowledge the church's local lack of hospitality and its hypocrisy in singling out same-sex sexual practice as sinful while remaining silent about other sexual sins (pornography, premarital sex, extramarital sex, etc.).
- f. During corporate worship, plan congregational prayers that include the health and well-being of single Christians as well as of couples and families. As part of the time of confession, refer by name to specific sins, including homosexual practice. Train liturgists/worship leaders to use language indicating that every kind of sin displeases God but that no sin is beyond God's forgiveness. As part of the sermon, talk about a variety of sexual sins, including all sexual practices outside of marriage (premarital, extramarital, same-sex). Give examples of God's grace and comfort to listeners who struggle with brokenness, especially examples of people who have been freed from the power of different kinds of sexual sin.

### 4. Mission

- a. Only when we have become comfortable in close relationships with people who are attracted to the same sex, both inside and outside of the church, will we be able to minister faithfully to people. We should continually be seeking to establish and foster relationships with people who are different from us in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and recreational settings. Our primary goal in these interactions should not

be to change their behavior but to love and serve them as befits followers of Christ. Just as you would not expect to offer unsolicited biblical advice to a colleague living with her boyfriend or your soccer teammate who gambles on the weekend, so you should not expect to do so with an unchurched gay neighbor or acquaintance. Such familiarity requires trust and respect, and building trust and respect takes time.

- b. Acquaintances who are attracted to the same sex may seem uninterested in the gospel, or even antagonistic, but this should not hinder our ability to befriend them. Rather, as you show kindness in ways that encourage trust and respect, be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you. Seek opportunities to connect them to the body of Christ and to the Scriptures. Trust the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts. If they are drawn to the way of life reflected in you and in your church, they may become willing to hear more about the gospel. The more honest you can be about your own struggles in following Jesus, and about the practical ways God has given you power and joy, the more credible your faith will be.
- c. Expect to answer questions and explain why you and your church believe that homosexual activity is wrong. Always be prepared to summarize the gospel as it applies to same-sex relationships and to the way in which Christians have often mistreated gay and lesbian people. Take the time to speak carefully, even if that means inviting someone to chat over coffee or a meal. Be clear and consistent, loving and generous. Be up front about the fact that your church does not recognize same-sex marriage. Make your theological stance obvious and accessible and always show how it arises out of the good news of Christ. Highlight the many ways in which God's will for sexuality is good for all people. Remember that faithful Christlike leadership does not require you to compromise truth or love. If you tend to surrender one or the other, confess your sin to God, pray, and work hard to develop a more Christlike approach.
- d. If a gay couple starts attending your church, treat them as you would any other visitors. That is to say, show them hospitality! How would you treat a young man and woman who are living together outside of marriage, or a college student who does not believe in God, or a wealthy person who has spent their money on selfish and materialistic ends? Remember that we are all sinners in need of grace and love and that God wants all people to enjoy his salvation and full life in his kingdom (John 10:10; 1 Tim. 2:4). Invite them to participate in events and ministries and to build relationships with the members of your congregation. Show them the love by which Jesus said his disciples would be known (John 14:34-35). Again, do not focus on changing their behavior. Give them the freedom to wrestle with what it would mean to become disciples in a spirit of love and grace.
- e. If a gay couple asks about membership, explain why church members are held accountable to following Jesus in their sexuality and in other areas of life. If they want to become members, make sure they are committed to following Christ's teaching in their lives, including

their sexuality. But don't devote all of your attention to their same-sex desires, as if that were the only thing that God cares about. Ensure that they understand the grace of church discipline, how it works, and why it is beneficial. At the same time, remind them that membership is not for the perfect but for the repentant. Give them confidence that they will be supported in grace even when they stumble and fall.

- f. As they learn about the gospel and the cost of discipleship, some people may decide not to pursue membership. If so, continue to treat them with grace and love, just as you should any other person who has not yet become a Christian. You do not know when God may work in their lives to reconcile them to himself, whether through your church or through another church. Others may struggle to overcome their feelings of fear or hurt due to the ways in which they have been treated by Christians—possibly even your church—in the past. This may even be the case if your church has confessed or repented of its sin. If so, you should be understanding, affirm their desire to be in relationship with Christ and his people, and encourage them to find another church. Do what you can to keep the communication lines open in case there might be reconciliation in the future.

Sarah,\* white and in her sixties, became a Christian in college through a campus ministry. When she met Kristine in her mid-thirties, she had drifted from the Christian community and from her previous spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer. Yet Sarah prayed about dating Kristine and believed God was answering her need for companionship. Ten years later, two colleagues invited Sarah to help their church in a professional capacity, and she started to have spiritual conversations with them and also with their pastor, since each of them showed great respect for her thinking and her experiences. Gradually Sarah became a member of a large, welcoming church. Soon after Kristine also started following Jesus, she became uncomfortable with the nature of their relationship, and they stopped being lovers. Now describing themselves as “spiritual friends” who have been together for decades, Sarah and Kristine gratefully experience the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The two are heavily involved in local ministry, and Sarah is a longtime deacon in the church.

Raised in the church, medical student Angela\* (white) initially told no one about her two-year relationship with a woman. When her lover left her, she was bitterly angry and despairing of her future. At the same time, Angela began to feel drawn to walk closely with God. She threw herself into a Christian community and changed the kind of movies she watched and the music she listened to. Afterward she told a new Christian friend that focusing on spiritual things and friendships with deep Christians had freed her to make a completely new start and to follow Jesus. In medical practice later, she married a man and had children while continuing to develop strong, nonsexual friendships with women and other men.

C. *A word to church members who are attracted to the same sex*

1. Undeserved shame

God wants to release you from the shame that you do not deserve. You have been chided or scorned for being different from others around you. You carry a burden of shame because many in the church equate your longings with sin. Know that your sexual attractions do not make you sinful any more than your temptations to pride, selfishness, or idolatry make you sinful. Take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows your struggles, since he himself was tempted in all ways as we are yet was without sin (Heb. 4:14-16). Some of us find ourselves naturally inclined toward gluttony or to slander but, unless we act on those impulses, we are not sinning. Scripture makes clear that God wants to take away our shame and give us dignity.

2. Identity

a. We are all made in the image of God, so, to God, you have great worth and value just as you are. You are not less female if you are not interested in the same things as most other women are. You are not less male if you don't fit into the traditional boxes that contemporary culture wants to put you in. You are called to imitate Christ—not the culture's ideas of masculinity or femininity. Jesus himself was both gentle and strong, humble and bold, submissive and a leader. Your maleness or femaleness depends not on any human ideas of how you should act but on the biological reality of how God has created you.

b. Once you chose to love and follow Jesus, you became a child of God. As a child of God, you are also part of a family who are all forgiven sinners. Whatever the sins are that you leave behind, in this community your new identity is as one of the sanctified: "That is what some of you *were* [the greedy, sexual sinners, drunkards, thieves, slanderers, swindlers]. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

3. Minister to others

God has given you spiritual gifts and the ability to serve other people. Get involved in ministry teams or initiatives in areas that interest you. Allow God to use what you have suffered to make you more compassionate to others and also to seek justice for people who are oppressed in various ways. Pray regularly with and for the people in your home, your church, and in the communities around you.

4. Community of Jesus followers

a. Find a local church that values you and equips you for ministry.

b. Seek out other godly Christians with whom you can have deep spiritual friendships, supporting each other daily in prayer and in common interests.

c. Explore the wider community of believers who support each other in following Jesus through community-wide ministries, blogs, websites, and books (see suggested resources below).

#### 5. Power over temptation and sinful patterns

- a. You are free. In common with every believer, your guilt and shame are taken away by the cross. But in the cross Christ also “disarmed the rulers and authorities . . . triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15, NRSV). This means that with the presence and power of Christ you have power over any lifelong patterns of bitterness, lust, rage, or other sins. Most longtime Jesus-followers also describe a lessening of the power of their same-sex attraction as they seek holiness, although it is unusual for an attraction to the same sex to completely disappear. Some also find themselves sexually attracted to an opposite-sex friend who knows their deepest struggles and joys, and they are able to marry.
- b. You are being made new. By the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in you, the old sinful self will be transformed, but it is a process. “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). God promises that one day you will be like Jesus, but it will take work and prayer. Since the Bible cautions us that nourishing evil desires leads to sin (James 1:13-16), that looking lustfully at another person is sin (Matt. 5:28), and that we must abstain from sinful desires (1 Pet. 2:11), we must be careful to avoid situations and environments that might lead to the sins that so easily entangle us (Heb. 12:1).
- c. You are not alone. Jesus is *Immanuel*, which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Jesus lives up to this name as he promises, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, NIV). So you are not alone, but Jesus is always with you. What’s more, Jesus has experienced what you are going through, so he is able “to empathize with our weaknesses. . . . Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

#### 6. Intimate relationships

Although many North American adults live alone, the full life Jesus offers is a *communal* life. From monastic and Christian communities, both ancient and contemporary, we learn that living with others can provide deeply meaningful human connections, allow us to serve others in practical ways, and challenge our natural tendency to selfishness.

##### a. Community houses

Some Christians may choose to buy or rent living space with shared space for cooking, eating, and socializing. Others may choose to live as singles and couples or families together in one large house, often with the intent to care for each other while also serving their neighborhoods.<sup>208</sup> If neither your congregation nor a neighboring church already has such households, consider raising these housing possibilities with other singles or married couples. *Caution:* Accountability and support

<sup>208</sup> [gcbchurch.ca/blog/new-monasticism-an-old-idea-in-a-new-form](http://gcbchurch.ca/blog/new-monasticism-an-old-idea-in-a-new-form)

from a church or believers outside your household will be essential to help when communication difficulties arise or if community members experience sexual attraction to each other.

Patrick,\* a single, white Christian who is attracted to men shares a house with Rose, Eric, and their infant daughter, who are Chinese Canadians. Although Patrick had always wanted to raise his own children, he has found great joy in being loved by this baby—and later by two other siblings who join her. Patrick eats meals together with the family several days a week and also feels comfortable inviting his friends and some of his neighbors to join them. Sometimes Patrick has long conversations with Rose, while at other times he hangs out with Eric. For their part, Rose and Eric benefit greatly from Patrick's presence and help; they find that another adult in the house makes things in their hectic family life run more smoothly. At times Patrick finds himself longing for his own spouse, yet he derives great satisfaction in being intimately involved in the lives of this young family.

b. Living with another Christ-follower of the same sex<sup>209</sup>

Some Christians who are committed to holiness report that by living in a nonsexual relationship with another believer of the same sex, they are actually freer from sexual temptation than when living alone, even if they could potentially find their housemate sexually attractive. This might seem dangerous or counterintuitive to some people. Yet virtually all believers struggle with sexual temptation at times, no matter their attraction or living situation. And many single believers living alone find that loneliness triggers temptation toward sexual sin via porn use, hook-ups, or other ungodly relationships. In contrast, the ordinary daily interaction of meals, chores, and prayers with a fellow Christ-follower can be a healthy way to meet the basic deep-rooted need for intimacy that all humans share. If the two persons share a desire to follow Jesus, they can support each other and can also use their home in hospitable ministry to others. *Caution:* If you know that the person you would live with is also attracted to the same sex, honesty with yourself and with that person concerning your intentions for the relationship will be essential. In that case, other believers who know the status of your relationship and are holding you accountable will also be important in helping your living relationship to be healthy.

[12th-century Cistercian abbot] Aelred of Rievaulx's little treatise *On Spiritual Friendship* . . . helped me to see that, although Christian discipleship is costly, it need not be lonely. Our culture has become very fixated on sex, but sex and romance are not the same as love. Nor is Christian love the same as the kind of casual friendship that is common in our culture (Facebook informs me that I currently have 554 "friends"). . . . Aelred helped me to see that obedience to Christ offered more to me

<sup>209</sup> *Note:* Not all committee members affirm the possibility of the living arrangement envisioned in this paragraph on the grounds that Christ-followers are exhorted to resist temptation (James 4:7) and that such a housing situation may cause other believers to stumble (Rom. 14). They would consider instances of such a living arrangement permissible only with the prior agreement of a counseling pastor and the knowledge of the local community of faith who can hold the relevant persons accountable.

than just the denial of sex and romance. Christ-centered chaste friendships offered a positive and fulfilling—albeit at times challenging—path to holiness.

(Posted by Ron Belgau at [spiritualfriendship.org/2012/08/29/spiritual-friendship-in-300-words](http://spiritualfriendship.org/2012/08/29/spiritual-friendship-in-300-words))

c. Marriage to an opposite-sex partner

Some Christians who are attracted exclusively to the same sex and who long for sexual intimacy and the blessing of children pray that God will allow them to be drawn to a partner of the opposite sex. They then find themselves sexually attracted to an opposite-sex friend who knows their deepest struggles and joys, and they are able to get married. Many men and women in such marriages continue to experience regular attraction toward members of the same sex, but the fact that they continue to face temptation is hardly unique. Like all faithful Christians, they are able to resist these temptations by the power of the Holy Spirit. *Caution:* It is essential that a person is completely honest with their potential spouse about their sexual attractions. If they are not, their partner will inevitably feel deeply betrayed. In addition, honesty is essential if they are to find the support and accountability they need. Realistic expectations are likewise crucial. Anyone considering such a marriage should be aware that this relationship is unlikely to remove a person's same-sex desires, although it may diminish them. Sometimes a spouse may reveal that they are attracted to the same sex after they are already married. This may cause feelings of hurt and betrayal, and the couple will need a high level of pastoral support, counseling, and prayer.

A radical feminist living in a lesbian community house, Suzanne,\* white and in her twenties, met some Christian activists of various ethnic backgrounds and started hanging out with their Christian friends. Although she gently mocked those who were attracted to the same sex for not having lesbian lovers, encouraging them to “live freely and fully,” she appreciated their companionship. Some years later, she wrote to ask the pastor of that Christian community to officiate at her wedding to a man and to renew her interest in the Jesus Way.

Breaking up a two-year relationship with a man because he couldn't reconcile it with his love for Jesus and the Bible's teaching, David,\* white and in his late twenties, went to seminary and gradually began to date some women. Always honest with these women about his sexual desire for men, David had some good relationships, but none led to marriage. Over the years, especially when traveling alone, David sometimes has experienced deep longings for a romantic relationship with a man. In the meantime, however, he has become a dynamic and beloved leader of growing new Christian communities. David's union with Christ has deepened as he has sought the constant presence of the Holy Spirit through sung worship, meditating on Scripture, and intercessory, healing prayer for new believers and nonbelievers. Sometimes sharing space with other single men, and sometimes living alone, David is a sought-after

companion by many because of his warmth and genuine love for others.

#### D. Selected resources

##### 1. Books

- Allberry, Sam. *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2020).
- Burk, Denny. *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013).
- Butterfield, Rosaria. *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012).
- DeYoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015).
- Forston, S. Donald, and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scriptures and Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2016).
- Gagnon, Robert A. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001).
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1998).
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##### 2. Websites and blogs

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- A Queer Calling ([aqueercalling.com](http://aqueercalling.com)) features the journey of a self-described queer Christian couple committed to sexual abstinence.
- Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender ([centerforfaith.com](http://centerforfaith.com)) provides articles and other help for Christians to engage questions about faith, sexuality and gender.
- Hole in My Heart Ministries ([himhministries.com](http://himhministries.com)) features Laurie Krieg, a same-sex attracted woman who ultimately married a man and started both a family and a ministry focused on teaching the church how to approach sexuality with the gospel.
- Living Out ([livingout.org](http://livingout.org)) involves gay Christians talking about homosexuality from a biblical perspective. Includes stories, resources, and questions.
- Spiritual Friendship ([spiritualfriendship.org](http://spiritualfriendship.org)) features the writings of several gay Christians committed to celibacy and others who hold a historically orthodox view of sexuality.

### 3. Videos

Sam Allberry, "You Are Not Your Sexuality," [youtube.com/watch?v=WnI2Vr4UIA4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnI2Vr4UIA4&feature=youtu.be)

Deborah Hirsch, "Redeeming Sexuality," [youtube.com/watch?v=Jb96CCg5e50](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb96CCg5e50)

#### **XIV. Reflections on singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, and divorce**

As part of our mandate, we have been asked to "provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin." In preceding sections of this report we have summarized biblical teaching on sexuality and addressed the issues of pornography, gender identity, and homosexuality in substantial detail. In this section we offer some reflections on other matters of concern to the church: sex and singleness, polyamory, and divorce. We are aware that our study and discussion of these matters is less thorough than with those other issues. However, because these additional matters are so important to a balanced assessment of sexuality and the Christian life, we believe it is important to offer at least some guidance in these areas.

##### *A. Singleness*

According to the 2017 report of the U. S. Census Bureau, about 50 percent of all American adults are unmarried. Millennials are the most likely to be single, with close to 59 percent of millennials unmarried. This is partly the result of young people delaying the age at which they marry. The average age of marriage for a male in 2017 was 30, and for women it was 28, an increase of about five years for men and six years for women since 1980. But being single is not necessarily a factor of age. About 45 percent of persons 65 and older are single.

For a large part of church history, especially the first few centuries, unmarried persons were held in high honor. To encourage and validate singleness, leading church figures such as Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom invoked Jesus' words about marriage after the resurrection (Matt. 22:29-32), his praise for people who become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12), and Paul's encouragement and validation of singleness (1 Cor. 7:25-35). Drawing specifically on 1 Corinthians 7, the early church recognized that people who are married will have divided interests with respect to the Lord. By contrast, single people are less restricted by "the affairs of this world" and are free to pursue "the Lord's affairs" (1 Cor. 7:32-34).

Endorsing celibacy (the Latin word *caelibatus* literally means "unmarried state" or "singleness") in the early centuries of the church was radically countercultural. Marriage was not considered optional. Young men and women were expected to do their duties to their families and to society by marrying young, raising children, and establishing a prosperous household. For women in particular, life often consisted of marriage during a girl's teenage years, a decade or two of producing many children, and often death in childbirth. Whereas many Christians today experience singleness as a

burden, many in the early church experienced it as liberation. Women and men who did not marry were free from a plethora of social constraints to pursue the cause of the kingdom of God. They encouraged it as “an entire way of life . . . that is open to *any* who seek it.”<sup>210</sup>

Sexual desire is a healthy and normal part of being human. Scripture teaches that we have been created for relationship with God and other humans. One mark of this capacity for relationship is the desire for intimacy with others. Sexual intimacy is just one form of this. The Oxford English online dictionary defines intimacy as “the state of having a close personal relationship with someone.” Intimacy is present in many different types of relationships, including among friends and between parents and their children, sisters and brothers, and a husband and wife. On the other hand, although all of these relationships may involve intimacy, intimacy is not necessarily a component of any of them.

Just as emotional intimacy need not include sexual intimacy, so sexual intimacy is often present without emotional intimacy. In fact, the irony of our time is that despite an amazing level of connectedness, particularly through social media, and despite widespread permissive attitudes toward sexuality, loneliness is reported to be at epidemic levels.<sup>211</sup> One recent study even claims that “loneliness is a prevalent and urgent public health issue.”<sup>212</sup> In 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom declared loneliness to be one of the great health issues of our time, even going so far as to appoint a Minister of Loneliness to help address the problem.<sup>213</sup>

Many single adults are lonely. At the heart of this loneliness is not simply a desire for casual friendship, a handshake on Sunday morning, or participation in a “singles group” at church. Rather, singles, like all people, desire deep and lasting intimacy with other humans. Wesley Hill, a celibate gay Christian, writes,

The love of God is better than any human love. Yes, that’s true, but that doesn’t change the fact that I feel – in the deepest parts of who I am – that I am wired for human love. . . . And the longing isn’t mainly for sex (since sex with a woman seems impossible at this point); it is mainly for the day-to-day, small kind of intimacy where you wake up next to a person you pledged your life to, and then you brush your teeth together, you read a book in the same room without necessarily talking to each other, you share each other’s small joys and heartaches.<sup>214</sup>

Hill notes that as human beings we desperately need “love, affection, companionship, permanent intimacy, life-giving community, a deep sense of belonging, a safe haven, a home.”<sup>215</sup> Unfulfilled, these longings are like a gaping wound and terribly painful.

<sup>210</sup> Kathryn Wehr, “Virginity, Singleness, and Celibacy: Late Fourth Century and Recent Evangelical Visions of Unmarried Christians,” *Theology and Sexuality* 17.1 (2011), p. 78.

<sup>211</sup> Report of the U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

<sup>212</sup> “The Loneliness Epidemic,” [hrsa.gov/enews/past-issues/2019/january-17/loneliness-epidemic](https://hrsa.gov/enews/past-issues/2019/january-17/loneliness-epidemic), accessed 9-19-19.

<sup>213</sup> [gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy](https://gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy), accessed 9-19-19

<sup>214</sup> Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), p. 105.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Part of the problem, Hill argues, is that the church has come to emphasize marriage and family rather than friendship as the most significant relationships in people's lives. Single people's need for intimacy is almost completely ignored. Further, even many married people are lonely. While there is nothing wrong with celebrating marriages, families, and all that goes with them, the church also needs to find ways to foster friendship and intimacy outside of marriage and family. Hill himself has written extensively about what he calls "spiritual friendship."<sup>216</sup>

Hill's point is well taken. All too often our friendships are limited to the members of our families or to people with whom we have common interests and hobbies. They exclude people who are not our age, gender, or socioeconomic status. Yet it is through friendship that we most often find genuine intimacy with one another. Friendship leads us to take responsibility for one another, bearing each other's burdens and encouraging, exhorting, challenging, and rebuking one another to seek what is good. If, as Christians, we are not ultimately created for marriage but for friendship in the family of God, how is it that we have come to emphasize marriage and family more than the friendship to which all of us are called?

According to Christian teaching, to be an unmarried follower of Jesus is to be called to celibacy regardless of age.<sup>217</sup> Sexual relationships outside of marriage, whether casual or committed, are immoral. Celibate singleness is often difficult; it can be very difficult to accept and is often a call that materializes over time. Kathryn Wehr observes that over a period of years a person might gradually move from rejecting the call, to reluctantly accepting it, to accepting it with joy.<sup>218</sup> It should be remembered that for many people the call to lifelong marriage is difficult as well, albeit in different ways.

There are a number of things the church must do to help single people who are committed to honoring God with their bodies. We should recognize that our overemphasis on marriage and family has been hurtful and exclusive. We can focus not just on creation but also on resurrection, as Mary Hulst puts it, "rejecting the Gnostic notion that we can do what we want with our bodies because they are dust, and instead embrace that we will do what God wants with our bodies because they are his."<sup>219</sup> We can encourage singles to base their sexuality not on a potential future mate, but on their "present relationship to God."<sup>220</sup> In addition, we can preach about sex and include in our pastoral prayers those who are struggling with loneliness and sexual temptations of various kinds. We can preach about celibacy and singleness, holding up Jesus and the apostle Paul as examples for Christians to follow. We can welcome those who struggle and fail by making clear that grace happens in the church.<sup>221</sup> We can say to the singles in our church, "We

<sup>216</sup> See Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015).

<sup>217</sup> This is not just a problem for the young; many senior adults are choosing not to marry for financial reasons.

<sup>218</sup> Wehr, p. 88.

<sup>219</sup> Mary Hulst, "Belong," a presentation at Inspire 2019, a binational gathering of ministry leaders in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, held in Windsor, Ont., Aug. 1-3, 2019; [soundcloud.com/crcna/inspire-2019-2019-08-01-mary-hulst](https://soundcloud.com/crcna/inspire-2019-2019-08-01-mary-hulst); accessed, 8-21-20.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

see you, single people, and we know how challenging it is to follow Jesus in your sexuality, and we know that our emphasis on families and the idolatry of marriage has hurt you. Your singleness matters to God, and it matters to your church.”<sup>222</sup>

One way the church can offer helpful teaching in the area of sex and singleness is to approach it as a matter of virtue. Virtue ethics focus on habits that enable a person to flourish in accord with his or her created purpose. The emphasis does not fall on rules but on practices and dispositions.<sup>223</sup> The virtuous life is characterized by struggle, for it takes discipline to put vices to death and to turn new practices into virtuous habits. But this struggle to stay morally on target can be, as one author puts it “a sign of health—the growing pains of character.”<sup>224</sup> When the new practices do become habitual, they bring joy. They enable a person to flourish in a way that honors the creator.

In the area of sex and singleness the most important virtue is that of chastity. To practice chastity is to live out one’s sexuality in a way that conforms to God’s created purpose for human beings as male and female, whether married or single. Practicing chastity is characterized by seeking the flourishing of the persons with whom we are in relationships, the health of these relationships, and the honor and glory of God, who has created us for such relationships. As DeYoung puts it, “Proper use and enjoyment of our sexual nature should track the way sexual desire and its fulfillment can enhance our relationships with God and each other.”<sup>225</sup> This leads us to refuse to objectify other people or treat them as means to the end of our own sexual satisfaction. Simon notes: “Chastity, as a virtue, is not just the ability to ‘do without sex’ for weeks or months. More importantly, it keeps our sexual desires from making us view others as collections of sexually arousing body parts.”<sup>226</sup>

The vice of lust, in contrast to chastity, makes sex primarily about me and my pleasure, rather than about God and my neighbor. “In lust, my own pleasure is the goal, and I decide where to get it, and when, and with whom,” DeYoung writes.<sup>227</sup> Lust is powerful because it is deceptive. It feels right. We often confuse it for love. Yet it is never loving to enter into a sexual relationship that is outside of the will of God. Such a relationship can never lead to genuine flourishing, even if for a time it feels like it does. Thus unchaste sexual activity—sexual activity that exhibits the vice of lust—includes such things as any sexual behavior prohibited by Scripture, living together in a sexual relationship outside the covenant commitment of marriage, having sexual partners outside of the marriage covenant, use of any form of pornography, prostitution, going to sexually charged environments like strip clubs, fantasizing about sex with persons to whom one is not married, and the list goes on. “Lust is always in pursuit and ends as empty-handed as it began.”<sup>228</sup>

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. These are just a few of the ideas that Hulst presents.

<sup>223</sup> For a more complete description of virtues, see DeYoung, pp. 14-18.

<sup>224</sup> Caroline J. Simon, *Bringing Sex into Focus: The Quest for Sexual Integrity* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2012), p. 73.

<sup>225</sup> DeYoung, p. 163.

<sup>226</sup> Simon, p. 76. For a more complete description of the virtue of chastity, see Simon, pp. 71-79.

<sup>227</sup> DeYoung, p. 167.

<sup>228</sup> Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 179.

It does not ultimately satisfy, and it often causes tremendous harm by alienating a person from God or from other people, destroying relationships, even at times provoking a person to commit sexual violence or other abusive behavior. It can also lead to sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as well as psychological, emotional, and spiritual harm.

The virtue of chastity involves both married and single persons. Sex, as God designed it, is both psychologically and biologically good and purposeful. The penultimate ends of sex are, first, bonding two people into a one-flesh union, and, second, creating new life, something symbolized in the birth of children, in whom what God has joined together literally cannot be separated.<sup>229</sup> In other words, sex is potentially both unitive and procreative. The effects of original sin as well as our own actual sin can thwart those potentials. Though marriage is not a guarantee of perfect intimacy, sexual or relational, sex in its proper context and directed toward its intended purpose is a wonderful gift.

Given that our society emphasizes sexual intimacy as the truest form of intimacy, it is no wonder that so many people feel that they have to have sex in order to have intimacy. But genuine intimacy need not take sexual expression. As a church, we need to reflect much more on how we can encourage and support one another to establish deeper friendships. Single and married people alike should be taught to invest in friendships with one another that are both chaste and intimate. Christians who are mature and who have mature friendships with other Christians should be held up as examples from whom the rest of us can learn. God has called us his friends. We need to learn to be friends with one another.

#### *B. Premarital sex and cohabitation*

In contemporary North American culture, where casual sex is commonplace and premarital sex is assumed to be part of a dating relationship, most younger people considering marriage are already sexually involved and would not consider marrying without first living together. Cohabitation is seen as a first step of commitment—a move toward faithfulness and a stable shared life. Analysis of national surveys indicates that while many choose to marry before they have children, permanent cohabitation with no plans for marriage is increasingly the norm.<sup>230</sup>

While a slim majority of black Protestants, as well as most white evangelicals, still believe that people should not live together unless they plan to marry, both serial monogamy in dating relationships and cohabitation have become the norm in the church.<sup>231</sup> Recent research reveals that virtually all never-married members of conservative denominations have had premarital sex, and most with several partners.<sup>232</sup> Many Christians plan to marry eventually but cite financial concerns as their reason to postpone marriage (until

<sup>229</sup> DeYoung, p. 164.

<sup>230</sup> Pew Research Center, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States,” Nov. 5, 2019; [pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/](https://pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/) psdt\_11-06-19\_cohabitation-00-010.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> David J. Ayers, *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2018), p. 68. See also Ayers’s review of General Social Surveys 2014-2018, [ifstudies.org/blog/sex-and-the-single-evangelical](https://ifstudies.org/blog/sex-and-the-single-evangelical).

they can afford a wedding, provide for children, afford a house, etc.). Some avoid a legal marriage altogether so as not to lose tax benefits they currently rely on in retirement. Others use the time living together as a couple to assess their potential spouse's sexual and relational compatibility and general reliability. Still others express uncertainty about their own readiness for marriage but desire daily intimacy to combat loneliness.

Pastors report hearing, from adults of all ages, such comments and questions as "Why can't we make a life commitment without getting married?" "My parents don't want me to get serious with anyone until I'm through grad school and am financially stable." "I know adultery is wrong, and I would never cheat on a spouse, but where does the Bible teach that premarital sex is wrong?"

So does the Bible address sex without benefit of marriage?

The Old Testament forbids adultery, incest, and sex between people of the same sex, making it clear that only sexual activity within the context of marriage pleases God. Thus, when a man seduced an unbetrothed woman, he was required to marry her, and if the father refused to let the man marry her, he was still required to pay the dowry price (Ex. 22:16-17). On the other hand, the Hebrew Scriptures celebrate the joys of married sex, beginning with the intimate and exclusive bond it produces, "That is why a man leaves his mother and his father and is united with his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). It suggests the lifelong pleasure it can provide: "May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . May her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love" (Prov. 5:18-19). The sexually explicit love poem Song of Songs also makes clear that sexual intimacy and commitment go hand in hand. The woman exhorts her potential lover: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

Jewish tradition has always explicitly forbidden extramarital sex,<sup>233</sup> considering marriage itself to be holy. Emerging from that context, Jesus and the New Testament writers speak even more directly, both to encourage sex in marriage and to condemn all sex outside of marriage as immorality. Jesus reiterates the Creator's intention for sexual partnerships to be enduring and monogamous when he references the one-flesh union of Genesis 2 and adds, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt. 19:6).

Similarly the writer of Hebrews tells us, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4). Paul also specifically delineates marriage as the site for all sexual expression in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). Paul even tells both husbands and wives that they have a marital duty to have sex with each other and should not deprive their partner (7:5). Though Paul recommends the celibate life that he himself lives, and he exhorts believers to control their own bodies (1 Thess. 4:3-5), he does command single believers

<sup>233</sup> Michael J. Broyde and Michael Ausubel, eds., *Marriage, Sex, and Family in Judaism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 96.

to marry if they cannot control themselves (1 Cor. 7:9). In each of those texts, and many others in the New Testament, the Greek word *porneia*, usually translated as “fornication” or “immorality,” refers to all sexual activity outside of marriage.

The biblical writers acknowledge our physical and emotional longings for sexual intimacy. But whether we are single or married, we are called to use our bodies for God instead of immorality. We are called to seek to please the God who cherishes us. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you . . . ? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; see also Gal. 5:17-26; Eph. 5:3-20; 1 Pet. 4:1-7; 1 John 2:3-4). The God to whom we belong, and who has freed us from sin, makes it possible to walk in holiness, by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh [sinful nature]” (Gal. 5:16). “Live as children of light” and “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:8, 18).

In short, the Bible teaches that sex unites a man and woman in body, soul, and spirit; that this good gift belongs in marriage and only in marriage; and that being born again by the Spirit makes holiness and joy outside of marriage possible.

Whether in dating relationships, hook-ups, or cohabitation, premarital sex is perhaps the most common sinful sexual practice in the contemporary church. Mores have so changed, even within the church, that some parents support its practice by allowing adult children and partners to save money for a house or a wedding by living together with them. And the practice is not confined to the young. Older divorced or widowed people, now accustomed to sexual intimacy, choose to have sex with their dating partners, even if they were not sexually active before their original marriage. Yet even while most single church members, as well as those who live together, now have sex outside of marriage, the church has done little to address it pastorally.

Elders and other mature Christians should disciple people who are sexually active outside of marriage into the freedom of life in the Spirit. Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in John 4 is a good model of such pastoral care. Jesus began building a relationship through respectful dialogue, responding to the woman’s questions. He then gently confronted her sinfulness without shaming her. Finally, Jesus offered her grace. He invited her to a new life in which her deepest needs would be met in relationship with God. Her reaction was to run, leaving her water jar, back to her village to share the good news about her life-giving interaction with Jesus.

In the same way, loving Christians can help fellow believers to discern whether or not they want to be in a committed relationship with someone with whom they are sexually involved, and if they do, to work toward discovering ways to remove financial, family, or other obstacles to marriage. If they decide they are not ready for marriage, it’s important to help them understand the boundaries God has put around sex, explaining what it means to follow Jesus and inviting them to be filled with the powerful Spirit who will lead them and draw them into intimacy with Jesus, the living water (John 4:10).

### C. Polyamory

Sarah\*<sup>234</sup> found herself attracted to her co-worker, Robert. At first she resisted her feelings and his rather obvious flirtations because she knew that he was married to Jill. After a Christmas work party, however, she gave in to her desires and started an ongoing, intimate relationship with Robert. This went on for three months until Robert unexpectedly invited Sarah to move in with him and his wife. Sarah's immediate reaction was to reject the idea. But not wanting to break off her newfound relationship with Robert, she gave him—and polyamory—a shot. She reasoned to herself: "I love him and really believe that he loves me. If parents can love more than one child, is it really crazy to believe that a great guy like Robert can love me even while he still loves his wife? Plus, now our relationship will be in the open, and I won't have to feel so guilty about hiding things from Jill."

Sam\* and Becky,\* both white, had been married for two years. Each grew up in a Christian home and considered themselves to be Christians, even though they only infrequently attended a local church. One of Sam's good friends, Justin, who was single, started spending more and more time at Sam and Becky's place and found himself increasingly attracted to his friend's wife. Becky reacted positively to the advances of Justin but did not want to begin a secret relationship with him behind her husband's back. She and Justin instead shared their true feelings with Sam and asked him to consider polyamory, in which Justin would be added to their marriage relationship as a significant other. Sam ultimately agreed to this proposal. When Christian friends of Sam and Becky learned about this new relationship, they could not help voicing their concern and objections. Sam and Becky, however, pushed back, arguing that their situation did not really qualify as adultery since everything was in the open and all three persons involved agreed to this relationship. Further, they argued, polygamy was practiced by many Old Testament heroes of the faith, and, as far as they could tell, they couldn't find any explicit rejection of these relationships in the New Testament.

Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM), or what is more commonly called polyamory (from the Greek *poly*, meaning "many" and the Latin *-amory*, meaning "love"), refers to a mutually agreed-upon sexual relationship between three or more people. (The first verifiable use of the word *polyamory*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, occurred in 1992.) Some of these relationships are called "vees" (from the letter *v*), since they involve three people, one of whom is involved sexually with the other two, while the other two are not intimate with each other. This is slightly different from "triads," which involve three people, all of whom are sexually involved with each other. Another type of these consensual nonmonogamous relationships is a "quad," which involves four people, typically two couples who have an intimate relationship with each other.

Within these different types of polyamorous relationships there are varying degrees of commitment and exclusivity. Some polyamorous relationships are explicit in identifying one sexual partner as "primary" and others

<sup>234</sup> \*Names and minor details of the account have been changed.

as “secondary.” Other relationships do not make such distinctions among their members. Most of these polyamorous relationships expect the different members to be sexually active only with the members of their relationship. Other relationships do not have this restriction. The biggest feature that all polyamorous relationships have in common is a commitment to openness and honesty. The partners insist on being open and honest with each other about expectations and about the setting of ground rules with which everyone agrees.

Polyamory may sound strange and puzzling to many people. Nevertheless, polyamorous relationships are quickly becoming more common, not only in the broader culture but even among some Christians. It is hard to obtain definitive numbers because the phenomenon of polyamory is relatively new, and so far there have been few studies involving large sample groups. Yet the studies that exist show a range of 3-5 percent of people in North America currently living in a consensual nonmonogamous relationship. They suggest that 12-20 percent of Americans have been in some kind of open sexual relationship at some point in the past.<sup>235</sup> Sociologist Mark Regnerus has claimed that 24 percent of people who identify themselves as Christians believe that polyamorous relationships are morally permissible,<sup>236</sup> although he subsequently qualified this claim by saying that only 6 percent of Evangelicals and 19 percent of Catholics consider polyamorous relationships to be acceptable.<sup>237</sup>

A variety of different arguments have been forwarded by people who identify themselves as Christians to defend the practice of polyamory. What follows below is a survey and evaluation of the most commonly used of these arguments.<sup>238</sup>

### 1. Old Testament polygamy

The most common argument used to justify polyamorous relationships involves an appeal to the numerous instances of polygamy in the Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament heroes of faith had more than one wife: Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon. In fact, over forty key individuals in the Old Testament were married to more than one woman. Since so many persons in the Old Testament were in nonmonogamous relationships, it is claimed, similar consensual nonmonogamous relationships should be permitted today.

There are two main responses to this argument. The first involves distinguishing what is “descriptive” in the Bible—the report of something that happened—from what is “prescriptive” in the Bible—the positive or

<sup>235</sup> See M. L. Hauptert, Amanda N. Gesselman, Amy C. Moors, Helen E. Fisher, and Justin R. Garcia, “Prevalence of Experiences with Consensual Nonmonogamous Relationships: Findings from Two National Samples of Single Americans,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 43.5 (2017), pp. 424-40; Heather Smith, “National Survey Reveals Generational Differences in Consensual Nonmonogamy,” Institute for Family Studies (Sept. 11, 2019).

<sup>236</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 186.

<sup>237</sup> Mark Regnerus, “How the Rise in Unreligious Americans Affects Sex and Marriage: Comparative Evidence from New Survey Data”; [thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/08/55179](http://thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/08/55179).

<sup>238</sup> The following section draws heavily from the excellent review of biblical arguments for polyamory by Branson Parler, “The Bible, Polyamory, and Monogamy,” available from The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender ([centerforfaith.com](http://centerforfaith.com)).

negative judgment about what happened. The fact that many Old Testament figures took multiple wives is *descriptive*. There is nothing in the Bible, however, that indicates that polygamy is good and acceptable and ought to be practiced. In other words, these examples are not prescriptive. In fact, in the case of many Old Testament figures the Bible describes the pain, division, and strife that emerged within these polygamous relationships, thereby implying significant disapproval.

The second and more important response to the appeal to Old Testament polygamy as a justification of modern polyamory is that the rest of Scripture makes clear that God's intention is for sex to take place only in a marriage relationship between one man and one woman. This divine intent is revealed in the creation account of Genesis 1-2, in which God provides Adam with *one* other person. It is confirmed in the New Testament in Jesus' double citation of this creation account: "'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female" [Gen. 1:27], and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" [Gen. 2:24]?"' (Matt. 19:4-5). God's expectation that marriage be between one man and one woman is assumed in Paul's exhortation to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33. His extended discussion concerning marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 asserts that each man should have his own wife (not wives) and each woman her own husband (not husbands).

## 2. Certain Old Testament laws

The second argument for polyamory is an extension of the first one. Proponents of polyamory sometimes claim that the laws of Deuteronomy 17:17 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17 show that God accepted polygamy. In a similar way, it is argued, God also accepts nonmonogamous relationships like that of polyamory. Deuteronomy 17:17 requires that the king of Israel "must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." This command seems to prohibit marrying an excessive amount of wives, but that leaves open the possibility of marrying a few wives. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 deals with the inheritance rights of the oldest son in a family in which the father has sons from two different wives.

It is true that neither of these Old Testament laws prohibits polygamy, but it is also true that neither one sanctions the practice. Such laws ought to be viewed as the regulations of sinful practices that God tolerated due to the hardness of human hearts. Here the parallel with divorce is helpful. Jesus makes clear that the Old Testament law permitting divorce did not reflect God's will for the permanence of marriage but, rather, was a divine concession: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matt. 19:8-9).

Although God allowed divorce and regulated it through Old Testament laws, that did not mean such divorce was in accord with his will. Divorce was tolerated under the old covenant, but the new covenant reaffirms the creational requirement of lifelong fidelity between a husband and wife. In a similar way, although God tolerated polygamy and regulated it through

Old Testament laws, this was not his original intent for marriage; nor is it in accord with his will.

### 3. Certain New Testament commands

There are a few occasions in the New Testament where the apostle Paul commands that an elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6, RSV) and that a deacon must be the “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12). Some claim that, since Paul had to issue a special law against polygamy among those in leadership positions, this implies that the Old Testament toleration of polygamy remained in place in the New Testament church.

The key phrase in all these three texts, however, is capable of several different meanings. The phrase, which literally reads “a man of one woman,” can mean that an elder and deacon must either (1) be married rather than single, (2) be monogamous rather than polygamous, or (3) be faithful in his marriage. The first option is not likely, given Paul’s strong commendation of singleness (1 Cor. 7:7-8; 7:38) as well as his own single state (1 Cor. 9:1). The second option is also not likely. The exact same phrase occurs in 1 Tim. 5:9 but refers to “a woman of one man.” Here polygamy cannot be in view, since there are no examples in the ancient world of a woman having more than one husband. The meaning of the key phrase, then, is most likely the third option—namely, the need to be faithful in one’s marriage.<sup>239</sup>

Even if the phrase were a reference to polygamy, however, that would not mean Paul intended to lay down a requirement that applies only to church leaders and not to all believers.

### 4. Divine relationships

Another argument used to justify polyamory involves an appeal to divine relationships, including (1) the relationship that the members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have with each other, and (2) the relationship between God and his people. Chuck McKnight, who self-identifies as a “progressive Christian,” argues that “God is not in any sense monogamous” and tries to prove this point by appealing to three things: the Trinity, God’s relationship with Israel, and Christ’s relationship with the church.<sup>240</sup>

McKnight appeals to the Trinity as the most intimate and loving relationship imaginable, shared equally and eternally between three divine persons. But although Christians ought to model the unity of the Trinity (John 17), there is no indication in Scripture that the relationship among the divine persons is intended as the paradigm for human sexual relationships.

McKnight also appeals to two Old Testament texts in which God is portrayed as having more than one wife. Jeremiah 3 describes God as being married to both the southern kingdom of Judah and her sister, the northern kingdom of Israel. Ezekiel 23 portrays both Jerusalem and Samaria as God’s two adulterous wives. When these two texts are compared to

<sup>239</sup> See George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 156-59.

<sup>240</sup> Chuck McKnight, “Is God Polyamorous?” (Oct. 2, 2017); [patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html](http://patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html).

the testimony of Scripture as a whole, however, it is clear that Judah and Israel (and their capital cities, Jerusalem and Samaria) are both part of the one people of God. They were not supposed to be divided. Further, the language of marriage and adultery in these texts is used metaphorically, not literally. There is no justification for concluding, as McKnight does, that these two texts “portray God as polygamous,” and there is even less justification for inferring from these texts that consensual nonmonogamous relationships mirror God’s relationship with his people.

Finally, McKnight also appeals to the relationship between Christ and the church as described in terms of a marriage relationship in Ephesians 5. He wonders how the marriage between Christ and the church ought to be understood in the light of God’s previous marriages, as he calls them, to Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, and Samaria. He also stresses that although the church is a single, corporate whole, “God has an intimate relationship with each and every one of us. Christ’s marriage to the church is ultimately a marriage to billions of individuals.” This leads him to conclude that “polyamory does at least provide a more-accurate picture of God’s relationships than monogamy.”

The logic of this reasoning is extremely dubious. First, we are once again dealing with a metaphor, so it would be dangerous to conclude too much from this image about actual marriage relationships. Second, the metaphor identifies the bride of Christ not with each individual believer but as the collective body of believers. The bride is the church. Third, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in the middle of this metaphor (Eph. 5:31), thereby stressing that marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman.

#### 5. “Born this way”

A more common argument used by proponents of polyamory appeals to biology. This argument claims that some people have a sexual orientation that makes them predisposed against monogamy and gives them an innate desire for sexual relationships with more than one person. For people with such a polyamorous orientation, monogamy is unnatural. Nonmonogamy is not just something that they *do*. It is who they *are*. The argument that polyamory should be legally recognized as a sexual orientation has even appeared in a peer-reviewed law journal.<sup>241</sup>

It is important to note that there is no evidence for the claim that polyamory is a biologically rooted sexual orientation. Yet even if it could be proven that polyamory is a genetically caused sexual orientation, it would not logically follow that consensual nonmonogamy is morally permissible for Christians. As we noted in our discussion of homosexuality, people are born with all kinds of biologically caused proclivities and desires that Scripture identifies as sinful. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to overcome these inclinations through the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### D. Divorce

In Matthew 19:8-9 (NIV) Jesus declares, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual

<sup>241</sup> Ann E. Tweedy, “Polyamory as a Sexual Orientation,” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 79 (2011), pp. 1461-1515.

immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Since breaking the marriage covenant is sin and given the high divorce rate, the church must act more intentionally to call married partners to reconciliation and renewed commitment to the marriage covenant.

Synod 1980 of the Christian Reformed Church received a study report on divorce and remarriage. The authors of that report provided a thorough study of scriptural teaching on the topic. They concluded by calling the church to “reaffirm the general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery” (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 484).

The 1980 report also included guidelines to do the following:

- Deal pastorally with those who have failed to keep the biblical principle by
  - Refraining from a strictly legal approach to remarriage that tries to provide a basis for judgment that certain categories of remarriage are always compatible or incompatible with the teachings of Scripture.
  - Seeking to bring persons contemplating remarriage to a genuine awareness of what is involved in the covenant of marriage. The teaching of Scripture concerning marriage, grace, love, loyalty, vows, forgiveness, hope, and promise should be openly discussed.
  - Calling persons contemplating remarriage to an examination of their intentions in the light of the biblical teaching concerning reconciliation with the former spouse, the possibility of the single life, and remarriage.
  - Counseling firmly and compassionately against any remarriage that conflicts with the biblical teaching concerning marriage and divorce.
  - Exercising formal discipline when persons in hardness of heart refuse to heed the admonitions of the consistory and do not acknowledge and repent of their sins involved in divorce and remarriage.

(*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 484-85)

Despite the 1980 report’s emphasis on the “general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery,” divorce and remarriage have become widespread in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. As a committee, we therefore call upon the church to recover the teaching of that report and to hold one another accountable to practicing the teachings of Jesus on divorce and remarriage.

#### E. Selected resources

##### 1. Books

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## 2. Internet

Mary Hulst, "Belong," [soundcloud.com/crcna/inspire-2019-2019-08-01-mary-hulst](https://soundcloud.com/crcna/inspire-2019-2019-08-01-mary-hulst); accessed 10-1-19.

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## XV. Sexual desire: Bodies, bonding, and boundaries in the Song of Songs

Inspired by a loving Creator who made us male and female in his image, the Song of Songs evokes the intensity, longings, delights, and pleasures of sexual love. Enduring centuries of scholarly debates about its authorship, its interpretation, and its primary value as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his covenant people or as a vivid picture of human love, the Song of Songs remains a vivid and exuberant piece of sexual love poetry. In an era of incessant media depictions of unrestrained lust, contrasted by segments of the Christian church, which speak mostly negatively—or not at all—about sexuality, the Song of Songs celebrates the beauty of bodies and the boundaries of sexual love. This erotic love poem is centrally located among the books of the Christian Bible, and for the following reasons the church would be wise to give it a central place in our understanding of the Creator’s intent for sexual intimacy.

### A. *Song of Songs helps us recover a theology of the body rooted in creation and resurrection theology*

“I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body,” we confess with the global and historical church. Jesus, who “is the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18) is God become human. The mysterious incarnation dignifies our humanity because the Creator is now also a creature. Created in God’s image, male and female, we are not just embodied souls but physical beings who will live forever in glorified bodies. Somehow in our very fleshiness we image God. Through the apostle Paul, God also tells us, “Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you. . . . Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom. 12:1).

The capacity for sexual desire is a gift from God. However, the church sometimes lapses into a form of the heresy of Gnosticism, believing that the material world is evil and the sexual act is itself shameful—or, more simply, that the soul is more valuable than the body and therefore sexuality is not spiritual. Unfortunately the church has also been deeply influenced by Augustine, who believed that all passion was lust, even within marriage.

Indeed, like other powerful desires such as hunger, sexual desire can easily lead us into sin.

But the Song of Songs unabashedly celebrates the physical nature of sexual love. God designed our bodies to be stimulated and aroused by the touch of the beloved other (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine”—1:2), as well by the aroma (“Awake, north wind . . . ! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere”—4:12), tastes (“his fruit is sweet to my taste”—2:3), and sight of that desirable body (“You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you”—4:7). An entire biblical book devoted to sexual love, Song of Songs is neither crude nor degrading because it portrays sex as a gift from God for the joy and intimacy of material beings.

Thus the Song of Songs can free us from shame in our bodily desires and teach us to savor the act of love with joy and gratitude. The striking physicality of the Song of Songs can also remind the whole church of the hunger those of us without the privilege of sexual touch are likely to have for casual affectionate touches from others with whom we feel comfortable, as well as “greetings with a holy kiss” and supportive hugs.

*B. The poem addresses the intense longing we feel for a beloved when we are apart*

“I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me” (2:5-6). How much we might sacrifice or endure in order to be in the same physical space with a lover. “I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city. . . . I will search for the one my heart loves” (3:1-2).

This intensity of desire holds up a mirror to human nature and reminds the church of the longings of all of those who are not in sexual relationships but wish they were, whether it be the longing of unrequited love or for a lover who never appears, the loss of sexual love by those who are divorced or widowed, or the longing of those who have chosen celibacy. The church can become willing to talk candidly about the physical remedy of masturbation people often choose as well as the ways to cultivate and support deep emotional intimacy within the church among sisters and brothers in the family of God.

*C. The song focuses on the uniqueness and value of the beloved one*

Repeatedly we hear the woman and the man refer to each other as “my beloved” and “my love.” “You have stolen my heart . . .” the man cries. “How delightful is your love” (4:9,10). “When I found the one my heart loves . . .” the woman remembers, “I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house” (3:4).

As it did in the ancient world, Song of Songs confronts the common idea that sex is about self-pleasure and meeting our own needs. Instead the poetry shows the lovers actually seeing and valuing each other. Although every aspect of their physical bodies is accentuated in loving detail, neither man nor woman is objectified; instead, they are described in terms of love and eagerness for being bonded.

*D. This poetry highlights equity between female and male lovers*

The allure, physical virtues, and sexual beauty of both the woman and the man are extolled. The song is written in the woman’s voice at least as often

as the man's and shows a degree of male-female equality that brings us back to Genesis 1:26-31 before the fall into sin and anticipates Jesus' treatment of women and Paul's strikingly identical teaching about sexuality to women and men in 1 Corinthians 7.

In addition, the woman chooses to give of herself. She is not given. "Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits," she says (4:16). (See 4:1-5:1.) In this way the Song of Songs challenges the contemporary commodification of the (usually female) body as well as the connection our culture has made between sex and conquest or domination.

The woman demonstrates the giving of oneself, not being taken and not being bought (8:7-14). Sexual intimacy will not be coerced or forced. She declares, "If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned" (8:7). Instead "my own vineyard is mine to give," she says (8:12). It is not for Solomon to buy with his money or to take. But to the one she loves and longs for, she calls, "Come away, my beloved."

#### *E. Exclusivity of sexual love*

Contemporary culture shouts about the pleasures of sex, frequently without any reference to being in a permanently committed context. In contrast, the Song of Songs teaches us to celebrate the sensuality of human sexual love without licentiousness.

By demonstrating a woman's openness to a man with the unashamed sharing of her naked self, we are reminded of how wonderfully such vulnerability builds trust. "Let my beloved come into his garden, and taste its choice fruits" (4:16). When we know we are loved and cherished, we dare to offer more of ourselves. When we risk such openness and are not rebuffed but received with appreciation, the fruit is increased confidence in the relationship.

This is why the poem warns us against sexual love without commitment. "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (3:5). Instead the woman calls for a covenantal relationship. "Place me as a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (8:6) And if you would be my lover, you must always be my lover, she implies, for "love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (8:6). This alerts us to the potential that strong emotions like jealousy and perhaps violence could be evoked if we enter into physical intimacy with someone and then betray their love, whether it is by physical adultery or abandonment, adultery of the heart through porn, or simply not following through into permanent public commitment. The Song of Songs enables us to see that the boundaries around love give us freedom.

#### *F. In the Song, God sings the intensity of God's love for us*

Across history the church has viewed the poem in two ways: "as a double love story: vertical and horizontal; divine and human."<sup>242</sup> Elsewhere Scripture also compares the relationship of God and God's people to lovers, spouses, affianced couples. These examples highlight the exclusivity of our relationship with God. In the same way, the Song of Songs affirms that this covenant of love precludes our having any other gods because God is a jealous God.

<sup>242</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1989), p. 100.

The Song's fleshly example of sexual delight also enables us to understand just how intimate God wants to be with us. As the Song of Song's lovers long for each other, so God longs for deep connection with his people together as well as with each one of us. (See also "deep calls to deep"—Ps. 42:7.) Moreover, just as the Bible tells us we are God's inheritance and God is ours, so the Song of Songs assures us, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). As the woman seeks out her beloved, so God seeks us out when we become distant. We can be vulnerable with God, bare ourselves to God, knowing that this Lover delights in us fully. And, of course, this metaphor is also our reality. The children of God are God's Beloved. Jesus actually is the Bridegroom who is preparing the Bride for the consummation of our love when he returns. "Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love" (2:4).

## **XVI. Confessional status**

Our committee has been asked to evaluate "whether or not, with respect to same sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a *status confessionis*" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). This raises the question, What is a *status confessionis*?

Very simply, this Latin phrase means "confessional status." To raise the question of confessional status is to wonder whether some teaching or ecclesiastical practice, if adopted, would violate the teachings of the confessions of the church. This is important because the teachings of the confessions are understood to represent biblical teaching on the matter in question.

Confessional status can affect doctrines that are directly asserted in a creed, such as the two natures of Christ or, in the case of the Reformed confessions, the doctrine of providence. Confessional status can also extend to broader teachings that contradict the confessions in some way. So one can raise the question about whether some stance on a moral or political issue, if accepted by the church, would constitute a violation of the teaching of the historic creeds and confessions of the church.

Sometimes the church has to consider whether a particular teaching ought to have confessional status, even though it currently does not. For example, in 2012 the church was asked to consider adding the Belhar Confession to the list of historical documents to which all officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church in North America are bound. In 2017 the church decided that, while the issues addressed in this document are serious, the document itself does not rise to the level of a confession.

Two considerations might push one to consider whether an issue should be raised to the level of a confessional teaching. First, one might ask whether the teaching in question violates a clear teaching of Scripture. Second, one could consider whether the issue involves the heart of the message of the gospel. For example, in the case of the Belhar Confession, the church's rejection of institutionalized racism in South Africa could be understood to have confessional status because it involves the heart of the message of the gospel of reconciliation. Alan Boesak suggested as much in 1982 when he asserted at the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa that

apartheid was “anti-evangelical” because it takes “as its point of departure the irreconcilability of people of different race groups.”<sup>243</sup>

The CRC in the 1970s articulated several levels of authority of doctrinal and moral teaching:

- Scripture
- creed
- confession
- Church Order
- synodical decision

Other levels might include testimonies, decisions of a classis, and decisions of local congregations.

Scripture is the first and final authority to which all other levels of authority are subservient. The ecumenical creeds are broad statements of faith that are adopted or affirmed by a large portion of the universal church. They address the basics of the Christian faith and identify the essential teachings of a Christian church. They succinctly articulate to the world what we as Christians believe to be true and indispensable to our faith.

Confessions are statements that identify who we are within the larger body of the universal church. Thus, the Reformed confessions (in the case of the CRCNA, the Three Forms of Unity) identify this particular body of the church as Reformed and not, for example, Lutheran or Baptist, even though we share many things in common with these brothers and sisters.

Part of the work of synod is to decide on the proper interpretation of Scripture on any given topic (abortion was one such topic). Synod is also charged with deciding whether the confessions accurately represent the teaching of Scripture. For example, in 1958 synod replaced several paragraphs in Belgic Confession Article 36 on the relationship between the church and the state. Sometimes synod is asked to consider whether the confessions represent other traditions or teachings fairly. For example, Synod 2006 chose to bracket Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80, which misrepresented the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church about the mass.

Even if a teaching has confessional status, that does not mean there is no room for disagreement within the bounds of that teaching. In addition, the church sometimes allows for pastoral accommodations. For example, our confessions say that the children of believers should be baptized. Yet some congregations are willing to allow members not to baptize their children.

If a teaching is declared to have confessional status, questions arise about what that means for those who sign the Covenant for Officebearers (CFO) in the CRCNA. Will those who have already signed it need to accept this new item as having confessional status? What happens if they don't? Will those who subsequently sign the CFO need to accept this new item?

#### A. *The confessional status of church teaching on sexuality*

To repeat the issue at hand, we have been asked to consider “whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a *status*

<sup>243</sup> See *The Acts and Proceedings of the 201st Regular Session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2007), p. 279; [images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf](https://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf).

*confessionis.*” However, this raises the question, Does the church’s teaching that homosexual activity, as well as premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, pornography, and polyamory already have confessional status?

It is important to remember that the question is not whether a particular *action* violates the confession but whether a particular *teaching* violates the confession. To put it another way, is it a violation of any of our current confessions to teach that it is acceptable for Christians to use pornography? Is it a violation of our confessions to teach that it is acceptable for Christians to engage in homosexual activity, extramarital sex, or adultery?

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which explains the meaning of the seventh commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”), states that “God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.” By the word “unchastity” the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity. The Reformed Church in America acknowledged this in 2017, affirming that in the catechism “God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity.”<sup>244</sup>

Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, confirms this in his commentary on Q&A 108. He writes that the first class of lusts included in unchastity “are those which are contrary to nature and from the devil. . . . The lusts of which the apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans are of this class, as the confounding of sexes, [and] also abuses of the female sex.” He goes on to say that unchastity includes incest as well, even though this sin is not mentioned in the catechism by name.<sup>245</sup> As a committee, we note that pornography, polyamory, and all forms of premarital and extramarital sex are also encompassed in the catechism’s condemnation of unchastity.

It is also worth noting that the Belgic Confession affirms that church discipline is one of the essential marks of a true church. Article 29 declares that the true church “practices church discipline for correcting faults.” Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81 declares that people “who are unrepentant” should not come to the Lord’s table lest they “eat and drink judgment on themselves.” For this reason, Q&A 82 adds, the church is required to “exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.”

We conclude, then, that the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, *already* has confessional status. According to our confessions, the church may never approve or even tolerate any form of sexual immorality, including pornography, polyamory, premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, or homosexual sex. On the contrary, the church must warn its members that those who refuse to repent of these sins—as well as of idolatry, greed, and other such sins—will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11). It must discipline those who refuse to repent of such sins for the sake of their souls (1 Cor. 5-6).

As a committee, we also wrestled with the question of whether the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory,

<sup>244</sup> *The Acts and Proceedings of the 211th Regular Session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2017), p. 161; [images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2017MGS-Complete.pdf](https://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2017MGS-Complete.pdf).

<sup>245</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 1043; [rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/UrsinusZ\\_HC-Commentary-17-NEW-HC.pdf](https://rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/UrsinusZ_HC-Commentary-17-NEW-HC.pdf).

the use of pornography, or homosexual sex ought to have confessional status. We did so by asking two questions.

First, does teaching that affirms such behavior violate the clear teaching of Scripture? The biblical portion of our report is clear. Marriage between one man and one woman is the only appropriate place for sex. Anything that deviates from that teaching is contrary to Scripture. Thus premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, the use of pornography, and homosexual sex all fall under the heading of sexual immorality and are therefore morally impermissible. To teach that any of these behaviors is permissible undermines the teaching and authority of Scripture. Whenever the church teaches that a form of behavior forbidden in Scripture is morally permissible, it is guilty of false teaching.

Second, does teaching that affirms premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, the use of pornography, or homosexual sex involve the heart of the message of the gospel? At the heart of the gospel is the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Through the power of Christ's death and resurrection we receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to practice this righteousness, putting our old sinful nature to death and being conformed more and more into the image of Jesus. We are "washed . . . sanctified . . . [and] justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

This new life is characterized by ongoing repentance, a daily dying and rising with Christ. If the church chooses to call any form of immorality, including sexual immorality, permissible, it places a dangerous stumbling block in the path of our sanctification. Scripture repeatedly warns us against deceiving ourselves in this way, specifically naming the sins of homosexual sex, sexual immorality, and adultery. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Likewise in Ephesians 5:5-7 he warns, "Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them." In Galatians 5:19-21 he warns, "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

In fact, the New Testament repeatedly warns us that in the latter days false teachers will come who will deceive the people by telling them that they are free to practice various forms of sin, including sexual immorality. Jude 4 warns against "ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality." In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul also warns that "the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

The Old Testament similarly asserts that if a prophet does not warn the people of their sin, God will hold that prophet accountable for that sin. God declares to Ezekiel, “When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood” (Ezek. 33:8). As leaders of the church, we must take this warning seriously.

#### B. Conclusion

As a committee, we conclude, therefore, that *the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status*. As such, there is no need for a new declaration. We also conclude that this status is warranted because these sins threaten a person’s salvation. The Scriptures call the church to warn people to flee sexual immorality for the sake of their souls and to encourage them with God’s presence and power to equip them for holy living. A church that fails to call people to repentance and offer them the hope of God’s loving deliverance is acting like a false church.

In coming to this conclusion, we observe that we stand with the majority church worldwide, including the Roman Catholic Church, all branches of Orthodoxy, the non-Western global church, and a majority of active Protestants in North America and Europe. Indeed, the global church finds the Western church’s challenges to biblical teaching on human sexuality incomprehensible and offensive.<sup>246</sup> To refuse to uphold Christian teaching on sexual immorality would signal that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is deviating not only from Scripture but from the shared confession of the historic and worldwide church.

By the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, may the Great Shepherd of the sheep lead us together into the joyful freedom of obedience. “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 24-25).

### XVII. Recommendations

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of the committee: Mary-Lee Bouma, Jim Vanderwoerd, and Jeff Weima.
- B. That synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives.
- C. That synod encourage the churches to make use of the curriculum prepared by Pastor Church Resources, in conjunction with members of the committee, to help small groups study and discuss aspects of the committee’s report which may be controversial.

<sup>246</sup> See, for example, various statements by non-Western bishops in the United Methodist Church at their 2019 General Assembly.

D. That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.

E. That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.

*Ground:* A change in the main text of the Church Order is (1) not necessary and (2) would require an overture to synod.

F. That synod not appoint a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the conclusion of the present report.

*Grounds:*

1. Such a team of individuals would in effect duplicate the work of the present committee.
2. It seems unwise to give the conclusions of the present report the quasi-confessional authority of a statement of faith.
3. There are existing contemporary statements on human sexuality, such as the RCA Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality, which are in broad agreement with the conclusions of the present report, and which could be adopted or adapted by a future synod.

Committee to Articulate a Foundation–laying  
Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

Mary-Lee Bouma

Charles Kim

Jose Rayas

Paula Seales

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (*promotor fidei*)

Mary Vanden Berg

Jim Vanderwoerd

Jeff Weima (cochair)

Al Wolters (cochair)

## Appendix A

### What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

#### I. Preamble: Reasons for the turn to biology

Biological theories about the origins of sexual orientation have a long history, but for much of the 20th century they were eclipsed, both academically and clinically, by *psychoanalytic* and *behavioral* explanations. While each of these theories is not without some supporting evidence, each also has significant weaknesses, and these helped to “spur the search for other *biological* explanations,” beginning around the final third of the 20th century.<sup>247</sup>

<sup>247</sup> Simon LeVay, *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 27 (emphasis added).

Psychoanalytic, or depth-psychological, explanations focus on unconscious emotional conflicts that, according to the theory, need to be identified and addressed in order to relieve symptoms of anxiety, the cause of which, to the sufferer, is not clear. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) theorized that such conflicts were rooted largely in early childhood family dynamics—of a sexual nature (for classical Freudians), or in more general failures of attachment between a child and its caretakers (for theorists and clinicians of a more neo-Freudian bent). Freud’s theory was not systematically tested beyond clinical cases from his middle-class, turn-of-the-20th-century, mostly German patients. And not a few critics have cast him as a “pseudo-scientist,” since he tended to explain away challenges to his theory by proposing (equally untested) auxiliary hypotheses to shore it up.<sup>248</sup>

The general problem with psychoanalytic theories about the genesis of sexual orientation is not so much “that they’ve been proven wrong; it’s just that there’s no good reason to think they’re right. In that situation, their implausibility and complexity count against them.”<sup>249</sup> Thus alternative theories about the causal origins of homosexuality have arisen and generated their own bodies of research. Simon LeVay,<sup>250</sup> as a neuroscientist, was among those who joined forces to look for possible biological causes. In the meantime, others explored environmental explanations, drawing on behaviorist principles such as those originally set forth by B.F. Skinner (1904-1990).

In stark contrast to psychoanalytic theorists, early behaviorists renounced the quest to understand what was happening in the mind, on the grounds that it was at best inaccessible and at worst constantly changing in response to any attempts to study it. It would be more scientific, they said, to study outwardly observable *behavior* and the ways in which it was influenced by observable (and more easily controllable) events in the *environment*. On this account, one’s eventual sexual orientation is the product of one’s reinforcement history – the result of positive and/or punitive feelings that have accompanied early sexual experiences. Undergirding Skinnerian behaviorism is a largely Lockean view of the child’s mind as a blank slate, whose future contents are almost entirely determined by subsequent environmental events.

The weaknesses of both psychoanalytic and behavioral explanations for sexual orientation have resulted, over the past several decades, in a turn toward biological explanations as a plausible alternative.

## II. Biological research on sexual orientation

Given the variety of previously discussed definitions for homosexuality (desire, attraction, self-identity, behavior) and the different prevalence rates each measure yields, it might seem strange for biologists to make statements of any confidence about what causes it. Nevertheless, many adherents of brain organization theory (BOT) do this and more, claiming that sexual orientation *and* gender identity *and* gender role behavior in humans are a “package deal.” That is, they are *all* seen as minimally affected by cultural factors and largely determined by prenatal (and, to a lesser extent, later

<sup>248</sup> Most famously, the philosopher of science Karl Popper in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

<sup>249</sup> LeVay, p. 33.

<sup>250</sup> LeVay, chap. 2.

pubertal) hormonal processes. To complicate matters, there are many “quasi-BOT” sympathizers who strongly reject the BOT claim that gender-stereotypical *roles* in men and women are more biologically than culturally driven, but who are quite ready to believe (often in the interest of supporting the rights of sexual minorities) that gender *identity* and sexual *orientation* have been “proven” to be almost completely determined by biology.

The reverse is also the case. Some conservative (including Christian) groups are quite prepared to believe the part of brain organization theory that biologically essentializes stereotypical gender roles (and for some, the status differences between the sexes that have historically accompanied them), but not the part that does the same for homosexual identity formation (since one could hardly “blame” anyone for a condition if it was predetermined before birth). But in either case, this selective overconfidence in brain organization theory is based largely on animal research, the applicability of which to humans should not be overstated.

What arguments are advanced for thinking that sexual orientation in humans might be biologically driven to the same extent that it seems to be in animals? Here is a summary of the main arguments:

*A. The timing of fetal reproductive development vs. brain development*

In human fetuses, the development of reproductive structures is completed several months before the brain begins to differentiate. So it is conceivable that even after reproductive structures have developed in a standard way, something might disrupt standard sex-hormonal circulation in the brain or (alternately) to the brain’s sensitivity to normal hormone levels. This might explain why a physically and physiologically ordinary person could have a homosexual rather than a heterosexual orientation. Though the disrupting “something” (or things) in humans is not yet definitively known, animal—and some human clinical—research suggests testosterone as a prime candidate.

*B. The sexually dimorphic brain nucleus and other brain structures*

Since the early 1990s, studies of brain structure and sexual orientation have been done both by the examination of post-mortem human brains and, more recently, by the use of imaging techniques (such as PET and MRI scans) on the brains of live adults. Note again that, as in animal studies, more of this research has been done with males than with females. Note also that imaging studies (for all their technological impressiveness) are not much better than any other nonexperimental method for ascertaining causality. They can show structural and functional correlations, but as limited “snapshots” at only one point in time they cannot ascertain causal connections.

*C. Other physical differences correlated with sexual orientation*

Androgenic hormones are known to affect not just the development of reproductive structures *in utero*; they also prime male and female fetuses for average differences in bone development. One result is that adult males are on average taller than females (the long bones of their limbs have had more androgenic priming). Androgenic priming *in utero* may also account for the fact that, on average, males’ ring fingers are longer than their index fingers, whereas in females, the length of these two digits is more likely to be more equal. (This is sometimes called the D2:D4 ratio difference.) Several

studies assessing these digit ratios in both heterosexual and lesbian women have found that the latter have D2:D4 ratios closer to those of heterosexual men, which could (like their homosexual “brain sex”?) be the result of higher than usual testosterone circulating at some point *in utero* after their standard female reproductive structures have been laid down.

Another sex difference (in humans and other mammals) that may be the result of prenatal androgenic priming is a phenomenon called oto-acoustic emissions, or OAEs. These are minuscule clicks that are emitted by the inner ear, but on average less often at lower amplitude in males than females—unless those females happen to be lesbian, in which case their OAE pattern is much closer to that of heterosexual men. Again, the BOT “package deal” inference is that abnormal androgenic priming could be jointly responsible for the lesbian sexual orientation *and* their “more masculine” D2:D4 finger ratios *and* their “more masculine” OAE emissions pattern. However, neither D2:D4 ratios *nor* OAE emission patterns show any correlation with measures of *male* homosexuality. This is awkward for brain organization theory, which would presumably expect an obverse pattern—i.e., that male homosexual D2:D4 ratios and OAE patterns would more resemble those of heterosexual women. So far, no hypothesis has been advanced for this gender asymmetry of results.

*D. “Unplanned” experiments such as Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH)*

As noted in Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications, this intersex syndrome is caused by abnormally high amounts of adrenal androgen circulating during fetal development, resulting in partially to completely masculinized external genitals if the fetus is a girl. Whether wisely or not, plastic surgery is often used to “refeminize” the genitals shortly after birth—but of course that does not alter the fact that the girl had extra testosterone circulating not just during early genital development but also, presumably, at a later fetal stage when the brain was developing. This has been often been taken as a quasiexperimental test of the brain organization theorists’ “package deal” model. So BOT researchers ask this question: Compared to normal control girls (e.g., their own sisters), how likely is it that, despite being raised as girls, CAH females end up (a) acting more like boys in terms of gender roles in childhood, and (b) developing homosexual desires and/or identities and/or behaviors after puberty? According to BOT researchers’ reading of the relevant literature, all of these occur often enough to support the theory that higher fetal testosterone levels have “masculinized” not only CAH girls’ external genitals but probably also their brains. In sum, BOT adherents suggest that in the case of genitally normal lesbians, only prenatal *brain* masculinization has occurred—whereas in the case of CAH females, *both* genital sex *and* “brain sex” have been masculinized.

In the opinions of many other brain researchers, as well as of social psychologists, the evidence for such a conclusion is thin. For starters, the parents of girls with surgically “re-feminized” genitals obviously know about their child’s original anatomical ambiguity, and thus may or may not socialize their daughters in a standardly “feminine” way. Unlike a true clinical trial (for example, of an experimental drug), this quasiexperiment is not done “blind,” since those raising the child are not ignorant of her medical history. Hence nature and nurture are confounded: if the child is “tomboyish,” is this

due to her hormonal history, to expectations on the part of her parents, or both? We don't know.

Second, gender differences in behavior are historically and culturally a moving target, and they show more variation within than between the sexes. BOT researchers have underplayed such findings and, as it turns out, to their own detriment. For example, in normal populations of males and females, there is a modest but statistically significant difference in some spatial skills, in the direction of slightly higher average scores for males. (These are the sort of skills that help you figure out how to fit jigsaw puzzle pieces together, or to find your way through a maze.) BOT researchers attribute this to greater prenatal, testosterone-related brain organization in males, and the researchers hypothesize that it should therefore also occur in CAH females. But when assessing CAH females, most studies either show no advantage, or (more embarrassingly) *poorer* spatial skills in CAH females than in normal XX controls.<sup>251</sup> Nor are CAH girls reliably more aggressive, assertive, competitive, or socially dominant than their non-CAH peers. Nor are they more likely than girls in general to engage in rough-and-tumble play as children, or to prefer male playmates in childhood, or to seek out female sexual partners in adulthood. And all this is *despite* the fact that, having been born with masculinized genitals, there may be the expectation by parents and others who know of their condition that they *will* be stereotypically more like boys. Remember, you can't do a double blind experiment when you're raising children.<sup>252</sup>

One exception to these disconfirmations of brain organization theory is that CAH girls, compared to matched controls, are more likely to say they prefer stereotypical boys' toys, such as building blocks or vehicles, to toys like dolls or cooking sets. But here we run into two problems. The first is that what people say and what they do are often discrepant, and few studies

<sup>251</sup> This is also the case with CAH males, who, like CAH girls, have also had extra testosterone supposedly "organizing" their brains *in utero*, even though it has not affected their internal or external sexual anatomy. Some BOT theorists have tried to explain these counter-intuitive findings by suggesting that the "dose-response" relationship between testosterone and spatial skills is curvilinear (an inverted "U-shape") rather than linear. That is to say, the best spatial skills might be associated with *intermediate* rather than *very high* levels of testosterone, such as those associated with both boys and girls who have CAH. However, there is as yet no empirical study that has supported (or negated) this "auxiliary hypothesis." In the meantime, invoking it to "explain away" the unexpectedly low spatial abilities of CAH children suspiciously resembles the kind of refusal to accept falsifying results that BOT researchers originally leveled against Freudians.

<sup>252</sup> Because studies of girls with CAH are assumed to be the "ideal" quasiexperimental test of brain organization theory, hardly any developmental tracking has been done of the hormonally "opposite" syndrome—namely, XY children who have androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) from the time of fetal development and throughout life, and thus have been born with partially or completely feminized external genitals. BOT adherents assume that (a) these XY infants' brains were already "demasculinized" *in utero* (due to their androgen insensitivity) and (b) they continue to have a "demasculinized" (i.e., feminine) upbringing as girls, and hence are not suitable test subjects for BOT theory. (See Jacques Balthazart, *The Biology of Homosexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 6.) But as with the case of CAH girls, there may be expectancy effects in the parents. That is, if parents *know* that their child was born with an XY karyotype—and also with internal testicles (that may or may not have been removed postnatally), their "feminine" expectations of their (sex-reassigned) "daughter" may be muted. That XY females with complete AIS remain, on average, pretty strongly female-identified in spite of a possibly gender-ambiguous upbringing might arguably be even better evidence for brain organization theory than the convoluted case made on the basis of CAH girls.

have looked at what toys CAH girls actually *do* play with in comparison to normal controls. A 2003 study that did so (in an individualized playroom setting) found that CAH girls were indeed more likely than others to play with a toy garage, cars, and Lincoln logs than with baby dolls. This was taken as support for a version of BOT that sees people with testosterone-organized brains as more likely to be “systematizers” (interested in how things are put together, both concretely and abstractly) than “empathizers” (interested in understanding other people).<sup>253</sup> However, a closer look at the data shows that even the normal control girls spent three times as much time playing with the garage and cars as with the baby doll, and six times as much with the Lincoln logs. And at the end of the play period, when offered the choice of a doll, a car, or a ball to take home, they chose the doll least often, by a wide margin.

If you’re wondering why, in 2003 (well after girls started playing soccer in droves) BOT researchers were coding “masculine” and “feminine” toys the same way they did in the 1950s, that’s another problem. It reflects the essentialist presumption that gendered behaviors, along with gendered genitals and brains, are parts of a fixed package, so their measures can remain as unchanging as measures of genital anatomy. It presumes that normal girls with low testosterone can be only minimally influenced by cultural shifts to start preferring Lincoln logs to baby dolls (once an empathizer, always an empathizer) even when data gathered by BOT researchers indicate otherwise.

In the face of such contradictions some BOT researchers have over the years quietly changed their definitions of what is “natural.” For example, the BOT view of “natural” female sexuality originally excluded things like masturbation, erotic dreams, and initiating sex, all of which were regarded as quintessentially masculine. These days BOT researchers treat all of these as “natural” for both sexes. But they did not make this shift because they suddenly admitted that cultural forces (for example, the second wave of feminism) might be stronger than they previously thought. Instead, they underplayed the changes they’d made to accommodate those very same cultural forces, and they continued to embrace a biologically essentialist paradigm. The result is that current definitions of female sexuality are treated as equivalent to past ones for purposes of supporting the theory, when in fact they are more like apples and oranges.<sup>254</sup>

#### *E. Genetic studies*

As early as the mid-19th century, even before Gregor Mendel’s pea plant experiments suggested the existence of what we now call genes, scientists were taking advantage of another “experiment” of nature—namely, the occasional occurrence of twins—in an attempt to assess the relative effects of nature and nurture on human traits. Identical twins share each other’s genes virtually completely (and are always of the same sex) whereas fraternal

<sup>253</sup> A chief proponent of this theory is Cambridge researcher Simon Baron-Cohen. See his volume *The Essential Difference: Men, Women, and the Extreme Male Brain* (London: Penguin Science Press, 2004).

<sup>254</sup> Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, *Brainstorm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), chap. 6. Jordan-Young’s critique of brain organization theory is based on an analysis of approximately 300 studies and detailed interviews with two dozen BOT researchers.

twins (whether of the same or opposite sex) are no more genetically similar than ordinary sibling pairs. So, for example, it has been shown that if one of a pair of identical twins is diagnosed as schizophrenic, the likelihood that the other twin will be is close to 50 percent (and this holds true even for identical twins who have been reared separately). By contrast, the schizophrenia “concordance rate” (as it is called) for same-sex fraternal twins is only around 15 percent. The fact that the concordance rate is so much higher for identical than for fraternal twins suggests that nature (in the form of genetic factors) contributes considerably to the risk for schizophrenia. But the fact that the concordance rate for identical twins is *not* 100 percent, in spite of their identical genes, suggests that nurture (in the form of prenatal and/or postnatal environments) also plays a part.

Twins of either kind are, of course, a rare enough occurrence—and twin pairs in which one or both are homosexual are even rarer. As a result, early studies using twins to ascertain the contribution of nature vs. nurture to homosexuality relied on opportunistic sampling (e.g., finding twin pairs by word-of-mouth contacts from people who frequented gay bars or read gay newspapers) instead of randomly sampling the wider population. This made any conclusions about homosexual prevalence rates suspect, due to possible sampling bias and often small sample sizes. In opportunistic studies of this sort, the lowest homosexuality concordance rate for identical male twins has been 47 percent, and for females, 48 percent, suggesting (as in the example of schizophrenia) a strong genetic influence on sexual orientation.

More recent studies have tried to better approximate random sampling by using data banks called twin registries, of which there are several in modern Western countries, including the government-funded Australian Twin Registry. Since the early 1980s both identical and fraternal twin pairs of all ages and classes have registered at this office, resulting in a data bank of over 25,000 twin pairs that is fairly representative of the wider Australian population. A study team in the late 1990s surveyed over 4,000 sets of twins from this registry, from whom they obtained measures of sexual orientation. It found homosexuality concordance rates substantially lower than those reported by earlier opportunistic studies. They were only around 25 percent for both male and female identical twins, and less than half that for fraternal twins, showing that sampling methods matter a great deal to the outcome of such concordance studies.<sup>255</sup>

Another way to assess a possible genetic contribution to homosexuality is to do genealogical studies to see if homosexual persons have other homosexual relatives, and, if so, where in the family. Most of these studies show that a gay male has a higher probability of having a gay ancestor on his mother’s side than on his father’s side, and this has led to the suggestion that something on the gay male’s X chromosome (which all males get from their mothers) might be responsible. Recent molecular genetic studies have

<sup>255</sup> J. Michael Baily, Michael P. Dunne, and Nicholas P. Martin, “Genetic and Environmental Influences on Sexual Orientation and Its Correlates in an Australian Twin Sample,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2000), pp. 524-36. The authors point out that even though their sample was larger and more random than that of previous studies, it still yielded only a modest percentage of twin pairs in which at least one member identified as homosexual, which lessens the power of their concordance measures. They indicated interest in doubling the sample size for a future replication study, possibly by using twin registries from other countries.

tried to narrow down the area of the X chromosome that might be involved in such “maternal transmission” cases, and several have found that about 50 percent of the gay males with gay maternal (but not paternal) relatives share a common set of markers on the end of one arm of the X chromosome (called region Xq28). If that gay relative is a brother, the likelihood that both brothers share this regional marker goes up to over 60 percent.

Molecular geneticists point out that the Xq28 region is quite broad and probably contains many genes, none of which have been individually identified. Thus popular claims about the discovery of a “gay gene” are unjustified exaggerations. For one thing, complex behavioral (and even physical) traits almost always involve multiple, not single, genes. For another, those genes might not all be on the X chromosome. Recently, regions of some nonsex (autosomal) chromosomes have also been correlated to male homosexual orientation, with maternal *and* paternal contributions being about equal. By contrast, genealogical studies with lesbians have shown that they are more likely (but not exclusively) to have lesbian relatives on their *father’s* side of the family. These results are harder to interpret, because women inherit two X chromosomes—one from each parent—either or both of which might be influential. But we don’t know, because molecular-level studies of XX (and other) chromosomes in lesbians have not yet been done.<sup>256</sup>

A 2019 study published in *Science* examined genetic markers in nearly half a million participants and concluded that the influence of a person’s genetic makeup on their sexual orientation was about 32 percent and, further, that this genetic influence was not from one gene but many.<sup>257</sup> Although one of the largest studies of its kind, its sample was still not representative of the general population. Nevertheless, this study affirms findings of previous research that together raise questions about the genetic basis for claims that persons who experience same-sex attraction are “born that way.”<sup>258</sup>

*F. Progressive maternal immunization (or “the older brother effect”)*

Intriguingly, the factor that is the most consistently correlated with male homosexuality is one that is less often cited, and rather different from all the others that have been put forward. It is simply the number of older brothers that a man has. An analysis of fourteen birth-order studies involving a total of about 10,000 people has shown that for each older brother that a man has, the probability of his being gay (compared to the actual rate of gays in the population at large) increases by about 33 percent. The probability that the fourth boy in a family being gay becomes about twice as high as it would be if he were a firstborn son. The overall “older brother” effect on prevalence rates for homosexuality is actually fairly small, but still larger than other factors that have been studied. Moreover, it is not altered by the age spread of the boys in the family, or the number of sisters—older or younger—or the age of the parents when a boy is born, or the number of younger brothers any given man has. It is specifically and only correlated with the number of brothers previously born to the same mother. And it is specific to men: there is no increase

<sup>256</sup> Balthazart, chap. 10.

<sup>257</sup> Andrea Ganna et al., “Large-Scale GWAS Reveals Insights into the Genetic Architecture of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior”, *Science* (Aug. 30, 2019).

<sup>258</sup> Paul Sullins, “‘Born That Way’ No More: The New Science of Sexual Orientation, *Public Discourse* (Sept. 30, 2019); [thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/09/57342](http://thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/09/57342).

in the likelihood of homosexuality in women that correlates with the number of brothers or sisters she has, whether born before or after her.<sup>259</sup>

An explanation advanced by those studying this phenomenon is that with each successive fetal son a woman carries, she builds up some kind of as-yet-unidentified immune response (hence the term “maternal immunization effect”) that does not occur when she carries a daughter. This may seem intuitively implausible, but there is a well-attested clinical phenomenon that provides an analogy—namely, the accumulation of antibodies an Rh-negative woman builds up if she carries successive fetuses (of either sex) that have an Rh-positive blood type. The first child is hardly affected by this blood-type discrepancy, but later ones may be so severely affected by the accumulation of maternal antibodies from previous pregnancies that they need an entire postnatal transfusion of new blood to avoid life-threatening damage.

Just *why* a cumulative immunization effect might occur due to discrepant blood types in a mother and her successive children—or the sex discrepancy between a mother and her male children—remains a mystery. But the maternal immunization hypothesis in the case of “the older brother effect” suggests the possibility that some mothers who have successive sons accumulate antibodies against as-yet-unidentified male fetal proteins, and that these antibodies affect later sons’ fetal brain development in ways that might contribute to development of a postnatal homosexual orientation.<sup>260</sup> But for now, this remains an intriguing hypothesis without systematic empirical support. Moreover, when we turn to the research literature on *bisexuals*, the debate about the origins of sexual orientation becomes even more complex.

### III. Bisexuality and sexual fluidity

*Bisexuality* is formally defined as having romantic and/or sexual attraction to, and/or having sexual experiences with, both men and women, and/or self-identifying as bisexual. The definition is complicated, as is the definition of homosexuality—and for some of the same historical reasons. In the first half of the 20th century it was generally assumed that people were either completely heterosexual (the majority) or completely homosexual (a small minority). Scholars often referred to homosexuals as “inverts”—a term that reflects this essentialist, either/or way of thinking. Alfred Kinsey departed from this assumption with his development in 1948 of a seven-point sexual orientation scale, aimed at measuring self-reported sexual behavior, from “completely heterosexual” (0) to “completely homosexual” (6). Kinsey’s work confirmed that there were indeed degrees of orientation between these extremes, with point 3 (for example) indicating more or less equal sexual experience with both men and women. As with the study of homosexuality, the use of Kinsey’s scale (and others like it) was later expanded beyond measuring only bisexual *behavior* to measuring bisexual *romantic attraction* and *sexual desire*. Each of these may or may not coincide with others, just as they may or may not do so for self-identified homosexuals or heterosexuals.

<sup>259</sup> Raymond Blanchard, “Quantitative and Theoretical Analyses of the Relation between Older Brothers and Homosexuality in Men,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, Vol. 230 (2004), pp. 173-87.

<sup>260</sup> Anthony F. Bogaert and Malvina N. Skorska, “Sexual Orientation, Fraternal Birth Order, and the Maternal Immune Hypothesis: A Review of the Evidence,” *Front Neuroendocrinol*, Vol. 32 (2011), pp. 247-54.

However, bisexuality is still a comparatively under researched topic, for reasons both methodological and political. In both arenas, it is far from settled as to who should “count” as a “true” bisexual. Should we only count those who rate themselves a “3” (right in the middle of the Kinsey scale)? What about people who rate themselves as 1 or 2 (closer to, but not completely heterosexual)? Or those who rate themselves as a 5 or 6 (closer to, but not completely homosexual)? Are any or all of the former just trying to get the best of both worlds, keeping one foot in the safe, socially normative heterosexual camp, while dabbling—perhaps just out of curiosity—in the other (i.e., homosexual activity)? Are some or all of the latter complete but timid homosexuals, unwilling to embrace their true orientation because of the social and political burdens it may entail? On the research level, debates like these have resulted in inconsistent use of the Kinsey scale’s intermediate categories, and consequent difficulties in comparing results across studies. As a result, many sexual orientation researchers have simply avoided including bisexuals in their studies, either because of definitional problems or because they suspect bisexuality is too fluid a state to qualify as a “real” phenomenon.<sup>261</sup>

Moreover, activist groups for sexual minorities are often hostile to self-identified bisexuals, suspecting them of false consciousness about their “true” orientation or of being political opportunists trying to get the best of both worlds. Nevertheless, the continued sidelining of bisexuality as a research topic is puzzling, particularly since the 1994 *Sex in America* study found that in its large, population-based sample—and especially among women—significantly more people reported bisexual attractions than reported exclusive attraction toward their same sex.<sup>262</sup>

The challenge of recognizing and measuring bisexuality may also help to explain the underrepresentation of women in sexual orientation research. Neither the old, dichotomous categorization of sexual orientation nor Kinsey’s seven-point scale allows for the possibility that one’s self-categorization might change over time. The implicit assumption has been that adults will be stably homosexual, heterosexual, or (more vaguely) bisexual. Indeed, this is seen as one of the strongest reasons for expanding civil and ecclesiastical privileges to sexual minorities. (How can you penalize people for a condition that is innate and unchangeable?) It is also, as we have seen, a key assumption of brain organization theory. However, as documented by University of Utah psychologist Lisa Diamond, evidence of change over time, especially among women, “has circulated in the scientific literature for decades, though it has tended to be submerged in data rather than explicitly theorized.”<sup>263</sup> One set of post-Kinsey researchers, headed by American psychiatrist Fritz

<sup>261</sup> Earlier exceptions to this neglect of bisexuality include John Money, *Gay, Straight, and In-Between: The Sexology of Erotic Orientation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Douglas W. Pryor, *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>262</sup> Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). This finding has since been replicated in other national-sample surveys in other nations.

<sup>263</sup> Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 3. This book received the 2009 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues Distinguished Book Award by Division 44 of the American Psychological Association, which represents scholars and clinicians who work on these topics.

Klein, did develop a complex measure of sexual orientation in the early 1980s that included changes over time—but it never really caught on among researchers.<sup>264</sup> Most have continued to measure only current sexual behaviors, attractions, and/or identities on the assumption that the direction of one's sexual attraction is an early-developing and stable trait—due to nature, nurture, or the interaction of both. But, observes Diamond,

What few people realize is that these assumptions are based on men's experience, because most research on sexual orientation has been conducted on men. Although this model of [early developing, fixed adult] sexual orientation describes men fairly accurately, it does not always apply so well to women.<sup>265</sup>

*Sexual fluidity:* Diamond uses this term to refer specifically to women's somewhat greater flexibility regarding the targets of their romantic and sexual attraction. It refers to the finding that a significant percentage of women can, under certain circumstances, find themselves experiencing desire for a person not of the sex that they are usually attracted to—for example, a longtime lesbian may find herself unexpectedly attracted to a particular man, or a longtime heterosexual woman to a particular woman.<sup>266</sup> By contrast, the proportion of men showing such sexual-attraction fluidity is much smaller. Both gay and straight men are more likely to say they experience their sexual orientation as innate and fixed, while women—regardless of stated or felt orientation—are more apt to say that changed circumstances have led (or might lead) them on occasion to be strongly attracted to a person not of the sex they are usually drawn to.<sup>267</sup> Diamond notes that this known but rarely publicized gender asymmetry may be one reason for the dearth of research on women's sexual orientation:

It is interesting to note that early studies investigating biological causes of sexual orientation included both men and women. Over time, it appears, researchers shifted their emphasis to men because the findings for men were so much more consistent and promising than the findings for both sexes considered together.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>264</sup> Klein used a spreadsheet-like grid and had respondents rate themselves simultaneously on degrees of attraction, desire, and behavior—and how each of these had changed (if at all) over time. See Fritz Klein, Barry Sepekoff, and Timothy J. Wolf, "Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 14 (1-2), 1985, pp. 35-49.

<sup>265</sup> Diamond, p. 2. Chapter 1 of this book summarizes the previous social science research literature on this topic.

<sup>266</sup> See, for example, Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Douglas W. Pryor, *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Roy F. Baumeister, "Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity: The Female Sex Drive as Socially Flexible and Responsive," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 126 (2000), pp. 247-74.

<sup>267</sup> Diamond, chap. 2. See also Richard Lippa, "Sex Drives, Sociosexuality, and Height across 53 Nations: Testing Evolutionary and Social Structural Theories," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2009), pp. 631-51; and Roy F. Baumeister, "Gender and Erotic Plasticity: Sociocultural Influences on the Sex Drive," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2004), pp. 1468-79.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. The tendency to confine natural and social science research studies to male subjects extends well beyond the study of sexual orientation. The American National Institutes for Health finally set up a corrective to this skewed practice (in the form of its Office of Research on Women's Health) only in 1990. In spite of such efforts, it is still very common to do male-only research (whether with humans or animals) on the assumption that the results will be equally applicable to both sexes—thought few seem to think (if that is the theoretical assumption) that studies could equally well be done drawing on female-only populations. The same point applies to the underrepresentation of non-Caucasian ethnic groups in health (and other) research. See for example the four editorials under the heading "Putting Gender on the Agenda," *Nature*, Vol. 465, No. 7299 (June 10, 2010), pp. 665, 668-90.

Diamond (who is a self-identified lesbian) examined the assumption that one's direction of sexual attraction is both rigidly fixed and gender-symmetrical, by conducting a ten-year longitudinal study on almost a hundred same-sex attracted women—aged 16 to 23 at the outset, and self-identified as lesbian, bisexual, or simply “unlabeled”—and a comparison group of self-identified heterosexual women.<sup>269</sup> All were interviewed in depth about their sexual attractions, desires, and behavior five times over the ten-year period of the study, including assessment of these three indicators using a scale similar to Kinsey's. One of her main findings was that fully two-thirds of the women who initially identified as other than heterosexual changed their identity label at least once over the 10-year study period—usually as the result of a relationship they had entered between interviews. So, for example, some of the initially self-identified lesbians later reidentified as bisexual, unlabeled, or heterosexual, and some of the initially self-identified bisexuals or unlabeled later reidentified as lesbian or heterosexual.<sup>270</sup>

Diamond concluded that this was probably not evidence of an orientation change *per se*, since her respondents' attraction and desire measures tended to stay within a consistent and fairly narrow range throughout the study. That is, most originally self-defined lesbians continued to score in much the same range for same-sex attraction over the ten-year study, despite sometimes changing both their behavior and self-identity in a heterosexual direction. The same was true for those originally self-identified as bisexual or “unlabeled.”<sup>271</sup> While cautious about taking sides in the nature / nurture controversy concerning the origins and stability of sexual orientation (her own study was mainly an investigation over time of a large group of women's lived experiences), Diamond suggests that sexual orientation is not a single, unvarying point on a feeling scale that unvaryingly predicts which sex(es) a person will be attracted to. It is rather a generally stable range of feeling—hetero-, homo-, or bisexual—from which departures can occur. And when they do occur, they are likely to come as a surprise and not be seen as any more willful than one's normally experienced sexual orientation.

<sup>269</sup> Those of her respondents who preferred to be “unlabeled” might, in other circumstances, have identified themselves as “queer”—that is, rejecting not just dichotomies such as gay / straight but even the trichotomy of gay / straight / bisexual, and asserting instead complete randomness and / or arbitrary choice in human sexual attraction. Diamond is careful to point out that her overall study sample is not a random one, since recruiting (and funding for a 10-year study) a random sample of bisexuals would be prohibitively expensive. Her respondents were recruited mainly from northeast U.S. university classes and from ongoing LGBT events, so they are disproportionately middle class, educated, and Caucasian. Consequently, she regards this as a preliminary and exploratory study, though a needed one in light of the paucity of research on sexual orientation shifts across time.

<sup>270</sup> The capacity for sexual fluidity was also evident in Diamond's heterosexual controls, but the sample size was small (10 women) and revealed no instances of actual change in self-labeling during the ten-year study period.

<sup>271</sup> By the end of the ten-year study, Diamonds says, “It became quite clear that the [main, nonhetero- sexual] sample could be divided into two groups: 1) lesbians who had been exclusively attracted to and involved with women throughout the study, and who were least likely to change their identities; and 2) everyone else. [Regardless of initial self-labeling] these other participants consistently reported non-exclusive attractions, increasing other-sex behavior [i.e., emotional and / or sexual involvement with men], and were the ones most likely to change their identities. Clearly, the women who were changing their identities were not undergoing change in their orientations. They had been attracted to both women and men all along” (*Sexual Fluidity*, pp. 67-68).

What accounts for the possibility of such sexual fluidity and the fact that it is more common in women than in men, regardless of their dominant sexual orientation? Biology has a role, Diamond theorizes, but not in the testosterone-explains-everything fashion that is assumed by brain organization theory. Even if one accepts the BOT hypothesis that sexual orientation is caused by prenatal disruption in the circulation (or alternately the uptake) of testosterone in the developing brain, there are two other biological processes that may account for observed fluidity differences in men's and women's sexual expression, regardless of sexual orientation. The first has to do with the distinction between two types of sexual arousal—namely, *proceptivity* and *receptivity*. The second has to do with the distinction between *romantic love* and *sexual desire*—and the biological contributors to each. Again, these processes have been explored more extensively in animals than in people, though the animal models suggest human parallels. And in contrast to most sexual orientation research, females are given much more sustained attention.

#### IV. Proceptivity vs. receptivity

Mammalian researchers coined the terms *proceptivity* and *receptivity* to distinguish between two different modes of female sexual behavior. Some mammalian species engage in sexual behavior only when the female is “in heat.” While the males’ relatively steady levels of androgens keep them ready for sex just about any time, the females only go into estrus, or “heat,” around the time they are ovulating. Motivated by rising levels of estrogen (and smaller rises of androgens), females in the ovulatory period will actively seek out sexual contact with males, and then cease being sexually proactive as their estrogen levels decrease after ovulation. Thus in many mammalian species there is a gender-asymmetry in the process of “feeling horny”: more constant in males, but clearly cyclic in females. In either case, this hormonally driven, proactive sexual urge is what animal researchers have labeled *proceptivity*.

*Receptivity* is a term coined to describe another, specifically female, sexual behavior observed in many other mammals, including primates. In these species, a “receptive” female may respond to sexual overtures even if she is not in estrus. In other words, even if she is hormonally less motivated to initiate sexual contact, she may be induced by certain environmental cues to accept it. These nonovulating females are more choosy about potential mates than when they are in estrus, and the external cues inducing them to respond may be any or all of visual, vocal, smell, or tactile stimuli associated with a preferred male.<sup>272</sup> And in humans, social and cultural factors interact with biology to facilitate even more variation in sexual behavior so that the processes of proceptivity and receptivity operate in both sexes. “In fact,” Diamond observes, “any particular instance of sexual desire probably involves some degree of each. A sudden, automatic feeling of lust might be primarily driven by proceptivity, whereas a gradual increase in sexual arousal while

<sup>272</sup> Frank A. Beach, “Sexual Attractivity, Proceptivity, and Receptivity in Female Mammals,” *Hormones and Behavior*, Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 105-38; Kim Wallen, “Desire and Ability: Hormones and the Regulation of Female Sexual Behavior,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Review*, Vol. 14 (1990), pp. 233-41.

watching a romantic movie might be primarily driven by [receptivity]. Most experiences fall somewhere between these two extremes.<sup>273</sup>

As in other mammals, normal-range levels of testosterone in men correlate with non-cyclic [read: fairly steady] proceptive sexual feelings, while cyclic, ovulatory rises in estrogen are correlated with the same urges in women.<sup>274</sup> Interestingly, men who have lost testicular function (due to chemical castration, disease, or other damage) and who thus have the lowest possible levels of testosterone, also lose their proceptive desire: they cease to have spontaneous sexual urges, and they no longer seek out sexual stimuli or activities. But they are still capable of receptivity—that is, they can be aroused when presented with familiar sexual stimuli. This is further evidence of the role learning plays in human sexual arousal.<sup>275</sup> In addition, the balance of proceptive and receptive influences may be different for most women and men, Diamond suggests:

If female proceptivity peaks for only a few days per month, then during the rest of the time a woman's sexual desire will be primarily driven by [receptivity] and therefore will be dependent on her exposure to various situational cues. These cues should have comparatively less influence on men's day-to-day sexual desires because men have such consistent levels of hormonally driven proceptivity. This is not to say that men's sexuality is not influenced by situational factors and cues—it most certainly is! Yet the balance of influences is different for men versus women, in that situational factors play a bigger role for women.<sup>276</sup>

Diamond seems to concur with brain organization theorists that sexual orientation results from standard or nonstandard hormonal circulation in the prenatal brain. But she theorizes that it affects only the proceptive—not the receptive—aspects of sexual attraction.<sup>277</sup> From a purely reproductive

<sup>273</sup> Diamond, p. 206. Note that she uses repeated qualifiers (“might,” “probably”), which she continues to do throughout her report. This is to remind readers that even though her theory of sexual fluidity is more nuanced than brain organization theory, it is likewise based largely on animal models, the application of which to humans is still underresearched. Likewise, her theory must rely on less-intrusive research techniques than those that can be used with animals, thus yielding more correlational than causal findings.

<sup>274</sup> D.B. Adams, A.R. Gold, and A.D. Burt, “Rise in Female Sexual Activity at Ovulation and Its Suppression by Oral Contraceptives,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 299 (1978), pp. 1145-50. However, increased testosterone levels are less reliable predictors of proprioceptive arousal in women: clinically, they work for some women who are experiencing low levels of libido, and not for others. Moreover, oral contraceptives change the nature of the menstrual cycle, such that ovulation—and hence the increase in proprioceptive arousal that would commonly accompany it—do not occur.

<sup>275</sup> Marie Kwan, Walter J. Greenleaf, Jay Mann, Lawrence Crapo, and Julian M. Davidson, “The Nature of Androgen Action on Male Sexuality: A Combined Laboratory-Self Report Study on Hypogonadal Men,” *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, Vol. 57 (1983), pp. 557-62. The receptivity-inducing stimuli “could be almost anything—different images, environments, smells, or ideas—and they will vary not only from culture to culture but from individual to individual, as a function of someone's particular pattern of sexual experiences, expectations, memories, and attitudes” (Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity*, p. 207).

<sup>276</sup> Diamond, p. 209. For a review of studies examining these differing (average) differences in men's and women's arousal patterns, see Baumeister, “Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity.”

<sup>277</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, Diamond writes, “It makes sense for proceptivity [in both men and women] to be intrinsically targeted to other-sex partners, to ensure that these desires result not only in sexual activity, but *reproductive* sexual activity. In this model, homosexual and bisexual orientations represent (at least in some cases) intrinsic deviations from this program” (*Sexual Fluidity*, p. 210).

point of view, if enough males and females have “proceptive sex” when both members of the pair are optimally aroused (on average, more cyclically for females, more steadily for males) that would suffice to keep the human race going. Receptivity, by contrast, is “gender-neutral,” in the sense that it works alongside (but largely independent of) the strong proceptive urges that ensure sexual reproduction. It is far less dependent on hormones like estrogen and testosterone than on conditioning to a wide range of cultural, situational, and interpersonal cues—music, clothing, interpersonal compatibility, frequency of contact, etc. And since women—whatever their dominant sexual orientation—usually spend less time than men in a state of urgent proceptive arousal, they will likely develop a wider range of conditioned receptive responses to such cues. As a result, Diamond suggests, regardless of their dominant sexual orientation, we should expect “more women than men to report more abrupt disjunctures in their desires and behaviors as a result of changes in their environments and relationships; and more women than men to report that their same-sex desires are linked to a specific individual—one of the most potent and common cues for same-sex receptivity. [And] this is exactly what has been found in extensive research on female sexuality.”<sup>278</sup>

## V. Romantic love vs. sexual desire

A second factor relevant to sexual attraction fluidity in women is the distinction between romantic love and sexual desire. Here again, biological research with animals dominates, so generalizations to humans should be taken as tentative. That said, there is a recent and substantial body of research on two neuropeptide hormones—*oxytocin* and *vasopressin*—that originate separately from sex hormones and that appear to be implicated in long-term “pair bonding” in mammals, including humans. Variations on these two hormones appear in all vertebrates, and they are related to each other both in location (the genes responsible for them are in the same chromosomal region) and in biochemical structure (suggesting a common ancestor gene). In the first half of the 20th century, two of oxytocin’s important functions in female mammals—including humans—were identified. Specifically, oxytocin is released during labor to aid birth contractions, and later during breastfeeding to promote the milk “let down” reflex. Later studies showed that oxytocin, while not implicated in sexual arousal *per se*, is released during orgasm in both men and women, and contributes to the sense of well-being and connection that follows.<sup>279</sup> A vital function of vasopressin, also identified around the mid-20th century, is to regulate water retention in bodily tissues—so it is often referred to as the “antidiuretic hormone.” But recent mammalian research suggests that it also plays a role in facilitating pair bonding.

Much of the work on these hormones’ relationship to pair bonding originated in the field observation of two intriguing species of small rodents known as mountain voles and prairie voles. The first of these, as is the case in many rodent species, mates promiscuously; but its cousins—the prairie voles—form permanent monogamous bonds. Further examination

<sup>278</sup> Diamond, p. 212.

<sup>279</sup> See, for example, Marie S. Carmichael, Valerie L. Warburton, Jean Dixon, and Julian M. Davidson, “Cardiovascular, Muscular, and Oxytocin Responses during Human Sexual Activity,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1994), pp. 54-79.

showed that these behavioral differences are correlated with differences in the amounts of oxytocin and vasopressin available to each of the types of voles, as well as differences in the concentration of brain receptors for these two hormones.<sup>280</sup> Later experimental work showed that chemical tinkering with these hormones could reverse the mating patterns of the two species: experimentally reduce them in the prairie voles, and they will start mating promiscuously like their mountain cousins. Experimentally inflate them in the mountain voles, and they will abandon their promiscuous ways and settle down in monogamous pairs.<sup>281</sup>

In both humans and other mammals, oxytocin is implicated in the formation of other social bonds too, particularly those associated with caregiving. Analogous to the experiments with reproductive pairs of voles, administering oxytocin enhances infant-parent attachment, whereas chemical interference with its natural levels disrupts the formation of such bonds. And the causal pathways run both ways: oxytocin leads to caregiving behavior, and caregiving behavior (e.g., physical closeness and tactile activities such as licking) leads to an increase in circulating levels of oxytocin, both in the caregiving animal and the one cared for.<sup>282</sup> In fact, oxytocin levels are associated with more general social affiliation in both adult humans and other mammals, and even in cross-species relationships, such as those between humans and pets.<sup>283</sup>

<sup>280</sup> While both oxytocin and vasopressin influence pair bonding—or its absence—in both male and female voles, oxytocin has a greater effect on females while vasopressin appears to be more influential in males.

<sup>281</sup> Thomas R. Insel, James T. Winslow, Zuoxin Chan, and Larry J. Young, "Oxytocin, Vasopressin, and the Neuroendocrine Basis of Pair Bond Formation," *Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology*, Vol. 449 (1998), pp. 215-24.

<sup>282</sup> In humans, hormonally mediated attachment processes characterize both maternal and paternal parents to a greater degree than in other mammals. See for example Sandra J. Berg and Katherine E. Wynne-Edwards, "Changes in Testosterone, Cortisol, and Estradiol Levels in Men Becoming Fathers," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (2001), pp. 582-92; Johanna H. Hume and Katherine E. Wynne-Edwards, "Parental Responsiveness in Bipotential Dwarf Hamsters Does Not Require Estradiol," *Hormonal Behavior*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2006), pp. 533-44; Ilana Gordon, Orana Zagoory-Sharon, James F. Lechman, and Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and the Development of Parenting in Humans," *Biological Psychiatry*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2010); and Adrian V. Jaeggi, Benjamin C. Trumble, Hillard S. Kaplan, and Michael Curven, "Salivary Oxytocin Increases Concurrently with Testosterone and Time Away from Home in Tsimane Hunters," *Biology Letters*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2015).

<sup>283</sup> For a review of the pertinent literature, see, for example, C. Sue Carter and E. Barry Keverne, "The Neurobiology of Social Affiliation and Pair Bonding," in J. Pfaff, A.P. Arnold, A.E. Etgen, and S.E. Farbach, eds., *Hormones, Brain and Behavior*, Vol. 1, pp. 299-377 (New York: Academic Press, 2002). As a cautionary note, it should be said that the clinical psychological use of oxytocin with humans may be proceeding at too fast a pace. In light of the genomic discovery that persons with autism or schizophrenia often have defects in genes responsible for oxytocin production and/or reception, it became something of a vogue to administer intranasal oxytocin in order to facilitate these persons' social skills, with varying levels of success. However, this practice has been tested only over short-term administration of the hormone, and recent animal research has shown that long-term administration of oxytocin in voles eventuates in the reverse effect: it impairs their adult social relationships, for reasons not yet completely understood. This suggests that enthusiasm for "the love hormone" (as oxytocin is popularity called) should be tempered pending further research into its long-term (as opposed to short-term) effects, also in humans. See Karen L. Bales, Allison M. Perkeybile, Olivia G. Conley, Meredith H. Lee, Caleigh D. Guoynes, Griffin M. Downing, Catherine R. Yun, Marjorie Solomon, Suma Jacob, and Sally P. Mendoza, "Chronic Intranasal Oxytocin Causes Long-Term Impairments in Partner Preference Formation in Male Prairie Voles," *Biological Psychiatry*, Vol. 74, Iss. 3 (Aug. 2013).

Although it makes intuitive sense that male-female pair bonding (mediated by hormones like oxytocin and vasopressin) would enhance sexual desire, and sexual desire (mediated by hormones like testosterone and estrogen) would enhance pair bonding, the two systems do not necessarily have a common biological origin. Many biologists and social scientists argue that the strong emotions associated with human pair bonding—what we call romantic love—originated “not in the context of mating, but in the context of infant-caregiver attachment, a biologically based bonding program that evolved to ensure that highly vulnerable mammalian infants stayed close to their caregivers to improve their odds of survival.”<sup>284</sup> Attachment formation between primate (including human) infants and their caregivers is characterized by the infant’s increasingly selective preference for the primary caregiver, regular pursuit of physical contact with the caregiver, increasing distress when separated, and a gradual reduction of distress when contact is resumed.<sup>285</sup> And in the best-case scenario, these emotions become reciprocal, which is why we often speak of parents “falling in love” with their infants.

What has this to do with sexual fluidity and its greater likelihood in women? Note that the above-mentioned emotions (intense fixation, frequent contact, distress over separation, and relief when reunited) also typify romantic attachments between adults. This is why, in the late 1980s, social psychologists Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver proposed that human romantic love—long assumed to be driven simply by the same hormonal processes as sexual desire—might instead be a later-life version of infant-caregiver attachment.<sup>286</sup> Indeed, it can be observed in close, same-sex adolescent and adult friendships, and even in friendships between prepubescent children, even though they are still in a state of sex-hormonal latency. This widespread occurrence of “romantic” or “passionate” attachment beyond sexually involved adult pairs has led Lisa Diamond to describe it in terms of “the unorientation of love.”<sup>287</sup>

Going from attachment-based love to sexual desire seems to be a “biosocial-psychological” process in the case of sexually fluid women. For starters, cultures vary in the degree to which they encourage the expression of intimacy, and for the past century or more Western society has assigned women—much more than men—to be the interpersonal attachment specialists. If you combine this with the asymmetry of proceptive desire (more cyclic in women, more steady in men), then, Diamond suggests, women will often spend much of their receptive-stage time developing nonsexual attachment bonds, often with people of both sexes. “If so,” she writes, then

it makes sense that when individuals form unexpected attachments to people who are the wrong gender for their sexual orientation, they might also end up developing sexual desires for these individuals. Because these “cross-orientation” desires should be dependent on the emotional and biological

<sup>284</sup> Diamond, p. 224 (emphases added).

<sup>285</sup> John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (London: Tavistock, 1979).

<sup>286</sup> Cindy Hazan and Philip R. Shaver, “Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 52 (1987), pp. 511-24.

<sup>287</sup> Diamond, pp. 223-31. On the breadth of romantic (or passionate) love, also among prepubertal children, see Elaine Hatfield, “Passionate and Companionate Love,” in Robert J. Sternberg and Michael Barnes, *The Psychology of Love* (New Haven, Conn.; Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 191-217.

processes of attachment, they should be specific to the relationship in question. This . . . is exactly what so many women have described, in my own study as well as in many others. It certainly fits with [their reports] of being first attracted to the person, not the gender. . . . [This] may in fact be the psychological experience of attachment formation, with its associated experiences of preoccupation, fixation, separation distress, possessiveness, and so on.<sup>288</sup>

That this process can happen in men as well as in women is attested to by a substantial minority of same-sex attracted men married to heterosexual women who say that their wives were (and are) the only women for whom they had developed sexual attraction.<sup>289</sup> But Diamond hypothesizes that women's greater sexual-attraction fluidity may be facilitated by their higher levels of estrogen, because estrogen stimulates the release of oxytocin from the hypothalamus and also increases uptake in its brain receptors.<sup>290</sup>

Given the ethical restrictions on doing intrusive experimental research on humans, doing a longitudinal study is regarded as at least a quasiexperimental way of getting at causal connections, in that there are "before" and "after" measures of the variables (e.g., relationship involvement and direction of sexual attraction) thought to be causally connected. However, unlike laboratory studies with animals, the human participants in a longitudinal study cannot be randomly assigned to treatment conditions (nor randomly drawn from a wide societal population), so such studies remain "quasi"—not true—experiments. Diamond is well aware of—and regularly affirms—these limitations to her research, seeing it as provisional and suggestive of further work to be done on sexual orientation with more representative groups of people. But in addition to its use of longitudinal methodology—gathering repeated measures across time to demonstrate the fluidity of sexual attraction—it helps to correct the skewed attention to males over females in sexuality research, and it helps to bring attention to other hormonal systems (those associated with attachment behavior and romantic love) that may interact in complex ways with both sex (male or female) and sexual orientation. In this way it challenges and complicates brain organization theory—with its singular focus on the supposed effects of testosterone—while also acknowledging the importance of cultural forces on the shaping and expression of sexuality.

## **Appendix B**

### **Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications**

#### **I. Introduction and background**

"Standard" (or "normal") sex development in both females and males is usually taken to mean the alignment of certain biological elements in a developmental sequence, from conception to birth, through childhood,

<sup>288</sup> Diamond, pp. 230-31.

<sup>289</sup> See, for example, Joel Kort, "Straight Women and Their Gay Husbands," *Psychology Today* (Jan. 14, 2015); Warren Throckmorton and Mark A. Yarhouse, "Sexual Identity Therapy: A Framework for Addressing Sexual Identity Issues"; [sitframework.com](http://sitframework.com) (accessed 9-12-2017).

<sup>290</sup> Alexandra Acevedo-Rodriguez, Shalla K. Mani and Robert J. Handa, "Oxytocin and Estrogen Receptor *Beta* in the Brain: A Review," *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, Vol. 6 (2015), Art. 160.

adolescence, and then adulthood. A certain pattern of sex chromosomes (XX or XY) at conception leads to a differing balance of hormones (e.g., estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone), a differing pattern of internal sex organs (e.g., ovaries, uterus, and fallopian tubes in females; testicles, seminal vesicles, and prostate gland in males), and at birth a set of differing external genitals (e.g., clitoris, labia, and vagina in females; penis and scrotal sac in males). When childhood merges into puberty, a new surge of hormones—again in different ratios for girls and boys—leads to differing secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts in girls, beards in boys) and to the possibility of parenthood, as ova mature on a cyclic basis in girls, and boys begin to produce sperm.

Of course, this summary of sex development masks the sheer complexity of the pre- and postnatal processes that take place from conception to standard adult reproductive maturity. To understand various disorders of sex development and their medical, psychological, legal, and pastoral implications, it helps to know in more detail the process of standard reproductive development. It is when that course of development takes a different turn—for one reason or another, at one developmental stage or another—that a disorder of sex development results.

Both a mother's and father's gametes (ova and sperm) are needed to conceive a child. The mother's ovum—always formed from an X chromosome—combines with a sperm from the father that is formed from *either* an X or a Y chromosome. If two X-chromosome gametes (one from each parent) unite, the eventual child is usually an anatomically and physiologically normal girl. If an X and a Y combine (from mother and father respectively), the child is usually a normal boy. A father's gametes are thus responsible for the sex of the child: a father's X plus a mother's X results in a girl; a father's Y plus a mother's X results in a boy.

The developmental processes by which this happens are complex and not neatly separable along parallel "X-directed" or "Y-directed" paths *in utero*. Right from conception, normal male reproductive development requires something more than just a Y chromosome: it requires vital cooperation from a range of genes on the X chromosome. In addition, reproductive development in both sexes also needs the help of many genes not located on the sex chromosomes at all, but rather on various nonsex (or "autosomal") chromosomes.

However, none of this begins to happen until toward the second trimester of pregnancy because, for the first several weeks, male and female embryos share a single, undifferentiated developmental platform. Indeed, if we were to examine a tiny fetus that miscarried around the ninth week of pregnancy, we could not tell by examining either its external or internal structures whether it was female or male.

Externally, we would see only an undifferentiated "urethral groove" and a bump called the "genital tubercle" that is neither penis nor clitoris. Internally, we would find neither testes nor ovaries. Instead, attached to the indifferent gonads would be two sets of tubes—one looking like a tiny set of combs (the Wolffian ducts), the other like a pair of slender trumpets (the Mullerian ducts). Wolffian ducts are the precursors of male internal reproductive structures, such as the prostate gland and the seminal vesicles. Mullerian ducts are the precursors of female internal reproductive structures, such as

the uterus and fallopian tubes. But the normally developing fetus with XX or XY chromosomes comes preloaded, so to speak, with both. And that is why almost all of us have vestigial remnants of one or the other on our gonads even now.

It is at this point that standard male/female sexual differentiation begins to take place, continuing in a step-wise (or we could also say “domino”) fashion until birth. In other words, certain processes need to occur at the right time and in the right order for a standard newborn girl or boy to result. But these processes do not occur in a completely symmetrical fashion for boys and girls. Biological research seems to show that, for humans as well as other mammals, the fertilized zygote’s default setting is to produce a female. In other words, male development requires certain additions along the way if it is not to default toward the female direction.

The first of these asymmetries occurs in those early, bean-shaped “indifferent gonads.” If they are to become testes, an additional substance (known as H-Y antigen, which is controlled by genes on the Y chromosome) needs to kick in. In the rare instances where this does not occur, the indifferent gonads will become ovaries, regardless of the XY sex-chromosomal makeup of the fetus. Moreover, there does not seem to be an analogous antigen needed for the indifferent gonads in an XX fetus to begin developing as ovaries: around the eighth week, they just begin to do so without any (so far known) additional input.

Only about a week later, a second asymmetry occurs when the tiny Wolffian or Mullerian ducts are ready to start developing, respectively, as male or female internal sexual anatomy. With the help of another biochemical substance (called MIS, or Mullerian-Inhibiting Substance), the comb-like Wolffian ducts in the male fetus start differentiating into structures like the prostate gland and seminal vesicles, while the accompanying Mullerian ducts (the precursors of internal female development) regress until they become vestigial remnants on top of the now-developing testes. In female fetuses the male-leaning Wolffian ducts regress and become vestigial remnants on the now-developing ovaries, apparently without any added biochemical help, while the uterus and fallopian tubes also begin to form.

If these standard processes occur without interference, the now-differentiated ovaries and testes will begin to produce sex hormones, one of whose main jobs (from about the ninth week) is to turn the undifferentiated external genital area of the male fetus into a penis and scrotum. This too is a complex process. It is misleading to refer to these reproductive hormones (which include testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone) as “female” or “male,” since all of them are normally produced, though in different ratios, by both ovaries and testes—and in the case of testosterone, in smaller amounts by the adrenal glands. In optimal amounts, testosterone is crucial at this stage for the formation of the external genitals and the prostate gland in the male fetus—but also for egg development in the ovaries of the female, showing again how interwoven are the processes of girls’ and boys’ prenatal sex development.

At this stage, a third asymmetry between male and female development occurs. Testosterone—normally produced in greater quantities by a male than a female fetus—is needed to masculinize a boy’s originally undifferentiated external genitals. But to complete the process, a kind of “super

testosterone”—called DHT, or dihydrotestosterone—must also be added. DHT is formed when a certain enzyme acts on ordinary testosterone, and in very rare cases, when DHT is absent, the fetal male’s penis is apt to be small and also to lack the seam underneath it that normally encloses the earlier, open urethral groove into the scrotal sac.

If the above-described fetal developmental processes proceed in the usual male or female direction, they will result in standard male or female internal/external anatomy at birth, and in the physiological potential for fertility in adulthood. Knowing about these processes in somewhat more detail should now make it easier to understand how they may depart from the norm to become various disorders of sex development. It is customary to divide these conditions between those that result from ‘chromosomal anomalies,’ which occur before the zygote even becomes a developing embryo, and those that result from “hormonal anomalies,” which occur in the postconception stages of development.

More will be said below about the frequencies of various disorders of sex development, but overall, some estimates suggest that a disorder of sex development of some sort may be found in as many as one in a hundred people (see Table 1). Estimates vary, depending on the populations sampled and the sampling methods used. Either way, these conditions are frequent enough that it is likely almost all of us know someone who has one, even if we have not been told about it.

**Table 1. Selected Chromosomal and Hormonal Disorders of Sexual Development and Estimated Incidence**

Chromosomal DSDs		Hormonal DSDs	
Name	Estimated Incidence	Name	Estimated Incidence
De la Chapelle Syndrome	1 in 20,000	Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome	1 in 20,000
Jacob’s Syndrome	1 in 500	Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia	1 in 15,000
Klinefelter Syndrome	1 in 500	5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency	“very rare” <sup>291</sup>
Metafemale Syndrome	1 in 1,100		
Swyer Syndrome	1 in 80,000		
Turner Syndrome	1 in 2,000		

## II. Sex chromosomal anomalies

A sex chromosomal anomaly is a condition in which the affected person is conceived with other than the standard number of sex chromosomes for a female (XX) or male (XY). This can also happen with nonsex chromosomes: most of us, for example, know about Down Syndrome, or Trisomy 21, where an individual has three instead of the standard two copies of chromosome 21.

### A. Turner Syndrome (*Monosomy X, or X0*)

Earlier we mentioned that a zygote with a single Y (but no X) chromosome cannot survive in utero beyond that stage, but that the opposite case—persons who have only a single X (but no accompanying X or Y)

<sup>291</sup> G. Kumar and J.J. Barboza-Meca, “5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency,” *National Center for Biotechnology Information* (Mar. 24, 2019); [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK539904](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK539904).

chromosomes are not uncommon. Known as Turner Syndrome, it is estimated to occur in 1:2,000 or 3,000 births. Its fetal developmental journey is largely that of a standard female in terms of both internal and external anatomy—except that the ovaries are underdeveloped, often to the point of being just streaks of undifferentiated tissue. Streak ovaries usually cannot produce sufficient amounts of hormones like estrogen and progesterone needed for later breast development, fertility, and menstrual cycle regulation. Children with Turner Syndrome tend to be short in stature and to have broader than average chests and a weblike neck, but are otherwise not noticeably different from their female peers. They are, however, at risk for heart defects, thyroid disease, diabetes, and/or other immune disorders, and a small percentage exhibit signs of mild cognitive retardation.

Until the advent of hormone replacement therapy, Turner syndrome children were unlikely to undergo puberty, and thus were not likely to menstruate or develop breasts. Estrogen replacement therapy has changed this, and it is even possible for some Turner persons to gestate a child via egg donation. The possibility of such interventions is usually welcomed, as most Turner persons have a quite stable female gender identity. Is a Turner person, with only single-X chromosomes, someone who *should* be routinely expected to undergo estrogen replacement therapy? After all, the original missing chromosome was just as likely to have been a Y as an X, so perhaps testosterone therapy beginning in adolescence should be a routine possibility for Turner persons who might prefer to look and function more like a male. Or what if no hormone intervention at all is preferred, no matter what the result might be for adult bodily appearance?

#### *B. Metafemale Syndrome (Trisomy X, or XXX)*

At the other extreme from X0 Turner persons are women who have an extra X chromosome—hence the designation XXX, or Trisomy X (analogous to Trisomy 19 for Down Syndrome persons). More rarely, this syndrome can appear as XXXX, or even XXXXX. Its frequency is estimated to be about 1:1,000 persons and (like Down Syndrome) is more likely to occur in the children of older mothers. Women with Trisomy X (or its variations) tend to have longer legs and more slender torsos, but otherwise present as standard females in terms of internal and external sexual anatomy, secondary sex characteristics, fertility, and childbearing potential. Historically, before the advent of microbiology, these women would not have been identified as out of the ordinary at any stage of their life, though they did (and do) have a greater than ordinary chance of premature ovarian failure.

#### *C. Jacob's Syndrome (XYY or Metamales)*

As females can be conceived with one or more extra X chromosomes, so can males be conceived with an extra Y chromosome (XYY) or, more rarely, two (XYYY). The frequency of XYY males is estimated at between 1:1,000 and 1:2,000, and, like females with extra X chromosomes, there is little to distinguish them from standard chromosomal males, other than the likelihood of being taller than average, and sometimes having mild cognitive developmental delays. The same is not true for (the very rare) XYYY males, who are more likely to have skeletal abnormalities, delayed bodily development, and much lower intelligence scores than either multi-X females or males who have only one or one extra Y chromosome.

Since mandated chromosome checks of newborns are usually just the ones needed to identify intersex syndromes with serious health implications (of which XYY is not one), a large percentage of XYY males live ordinary lives not even knowing about their extra Y.

#### D. *Klinefelter Syndrome (XXY males)*

Klinefelter Syndrome males have an extra X chromosome (or, much more rarely, an extra two or three). The classic XXY version is one of the more common sex chromosomal anomalies, with a frequency of about 1:500. Like XYY males, XXY males are not usually identified by a chromosomal check in the delivery room, and so may go through childhood or even beyond without being detected. Their external appearance at birth is standardly male, because although their extra X chromosome results in a lowered level of fetal testosterone, it is not usually low enough to visibly affect external genital appearance.

However, lower testosterone production also occurs prior to puberty, with the result that secondary sex characteristic development is slow or incomplete. Klinefelter adolescents may have less developed musculature, less facial and bodily hair, weaker bones and somewhat broader hips. They may also develop breast tissue (a condition known as gynecomastia). By adulthood their appearance is similar enough to fit within the standard male range, though they tend to be above average in height, and to have a lanky build and youthful facial appearance, or alternately, a rounded body with some continuing gynecomastia. They also have reduced (or sometimes no) sperm production, and it may only be if they are unsuccessful in fathering children that their XXY condition is detected.

Klinefelter syndrome is not life threatening, though it does increase the risk of health problems more typical of women, such as breast cancer, osteoporosis, and autoimmune disorders. In terms of gender identity, most people with Klinefelter syndrome identify as male and are less apt to be homosexual than somewhat asexual. Many of their physical challenges can be alleviated by testosterone replacement therapy. Their biggest challenge may be gaining acceptance by others despite having less than stereotypically masculine appearance and interests.

#### E. *XX Males (de la Chapelle Syndrome)*

Strictly speaking, the last two syndromes to be discussed are not sex chromosomal anomalies in the sense that they do not involve nonstandard numbers of sex chromosomes. But because they can be clinically mistaken for other sex chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, it seems appropriate to deal with them here.

From the earlier discussion about standard male development, you may recall that a gene on the Y chromosome, called the SRY (or sex-determining region of the Y) is a necessary—but not sufficient—condition to produce a standard male child at birth. But in rare instances (about 1:20,000), this area of the Y chromosome breaks off during meiosis (when XY cells divide to form the two types of sperm in the father's testes) and attaches to its neighboring X-chromosome instead. If the SRY-added X chromosome from the father fertilizes a standard X chromosomal egg from the mother, the result will be what is called an XX (or de la Chapelle syndrome) male.

De la Chapelle, or XX, males are born with a penis and testes but no internal female reproductive structures, such as ovaries and uterus. However, their testes are sterile and sometimes remain undescended after birth, and the urethra sometimes appears on the underside—rather than on the tip—of the penis (a condition known as hypospadias). Yet most de la Chapelle children have the external appearance of a standard male, and almost always grow up with a male gender identity. The condition is often not diagnosed until after puberty, when the smaller size of their testes, their failure to produce sperm, and the development of breast tissue become causes for concern. Sometimes, in the absence of further tests, they may be misdiagnosed as XXY (Klinefelter) males.

#### *F. XY Females (Swyer Syndrome, or XY Gonadal Dysgenesis)*

Swyer syndrome is more or less the opposite of de la Chapelle's syndrome, in that it also involves problems with the Y chromosome's SRY gene—not when that gene is transferred to the X chromosome, but rather when it fails to function on its own Y chromosome due to certain genetic mutations. It is rarer than de la Chapelle's syndrome, with a frequency of about 1:80,000. Swyer fetuses, despite their XY chromosomal makeup, illustrate the principle that, in the absence of a functional SRY gene, the embryo will travel along the female path, developing a uterus, fallopian tubes, cervix, vagina, and standard female external genitalia at birth. However, Swyer syndrome gonads are neither ovaries nor testes, but merely “streak gonads” which can produce neither gametes nor sex hormones of any kind.

Swyer newborns are rarely diagnosed as such at birth, and are raised as girls, typically with female gender identification. When menstruation and female secondary sex characteristics (other than pubic hair, thanks to the adrenal testosterone) fail to appear, an initial diagnosis of (X0) Turner syndrome, or AIS (androgen insensitivity syndrome, which is discussed below) may be considered. But when karyotyping reveals an XY chromosomal pattern, and internal body imaging tests confirm the presence of streak gonads, a diagnosis of Swyer syndrome may be made. As with most intersex conditions, this syndrome is not life threatening. But because the streak gonads are at some risk of becoming cancerous, they are often surgically removed.

As in Turner syndrome, both menstruation and breast development can be induced in these XY females with estrogen and progesterone replacement therapy, and some may become pregnant with a donor egg or embryo.

### **III. Sex hormonal anomalies**

Sex hormonal anomalies do not involve nonstandard numbers of sex chromosomes but occur in persons conceived with the usual XY male or XX female sex chromosomal pattern. They begin instead when something hormonally unusual happens during postembryonic fetal development. In a sense, there are both fewer and more of them compared to sex chromosomal anomalies. In their classic forms, there are three syndromes—but all three come in various gradations, and thus are divided into what are called “partial” and “complete” types. Indeed, part of the problem of making accurate frequency estimates of these syndromes may stem from ongoing discussions about how (or if at all) to subdivide the “partial” types into more and less severe forms. Moreover, of all the disorders of sex development (both

chromosomal and hormonal), these three are probably the most heavily “politicized” in discussions of sex and gender.

A. *Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) in XY fetuses*

Intersex persons with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome have an XY sex chromosomal pattern but (in its complete form) are born with standard female external genitals at birth. However, their internal reproductive anatomy, including gonads, is that of a standard male. They are almost always raised as female, have a strong female gender identity, and in adolescence undergo normal-range female breast development. Complete AIS (CAIS) persons, who identify as female (as almost all do) often marry and have “normal heterosexual” relations with their (standard XY) husbands. Because there are few health risks to this syndrome, sex chromosome karyotyping at birth is not always mandated, so CAIS infants may nonetheless leave the delivery room having been recorded as ordinary XY males. The combined frequency of CAIS and Partial AIS (PAIS) births is estimated at about 1 in 20,000.

How does AIS come about? Testosterone in optimal amounts is needed in an XY male fetus to complete the conversion of the early, undifferentiated genital area into a standard penis and scrotal sac after the testes, prostate, and other internal male structures have been laid down. But in a CAIS fetus, there is a mutation on the X chromosome that makes the fetal body unable to use any of the testosterone being produced by the testes or (in smaller amounts) by the adrenal glands. So normal-range testosterone is being produced, but it is functionally unusable. This means that the rest of the fetus’s reproductive development defaults to the female direction, and the penis and scrotal sac do not form.

We might well ask why AIS persons develop breasts at puberty, and this is where another complexity of hormonal ratios needs to be explained. We know that both ovaries and testes—though normally in differing ratios—produce the complete range of reproductive hormones, including testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone. This is the case both in fetal development, and later again at puberty. Because AIS is a lifelong condition, and not just limited to fetal development, the adolescent CAIS person is producing testosterone in the amounts needed to bring about male secondary sex characteristics—but again, the body cannot use any of it, so the voice does not deepen, nor does a beard grow or other bodily hair thicken. Instead, the smaller amounts of progesterone and estrogen (which are *not* affected by the original genetic mutation, and so can be taken up by the body’s cells) get to work and do what they do in standard XX adolescent females: they produce breast tissue.

What they do *not* do (as you may have already guessed) is produce a menstrual cycle, which cannot occur in the absence of a uterus. So it is in adolescence that CAIS may be identified, if a diagnosis has not been previously made. Medically speaking, the only thing to be concerned about are the still-undescended testes, which are at some risk for cancer, and thus are usually removed.

So far we have been discussing only Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS). In its less common, “partial” form (PAIS), for reasons still largely unknown the original X-chromosome genetic mutation is only partially operative. This means that functional fetal testosterone levels are

reduced, but not to a zero level of effectiveness. The result at birth is a varying level of external genital ambiguity—from not quite standard male, to not quite standard female. This of course means that the requisite chromosomal and internal scanning tests for AIS will be done, and a diagnosis made shortly after birth. But that can also lead to difficult decisions.

In the centuries before cosmetic surgery became safer and more technically sophisticated, persons born with ambiguous external genitals simply grew up with them. Now it is possible to surgically “feminize” the ambiguous genitals of a PAIS infant to look like those of a more standard female. But should it be done if the parents request it? Should it wait until the child is old enough to state a preference? Moreover, such genital surgery in infancy is a delicate business, and can result in (often seriously) reduced sexual arousability in adulthood, if a penis-like clitoris has been surgically reduced for reasons of appearance. There are many adults who, having had such surgery when they were too young to consent to it, are vocally angry about the problems—not life threatening, but still serious—that have resulted, including not just reduced genital sensitivity, but also the development of painful scar tissue. It is becoming more common in medical circles to recommend delaying surgery (if any) to well beyond infancy, then raising a PAIS child to have a (provisional) gender identity as either male or female, and making a decision about surgery on a case-by-case basis, with various people—including parents, the child, medical, and often psychological personnel involved.

#### *B. Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) in XX fetuses*

In a rough sense, this hormonal anomaly is the reverse of the one just discussed, in that in its extreme form (Complete CAH) a fetus with XX or standard female chromosomes is born with standard male external genitalia. In its less extreme form (Partial CAH), the external genitals may be ambiguous to varying degrees, just as they are in Partial AIS births—and this leads to the same challenging decisions regarding genital surgery in infancy and/or how to raise the child initially in terms of gender assignment.

The mechanism behind Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, however, is quite different, though its awkward name summarizes what it is: *congenital* means that the syndrome occurs before birth and continues beyond; *adrenal* means that the adrenal glands are involved; and *hyperplasia* means that those adrenal glands are overproducing something. In this case it is testosterone, which is usually only produced in minute amounts in standard female and male adrenals. But in CAH, due to the mutation of a recessive gene on one of the nonsex (autosomal) chromosomes, the adrenal glands overproduce testosterone greatly. Because it is a recessive gene, both the child’s mother and father must have it in order for CAH to occur. When this happens in a XX fetus (whose gonads and internal reproductive structures have already differentiated as female), the remaining external genital development will be partially or completely male.

CAH can occur in either a female or a male fetus, and it occurs in about 1 in 15,000 births. It is also involves a serious health risk in that it is accompanied by salt imbalances that, without appropriate medical treatment, can cause bodily dehydration and death. For this reason, it is one of the conditions usually tested for among newborns in hospital delivery settings—although even today, about 25 percent of Complete CAH cases are not

diagnosed until later. In boys it has no effect on external genital appearance, but it can lead to premature puberty (with a growth spurt and secondary sex characteristics) as early as about age seven. And the same can happen in girls: pubertal development is too early and too typically male—all this in addition to the partial or complete masculinization of external genitals that is present at birth.

Medically, the solution for both the risky salt imbalances and the overproduction of adrenal testosterone is to prescribe various forms of cortisone (continuously) and other medications (temporarily) to slow down the premature pubertal growth spurt. Girls with CAH most often have a female gender identity and if successfully treated medically will be fertile and able to bear children.

### *C. 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency Syndrome (5-ARD) in XY fetuses*

One of the hormones needed to complete external genital formation (i.e., the closing of the underseam of the penis and scrotal sac) is a kind of “super testosterone” known as dihydrotestosterone, or DHT. This hormone is formed when an enzyme known as 5-Alpha Reductase acts on ordinary testosterone. But in very rare instances this does not occur, due to a recessive gene mutation on a nonsex chromosome. As with CAH, the condition depends on inherited genetic factors, but the recessive gene must occur on both the father’s and the mother’s chromosome in order for 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency (5-ARD) Syndrome to occur—and when it does, it only affects male, not female, fetuses. As in two previously described syndromes, it results in partially to completely feminized external genitals in an XY male infant, even though the internal reproductive anatomy, including gonads, is that of a standard XY male. However, it is unique in one respect: when puberty arrives, the renewed surge of testosterone (for reasons that are still unclear) is enough to make the previously internalized testes descend, and the penis to enlarge, and its underlying seam to be completed. Typically male secondary sex characteristics also appear, and sperm production begins.

There have been a few 5-ARD cases identified in North America, and slightly more have come from countries in the Middle East and the Far East. But the largest frequency is found in an isolated village located in the Dominican Republic, where about one in 90 males are affected. These males are almost always raised as girls. But with the arrival of almost complete masculinization in puberty (the locals sometimes call it “Penis-at-Twelve”), they must decide whether to switch to a male identity. Most of them do, are accepted as such, and many go on to marry and father children.



# OVERTURES AND COMMUNICATIONS



**Overture 1: Pause Implementation of the Structure and Leadership Task Force Report; Enhance the Capacity of Ministries in Canada; Ensure That the Executive Director-Canada Has a Voice in the Senior Leadership of the Whole Denomination; Ensure That the Canada Corporation Has Authority and Respect within the Council of Delegates**

Classis Toronto overtures Synod 2022 to do the following:

A. Pause implementation of the Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report, as it affects Canadian ministry, until Canadian churches and members have been well informed and have had a reasonable opportunity to provide input.

B. Establish that the top priority is to enhance the capacity of ministries in Canada to be appropriate for and to respond to the Canadian context in which we do ministry, as well as compliance with Canada Revenue Agency and unity with respect for diversity between Canadian and United States partners within the CRCNA.

C. Ensure that the executive director-Canada will have a voice in the senior leadership of the whole denomination, as well as meet legal requirements to ensure that decisions regarding direction and control of ministry resources in Canada are made by the appropriate authorities.

D. Ensure that the Canada Corporation, whatever its new name, has enough authority and respect within the Council of Delegates to fulfill the functions for which it has been established and directed by various synods and by the legal requirements in Canada.

*Grounds:*

1. While the SALT report has significant implications for how ministry will be governed and implemented in Canada,
  - a. It is not widely understood by leaders at all levels of Canadian churches.
  - b. There was not sufficient time or opportunity to provide input into what seemed like a secretive process that was heavily influenced by a few individuals.
  - c. It contains factual errors, such as the failure to recognize that the Canadian ministries director was already established as executive director for Canada in 2013.
  - d. Its analysis fails to identify and address the factors that contribute to the problems it is designed to resolve, which go well beyond

- personalities, and in some places its noncooperative stance lacks respect for Canadian churches as adult partners in ministry and imputes questionable motives without evidence.
- e. There are other options for solutions than those considered in the SALT report.
  - f. Its weaknesses have been recognized in votes against adoption by a significant number of Council of Delegate members at its May 2021 meeting and subsequent concerns raised by a wide range of leaders and senior staff with knowledge of how Canadian ministries work.
2. The capacity to develop and implement ministries in Canada that relate well and respond to the Canadian context, within a Reformed world-and-life view, is important and has practical implications for a wide range of ministry areas, including, as examples:
    - a. Chaplaincy ministries, which operate differently in Canada, as identified by CRC Canadians active in this field. The CRC has missed opportunities for ministry and influence because there is no mechanism to organize a Canadian CRC presence in this field. This is a growing field of ministry for which people trained in a Reformed world-and-life-view are well suited.
    - b. Race Relations, because racism has a different face in Canada than in the United States, the factors that contribute to it are different, and the avenues for working against racism are different. Requests in the past to develop a Canadian strategy were denied, with insistence that the Toronto office be treated in a similar way to the Chicago or California office. This has implications for the effectiveness of resources allocated for ministry in Canada and the support available to Canadian churches who wish to engage in antiracism in Canada.
    - c. Prison ministries, because the prison system in Canada works very differently than prison systems do in the United States.
    - d. Social support systems and health care systems, which are different in Canada in ways that affect local ministry and outreach to persons affected by them.
    - e. Social justice ministry, for which there is existing recognition of difference and a positive track record of why that has been important.
    - f. Indigenous ministries, which have also been recognized for a distinctive approach in Canada that fits for our context and are widely respected as a consequence.
    - g. International development through World Renew Canada, which has also resulted in significant government grants that would not be possible without having a codirector in Canada.
  3. The CRCNA leadership team established in 2013-2015 included the Canadian ministries director as part of the senior leadership team, with executive-director level responsibilities for ministries in Canada. While the SALT report recommends a change in name from Canadian ministries director to executive director-Canada (which the position already is by approval of synod and in Canadian bylaws), it no longer recognizes this position as part of the senior leadership team for both countries.
  4. When synod adopted the Council of Delegates model for the governing structure within the CRCNA, it included a robust role for the Canada

Corporation and other mechanisms for a robust approach to binationality. The SALT report does not provide clear analysis of why that has not worked well; proposed legal ministry agreements as a solution will only be effective if that body, whatever new name it gets, has adequate authority and respect within the Council of Delegates to fulfill the functions synod intended for it.

Classis Toronto  
Richard Bodini, stated clerk

## **Overture 2: Table the Report of the Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) and Revisit the Binational Leadership Structure Proposal**

### **I. Introduction**

The history of the CRCNA can be told in many ways. One way to tell our story is to follow the movements toward becoming a binational denomination and to notice all that has happened as the CRCNA lived out of that binational character. We are thankful for the recent work of *The Banner* as Gayla Postma compiled a field guide with a focus on the Canadian part of this binational story ([thebanner.org/news/2021/10/the-crc-in-canada-a-field-guide](http://thebanner.org/news/2021/10/the-crc-in-canada-a-field-guide)). We are also concerned that this binational story arc is not moving in a healthy direction.

On January 29, 2022, delegates from every classis in Canada met together. While that meeting did not have the authority to send an overture, that meeting did send a fairly clear message. Many on the Canadian side of the CRCNA are experiencing tension in our binational relationship, worried about how that tension is affecting local Canadian ministry, and wondering about other ways of being connected as a church.

This meeting was catalyzed in order to have a Canadian conversation about binationality, the SALT report before Synod 2022, and concerns for Canadian contextual ministries. While there were some aspects of appreciation for the Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report expressed at that January 29 meeting, there were significant concerns.

As a part of that meeting, the delegates explored alternate pathways to organizing the CRCNA. The delegates discussed the original model that the COD had adopted as a framework for their consideration before they assembled the SALT team: one ecclesiastical officer for the full CRCNA, and then independent executive directors (or perhaps “ministry directors”) for each country. Second, the delegates discussed shifting to two denominations, CRC-USA and CRC-Canada as denominations in strong ecclesiastical fellowship. Finally, the delegates discussed a shift toward a more flexible network-type model that seems to be a growing option in other ecclesial communities. This overture wants to draw our attention particularly to the model with an ecclesiastical officer and dual executive directors.

## II. Background

In May 2020 the Council of Delegates (COD) adopted the proposal from the Ecclesiastical, Structural, and Legal team, along with these three overarching principles (Minutes of COD, May 2020 – COD 5976, EC 20-070):

1. Going forward, leadership of the CRCNA must be done through an independent executive director in each country, who works collaboratively with the executive director in the other country on matters of shared ministry. This includes monitoring and making decisions about joint ministry agreements for shared programs.
2. In addition, there must be an ecclesiastical officer who can help shepherd the denomination forward in a way that fosters unity across the border, emphasizes our shared faith, synodical positions, and ecclesiastical polity, and advances the denomination's global ecclesiastical goals.
3. Finally, this model should be revisited in three years (and perhaps every three years) to ensure that it is working as intended. If it is decided that there is redundancy or a greater need for cross-border coordination, appropriate adjustments should be made.

We want to acknowledge that we deeply appreciated the structure already present in these overarching principles: a single binational denomination shepherded by an ecclesiastical officer (EO), independent national executive directors (EDs) with oversight for contextualizing the CRCNA's ministry in each country, and a regular rhythm of structural review to ensure the health of ministries and to minimize redundancy. We also imagine those two national EDs to partner in planning, giving direction to, and supervising our international ministries in concert with those agency boards.

While such a structure would need additional clarification, one benefit of such a structure is clear binational balance with clarity around who serves in senior leadership roles (EO, ED-U.S., and ED-Canada). Both countries in this binational denomination would be able to come to the leadership table, share learnings and questions, and have a dedicated ED that could sign joint ministry agreements for each national corporate board. Our initial instinct imagines that the ED-U.S. would have a job description parallel to the ED-Canada (or what has been called the "Canadian Ministries Director"), and that the EO would supervise the "various ecclesiastical duties not covered by the two EDs (e.g., synodical committees such as the Candidacy Committee, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, Historical Committee, and Judicial Code Committee)" (Minutes of COD, May 2020 – COD 5976, EC 20-070). We have seen a dual ED model flourish with World Renew, enabling deep and real partnerships while also empowering the contextualization of ministry and imagining in partnership the ministry beyond the borders of both countries.

But much has happened since the COD's adoption of those three overarching principles. In October 2020 the SALT team was created to give further shape to this structure, but soon their mandate was expanded, and their resulting work significantly moved away from this balanced binational structure. Instead, the SALT report brought forward three positions that result in an unbalanced structure where the Canadian office seems more like an appendage to the main "Office of General Secretary" and its two positions. We would note that the growing Canadian concerns around this unbalanced SALT structure catalyzed that all-Canada meeting (Canadian Catalytic Conversation 2 on January 29, 2022).

### III. Concerns about the SALT process and structure

It may be helpful to name a few of the major concerns about the SALT structure that trouble many within Canada. While there were many concerns named by the Canada Corporation and by CRCNA staff within Canada, and gathered from CRCNA members in Canada for the Canadian Catalytic Conversation 2 on January 29, let us focus on two major areas of concern.

#### A. *Concerns about the process of developing SALT*

At the May 2021 meeting where SALT was approved by the Council of Delegates (COD), a Canadian delegate read a “communique” sent by the whole CRCNA Canadian Corporation asking to table the SALT recommendations until wider stakeholder input could be received and considered. The COD had received the written SALT report on April 19, 2021; this COD meeting was May 5-7, 2021. Within those few days, the fifteen COD members from Canada (who make up the CRCNA Canadian Corporation members) had reviewed the report, met together, shared deep concerns, and written up a 3.5-page communique. Perhaps it was the most they could do on such a short timeline in response to such a significant report. Within that communique as read at the COD meeting, it says that the “Directors of the Canadian corporation have a fiduciary duty to canvass all stakeholders prior to making decisions of this magnitude.” But the motion made to table SALT awaiting further stakeholder feedback was defeated 28-18 (we do not have an official record of voting by nation, but it seems a reasonable guess that the motion would have been passed if only voted on by the 15 Canadian COD members).

Instead of pausing SALT’s implementation to receive stakeholder feedback, SALT continued to move forward. This means that at Synod 2022, many decisions about SALT will have to all be made together at the same deliberative gathering. Synod 2022 will be asked to deliberate and discern whether or not SALT is an appropriate structure. But at the time of writing this overture, there are *already* search teams seeking the best candidate for both the general secretary and chief administrative officer roles (which have not yet been approved by synod). Having these two COD-approved candidates simply waiting for Synod 2022 to approve the SALT structure *and then at the same synod* to approve these two candidates for these two major positions puts inappropriate pressure on the process of considering the structure itself.

Thus, among other concerns about process, these two seem the most significant: First, one whole national corporation asked to do their “fiduciary duty” of canvassing stakeholders and was denied that ability as they were outvoted (presumably because of a significant U.S. majority in voting members). Second, the CRCNA discernment of SALT is happening at the same meeting where we are supposed to already have COD-approved candidates for positions that synod has not yet approved.

#### B. *Concerns about the SALT structure*

As noted above, the SALT structure seems lopsided. The SALT report spends a significant amount of time articulating a new Canadian Office, an ED-Canada position, and how both of those are governed by the CRCNA Canada Corporation. Together, these organize, guide, and support CRCNA ministry in Canada. But where is parallel discussion of the U.S. office,

ED-U.S., governed by the CRCNA U.S. Corporation? From a Canadian perspective, the answer has historically been obvious: the CRCNA senior leadership positions have always coalesced with the U.S. office and done the work of supervising ministry in the U.S. context. That is to say, the U.S. does not need to attend to its own distinct structures because the CRCNA leadership is “aimed at” creating CRCNA ministry that fits a U.S. context. This leads to the Canadians needing to regularly do additional work of discerning what is distinct about “Canadian ministry.” Thus, Canada has created additional structures to facilitate Canadian-specific ministry.

With this background, perhaps one can begin to see why the SALT structure feels like more of the same historical precedent. With so much attention focused on creating space and freedom for a Canadian Office and a Canadian executive director, is SALT actually assuming that the Office of General Secretary will simply coalesce with the U.S. office and U.S. ministry? Thus, when Canadians first heard in May 2020 that there may be dual executive directors, it felt like for the first time in our CRCNA history, perhaps our senior leadership structure would be balanced. We would have structural parity. Indeed, the proposal that the COD adopted in principle from the Ecclesiastical, Structural, and Legal team (ESL) provided a sense of hope.

If this still sounds foreign or surprising to members of the CRCNA in the U.S., perhaps this thought experiment will help stoke the imagination. The SALT structure and subsequent COD announcements have noted that the ED-Canada will be located in Burlington (in the Canadian Office). They have also noted that the general secretary and the chief administrative officer could both be Canadian and could work out of the Canadian Office in Burlington. What does it feel like, then, if we imagine all three of the senior leaders being Canadian and working out of the Burlington office? What if there were no senior leadership in Grand Rapids—would that feel right to U.S. members of the CRCNA? If such a result doesn’t feel right, that’s worth noticing.

Such a result would also be against our historic commitments made by the CRCNA, COD, and synod. There was significant focus on our binationality over the past decade. One of the most significant reports was “Cultivating Binationality,” which included five pathways for cultivating binationality. One of those pathways is labeled this way: “Pathway 3: Senior executive leadership team embodies binationality.” If this SALT implementation results in three Canadians in the three articulated roles, then we have failed to keep our commitments. That in itself demonstrates that the SALT structure does not honor our historic commitments. In a similar way, if both the general secretary and the chief administrative officer are U.S. citizens living in Grand Rapids, then we again have to wonder if we have honored our historic commitments. Why? Because the SALT report does not seem to clearly describe if or how the ED-Canada would be a part of the senior executive leadership team. Is the ED-Canada simply a part of the “Ministries Leadership Council” with more than a dozen others (as shown in Appendix 4 of the SALT report)? Is the ED-Canada a senior leadership position or not? While SALT names the general secretary and chief administrative officer as in senior leadership positions (SALT report, p. 19), the ED-Canada is not a part of the Office of General Secretary and does not seem to be discussed as a parallel “senior leadership” title. So, once again, the commitment to senior leadership em-

bodying binationality could easily not happen, and we would fall short of our commitments.

While there are many more concerns that could be added (including those gathered in preparation for and expressed at the January 29, 2022, gathering), we hope these briefly establish some of the concerns felt by Canadians as we look at the SALT process and structure.

#### **IV. Benefits of our proposed “Codirector Leadership Model”**

A first note that may be worth making about any proposed structure is around nomenclature. While the ESL report uses the language of “an independent executive director in each country,” it may be important to clarify one item. Often we use the language of “executive director” in relation to a board or a corporation. And those in these roles serve as the executive director over all included in the corporation. Already the ESL report noted some tension with such an idea, noting that some ministries currently located in the United States would *not* fall under the ED-U.S. but instead under the ecclesiastical officer. We assume that is because while the CRCNA Canada Corporation is fairly focused on Canadian ministries, the CRCNA U.S. Corporation includes many “shared” offices and agencies. Thus, we wonder if it makes it easier to imagine the three senior level positions this way: a Canadian ministries director who reports to the CRCNA Canada Board and is responsible for contextualizing ministry in Canada; a U.S. ministries director who reports to the CRCNA U.S. Board and is responsible for contextualizing ministry in the U.S.; and an ecclesiastical officer (as mentioned above). In addition, the Canadian ministries director and the U.S. ministries director would partner to plan, give direction to, and supervise the CRCNA’s international ministries in concert with the agency boards. The benefit here is that Canada has a strong history of having a Canadian ministries director who has supported flourishing contextualized ministry; the U.S. position could be created to cover parallel ground; and the ecclesiastical officer’s position would cover what is remaining inside the CRCNA U.S. Corporation (e.g., Synodical Services, which are not in the CRCNA Canada Corporation, and not led by the Canadian ministries director). As such, we will call this a “*Codirector Leadership Model*” which would still include a shared ecclesiastical officer.

From a Canadian standpoint, the first benefit of this model is that it continues to allow the Canadian office to support and coordinate Canadian contextualized ministries. This is at the heart of mission.

Second, a codirector model allows for structural parity. As noted above, there have been deep historic tensions resulting from lack of parity.

Third, a codirector model easily and clearly satisfies the requirements of charitable law. It has structural parity, so it allows the CRCNA Canada Board to partner with the CRCNA U.S. Board by way of the same joint ministry agreements that are already being created. This has been shown to be successful for many years already through World Renew.

Fourth, given the significant tension expressed over the past decades and again on January 29, 2022, at the Canadian Catalytic Conversation 2, it is hard to imagine that moving forward with SALT would not create a significant rift within the CRCNA, potentially resulting in the desire of the CRCNA within Canada to separate out into a separate denomination while intending

to stay in strong ecclesial fellowship. This codirector model would allow the CRCNA to stay one strong and connected denomination. If it feels like it is asking something of the United States that the United States does not desire (e.g., to have a U.S. ministries director or U.S. ED), many in Canada would simply ask the United States to strongly consider going in that direction for the sake of denominational unity.

But perhaps the most exciting possibilities of a codirector model are what may emerge from it. The CRCNA will hopefully learn that there is no “one-size-fits-all” ministry shape. All ministry needs to be contextualized. As the codirectors meet to discuss *how* contextualization is helping the flourishing of ministry, perhaps other contexts will be given attention. Already the CRCNA in Canada has shaped ministries with a contextualized shape for Indigenous ministries and for contact with the Canadian government. Perhaps there could be ways of listening more deeply and shaping ministry for our Hispanic context in the United States, or the Black and Reformed context, or Korean ministry.

As we become more astute in recognizing the wide diversity of potential ministries, perhaps the CRCNA will more easily invite CRCs of other countries into deeper and meaningful relationship. What could we learn from richer conversation about what it looks like to be CRC in Cuba or Haiti? What could we learn from more meaningful listening to how the CRC takes shape in Nigeria?

Our binational history demonstrates our own struggle to see ministry as deeply contextualized. But, if we can find ways to let our own ministries more deeply flourish in both Canadian-distinct ways in Canada and U.S.-distinct ways in the United States, perhaps we can embody a denomination that more nimbly attends to cultural nuances and leans into a learning posture with other CRC embodiments around the globe.

## V. How to proceed

We recognize that this overture comes at a time when the CRCNA is meeting to potentially approve SALT and implement it by filling the key positions. We wish this was not the case. It would have been much preferred to have time as a denomination to simply consider the SALT structure and not have to wonder what to do with worthy people ready to serve.

As you will see in our overture, we suggest that the COD provide interim leadership for the CRCNA. We note that such leadership could be done by the undoubtedly capable people in the room. But we do not think that simply “testing out” the SALT structure is a helpful way to go. These structures begin to embed themselves. Instead, one of the persons in the room could adjust into a role parallel to that of the ecclesiastical officer, and another could take on the work of a U.S. ministries director, similar to that of the Canadian ministries director (or ED-Canada).

We also want to note that this “codirector” model was never fully articulated. Work would need to be done to clarify the three roles.

We note that other ideas also came to the January 29, 2022, table—and likely have also come to the synodical table. What would two denominations in close ecclesiastical fellowship look like? How might we imagine a looser network model? These are questions worth asking.

Finally, we also note the desire for wider stakeholder agreement, and would want to incorporate such feedback into any process, as well as to invite members of the CRCNA to see the feedback themselves.

With that in mind, we propose the following overture.

## **VI. Overture**

Classis B.C. North-West overtures synod to do the following:

- A. Table the SALT report and cease its implementation.
- B. Task the COD to provide interim leadership for the CRCNA in whatever way they deem necessary, including an ED-Canada and joint ministry agreements that allow for compliance with Canadian requirements.
- C. Articulate a balanced binational structure that more closely aligns with the proposal from the Ecclesiastical, Structural, and Legal team report adopted by the Council of Delegates in May 2020, including positions similar to those of an ecclesiastical officer, an ED-Canada, and an ED-U.S. (though we prefer “Canadian ministries director” and “U.S. ministries director” for their ecclesial language as opposed to their corporate language).
- D. Consider if there are other proposed structures also worth more fully articulating before stakeholder engagement (e.g., two denominations in close ecclesiastical fellowship or a looser network model).

### *Grounds:*

1. There are significant concerns with the SALT process. While many concerns can be found in the materials gathered in preparation for and follow-up from the Canadian Catalytic Conversation 2 that happened on January 29, 2022, we noted the following two process concerns in this overture:
  - a. First, the directors of the Canadian corporation explicitly named that they “have a fiduciary duty to canvass all stakeholders prior to making decisions of this magnitude,” and a motion was put forward to table the SALT report recommendations to provide time to perform this “fiduciary duty.” This motion was voted down in a Council of Delegates that has a strong majority of U.S. members. There is a serious process concern when a national board names they have a fiduciary duty to their membership but is unable to perform it, assumedly because they are outnumbered by members from another national board.
  - b. Second, the CRCNA discernment of SALT is happening at the same synod meeting where synod will also be asked by the COD to approve their candidates for the positions that synod has not yet deliberated on and approved. This process puts undue pressure on the delegates of synod.
2. There are significant concerns with the SALT structure. Again, while other concerns can be found in the materials gathered in preparation for and follow-up from the Canadian Catalytic Conversation 2 that happened on January 29, 2022, we noted these major structural concerns in this overture:

- a. The SALT structure does not have binational balance or structural parity. While there is clear articulation of the function of the Canadian Office and the ED-Canada in shaping contextualized Canadian ministry, there is no parallel conversation in the SALT report about how any U.S. Office or U.S. leader shapes contextualized U.S. ministry. Without this articulation, there is concern that the Office of General Secretary will simply coalesce with U.S.-focused ministry.
- b. The SALT structure does not fulfill the commitment to having our senior leadership embody binationality. While this might simply happen by way of potential candidates, it is problematic to adopt a new structure that does not provide for a structural shape that embeds binationality into senior leadership.

Classis B.C. North-West  
Kathy Smith, stated clerk

### **Overture 3: Table the SALT Report and Articulate a Balanced Binational Structure**

#### **I. Introduction**

For over 115 years the CRCNA has operated as a binational denomination. Over the past approximately 35 years, the CRC in Canada and the CRC in the United States have been trying to discover the best way to operate as a binational denomination. Along the way, many challenges have arisen as church bodies in two separate countries try to operate in a unified way. These challenges have once again come to the forefront as recently as 2020.

This overture aims for maintaining the binationality of the denomination by way of a model similar to that which has been successful for nearly 35 years in the ministry of World Renew. This model has a successful track record of operating in Canada and the United States simultaneously. This overture will ask for a return to a decision agreed upon by the COD in May 2020.

#### **II. Background**

In May 2020, the Council of Delegates (COD) adopted a proposal from the Ecclesiastical, Structural, and Legal team (ESL), along with these three overarching principles (Minutes of COD, May 2020 – COD 5976, EC 20-070):

1. Going forward, leadership of the CRCNA must be done through an independent executive director (ED) in each country, who works collaboratively with the executive director in the other country on matters of shared ministry. This includes monitoring and making decisions about joint ministry agreements for shared programs.
2. In addition, there must be an ecclesiastical officer who can help shepherd the denomination forward in a way that fosters unity across the border, emphasizes our shared faith, synodical positions, and ecclesiastical polity, and advances the denomination's global ecclesiastical goals.
3. Finally, this model should be revisited in three years (and perhaps every three years) to ensure that it is working as intended. If it is decided that there is redundancy or a greater need for cross-border coordination, appropriate adjustments should be made.

The Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report, which was eventually passed by the COD in May 2021, departs from this initial decision. Instead of a dual ED structure, it created three different positions: general secretary, chief administrative officer, and a Canadian executive director. When the SALT report was presented to the COD, there were concerns articulated by the fifteen CRCNA Canada Corporation members. After expressing those concerns, a motion to table the SALT report in order to get further stakeholder feedback was made but defeated by a margin of 28-18 in a U.S.-majority COD.

Instead of pausing the implementation of the SALT report to get further feedback, it was adopted, and search teams were appointed to fill the senior-level positions in the new structure. This means that the delegates of Synod 2022 will be asked to deliberate and discern if the SALT report is the appropriate structure, and then immediately after, they will be asked to approve the COD nominees for the positions in the new structure. This process puts undue pressure on the delegates' deliberation of SALT.

While there are other concerns about process, these two concerns seem the most significant.

### III. Overture

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan overtures Synod 2022 to do the following:

- A. Table the SALT report and cease its implementation.
- B. Task the COD to provide interim leadership for the CRCNA in whatever way they deem necessary, including an ED-Canada and joint ministry agreements that allow for compliance with Canadian requirements.
- C. Articulate a balanced binational structure that more closely aligns with the proposal from the Ecclesiastical, Structural and Legal team report adopted by the Council of Delegates in May 2020, including positions similar to an ecclesiastical officer, an ED-Canada, and an ED-U.S. (though we prefer Canadian Ministries Director and U.S. Ministries Director for their ecclesial language as opposed to their corporate language).

#### *Grounds:*

1. Concerns about the SALT process
  - a. First, the directors of the Canadian corporation explicitly named that they "have a fiduciary duty to canvass all stakeholders prior to making decisions of this magnitude," and a motion was put forward to table the SALT report recommendations to provide time to perform this "fiduciary duty." This motion was voted down in a Council of Delegates that has a strong majority of U.S. members.
  - b. Second, the CRCNA discernment of SALT is happening at the same synod meeting where synod will also be asked by the COD to approve their candidates for the positions that synod has not yet deliberated upon and approved. This process puts undue pressure on the delegates of synod.
2. Concerns about the SALT structure
  - a. The SALT report does not maintain a binational balance or structural parity. While there is focus on the "Canadian office" and the

ED-Canada is discussed, there is no discussion of a similar position for the U.S. office. Without this position being articulated, there is a concern that the Office of General Secretary will simply coalesce with U.S.-focused ministry. If the general secretary ends up in Canada, then it swings the opposite direction.

- b. The SALT structure does not fulfill the commitment to having our senior leadership embody binationality as found in the “Cultivating Binationality” report of 2014. While this might simply happen by way of potential candidates, it is problematic to adopt a new structure that does not provide for a structural shape that embeds binationality into senior leadership.
3. The codirector structure, while not fully articulated, looks to have significant benefits for our binational denomination.
  - a. The codirector model allows for a well-balanced binational structural. Much of the historic tension comes from a lack of structural parity; we hope this would give us an opportunity to resolve that tension.
  - b. The codirector model satisfies the requirements of charitable law, notably in Canada.
  - c. This codirector model has worked successfully for many years with World Renew.
  - d. The codirector model allows for the CRCNA to continue as one denomination working together across the border.

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan  
Nelly Eyk, stated clerk

#### **Overture 4: Create Parallel Positions of Senior Ministry Directors in the United States and Canada**

##### **I. Background**

Classis Hamilton was encouraged to note in the minutes of the COD meeting held February 16-18, 2022, that the COD is working toward a proposed refinement of the denominational structure that would separate the Office of General Secretary from the CRCNA U.S. and CRCNA Canada corporations and instead create it as a separate ecclesiastical entity. As reflected in the following COD minute, this proposal also envisions that a senior U.S. “point of contact” be identified for the CRCNA U.S. Corporation:

The ED proposes that we take the Office of General Secretary, currently housed in the CRCNA U.S. Corporation, and make it clear that it is a denominational/ ecclesiastical role and create a separate legal entity for the Office of General Secretary. In addition, each corporation has a “point person”—a single point of contact. It is proposed that a ministry director in the U.S. be designated as the head (point person) of the CRCNA U.S. Corporation. There is precedent for this on the U.S. side.

A motion carries by rule of the chair to endorse the restructuring proposal and ask the ED and the deputy ED to move in the direction of a proposal for a separation of the Office of General Secretary from the CRCNA U.S. Corporation, and bring a more comprehensive report and proposed bylaws to the COD in May.

(Minutes of the Council of Delegates CRCNA, Feb. 16-18, 2022,  
G: EC 22-020 - ED Supplemental Report to COD)

While the details of this proposal are yet to be worked out, Classis Hamilton views this as a positive development that will help to alleviate some of the structural tension that has been encountered in the denomination.

## II. Overture

Classis Hamilton overtures synod to instruct the COD, through what is currently the Office of the Executive Director, to proceed with restructuring that would include parallel positions of senior ministry directors in the United States and Canada, as reflected in the proposal presented to the COD February 16-18, 2022, in the ED Supplemental Report.

### *Grounds:*

1. These steps in restructuring will help to differentiate the ecclesiastical responsibility of the Office of General Secretary from the governance responsibilities of the respective corporations.
2. These steps will assist in promoting binational implementation of the contextualized and cooperative ministry collaboration that is envisioned in the SALT report.

Classis Hamilton

Gillian Bruce, president, Classis Interim Committee

*Note:* The Classis Hamilton stated clerk position is currently vacant.

## **Overture 5: Envision the CRCNA as Two Distinct National Christian Reformed Churches**

Classis Quinte overtures synod to do the following:

- A. Envision the CRCNA as two distinct national Christian Reformed denominations.
- B. Make the changes necessary for this reorganization to be accomplished.
- C. Declare that the CRC in Canada and the CRC in the United States are *churches in communion*, following the model of the current relationship between the CRCNA and the Reformed Church in America.

### *Grounds:*

1. The CRC in Canada has long expressed its need to have a distinct voice and presence within its national context. Steps toward ensuring a distinct Canadian voice within the binational structure have been thwarted by bodies dominated by the United States (agency boards, synod, Council of Delegates).

Examples include the following:

- refusal to create a U.S. ministry board after the Canadian Ministry Board was instituted (causing imbalance that plagues the denomination to this day)
- refusal to allow the New Mission Agency (later named Resonate) to have national leaders working in partnership, by retracting an

- earlier agreement and instead appointing a single U.S. director over the entire agency
- changing the Board of Trustees from 30 members (15 from Canada and 15 from the U.S.) to the Council of Delegates with 15 Canadian delegates and 39 U.S. delegates (2014), which results in marginalizing Canadian ministry
  - abandoning or showing apathy toward the “Cultivating Binationality in the CRCNA” report (2014) and the Canadian Restructuring Team report (2020), which held out the promise of room for the CRC in Canada to function with autonomy within the binational context, and replacing them with the Structure and Leadership Task Force report (SALT) that rejects any autonomy for the CRC in Canada and essentially calls for the continued dominating relationship of the U.S. church over the church in Canada
2. Canada and the United States are very different nations, and the CRCs in the United States and Canada are distinct from each other. This includes the following:
    - political systems and sensibilities
    - religious and spiritual climates
    - historical and cultural differences
    - different opportunities for scale of impact. In terms of distribution and opportunity for influence, the CRC in the United States within its national context is a small fish in a big pond, while the CRC in Canada within its national context is a large fish in a small pond.
    - ministry approaches (i.e., Indigenous ministries and contact with the government)
    - relationship to local churches and donors
  3. Given the distinctions noted in ground 2, there is a clear need for both the CRC in the United States and the CRC in Canada to develop ministry plans that are tailored to the needs and opportunities within their respective nations. This goal has been talked about for decades; unfortunately, binational bureaucracy weighted to the U.S. has inhibited this goal from being anything more than just talk. Unfortunately, the binational structure currently in place for the CRCNA has inhibited the Canadian church’s ability to do the following:
    - identify and engage with social/ cultural issues that the Canadian church must address on the provincial and national levels
    - engage with national and provincial leaders to converse about issues specific to each nation
  4. Canada is the only nation in the world with which the CRCNA has a paternalistic relationship. The normal and historical practice of the CRCNA is to raise up indigenous leadership from the country in which mission and church planting thrive. As such, a move toward autonomy fits the missional pattern and historicity of the CRC.
  5. This will allow for a far more responsible use of Canadian funds for Canadian ministry instead of a constant transfer of Canadian dollars to support U.S. staffing and/or ministry choices made without appropriate input of Canadian leadership.

6. Canadian legal requirements are much stricter than those of the United States. A separate governance structure will allow the CRC in Canada to be in compliance with Canadian tax and charity law. Currently the CRCNA is often out of compliance in ensuring that Canadian leaders maintain proper direction and control of Canadian staff, funds, and other resources (donated funds were and are still controlled by U.S. dominated bodies).
7. The CRCNA is in communion with other national churches and has joint agreements with many, including the wonderfully close bond with the Reformed Church in America. The success of these relationships is a precedent that shows how well true collaboration between equals can work.

Classis Quinte  
Joan Crawford, stated clerk

## Addendum

### Items from the Timeline

- First congregation of the CRC in Canada organized—1904
- First Canadian Classes (Hamilton, Chatham, Eastern Canada)—1952
- Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada formed—1966
- CRWRC establishes agency codirectors, one for Canada and one for U.S.—1989
- Dissolution of the Council of the Christian Reformed Churches in Canada (CCRCC)—1996
- Canadian Ministries Board formed—1999
- Ray Elgersma appointed first Canadian Ministries Director—1999
- Synod designated that the Board of Trustees be divided into two distinctly separate boards: Board of Trustees CRCNA-Michigan Corporation and Board of Trustees CRCNA-Canada Corporation (this required the dissolution of the Canadian Ministries Board)—2000
- Synod decided to stop the implementation of the U.S. Ministries Board with a director parallel to the Canadian Ministries Director (rejection of the CRWRC model for the denomination)—2000
- Ray Elgersma resigns as Canadian Ministries Director—2001
- William Veenstra appointed Canadian Ministries Director—2001
- Canadian Ministry Forum held in Edmonton, Alberta—2002
- William Veenstra resigns—2004
- Bruce Adema appointed Director of Canadian Ministries—2006
- Bruce Adema resigns—2012
- Darren Roorda appointed Canadian Ministries Director—2014
- Board of Trustees becomes Council of Delegates (unbalancing the governance structure by maintaining Canadian representation at 15 delegates while increasing U.S. representation to 39 delegates)—2015
- The New Mission Agency (formerly CR World Missions and CR Home Missions) retracts the agreement to have national directors and selects a sole U.S. leader for the agency—2017
- Darren Roorda dismissed—2021

**Overture 6: Approve Transfer of San Jose New Hope CRC from Classis Hanmi to Classis Central California**

Classis Hanmi, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of the San Jose New Hope CRC of Santa Clara, California, from Classis Hanmi to Classis Central California due to geographic proximity. This request originated in the San Jose New Hope CRC council and was approved by both classes.

Classis Hanmi  
Sang Myeun Moon, stated clerk

**Overture 7: Approve Transfer of San Jose New Hope CRC of Santa Clara, California, from Classis Hanmi to Classis Central California**

Classis Central California, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of the San Jose New Hope CRC of Santa Clara, California, from Classis Hanmi to Classis Central California due to geographic proximity.

*Ground:* This request originated from the council and was approved by both classes.

Classis Central California  
Larry M. Fryling, stated clerk

**Overture 8: Oppose White Supremacy and Systemic Racism**

Classis Greater Los Angeles overtures Synod 2022 to formulate and put into action a plan to inspire and support CRC members to embrace and embody biblical justice in opposition to the belief systems of white supremacy and systemic racism.

**I. Definitions**

We understand *racism* to be the belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capabilities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority in a particular race (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

We understand *white supremacy* to be the belief not only that white people are superior to other races but also that as superior people they should dominate and hold power over other races (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

We recognize that white supremacy was the rationale behind colonialism, the Confederacy from 1861-1864, the Jim Crow period from 1865-1964, and is behind hate crimes of today.

We understand *systemic (institutional or structural) racism* is to have policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization that result in and support a continued advantage to some people and an unfair and harmful treatment of others, based on race (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

## II. CRC synodical declarations on white supremacy

Synod has declared white supremacy to be an unbiblical belief system. Synod 2019 declared kinism to be “neither biblical nor Reformed” (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 818), and Synod 2012 rejected apartheid thinking and practices in its adoption of the Belhar Confession, later recategorized as a contemporary testimony (*Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 700). Synod said kinism and apartheid are rooted in white supremacist beliefs and practices and cannot be tolerated within the CRC membership.

## III. The problem

These synodical decisions have not been adequate to stop some CRC members from voicing, either consciously or unconsciously, the belief that white people should continue to control the wealth and power within American society.

## IV. Evidence of the problem

One pastor in 2020 resigned from the CRC ministry after thirty years of ministry because there were members of his church who rejected biblical teaching on the issue of justice and race, vocally espousing instead white supremacist beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The CRC Council of Delegates received information at its February 23, 2021, meeting that the staff of the Office of Social Justice had received an increase in the number of offensive racist comments, as well as racist posts on social media and anonymous letters and postcards, leaving the staff so concerned for their personal safety that some incidents were reported to the police.<sup>2</sup>

These voices do not reflect biblical teaching or the CRC Reformed doctrinal position on race and justice.

## V. Biblical teaching

The Bible teaches that all humanity is made in the image of God, that no person should be devalued as less significant than another. The Bible, in Micah 6:8, calls us to worship God, to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God, and to be servants to one another.

“Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” (Mal. 2:10, NIV 1984).

“The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11-12).

**“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.** But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:8-10).

<sup>1</sup> Keith Mannes, “My 15 Minutes of Fame”; [blog.reformedjournal.com/2020/11/10/my-fifteen-minutes-of-fame](http://blog.reformedjournal.com/2020/11/10/my-fifteen-minutes-of-fame).

<sup>2</sup> “Mercy and Justice Staff Report Escalating Intimidation”; [thebanner.org/news/2021/02/mercy-and-justice-staff-report-escalating-intimidation](http://thebanner.org/news/2021/02/mercy-and-justice-staff-report-escalating-intimidation).

## VI. Preface

We believe events in both society and the church require a renewed biblically prophetic call to CRC members to turn to the Word of God and Reformed doctrine for guidance on the connection between race and justice.

## VII. Overture

Therefore, Classis Greater Los Angeles overtures Synod 2022 to do the following:

A. Direct Calvin Theological Seminary to *analyze* what is being done to ensure all graduates of Calvin Seminary adhere to a biblical and Reformed perspective on issues of race and justice. We request that synod direct the classes to ask questions of all candidates for ministry regarding their commitment to preach a biblical and Reformed perspective on race and justice.

*Ground:* We believe the pulpit holds the key and has the responsibility to teach and inspire members to commit to embrace and embody biblical and Reformed perspectives on race and justice.

B. Remind all elders of their responsibility to *defend the faith and doctrine* taught from their church pulpit, evaluating if biblical justice is being taught from the pulpit.

*Ground:* The elders' evaluation regarding what is taught about biblical justice will provide confessional fidelity within CRC churches.

C. Direct CRC persons of color who are qualified by political experience and/or education from both political parties to *articulate* for CRC members *how a particular policy will affect people of color* and provide an avenue for distributing that information.

*Ground:* CRC members will be assisted in evaluating current events and voting options, and they will be assisted in making choices in their daily living and conversations that reflect biblical and doctrinally Reformed justice.

D. Prepare a *written declaration* to be sent to every church council to be read in the worship service on a designated Sunday morning articulating and reminding members once more what the CRC position is on white supremacy and systemic racism and the reasons why these belief systems cannot be tolerated within the CRC.

*Ground:* We believe the many actions (See Appendix A), the many written statements the CRC has made, and the many excellent articles written in *The Banner* relating to white supremacy either are not known or not understood by some members. We believe this effort will clarify for current CRC pastors, who have the responsibility to teach biblical and Reformed justice, exactly what the CRC's biblical and doctrinal position is on race and justice.

E. Designate a Sunday for a *collective acknowledgment of, repentance of, and lament* for the sins of our nation and include materials for the churches to use.

*Grounds:*

1. Scripture commands repentance and lament for national sins.
  - “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Prov. 28:13).
  - “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).
2. The Heidelberg Catechism supports the need for confession and repentance in Question and Answer 89: “What is the dying away of the old self? To be genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it.”
3. Even though we did not commit the atrocities that have been committed against people of color, the church must serve as a guardian of truth.

F. Continue, through Faith Alive, to develop age-appropriate curriculum for children, young people, and adults that articulates a factual telling of our nation’s history as related to the experiences of all people of color.

*Ground:* We believe there can be no true unity between diverse races without all CRC members knowing and acknowledging the same factual truths about the role of white supremacy in our nation’s history. These facts will provide the foundation for what must change to prevent wrongdoing in the future.

G. Direct Faith Formation Ministries, along with advice from people of color, to provide a list of recommended books, videos, and films that are available to assist young adult and adult members to access trusted facts about our national history and to embrace and embody biblical and doctrinally Reformed perspectives on justice and race.

*Ground:* We believe this list will inspire and support members to live authentic, biblical, and doctrinally Reformed lives in the area of race and justice.

H. Direct selected leaders to provide opportunities for listening, learning, and practicing civil dialogue on the difficult conversations needed to better understand one another’s perspective on biblical justice. Three possible resources:

- The *Colossian Forum* provides practice for civil dialogue on difficult conversations.
- Latasha Morrison, consultant for racial reconciliation and author of the book *Be the Bridge*, works with churches on listening and reconciliation.
- *Narrative 4*, founded by Colum McCann, is a global organization of educators, students, and artists who use the power of storytelling to build the empathy needed to assist people coming from very different experiences to understand one another’s perspectives.

*Ground:* Listening has the power to create the change needed for justice between diverse races. The empathy that rises from the power of sharing stories will lead members to actions that will transform the interconnection between justice and racial policy, giving our lives of faith integrity.

Peter W. Marty noted in his *Christian Century* editorial (Nov. 18, 2020) that Jesus chose not to opt out of going to the cross: “Even near the end, surrounded by a hostile group of people holding clubs and swords, Jesus can say, ‘Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father . . . ?’ Jesus’ decision to opt in to his greater calling of love remains both instructive and saving.” Marty further noted that “many of us have the privilege of opting out of less than desirable circumstances . . . but our greater calling is to identify and choose opportunities to opt in, where we can come to the table and share in the work of strengthening the common good.”

In his last speech Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Let us be true to what we have said on paper.”

Classis Greater Los Angeles  
Ashley G. Medendorp, stated clerk

## Appendix A

The CRC has a long history of addressing issues of racial injustice. It began to deal with race relations in 1957 in regard to segregation. It has provided many resources and training for members to live authentic Christian lives promoting racial justice. Some of the many efforts the CRC has made to address racial injustice follow (information gathered from [crcna.org](http://crcna.org)).

- organized a Race Commission in the mid-1960s in response to serious unrest in Chicago over Black children being denied admission to a white school, and abroad held discussions with Reformed Churches in South Africa regarding the policy of apartheid.
- replaced the commission with the Synodical Commission on Race Relations (SCORR) in 1971 with the goal of recruiting persons of color as leaders, teachers, other church personnel, and students, and with the goal of publishing curriculum materials that reflect diversity.
- replaced SCORR with the Race Relations Committee in 1981 for a more collaborative attempt to end racism.
- added the Office of Social Justice in 1995 assigned to deal with a large range of social issues from hunger to abortion to immigration, etc.
- published a booklet in 1996: *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*, which covers the history of racial and ethnic diversity in the CRC.
- developed a curriculum for antiracism training in 2006 known in the U.S. as *Dance of Racial Reconciliation* and in Canada as *Widening the Circle*.
- distributed a six-session *Facing Racism* video to all churches in 2011.
- adopted the Belhar Confession in 2012 to take a position of opposition to apartheid and the underlying belief of white supremacy; Synod 2017 recategorized the Belhar Confession as a contemporary testimony.
- discussed the Doctrine of Discovery in 2016 out of concern regarding the treatment of Native America tribes by CRC boarding schools in the 1890s.
- appointed a new Justice Committee in 2018 to determine how to discuss political issues within the church.

- declared kinism to be “neither biblical nor Reformed” in 2019: The kinism overture declared kinism to be heresy because it teaches racial segregation and opposes interracial marriage; the Council of Delegates was mandated to research the term *heresy*.
- published a CRCNA Statement Against White Supremacy in *The Banner* in 2019 signed by nine CRC leaders in response to several killings motivated by white supremacy.
- presented *Our Journey 2025* in 2020 with goal number 3 stating we want to “grow in diversity and unity by seeking justice, reconciliation, and welcome, sharing our faith as we build relationships with and honor the cultures of our neighbors and newcomers.”

## Appendix B

1. America has lived with contradiction since its beginning. Our nation’s founders wrote about equality, freedom, and liberty, but those blessings were assumed to be for white people and white male landowners in particular. The founders owned and were masters of fellow human beings. Knowingly or unknowingly, we have lived with this contradiction ever since. White supremacy and its practices are not compatible with the gospel. As a church we have ignored or allowed various shapes of white supremacist beliefs and its practices to continue in our nation for centuries.
2. White supremacy is not just a belief system; it is also a political system aimed at excluding nonwhites from voting rights, land ownership, full participation in public institutions and services, political representation, and protection in the courts. While we inherited white supremacist beliefs and its practices as a nation, as followers of teachings in the Bible, we must not normalize it but rather support any effort to end white supremacist beliefs and practices if our good news is to have integrity.
3. The word *political* comes from the Greek word *polis*, meaning “city.” Our politics say how we choose to live together. Unfortunately, the word often triggers the word *partisan* referring to the politics of political parties—in the U.S.A., Republican or Democratic. As followers of the Bible, we must listen to what the *biblical prophets* teach about how to live together, not to party politics. While it is true that the church must be about the work of sharing the gospel, the Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper taught that we also must work to claim every square inch of our world for God, that includes all the ways in which we live together on this earth, ensuring that, as the *biblical prophets* directed, all who are made in the image of God flourish.<sup>3</sup> Our faith must support kingdom values coming to bear on the decisions made as to how we choose to live together. Again, this work is what gives the good news integrity.
4. Bryan Stevenson said, “Truth and justice are sequential. You have to have truth before you can have reconciliation; you have to have truth

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Meg Jenista, *Political or Partisan?* on [cepreaching.org/resources/fine-tune-your-preaching](http://cepreaching.org/resources/fine-tune-your-preaching); CRC Center for Excellence in Preaching, 2021.

before you can have restoration.”<sup>4</sup> We would add that you have to have truth before you can have unity. As followers of the Word, truth should unite us, not divide us.

5. Guilt cannot be avoided if we want to be free of wrongdoing. In order to be freed from our personal guilt of sin, we need to acknowledge the truth of our sinful nature, repent, and begin living a new life in Christ. In the same way, in order to be free of the guilt of white supremacy, we need to acknowledge the truth of our national history, repent, and begin living a new life in Christ. Education is not negotiable or optional if we want to end white supremacy and its practices. Education is the path to truth, change, unity, and peace between diverse races.
6. When we fear that white children will experience guilt when learning the truth about our national history, it is important to remember that children of color have lived with and will continue to live with daily fear and pain as long as white supremacy and its practices are allowed to continue. Empathy is a more likely outcome of learning the truth about American history. When we have walked in another’s shoes, we will not allow unfair practices to continue to harm another.
7. Voting is a basic right and responsibility of citizenship in the U.S.A. Followers of biblical teaching will want to support efforts to make voting easily accessible for all people because they believe all people are made in the image of God. They also will support efforts to ensure that the same avenues to wealth and power are available to people of color.

“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people” (Isa. 10:1-2).

8. Biblically based ballot choices at the voting booth are made in the interests of others before our own interests or security, ensuring, as Jesus commanded in the Bible, that all of us can flourish.  
“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:4-8).
9. The practice of moving district lines so that votes will benefit those who want power is an example of systemic racism because it is often used, even as we write this overture, to limit the voting power of people of color.
10. The practice of coloring areas on a city map red is also an example of systemic racism, because it is done where people of color live and it serves to limit the ability to gain financially in the way white communities gain wealth—by getting loans to own homes, property, or

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *How We Arrived Here*; [youtube.com/watch?v=Q65pzBelB1c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q65pzBelB1c).

businesses. These areas also have less access to good health care, good schools, fresh foods, and justice-based policing.

11. The disparities in housing, health care, education, and the criminal justice system also illustrate that systemic racism still exists today. For example:<sup>5</sup>
  - Housing lenders have disproportionately steered Black Americans to subprime housing loans, even when they qualified for prime loans. (*Suffolk University Law Review*)
  - Black Americans represent 40 percent of the homeless population despite being 13 percent of the general population. (National Alliance to End Homelessness)
  - Black American mothers are less likely to receive prenatal care. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
  - Black Americans are less likely to receive organ transplants. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
  - Black students/ children have less access to computers and internet. (National Center for Educational Statistics)
  - A higher percentage of Black Americans with a GPA of 3.5 or higher attend community colleges versus top-tier selective institutions. (Georgetown University)
  - Black Americans represent 40 percent more of the total prison population despite representing 13 percent of the general population. (United States Census - 2010)
  - Black Americans receive harsher punishments for the same crimes. (University of Michigan Law Center)
  - Black drivers are 20 percent more likely to be pulled over than white drivers. (*Nature Human Behavior*, Study by Stanford University)
12. The Bible teaches that our greatness is in our servanthood. The concept of a personal right that harms another is not biblical.

“You, my brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Gal. 5:13-15).
13. Adam Russell Taylor, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, said in an article, “It’s Time to Rethink American Churches,” that Christians should be defined by radical love toward those who have been excluded as well as by a commitment to work for justice for all. And the church should serve as the “conscience of the state,” rising above partisanship and “holding all sides accountable to our gospel value and priorities.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “64 Examples of Systemic Racism against Black Americans”; [curiousrefuge.com/blog/systemic-racism](https://curiousrefuge.com/blog/systemic-racism).

<sup>6</sup> [sojo.net/articles/it-s-time-rethink-american-churches](https://sojo.net/articles/it-s-time-rethink-american-churches).

## **Overture 9: Implement Insurance for Short-Term Illness**

It has become clear to Classis Quinte that there is an evident and pressing need for the Christian Reformed Church to establish a set of guidelines, along with a group insurance plan, to cover salaries of church employees during leaves of absence due to illness (mental, emotional, or physical).

### **Overture**

Classis Quinte overtures synod to do the following:

- A. Create a committee to develop a denominational framework for short-term illness of members of church staff.
- B. Direct the Council of Delegates to develop resources for churches regarding short-term illness of staff members, including a recommendation for the level of compensation during such a leave.
- C. Task the Council of Delegates to explore and implement short-term illness benefits into the Consolidated Group Insurance package.

### *Grounds:*

1. The absence of guidance from the CRCNA means that a local congregation could be put into a position of making a decision under pressure, possibly creating friction between church and employee, and within the congregation.
2. Without clear guidelines, an employee may be tempted to interpret the level of support arrived at as an indication of his or her performance, and a council may be tempted to think of it this way. Denominational guidelines would help avoid misunderstanding.
3. There are often additional costs when an employee goes on leave. In smaller churches, the budget may not have a lot of room to cover these without insurance in place. Churches should be able to act as model employers who show practical loving care for their employees.

Classis Quinte

Joan Crawford, stated clerk

## **Overture 10: Clarify Process for Reinstatement of Pastors Who Resigned to Serve in Other Denominations**

### **I. Background**

Classis Atlantic Northeast was recently asked to examine a minister who had previously resigned from service in the CRC to serve in another denomination. Church Order Article 14 appears to indicate that such requests be processed by the “classis by which such action was taken” (Church Order Art. 14-e), making no distinction between the different categories of resignation from CRC ministry covered in that article (Art. 14-b, -c, and -d).

However, classis discovered that synod has given different instruction for the readmission of pastors who resign to serve in ministry outside the denomination. In the case of an Article 14-b resignation, synod has said that “Church Order Article 8—not Article 14—is to be followed” because Article 8 is the normal process for admission to ministry in the CRC from another

denomination (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 491-92). Yet it seems to us that there is a distinction between those who enter the ministry of the CRC for the first time and those who reenter the ministry of the CRC after a period of service in another denomination. The process for entering through Article 8 is usually one of orientation to the CRC and does not naturally consider “the circumstances surrounding the release and the renewed desire to serve in ministry,” as Article 14-e requires. Synod’s statement also appears to contradict the principle elsewhere in Church Order that requests for readmission to service in the CRC be processed by the assembly that adjudicated the original case (cf. Art. 14-e and Supplement, Art. 82-84). In addition, our classis is aware of cases in which an individual released from ministry in the CRC via Article 14-b was subsequently readmitted via Article 14-e.

We presume that, in the case of a pastor who leaves to serve in another denomination and later returns to the CRC, the “manner and spirit” of the resignation (Supplement, Art. 14-b, section b) would be considered as part of the process through which the Candidacy Committee judges a candidate’s readiness for call in the CRC (cf. *Agenda for Synod 2018*, p. 224; *Journey Toward Ordination*, Art. 8, section 4.1.2), but this is never explicitly stated in synodical directives we are aware of. We also recognize the wisdom that regards the assembly handling the original case as being valuable in judging the candidate’s fitness for ministry leadership, and that realizes the possibility that Article 14 could be used as a means of avoiding special discipline (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 708). If an Article 8 readmission does not take these realities into account, it seems that we fall short in our covenantal obligations to one another as part of the same denomination.

## II. Overture

Classis Atlantic Northeast overtures Synod 2022 to add the following line to Church Order Supplement, Article 8, E, 2 (indicated by *italics*) in order to clarify the process by which ministers released to serve in another denomination are to be readmitted:

A minister ordained outside of the CRCNA desiring to be declared eligible for a call to a Christian Reformed church shall make application to the Candidacy Committee. Once the application has been filed, the procedures prescribed by the Candidacy Committee in the Journey Toward Ordination document shall be followed. *Ministers who have previously been released from service in the CRC should follow the procedures of Church Order Article 14-e when requesting readmission to ministry in the denomination.*

### *Grounds:*

1. The instruction of Synod 1994 (*Acts of Synod 1994*, p. 492), providing that Article 8 be followed in such cases, appears to contradict the principles of Articles 14 and 84 and their relevant supplements, which require that the assembly that processed the original release of a minister approve a subsequent request for reinstatement.
2. Uses of Article 14-e to readmit a minister released under Church Order Article 14-b indicate ongoing confusion over the correct process for such situations.

Classis Atlantic Northeast  
David D. Poolman, stated clerk

## **Overture 11: Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly**

### **I. Overture**

Classis Hackensack overtures Synod 2022 to appoint a task force to develop Church Order procedures to discipline officebearers, including disaffiliation of a consistory or classis initiated by a major assembly.

#### *Grounds:*

1. The church is enjoined with the responsibility to bring those who wander away back to the truth of God (James 5:19-20)—and when gentle appeals are ignored, to exclude them and pray for them (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1-10; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:19-21).
2. We lack a published mechanism for major assemblies to use in responding to gross theological error.
3. Past practice and appeals confirm that major assemblies have authority to depose officebearers in local churches.
4. Clarifying our discipline would bring consistency to our Church Order in how we discipline erring consistories and classes.

### **II. Background**

Our present Church Order does not accurately reflect the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Reformed confessions with respect to ecclesiastical discipline. We confess that discipline is one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). Our polity has provisions for accountability at the congregational level: members are accountable to elders (Church Order Art. 81), officebearers are accountable to one another (Art. 82-84). These are faithful elaborations of the principles of discipline provided in Matthew 18 and other passages. Principles of good, restrained discipline are spelled out at the congregational level. Local consistories are able respond to correct erring members and officebearers. They can call members to repentance and, as a last resort, exclude them.

However, these principles are opaque for a consistory and classis. Our polity includes appointment of classis counselors and visitors (Art. 42), and synod appoints deputies (Art. 48) to maintain sound doctrine. These roles help our churches abide by good order. Those appointed as counselors, visitors, and deputies have advisory roles to classis or synod. Where a local consistory can exclude confessing members (Art. 81), comparable provisions are not delineated for classis and synod. The authority of broader assemblies is recognized (Art. 27), and the principles of mutual submission and restraint are also expressed (Art. 85).

Christian Reformed churches agree that ecclesiastical authority is original to the local church council, and the authority of major assemblies is delegated (Art. 27). By joining a broader assembly, officebearers of a local church relinquish some authority. What appears absent in the delegation of this authority is a clear process for discipline by a major assembly.

Our Church Order provides little guidance of what to do when those who err ignore admonition and discipline of broader accountability. However, past classical and synodical actions reveal an established practice:

- In 1924 Classis Grand Rapids West deposed the consistories of First CRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Hope CRC in Grandville, Michigan; Synod 1926 upheld the decision of classis.
- In 1980 Classis Huron deposed Rev. Wiebo Ludwig and four other consistory members of Trinity CRC in Goderich, Ontario; Synod 1982 upheld the decision of classis.
- In 1991 Classis Lake Erie deposed officebearers of Washington (Pa.) CRC; Synod 1991 ruled that classis acted within its authority.

Synods have repeatedly affirmed the principle that a classis has authority to depose a consistory (additional cases are noted in Henry De Moor’s 1986 *Equipping the Saints* doctoral dissertation). Although precedents exist, our Church Order does not regulate the practice.

Further, there is no precedent for the disaffiliation of a classis by synod. The silence of our Church Order on this important aspect of discipline affects both local congregations and broader assemblies. Local consistories and officebearers may be denied due process because no discernible process exists. Without a uniform standard, broader assemblies are open to charges of inconsistency and injustice. Developing a clear standard for the disaffiliation of a consistory or classis initiated by a major assembly would ensure such separations are handled fairly.

Specifying the disciplinary procedures available to a major assembly would equip delegates of classes. The most recent synod passed a motion to “admonish councils and classes to promote confessional fidelity and mutually to pursue special discipline of an officebearer who is found to hold views contrary to our standard” (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 818-19). This was synod’s response to years of heresy being taught in a local church and of the classis failing to act. Delegated officebearers rely on the Church Order as part of the discernment process. Our Church Order needs to adequately guide our officebearers in critical situations of how church discipline functions at the classis and synodical levels.

Classis Hackensack  
Sheila E. Holmes, stated clerk

## **Overture 12: Admonish and Censure the Officebearers of Classis Grand Rapids East**

### **I. Background**

For the past year and a half, Neland Avenue CRC has refused to discipline an officebearer living in public sin (as affirmed by Synods 1973, 1980, 2002, 2004, and 2016). Numerous communications from individuals, churches, classes, and even the Council of Delegates have been ignored (see appendices to Overture 7, *Agenda for Synod 2021*, for a sample of these communications). What is more, Classis Grand Rapids East (GRE) has likewise known of this public matter, received numerous communications, and refused to act by bringing the loving discipline that is needed. This behavior by our sister church/churches is largely unprecedented in our denomination’s history and is an attack upon the covenant bonds that unite us. Not only has this church and classis broken covenant with us, but the lack of appeal from any

officebearers within the classis further tells the story of how complicit Classis GRE currently is in this matter.

In Lord's Day 31, the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. and A. 85, lays out its teaching on the necessity of discipline, as one of only two "keys of the kingdom." As critical as the preaching of the holy gospel is, the catechism argues that the regular, faithful, and loving exercise of church discipline, toward repentance, is equally needed. Familiar texts like Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 11-13 clearly outline the critical nature of such discipline. Discipline is not optional for the Christian church.

The Belgic Confession uses slightly different language, speaking not of two keys but rather the three marks of the true church in Article 29. The Belgic Confession also includes the preaching of the gospel, adds the pure administration of the sacraments, and then third, holds up the necessity of discipline. Again, church discipline is part of how the true church manages itself in all things "according to the pure Word of God." The discipline of open and unrepentant sin, all the more in regard to officebearers, is critical, and distinguishes the true from the false church, in the words of our confession.

Since the council of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis GRE have refused to exercise discipline, it falls to synod to discern the process and scope of discipline that needs to be exercised and act on it. At the June 15 Special Meeting of the COD in lieu of Synod 2021, the Church Order adviser for that meeting, Rev. Kathy Smith, shared her belief that synod cannot discipline a local council unless there is an appeal originating from within that church or classis (Tuesday Morning, 1:34:00ff p.m. time stamp). Since the officebearers of Classis GRE have accepted that interpretation, that only those in the classis can appeal to ensure that the second key of the kingdom is maintained and the third mark of the true church is preserved, then officebearers who have not appealed this matter to synod have likewise broken their vows through their silence. This is an unprecedented public matter which all are aware of, within the church and outside of it, and therefore the responsibility is greater.

In Acts 20:28, speaking to the elders within the church (v. 17), Paul charges them to "pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The offense and error at Neland means that they are not displaying a mark of the true church and are in danger of becoming a false church. The deacons, elders, and pastors in that congregation, as well as those that have covenanted together in Classis GRE, have formally endorsed (via Communication 6 in the *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*) a position that opposes the Word of God, as repeatedly affirmed by previous decisions of synod. This is jeopardizing a church for which Jesus bled. These overseers have failed to be watchful as commanded.

Likewise, 1 Peter 5:2-3 charges elders with the necessity that they remain faithful in shepherding "the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." This call and responsibility to exercise oversight is one of the key charges for an undershepherd. If they refuse to ex-

ercise the oversight and care for the flock, they are disqualifying themselves from the care of God's people.

The convergence of the unfaithfulness of a congregation along with the turning of a blind eye by an entire classis is not something we have witnessed before. Similarly, our Church Order was not designed to handle this kind of mass disobedience, so this synod will have to wrestle with the issue. Will we maintain the keys to the kingdom, the marks of the true church, and take the bold steps to remain faithful?

## II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2022 to do the following:

A. Publicly admonish all officebearers serving on councils in Classis Grand Rapids East in 2021 and 2022 that have not filed a formal appeal regarding Neland's covenant breaking.

*Grounds:*

1. Through their silence, these officebearers have failed to keep the vows they made in the Covenant for Officebearers and have not taught and acted in accordance with our confessions, as they promised.
2. Every officebearer in Classis GRE has had the opportunity to overture their council on this matter, and if not acceded to by the council, to appeal to classis and even to synod (in accordance with our Church Order). Failure to do so at this stage implies passive agreement with the decision.
3. Admonishment is the first step of discipline, and an obligation of the true church. This is all the more so for officebearers ordained to represent Christ to his people. Since the council of Neland has erred and Classis GRE has failed and refused to correct them, it falls to synod to act.

B. Unseat all delegates of Classis Grand Rapids East from Synod 2022 that have been admonished by this synod.

*Ground:* Officebearers cannot properly represent and serve the church while under formal and public admonishment.

C. Remove all privileges of the floor, for Synod 2022, from all officebearers that have been admonished by this synod.

*Ground:* These officers cannot properly participate in the work of the church while under admonishment for this breach of covenant, so it is necessary that they be censured.

D. Pray that this admonishment would be received by these officebearers as the loving correction it is, awakening them to their negligence or disobedience in this matter, and that the Spirit of God would help them to submit to God's Word in all things and serve all the more faithfully in the future; that God would grant true repentance, reconciliation, and restoration and restore the unity, faithfulness, and public witness of our beloved denomination.

Classis Zeeland

Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

## Overture 13: Establish a Task Force on Unity

### I. Background/Introduction

The goal of this overture is to lay out a way for the Christian Reformed Church in North America to prioritize Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18-20 to "make disciples of all nations" by enabling believers and churches in the denomination with valid and important issues of disagreement over marriage and human sexuality to work together as one. This is not an overture asking for the two sides to agree to a position on the issue of marriage and human sexuality; rather, this overture is meant to help the two sides live together in ministry notwithstanding their major differences of opinion.

We hear it often: "We live in exceedingly divisive times!" In North America, political parties jockey for votes, with the public engaging in more and more extreme actions. Think of the 2021 elections in Canada when the crowd threw stones at their prime minister, or consider the 2020 presidential election, over which supporters of one party stormed the Capitol over the confirmation of electoral votes.

But it's not just political divisiveness. Matters of public health have become divisive, as many welcome vaccinations while others refuse them. The use of masks has been contentious, with the result of schools often embroiled in controversy. Some yard signs proclaim "All Lives Matter" while others state "Black Lives Matter." Some claim racism is overstated; others experience it daily. Schools debate whether critical race theory should be taught.

The list goes on. Most importantly, members and leaders of the CRCNA find themselves in this confusing and chaotic cultural moment, which for some feels like a culture war.

Sadly, we hurl hateful words and take abrasive positions on social and political issues within the church, demonstrating to the next generation—our children and grandchildren—and the world that we can't even love each other as fellow Christians, let alone love those who deny Christ. Our warfare marginalizes our witness to the world and consequently leads to shrinking congregations and inhibits the building of the kingdom.

Thus, the question behind this overture is this: How does the church—meaning the denomination we know as the Christian Reformed Church in North America—provide a gospel witness in these times, first with one another in the denomination and then to the world? A second question follows: How is the church to express its unity in so doing?

#### A. *Biblical, confessional, and testimonial basis*

A beginning point for our call to witness Christ's love is found in Q. and A. 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ." Important scriptural basis for this answer can be found in Matthew 5:14-16; Romans 14:17-19; and 1 Peter 2:12, 3:1-2.

Many times, as synod has addressed an ethical or moral aspect of our shared humanity, it has suggested what our witness should be. One example is that we are called to be "voices for justice and public examples in the effort to live sustainably within our God-given resources, to promote stewardship in our own communities and our nations," and to "examine energy choices" in our daily life and work "from a perspective of stewardship, challenging

ourselves to use less energy and to use it more wisely” while seeking “justice for the poor and vulnerable among us and for future generations” (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 803-805).

A closer examination of synodical position statements shows no direct focus on our unity. Nevertheless, the Scriptures are filled with such calls. A few examples include the following:

- John 17:11: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”
- Psalm 133:1: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”
- 2 Corinthians 13:11: “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.”
- Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
- Philippians 2:2: “Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”
- Colossians 3:14: “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”
- Romans 12:4-5: “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”
- Our World Belongs to God, one of our contemporary testimonies, provides additional descriptions of the unity of God’s people, and in doing so, reminds us of both our brokenness and our commitments to unity:

39. The church is a gathering of forgiven sinners called to be holy. Saved by the patient grace of God, we deal patiently with others and together confess our need for grace and forgiveness.

Finally, we would do well to remember our Covenant for Officebearers, specifically this sentence: “We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel.”

#### *B. Our present need*

Our differences within the church over marriage and human sexuality not only reflect the culture around us, but they also go to the very heart of our call as believers. When we have differences that divide us deeply, our witness is dimmed and our unity is fractured. For example, as synod acts this summer on the recommendations of the Human Sexuality Report, some will quickly use that decision, regardless of what the decision is, as a cause for division. For all the reasons enumerated here, we do not believe that such division is healthy. Likewise, some will simply encourage us not to make any final decision as a denomination. But this delaying tactic will only mean that the wound of potential division will continue to fester.

C. *An urgent call to action*

Thus,

1. We should come together with our differences over marriage and human sexuality and agree on the Key Elements of Biblical Truth (e.g., Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration, etc.) as taught in Scripture and as affirmed in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dordt, and the Belgic Confession, and,
2. we should then learn skills to deal with disagreements and covenant together in both our agreements and in our actions as to how we treat each other despite our differences so that . . .
3. we can concentrate on our task assigned by Jesus to “go and make disciples of all nations. . . .”

**II. Overture**

Classis Grand Rapids South overtures Synod 2022 to establish a Task Force on Unity to recall and articulate core matters of agreement (the Key Elements of Biblical Truth) and create and provide suggestions, principles, and approaches to the churches, as well as Reformed theology, for how we treat one another despite our differences. When conflict is present, principles such as the following could help us strive toward unity:

1. The issues that separate believers (e.g., positions regarding marriage and human sexuality) are secondary to the Key Elements of Biblical Truth shared by all in the CRCNA.
2. Each side must understand that the other side of the marriage and human sexuality debate bases their decisions and actions on what they believe is their clear understanding of God’s Word: the Bible.
3. Each side must respectfully and lovingly disagree with the other side.
4. Each side must want to call the world, through word and witness, to embrace the Key Elements of Biblical Truth and emphasize the truths rather than the issues that divide them.
5. Each side is therefore calling the world to Jesus as their first task in obedience to Jesus’ own teaching in Matthew 28:18-20.

The mandate of this task force would include the following:

1. Create and provide the items outlined above to the churches.
2. Gather their responses.
3. Give annual interim reports to synod.
4. Prepare a final report with recommendations to Synod 2026.

Unlike other task force guidelines, this mandate includes the encouragement to pilot various approaches in classes and churches (relying on CRCNA denominational staff when appropriate) before the final report to Synod 2026 so that the approaches included in the final recommendations are field-tested. This task force is to be given highest priority by leaders and staff of the CRCNA. Its work is to begin within weeks of Synod 2022’s adjournment, and its activities are highly recommended to the churches for reflection and engagement over the next 48 months.

### III. In summary

This overture, by asking for a Task Force on Unity, provides a roadmap to identify ways the churches of the CRCNA, with differing views on marriage and human sexuality as well as a host of other issues, can continue ministering in the same denomination. The roadmap is to be developed by this task force.

The task force shall create and provide suggestions, principles, and approaches to the churches, gather their responses, give annual interim reports to synod, and prepare a final report with recommendations to Synod 2026.

Further, such a Task Force on Unity would do the following:

1. Demonstrate that the priority of the CRCNA is to obey Jesus' own call in Matthew 28:18-20 when he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
2. Demonstrate to the world the power of God's love in the lives of his people.
3. Encourage members of the CRCNA to stay in conversation on this issue to help each other learn how to value and love all people, regardless of their sexual identification.
4. Allow members and scholars in the CRCNA to continue to debate a very important theological issue and learn more from the Holy Spirit as he guides them and the church.
5. Show our heirs and the world that we, as a denomination, are humbly and authentically trying to face a difficult issue as followers of Jesus called to live together—not called to separate.
6. Point out what is absolutely important to our faith by stating clearly the Key Elements of Biblical Truth that are nonnegotiable salvation issues.

Classis Grand Rapids South  
George G. Vink, stated clerk

## Overture 14: Adopt All Recommendations in the Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

### I. Background

Synod 2016 adopted the following recommendation:

That synod appoint a new study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin.

*(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 919-20)*

We appreciate the sizable undertaking this study committee has completed and delivered in their report. Providing an Executive Summary of this report proved to be valuable as it allowed many more members of our councils and congregations to engage in the fruit of this labor. The report leads the reader to embrace the truths of Scripture and engage our fallen world with an empathic posture. The articulated worldview, biblical exegesis, lists of resources, pastoral wisdom, other perspectives, and topical studies will serve Christ's church as it continues to engage a world that finds Scripture's teaching about sexuality to be implausible. By God's grace, the church will be the place people find their true identity in Christ and follow God's Word when the idolatries of sexual immorality leave people empty and the strongholds of worldly sexual ideologies fall.

We do not have anything to contribute that alters or challenges the conclusions of this report. We simply wish to add support to the argument made in section XVI regarding confessional status. Two books published by Faith Alive about the Heidelberg Catechism, *Comfort and Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* by Andrew Kuyvenhoven and *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* by Fred. H. Klooster, give further support to the report's statement about Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108. Addressing this topic on page 458, the report states the following: "By the word 'unchastity' the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity."

After establishing marriage "as a lasting bond between one man and one woman," Kuyvenhoven goes on to say, "Many people disagree with this Christian teaching and claim that consenting adults may choose a different arrangement for their sexual relationship. But if sex and marriage have been given by God, we will have to live by the rules he established, or we will deeply hurt ourselves and each other. And God will punish us for breaking his laws" (*Comfort and Joy*, p. 240). He also writes, "Christians must be very alert to withstand the call for 'sexual freedom' because it will lead us into terrible bondage" (*Comfort and Joy*, p. 242). According to Kuyvenhoven, the term *unchastity* in answers 108 and 109 of the catechism refers to sexual relations outside the marriage of one man and one woman, and we must resist "sexual freedom" that entices us toward such activities.

Klooster makes a similar statement when he writes, "In this commandment God singles out adultery as the most serious of the sins of unchastity while also forbidding all degenerate lusts, whether found in married or unmarried persons" (*Our Only Comfort*, p. 1006). He then equates *unchastity* in answers 108 and 109 of the catechism with the term *sexual immorality* in Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; and 1 Corinthians 6:18. He clearly sees 1 Corinthians 7:2 as the state where sex is ordained by God, where "each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" (*Our Only Comfort*, p. 1007). Sexual activity outside such a marriage is *unchastity* or *sexual immorality*. Therefore, both Klooster and Kuyvenhoven offer further support to the conclusion reached in section XVI of the report on page 460, that "the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status."

## II. Overture

Classis Heartland overtures Synod 2022 to adopt the recommendations in the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

*Grounds:*

1. The study committee ought to be commended for meeting the mandate of Synod 2016 by engaging the breadth of our sexual brokenness—a sensitive and controversial matter—guided by the holy Scriptures and our Reformed confessions.
2. This report is helpful and important for our congregations as we struggle to minister with truth and grace in a society where secular norms are constantly changing.
3. If we promote as godly behavior what Scripture clearly and consistently condemns (Lev. 18:6-24; 20:10-24; Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:3-5; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; and 1 Tim. 1:9-11), we do so to our own detriment and invite God’s judgment.
4. As argued in the report and supported above, it is clear what the Bible means by *sexual immorality* and what the Heidelberg Catechism means by *unchastity*. Violations of sexual purity outlined in this report, therefore, ought to continue guiding the faith and life of the church with “confessional status.”
5. It is imperative that we remain united by the biblical teachings expressed in this report to remain united in our covenant together as the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Classis Heartland

Phillip T. Westra, stated clerk

## Overture 15: Accede to Recommendations A-F of the Human Sexuality Report

### I. Background

The church of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, spans every inhabited continent and has evangelized an amazing variety of cultures with an amazing variety of religious and ethical backgrounds. In spite of this broad variety of the cultural expressions in which the church has taken form, and in spite of the resistance of the hostile ethics of surrounding cultures, the church’s sexual ethic has been consistent and firm in all of these places and through every period of history, for it is rooted in Scripture and has been guided by the Holy Spirit. The post-Christian culture of the Western world in the 21st century has, in the name of freedom and liberty, adopted a sexual ethic that is hostile to the church’s consistent sexual ethic in which alone sexual liberty, wholeness, and justice are found. Confusion, brokenness, and death have accompanied our culture’s rejection of the Christian sexual ethic.

Too often the sexual confusion, chaos, and brokenness that have accompanied the sexual rebellion of the culture that surrounds the congregations of the CRCNA have permeated our churches, schools, and homes—and our very hearts and minds. The lack of clarity within the CRCNA on this doctri-

nal issue has produced a lot of theological heat; but this theological heat has generated little pastoral warmth for the members of our congregations who struggle to live in holiness and fidelity to God and his Word amid our own disordered sexual desires as well as the surrounding cultural confusion and brokenness.

In the midst of our own brokenness and the surrounding cultural and denominational confusion, recognizing that our congregations needed far more doctrinal and pastoral guidance than advice regarding participation in “same-sex marriages,” Synod 2016 established a committee “to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20).

This committee’s study report faithfully fulfills the mandate given by Synod 2016 and provides robust biblical, theological, and pastoral guidance to the churches of the CRCNA that will lead churches and their members into the holiness, wholeness, and justice into which Scripture and the long tradition of the catholic and apostolic church invites them, and into faithful witness to this rebellious and confused world.

## II. Overture

Classis Iakota therefore overtures Synod 2022 to maintain the unity of the catholic and apostolic church by acceding to recommendations A through F of the study report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

### *Grounds:*

1. The study report provides doctrinal clarity in faithfulness to God’s Word that will reduce the theological heat that plagues our denomination so that our pastoral warmth and witness to the world might increase.
2. The study report provides the doctrinal and confessional clarity necessary to maintain not only the unity of the CRCNA but also the CRCNA’s unity with the catholic and apostolic church of all times and places.
3. The study throughout is a helpful invitation to Christian discipleship as a covenant community, calling each of us to submit our sexuality to Christ’s call to daily take up our cross (Luke 9:23), die to our sinful nature (Col. 3:5), and embrace the mutual accountability we share as members of Christ’s body (Heb. 3:13).

Classis Iakota

Bernard J. Haan, stated clerk

## Overture 16: Approve the Human Sexuality Report and All of Its Recommendations

### I. Introduction

In March 2021, classis encouraged the councils of each church to read the Human Sexuality Report and reflect together on this. We have done that, taking time each month to go through the different sections of the report. We are grateful for the report and believe that, while not perfect, it is an important document that fulfills its mandate from synod: “to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality.”

Furthermore, we have reflected on the recommendations of the study committee, and are in agreement with all of them.

*Recommendations (as stated in the report)*

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of the committee: Mary-Lee Bouma, Jim Vanderwoerd, and Jeff Weima.
- B. That synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives.
- C. That synod encourage the churches to make use of the curriculum prepared by Pastor Church Resources, in conjunction with members of the committee, to help small groups study and discuss aspects of the committee’s report which may be controversial.
- D. That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.
- E. That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.
- F. That synod not appoint a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the conclusion of the present report.

In light of this, Classis Rocky Mountain overtures synod to do the following:

### II. Overture

Classis Rocky Mountain overtures synod to approve the Human Sexuality Report with all of its recommendations.

*Ground:* While it is not perfect, the Human Sexuality Report has two elements we sorely need today:

- **Compassion:** The report has compassion for people struggling in different areas with sexuality and gender, and it also has an important tone of humility, calling the church to repentance so that we can care better for people struggling in these areas.
- **Without Compromise:** It also doesn’t compromise on basic biblical teaching. Some people are questioning this today, but we haven’t

heard valid biblical grounds for why we should do so. It is essential that we not compromise on Scripture.

Classis Rocky Mountain  
Mark W. Hilbelink, stated clerk

## **Overture 17: Consider the Position of Latinos Concerning the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Background**

The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) will be discussed at Synod 2022. Many churches and classes will weigh in on various aspects of the report. The Consejo Latino (an active network of Hispanic ministry leaders within the CRCNA and beyond) works to connect and train pastors seeking ordination in the CRCNA. The group is also conscious of being a link that serves not only Hispanic churches but the denomination as well. Toward that end, the Consejo Latino has written an official position on the HSR (in section II below, written in Spanish, followed by a translation into English).

Classis Arizona has a substantial outreach to the Hispanic community and continues to work at expanding those efforts. Classis Arizona is in general agreement with the HSR. Classis Arizona also believes that it is important to consider minority voices in this discussion.

### **II. Analysis<sup>1</sup>—Nuestra posición como latinos con respecto al Informe sobre Sexualidad humana de CRCNA**

A través de este comunicado queremos dar a conocer nuestra perspectiva acerca del informe sobre la sexualidad humana que será discutido en el Sínodo 2022. Como primera medida entendemos que vivimos en un mundo quebrantado y caído, que fomenta la sexualidad sin reservas contribuyendo al daño cada vez mayor de los principios y valores cristianos. Vivimos en una sociedad en la que a lo malo se le llama bueno y a lo bueno se le llama malo (Isaías 5:20). Pero eso no significa que la Biblia ha perdido su vigencia o que debemos aceptar la corriente cultural que nos rodea. Somos conscientes de que vivimos en una época de libertinaje sexual y de primacía del hedonismo y el placer como fin propio de la vida. Pero las modas, la cultura o las opiniones de quienes así desean vivir, no pueden jamás eliminar los pasajes bíblicos que se refieren a la pureza, las relaciones sexuales entre personas casadas y heterosexuales y el respeto al cuerpo como templo del Espíritu Santo. El Dios a quien pertenecemos y que nos ha librado del pecado, hace posible y nos pide (Lev. 11:44; Heb. 13:4-6) caminar en Santidad, por el poder del Espíritu Santo que vive en nosotros.

Nuestra comunidad latina es tradicionalmente conservadora y apegada a la Escritura en cada uno de los temas que esta define. Siempre hemos considerado que la Biblia define la condición caída del ser humano, pero también la vía a través de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo para obtener el perdón y la vida eterna.

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish text here is followed by a translation into English.

Consideramos sin lugar a duda que la Biblia tiene el contenido apropiado para quienes están lidiando con cualquier tipo o manifestación de pecado. El sexo no es impuro por naturaleza, de hecho, es creado por Dios para el placer de la pareja y garantizar la procreación. El problema es llevarlo a cabo fuera de los límites impuestos por Dios mismo en su palabra.

El Antiguo Testamento prohíbe el adulterio, el incesto y el sexo entre personas del mismo sexo, dejando en claro que solo la actividad sexual dentro del contexto del matrimonio le agrada a Dios. Jesús y los escritores del Nuevo Testamento hablan aún más directamente, tanto para fomentar el sexo en el matrimonio, como para condenar todo sexo fuera del matrimonio como inmoralidad. La enseñanza de las Escrituras sobre el matrimonio, la gracia, el amor, la lealtad, los votos, el perdón, la esperanza y la promesa son suficientes para poder tomar una posición clara sobre cada uno de estos aspectos.

La enseñanza de la iglesia sobre el sexo prematrimonial, el sexo extramarital, el adulterio, el poli amorío, la pornografía y el sexo homosexual ya tiene estatus confesional. El contenido de nuestros credos y nuestras confesiones nos ayudan a entender de una manera bíblica y Cristiana todo aquello que hoy en día se debate con tanta pasión.

Rechazamos abiertamente la definición de sexo dada por la ideología de género, al afirmar que el sexo es una construcción social y que cada persona es libre de determinarlo de acuerdo con sus gustos temporales o definitivos. Esto ha traído una gran confusión a la humanidad, especialmente entre la juventud que asiste a una verdadera esquizofrenia de opiniones encontradas en ese sentido.

Así mismo el intento de definir la homosexualidad a partir de explicaciones genéticas, también ha sido desvirtuado por la misma ciencia. Las afirmaciones populares sobre el descubrimiento de un “gene homosexual” son exageraciones injustificadas. El tratar de justificar estas opiniones en si es declarar que Dios no sabe lo que está haciendo (Rom. 1:18-25). De todas maneras, somos conscientes de que la iglesia no puede esquivar estas inquietudes. Desafortunadamente hoy en día los cristianos que rechazan la práctica de vida homosexual son habitualmente etiquetados homofóbicos, intolerantes e, incluso, odiosos.

La moralidad no es sólo un asunto de gustos o culturas. Cuando fallamos en guardar los mandamientos de Dios, en realidad nos hacemos culpables ante Él y necesitamos de su perdón. La moralidad está basada en la palabra de Dios y, por lo tanto, el bien y mal existen y no son afectados por las opiniones o los rasgos culturales de la vida contemporánea.

Lo que la Biblia condena son las acciones o comportamiento homosexuales, no el tener una orientación homosexual. Muchos homosexuales testifican cuán agonizante es encontrarse con estos deseos y luchar contra ellos. Y la Biblia no condena a una persona porque tenga una orientación homosexual. Lo que ella condena son las prácticas o actos homosexuales. Reconocemos la realidad bíblica que cristianos nacidos de nuevo experimentarán fuertes deseos—deseos que a veces no hemos pedido—que contradicen al diseño revelado de Dios en nuestras vidas. Esta realidad es parte de nuestra “depravación total”; sin embargo, también tenemos la promesa de la ayuda del Espíritu Santo y del uno en el otro en luchar contra estos deseos a como buscamos el deseo más satisfactorio de conocer y vivir por Jesús. Por lo

tanto, rechazamos la idea que los deseos pecaminosos -con los cuales hemos sido nacidos en una manera u otra—fundamentalmente definan la identidad de quienes le pertenecen a Jesús (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

“Y esto eran algunos de ustedes.” En otras palabras, mediante la fe en Cristo, ya no somos identificados por el pecado. Somos una nueva creación en Cristo Jesús (2 Cor. 5:17; Efesios 4:22-24), creados a la imagen de Dios en justicia y santidad. Ahora nos identificamos por el nombre de Jesús, como hijos amados y santos de Dios. Ciertamente, esta nueva identidad da poder para luchar contra los deseos pecaminosos que permanecen (Col. 3).

Como discípulos de Jesús, somos llamados a superar estas inclinaciones mediante el poder del Espíritu Santo. La Biblia es muy directa y clara cuando trata con el comportamiento homosexual. La práctica homosexual es contraria al diseño de Dios y es pecado. Pero no solo esto sino además la práctica de cualquier actividad heterosexual fuera del matrimonio también es pecado.

Levítico 18:22, la Biblia dice que es una abominación que un hombre se acueste con otro hombre como quien se acuesta con una mujer.

En Levítico 20:13 se ordena la pena de muerte en Israel para tal acto, juntamente con el adulterio, incesto y bestialidad. En 1 Corintios 6:9-10 el apóstol Pablo escribe: ¿O no sabéis que los injustos no heredarán el reino de Dios? No os dejéis engañar: ni los inmorales, ni los idólatras, ni los adúlteros, ni los afeminados, ni los homosexuales, ni los ladrones, ni los avaros, ni los borrachos, ni los difamadores, ni los estafadores heredarán el reino de Dios.”

(Ef. 5:32) Pablo dice que la unión entre un hombre y su esposa es un símbolo viviente de la unidad de Cristo con su pueblo, la Iglesia. Cuando pensamos en esto, podemos ver cuán terrible sacrilegio, la gran burla del plan de Dios, que es la unión homosexual. Ella contradice la intención de Dios que Él tiene para la humanidad desde el momento de la creación.

Algunas personas afirman que las prohibiciones de la Biblia contra el comportamiento homosexual ya no son válidas para nuestro tiempo. Pero esa objeción representa un malentendido serio. No hay evidencia de que los mandamientos de Pablo relacionados a las prácticas homosexuales son culturalmente relativos. La Biblia no dice que ignoremos la inmoralidad sexual. ¡Nos dice que huyamos! (1 Cor. 6:18).

De igual manera como creyentes cristianos rechazamos cualquier forma de agresión hacia cualquier ser humano por su tendencia sexual, raza, lengua, color, edad o cualquier otra condición. La mayoría de los homosexuales no escogieron tener tal orientación y quisieran cambiar si pudieran. Necesitamos aceptarlos y con amor apoyar a los hermanos y hermanas que están luchando con este problema. Y, en general, necesitamos extender el amor de Dios a las personas homosexuales.

Por estas razones, respaldamos el informe que se ha preparado por parte de la denominación.

Rev. John Harold Caicedo, Presidente del Consejo Latino  
Rev. Mirtha M. Villafane, Vicepresidente del Consejo Latino  
Rev. José Rayas, Secretario

**Translation: \* Analysis—Our position as Latinos concerning the Human Sexuality Report of the CRCNA**

With this communication we would like to make known our perspective about the Human Sexuality Report, which will be discussed at Synod 2022. As a first step, we understand that we live in a broken and fallen world that promotes an unreserved sexuality that contributes to the ever-increasing damage to Christian principles and values. We live in a society in which evil is called good and good is called evil (Isa. 5:20). But this does not mean that the Bible has lost its validity, or that we have to accept the cultural wave that surrounds us. We are conscious that we live in an era of sexual debauchery and the primacy of hedonism and pleasure as the purpose of life. But these fads, the culture or the opinions of those who desire to live this way, can never eliminate the biblical passages that deal with purity, sexual relations between married heterosexual individuals, and the respect for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. The God to whom we belong, and who has liberated us from sin, makes it possible and calls us (Lev. 11:44; Heb. 13:4-6) to walk in holiness, by the power of the Holy Spirit that lives in us.

Our Latino community is traditionally conservative and attached to Scripture in each of the topics that it defines. We have always considered that the Bible defines the fallen condition of the human being, but also the way through our Lord Jesus Christ, to obtain forgiveness and the life eternal. We consider, without a doubt, that the Bible has the appropriate content for those who are wrestling with any type or manifestation of sin. Sex is not impure by nature—in fact, it was created by God for the pleasure of the couple and to guarantee procreation. The problem comes when it is taken outside the limits imposed by God in his Word.

The Old Testament prohibits adultery, incest, and sex between individuals of the same sex, making it clear that only sexual activity within the context of marriage is pleasing to God. Jesus and the New Testament writers speak even more directly, to promote sex within the marriage, as well as to condemn all sex outside of marriage as immorality. Scriptural teaching on marriage, grace, love, loyalty, vows, forgiveness, hope, and the promise are sufficient to take a clear position on each of these aspects.

The teachings of the church on premarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already have confessional status. The contents of our creeds and confessions help us understand everything that is debated today with such passion, in a biblical and Christian manner.

We reject openly the definition of sex given by an ideology of gender, that affirms that sex is a social construct, and that each person is free to determine it in accordance with his/her temporary or definitive likes. This has brought great confusion to humanity, especially among the young who witness a true schizophrenia of conflicting opinions in this regard.

Likewise, the attempt to define homosexuality based on genetic explanations has also been distorted by science itself. Popular claims about the discovery of a “homosexual gene” are unwarranted exaggerations. To try to justify these opinions is to declare that God does not really know what he is doing (Rom. 1:18-25). In any case, we are conscious of the fact that the church cannot evade these inquietudes. Unfortunately, today Christians who reject the practices of a homosexual lifestyle are habitually labeled homophobic, intolerant, as well as hateful.

Morality is not just a matter of likes or cultures. When we fail to keep God's commandments, in reality we are making ourselves guilty before him, and we need his forgiveness. Morality is based on the Word of God, and thus good and evil exist and are not affected by the opinions or cultural traits of contemporary life.

What the Bible condemns are the actions or homosexual behaviors; it does not condemn having a homosexual orientation. Many homosexuals have given testimony of how agonizing it is to find oneself with these desires and wrestle against them. The Bible does not condemn a person for having a homosexual orientation. What it condemns are the homosexual practices or acts. We recognize the biblical reality that born-again Christians will experience strong desires—sometimes unasked for—that contradict with God's revealed design for our lives. This reality is part of our "total depravity"; however, we are also promised the help of the Holy Spirit and one another in fighting these desires as we pursue the more satisfying desire of knowing and living for Jesus. Therefore, we reject the idea that sinful desires—which we are each born with in one way or another—fundamentally define the identity of those who belong to Jesus (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

"And such were some of you." In other words, through faith in Christ, we are identified by sin no longer. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:22-24), created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. We are now identified by the Name of Jesus as holy and beloved children of God. Indeed, this new identity gives power for fighting the sinful desires that remain (Col. 3).

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to overcome these inclinations by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is very direct and clear when it deals with homosexual behavior. Homosexual practice is contrary to God's design and is sin. But not only this, but also any heterosexual practice outside of marriage is sin.

In Leviticus 18:22, the Bible says that it is an abomination for a man to sleep with another man as he does with a woman.

In Leviticus 20:13, the death penalty is prescribed in Israel for such an act, together with adultery, incest, and bestiality.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 the apostle Paul writes: "Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

(Eph. 5:2) Paul says that the union between a man and his wife is the living symbol of the unity between Christ and his people, the church. When we think about this, we can see how terrible a sacrilege, how great a mockery of God's plan, is the homosexual union. It contradicts God's intention for humanity since the moment of creation.

Some people affirm that the Bible's prohibitions of homosexual behavior are no longer valid for our time. But that objection represents a serious misunderstanding. There is no evidence that Paul's mandates related to homosexual practices are culturally relative. The Bible does not say that we should ignore sexual immorality. It tells us to flee from it! (1 Cor. 6:18).

In the same manner, as Christian believers, we reject any form of aggression against any human being for their sexual tendency, race, language,

color, age, or any other condition. The majority of homosexuals did not choose to have such an orientation and would like to change if they could. We need to accept them in love and support our brothers and sisters who are wrestling with this problem. And, in general, we need to extend the love of God to homosexual people.

For this reason, we support the report that was prepared on behalf of the denomination.

Rev. John Harold Caicedo, President of the Consejo Latino  
Rev. Mirtha M Villafane, Vice-president of the Consejo Latino  
Rev. José Rayas, Secretary

### III. Overture

Classis Arizona overtures Synod 2022 to consider the position of the Consejo Latino in its consideration of the HSR.

*Grounds:*

1. The CRCNA desires to continue growing beyond the Dutch and German heritage that is the historical population of the denomination. Listening to minority voices is a crucially important way to do so.
2. Maintaining a position on human sexuality consistent with biblical teaching that reaches back two thousand years and prior is particularly important for reaching new people in the Hispanic context. Our churches should not be burdened with demonstrated beliefs or practices in CRCNA congregations that will hurt efforts to reach the unchurched or non-Christian population.

Classis Arizona  
José Rayas, stated clerk

*Note:* The preceding analysis from the Consejo Latino was adopted and submitted to synod as a *communication* by the following classes. To conserve paper, it has not been reprinted as a separate communication.

Classis California South  
Cornelius Pool, stated clerk  
Classis Rocky Mountain  
Mark W. Hilbelink, stated clerk

### **Overture 18: Adopt the Human Sexuality Report and Emphasize Importance of Recommendation D**

The council of New Westminster CRC of Burnaby, British Columbia, overtures synod to adopt the recommendations of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality and emphasizes the importance of declaring “that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status” (Recommendation D).

*Grounds:*

1. Declaring this will ensure that officebearers and congregations are clear about what the Scriptures teach and that church discipline will be exercised in situations when discipline is necessary.
2. Failure to declare this matter as having confessional status will prolong unnecessary division, debate, and disagreement within our denomination.

We are thankful for the work of the committee, the content and thoroughness of the report, and its conclusions.

Council of New Westminster CRC, Burnaby, British Columbia  
Irene Kraay, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was processed through the January meeting of Classis B.C. North-West but was not adopted.

## **Overture 19: Adopt the Human Sexuality Report and Its Recommendations**

### **I. Introduction**

Synod 2022 will be asked to consider and make a decision about the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). The HSR engages a host of questions and issues that are much discussed and much contested in our churches and in the culture at large. In the balance hangs the spiritual and psychological well-being of our sisters and brothers in Christ, the internal ministry and the external mission of our church, and possibly the future of our denomination.

Classis Wisconsin submits this overture with humility, acknowledging that every mind and heart bears the marks of our individual and collective human sinfulness. We recognize that the church itself is inherently fallible and capable of error. Consequently, we expect our church to be Reformed and always subject to reform, relying utterly on the grace and wisdom of God.

As we strive to be a faithful church in the midst of an ever-changing culture, we must let Scripture be our guide. We must walk humbly and boldly in the light of its unchanging truths, taking care not to forsake its sacred instruction.

### **II. Overture**

Classis Wisconsin overtures Synod 2022 to take the following four actions:

#### **A. Adopt the HSR and its recommendations.**

It is not our intention in this overture to restate the case for a biblical understanding of gender, human sexuality, marriage, and related issues. We have considered the HSR carefully, and we believe it offers a faithful exposition of biblical teaching on these matters. It aligns with the historical, biblically grounded, agreed-upon position of the CRCNA.

In our view, objections to the HSR seem to stem from disappointment with its conclusions rather than from fair critique of the exegesis of relevant biblical passages that led to those conclusions. The HSR is thorough and convincing—in fact, compelling.

B. Reaffirm our denomination's continual submission to Scripture, inviting anyone who disagrees with the HSR to submit an overture or gravamen so that we *can reconsider our position in light of a reasoned theological discourse*.

It is our hope and desire that the church will be faithful in all respects to its Reformed character. While it would be more comfortable for many of us to conform to the cultural mainstream in relation to human sexuality and related issues, we recognize that Scripture calls us to speak the truth in love, without compromising either the truth or the love. In the Reformed spirit, we must walk in continual submission to the full authority of Scripture over all areas of life, and we want no less from our whole denomination.

Our denomination has a procedure for reconsidering our theological positions. Our church's position on human sexuality has been consistent from the beginning and was clarified by Synod 1973. Because we desire to be faithful to God's Word, our denomination offers the opportunity for officebearers, churches, and classes to submit confessional-revision gravamen in order to present a clear, Scriptural rationale for changing our positions. We invite anyone who disagrees with our denomination's position on human sexuality to submit such a gravamen or overture. At the same time, such disagreements, when not presented according to our Church Order, should not hinder the adoption of a report that aligns with our agreed-upon position.

C. Consider the larger implications of the HSR, take full stock of what is at stake for our churches in this moment, and declare clear and binding moral positions in these important matters of belief and practice by according *status confessionis* or some other authoritative synodical declaration regarding the church's teachings on gender and sexuality.

The church's position on human sexuality entails more than minor points of exegetical difference, questions about Church Order, or whether a particular point of the church's moral teaching has confessional status. We do not minimize the importance of exegesis, belittle the Church Order, or downplay the binding character of the church's ethical teaching. Far from it: we wish to uphold these things.

However, in our view there is something even greater at stake. The very character of the church is in question. Will we rightly use the keys of the kingdom that Christ has entrusted to the church, and will we bear faithful witness to Jesus in the world he died to save? Will we maintain fidelity to God's revelation, living as his called-out people and submitting to his wisdom and grace?

Our confessions teach that there is a true church and a false church. The true church is characterized by three marks: "The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults" (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

We are gravely concerned that in some of our churches, the gospel is not faithfully preached and church discipline is not faithfully exercised. Some of our churches ordain to church offices people who are living in relationships that God's Word and our church teach to be sinful. Some of our churches have stated their intention to bless marriages that God's Word and our church teach to be worthy of repentance, not celebration. And at least one classis—Classis Grand Rapids East—has communicated that synod has no

capacity to admonish or discipline these churches. From any point of view—biblical theology, Church Order, or historical precedent—that proposition is sheer nonsense. A church that cannot regulate its preaching or discipline its wayward teachers cannot be the true church as we confess the church to be.

D. Admonish and if necessary discipline church officebearers and assemblies that have acted and taught contrary to the official teaching of the CRCNA without going through the process of submitting overtures or gravamina.

Our denomination is a covenant that we have made with each other. When some churches break that covenant by the above-mentioned actions, we must address those covenant violations. Like a marriage marred by infidelity, covenant love demands not ignoring the sin but exposing it and calling for an appropriate response of repentance.

Our classis has long understood our church's positions to be binding on us as a classis and on our individual officebearers. We have signed the Covenant for Officebearers, in accordance with our Church Order, under that understanding. We ask that synod affirm this understanding by admonishing and, if necessary, disciplining those officebearers who have been unfaithful to the covenant by teaching and/or living contrary to our church's stated positions.

We ask Synod 2022 to affirm that we are not bound together by a shared name or a shared history, but by a shared commitment to worshiping God as revealed in his Word and as set forth by our confessions. Any churches, pastors, elders, deacons, professors, or denominational employees who no longer wish to be bound by our covenant should say so honestly rather than unilaterally altering the terms of the covenant.

### III. Conclusion

In our view, this is not only a moment of discernment, but of testing. Will we be a church that exchanges the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25)? Will we be a church that goes forward in the light of God's revealed wisdom, or one that stumbles in the darkness of our pooled human ignorance (1 Cor. 2:1-16)? Will we be a church that strives to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:11-16), or a church that celebrates the moral diversity of our fragmented and fallen world? Will we build on the shifting sand of culture, or will we build on the rock-solid foundation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (Matt. 7:24-27; Eph. 2:20)? Will we be a church that walks the narrow way that leads to life, which only a few find, or will we be a church that walks the wide road that leads to destruction, which many take (Matt. 7:13-20)?

These are stark and sobering questions. We encourage Synod 2022 to remain firmly rooted in God's Word as it considers the HSR and its implications.

Classis Wisconsin  
Rodolfo Galindo, stated clerk

**Overture 20: Adopt Recommendations of the Committee to Establish a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality; Appoint Committee to Write Guidelines**

Classis Red Mesa overtures synod to approve all of the recommendations of the report of the Committee to Establish a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. Second, we overture synod to appoint a committee to write practical guidelines as to how the conclusions of this report should be carried out by our congregations in our society, which not only seems opposed to them but in which secular leaders are also actively working on many levels to promote very different moral standards. While the committee should include practical advice concerning homosexuality and gender issues, it must also deal with other issues addressed by the report on human sexuality, such as cohabitation and divorce. The committee should consist of practical theologians, psychologists, pastors, and other respected church leaders who are committed to the conclusions of the Committee to Establish a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality as recommended to Synod 2022. Furthermore, because of specific concerns by various major ethnic groups within the Christian Reformed Church, the committee must include at least one Native or Indigenous member, one Korean or other Asian member, one African American member, and one Latino or Hispanic member. The committee should report its guidelines to Synod 2025.

*Grounds:*

1. The Bible is very clear on the importance of sexual morality in the lives of all God's people. This was true not only in Old Testament times but also in the New Testament, where the Holy Spirit inspired gospel writers to quote words from our Lord Jesus about marriage and adultery and the writers of the epistles to remind their readers that they had been saved to live in new relationships that were supported by God-ordained standards of sexual behavior. This is well expressed by the committee in their report. Although some might argue that more work could have been done by them in this area, they certainly did an adequate job in laying out a biblical case for their conclusions.
2. Having a clearly defined biblical view of human sexuality may be helpful in showing that our denomination remains true to Scripture, but it does little good for our people if they are not actually attempting to live that way. In Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV), our Lord proclaimed, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Certainly, every one of us sins. And the only way our righteousness will surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law is when we by God's

grace, which we receive through faith, become one with Christ, are forgiven because of his sacrifice and death, are raised to be new persons in him, and receive his righteousness. As those who are one with Christ, our sexual desires must be governed by the Word of God.

3. Although there are many materials that seek to provide guidance to pastors and churches on these issues, these materials come from many different perspectives, some of which seem very opposed to that which Synod 2022 may accept as binding for our churches.
4. Our church exists in an increasingly secular society that is challenging and rejecting our long-held biblical standards of human sexuality.
  - a. For those of us who are Navajo and Zuni, some of these standards were given to our ancestors who were not Christians through God's general revelation. There was considerable discussion in our group about traditional Zuni and Navajo marriage practices. While there were differences in various communities and there were acceptable methods of divorce, most of those who spoke expressed how their ancestors clearly taught that human sexual activity was only to take place within the context of marriage.
  - b. The members of our committee spoke of how learning what God said in his Word supported and expanded on what they now know to be the Creator's will for human sexuality and sexual behavior.
  - c. Several committee members testified as to how they and their children and grandchildren have now been attracted to secular lifestyles with regard to cohabitation, marriage, and same-sex relationships.
5. Although our congregations are trying to uphold biblical standards, we are facing some very difficult situations.
  - a. In our congregations, some of our children, who were cohabiting, were talked about and talked to by other members. They were probably hoping to help them but instead left our children feeling they had no place in the church.
  - b. While our parents and we ourselves try to teach our children and grandchildren God's truth, they are often more persuaded by their friends, their own desires, and the secular media.
  - c. Some of our Native children are claiming that they are following our traditions by engaging in what we traditionally would call a common-law marriage. However, unlike our ancestors, who considered their marriages to be lifelong, our children seem to have no problem breaking up and entering into new relationships, even after they have had children from that first marriage. We need guidance from our denomination as to how we should deal with this.
  - d. All of us fail every day to live as God commands. In light of this we often feel very hypocritical as we attempt to help others live sexually moral lives, something we are clearly commanded to do (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1-13).
  - e. While not every situation can be answered in the same way, how should we respond when someone, whom our council believes is living in sin, wants to become a member? In Christian Reformed congregations today, for example, persons whom some churches may choose as their officebearers would be placed under discipline by other congregations for their sexually immoral lifestyles.

And other congregations may not accept them as members for that reason.

6. We are aware that some practical issues concerning marriage are addressed by the report of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force. And while all congregations within our denomination are dealing with issues regarding sexuality and marriage, a congregation's ethnic background exposes them to particular challenges, making it wise to include CRCNA members from various major ethnic groups on the committee.

Classis Red Mesa

John J. Greydanus, stated clerk

## **Overture 21: Adopt the Recommendations of the Report on Human Sexuality and Offer Pastoral Care**

### **I. Background**

#### *A. What is faithful contextualization?*

The church of Christ has always been called both to appreciate and to oppose parts of all cultures, including our own. Every missionary has to face the question of contextualization, or fall into the twin errors of ethnocentrism (thinking that his or her own culture is the objective standard) or relativism (thinking that there is no objective standard). Thus Michael Goheen, in *Introducing Christian Mission Today* (IVP Academic, 2014) asks the question, "What is faithful contextualization? It is not a matter of whether the gospel is shaped by culture; the only question is whether the contextualization of the gospel is faithful or unfaithful."

#### *B. Significant shifts and pressures regarding sexuality and gender in North America*

There is no question that we, as a culture, are facing significant shifts in how to understand sexuality and gender. This is evidenced by the legalization of homosexual marriage in both the United States and Canada, the rise of gender dysphoria, intensified pressure to affirm gender transitioning and the use of pronouns that honor psychological over biological identity. Parallel with these cultural changes has been a growing pressure in the CRC to normalize and embrace these shifts. This is evidenced by the group All One Body (a LGBTQ+ advocacy group), the 2016 Grand Rapids East Report on Human Sexuality (which supports same-sex marriage), the installation of a deacon who is openly involved in homosexual activity at Neland Avenue CRC, and recent articles in *The Banner* titled, "Gentiles, Homosexuality, and Grace in the Body of Christ," (Nov. 2017) and "Same-Sex Relationships in the CRC" (Nov. 2020).

#### *C. The 2020 report in relation to historical synodical interpretation of the 1973 position*

To answer these pressures, both in the culture and in the church, Synod 2016 appointed a committee to "articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality." While offering significant update and expansion,

this report upholds the 1973 synodical position, including its definitions and recommendations for pastoral care and accountability.

To understand the nature of this accountability, it is worth reflecting on how synod has acted. Over the years, the 1973 position has been used as the basis to invite CRC congregations to discontinue table fellowship with members of other denominations who affirmed same-sex behavior (*Acts of Synod 1981*, p. 66). It has also been used to ask our own congregations to maintain their teaching and practice with the stated beliefs of the CRCNA (*Acts of Synod 1994*, p. 459; *Acts of Synod 2006*, pp. 653-54). When First CRC Toronto began opening its doors to homosexual officebearers, it was held accountable by Classis Toronto and came back in line with the denomination's stance. In 2006 synod approved the work of an *in loco* committee that had asked the church to once again do the following:

agree to conform our teaching and ministry practices to the denominationally approved recommendations in the synodical reports of 1973 and 2002 regarding homosexual identity and practice. We understand that in these synodical recommendations, references to homosexual identity and practice apply to all persons with same-gender attraction, including those living in committed relationships.

(*Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 457-58; *Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 653)

#### *D. The need for clarity and accountability in pursuit of faithful contextualization*

If the CRCNA is going to have faithful contextualized mission into the future, we must maintain this kind of clarity and accountability. We are all rightly concerned that compassionate and appropriate pastoral care be given to homosexuals and people who identify as transgender. Many reasonably predict some will turn away in offense and pain if their own sexuality or gender identity, or the sexuality or gender identity of someone they love, is not affirmed or celebrated as a gift of God. These are important issues that cannot be brushed aside, yet affirmation of anyone's experience without regard to the Word of God and the vision of human flourishing set forth by the Word of God is not loving. If the denomination sacrifices its clarity about sexuality in an effort to care for those who experience same-sex attraction, gender confusion, or related struggles, it will also sacrifice its ability to love people well. Unfaithfulness to the Word of God (either in the form of abandonment or redefinition) undermines Christian authority and history, and thus the entire possibility of pastoral care. Simply put, faithful pastoral care cannot be done by mere compassion. Pastoral care also requires a *direction*. And a direction requires a telos, and a telos requires an objective truth. "All flesh is grass . . . but the Word of God stands forever" (Isa. 40:6-8). "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt. 19:6).

## **II. Overture**

Classis Atlantic Northeast overtures Synod 2022 to adopt the recommendations of the 2020 report on human sexuality, specifically recommendations D and E of the report,

- D. That synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.
- E. That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.

and to call on all churches, delegates, and classes to offer the pastoral care of accountability and discipline for anyone persistently living and/or teaching in a way contrary to the Word of God (Church Order Art. 78-84 and Supplements).

*Grounds:*

1. Faithful contextualized mission requires a standard outside the culture, clarity about what that standard means, and accountability for upholding that standard.
2. The Word of God is our standard, as interpreted by our confessions and creeds, and this report of human sexuality is an apt and clear interpretation of it.
3. There are those in the CRCNA that not only oppose this understanding of the denominational standard but who are also working to undermine it.
4. If this opposition goes unaddressed, the CRCNA stands to lose theological, missional, and pastoral credibility, both internally and with those who might otherwise join or partner with the denomination.

Classis Atlantic Northeast  
David Poolman, stated clerk

## **Overture 22: Affirm the Biblical Foundation Sections of the Human Sexuality Report as Being in Accord with Biblical Teaching**

### **I. Background**

Clearly there is a persistent need today for the church to speak the truth of Scripture in love in the midst of our culture's growing sexual confusion and chaos. An integral part of this calling is to listen carefully and lovingly to the experiences—often painful—of persons living with same-sex attraction and especially in the context of church life.

We lament our pastoral failures to have often let silence be the message to persons living with sexual challenges and temptations. We lament the harsh and judgmental treatment of many with respect to sexual challenges that has too often been the default reaction of fellow believers to their neighbors and their brothers and sisters in Christ who share what they struggle with.

We recognize there are Christians, including Christian scholars, who espouse acceptance of same-sex marriage as the way to answer the suffering and the needs of people living with same-sex attraction. These perspectives most often start from a position of acceptance of same-sex attraction as being in some way normative and, from there, going to Scripture to see how this can work biblically. We do not believe that is a faithful starting point.

We need to move from Scripture to how we are all called to live, submitting our lives in all aspects to the living Word. We believe the Holy Spirit does not lead us to live in ways that are contrary to the Scriptures. We also recognize our understanding of the Scriptures is always a work in progress. Yet changing our views of any teaching of the Scriptures has to be supported by the Scriptures themselves, and not be primarily the result of personal experiences regardless of how intense and persistent, nor be in reaction to the threat of ridicule and rejection of scriptural teaching by those who disagree.

## II. Overture

Classis Niagara overtures synod to affirm the biblical foundation sections of the Human Sexuality Report as being in accord with biblical teaching understood from a Reformed perspective as it pertains to human sexuality in the areas addressed in the report.

*Grounds:*

1. The report's examination of biblical passages pertaining to human sexuality is consistently rooted in sound Reformed, biblical hermeneutics. The various sections dealing with specific Bible passages present exegetical answers to the different biblical perspectives that are being espoused today.
2. The report's approach starts with Scripture as the foundation for our theology and our ethical approaches rather than starting from peoples' experiences or from our culture's beliefs about human sexuality. As we engage, discuss, learn, and grow in loving ministry with respect to the areas discussed in the report, we need to be anchored in the truth of God's Word.
3. These sections of the report cover the relevant passages of Scripture in a holistic way, freely allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.
4. Accepting these sections does not mean accepting exactly the report's wording as the best way to put things. Yet the teaching of these sections remains in basic agreement with biblical teaching.

Classis Niagara  
Wendy de Jong, stated clerk

### **Overture 23: Affirm the Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Contained in the Human Sexuality Report**

Classis B.C. North-West overtures synod to affirm that the biblical theology of human sexuality contained in the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality provides a useful and faithful summary of the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality. Moreover, we affirm that synod adopt Recommendation E, declaring that Church Order Art. 69-c be interpreted in light of the biblical evidence laid out in the report.

*Grounds:*

1. The report faithfully represents the scriptural teaching on human sexuality comprehensively, including chaste singleness and biblical marriage.
2. As a growing number of voices in the denomination are advocating new interpretations of Scripture concerning human sexuality, it is important that synod adopt a clear biblical-theological position for the churches.
3. Securing this report as our denomination's stated position on matters of human sexuality will foster clarity within and outside of our churches.

Classis B.C. North-West  
Kathy Smith, stated clerk

## **Overture 24: Approve the Conclusion of the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Overture**

To keep in line with the historic and confessional teachings of the universal church, Classis Southeast U.S. overtures synod to approve the Human Sexuality Report's conclusion that *"the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status"* (p. 460), that officebearers in the CRCNA must adhere to this confession if they are to serve in the CRCNA, that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in light of the report's conclusion, and that the floor be given to Mary-Lee Bouma, Jim Vanderwoerd, and Jeff Weima.

#### *Grounds:*

1. As the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) has demonstrated, homosexuality is clearly prohibited in Scripture for the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments (pp. 411-12).
2. Moreover, the prohibition is acknowledged by some who affirm homosexuality within the church and recognize it as being prohibited if one believes the writers of Scripture were not mistaken in their views (p. 424).
3. The HSR is well balanced and gives attention to how pastors can show thoughtful, practical care (pp. 426-33) for people struggling with all manner of sexual temptation and sin.
4. Approval of the HSR's conclusion effectively prevents a local option, allowing for the faithfulness of all churches and their officebearers within our denomination and effecting the discipline necessary to correct those at fault for propagating the notion that Scripture is silent regarding same-sex marriage and homosexuality (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

### **II. Conclusion**

If members in the CRC are to hold the office of deacon, elder, or pastor, then they must not only affirm but practice chaste living. Advocating for same-sex marriage within the church is a false teaching that needs to be repudiated.

Classis Southeast U.S.

Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

## **Overture 25: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality recommends that synod "declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status." We believe that the church's teaching on homosexuality does not already have confessional status and should not be elevated to confessional status. This overture is fully compatible with both agreement and disagreement with the denomination's current position on homosexuality.

## **I. The denomination's position on homosexuality does not already hold confessional status**

### *A. The 1973 report on homosexuality does not currently hold confessional status*

Synod 1973 adopted the denomination's position on homosexuality via the recommendation "that synod serve the churches with the following statements of pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 51). Two years later Synod 1975 issued a landmark report explaining the binding nature of Scripture, the confessions, and other synodical decisions, such as those of pastoral advice.

There is an obvious difference between the use and function of a pronouncement as interpretation of the confessions and a decision involving "guidelines" or "pastoral advice." It is the wording of synod's decision which usually indicates the precise character of its decision, and this wording of the decision determines its use and function. No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions.

(*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598)

Synod 1975 explained that pastoral advice does remain "settled and binding" and "all officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44). However, while "full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all officebearers by signing the [Covenant for Officebearers] . . . subscription to synodical decisions is not required" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-602). Therefore, the 1973 report on homosexuality does not hold confessional status.

### *B. The denomination's position on homosexuality does not hold confessional status via the word "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108*

The committee asserts that the church's position on homosexuality holds confessional status because it is already encompassed in the Heidelberg Catechism's condemnation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108:

Q: What does the seventh commandment teach us?

A: That God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.

However, commitment to the confessions includes commitment only to the doctrines of the confessions themselves and interpretations of the confessions declared by synod. The Church Order Supplement makes clear that an individual who signs the Covenant for Officebearers "affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section A, 1).

But that is the extent of its binding nature. "A signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions" (Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section A, 3). In fact, the signatory does not even affirm that "these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner" (Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section A, 2).

While some "interpretations" of the confessions delineated by synod may be on par with the confessions themselves, no previous synod has

interpreted the word “unchastity” in Lord’s Day Q. and A. 108 with regard to the issue of homosexuality. “When a synodical decision involves pronouncements that . . . go beyond the confessions, the use and function of such decisions is to further express the faith of the church without such statements thereby becoming additions to the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44). Application of the term “chastity” to the question of homosexuality extends the term beyond its strict definition and represents a broader interpretation of the confession.

Calvin Theological Seminary’s professor emeritus of church polity, Henry DeMoor, puts it this way:

Only if a CRCNA synod has thus interpreted Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism can this be called a confessional issue in our denomination. It is not enough for a study committee to quote Ursinus or do anything else to argue that it is “already” a confessional issue. The synod must have decided it.  
(network.crcna.org/church-order/status-confessionis, Nov. 11, 2020)

## **II. The church’s teaching on homosexuality should not hold confessional status**

*A. Elevating the denomination’s position on homosexuality to confessional status would exclude those who love our denomination and “abide by” this position as “settled and binding” in accordance with Church Order and synodical precedent, but do not fully agree with this position*

In the Christian Reformed Church, our confessions are also known as “forms of unity.” Indeed, one of the very purposes of the confessions is to “function as *forms of unity* in which the common faith of the members of the church is expressed” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 596-97).

The key question must be asked: If the denomination’s position on homosexuality is on par with the confessions, would mere disagreement with the denomination’s position preclude an individual from serving as an officebearer, or even a confessing member, in the Christian Reformed Church?

For officebearers, the answer seems clear that agreement with the confessions is required. The Covenant for Officebearers affirms that the confessions “fully agree” with Scripture. “The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, section A, 1).

For members, the Church Order states that confessing members make “a commitment to the creeds and confessions” (Church Order Art. 59). Synod 1975 spells out what this means in a bit more detail: “These confessions are binding upon all confessing members of the church as is indicated by their public profession of faith” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44). The report says “full agreement with the *confessions*” is “expected” of members, while “subscription” is “required” of officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601).

Indeed, to adopt this recommendation is to exclude anyone who disagrees with this position from the church, even if they accept the denominational position as “settled and binding” (Church Order Art. 29). It would also require affirmation by professors at Calvin University, who must also sign the similar Covenant for Faculty Members.

This is the beauty of our nature as a confessional church. Our forms of unity define the core tenets of our faith and proclaim our witness of the good news of Jesus Christ. Synods and assemblies delineate additional positions.

These positions explain our beliefs, hold the church together in unity, and remain “settled and binding” on the denomination. These positions, however, do not bind the consciences or minds of our officebearers or members as our confessions do.

If synod decides to adopt the study committee’s recommendation or elevate the denomination’s position on homosexuality to confessional status, we believe it must be submitted to a second synod for approval, following the precedent established when the denomination considered adopting the Belhar Confession.

If the churches and classes have not had prior opportunity to consider a substantial alteration, it must be submitted to a following synod, which will consider its advisability. The first decision shall be understood as a decision to propose; the action of a following synod shall be understood as a decision to adopt.

(Church Order Supplement, Art. 47)

*B. Elevating the denomination’s position on homosexuality to confessional status is unnecessary and does not align with the core purposes of the confessions*

The 1973 report on homosexuality, in conjunction with the 1975 report on synodical decisions, has been “settled and binding” on the denomination for nearly half a century. It is unnecessary for synod to take additional action.

For centuries, the Reformed tradition, including the Christian Reformed Church, has affirmed three creeds—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—and three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. Over the years, synod has set precedent by refusing to adopt recommendations to assign confessional status to proposed statements, testimonies, and positions.

Synod 1975 describes the purposes of the confessions in the Christian Reformed Church:

The creeds or confessions of the Reformed churches are first of all *confessions* in which the church gives expression to its faith in response to God who revealed himself in his Word. In the confessions the church also presents a *public testimony* to the world concerning her Christian faith. Within its own communion the confessions function as *forms of unity* in which the common faith of the members of the church is expressed. The confessions also serve as *instruments for the instruction* of the youth in the church in order, by God’s grace, to bring them to confess this faith also. As forms of unity the confessions also serve a *juridical function* in guarding the purity of the church in doctrine and life. The confessions also serve a *missionary purpose* as instruments for witnessing to the world with the full Gospel of Jesus Christ.

(*Agenda for Synod 1975*, pp. 596-97)

This question has been raised about other issues in our denomination’s past. A 2000 report on whether to elevate women in office to confessional status asked:

Is women’s ordination confessional in the sense that the main articles of the Apostles’ Creed are confessional? Does it merit classification along with essential doctrines of salvation or the nature of God? Does it undermine the teachings about Jesus, his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and present reign? Does it detract from the Bible’s teaching about the Holy Spirit and the way of salvation?

(*Agenda for Synod 2000*, p. 374)

Synod concluded the answer was no.

More precedent stretches back decades. Synod 1940 refused to draw a confessional line on the “extraordinary conditions” in which officebearers could work on Sundays, rejecting a motion from a synodical advisory committee that wanted to avoid “a great number of different interpretations” (*Acts of Synod 1940*, pp. 102-103). Synod 1989 declined to attach confessional status to the denomination’s position on women in office during a judicial appeal. Synod 2012 rejected efforts to adopt the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession. Our World Belongs to God was adopted by Synod 1986 and revised by Synod 2008, each time as a contemporary testimony, not a confession. By any measure of history, philosophy, tradition, or precedent, questions of sexuality do not rise to confessional status.

Elevating the denomination’s position on homosexuality to confessional status would open a Pandora’s box for other denominational positions.

Further, the committee’s criteria create a two-pronged test by which to judge whether a position should be confessional: whether it “violates a clear teaching of Scripture” and whether it “involves the heart of the message of the gospel.”

Surely many in our denomination believe that other synodical pronouncements pass this two-pronged test, and the study committee itself states that “all sin is ultimately incompatible with our union with Christ.”

So what does that mean for other denominational positions that currently do not have confessional status, but might be encompassed by our confessions? Does Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 105 make confessionally binding our position on the death penalty or war? Does Q. & A. 107 encompass our positions on immigration or creation care?

Does the inclusion of the Ten Commandments in Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 92, which cites Scripture’s proclamation that God made the earth in six days, require us to believe the earth was created in six 24-hour days? Synod 2010, by removing Declaration F from the denomination’s position on creation and science, made clear the answer is no. Of course, the confessions should inform the church’s positions on all of these issues, including sexuality. But these positions should not hold confessional status in our denomination. Neither should the position on homosexuality.

### III. Overture

Classis Hackensack overtures synod not to adopt Recommendation D of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

*Grounds:*

1. The 1973 report on homosexuality does not currently hold confessional status because it was adopted as “pastoral advice.”
2. The denomination’s position on homosexuality does not hold confessional status via the word “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 108 because a previous synod has not declared such an interpretation of the word.
3. Elevating the denomination’s position on homosexuality to confessional status would exclude those who love our denomination and “abide by” this position as “settled and binding” in accordance with

Church Order and synodical precedent, but do not fully agree with this position.

4. Elevating the denomination's position on homosexuality to confessional status is unnecessary and does not align with the core purposes of the confessions.
5. Elevating the denomination's position on homosexuality to confessional status would open a Pandora's box for other denominational positions that may be encompassed in other words throughout our confessions.

Classis Hackensack  
Sheila E. Holmes, stated clerk

### **Overture 26: Do Not Accede to Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

Classis Quinte overtures synod to not accede to Recommendation D of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

Recommendation D reads as follows: "That synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status."

*Grounds:*

1. Declaring the conclusions of the report as confessional could negatively affect the unity and witness of Christ's church, which benefits from continued diversity of thought, growth, and sanctification as well as reformation.
2. Classis Quinte believes that sections of the report are not in alignment with Christ's call to love our neighbors without judgment.
3. The content, conclusions, and recommendations of the report elevate the salvific nature of certain sins.
4. The mandate of the committee, requiring adherence to the 1973 position statements on same-sex attraction and behaviors, has limited its ability to present a well-rounded and objective report.
5. Declaring that the report's interpretation and deductions of the church's teachings already have confessional status retroactively defines the vows that have been made by many members of the CRCNA.

Classis Quinte  
Joan Crawford, stated clerk

### **Overture 27: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

In response to the report to Synod 2022 from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, we, the undersigned, respectfully overture Synod 2022 as follows.

This overture was presented to the council of West End CRC in Edmonton, Alberta, but the council sent a separate overture to Classis Alberta North. Because West End's overture did not fully meet the concerns of our overture, the latter was submitted to Classis Alberta North. At its February 5, 2022, meeting, Classis Alberta North took this action: "Classis withholds action on the overtures presented at this meeting without prejudice, understanding—and encouraging—that the churches that presented them will forward the overtures to synod so that synod has the information and concerns and considerations recommended in them" (*Minutes of the 173rd Session Special Meeting*, Feb. 5, 2022). Therefore, as per classis' decision, we now present this overture directly to Synod 2022. The council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta, adds its endorsement of this overture.

## I. Preamble

This overture does not express any opinion on whether the report to synod from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality is correct in its views on whether same-sex sexual relations are biblically permissible or not. Many within the denomination will, no doubt, continue to debate that issue for a long time to come. What this overture does ask is that we keep this conversation within the bounds of respectful and loving dialog as we together struggle toward greater understanding. It asks that we do not allow the present majority opinion to exclude the minority from full membership in the denomination. This overture also seeks to prevent our denomination from once again committing the sin of tearing apart Christ's body over our differences on pastoral matters.

## II. Overture

In light of this, the undersigned overture Synod 2022 not to adopt Recommendation D of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, which states: "That synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 461).

### *Grounds:*

1. The assumption of the study committee that its understanding of what constitutes the church's teaching on human sexuality as having confessional status is factually and historically incorrect (except for actual adultery, which is clearly forbidden in Scripture and the confessions). That remains the case even if Synod 2022 decides to adopt their interpretation. Synodical decisions do not have confessional status unless synods specifically raise them to the level of a *status confessionis*. Most study committee reports adopted by synod have not been given that status, including, for example, the biblical positions advanced by the Committee to Study Homosexuality (1973), the Creation Stewardship Task Force (2012), and a number of study committees with respect to women's ordination, which offered conflicting views.
2. Synod has expressly elevated interpretations of confessions to confessional status a number of times in the past. A good example is Synod 1926's decision regarding the Lord's Day that was declared to be

“binding for every officer and member of our denominational group” (*Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 191-92). This demonstrates that when synods have developed the current CRC position on homosexuality, beginning with Synod 1973, and have placed that position in the framework of “pastoral advice,” they have deliberately avoided a declaration of confessional status. These synods have not made the same assumption that the committee now makes and recommends to synod. Church Order Supplement, Article 69-c (see below) also shows this. Synod 2016 agreed with the guidance given in the minority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage. But Synod 2016 identified that as “pastoral guidance.” It did not assume that this advice had confessional status, and it did not raise this pastoral guidance to the level of *status confessionis*. It mandated the present committee to recommend whether or not a future synod should actually do so.

3. Synod 2022 must take into account the substantial number of CRC members and officebearers who either do not share the study committee’s views on a number of issues, or who continue to wrestle with Scripture and the confessions, particularly with respect to same-sex committed relationships. By “assuming” that the interpretations of Scripture presented by the synodical study committees already have confessional status, Synod 2022 would rule out what a large minority perceives to be an equally Reformed and obedient Spirit-led interpretation of Scripture.
4. If Synod 2022 adopts recommendation D and the committee’s views are taken to have confessional status, then a large number of CRC officebearers will be unable to sign the Covenant for Officebearers. This will not only exclude them from major and minor assemblies but also prevent them from being ordained to office in their local church. This would include many pastors, who would need to find other employment or another denomination.
5. Some argue that even if we do not assume that the biblical position laid out by the committee has confessional status, the decisions of past synods are still settled and binding. However, Synod 1975 stated the following:
  - c. The confessions and synodical pronouncements have nuances of differences. They differ in their extent of jurisdiction, in their nature of authority, in the distinction of purposes, in the measure of agreement expected, and in their use and function.
  - d. The use and function of synodical decisions is explicitly or implicitly indicated by the wording of the particular decision itself.

*(Acts of Synod 1975, p. 603)*

The wording of Synod 1973 and subsequent synods specifically identify their pronouncements as “pastoral advice,” not as binding interpretations of the confessions.

6. Assuming confessional status would be a new and drastic step by which the (present) majority would seek to impose its views on the minority. That would needlessly tear our denomination apart yet again—something that will further rend the body of Christ against our Lord’s express command for us to remain one.

### III. Supplement, Article 69-c

The pastoral guidance recommended to the churches by Synod 2016, found in the minority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 436-43), “represents one example of how synod has determined that a marriage is considered to be in conflict with the Word of God” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 918).

Members of West End CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
Robert De Moor, retired minister of the Word  
Rick Mast, commissioned pastor  
Thomas Oosterhuis, retired minister of the Word  
Gordon Pols, retired minister of the Word  
Cecil Van Niejenhuis, retired minister of the Word  
Council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
Henry Wisselink, clerk

## Overture 28: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report

### I. Background

The CRCNA is what is known as a “confessional church,” meaning that “professing members of the CRC claim to believe not only that the Bible is the Word of God but also that ‘the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation.’”<sup>1</sup> The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, and our belief in them, stand as a statement of unity (“part of the glue that cements us together as a denomination and with other denominations that also hold to them”)<sup>2</sup>; signify to others who we are, where we come from, and what we believe; act as teaching tools for the church; and help “identify the boundary lines between truth and error.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore in our understanding of Church Order and the history of the CRCNA, to say that a teaching has “confessional status” is to declare that this teaching represents *the* biblical position on the topic (therefore inherently connected to what is the gospel—i.e., salvation message) and that disagreeing with this teaching would violate our affirmation of “the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God”<sup>4</sup> (these three Reformed confessions are also commonly referred as the Three Forms of Unity).

Before beginning its work, the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality was given a number of mandates by Synod 2016. Among them was to evaluate “whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a *status confessionis*

<sup>1</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, quoting the CRC Form for the Public Profession of Faith in “Why Be a Confessional Church?” *The Forum* (Calvin Theological Seminary), Spring 2008, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> CRCNA Covenant for Officebearers, Church Order Supplement, Art. 5.

[confessional status]" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20). The report spends a number of pages (pp. 456-60) discussing this question before concluding "that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex **already has confessional status** [emphasis ours]. As such, there is no need for a new declaration. We also conclude that this status is warranted because these sins threaten a person's salvation" (p. 460). It then makes the recommendation (Recommendation D) that synod approve this conclusion when the report goes before synodical delegates (p. 461).

However, declaring that the teachings *already* have confessional status does not align with our understanding of the decisions of previous synods on homosexuality in particular, and specifically Synod 1973, which defined the denomination's teachings on homosexuality as "pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 51). That same synod appointed the Committee on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions, which then reported at Synod 1975. This committee's mandate involved two tasks: "1. To compile materials for a book to contain pertinent synodical decisions on doctrinal and ethical matters," and "2. To present a clear statement as to how such synodical decisions are related to the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 596). The committee's report to Synod 1975 noted that "synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters fall into several categories. Although there may be some additional types, at least the following main categories may be distinguished"; it then went on to list seven categories, with the first stating that "some doctrinal and ethical pronouncements of synod are set forth as an interpretation of the confessions" and the seventh stating that "some synodical decisions involve pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 597-98). Synod 1973's decisions on homosexuality belong in the seventh category and *not* the first.

Given that the teachings were not designated as an interpretation of the confessions at prior synods, we believe that disagreeing with the report's conclusions does not violate our affirmation of the Three Forms of Unity, and in particular the Heidelberg Catechism. We understand that synodical decisions "shall be considered settled and binding" (Church Order Art. 29), but we also emphasize Synod 1975's point that "there is an obvious difference between the use and function of a pronouncement as interpretation of the confessions and a decision involving 'guidelines' or 'pastoral advice'" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). To date, officebearers in our congregation were of the understanding that they could sign the Form of Subscription/Covenant for Officebearers with integrity, agreeing to the confessions, while still disagreeing with the denomination's teachings on homosexuality. To accede to Recommendation D of the report would suggest otherwise.

Therefore, we believe that now declaring a *status confessionis* would harm and unnecessarily divide our congregations, classes, and denomination, halting the fruitful and gracious dialogue that we have experienced as congregations while discussing the committee's report and the issues therein. Understanding that faithful, committed Christians who are rooted in Scripture, centered in Christ, and attentive to the Holy Spirit can disagree with one another on topics contained within the report has allowed us to take a posture of (what we hope was/is) Christlike humility and hospitality in our conversations with one another. At the same time, as "iron sharpening iron" (see Prov. 27:17), we continue to challenge each other to holy living—including

healthy sexuality—and hold one another accountable to displaying the love and unity of Christ. Being wise, discerning, and loving in these conversations (and in present and future actions stemming from them) would have been (and would be) made much more difficult were we held to a confessional status on these subjects which we do not think does or should exist.

## II. Overture

Classis B.C. North-West overtures synod not to accede to Recommendation D of the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

### *Grounds:*

1. The conclusions of this report regarding homosexuality do not already have confessional status. Equating the report's conclusions with the confessions does not follow previous synods' conclusions on these subjects as "pastoral advice."
2. Giving the conclusions of this report confessional status would draw a (previously undrawn) line that would be prohibitive for local and pastoral discernment and care by councils, pastors, and classes. This harms the possibilities for a local and faithful response as well as dialogue within our congregations.
3. Giving the conclusions of this report confessional status may compel many faithful and committed leaders and officebearers to resign from their roles, leaving lamentable gaps in leadership.
4. Giving the conclusions of this report confessional status may compel many faithful and committed members to depart from the denomination.

Classis B.C. North-West  
Kathy Smith, stated clerk

## Overture 29: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report

### I. Introduction

Synod 2016's mandate for the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality [hereafter, "the committee"], included reflection and evaluation on the question "whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a *status confessionis*" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20).

After concluding its lengthy report, the committee provides its response to that question in its Recommendation D: "That synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status."

The brief section of the report provided as background to this recommendation (pp. 456-60) has the most profound implications for the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination. However, this section relies on weak arguments, flows without a clear and consistent train of thought, and offers several hints and suggestions without drawing firm conclusions or definite

implications of its declaration that the church's teaching on sexual matters already has confessional status. As a result, the churches are left to guess what these implications might be. The possibilities that are left open include implications that call into question the salvation of thousands of CRC members, and also include potentially barring thousands of CRC members from holding various leadership positions in churches and Christian Reformed organizations. The wounds caused by such potential implications will damage the faith lives and leadership capacities of thousands of brothers and sisters for decades to come.

We see multiple reasons for rejecting the report's Recommendation D.

When Synod 2016 included in the committee's mandate for it to consider "whether or not . . . it will be advisable for future synods to consider . . . declaring a status confessionis," it is apparent—from the wording itself—that Synod 2016 did not consider (and synods of the past had not considered) the issue as "already having" such status. The committee's assertion that what it argues for in its report "already has confessional status" is simply not true, whether from a church history perspective or from the history of CRCNA church polity. No such synodical declaration has ever been made. Historically, synod has been wisely cautious in ascribing confessional status to specific matters by declaring its decisions to be interpretations of the confessions. The report's assertion does not honor this traditional practice of caution. Synod rarely, if ever, states that an issue does or does not have confessional status.

Two of the report's arguments for its recommendation are weak and potentially misleading. First, the committee points out that one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism was Zacharias Ursinus and that "unchastity" in Q. and A. 108 should be interpreted in accordance with what Ursinus expounds "unchastity" to include in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (p. 458). However, the Heidelberg Catechism has confessional status, while Ursinus's commentary does not; and officebearers are bound to the doctrines within the confessions, not to any theological deductions from them (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3). Second, the report notes that the Reformed Church in America has declared "that in the catechism 'God condemns all unchastity,' which includes same-sex sexual activity" (p. 458). The report does not clarify that officebearers in the RCA are not bound to this confessional interpretation as CRC officebearers might be if synod adopted such a statement, due to significant differences in church polity. Further, it is important to remember that decisions of the RCA are not binding on CRC officebearers.

On the report's final page we read, "We also conclude that this [confessional] status is warranted because these sins [earlier named as 'premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex'] threaten a person's salvation" (p. 460). Does this sentence articulate a Reformed and biblical understanding of salvation? Which one of us can declare, "I have never committed any form of sexual sin," especially after reading the Sermon on the Mount? The wording of the report *gives the impression* that specific sexual acts constitute a unique category of sin that threatens one's salvation, and this impression is both biblically inaccurate and can lead to a false witness to the world concerning the character of salvation.

Furthermore, for church councils to exercise church discipline based on this understanding of confessional status would be extremely difficult if not impossible, because sexual sins (as described in the report) are divided into those which are secret and those which are public. We know the statistics concerning pornography consumption in the CRCNA. We know that in the vast majority of cases, such sin is practiced in secret. By contrast, same-sex marriage is a publicly visible phenomenon. Because of this secret/public distinction, councils will be forced to practice a double standard that violates the gospel witness, a hypocrisy that is especially all too apparent to our younger members. When one also notes (as indicated above) Jesus' radical re-definition of sexual sin (and much more) in the Sermon on the Mount to include looking at another lustfully (Matt. 5: 27-30), the impossibility of exercising appropriate discipline in this specific instance without double standards seems apparent.

The report does not spell out the implications of this confessional status for CRC officebearers. Is the implication that a new question will be added to the form for installation, which may read something like, "Do you declare, before God and his people, that you do not practice or condone any of the sexual sins as they are understood to be named by implication in the confessions of the church?" We know that adding such a question is ludicrous and contrary to the heart of the gospel. How are we to implement the implications of this confessional status for officebearing in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Further, since all confessing members are likewise required to affirm the doctrine of the church as found in the Reformed confessions, will a similar question be added to the form for profession of faith as well?

The report acknowledges that our declarations of confessional status include situations that require "pastoral accommodation," and it gives the example of members who do not baptize their infants (p. 457). We are grateful for this acknowledgment of the grace of our Lord embracing the complicatedness and messiness of the human condition, and recognition that the church does not always rush to discipline, even when the doctrines of the confessions are sometimes ignored in practice. We also know that among the community of those who are same-sex attracted there is higher incidence of suicide, mental health struggle, and leaving the Christian faith because of the harsh judgment of believers. How might the principle of pastoral accommodation practiced in obedience to the good shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of the one lost sheep be embodied in regard to the confessional status of sexual sin? Do we declare that certain categories of our confessions are exempt from pastoral accommodation? Is that a Reformed understanding of grace?

Furthermore, we know that there are thousands of Christian Reformed members who are divorced and remarried in circumstances that the report calls into question (p. 451). The report calls upon congregations to recover "the 1980 report's emphasis on the 'general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery'" (p. 451). These very brief references to the 1980 report followed by the call to avoid adultery fail to acknowledge other sections of the 1980 report that recognize the need in many instances for pastoral accommodation concerning divorce and remarriage. We find this imbalanced, out-of-context reference to the 1980 report misleading and

revisionist. We wonder what the implications of this reading of 1980 are for church discipline if this reference is determined to fall under the umbrella of “unchastity” and therefore has confessional status.

The report calls on churches to be places of warm hospitality and intimate communion and fellowship so that same-sex attracted members will experience family-like love as they practice celibacy (pp. 426-33). The Scriptures and the confessions have rich descriptions of the gift of Christian community, and they speak forthrightly of the sins of dysfunctional community such as divisiveness, judgmentalism, hypocrisy, and mistreatment of the marginalized (Phil. 2: 2-4; Gal. 5:19-21). The report’s description of confessional status makes no reference whatsoever to such sins. How is it possible for a Reformed understanding of total depravity and irresistible grace to focus on the sins of sexuality but not the sins that underlie community inhospitality? What are the implications of the report’s omission here for its warning that we not act like a false church (p. 460)? Can an inhospitable church claim to be the “true church?” Does this omission in the report reflect who we are as a denomination whose tradition has a profoundly rich theology of grace as well as a robust understanding of the call of the Christian community to witness?

All of these reflections have bearing in some way on church discipline as it is exercised both personally and corporately. We acknowledge that the practice of church discipline in our day is confusing, inconsistent, and often weak. Some classes are seeking corporate disciplinary action against congregations that do not practice one or more of the recommendations of the 1973 report on human sexuality. Would consistency require that classes also seek corporate disciplinary action against congregations that do not provide a safe and secure spiritual home for celibate gay believers? Some seek disciplinary action against committed gay couples. Would consistency require that we also seek disciplinary action against all believers who make use of pornography? We find the intersection between the Human Sexuality Report and church discipline particularly fraught and in need of much greater clarity and consistency if it is to be handled with integrity.

## II. Overture

The council of Meadowlands Fellowship CRC of Ancaster, Ontario, overtures Synod 2022 not to adopt Recommendation D of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

### *Grounds:*

1. The report’s claim that these matters already have confessional status is not consistent with CRCNA practices.
2. This claim prioritizes sexual sin over other significant forms of sin.
3. The report’s references to Ursinus’s commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism and decisions made by the Reformed Church in America do not have bearing on this matter.
4. The report’s description of sexual acts that threaten one’s salvation leave an impression that is not consistent with Reformed soteriology. Impressions matter a great deal.
5. The implications of the report’s claim are not spelled out with regard to the forms for installing officebearers and making profession of faith, and these implications have the potential to invite hypocrisy.

6. The report recognizes the realities of pastoral accommodation but does not apply this to human sexuality, thereby leaving a wide area of confusion.
7. The report recognizes the high calling of the Christian community to be a place of warm hospitality and belonging, but it does not describe how the exercise of church discipline might address our sinful failure to live up to this high calling.

Council of Meadowlands Fellowship CRC, Ancaster, Ontario  
Kevin Vander Meulen, clerk

*Note:* This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Hamilton but was not adopted.

## **Overture 30: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Overture**

Classis Chicago South overtures Synod 2022 to reject recommendation D of the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

*Note:* This overture was sent to Classis Chicago South by Hope CRC of Oak Forest, Illinois, and was adopted by classis to be forwarded to synod as written.

### **II. Grounds**

For 60 years Hope CRC has been a shelter for those who belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to Jesus Christ. We have grown in faith and wrestled with questions, all within the context of our confessional standards. As a congregation, we live with a broad range of interpretations of Scripture, hermeneutical perspectives, and political/cultural opinions. We hold our belonging to Christ central and try to love and make room for all. We cherish this quality of our community life.

Like many churches, Hope CRC has a mission statement that shapes and sharpens our ministry and life together. Grounded in Philippians 2:1-11, it offers defining values and resulting practices in worship, education, fellowship, and mission. That statement includes these lines about fellowship:

We value the shared life of community in which we celebrate each other's joys and bear each other's burdens. Therefore, we symbolically recognize this community in worship through a time of mutual greeting and corporate prayer. We strive to welcome and embrace people from all walks of life, and cherish a wide range of perspectives and positions. We seek to build relationships that are marked by love, mutual forgiveness, and reconciliation. We wish to be a harbor or refuge, especially for those who feel battered, marginalized, and forgotten. We try to gather regularly for shared meals and music, for laughter and conversation, for genuine intimacy and intergenerational fellowship. We expect our relationships to encourage and challenge us to more closely follow Jesus Christ.

Therefore, our fellowship includes faithful Christians who have come to different interpretations of Scripture regarding same-sex attraction. We have children, siblings, parents, partners, and friends who live in monogamous

same-sex relationships. We are, all of us, believers and Christ-followers. We have welcomed all to the Lord's table. We have been to each other's weddings. We welcome all into our life together.

We acknowledge that the members of our congregation are not in uniform agreement about same-sex relationships. In our community of faith—friendships, families, and marriages—we have differing views. We hold these views in tension, mutual respect, and—at our best—in conversation and prayer. We try to hold all of this in humility, love, and unity in Christ.

As we understand it, the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality precludes our ability to honor our differing perspectives. To recommend that this singular interpretation of Scripture about same-sex relationships already has confessional status and that to think or act otherwise “threatens a person's salvation” is divisive. To recommend that the report is necessarily embedded in the confessions in such a manner that to believe otherwise is to be “acting like the false church” is damning to Hope CRC and to those we love and serve.

Nicholas Wolterstorff summarizes our concern this way:

The report declares, “Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful” (p. 424). Let's be clear on what this declaration implies. It implies that those who disagree with the report's interpretation of Scripture on this matter are either obtuse or perverse—obtuse, if they do not perceive what Scripture clearly, consistently, and compellingly teaches; perverse, if they do perceive that this is what Scripture clearly, consistently, and compellingly teaches but refuse to acknowledge that it does.

The report recommends that synod declare that the traditional teaching of the CRC, that all homosexual acts are sinful, already has confessional status—*status confessionis*, to use the technical Latin term. What synod's acceptance of this recommendation would imply, as a minimum, is that anyone who expresses the contrary view concerning homosexual acts is ineligible for any office or position in the CRC.

(“Response to the Human Sexuality Report to the CRC Synod of 2021,”  
December 2020; [libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=59367502](http://libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content_id=59367502))

It is hard to read the report and not conclude that many at Hope CRC would be severed from the body. It doesn't afford us the grace to be who we have been for the past 60 years as we have sought to follow the way of Jesus. It casts aside many in our communion who have faithfully studied and struggled with these issues and have come to different understandings. And it hinders, rather than helps, as we seek to be faithful to our missional calling.

We understand that other congregations will come to other positions. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part . . .” (1 Cor. 13: 8-10). We believe that these interpretive differences have long been part of the nature of the church and Scripture and being human. We welcome the report for study and reflection and the ongoing educational role of the church; we reject the singular interpretation and confessional status that it claims. As Hope has found ways to exist and thrive with differing understandings, we pray for the same within our classis and denomination. Therefore, we request that recommendation D be rejected.

Classis Chicago South

Roger Nelson, stated clerk pro tem

## Overture 31: Do Not Accede to Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report

Upon significant discussion in council meetings and assigned review groups, and from gathering congregational feedback, First CRC of Taber, Alberta, feels that the theological background provided in the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality is sound. We do, however, have a lot of questions and concern around what the committee considers confessional status against the many other differing opinions of confessional status, and what this confessional status would look like for the CRC denomination if the report is accepted in its entirety.

First CRC, Taber, Alberta, reviewed several overtures from other CRC classes and churches and cited literature from Eastern Avenue CRC and Church of the Servant CRC—both from Classis Grand Rapids East—to form our overture as these aligned to the discussion from both congregational and council meetings.

First CRC, Taber, Alberta, overtures Synod 2022 not to accede to Recommendation D of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

Recommendation D of the report concerns the status of various teachings and practices concerning human sexuality: “That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.”

*Confessional status* means elevating teachings on sexuality to the level of doctrines of God and salvation. The report deems that unrepentant contravention of the report’s biblical interpretation of several areas of human sexuality—whether by teaching or action—endangers a person’s salvation and requires church discipline up to and including excommunication. These are deeply serious matters for the church.

1. The argument for *status confessionis* is not sufficiently grounded or clear for synod to take such a serious step. The report fails to provide the “concise and clear” guidance required by the committee’s mandate. The points that follow describe some of the report’s deficiencies in this area.
2. The report suggests a false equivalency between premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex. Including these diverse topics in one sweeping claim of confessional status does not do justice to the complexity or nuance of any one of them. The report is silent on what *status confessionis* would mean in practical pastoral terms for churches dealing with situations involving these areas.
3. It is not clear to what extent dissenting views are permissible, should a *status confessionis* be declared. Historically, Reformed churches only declare a *status confessionis* when they believe the integrity of the gospel is at stake and are willing to accept a schism over the issue. This report seems uncomfortable with that posture, since it states there is still room for disagreement:

Even if a teaching has confessional status, that does not mean there is no room for disagreement within the bounds of that teaching. In addition, the

church sometimes allows for pastoral accommodations. For example, our confessions say that the children of believers should be baptized. Yet some congregations are willing to allow members not to baptize their children (p. 457).

Yet the report's contradictory statements about the permissibility of differing views promotes confusion. For example, just two pages after the above quote, the report states: "To teach that any of these behaviors is permissible undermines the teaching and authority of Scripture. Whenever the church teaches that a form of behavior forbidden in Scripture is morally permissible, it is guilty of false teaching" (p. 459).

Lack of clarity on this matter leaves open urgent questions regarding the salvation, membership, and status of same-sex married believers in our congregations, divorced and remarried persons, those who are cohabiting, those who have had premarital or extramarital sex, and those involved in pornography use, as well as the large number of CRCNA members who believe the CRCNA should affirm same-sex marriages.

4. The report recognizes in passing that *status confessionis* involves pressing and difficult questions regarding officebearers as well as faculty at Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary who sign the Covenant for Officebearers (p. 457). However, it fails to give any guidance on a matter that concerns the employment and ministry of many brothers and sisters in the CRCNA, its churches, and institutions. It is irresponsible to declare that a *status confessionis* already exists without consulting with the institutions that will be affected or acknowledging the implications for people's employment and families' livelihoods.

*Grounds:*

- a. The report fails to provide the "concise and clear" guidance required by its mandate. The argument for *status confessionis* is not sufficiently grounded or clear for synod to take such an important step. The report is unclear on a number of key issues, including whether teaching or practice or both set a person outside the bounds of confessional orthodoxy; whether the committee believes the theological section of its own report already has confessional status; and the extent to which dissenting views may be permissible should a *status confessionis* be declared.
- b. Combining the topics of premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex creates a false equivalency. The report fails to consider what *status confessionis* would mean in practical pastoral terms in any of these areas. There is no discussion of how *status confessionis* would affect the salvation, membership, and status of same-sex married believers, divorced and remarried persons, those who are cohabiting, those who have had premarital or extramarital sex, those involved in pornography use, and those who support the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the church. Interpretation of *status confessionis* could end or prevent the employment and ministry of many in CRCNA churches and institutions.
- c. The report states that its answers to the questions raised in the report have confessional status. This is a momentous claim, backed

with little evidence in the report. This claim has profound implications for our pastors, elders, deacons, and members who are faculty at our denominational university and seminary. At one point the report refers to its conclusions as a matter of salvation.

That is a far more serious claim than the “pastoral guidance” that has marked previous synodical statements about sexuality. We would like to see more discussion and clarity of the claim of confessional status in the report, given its momentous implications for the church.

Council of First CRC, Taber, Alberta  
John Muller, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was submitted to the March 2022 meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan but was not adopted.

## **Overture 32: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Introduction**

Community CRC (CCRC) of Kitchener, Ontario, engaged in active discussions that involved over 100 members and officebearers studying the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). The members of CCRC that participated in the HSR discussion groups agree that this cannot be the end of the conversation. CCRC is committed to continuing the discussion around human sexuality and how it impacts our congregation. Council received a variety of opinions from the participants and spent a full day together reviewing the responses and recommendations of these study groups. The council of CCRC is not in full agreement with the Human Sexuality Report and certainly does not want it to be the conclusion of the discussion around human sexuality within the CRC denomination. Although we have a variety of concerns with the HSR, we have focused our attention on Recommendation D: “That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.” This is for us the most concerning portion of the report. Therefore, we submit the following overture to Synod 2022.

### **II. Overture**

Community CRC of Kitchener, Ontario, overtures synod not to adopt Recommendation D of the Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

*Grounds:*

1. Adopting Recommendation D would create deep confusion among the churches.
  - The report seems to equate the Latin term *status confessionis* with the English term “confessional status.” But the terms have different meanings. Historically *status confessionis* has meant “crisis moment

where the faith must be confessed anew”<sup>1</sup> rather than “status of confession.” This error in use of terms creates confusion.

- The statement “We conclude, then, that the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status” (HSR, p. 458) is confusing and unclear. It seems to be stating that the opinions and interpretations of the HSR are already the prevailing understanding of the confessions and the Bible in the CRC. Given the controversy and the ongoing discussion surrounding the HSR, the interpretations documented within it are not the sole understandings among the broader Christian Reformed Church.
  - The report doesn’t answer its own questions: “If a teaching is declared to have confessional status, questions arise about what that means for those who sign the Covenant for Officebearers (CFO) in the CRCNA. Will those who have already signed it need to accept this new item as having confessional status? What happens if they don’t? Will those who subsequently sign the CFO need to accept this new item?” These questions are posed but not answered, leading to deep confusion as to the meaning of “confessional status.”
2. Adopting recommendation D would elevate the HSR to a level comparable to our existing confessions. Designating the HSR as anything more than a position statement provided for pastoral guidance is an overreach.
    - Confessions are documents that bind us to a wider body of believers. Designating it as a “position statement” to be used for pastoral guidance is a more fitting approach.
    - Confessions are statements that fully confirm biblical teaching. Synod 2016 placed limitations on the committee that bound them to the CRC position on homosexuality established by Synod 1973. This prevented the committee from coming up with a deeper understanding of biblical teaching as it pertains to human sexuality.
    - Confessions are a joy to express. This declaration of confessional status will be embedded in a long denominational report and as such, will become difficult to access and hard to express.
    - Confessions are unifying. There is too much controversy and confusion surrounding the Human Sexuality Report and its recommendations for it to be declared as having confessional status.
  3. Adopting Recommendation D would involve following an unknown and unproven process.
    - The CRC has never adopted a new confession in its history. The CRC inherited the Three Forms of Unity when it split from the RCA in 1857. The CRC commissioned and accepted *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* in 1986. Then many years later, after completing an in-depth assessment of the Belhar Confession and first adopting it (in 2012) as an “ecumenical faith declaration,” the CRC

<sup>1</sup> See “*Status Confessionis* and Confessional Status in the Christian Reformed Church: A Plea for Denominational Polity rather than Latin Rhetoric” by Matt Lundberg; [dropbox.com/s/afwmvw3lvm7a40c/Status%20Confessionis%20and%20Confessional%20Status%20in%20the%20CRCNA.pdf?dl=0](https://dropbox.com/s/afwmvw3lvm7a40c/Status%20Confessionis%20and%20Confessional%20Status%20in%20the%20CRCNA.pdf?dl=0).

established a category of “contemporary testimony” in 2017 and placed the Belhar within that. Adopting Recommendation D of the HSR would be an inappropriate process for declaring a new confession in a denomination that has historically been reluctant to do so. The council of CCRC expects a higher level of care, conversation, and time to consider the Human Sexuality Report to have confessional status.

- Adopting Recommendation D so soon does not give the church enough time to dwell with the report, to hear from those living a life of service within the church directly impacted by this report, and to determine over time whether it truly has confessional status. The process of accepting a confession takes much time and prayer in order to determine God’s leading, more time than has been allotted for this decision.
4. Adopting Recommendation D would be a serious and harmful error.
- It binds officebearers too strongly to a certain understanding of what the Bible teaches around human sexuality. The church should remain open to ongoing learning in this area of study as it cares for its diverse members.
  - It complicates future discussion of alternate interpretations of the Bible’s teaching on the complex issues related to human sexuality. It has a heavy-handed feel that will provoke deeper division in the denomination, not less. It attributes too much weight to this report too early and threatens to restrict further discussion.
  - Designating the HSR as a position statement will allow for further discussion and understanding among the variety of “minds” within the CRC on this matter.
  - If the HSR is recognized as having confessional status, many officebearers including pastors have expressed their inability to sign the Covenant for Officebearers. This would jeopardize the availability of many candidates that the Christian Reformed Church has historically called to lead the church.

Council of Community CRC, Kitchener, Ontario  
Alesha Hoekstra, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was processed through Classis Huron at its February 2022 meeting but was not adopted.

### **Overture 33: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

#### **I. Introduction**

We humbly submit the attached overture for consideration at Synod 2022. This overture asks synod not to adopt Recommendation D of the study report on human sexuality. This overture was written by members of the Waterloo CRC council and adopted at its January 11, 2022, meeting. The overture was submitted to Classis Huron but was not voted on.

Our church is not of one mind on the more controversial aspects of the report in question. We are confident other churches aren’t either. While our

discussions, prayer, and discernment over the past year have convinced us more dialogue is needed, making the findings of the report confessional, according to Recommendation D, would end disagreement by denying it and thereby harm the unity of our church and our denomination.

In asking synod not to adopt Recommendation D, our overture points out a number of areas where faithful Christians can find fault with the reasoning and conclusions of the report. We do so in love, and with the full hope that continued dialogue and the leading of the Holy Spirit will bring our church and our denomination to unity on these topics.

Recommendation D of the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR) asks synod to “declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.” While the church’s teaching on these topics is of vital importance to the lives of Christians, we do not believe it has confessional status. Nor do we wish it to have confessional status. Many of the issues covered by the report are complex and unsettled, both in our denomination and in the greater church; they require continuous study and discussion. In addition, we believe the HSR fails to support its conclusions sufficiently to warrant their elevation to confessional status. Finally, to declare these issues settled by giving them confessional status would prematurely shut down meaningful conversations between Christians who sincerely and faithfully disagree. Such a teaching denies the continued leading of the Holy Spirit and would result in grave harm to churches in the denomination where disagreement exists.

## II. Overture

The council of Waterloo (Ont.) CRC overtures synod not to adopt Recommendation D of the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

### *Grounds:*

1. The CRC’s current “position” **does not have** confessional status.

Although Synod 1973 offered “settled and binding” pastoral advice regarding, for example, homosexual activity, Synod 1975 declared, “No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). Therefore, we find that the conclusions of 1973 are clearly not confessional.

Further, while the HSR relies heavily on the writers’ claim that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 108 refers to homosexuality, no synod has affirmed this reading. As Calvin Theological Seminary professor emeritus of church polity Henry DeMoor wrote on *The Network*, “Only if a CRCNA synod has thus interpreted Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism can this be called a confessional issue in our denomination. It is not enough for a study committee to quote Ursinus or do anything else to argue that it is ‘already’ a confessional issue. The synod must have decided it” (Nov. 11, 2020, [network.crcna.org/church-order/status-confessionis](http://network.crcna.org/church-order/status-confessionis)).

For these reasons, it is evident that the denomination’s current position does not already have confessional status.

2. The positions articulated in the HSR **should not be given** confessional status.

Never before has synod declared a moral or ethical stance to jeopardize one's very salvation. Why these ones? Why now? Why should we be required to agree on the report's specific interpretations of texts to be members in good standing or officebearers in the CRC? The writers of the report demand agreement on interpretations where we know sincere Christians disagree, putting their conclusions on par with the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. As Reformed Christians, we confess that we are made right with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and his work for us. Synod must not add or subtract from that confession.

Further, the HSR itself does not provide trustworthy support for its own conclusions and therefore does not constitute a sure foundation for a declaration of confessional status. In particular, we find significant reasons to object to its use of science and Scripture.

- a. Science is both misrepresented and ignored.

When science is cited by the HSR, for example, beginning on p. 405, the main study to which the report refers ("How Do Genes Affect Same-Sex Behavior?," *Science* 365, no. 6456 [Aug. 30, 2019]) is misrepresented. First, the quotes are taken from a summary, not from the article itself. Second, the HSR's claim that this article supports its position that there is no "gay gene" grossly misrepresents the study's discoveries. What the article actually says is that, as with other human characteristics, specific genes for homosexuality are hard to find. Nevertheless, the study found *many* complex genetic correlations between same-sex behavior and at least five loci on the human chromosome, clearly indicating genetic determinants for homosexuality.

Similarly, in contrast to the HSR's conclusions on gender, we find that scientists increasingly understand the myriad differences between genders (appearance, behavior, attractions, etc.) to be more complex than any simple binary between X and Y chromosomes. We are, in fact, fearfully and wonderfully made, just as Scripture says. Studies done by Daphna Joel and her associates over the past twenty years, which she summarizes in "Beyond the Binary: Rethinking Sex and the Brain" (*Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 122 [Mar. 2021]: 165–75), give helpful clarity here. When ten regions of the brain showing the largest average sex differences were imaged, a mosaic of male and female characteristics were evident in each individual brain. The researchers found no consistent male or female pattern across these ten areas. It simply is not scientifically accurate to say that there are two, and only two, distinct genders. Note that this is not an argument for a gender continuum; instead, each of us has characteristics that our culture labels variously male and female. And yet the HSR unscientifically insists there is a simple binary of male and female.

The HSR's poor use of and ignorance of science on these two issues is unfortunately representative of the rest of the report. Rather than understanding the science they themselves cite, the authors

put forward a misinformed position or one completely uninformed by current science, and we cannot accept this as binding on faith.

To do so would place an impossible burden on believers to choose between scientific discovery and confessional assent.

- b. Scripture is used to support presuppositions rather than to understand complex issues.

The Belgic Confession teaches that Reformed theology looks to *both* special revelation (Scripture) and general revelation (creation/science) to know God (Art. 2). On pages 349-51, the HSR gives the impression that presuppositions shape science but that Scripture is readily understood, and therefore that special revelation/Scripture has “cognitive priority” over general revelation/science. This may be true in a certain sense, but we do not in practice have purity in either scientific or Scriptural studies. Both are clearly human attempts to understand God’s revelation, and consequently both may be flawed. So while it is true that Scripture perfectly reveals God and his will, it is *not* true that anyone’s, or any group’s, *interpretation* of Scripture perfectly reveals God’s truth. Thousands of years of church history show that humans do not understand God’s Word perfectly. The very disagreement the HSR seeks to address, over what Scripture says about human sexuality, shows that humans interpret God’s Word in several ways.

To claim that Scripture is clear on every topic, or even that “Scripture teaches in a *clear, consistent, and compelling way* that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful” (HSR, p. 424), denies the significant disagreements of hundreds of years of church history, often leading to denominational splits, including the Reformation itself. We do not wish to deny the reality of faithful disagreement, whether on homosexuality or any other issue outside the saving work of Christ. To do so impugns the faith of numerous Christian scholars who conclude that Scripture is *not* clear on these issues. As such, we find the HSR’s prejudicial dismissal of contrasting scholars and their work by labelling them “revisionists” unhelpful and akin to name-calling, which should be beneath us.

In addition, we are concerned by the HSR’s fluid use of a variety of Scripture translations, seemingly choosing whichever one best supports a particular argument. Our greatest concern regarding choice of translation comes in the significant argument based on Matthew 19:12 (HSR, p. 336). The HSR uses the NIV to buttress its belief that sexual behavior is simply a matter of self-control, because, according to the NIV, “there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” The report claims, without support, that “most scholars” agree that this verse is metaphorical, referring to personal self-control rather than physical alteration. But the NIV stands almost alone in this interpretation (even including a footnote acknowledging that the translators made a choice). Most other reputable translations treat this verse literally, saying, for example, that “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (NRSV). A eunuch’s sexual behavior after such surgery is, clearly, no longer a matter of self-control. And eunuchs, therefore, are hardly reasonable behavioral models for physically intact men, whether gay or straight.

The writers of the report are, of course, free to put forward their readings of certain passages, but we cannot accept their claim that theirs are the *only* possible faithful interpretations of such biblical texts. The conclusions of one small and unrepresentative group of biblical scholars, chosen because they already adhered to the CRC's view on marriage and same-sex relationships (HSR, p. 315) before the study began, are not a strong enough foundation for a binding confession in the CRC.

- c. The theology and hermeneutics employed are not faithfully Reformed.

Reformed hermeneutics tells us that all Scripture is completely inspired by God and completely written by humans. It must be read as a whole, verses must not be taken out of context, and study of Scripture must include study of grammar, historical context, and literary genre in order to understand, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what a text is teaching for all time.

The HSR does not do Reformed hermeneutics well. It does not take seriously the historical context, recognize the human limits of the authors, or allow the Holy Spirit much room to help readers discover the text's meaning.

For example, the report places much emphasis on the writers' interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, claiming from these two stories of creation a mandate for our sexual lives. It ignores questions about the literary function and historical context of these stories. It ignores the simpler reading that males and females are each created in the image of God. It doesn't ask what the text is teaching; it uses the text to prop up a vague "creation mandate" in opposition to same-sex relationships.

That mandate is never spelled out. In his December 2020 white paper, "Response to the Human Sexuality Report to the CRC Synod of 2021" ([libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=59367502](http://libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content_id=59367502)), Nicholas Wolterstorff says the best he can figure out is that the writers of the report think "human beings are divinely mandated to propagate by engaging in sexual activity within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage" (p. 4). Apparently, however, the creation mandate doesn't apply to everyone. It didn't apply to Paul, for example, given that he demonstrated no need to propagate. Perhaps it does not apply to LGBTQ+ persons either.

In our view, this is yet another example of the church misunderstanding the literary genre of Genesis 1 and 2, ignoring the culture in which these chapters were written, and reading current biases into the text. These chapters reveal much about what it means to be children of God, but we disagree with the narrow mandate for a theology of human sexuality that the HSR seems to discover.

In the New Testament, Paul would have written about homosexuality as he knew and understood it, as a behavior, not as a genetic predisposition or sexual orientation. This is what he knew. The report ignores the Reformed hermeneutic that human writers wrote from their own understanding of the world and could not have known things that we have learned since. As Wolterstorff writes, "We cannot just quote Bible verses that condemn same-sex behavior as the writers knew and understood it. We have to think for ourselves—as the church has done

throughout the centuries on other issues, for example, on the fact that the Bible implicitly condones slavery. Think for ourselves not as ‘free-thinkers’ but as committed Christians, integrating deep themes from Scripture with what we know from present-day science into a holistic understanding of human sexuality and its implications. The present report does not do that, nor did the 1973 report. Both reports fail the church” (“Response to the Human Sexuality Report,” p. 3).

3. The HSR does not represent the denomination.

Our youth, families, churches, classes, and denomination are divided on the issue of same-sex behavior. A study committee made up of scholars on only one side of the discussion does not represent the disagreement of faithful Christians within the CRC and cannot lead us forward to truth.

Jesus prays that we might remain united in John 17. To close the door on further discussion, insights, science, and particularly on the people who think and feel differently on this issue is to sever the unity of our churches. It would be painfully unjust, premature, and counter-productive. We ask synod not to impose such harm.

Council of Waterloo CRC, Waterloo, Ontario  
Andrew White, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was processed through Classis Huron at its February 2022 meeting but was not adopted.

## **Overture 34: Do Not Adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Overture**

The council of LaGrave Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan, overtures Synod 2022 not to adopt Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report.

*Ground:* The standard (Ursinus’s commentary) used by the committee to declare that “the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status,” sets a troublesome interpretive precedent. If the logic used by the report is applied to other parts of the catechism, all sorts of other teachings will “already” have confessional status.

### **II. Background**

#### *A. The report’s argument*

The substance of the committee’s *status confessionis* argument is found on page 458 of the report. After explaining what it means for a teaching to have confessional status, at the very top of page 458, the report asks the question “Does the church’s teaching that homosexual activity, as well as premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, pornography, and polyamory already have confessional status?”

The next four paragraphs contain the report’s reflection on this question. When those four paragraphs are complete, the committee thinks the question

is answered. In the fifth paragraph the report concludes, “the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status.” So the report’s grounds for saying that this teaching already has confessional status is contained in those four crucial paragraphs.

Here is the substance of those paragraphs. The report grounds the confessional status of its teaching in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108. There the catechism states “that God condemns all unchastity.” The report asserts that when the catechism uses the word “unchastity,” it intends to include all “homosexual activity” as part of what is condemned. How do we know that the catechism intends to include “homosexual activity” when it speaks of unchastity?

In the first three paragraphs, the report points to two sources.

1. It points to a 2017 report issued by the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which made the same assertion: “God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity.”
2. The report points to the commentary of Zacharias Ursinus, one of the catechism’s authors. In his commentary on the catechism, Ursinus mentions same-sex sexual activity as one of the unchaste things forbidden by the seventh commandment: “The lusts of which the apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans are of this class, as the confounding of the sexes, [and] also abuses of the female sex.”

The fourth paragraph of the report’s reasoning contains an argument about the importance of church discipline. The Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism both state that church discipline is an essential part of a healthy congregation. Indeed, discipline is one of the three marks of the church. While this statement is undeniably true, it adds nothing to the question of whether or not the church’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity has confessional status.

The report’s only real ground for its position is Ursinus’s commentary. A 2017 opinion in the proceedings of the RCA synod is not a real ground for the ongoing confessional status of homosexual sex. The contemporary opinion of another denomination is interesting, but it doesn’t tell us about the historic understanding of the word “unchastity.”

Ursinus’s commentary does tell us something about what Zacharias Ursinus intended when he wrote the catechism. Nevertheless, we wonder if using Ursinus’s commentary on the catechism as the standard for deciding what is confessional causes more problems than it solves. If we say that Ursinus’s commentary on the meaning of “unchastity” determines what has *status confessionis*, does that mean everything Ursinus says in his commentary has equal weight? When Ursinus comments on other words and phrases in the catechism, does his commentary determine our confessional understanding of these other phrases and words? Does everything Ursinus teaches in his commentary about other questions and answers determine how we understand the catechism? Does Ursinus’s commentary now have something like confessional status? If so, there are some problems. Ursinus adds many specifics to the catechism’s more general counsel. The PDF of his commentary has 1,023 pages. Do all those pages now convey confessional weight? This is a troublesome precedent.

If Ursinus's commentary conveys confessional weight, if this is our new confessional hermeneutic, here are some possible implications.

*B. The second commandment*

Our church has many stained-glass windows. We also have some frescoes by the artist Reynold Weidenaar depicting biblical scenes. But in his interpretation of the second commandment, Ursinus would have churches like LaGrave Avenue CRC get rid of all our windows and our frescoes. Not only that, but he would remove any book or piece of curricular material that includes images and likenesses of creatures and saints from the Bible.

Here Ursinus expands on the catechism's teaching that "God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them" (Q. and A. 97; emphasis ours).

Those images and likenesses of creatures are unlawful which are set up in churches, at the corners of the streets, and elsewhere, for the worship of God, or for a perilous ornament. "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them," &c. "Keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21.) Those images of creatures, however, may be lawful which are made and kept away from the churches, which are without danger and appearance of idolatry, superstition, or offence, and which are for some political benefit, such as is historical or symbolical, or for some becoming ornament. . . .

. . . images and likenesses of God, or of the saints, are not to be tolerated in Christian churches, but abolished and removed from the sight of men, whether they be worshipped, or not. . . .

But the images of God and the saints, which are placed in our churches for the sake of religion, are neither good, nor is the use of them lawful, but expressly forbidden by the command of God. And not only so, but the accident which is superstition, or idolatry, invariably accompanies the use of these images (notwithstanding the vain pretences of those who are more fully established, and of their knowledge,) and is equally condemned by the commandment of God.

Ursinus clearly thinks images of Christ are idolatrous, and in his commentary he states that they shouldn't just be condemned, they should be removed (by the magistrates). So should we smash our windows and purge our books? Should we lobby for a law that prohibits stained glass in Grand Rapids?

*C. The fourth commandment*

Under the fourth commandment, anyone who fails to give to the church or who advocates for withholding support is disobeying the command to honor the Sabbath. Here's how Ursinus expands on the catechism's teaching that "the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained" (Q. and A. 103; emphasis ours).

The opposite of all this is embraced in a contempt of the ministry of the church, which takes place whenever this ministry is abolished, or is committed to persons unworthy of such a trust, or when it is not acknowledged as the means which God will employ for gathering the church; the same thing is likewise true when the ministers of the church are treated with contempt and reproach, when their teachings are heard but not practiced in the life, when acts of charity are overlooked, and when it is made ineffectual by things of a trifling and wicked character. So there is a contempt of the ministry of the church when a sufficient and necessary support is withheld, or when it is not protected and defended, and when other duties of gratitude are not performed towards the ministers of Christ, when schools are not maintained and supported, when

learning is neglected, and when, instead of making proper allowance for such defects of ministers as result from our natural weakness and imperfection, they are treated with contempt and derision. It is also in opposition to the use of the ministry, and at the same time a contempt thereof, whenever any one by his advice, example, or other means, prevents his own family or others from attending upon the public instructions of the sanctuary.

So any elder or deacon who publically advocates for withholding funds from the church as a protest for a policy or position would be violating the confessions. Do we want that? We think not.

#### *D. The fifth commandment*

In his interpretation of the fifth commandment (submission to all authorities), Ursinus suggests that magistrates should enforce all the laws of the Decalogue and punish those who break them. Following is how Ursinus expands on the catechism's call to "honor, love, and be loyal to my father and mother and all those in authority over me" (Q. and A. 104). He offers this interpretation of the duties proper to civic authority (emphasis ours).

The duties of magistrates may be reduced to these heads, 1. To require from their subjects obedience, and external propriety according to both tables of the Decalogue. 2. To enforce the precepts of the Decalogue, by defending those who yield obedience to it, and punishing such as are disobedient.

Do we think the state should be enforcing Sabbath observance? Should there be laws requiring Sunday worship? We don't think so. Are we in violations of the confessions?

### **III. Conclusion**

If we use Ursinus's commentary to determine what already has confessional status, we expand the scope of confessional teaching to an extent that is completely unworkable.

Council of LaGrave Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
Perrin Rynders, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was presented to the March 2022 meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South but was not adopted.

## **Overture 35: Do Not Adopt Recommendations B or D of the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Preamble**

During fall 2021 the council and congregation of Woody Nook CRC in Lacombe, Alberta, engaged in discussion of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR). Approximately forty-five people gathered in small groups to work through the *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* prepared by Pastor Church Resources, participating in lively and engaging discussions over five evenings.

We would like to thank the committees responsible for preparing the HSR and the toolkit as they have provided the groundwork for vigorous conversation, thoughtful listening, deep searching, and prayerful discerning in our congregation over these complex topics.

In response to these conversations the council of Woody Nook CRC presented an overture to Classis Alberta North at a special classis meeting held February 5, 2022. Several other churches and groups also presented similar overtures that day. At the conclusion of a day of listening and praying, classis decided to withhold action on all the overtures presented at that meeting without prejudice, with the understanding and encouragement that the overtures may be forwarded to synod by the presenting councils or individuals. The councils of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta, and Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta, have also signed this overture.

## II. Overture

The councils of Woody Nook CRC, Covenant CRC, and Avenue CRC overture synod to do the following:

A. Do not adopt Recommendation B: “That synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives.”

### *Grounds:*

1. The summary of biblical teaching is lacking in perspectives and voices. Many members in our study groups were concerned with the way the report used scriptural texts without providing enough context. Alternate interpretations of key texts were not given serious acknowledgment or attention, let alone explanation as to why they are not the stance taken by the committee. This report is not a comprehensive summary of biblical teaching on human sexuality and should not be recommended as such.
2. The pastoral advice in many sections was simplistic and lacking in compassion, grace, and understanding. It seemed out of touch with the real, tender, and complex lives our members live. Participants in our study would like to see more substantial pastoral guidance.

B. Do not adopt Recommendation D: “That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.”

### *Grounds:*

1. Claiming confessional status at this point will alienate many members. It would be very divisive for the denomination and, more importantly, would hinder our church’s witness of Christ in the world.
2. Implementing confessional status will close the conversation on these issues, when there is still little clarity and there are many differing viewpoints in our church. To make this report confessional is premature because there is a desire among our congregation for more discussion on the topic, both deeper and with more voices in the conversation. It was clear in all our study groups that there was no clear consensus among the members of our local church or our denomination.

## III. Summary

In conclusion, our churches appreciated the opportunity to come together to discuss the topics covered in the Human Sexuality Report, but we do not

think the HSR should be accepted as representing the scriptural understanding or the confessional status of the whole denomination.

Council of Woody Nook CRC, Lacombe, Alberta  
Judy Van Haren, clerk  
Council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
Henry Wisselink, clerk  
Council of Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
John Stadt, chair of the leadership team

## Overture 36: Do Not Accede to Recommendations B and E of the Human Sexuality Report

### I. Background

The Executive Summary of the Human Sexuality Report states,

All of us long to be deeply known and accepted as we are. Jesus taught and modeled a radically new kind of intimate community—sisters and brothers caring for each other daily in practical ways. But the church has not provided intimate community for people attracted to the same sex, nor indeed for most single people. Instead, it has condemned people in gay relationships while ignoring premarital sex, pornography use, and adultery throughout the church. We note, therefore, that for many people, no repetition of biblical teaching on homosexuality will be persuasive unless the church repents of this hypocrisy and becomes the loving, supportive community of Christ.

(crcna.org/synodresources, Reports, Executive Summary, p. 7)

We believe that the church's teaching on sexuality will not only be unpersuasive unless it repents; it will be unpersuasive until repents. Moreover, the church has condemned not only people in gay relationships but also many of those who simply identify as LGBTQ and those who have merely struggled with their gender or sexual identity. The church has not welcomed them, let alone provided them with intimate community. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that many churches in recent years have also been guilty of ignoring or covering up sexual abuse and harassment within the church and within the families of the church membership. This overture advocates that before we make blanket statements regarding our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, we should do the hard work of repentance first. We must first become a place that provides intimate community for those who identify as LGBTQ. And only then, in communion, dialogue, and conversation together, should we explore how the Scriptures should inform the church's ministry to and with those who are LGBTQ.

We believe that the report, with its misuse of Genesis 1:27-28 and its approach to the law, immediately closes the door to such community and conversation. The report correctly notes that, based on Genesis 1:27-28, "the suggestion that God created sexuality as a spectrum, with some human beings falling somewhere *in between* male and female, is . . . foreign to the text," and to read this into the text "is to isolate that verse and rip it from its context" (p. 329). But, likewise, to insist that the text teaches that "God created human beings with [only] binary, procreative sexuality" and that "procreation is *essential* to fulfilling God's mandate" for everyone (emphasis added), is also "to isolate that verse and [take it out of] context" (p. 329). Genesis

1:27-28 is silent about other, perhaps nonbinary experiences of sexuality and about the possible differences between sexuality and gender. It also leaves the door open for other ways in which God's blessing may come to fruition. Yet the report takes as its foundational principle, guiding all its pastoral advice, that, "God created human beings with binary, procreative sexuality," though the Scripture does not adequately support this position (p. 329). See, for example, the discussion about pastoral care for gender identity issues. While the report states that "the church should demonstrate great openness" regarding these issues, "and should be cautious in any pronouncements and policy making," presumably because "the Bible does not give explicit teaching on the issues raised by gender dysphoria and DSD," "nevertheless, on the basis of Scripture's clear teaching that humanity has been created as male and female, we believe the following constitutes wise counsel." The report then goes on to demonstrate a lack of "openness" and "caution" by advising transgendered believers to simply "be reconciled to their created self" (pp. 395-96).

Indeed this narrow view of Genesis 1:27-28 does not comport with the rest of the Old Testament. Throughout the narrative, Israel only truly lives into the blessings of "fruitfulness" and "dominion" by walking in the ways of love and justice, faithfulness and righteousness; having children and possessing land is not enough on its own. Within the story "children" and "nation" come to symbolize "fruitfulness," and "land" symbolizes "dominion." The blessings of Genesis 1:28, and hence "children" and "land," are best interpreted as metaphors for the many ways humans live fruitful lives by being creative and caring for some aspect of our world. While the marital relationship and infertility play important roles in the drama, particularly of Genesis, we should not miss the point that the standard basis for justice—whether the community is caring for the most vulnerable, the widows, orphans, and aliens—points to God's desire that all people be fruitful and have dominion by walking in love and justice in accordance with his shalom.

In the New Testament Jesus and Paul make clear that "binary, procreative sexuality" is but one way in which humans can enjoy God's blessing of fruitfulness and dominion. Jesus himself seems to be single. Paul is single and encourages people to remain so if they can (1 Cor. 7:1). Through his teaching and by gathering a small community of disciples around him, Jesus consistently breaks down the ideal of the nuclear family in favor of a new family defined by commitment to God (Mark 3:31-35; Matt. 19:28-29; Luke 14:26). By doing so, Jesus and Paul help us understand that the marital relationship is but one of the ways in which humans might live into God's blessings. This is a point the report misses in its discussion of Matthew 19:1-12 because it also takes a very narrow approach to the law.

A more faithful interpretation of Matthew 19:1-12 would begin with a look at the literary and cultural context of the passage. The main theme of the larger unit (Matt. 19:1-20:16) is "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last" (19:30; 20:16). In each of the first three pericopes of the unit Jesus commands people to care for, welcome, and be generous to those who are on the margins of society, those who are vulnerable and/or have no status (women, eunuchs, children, and the poor). He concludes the unit with a parable that demonstrates that it is God's character to be scandalously gracious rather than to follow what is "fair" according to the letter of the law. To say

“the last shall be first, and the first shall be last” is to say that those who have been prevented from living into God’s blessings of fruitfulness and dominion shall now be given priority over others.

With regard to the social context, Matthew 19:1-12 is about justice in the context of marriage. The Pharisees ask if a man can divorce his wife for any and every reason. Since a woman’s social and economic viability depended on her tie to a man (her husband, father, or son) in a patriarchal society, a woman who could be divorced simply because she upset or displeased her husband was extremely vulnerable: marginalized, one might add.

When one approaches Matthew 19:1-12 with the theme of the literary unit and the social context in mind, one sees that, instead of providing a clear-cut law for people to follow, Jesus demands that people fulfill the purpose of the law, which is love (Matt. 22:40), or, in the broader social context, justice (Ps. 89:14). The Pharisees (and the wealthy young man in the parallel pericope in 19:16) want Jesus to render a ruling about the law with regard to the rights and obligations of men (or a “righteous man,” cf. 19:20). Jesus, however, points to Genesis 1 and 2 to remind everyone that the purpose of marriage was so that men and women could together live into the fruitfulness of God’s blessing. Moses’ law regarding divorce was given as a measure of protection for women because of the sinfulness of men. A certificate allowed them to remarry and thus secure their economic and social space in society. Jesus’ point is that men should love their wives rather than look for a law that enables them to shirk their duties. In other words, he calls men to fulfill the law with radical, costly love and justice (as he also does in 19:21).

With regard to eunuchs, then, the issue is not so much about celibacy as about how humans might otherwise live into the fruitfulness of God’s blessing. The disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ teaching is not just to the demand for celibacy of a man who divorces his wife, but to the whole of his call to radical love in marriage. (Not marrying leaves the single man in the same position as the divorced man with regard to sex. If celibacy is the issue, why would it be better never to marry in the first place than to live as a divorced and celibate man?) The point Jesus is making is that if one pursues God’s blessing through marriage, it is difficult and calls for radical love. Likewise, pursuing God’s blessing as a single person is also difficult, but it is an option. What is radical here, however, is not a call to celibacy, but the mere fact that Jesus recognizes that there is another way, other than marriage, to pursue God’s blessing. Eunuchs were so marginalized in Jewish society that they were not even allowed in the temple. In fact, they were marginalized for the very reason that they did not fit the mold of “binary, procreative sexuality.” Since their sexual organ was dysfunctional, they were marked as unfit. They were thus not only celibate but also unable to enjoy all the other aspects of fruitfulness and dominion that accompany a marriage. To live as a eunuch was to forgo not only sex but also children, establishing a household, and growing old with someone. But here Jesus opens the doors of the kingdom to them. Rather than bringing issues of sexuality to the fore, Jesus relativizes them with regard to how humans might live into God’s blessing of fruitfulness. Note also how the parallel text of 19:16-30 centers on another command the disciples deem impossible (19:21, 25) and ends with an alternative example of how humans can experience God’s blessings: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for

my sake will receive a hundred times as much" (19:29). These two pericopes, rather than giving us easy-to-follow laws, call us to radically pursue the purpose of the law by challenging the typical understanding of how people live into God's blessings—that is, by having children and possessing land.

The committee's recommendations D and E, as well as many of the pastoral recommendations, are based upon the assumption that human sexuality is strictly binary in nature and upon a desire to establish "laws" that clearly delineate right and wrong. We contend that the Scriptures do not teach or demand a simple binary view of human sexuality and that Jesus teaches us to find in God's law a guide to radical love and justice. Moreover, several of the issues addressed are issues the church is just beginning to talk about. The church has only been debating the issues of sexual orientation and homosexual marriage for a couple of generations, and issues around gender identity have only recently arisen. The report itself notes that the distinction between sex and gender is "a relatively recent one, and it is unknown in the Bible" (p. 387). Likewise, the report states, "It is doubtful whether people in the first century were familiar with the concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today (that is, an involuntary disposition to be attracted to people of one's own gender)" (p. 420). The Bible does not speak directly to many of these issues because of its vastly different cultural and social contexts. We should therefore hesitate when we are tempted to find easy, clear-cut solutions. Moreover, we should follow Jesus' example of radical love and hospitality and take our cue from the report's own admission that the church needs to repent and be more hospitable to those in the LGBTQ community. It is our conviction that these issues need to be lived out and discussed in the local church with those who are in the LGBTQ community who are the fruit of the church's repentance and hospitality—that is, only after the church has repented, changed its ways, and welcomed them into the community.

The report's flawed biblical foundations lead the committee to erect two additional barriers to such engagement with the LGBTQ community. First, it makes the claim that the church's teaching on sexuality already has confessional status. This is patently false, since it was not obviously clear to Synod 2016, which gave the committee the mandate to look into the question. Acceding to the report's recommendation would alienate not only those in the LGBTQ community but also their friends, families, and those who wish the church were more hospitable to them.

Second, in support of their argument for confessional status, it equates its teaching on sexuality as being key to the gospel, raising sexual ethics to an issue of salvation. If this is the case, we should all sell all our possessions and give to the poor lest we threaten our salvation. In light of the above discussion on Matthew 19, we must give equal weight to Jesus' command to the rich young man as to his response to the Pharisees. If we are to raise sexual ethics to such a level, then we need also to take a much more stringent approach to our sins of greed, consumerism, covetousness, and lack of concern for the poor. Likewise, we would need to be equally vigilant about disciplining those who use pornography, have premarital sex, and commit adultery. Several problems arise, however, with such increased vigilance. First, it is easier to ignore sins such as greed, viewing pornography, and adultery because they are relatively "invisible," while an "out" homosexual couple is, well, "out." Second, will synod appoint more study committees to determine

exactly which sins merit such vigilance? Will synod produce charts to recommend that we tithe not a mere ten percent but forty percent, or fifty, depending on if we fall in the seventieth or eightieth percentile of income, lest we break Jesus' command to the rich young man? If synod declares our teaching on sexual ethics to be confessional and that it is central to the gospel, then we must give equal weight to all other sins. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it," but thank God that "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:10, 13)!

Finally, the report's recommendations pose a barrier to such hospitality because of two failures, one on the part of the committee, and the other on the part of synod. Although we truly appreciate the report's treatment of pornography, especially that it recognizes that pornography is a form of sexual abuse, the committee fails to deal with the larger issue of sexual abuse and harassment. In a context in which church leaders are in the news frequently because of their sexual abuse of church members, in which whole denominations and Christian institutions are covering up years of child sexual abuse, and in which our whole culture is finally refusing to tolerate sexual harassment, not to address these issues in a report on the church and human sexuality but yet to make ethical pronouncements about the sins of those in the LGBTQ community would be to give the appearance of hypocrisy, if not actually to reveal it.

Likewise, synod failed to grant confessional status to the Belhar Confession. If synod agrees with the report's recommendations, the Christian Reformed Church in North America will be saying that individual sexual holiness is more central to the gospel than the inclusion of all peoples into the body of Christ. This, in spite of the fact that racism is not only an individual sin but also one that infects whole societies and that the inclusion of all peoples into God's blessing is central to the whole narrative of Scripture. God blessed Abraham so that he would be a blessing to the nations. Paul even equates this promise with the gospel: "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Gal. 3:8). Jesus commands the disciples to make disciples of all nations. Paul continually insists that the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God is not just key to the gospel but the heart of the gospel (cf. Rom. 9-11; Gal. 2; Eph. 2; etc.). Finally, when John sees the heavenly Jerusalem coming down, he sees the nations bringing their wealth into it, and the tree of life whose leaves "are for the healing of the nations." While sexual sin is grievous like all other sins, there are only a sprinkling of texts throughout the whole of Scripture that address it. The sin of racism, however, contradicts the central narrative of Scripture. While sexual immorality crops up occasionally, God's graciousness to all peoples is one of Scripture's major themes.

## II. Overture

Chicago South overtures synod not to accede to recommendations B and E in the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

*Grounds:*

1. The committee itself recognizes the deep need for the church to repent of its treatment of those who identify as LGBTQ or have struggled with sexual orientation and gender identity, and its need to show them hospitality.
2. The report's biblical arguments rest on a very limited and narrow interpretation of Genesis 1-2 (particularly 1:27) as well as a limited and narrow view of the function of the law. These lead to an unwarranted view of sexuality as being strictly binary.
3. The committee gives contradictory advice with regard to gender identity. It first admonishes the church to be very cautious in its approach to and pronouncements upon issues regarding gender identity, but then takes a very firm stance regarding such issues.
4. Sexual orientation and gender identity are both relatively new issues that receive little to no direct address from the Bible.
5. Addressing such issues requires that the church community, including those who are LGBTQ, work through these issues at a local level, discerning God's direction and interpreting the Scriptures together.
6. The report works against its call to repentance and hospitality, erects barriers to open conversation, and continues to support a culture of shame by claiming the church's teaching on sexuality already has confessional status, by arguing sexual ethics are a matter of salvation, and by failing to address the issues of sexual abuse and harassment.
7. Synod failed to give the Belhar Confession confessional status.

Classis Chicago South

Roger Nelson, stated clerk pro tem

**Overture 37: Appoint a New Study Committee to Engage All Perspectives on Human Sexuality; Do Not Adopt Recommendations D and E of the Human Sexuality Report**

**I. Introduction**

The following overture was submitted to Classis Alberta North and was discussed, along with a number of other overtures, at a special meeting of the classis on February 5, 2022. At that meeting, Classis Alberta North was unable to reach a consensus, so a motion was made, and approved, as follows (quoting the relevant minute recorded by classis):

Motion carried: That

- a. Classis withholds action on the overtures presented at this meeting without prejudice, understanding—and encouraging—that the churches that presented them will forward the overtures to synod so that synod has the information and concerns and considerations recommended in them.
- b. Classis invites other churches to “sign on” to any individual overture, along with the initiating church, as a church's way of registering support with the presenting church.
- c. That a statement regarding the above be formulated to be added to each forwarded overture to clarify that the overture was neither defeated nor adopted but was discussed and given freedom to move forward.

With respect to the above decision of classis, since the time of that classis meeting, Fellowship CRC has received notice from the following three churches in Classis Alberta North indicating their support of this overture and their desire to “sign on” and become cosignatories: Inglewood CRC, Covenant CRC, and Avenue CRC, all of Edmonton, Alberta.

*Note:* This overture consists of two parts, taking into consideration that if synod does not accede to the first part, the signatories would urge that synod nevertheless carefully consider the second part.

## **II. Overture, Part 1: Appoint a New Study Committee to Engage All Perspectives on Human Sexuality**

We overture Synod 2022 to receive the synodical report on the biblical foundations of Human Sexuality for information, thank the committee for its work, and take the following action:

Appoint a new study committee that is not limited in the scope of its theological inquiry by adherence to the 1973 report. This committee will actively and appreciatively engage all perspectives on human sexuality and will seek input from the wide range of experiences in the CRC to help give direction to churches in ways that honor diverse perspectives and maintain the unity of the church. This committee will undertake a three-step process, with each step dependent on and accountable to the previous step.

First, the committee will design and coordinate a denominational listening tour to create safe spaces in which to hear the lived experiences of sexual minorities and their families within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The committee should take seriously the confessions of our church’s shortcomings and failures as outlined in the Human Sexuality Report, recognizing the following: “It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex” (p. 407). The committee must seek to navigate this tour with wisdom and grace, creating as safe a setting as possible (in line with p. 430 of the report).

Second, in conversations concerning the findings from the listening tour, and perhaps as part of it, the committee will critically examine the processes, policies, and practices of the CRC, as well as the assumptions and biases, that have led to the previous study committee’s overwhelming confession that since the 1973 report the CRC has failed to care for members who are attracted to the same sex:

The church has also harmed people who are attracted to the same sex by promoting the false expectation of orientation change, as if believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to become attracted to the opposite sex as they are sanctified. . . . Indeed, the church has not been the supportive, grace-saturated community it is supposed to be (p. 407).

Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all too often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers (p. 426).

These admissions, while remarkable in their honesty, beg for a collective self-examination about why the CRC has found it so difficult to fulfill the mandates and pastoral advice given to it by synod.

Third, in dialogue with, and accountable to, the findings of the first two steps, and with no responsibility to adhere to the conclusions of the 1973 synodical report on pastoral care to LGBT members, the committee will produce a new report on the biblical foundations for human sexuality with a particular focus on the question of inclusion for sexual minorities. The purpose of the new report will be threefold:

1. To dialogue with and offer constructive criticism of the current report. This critique will include examination and clarification of the report's hermeneutical starting point as well as a sympathetic and appreciative engagement with alternate and thoughtful biblical interpretations.
2. To engage more seriously and report more accurately the findings of new scientific research in the area of human sexuality.
3. To offer pastoral care recommendations that
  - promote nonshaming expressions of loving acceptance with a desire for individual and communal flourishing.
  - foster continued unity in the church as we work through an issue that threatens to be very divisive.
  - focus on caring for congregations whose perspectives and experiences lead them to ministry practices that include full participation.

*Grounds:*

1. A true desire to understand viewpoints of a diverse community requires authentic and open-hearted listening. The committee struck in 2016 was not free to listen well, having been constrained by the requirement that its members agree with the 1973 report. Voices that struggle with or disagree with the 1973 stance could not be heard. This fact is relevant not only to the credibility with which the final report is received, but also to pastoral care and justice concerns, where the commonly held aphorism “nothing about us without us” is good practice.
2. This requirement of adherence to 1973 conclusions meant that although the committee was equipped to articulate the historical position of the CRC, it could not honestly engage alternative readings of Scripture. It was also ill-equipped to objectively perform one of its primary tasks: to engage in a “discussion outlining how a Reformed hermeneutic does or does not comport with readings of Scripture being employed to endorse what are, for the historic church, ground-breaking conclusions regarding human sexual behavior and identification” (p. 315).
3. The lived experience of congregations within the Christian Reformed Church requires an unencumbered examination of the best biblical, theological, and pastoral arguments for all perspectives regarding the inclusion of LGBT Christians in full membership before making decisions at a denominational level.
4. We in the CRC have long considered our denomination to be thoughtful, deliberative, and biblically based. Honest denominational care of all Christians on a topic regarding inclusion/exclusion of

brothers and sisters requires a report capable of taking seriously all biblical and theological arguments before making recommendations. The very existence of a variety of robust biblical and theological arguments for the inclusion of celibate *and* married LGBT Christians in the church signals that there is not theological consensus on this topic. An unencumbered report would display our denominational trust in God's ability to reveal truth through Scripture and the Holy Spirit, and it would prevent us from engaging and making decisions from a place of fear.

5. The pastoral guidance offered for the care of sexual minorities is confusing and potentially harmful, and better guidance is needed, particularly for churches for whom caring for LGBT brothers and sisters is more than a hypothetical reality. For example, the report acknowledges the harm done in the past when same-sex attracted Christians were encouraged to change their orientation (p. 407). The acknowledgment that a change in orientation is not a realistic expectation implies that same-sex attraction is not a choice. Yet the report also raises the point that "no 'gay gene' has yet been identified" and that "the claim that attraction to the same sex has a biological cause has been seriously challenged by recent research" (p. 405). The mixed messages are bewildering and call for a more thorough examination of the scientific research regarding gender dysphoria and same-sex attraction, with due consideration of the view that these may be core elements of one's being.

There is a dissonance in the report that leads to confusing and potentially harmful pastoral care. How can we as a church be inviting, loving, accepting—as the report rightly calls us to be—up until the point a person or couple desires to join our congregation, when we have to tell them that they are not in fact welcome as they are but need to make changes before they can join? How could this not be devastating to both these people who have developed relationships within the church and to the elders or ministers who eventually have to have this conversation? If we are going to land where this new report lands, would it not be wiser and more kind to just be up front at the beginning of a new relationship with gender dysphoric and same-sex attracted people, and tell them as kindly and clearly as we can that they are not welcome unless they agree not to act on their natural impulses? Though the pastoral care section of the report expresses a desire to be compassionate and welcoming, in the end this desire will seem by many to be incompatible with the committee's conclusion that LGBT people who are not celibate may not participate fully in the life of the church.

6. Honest pastoral care takes into account the experiences, fears, hopes, and struggles of the individuals to whom it is seeking to offer care. By not taking seriously the voices of Christians who disagree with the traditional position, or feel devalued by it, the care that we offer is at risk of being more about caring for our leadership as we uphold the church's stance than it is for caring for the individuals among us who think and feel differently. It is at this point that we also risk making our churches culturally irrelevant by not engaging

in the very conversations in which our young people are immersed, both within and outside the church. This is why more sincere listening, without an agenda or foregone conclusion, needs to be done at every level of the church. This is an opportunity for us to model trust in God as we engage in difficult conversations that we cannot control.

7. If we as a denomination are serious about confessing the systemic harms perpetrated against and suffered by LGBT members in our community (which the previous study rightly names), then it is our responsibility to engage in a humble and thoughtful assessment of our ecclesiastical culture, including the procedures, policies, and practices that have allowed this harm to continue. We thank the committee for naming these weighty confessions, but we disagree with their assessment that we can simply choose to be better without an honest critique of the systems that have allowed for our ongoing patterns of harm.

### **III. Overture, Part 2: Do Not Adopt Recommendations D and E of the Human Sexuality Report**

In the event that Synod 2022 does not accede to our request to embark on a new and more open process and instead chooses to consider the recommendations of the Human Sexuality Report, we wish to communicate to Synod 2022 our objection to Recommendations D and E and urge synod not to adopt those recommendations.

#### *Grounds:*

1. These recommendations close the door on further theological study and reflection and assume that there is consensus on this matter when that is clearly not the case. Many faithful Christians interpret Scripture differently and come to different conclusions. To break communion with them would be an affront to the Lord of the church who prayed for our unity.
2. To declare that beliefs about human sexuality have confessional status when that same status was denied the Belhar Confession, which addresses core biblical themes of justice, unity, and reconciliation, is to say that those are of less importance than a contested view of human sexuality.
3. The scientific study of human sexuality is a relatively recent field of inquiry, and new discoveries are bound to deepen our understanding of same-sex attraction. We believe that the church should remain open to ongoing exploration and learning, and indeed is obliged to as it cares for its diverse members and reaches out to others living in an ever-evolving culture. To declare confessional status would cause stagnation, irrelevance, and a disregard for the gift of science.
4. To declare that the report's beliefs about human sexuality have confessional status will have consequences for denominational agencies engaged in ecumenical partnerships as well as for officebearers engaged in ecumenical and interfaith work (for example, campus ministers and hospital chaplains). These consequences should be considered.

5. To declare that this committee's interpretations are so thorough and reliable as to warrant confessional status is reckless and unnecessarily provocative, an attempt to draw a line in the sand foreclosing all further discussion. It is extremely divisive and will do irreparable harm to the church and its witness.

Council of Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

Jim Visser, chair of pastoral committee

Council of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

Janet Vlieg, chair of council

Council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

Henry Wisselink, clerk of council

Leadership Team of Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

John Stadt, chair

### **Overture 38: Receive the Human Sexuality Report as Information but Do Not Adopt It**

Having read and reflected on the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality to be submitted to Synod 2022, and while appreciating the report's counsel on a variety of points, the Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, Ontario, nevertheless overtures synod to receive this report as information and not adopt it.

#### *Grounds:*

1. The report describes issues surrounding human sexuality in contemporary society to be settled, and these interpretations binding in the CRC and in other traditions of Christianity, despite the serious and studied positions of many faithful Christians around the world that prove this not to be the case.
2. Unlike the compassionate, grace-filled 1980 Report on Divorce and Remarriage, this report instead uses the 1980 report and its recommendations as grounds to retreat from the healing power of forgiveness and restoration for divorced persons, and it goes on to apply that same retreat to same-sex relationships.
3. This report has failed to present personal stories of any of our members or former members that would not confirm the conclusions of the committee's work (see Appendix that follows for examples of such stories and the cost of this silence).
4. If accepted, the report has the potential to divide the CRC again by pitting our members against one another and undermining our witness as a body that accepts and works through disagreements with mutual love and support, all while maintaining our unity in Christ.

Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, Ontario

Alice Klamer, clerk of council

## Appendix

Following are some stories gathered from individuals connected with the Christian Reformed Church who want to be seen and heard. In most cases, the individuals requested to be identified. In some instances where revealing their identity could cause harm to the individuals or to their relationships with others, their stories are included with pseudonyms and are identified as such.

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### Christopher Rynberk

*My name is Christopher Rynberk. I am 72 years old, and I am a gay Christian. My husband and were married in a church, and we are active members of a loving church community. I love God, I experience joy every day, and I know that God loves me.*

*But it wasn't always this way. For 64 years I lived as a straight man, something that only changed when I was hospitalized and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My marriage of 37 years was in tatters, and attending church (Mountain-view Christian Reformed Church in Grimsby) made me physically ill. It wasn't until doctors said they could find no medical reason for the neurological effects I was experiencing that I finally admitted what I had actually known since I was four years old: I am gay, and I can't do this anymore.*

*I had to come to grips with the fact that I can't live that life anymore. I had to be truthful about who I am.*

*I grew up in a Christian family, and I knew how my parents expected me to live. We never talked about it, but when I was a teenager, my parents took me to both a psychiatrist and to a form of conversion therapy. My dad would drive me once a week to see a faith healer, and he would stroke my body and pray the gay away, or whatever it was. My parents never used that word, and they never asked me or told me I was gay. I was just different enough that they said, "You have to change your ways." So, between that, and the psychiatrist, and the conversion therapy, and the elders coming to our house, it put me in the closet, and I stayed there for years.*

*Yet, I had known since the age of four that I was different. There was something about me. At first, I thought I should have been born a girl, but when I hit puberty that did change, and today I can say I am happy to be male, but it was a very confusing time. I had no idea why my parents were taking me to a faith healer, but I just went along with it. I had relatives who told me I was different, but over the years I had learned to carefully cover up all of the feminine ways that I had had since I was a child.*

*I became a schoolteacher.*

*In those days, you'd be fired for being gay, and, in the church, you would be ostracized, so I just stayed in the closet and decided I wasn't gay. From time to time, I used to tell myself that. "I'm not gay. I am married. I have two children." I was an elder in the church. I was the treasurer. I was a worship leader. I played the piano for years. All of these things just kept me in the closet, because I knew what the church taught and I did not question it.*

*It was about three years into my marriage with my ex-wife when she decided there was something emotionally missing in our marriage. I was in total denial. I said, "We have to work harder." She said we should have some counselling, but I said, "No, no, no. We just have to work harder at it." That came up a couple of times in our marriage, but overall, it was a happy marriage. As I have discussed many times since then with my ex-wife, for the first 25 years, we managed quite well. But then my mind started to get affected, and the last 10 years were really quite dismal. We weren't communicating well, and although we didn't know it, I was getting PTSD.*

*We were in counselling for three years – three years! – before I realized I was gay. My counselor – a Christian counselor – said: "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "Well, I have to tell my wife." My counsellor referred me to Generous Space Ministries, and I had many sessions with Wendy Vanderwal Gritter, and I would be bawling my eyes out, asking, "What am I going to do? What are we going to do now?"*

*I was becoming free, but I also felt a great sadness when I moved out of our marital home and lived alone in an apartment. It was a horrible year, because, while I felt freedom, I also felt guilt, and shame-based trauma, which is part of the PTSD. I was feeling guilty that I was gay. It wasn't until I could say to myself that is how God made me – and it took a couple of years – that I realized that I didn't have to be ashamed. There are still moments – I mean, I am 72 years old and I lived in the closet for 64 years. But it gets better and better each year.*

*If you were to ask me if I am glad to be gay, if I would prefer to be gay, the answer is "Absolutely not." I would have preferred to be a straight person. I wish I could have continued to live my life as a straight person, but health-wise, and truth-wise, and authenticity-wise, I am not a straight person. And I have learned to accept that.*

*My ex-wife is a wonderful person. We are still friends. But I lived my life in the closet, and that affected her too. Although she is not angry at me, she is angry at the church. It is her belief that what the church has put me through psychologically – even though they may not have known it – is unforgivable for her.*

*I don't know if she is angry at God, but I'm not. I have never been angry at God, not ever. I was confused, but I never said, "God, damn you for doing this to me." I always prayed that each day would bring me joy, and I still do that. And I thank God for each day I have. And I still thank God, as a gay person – now that God has finally let me come out.*

*My journey is shaped by my religious upbringing. Other people come out when they are younger, but this was how I was expected to live. So it's distressing to me to hear that the Christian Reformed Church wants to make its position on homosexuality confessional. My husband and I attend another church, but we still have family in the CRC, and I do love my roots, so I can't disconnect from that completely. I don't feel animosity toward the church, but there are other people who also need to come out—and why should they be excluded? I lived as a straight person for 64 years, and now I am gay and I am not welcome in the church anymore? That does not seem to be the way we should be understanding and interpreting Scripture. The main thing about Scripture is that God is love, and that is how the church should be looking at us. We are working out our lives within the context of God's love, and that is how we should be included – no questions asked. We should be allowed to be at the table, anytime.*

*I have always felt that God loves unequivocally. I love God, and I sense God's presence. I am married to my soulmate now, and I share my life, my love, my prayers with Doug. I know that without God in my life, I would be nowhere. Thank goodness I had a faith because there were times when I had suicidal thoughts.*

*But I feel the most alive and thankful when we are in church and the choir is singing or there is Scripture being read. And the fact that the people sitting around us are mostly straight—that doesn't matter. We're just part of everybody else. That is the place I feel most alive, because I know God loves us all.*

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### **Joya Vandermeulen**

*When I was sixteen, I knew who I was.*

*I had been baptized as an infant into the Christian Reformed Church, a sign of God saying "You are mine," to which I responded with "I am yours" in my profession of faith 16 years later. I had run around the building with a pack of kids during coffee time, attended Sunday school, joined the girls' club and then youth group, volunteered for every task I could, learned all of the kids' Bible songs, participated in Christmas plays, memorized tons of Scripture and catechism and the Apostles' Creed, and attended CRC elementary and high schools. It was home, family, and basically my entire social life, and I loved it. I knew Jesus loved me just like my church family loved me, and I loved him back.*

*So, at 16, I was a good Christian. A good church girl. A pleaser and perfectionist. I knew that God was a white man with a beard sitting on a cloud, who fit nicely into a square box, and I knew the answers to all matters of faith as written in the catechism.*

*I, like the Magi, saw a star in the east.*

*So with much clarity, I built a five-year plan: finish high school, go to Calvin College for a BA and Calvin Seminary for an M.Div. The next five years would of course involve good employment, a husband, 2.5 kids, a house, and a pension. Like a respectable adult.*

*I wonder if those Magi knew how long their journey would be, or what they would find at the end?*

*It turns out that I never went to Calvin. I did get a BA but no M.Div. Instead of that good job, I had precarious employment, lived with my parents to save on rent, and there was definitely no pension. The spouse and kids things was on hold because of something I'd noticed but had hoped would go away: while my high school friends all had crushes on Mr. Cook, I just respected his good pedagogy, and when they discussed their first childhood crushes I laughed along—even though, shamefully, my first crush had been on a woman named Holly from the kids' show "Under the Umbrella Tree."*

*But I couldn't be gay, right? I just "hadn't met the right guy yet."*

*Then one day, God showed up in a terrifyingly true and holy way that pushed me to explore my own truth. My sister, who had left in the usual boring grey men's clothes, came home looking amazing. Buskerfest had been good to her. Hair done, wild makeup, a cute little skirt and a fancy top. She sat the family down and let us*

know that she is transgender and that we'd been misgendering her since she was born. And suddenly the neat square boxes that I'd grown up in were squashed flat.

That is her story.

But where it fits into mine is that it pushed me into community with a lot of 2SLG-BTQ+ people of faith who don't live in square boxes. These wonderful beings know a living God, one that can handle big feelings, and doubt, and creativity — one who certainly doesn't fit into a box. They told their stories of coming out, of familial rejection, of church rejection, of new life. They learned some Greek and Hebrew and dug through Scripture as a theology of survival.

It was beautiful. And it was terrible. Because as hard as I was trying to be straight, I felt their stories resonate deep within me. "Me too. Me too. ME TOO!" my guts said until I couldn't hold the charade any longer. Bit by bit I told safe people of my queerness, and with each telling it felt more true and right.

Through this personal crisis, I found myself in need of a safe and affirming place to fall . . . and the CRC church wasn't and wouldn't be and couldn't be it. In fact, it became exhausting and dangerous. So I left. It was excruciating. This community that I thought was — that was supposed to be — my home, my family, my safety net just wasn't. In the midst of crisis, I felt like I had nobody. For a year I couldn't bear to enter a church building. The Bible felt like a weapon. The sound of worship music was unbearable noise. Devotionals made me nauseous. God was an abstract concept.

Then, in November of 2015, I was invited to a new church by a friend, and I found a home there. It's an inclusive place where I can be myself: doubting and queer and curious. A gentle community where I feel seen and valued and safe.

At this point, faith no longer feels nice and fluffy — it feels more like a constant cycle of death and resurrection, of certainty and doubt, of safety and danger. It feels essential and unreasonable.

And that star that had pointed my teenage self toward seminary? I guess I miscalculated the angles or something, because it's taken me on a much more beautiful and complicated path than I expected.

Now at the age of 32, I'll be starting a master in theological studies after all, with three questions to guide my learning goals: Who am I? Who is God? What work is mine to do? It's the theology of survival.

I have no five-year plan. I don't know what I'll do, vocationally, when I'm done. I don't know if I'll even be employable — churches are kind of tricky for us nonheterosexual folks. But I do know that this is a right step.

So, like the Magi, I'll keep following that star.

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### **Laura Eldon\***

\*A pseudonym. Laura is proud of who she is, but she does not want to be disrespectful to those people in her story who could be seen in a negative light.

I grew up attending a Christian Reformed Church in British Columbia, and I went to Christian schools throughout my elementary and high school years. In my family, we were discouraged from interacting with non-Christians — we were taught that

*we live in the world but that we were not to live of this world. For me, this created fear and an inability to connect with others outside of my faith-based community. I lived in a social bubble, which felt safe. Because I grew up with the same people in all spheres of my world, it was particularly difficult to connect with my peers when I switched schools in Grade 9. Rather than at school, I found belonging within my church. It was my home.*

*During this time, I participated in leading worship, I organized youth events, and I attended retreats. I also worked as a Sunday school teacher and youth leader, and at times worked to maintain the building itself. My work with the church was really important to me and gave me a sense of purpose and identity. My faith was strong and was my foundation for living. Due to traumatic childhood experiences and mental illness, there was a time that I wanted to take my own life. I was plagued by the feeling that I did not belong in this world and that heaven was my true home. I yearned for God. I wanted to feel safe in his arms. Thankfully, a man was brought into my life who helped me with these feelings — the youth pastor at our church at that time. He became my closest friend. He taught me to rely on God for my strength, and reminded me that God would not give me more than I could handle. The deepening of my faith and the support that I received from my youth pastor acted as a tether that helped me continue on living in this world. Without my faith and the church, I am not confident that I would still be alive today.*

*I wasn't always conscious of my sexuality, but looking back from an adult's perspective, I can see the signs. I understand now why I was so drawn to certain women, and why I felt resistance from them. Although it wasn't sexual at that point, the sense that I was somehow too involved left me with a feeling of "otherness." Now, I realize these were crushes.*

*What I was conscious of was that same-sex relationships were wrong, and not how God had created us. I remember clearly hearing my mom exclaim that gay couples were "disgusting" after seeing them on TV. Coupled with the messages that being gay was akin to murder, I clearly understood that I would be sent to hell if I acted on any urges. My youth pastor was the one person that I told early on. I explained that I thought I was gay and that I didn't know how to reconcile that with God. He was emotionally supportive and told me it wasn't wrong to have those thoughts. Rather, it was acting on them that would put me in opposition to God. It was obvious to me that he believed being both gay and faithful to God was impossible. I would have to make a choice, and it should be the "right" one.*

*When I was 20, I met a woman at work who made my stomach flutter. We were drawn to each other in a way that I had not experienced before. As our relationship grew, it became clear we wanted to be together as a couple. But this created an inner paroxysm for me — how was I to live a life in line with my God who I held so dear, and be true to my own individual identity?*

*This was not made any easier by my parents. They began to pick up on the romance between my girlfriend and I and made their disapproval apparent. They told me that if I decided to continue dating her, that I would not be allowed to live in their house. But by that time I had realized that my attraction towards other women was a part of who I am; it wasn't a choice. If I was to have any integrity, I could not deny that part of myself. So, I was left with little choice and had to leave.*

*I felt so much shame. When I spoke with my youth pastor about it, we decided that it would be best if I took some time away from church ministry while I figured things out. While I didn't feel kicked out, I was very clear on the fact that there was not a path for me to continue leading worship and working with youth while also dating a woman.*

*My mom was so concerned for me that she brought the subject up with her church small group. However, as soon as she spoke the words, the fact that I was dating a woman spread like wildfire through the entire church family. My mom had outed me. She had already made me feel so much shame, and then all of a sudden, I was shamed by everyone. Hearing that my grandfather cried when he found out, and that people believed my attraction towards women was an effect of the trauma I experienced as a child was painful and invalidating. In the eyes of others, I was in the wrong for choosing this life, and if I didn't choose a heterosexual life then my soul was in peril. Although it wasn't an overt shunning, I felt the judgement surrounding me and no longer felt safe within my church family. I couldn't stay with the rumors and shaming comments. After I left, I didn't hear from a soul. The community that I had grown up with from birth just dropped me, and I was lost.*

*I went travelling through Europe for a few months soon after. During that time I wrestled. You would expect that travelling out on my own, exploring new places and cultures, would be exciting, but for me it was pervaded by sadness. However, there was an instant I remember clearly that brought me some peace. I was sitting on a riverbank in Germany, and I was reminded of how Jesus would hang out with the rejects of society, and that God WAS love. I thought, well, if God is love, then he could not hate me. And if Jesus spent his time with the outcasts, then he certainly would spend time with me. At that moment, my perspective changed. I realized that I didn't have to subscribe to limitations placed on me by my home community and faith tradition.*

*When I returned home from Europe, I moved back into my parent's home. I was hoping that with time I would have been welcomed back. This wasn't the case, however. I was reminded that if I was going to be with a woman, then I was no longer welcome to live in their home. So, when my girlfriend moved, I moved with her.*

*I didn't hear from any of my church friends or extended family after that, and I only spoke with my parents occasionally. When we did talk, it was very difficult. My mom and dad were attending Christian conferences that were supposed to help them figure out how to change me, and they were given hope that this was only a phase and I would end up straight. The conversations we did have had an undercurrent of rejection — it felt as though they were consistently choosing their church and their relationship with God over their own daughter. It was profoundly painful. It didn't matter who I was, and it didn't matter what I said; I would always, always come second.*

*As time passed, my girlfriend and I were able to go to my parent's house occasionally. They realized they would have to make some accommodations or they would lose their daughter completely. However, when we did make it to their home, we were expected to act like friends. My brothers were allowed to be with their girlfriends at my parents' house comfortably and affectionately, but I wasn't allowed to be with mine. Although my girlfriend and I were together for nine years, my family never came to a place of comfort and acceptance.*

*Several years ago, I became very unwell, and it was clear that I could not live on my own during that time. Because I was no longer seeing anyone, I was welcomed to live and recover in my parents' home. It was extremely difficult for me to be there, but due to my illness I didn't have another option. Now that I look back on this period, I can see there was a reason for me to be living with my parents — our relationships have healed in a lot of ways. I think we began to appreciate one another for who we are, and, although not on the same page, we look past our differences and are able to appreciate the love that we have for each other.*

*While I was living at home, my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During the months between his diagnosis and his passing, I had the privilege of taking care of him. I watched him struggle with his diagnosis and physical decline, but I also witnessed the strength of his faith. Words cannot express how incredibly thankful I am that we had the opportunity to heal and get to know each other again before he died. He became my favorite person, and I now think of him with fondness every single day.*

*It's really only been since my dad died that I have had a relationship with any of my extended family. My dad's mom and I have become particularly close. However, there are times when I am brought back into the place of shame. Although not directed specifically at me, she makes comments about how same-sex relationships are not of God and that she has no understanding of how anyone could follow that path. Even though she knows that her words hurt me, she feels justified in speaking her opinions because her faith in Jesus is foundational. Because of my history with the church, and the lack of flexibility when it comes to opinions about sexuality, I don't speak about my experiences. It's not that I feel ashamed about who I am; it's just that I am afraid of the judgment, rejection, and backlash, and I simply don't want to feel that pain again. But in some ways this means that I am denying myself all the time.*

*When it comes to my personal faith, I find it very painful to speak of. When I was young, the church was my home, my support, my lifeline. However, the experiences of shame, rejection, and judgment killed my trust in the church and my faith in Jesus along with it. Singing, which was a huge part of my life and brought me comfort, died too. To be honest, at this point I don't feel safe enough to seek out other Christian faith communities. I cannot go back to Christianity because I no longer see the world through that lens. When I was in Europe, God's message of love to me was outside the confines of religion. I was not loved because I was Christian, white, lesbian, or straight. I was loved simply for who I am and because that is what God is. Something my dad said to me in a letter he left was, "Laura, your faith still exists." When I first read that statement, I didn't quite believe him, but as I reflect on it now, I realize that he was right. My faith does still exist; it's just different now. And that's okay.*

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### **Christopher Godwalt**

*My first two years of university were some of the most gut-wrenchingly difficult years I've ever experienced. Back then I was deeply entrenched in the closet, knowing that I was definitely not straight, but also trusting no one with that secret.*

*It remained my secret until I came out to my now ex-wife just a couple years into our marriage.*

*My years at Redeemer, and especially those years when I lived on campus, were marked with guilt and fear! I felt guilty that I wasn't straight. I felt guilty that I developed crushes on my dorm-mates. I felt guilty when I engaged in any sort of interaction with members of the same gender, and guilty when I interacted with members of the opposite gender. I felt guilty for "leading" females on whenever I expressed interest in their lives. I felt guilty when I accessed porn in my dorm room. I felt guilty when I sat in accountability groups and had to pretend that I had once again "failed" to maintain a healthy sexual ethic with regard to members of the opposite sex, fantasy, pornography, and masturbation. I felt guilty when I "played along," laughing and sharing homophobic jokes.*

*And I lived daily in fear. I was afraid that someone would catch my eyes wandering. I was afraid that I would get caught crossing my legs the wrong way. I was afraid that someone would catch me aimlessly singing Abba. I was afraid that I would talk in my sleep and accidentally out myself. I was afraid that one of my dorm mates would walk in on me. I was afraid that I would have an erection at the most inopportune times which would lead others to suspect about my orientation. I was afraid that my faith wasn't strong enough because despite having prayed for years and years and years, I was still gay. I was afraid that I was going to hell, and that there was no way a sinner like me could make it to heaven. I felt afraid that I wasn't working hard enough, or doing enough spiritually and community-wise to save me from eternal damnation. I felt afraid that I wasn't worthy of grace because I was gay. I felt afraid that one of my dorm mates would discover my darkest shame, would out me, and I'd face public ridicule and eviction.*

*Every day, waking and sleeping, I exhausted myself trying to be the best damn straight Christian on campus so no one would ever know. And my true friendships suffered for it. My academic life suffered for it. And without a doubt, my development as a young, spiritually maturing Christian suffered for it. Instead of developing a true faith, I developed the perfect facade and learned how to live it day in and day out.*

*These days I live in the Netherlands with my husband. It took years and years and years of work to slowly chip away at the shame, guilt, and fear, which had, in place of a solid foundation based on Christ, formed the foundation of my daily life. Thankfully there were others, especially several within the RCA and CRC, who walked with me, journeyed with me, and crawled through the deepest valleys with me to help me unpack what I had learned in years of Christian Sunday school, youth group, Christian high school and Christian university. They've helped me see a God of love instead of a God of condemnation. Through their joint work, I've learned to build a faith and a life that is healthier (no, I've not yet learned it all, and I've a long way to go), I'm learning to trust that God is good, that his grace is sufficient for even me, and that he chooses me — a gay, married, Reform(ed)(ing) Christian — just as I am. He loves me, yes, even me!*

*Looking back, I remain grateful for much of my Christian school experience, but if I knew then what I know now, it would not have been my choice for schools. Back then I had no idea that there were Christians who didn't condemn every expression of LGBTQI+ reality. I had never met another gay or queer Christian, and I was convinced the two could never be married. I've now met so many Christians with deep, faith-based roots who are convinced that there is more than one possible way to journey through this life.*

*The church and Christian schools stand in a beautifully unique place to make a difference in the lives of many, and I pray that courage and wisdom lead to a holistic engagement of the reality of the beautifully diverse Christian reality, thereby helping to create a safe and nurturing learning and faith development space even for those within the LGBTQI+ spectrum.*

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### **Mary Vogelzang**

*I have a pretty deep connection to the Christian Reformed Church. Both my parents were long-time members; my father was a CRC minister and missionary. Because of this, I moved every seven or eight years, and lived in Chicago; Sheldon, Iowa; Bellevue, Washington; and Newton, Iowa. I am the youngest of seven children, and we went to Christian schools wherever we lived.*

*After graduating from high school, I went to Calvin College in Michigan. After I had attended there a few years, my mom started getting sick and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so I moved home and finished my nursing degree in the Seattle area. At about the same time, my parents officially retired from the CRC. I lived at home to spend time with and take care of my mom until she had to go to a nursing home.*

*After leaving Calvin to take care of my Mom, I went to a community college in Seattle and played basketball there. It was the first time I had ever been around people who were openly gay. This was around 1985 or so, so when I say they were "openly gay," I don't mean it was like it is today. But there were women on the team who talked about having girlfriends and so on. The community college wasn't Christian, and was unlike anywhere else I had been before. Previously I had only gone to Christian schools, so to have people who were talking like that about who they were dating was very surprising to me. During that time, I developed a crush on my coach, who soundly rejected me, but that experience forced me to look at myself and ask: "What is this feeling that I have?"*

*I started realizing that there had always been certain women in my life, typically older women, towards whom I had really strong feelings. I always just thought we were just really good friends, and I admired them for being such lovely people that I just really liked. However, after having that experience with my coach, I was able to look back and identify those relationships differently.*

*When my mom passed away, I wasn't really even "out" to myself, and at that point I was still dating men. I was certainly starting to ask myself what it meant that I was attracted to women, but I was still dating men because it was just what was comfortable. My mom died when I was 24, and around that time, I cut off contact with the church. Members of the local CRC attempted contact with me, but I had already stopped attending church when I went to Calvin. It was then that I realized that I wasn't going because I wanted to go; I was going because that was what was expected.*

*My parents could not have raised children in a more stringently CRC manner. We did all the catechism and grew up as children of CRC pastors and missionaries. But now none of us are in the CRC and all of us have chosen different churches for various reasons. My sister was the last of us to attend a CRC church. She married a man whose family was really involved in the North Seattle CRC church. But then her son came out as gay. People in the church basically said, "How hard for you, to have to*

choose your son or the church!" And she was like, "Uhhh, no." She realized that the church was really quite anti-gay, and she just didn't feel like she could go anymore.

My spouse and I are both former-CRC members, and neither of us plan to return to that denomination. We are both nurses, and we met at work. We've been together since 2004. She and I have a daughter, who is such a blessing to us. We also fostered two little boys for a while, and they ended up being adopted by two dads. The amazing part is that we are now the boys' legal godparents. We see them a lot, and we enjoy spending time with the dads, so we vacation with the dads and the boys, and it's kind of this one big happy family of seven: two gay couples and three kids. Our daughter thinks of them as cousins.

I think it's sad when churches can't adapt and change. I do sometimes go to church now, occasionally. My wife and I wanted to renew that connection when we had a child, so we found a church close to us that we feel like we could be comfortable in . . . but to be honest, it's sometimes still a struggle for both of us. It's the University Congregational United Church of Christ. At the time we joined, two of the three ministers or pastors were gay; it's an open and affirming church that practices what they preach when it comes to ministry.

I do sometimes feel sad that we are so far removed from the CRC now. It's a church with lots of history and heritage, and it's sad that my daughter won't know that part of it. But I am not sad enough that we would go back — since there is no CRC church that would actually accept us.

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### **Reuben VanDam\***

\*A pseudonym

My name is Reuben. I am in my late 20s. I live and work in a small city a few hours away from the farm where I grew up. I attended university and graduated with a good job in a professional field. I am an uncle, brother, son. I am single and live with three other young professionals. I attend the local Christian Reformed church, where I play piano during the services roughly once a month. I am blessed. I am happy.

#### *Part 1—A Child Born into Covenant and Brokenness*

My connection to the CRC is generational. My grandparents were founding members. My parents met in the nursery as babies. My great grandmother passed on her faith to my grandmother, and her to my mother, and my mother shared her faith with me. My dad shared his faith with me too. He would pray with my siblings and me every night. They were, in more ways than not, good examples of Christian discipleship, and they were both very involved in the church. Mom taught Sunday school, directed the choir, played piano, and was on the worship and education committees. Dad was on the building committee and served on council.

My parents had me baptized. The congregation promised to love, support, and encourage me. All this is not uncommon to the story of many who grew up in the CRC.

But my story is different (I assume) from many in the CRC. And it has been a deep-rooted sense of otherness that has defined so much of my life. I have limited the expression of my true self to be accepted, and I still do this. My earliest memories of this are when my brother showed his friends where I played with Barbies,

before I was even in kindergarten. I remember asking for more boys' toys after that, not because I wanted them, but because I knew I would be teased if I played with a girl's toy. As an older child and teenager, I remember hiding everything I liked, from clothes, to music, to movies, hobbies, even food. Can you imagine that food is gendered? Or I thought it was. I adjusted my behavior to be accepted.

This was before I even knew I was gay. When I went through puberty, things got worse. I heard a lot of terrible things from the people who promised to love and encourage me when I was baptized. It wasn't always just people from my church, although a lot of it was. A lot of the horrible things I heard also came from people who went to other churches. But still, it all came from my spiritual siblings: the (broken) hands and feet of Jesus. I didn't think I knew anyone who thought that gay people could be good people or that they were worthy of love or kindness. Gay people, I was led to believe, were broken, rebellious people who hated God.

But I didn't hate God. So what I was experiencing was obviously a test, or a phase. I prayed every day that God would take that and exchange it for an attraction to girls. It wasn't that I wasn't attracted to girls. I was—just not in a sexual way. I wanted to be friends with lots of girls. And maybe I would have been friends with girls if I felt that was allowed. I didn't have many friends. It was difficult for me to make friends with boys because I wasn't very good at pretending to have common interests, and I felt I wasn't allowed to be friends with girls. So I just didn't have a lot of friends. I had my sister, though. She was younger, but she always looked out for me, and was kind to me. She included me. But I never trusted her with my secret. It was a secret between me and God. I never told anyone, partly I think because of shame, but also because I did fully trust that God would heal me. Why bother telling people if it was going to change?

#### *Part 2—Paper Flowers*

But God didn't change me. I don't remember when I stopped believing he would. But sometime in high school I became okay with the fact that I would probably never be straight. But I wasn't okay with letting go of my imagined life, the life the church and society and everyone seemed to be telling me I would never be happy without. Having a girlfriend, a wife, a family, becoming a father. I called this my "paper flowers," which was from a song that I listened to a lot at that time. In it, the singer wishes she could live in her world of pretty (but fake) paper flowers and hide away from the real world of rampant chaos. I idolized this imagined heterosexual future.

What was worse, I came to believe that this fake future was not only critical to my own happiness, but also the happiness of many other people. I came to believe that my parents, my siblings, my uncles and aunts and cousins, my friends, grandparents, and people from church would be less happy if I did not someday marry a woman and have kids and a family of my own. My paper flowers would need to look real from the outside for the sake of everyone else. If God wouldn't heal me, I would just pretend.

Still in high school, I asked a girl to date me. We dated for six months, and I was very happy. She became my best friend. My family seemed to approve. It felt, finally, like I belonged in my world. This is what my whole world told me was supposed to be. And it was wonderful. Oh, so wonderful.

But it was also horrid. I knew I would have to tell her the truth at some point. But I thought that if we loved each other and trusted each other that it would just happen.

*And if we wanted to get married, we could make it work somehow. It would be our secret. Nobody else would need to know. But that feeling of trust never grew for me. The homophobia in my circles got worse. I hated myself more and more for lying to her. Guilt became shame.*

*When she broke it off, I was devastated that I lost her as a friend. But I also lost a piece of my identity that I was just beginning to hope would last and become real. In my journal in the months following, I wrote about overwhelming heartache and hopelessness. I'm sure this is common for teenagers after a breakup, but I believe I was starting to grieve something so much more. My Paper Flowers were on fire.*

*But when we stopped dating, I also felt a weight lifted; I didn't have to lie anymore. For the next years my journal entries would reflect this—and a constant back-and-forth between expressions of longing to be with a woman and have a family, but also recognizing more and more that I would never again subject myself to the shame and guilt of living a lie in that specific way. I never had another girlfriend. I never went on a date with another girl.*

### *Part 3 – It Gets Better*

*When I went to college, I had vague ideas of meeting new friends, maybe a lover, coming out, and being disowned by my family. I couldn't imagine bringing a boyfriend around them. It would have to be one or the other. And I imagined what that would look like. It was miserable. And lonely. But I was working hard, and I went home every weekend to be with my family. I never made new friends, and never had a boyfriend. I preoccupied myself with other things.*

*But I did grow. I grew in faith. I grew to love myself again, and I grew to love my family more. I used to believe that I was gay because I was born a broken person into a broken world. And just as some people were born blind, I believed that I was born with a brain that did not allow my sexuality to develop correctly. I believed that, for whatever reason, my brain was not exposed to the right balance of prenatal hormones, and so my gender and sex and sexuality grew to be out of sync because of that. And maybe that is still part of my belief; or, maybe being gay or straight is just a variation in a good creation, like blue or brown eyes. Or—maybe God made me this way because he knew that my family would need me to be exactly as I am. I don't know for sure. But I've come to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by a God who's always loved me. As the lyrics of my favorite hymn state:*

*"I find, I walk, I love, but oh, the whole  
of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee!  
For thou wert long beforehand with my soul;  
Always, always thou lovedst me."*

*And sometime, and some point, it seemed like it was okay to just be me, slowly. Oh, so slowly. And as it became more okay to be me, I became less sad. The more I loved myself, the more I found I could love other people. I finally did find friends who accepted me as I am, and I found my space where I could be 100 percent authentic with no fear of being rejected. Life, as they say, gets so much better. I live with my best friends, play piano in church (although my church doesn't know me fully yet), and I have a great job. I am thrilled to be experiencing my family grow and change—siblings getting married and building their homes, becoming an uncle, watching my*

parents transition into grandparents, Thanksgiving and Christmas and birthday dinners, experiencing tears and joys and challenges together.

*I am still single. Maybe I will stay single, or maybe I will find the right man to share my life with. I know I will most likely have to leave the CRC if that day comes. Maybe I will take a spiritual sojourn with my Anglican or United siblings. But the CRC will always be my home. I will always feel connected to this church; the church where my great grandmother was baptized, and her children, and so on.*

*But wherever my life leads, I know now that my family will still love and accept me regardless, and I will love them too. And yes, life is messy and painful and frustrating. But it is also beautiful and warm and good, and I am happy to be living it.*

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### **Abigail Potsdam\***

\*A pseudonym

*I was born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church. My family was deeply connected to the CRC, in the USA and in Canada. The way I see it now, looking back, is that our family has always been kind of like a family of servants to the CRC. My grandfather was a pastor, my dad was a pastor and a missionary, my ex-husband and I were a pastor and missionaries. But while we spent our lives serving the CRC, it wasn't a church that nourished us back.*

*Growing up, we moved around a bit. I was actually born in Nigeria; then we moved to Honduras. When I was seven, I moved back to Holland, Michigan, where my dad continued to work for the CRC.*

*There was a lot of sexual abuse in my childhood, from my father and from my brother. I grew up hearing puritanical messages from my mother, about how sex was forbidden until marriage and any show of sexuality was very off-limits, but at the same time, sexual things were happening to me as a young child. This led to a lot of secrecy and confusion in my life. I'm not sure how much my mother knew about the abuse, but I believe that she knew.*

*At the time of the abuse, the church was what was most important—more important than family, more important than anything—so there was no one for me to turn to, no one to talk with about what was happening to myself, either within the church or my family.*

*Of course, with this childhood experience, I naturally explored many different forms of sexuality during high school and college. It was complicated for me because of how the church talks about sexuality and because of how my parents raised me to believe that talking about sex is wrong, and then there was the added element of secrecy that came with sexual abuse. Thinking about these things, or even acknowledging that part of me, has only slowly started to come out now that I'm in my fifties. It was simply a lot to untangle. I now consider myself to be bisexual, as I've always been very attracted to both men and women.*

*My faith was always very strong despite all this; I completely felt connected to the Lord. After college, I taught English as a second language for two years, then I went to seminary. I was still kind of struggling with who I was at that point. I honestly thought I was going to be single all my life because I knew I was struggling with*

*these feelings of being more connected to women than to men. And then an unexpected thing happened: I fell in love with a man I met at seminary. We were married, and we went together to work as missionaries in West Africa.*

*Our time as missionaries was marked both by great work and service for the church and by traumatic events, including an armed robbery and a kidnapping. These events had an impact on our mental and emotional well-being. The trauma led to my husband going down another path, having affairs and other issues. It was only when our marriage was in trouble that support finally came from the church—and even then it was only for him and not for me or the rest of the family. When he decided to leave the CRC and started to attend a Catholic church—we were living in Michigan by then—I remained at the CRC. I didn't leave the CRC church myself, but it certainly felt like the church had left me. When my husband and I finally did separate, it was a shock to many people who knew us. We were missionaries, and missionaries aren't supposed to divorce.*

*It's only now that I'm divorced that I am struggling to decide what it actually means to be bisexual. When I was married, it wasn't really a factor. But now that I'm single, I have choices about who I'm going to date and how I'm going to live.*

*Part of being able to acknowledge my sexuality has come from my children. My children are much more open about who they are. I've left the CRC now, but I'm attending another church for my daughter. I purposely decided to join this church for my daughter because this is one she's willing to go to. It's a safe and affirming space for the LGBTQ community, and they're very open about it. And it's also a place where I feel like I can be a little bit more honest and where I can kind of explore who I am.*

*When it comes to the recent CRC human sexuality report, I've read it and found it very discouraging. The strictness and the black-and-whiteness of their thinking on sexuality reminds me so much of my mother. I see no grace in it, at all. Having come out of the CRC as this abused child, feeling neglected by the church I served for years, and then hearing the church self-righteously claim that they know that all these people can't be right or loved by God because of this inner part of them, it's tough to handle. As for myself, I don't know if I'm bisexual because of the abuse in my past, I don't know if this is because how God made me; I don't know why I'm this way! But this report claims that I'm supposed to say that I am sinful, and there's no grace, there is no love, there is no Jesus in that.*

*This is why I've had to leave the CRC. I thought perhaps that the CRC was becoming a more grace-filled church. I thought that grace was finally becoming a bandage that was wrapping over some of the puritanical tone and hyper-Calvinism of the past. I saw that process happening in my mom's life. Just before she died, I saw grace coming into her life, and it changed her. I thought that maybe the CRC was starting to undergo the same transformation. I started to feel a little bit of hope for people like my daughter, who is also bi, that she may be able to be part of the church and hear people say, "You're not damned; you're not gonna go to hell. You're loved. Christ loves you. We're all loved." But in this report, I don't see that at all.*

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## David Hall

*I am 63 years old. I am a gay Christian. I am not an oxymoron. I am David Hall.*

*For the first 59 years of my life, I struggled to live a life contrary to who I was. It was a life lived based on the expectations and beliefs of my family, of my religious upbringing, and of society. I feared the rejection, condemnation, and erasure I learned would be the result of living as a gay man. I did not want God's judgment of burning in hell for eternity.*

*I married Grace, with whom I had two daughters, Megan and Chelsey. I studied and worked as a minister of youth music, a career which ended when my same-sex attraction was known. I continued to serve in the church in various capacities as moderator, elder, worship leader, children and adult choir leader, and on several boards – from building administration to finance – while supporting my family working in the insurance and human resources industries.*

*I loved my family, church, and community. I received pastoral and clinical counseling, including reparative and conversion therapy, in the hope I would no longer be a homosexual, same-sex attracted, gay. I prayed constantly, often prostrate on the living room floor in the middle of the night, sobbing uncontrollably at times, for God to take away the gay. God did not answer my prayer. I was angry, confused, traumatized. Even so, I did not turn my back on God.*

*In our 33rd year of marriage, my wife Grace died of breast cancer. The facade of a straight Christian life crumbled. I hated God for taking away the life for which I had worked so hard and for not taking the “gay” away. I turned to alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity, and gambling. I lost everything. Life was no longer worth the effort. Within 10–15 minutes of being found by my sister and pastor, I was saved from succeeding with my third attempt at suicide.*

*With the love, prayers, and support of family and friends, I received counselling. It was my daughters and close friends of my wife who told me that it had been Grace's hope for me to live who I was created to be. It felt like being hit by God with the proverbial 2 X 4. God had not abandoned me. God had always been there waiting for me to acknowledge who I was created to be, in God's image, God's child. Loved. Beloved.*

*On January 1, 2016, I was able to say without shame, guilt, or hesitation that I was a gay Christian.*

*Within weeks I no longer looked for solace in the alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity, and gambling. I went off all the medication I had been on for more than 15 years for back pain, migraines, and intestinal problems. I lost 65 pounds eating healthier and exercising. I found joy in life, in people. My relationship with God felt closer than ever. I began to experience the abundant and fulfilling life God promised: a resurrected life of purpose and hope. I released myself to God, and although I was ready to live single for the rest of my life, God brought Jim unexpectedly into my life, and I knew it was right. I have a relationship I never thought possible – faithful, nourishing, enriching, honest, trusting, unconditional love.*

*Jim and I began to look for a church where we could worship and serve in the ministry and life of a welcoming and affirming Christian community. We attended Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church during our first year of being together. At*

*the time we were only able to attend every other Sunday, as Jim was living in Barrie. There was love, support, welcome, and affirmation among those we spoke with and who sought us out each time we attended. However, we realized there were glass ceilings limiting our involvement, as well as not being able to be married. There were also theological messages from the pulpit from guest speakers telling us indirectly that we didn't belong. We remain close friends with some Jubilee members and miss many others, but we simply could not continue to attend a church where there are conditions to Jesus' love—particularly for the LGBTQ2+ community.*

*We have found a community of faith where diversity is welcomed and affirmed, where love is given unconditionally, where we can worship and serve in the life and ministry of the church, and where we can be married. No human can be denied these inalienable rights to communion for all who seek God with heart, soul, mind, and body. We are all created in God's image, God's children, God's beloved. All with equal access to unknown measure of God's love, mercy, and grace.*

*I did experience rejection, condemnation, and erasure by some of my family and by my church when I came out as a Christian in a gay relationship, but not fear. Instead, I have seen God's goodness and blessing in ways I have never experienced before, including a new family and friends to walk through life with.*

*Thanks for this opportunity to serve God.*

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### **Carol Vanderstoep**

We need to be brave with our stories so other people can be brave with theirs.  
— Catherine Center

My deep belief is that stories are sacred and have the power to cultivate empathy and justice.  
— Brené Brown

*I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church, and I was educated in the Christian school system for elementary, high school, and post-secondary, attending Redeemer College for two years before moving on to Calvin University, from which I graduated. I spent my career as a teacher in several Christian schools. My husband, John, has a similar story, graduating from Kuiper College and then Calvin Seminary, now 20 years into a second career calling as pastor, missionary, and church planter. Our three daughters are also graduates of the Christian school system. We have been fully immersed in the CRC. We are your poster children.*

*As a young mom, I listened to Focus on the Family to be the best mom I could be to my three little girls. Focus on the Family said the "gays" were going to destroy the family as we've always known it. They talked about "Exodus Ministries International," saying it was a place where any Christian who suspected they might be gay should go for healing. I personally didn't know any gay people. I was told (so I was certain) that homosexuality was a choice, and a bad one at that.*

*A dear friend (then also CRC) had two gay friends, and she would often talk to me about them. I was concerned about her when she started to question so many things that seemed so foundational to the faith. I assumed what I'd been taught: that her friends must have had negative relationships with their fathers or had domineering mothers. I remember feeling so uncomfortable when she kept bringing it up. What I*

*didn't know is that she was offering me a gift that started me on a journey that took way too long for me to understand.*

*We didn't talk about homosexuality when I was growing up. It wasn't really an issue. There weren't any gay people in any church or school I was part of, or so I thought.*

*During John's years as a pastor, he started learning about people in his care who identified as LGBTQ. John started to recognize the torment that some people go through when they identify as LGBTQ. We didn't talk about it a lot, and rarely with our school-aged children. We still believed that it was a sin even though we hadn't done any study on this issue. It's what we believed because that was what we were taught.*

*I remember the day that same-sex marriage was approved in Canada. I was not impressed that they were going to call it a marriage because we all knew that marriage is between one man and one woman. I was asked by "Focus on the Family Canada" to send a letter to all of my email recipients suggesting that they too send something to the government. Maybe they could call this a civil union, but certainly not a marriage. I remember receiving a gently worded letter from one of my recipients that maybe I should look at this from the other perspective, which sadly, I will admit, I did not do.*

*Several years later we were invited to a fundraising dinner for an organization that supports people who are both LGBTQ and Christian. Their guest speaker for the evening was Tony Campolo. The evening was eye-opening. Could this really be a thing? Not a choice? Created this way? Christian and gay? Tony Campolo and his wife agreed that people can be LGBTQ and Christian, but did not agree on whether or not they could marry. And Tony Campolo shared his humble posture: "Maybe I am wrong."*

*Against this backdrop, I will share a bit about my family.*

*John and I have been married for 32 years. We have been blessed with 5 children — three girls now in their twenties, Erin, Kristin, and Meghan, and two teenaged boys, Nathan and Stephen. In the past three years our family has grown by three as we welcomed our son-in-law, Jordan, our daughter-in-law, Kimberley, and this past October our first grandchild, Avery.*

*Allow me to share about the journey we've been on with our second daughter. Kristin was born in August of 1994. She followed Erin, who was a calm, quiet, rule-abiding little girl who made us look like really good parents. We took on that mistaken identity! When Kristin entered the picture, we were humbled as parents and realized that we actually didn't have a clue what we were doing! She was the kid who fell down the stairs while acting silly or found a way to jump out of a shopping cart when we turned our heads for a split second. She was the little kid who couldn't sit still long enough to snap a cute Christmas photo (which, by the way, are the most adorable pictures for me to look at now!). She was a vivacious, lively, animated and fun-loving little girl, and there was never a dull moment with her around.*

*Kristin was also a girl with a huge heart, putting the needs of others before her own. When she was eight years old, she found an adoption agency flyer at church with pictures of kids who needed to find their "forever families." Kristin pleaded with us to adopt all of them or at least one or two. She knew all their names and faces. She*

*has always loved kids and is good with them. Already as a young girl, she started looking forward to the day that she could have her own children. She was a much loved babysitter and in high demand in the neighborhood. She was twelve years old when my youngest son was born, and she was my right-hand lady. I don't know how I would have managed without her. She has always been a "baby whisperer."*

*When Kristin was about twelve years old and entering puberty, she started to realize that something did not seem "right" about herself. She was attracted to girls rather than boys, and confusion set in. She didn't understand what she was going through. We didn't talk about being gay at home but she did get the message through home, church, and Christian school that homosexuality was a sin. She assumed she couldn't be gay because she didn't choose this and was told that being gay is something you choose. She begged and pleaded with God during those years to change her, and she suffered in silence with all of her wondering and questioning.*

*She decided that she would try dating guys to see if it worked out for her. It didn't. She dated three guys over the next few years — one guy at a time, of course. :) When she finally came to the conclusion that she must be gay, she decided that she would marry a man and keep her secret forever and tell her husband on her deathbed.*

*She wondered what would happen if she ever shared her deep dark secret. Would she be rejected by her family and/or community? What should she do about her deep longing to get married and her longtime dream to be a mom someday? What should she do with her faith—her love for God? Did God still love her? So many questions and struggles . . . ALONE. It still pains me deeply to share that part of the story, knowing how much she was going through and not sharing it with anyone.*

*Part way between grades 10 and 11, Kristin slipped into a depression. It made no sense to us. Kristin had always been a lively, fun-loving kid. We did everything we could think of to help her. We tried to support her in organizing and completing her school work, helped her change her diet as maybe the depression was food related, sent her to a therapist, etc. We wondered if she was carrying the burden of all of her friends' problems as she was the friend with a huge heart who would help carry their burdens. She could listen, counsel, and encourage her hurting friends for hours. We urged her to let some of that go and suggest her friends get help elsewhere. Supporting them was not helping her get better, and yet she was sinking deeper. One day I discovered that she was cutting herself to mask the pain that was really below the surface. I was devastated. Why was this happening to her?*

*Kristin took a year off after high school because she was not emotionally ready to tackle post-secondary education. At the end of that year off, Kristin chose Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. While there, she discovered a group of LGBTQ Christians and was able to admit for the first time that she was a lesbian, and she discovered that it was possible to be both gay and Christian. Prior to sharing this with us, she took time to learn and study and listen to the stories of other people who were both LGBTQ and Christian. She wrestled with coming to a point where she was at peace with being a Christian and gay while the church that she grew up in was telling her that this was not possible. She came to a place of accepting herself for who she was made to be. She had several months (years really) before telling us.*

*I will always remember the evening that Kristin came out to us. A few months earlier she had called us from Winnipeg and had told us that she was looking forward to coming home so that she could share something with us that she had been*

going through. My mind went in all directions except the possibility that she could be a lesbian. It honestly did not even cross my mind. As we sat in the living room together that evening, she opened her computer and read a beautifully written letter to us. After the initial “I am gay,” she went on to say that it had nothing to do with us being “bad parents.” Her words were a shock to me. She didn’t seem gay (whatever that meant!). Although her words were initially jarring to me, her letter was so caring and thoughtful, truly emulating her beautiful personality. She has always been one who puts the other person first, and she wanted to assure us through this letter that being gay was not our fault. We hugged her and told her that we love her, no matter what, and that we would figure this out. We told her that although in this moment everything changed, nothing changed. We would never stop loving or supporting her.

I recall the denial setting in the next day. I told her that maybe she should keep this quiet until she “really knew” whether or not she was gay. She was so gracious. She just hugged me and said, “Mom, I’ve known since I hit puberty.” She went on to tell me that she remembered going to a basketball tournament when she was in grade 7 when all of her friends were talking about the cute guys, but she was totally focussed on the girls.

The three months after Kristin came out were a blur. I was in the process of wrapping up my teaching year, and John was wrapping up a 10-year pastor position just prior to our family moving to Haiti for a year to work for Christian Reformed World Missions (now Resonate Global Mission). There was no time to process until we arrived in Haiti. The year in Haiti was a gift to me as I used as much of my spare time as possible to read, study, pray, journal, and learn. I realized that identifying as LGBTQ is not a choice. If it were a choice, I doubt people would choose it, since it usually involves so much heartache, pain, and loss. I immersed myself in stories and sadly heard the most horrific and painful stories of LGBTQ people, and my heart broke. I found other people through social media who were further ahead of me on this journey, and I began to learn from them.

While we lived in Haiti, many of our family members (also mostly Christian Reformed) came to visit us. On a number of occasions, we sat on our deck together with our visiting family, and Kristin came out to them as gay. We were surprised and thankful by their responses. They too told Kristin that they would love and support her, no matter what. I will never forget my dad’s response — my dad, a leader and elder in his church for years. He stood up to hug her and through tears said, “Kristin, I am so sorry that you had to go through this alone all those years.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the group.

On Boxing Day of 2015, now back in Ontario, we met the person who is now our beautiful daughter-in-law, Kimberly. She had also spent a year at Canadian Mennonite University, and, although they didn’t meet there, they had common friends who introduced them to each other. They were married on May 12, 2018. They are both so happy, thriving in their true identity instead of hiding who they are.

There have been many days over the past six years that I have felt guilty for not being able to “be there” for Kristin during her darkest days. Her response to me has been so gracious. “Mom, you did the best you could with what you knew at the time.” It is my passion to let other parents know my story so their kids will know

*that they are a safe place to come out, if necessary. I know that this journey will be harder for people who are faith-based.*

*I wonder where Kristin would be if we had rejected her that night? I thank God that he allowed us to express love instead of fear, and faith instead of judgment. Has this journey been hard? Yes! Do I feel the judgments of people who don't understand? Yes! Does this journey feel lonely sometimes? Yes! Would I change anything? NO.*

*Two key things I have discovered on this journey: (1) Having gay relatives and friends introduces me to learning I couldn't experience without them; and (2) How the church had interpreted the Bible saying about homosexuality—like our mistaken views on Jews, slaves, and women in the past—is at least worthy of being questioned so that we can accurately know God's heart for LGBTQ people. Because of this, over the past couple of years, my passion has grown for doing something to spread the word that people who identify as LGBTQ are loved by God and that LGBTQ followers of Jesus are part of his church and welcomed at his table. Like all of us, they need to be loved and supported. Three years ago, John and I, along with four others started a Generous Space group in Centre Wellington, which offers support for people who identify as both Christian and LGBTQ and those who are supportive allies. We have been richly blessed to know and love LGBTQ people whose faith in Jesus has persisted despite their churches' not being able to extend God's welcome to them.*

*When the CRC's Report on Human Sexuality was released on October 29, 2020, I was in a COVID-19 quarantine with Kristin for two weeks so that we could safely spend a week with my oldest daughter, husband, and new baby. I told her about the report, and we talked briefly. She told me that she didn't really want to talk about the report. She was tired of hearing about how there are people arguing about whether or not she can fully belong in the church since true belonging is being accepted for who you really are. She is weary of listening to those who want her to change before she can be a full member of the church. She acknowledged her confidence in knowing that she is loved by Jesus. Although Kristin and her wife would love to find a Christian church capable of communicating God's love without fear, they know it's a challenge and one that they don't always have the energy for.*

*One of Christianity's key teachings is that people are made in the image of God. Yet that portion of imagebearers who identify as gay are finding themselves squeezed out of the church by heterosexual Christians insisting that LGBTQ people fit into a heterosexual image. May God forgive us for standing in his place and withholding welcome where he would extend his love. I'll end with part of a quote from Brené Brown. "True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are." My hope and prayer is that the church will rise with compassion, love, and justice and do the right thing.*

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**Brian Zonder\***

*\*A pseudonym*

*Born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church, Brian ticks all the boxes: baptized as an infant, participated in weekly worship, educated in Christian day schools, joined Cadets as a boy, attended youth group as a teen, professed his faith as a young adult, and volunteered in his local CRC in various capacities for twenty years.*

When asked what his favorite worship song was, Brian, a millennial, responded without missing a beat: “Anything in the gray hymnbook.” Because he is a fan of organ music, “When Peace Like a River” tops his list. “I love getting dressed up on Sunday morning and going to church.”

But as young teen he began to struggle with whether or not he was gay—and with being both gay and Christian. Eventually he came out: first just to himself. “I came to a point where I was able to say, ‘This is who I am.’ I stopped hiding it from myself. I was still hiding it from family and friends, but I was opening up to it.”

At the same time, the church he’d grown up in began to feel less safe. Looking back now, he realizes that while the church itself was not affirming, there were many affirming people sitting in its pews. He just didn’t know who they were at the time.

He has since connected with many other members of the CRC who are LGBTQ or allies. He posits that you probably don’t have to look far in your congregation to find someone who is affirming. “It might be someone sitting beside you in the pew—only you don’t know it because you haven’t opened up the conversation.”

As a young adult, Brian attended his first Q Christian Fellowship Conference in Chicago. (QCF is an ecumenical Christian ministry focused on serving lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer, and straight ally Christians.) The conference is the largest such gathering in the world. Brian now volunteers his technical and organizational skills to help run the annual event.

Through both QCF and Generous Space (a Canadian Christian organization that supports LGBTQ+ people and their allies), Brian was exposed to a wide range of Christian traditions. It opened him up to new ways of thinking critically about the Scriptures and his faith. “There are different ways of doing church. Different ways to do communion. Different ways of reading the Bible. We need to ask, what was going on in society when a particular passage was written. What was the context?”

To those who say, “But the Bible doesn’t change,” Brian responds that our understanding of Scripture has indeed changed through the ages. Pastors continue to write new sermons every week, researching, rethinking, and reinterpreting familiar passages. “Christians once believed that women shouldn’t serve in church office, children shouldn’t come to the Lord’s table, and that slavery was just fine. If the church was able to change its mind about these things, maybe it can change its mind about LGBTQ people too.”

Brian left the CRC in 2015 when he couldn’t find a church where he felt safe and which was also within a reasonable, geographical striking distance. He now attends a United Church which he describes as having a good mix of affirming members and still feels very much like a CRC.

However, he continues to connect and work with many CRC members. A born organizer with an analytic mind, he remains involved because he believes change can be made to stem the steady flow of folks exiting the denomination. “There’s a lot of talk about declining membership in the CRC. OK, so maybe we need to think about the things that are making it decline.” Despite everything, Brian continues to have hope for the denomination.

What are his hopes for the church that baptized him as an infant? Unity, for one. “That it won’t split up over this issue. That it can find middle ground as it has on so

many other issues." He wonders if that could perhaps mean the generosity of allowing for a local option in which, as he puts it, "We're not going to say if it's good, bad, right, or wrong, but we recognize there is a variety of belief."

He also hopes the CRC will be both cautious and humble in its pronouncements about the place of the queer folk in the church because, whether the church realizes it or not, they are already among us. "Remember, they could be sitting at your Thanksgiving table or in your pew. Many people don't think that LGBTQ inclusion is their issue. Until it is. When that imaginary gay person is gone, and instead it is someone you know and love and trust and value."

He hopes the CRC will be careful in its teachings. "Hearing the message that you're condemned over and over again is a lie that can become your truth if you tell it to yourself often enough. I care about the future generation. The young people still sitting in the pews unsure of where they fit in and whether they have a safe space to come out." Recalling his own childhood in the pew of the CRC church he loved and attended as a boy, he quotes Mary Griffith: "Before you echo amen in your home or place of worship, think and remember a child is listening."

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### **Sandi Morrison**

*I was not familiar with the Christian Reformed Church until middle school, when I moved to Gallup, New Mexico. Before that, our family had been with a nondenominational mission organization in Ethiopia and other countries in Africa, and I had attended nondenominational churches. When we landed in Gallup, I started attending middle school at Rehoboth Christian School, so that was my introduction to the CRC.*

*My parents continued to attend a Baptist church in town, but my sister and I soon chose to attend Rehoboth CRC instead. It seemed more liberal and community-focused than some of the other local denominations, and the sermons and music were more interesting and appealing to me. Of course, it also helped that my friends went there too. After high school, I ended up at Calvin, so I did become quite involved in the CRC, despite not being from a CRC family.*

*I had a good group of supportive friends throughout high school, and we had fun together, but I don't know what the response from my friends would have been if I had realized that I was attracted to women when I was a teenager. In retrospect, it's pretty clear that I have been a lesbian my whole life—I definitely recall my friends all having crushes in elementary school and middle school, and I was just not interested in guys. I would kind of look at the guys in my class and decide which one I was going to have a crush on so that I could fit in. I generally just convinced myself that I just wasn't into guys, and that was okay. In high school, I decided I needed to be dating, so I kind of found somebody and decided that we were going to be dating, and it turns out that most high school guys are kind of amenable to that. As soon as he kissed me, I thought it was absolutely horrendous and wanted nothing to do with him, but I still just thought it was him specifically that was the problem, not men in general. I think that your mind is great at convincing yourself what you want to rationalize, and that's probably what I was doing.*

When I was 25, after I had graduated from Calvin with a nursing degree and spent some time working back in Gallup, I spent a year in Ethiopia working at a hospital there, which was a really formative experience. I met interesting people, and I really started exploring a lot of religious and spiritual questions. I was still trying to date men, and while I made good friends and had great conversations with them, dating just did not work out well for me.

When I moved back to the U.S., I had a lot of free time on my hands because it took a while for all the paperwork to go through for me to start working again. It was at this point that I finally allowed myself to wonder about my sexuality. Through talking with a supportive friend, I kind of had an epiphany and finally came to the point where I could accept that I was attracted to women, and that maybe that was okay. I realized that the choice I faced was to either acknowledge it and move on, or to keep denying a huge part of myself. I really believe that I was simply in a place in my life where I could finally accept this reality.

Throughout this time back in Gallup, I was back to attending my CRC church because that's just what I did when I was in town. I went regularly and even attended a small group, but there were definitely big religious questions happening for me in the back of my mind. It felt to me like church was not really a place where I could explore who I was. I don't know how explicit or implicit it was, but it was definitely there. I ended up wanting to move somewhere where I could go back to school if I chose to do that, and I ultimately ended up in Albuquerque.

Once I moved to Albuquerque, I left behind the social obligation and habit of attending church every week. It was then that I started dating women, and it was such a huge difference from my previous dating experiences. It was quite an amazing time of self-discovery and a very eye-opening thing for me. Up until this point, I still hadn't come out to any of my family members because I figured that if I had never dated a woman, I couldn't really say I was a lesbian. When I started seeing someone regularly, I decided I would tell the rest of my family.

My parents had split up when I was in high school, and I knew they would respond differently to this news. I told my mom, and I was kind of expecting that she would be fine with it, but it turned out to be rather hard for her. She pretended that she was fine with it, but it was definitely challenging. It took her time, I think, to accept that I wasn't going to marry the boy next door and have five kids and let her raise them. My dad's response was basically what I had expected: a long email about religion, saying things about how I'd chosen to stray from the Lord and that he hoped I'd choose to "forsake this life of sin."

When it comes to churches, what I wish they would hear is that it always seemed to be the case to me that if your sexuality was different, it was met with a "let's just not talk about it" kind of attitude—and that definitely sends a message to people. I pretty firmly believe that your sexuality is something that you're born with, and you can try however hard you want to fit in or to deny it, but ultimately you're just denying a part of yourself, and you can't live fully when you're in denial. So if the church is welcoming and acknowledges the fact that people have differences and that those differences are okay, I believe that's powerful.

One thing I've found too that is very helpful, in churches and other places, is if I see more diversity represented, and I can tell there's LGBTQ people and couples

and families, then I do find it a lot more comfortable because I can believe that it's accepted.

These days, I think that meaningful human connection is probably one of the biggest ways I experience joy. I also find enjoyment in little things like the cat crawling up on my lap, or going out in the mountains, or taking a walk in the snow.

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### **Lyle Clark and Fred Heerema**

When Lyle Clark fell in love with a member of the Christian Reformed Church, he was introduced to a way of integrating his faith into his daily life that, as a Christian raised in the Roman Catholic Church, he hadn't experienced before. And as a classically trained musician who had been involved in leading and participating in worship all his life, Lyle also appreciated the liturgy of the CRC and the sense of belonging in a congregation.

And for Fred Heerema, Lyle's partner for more than 30 years, the Christian Reformed Church was the place he was born and raised. The couple met while they were both attending another church, and even though that church was affirming, Fred, especially, missed "a depth of faith experience, the kinds of things the Reformed community stands for, it's social and cultural involvement." Fred longed to be back "within my own background and tradition."

For most of their time together, the couple have been active, participating members of First Christian Reformed Church of Toronto, a place where Lyle is involved in the worship committee and in leading worship, and Fred is currently on the finance committee. Some years ago, Lyle also officially joined the Christian Reformed Church after doing profession of faith. Most importantly, for Lyle and Fred, it's a place "where the people are caring and supportive."

Both Lyle and Fred are grateful for the opportunity to use their gifts to support their church, and they are glad to be in a community that sees their identity as Christians as more important than their sexual orientation. "In terms of my identity, first of all, I am a child of God, and the second is, I'm gay," Fred says, quoting a pastor he knows.

As an adolescent growing up in the CRC, Fred struggled with his growing awareness of his sexual orientation as a gay person, but "there has not been a time in my life when I felt estranged from God. There have been times when I was in doubt whether I was okay with God, but I never felt that I was not accepted by God." That realization hit home for him when a wise and kind therapist asked him once, "If you were standing in front of Christ right now, how do you think Christ would treat you?"

Fred said, "I think Christ would love me."

As a youth and young man, Lyle felt less conflict between his faith and being gay because of what he calls the "the duality" experienced by many Roman Catholics: "You go to Sunday Mass, and you confess your sins, and then for the rest of the week, it's just your everyday life that really has nothing to do with the Christian faith."

Both say they are grateful for the love and stability that their committed relationship gives them—and the ordinariness of their daily lives. Fred laments the situation of

*gay friends who don't enjoy the comfort and blessing of a committed relationship, while for Lyle, having the blessing of a Christian life partner has drawn him deeper into his Christian walk and into his sense of God's love and presence in his life.*

*Quoting Victor Hugo, Lyle says: "To love another person is to see the face of God."*

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### **Robin Hampton**

*I attended Sunshine CRC in Grand Rapids from the age of four until I was nineteen. My parents were heavily involved in different ministries, so naturally my sister and I were as well. As a middle schooler and young adult, I spent almost all of my free time at church: I participated in youth groups, mission trips, coaching teen Bible Challenge, singing, drama, and so on. When I was young, I felt most safe while at church; it was probably the only place that I felt safe and loved.*

*After I came out as gay and started dating Terra, I had a very difficult time. Almost all of my Christian friends stopped talking to me or treating me like a person. People I had known my whole life made it clear to me that I was sinning against God, and if I wanted to be included back into the fold, I would need to repent immediately. It made me question my relationship with God and whether I mattered at all to my Christian friends. My family was no exception when it came to ostracizing me. After some time, some of my old Christian friends started tolerating me at an arm's length, but they no longer wanted a close friendship. This was so painful to me.*

*I've been with Terra for 14 years – since meeting her through mutual friends. We are married, and she has been so supportive and is always there for me. I am currently disabled, due to a health condition for which I have had several surgeries. My body deteriorated to the point where I was basically bedridden for four years. Terra was the only one around during all of that – the only person who was a constant support to me. I was fighting with my mom a lot, because the way she talked about my relationship with Terra and the way she told other people about our relationship was quite hurtful. But Terra single-handedly paid all of the bills, took care of me, helped me get dressed: she and I were all we had for a while. That was very stressful for both of us, but we knew we at least had each other. She worked full-time and has done an exceptional job of taking care of both of us. She sees it as a problem for both of us to get through together. Our relationships with our families are better, but they are still strained. Yet Terra and I still have each other, and we really rely a lot on each other.*

*I do not experience God through church anymore now. I was very angry at God for a long time for the way that all of my friends and all of my support network treated me. It's just been in the past year and a half or so that I just started praying for God to help me stop being so angry. Then a few months ago, I asked God back into my life. I had realized that he was the only reason that I was good and happy at all, and that every good gift comes from Him. However, I know that I still have to be careful with whom I share my renewed faith. I told my mother, and her reaction was quite painful to me. In fact, she would disagree with me about the fact that I am a Christian at all because of the fact that I'm married to Terra. So I still very much have to guard my faith. But I've seen God work in my life in the past year and a half or so since I've started to listen to him again.*

*I want the church to know that when you keep pointing out what you feel is wrong about other people, you're not helping anyone. You're not pushing anyone to do*

*better or feel better, or to have the same beliefs as you — you're just ostracizing them. Even saying something kindly is not helpful. All you're doing is driving people away, making them feel angry and hurt. I feel like it would be helpful to me if people would look for common ground instead of making me feel like I'm wrong, I'm going to hell, I'm evil. All it did was shut me down. If all these people are telling me I'm wrong, am I? Why would God make me this way? It's not like I said, "I want to be gay; Let me figure out how to go do it!"*

*It's been difficult to find supportive friends. From my past, just one or two of my friends are supportive and loving, and they don't live close to me. This is a stark contrast from how many friends I had before I came out, so now I definitely find it hard to trust new people.*

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### **Terra Hampton**

*My faith journey has been complicated. As a child, I was required to attend a Methodist church, and I did not enjoy going. I fought it even more after I experienced sexual abuse starting in the sixth grade. I became angry with God about why he would let this happen to me. When I was required to attend church with my family, I would not participate in singing or reading Scripture from the Bible. Once I graduated high school and was attending college, I stopped attending church unless it was for an event that I was required to go to, such as a wedding or a funeral.*

*However, even when I was angry with God, I would pray to him. It took me many years to forgive God and myself for what had happened to me. Once I forgave myself, I was even more troubled and angry with hypocritical individuals who call themselves Christian but do not treat others as they would like to be treated themselves. I believe that we are all children of God, and that we should love one another for who we are, and not by any labels society puts on us.*

*It was when I met my wife that I first became familiar with the CRC. I was aware of the CRC before, but I didn't really know that much about it until I met Robin. I learned a little bit more about it, and I saw how much she had loved attending church growing up and how committed she had been to it. One of my responses was that it seemed very strict! I definitely got the impression that the CRC is quite rigid.*

*I do not have a connection with the CRC community anymore. Robin and I have spoken about attending church, but we have not found one that makes us both feel comfortable. I do often pray to God at work. I am a respiratory therapist, and as a healthcare worker, I see a lot of human pain: trauma, cancer, COPD, other chronic illnesses, and now COVID-19. I pray to God to help these patients find peace, I pray for the patients' families, and I pray for my coworkers.*

*I would like the church to understand that LGBTQ people are often people of faith and should not be rejected. I have experienced conflict within myself, and I know many others who have experienced the same, due to having our faith, families, and friends reject us for who we are. We need a safe space where we can go and worship without fear.*

*When I am with my wife and our pets, I experience joy. She makes me laugh and helps me to forget my stress and worry. I do not care what we are doing, just as long as I am with her.*

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## **Corry van der Ende**

*I was born in Holland in 1948, the eighth child of nine. I have five brothers and three sisters. Ours was a traditional Dutch family with my dad working to earn a living and my mother busy in the home caring for the children. Each lunch and dinner was preceded by prayer and finished with a Bible passage and more prayer. On Sunday we went to church in the morning followed by an elaborate dinner and an afternoon of visiting family or friends. Then it was church again in the evenings. It was understood by all of us that organized sports activities were forbidden on Sundays. We were taught to say our bedtime prayers kneeling at our bedside.*

*By the time I was to start grade 2, the Dutch immigrant population in the area had built a multipurpose building which would house the elementary school during the week and church on Sundays. I attended the Christian Reformed elementary school from grade 2 through 7 and then switched to the local public school from grade 8 through 12 because it was located across the street from our home, so we no longer had to take the bus to school as in elementary school. Thereafter it was the local secular university for my bachelor's degree, followed by a doctorate in Saskatchewan. I attended catechism classes in the evening once I turned 16, and I did profession of faith in our Christian Reformed church.*

*As an adolescent, I was attracted to male classmates and later in my late teens and throughout my twenties there were several boyfriends. I fell in love and received marriage proposals, but I remained "single," waiting for "the right one to come along." The years passed as I built my career and business. I was happy and content. I became a self-made professional woman. However, as I entered my fifties, I began to realize I did not want to get "old" alone. I prayed for a partner.*

*It was at the age of 55 on October 6th at 11:30 in the morning sitting in a small row boat out on a lake in B.C. that I received God's answer to my prayer. The battery to the electric motor for my boat had been on the charger all night and was fully loaded. We had a female visitor from Holland with us at the cabin, and I suggested the best way to experience the beauty of B.C.'s nature was in a small boat on the lake. Ninety minutes into our boat ride the motor stopped. It would be a long row back to the cabin. As I assumed rowing position facing the bow, I asked our visitor who was sitting behind me if she could row a boat. "No," she stated. It was then when the emotion that I had always felt only for certain men hit me like a thunderbolt. I expressed my confusion and was immediately embraced. It felt like "the right one," as my mother had told me. There was no question about it; this is who I wanted to marry.*

*But I was afraid as to how my family would react—and my clients. What about the church? Was the Bible really against this? As any scientist would do, I started to research the literature and discovered numerous books written by respected Christian authors who presented an alternative interpretation of the most commonly quoted Bible verses on the topic of same-sex attraction. Perhaps it is the Christian Reformed church that is misinterpreting the verses as they did with slavery, racism, women in office, etc. I moved to Holland, where same-sex relationships were accepted and not frowned upon. In 2003 we were married by the government official and an ordained minister in the Herformde Kerk in the town in which we were living. The pastor officiating was my 80-year-old uncle. He started his sermon by recognizing "the elephant in the room," stating that there were those present who approved, those who*

*didn't, and those who were unsure. The theme of his sermon was about love being the strongest emotion expressed in the Bible in general and by Christ.*

*One year later we returned to B.C. Within the first week of my return, I met with the pastor of my church to inform him of my marriage and to ask if we would be welcome as a couple in the church. He stated that he estimated 50 percent of the congregation would be supportive, but the official position of the church was not supportive of same-sex unions. It was only then that I started to probe synod rulings on the issue. I was appalled by what I read. Shortly thereafter my spouse and I attended a weekend retreat put on by Generous Space. Again, we were shocked by the pain that the Christian Reformed Church had afflicted on LGBTQ members and their families who dared to be supportive. I was ready to quit the church but was encouraged to stay by one of its pastors with the assurance that not all Christian Reformed churches were judgmental.*

*Being of the generation I am and having the family background I do, I can understand the difficulty those of my generation have understanding same-sex attraction, bisexuals, trans individuals and so on. I was there myself at one stage in my life. It is human nature to be frightened of the unknown, and when our peers support our fears, we feel justified being judgmental and even condemning. Add to this condemnation the support of synod, and we feel justified in how we feel. It brings to mind historical events of the past such as racism, slavery, the holocaust, modern-day ethnic cleansing, and the death penalty for gays in 13 countries today. Imagine if it's your son or daughter. I don't believe this was ever biblically justifiable.*

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### **Steph Busuttill**

*My name is Steph. I was raised in the CRC. I am queer and nonbinary, and I believe in God. These are just parts of what make me wholly and authentically who I am. This is my story.*

*I was a couple of months old when my parents adorned me in a perfect white dress, stood up in front of our congregation, family, and friends, and had me baptized. That Sunday my parents, friends, and family promised to love, support, and encourage me in my life and in my faith. The congregation, with one voice, promised to do the same. I did not know at that time what all of this meant, but as I grew up in the Christian Reformed community, I came to learn and love what those promises and what my faith meant for my life. For 18 years I was a dedicated and God-loving Christian. I grew up learning children's stories in Sunday school, earning badges in Calvinettes, earning trust and learning responsibility by babysitting kids in the church nursery, and at 17 years old, I stood up in front of the same church and congregation that had baptized me and did my profession of faith.*

*During those same 18 years, I came to realize that I was different. By my midteens, I quietly realized that I was having feelings for girls. My first girl crush was a close friend of my brother. She was amazing, and all I wanted to do was be around her and get to know her on a deeper level. These feelings went far beyond physical attraction. They were electric. It was the first time I finally felt what all my female friends said they felt about guys. Feelings that, up until this time, I had never related to. I had tried so hard to make myself like guys and be "normal," to no avail. My feelings for this girl were like a switch in my brain and body flipping on. These were the feelings I had hoped for years I would feel for guys but never did. As amazing*

as this revelation felt, with it came a gut-wrenching dread and anxiety. I was a Christian; how could I be gay? My life wasn't supposed to go like this. I knew what the Bible said about homosexuality, that it was a sin and that God punished those who engaged in homosexuality by banishing them to hell. I spent more nights than I can count praying that these feelings would go away, even though I had never felt more complete. I prayed God would make me "normal" and make me like guys. No matter what I did, no matter how hard or long I prayed, my feelings didn't change. This wasn't a phase; this was who I am, and I knew I had a choice to make. I could hide who I was to be a "good" Christian, or I could embrace and love this part of myself and live my life the way God had made me. To say that I was terrified was an understatement. I spent more than a year hiding these feelings from my family. I knew that my parents loved me, but I also knew that they were church-going, God-fearing people and that me being gay did not fit into that. Within me laid a strong fear that if people in the church found out that they had a gay child, my parents would be judged—possibly ostracized—and would lose the respect they had as serving members of our church. I was terrified that something I could not change would cause my family to lose one of the few constants we had in our lives. Despite the fear, I kept going to church while, outside the church, I was secretly living a life that felt more honest and real to who I was. Eventually I came out to my parents, and even though it was hard for them, they never, ever stopped loving me. I slowly came out to friends at school, and, just like my family, no one left me or made me feel the shame I felt every time I stepped into church. After almost two years of living with shame, guilt, and fear every time I went to church, I decided that I could no longer live a double life, filled with such drastically different feelings. I knew that suppressing my truth and my identity would be harmful to my health.

I didn't know it at the time, but my relationship with the church was coming to an end. One Sunday morning, while I was sitting in church and listening to a sermon with my family, the pastor began preaching about homosexuality and the Bible. This was the second or third time in a short while that I had sat through a sermon about homosexuality. I felt so isolated and alone listening to those sermons. I knew on that Sunday that I couldn't take any more. I knew in my heart that I had to choose to be me, all of me, without fear, without shame, and without guilt. So during that pastor's sermon, I got up and walked out. I left feeling sad, angry, and hurt. The same people and community that had promised to love and support me were causing the most hurt and harm. At the same time, I felt more free and powerful than I had ever felt. I trusted that I was making the right choice for me and for my family.

After leaving the church, I sought out a community like myself. In this community I found love, support, compassion, and an overwhelming sense of pride. Regardless of who I was or where I came from, my mere existence was one to be celebrated.

Over the last 20 years I have struggled to maintain a strong relationship with God. I knew God from the perspective of the church, but I also knew God as the creator who made me in their image. I have attended churches over the years but none that felt like home, where I could be authentically open and feel like I was in a safe space. Despite the struggles in my relationship with God, I can feel God in my life, still watching over me and guiding me. I feel a pull back to God and to the church, even though it has been a source of shame and anger. Recently I came out as queer and nonbinary. These personal revelations have brought me an ever deeper sense of understanding of self, and I trust that that is also God working in my life. Throughout my entire faith

*journey there has been a passage that has been a sense of comfort, inspiration, calm, and guidance. It is Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” I hold on to this passage and trust that God has a life of love, pride, and faith set out for me.*

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### **Liz and Joe Busuttli**

*We have two journeys with loved ones who identify as LGBTQ+ to share.*

*My (Liz) eldest brother, Al, got married in the early 1970s in a CRC church — a time for a family celebration. Al and his wife had a beautiful daughter. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last. A while later my brother said he was gay. Our family did not know what to do with this news. My parents, and we as siblings, were shocked and confused. We had nowhere to go. My brother had no one to turn to: certainly not the church. We hid our family’s shame. My brother’s life went into a downward spiral of self-destructive behaviors, and he tried to commit suicide several times. Thankfully, he recovered and spent a number of years working at AIDS hospices in Toronto. Al found his love; he married Daniel, and they spent a number of good years together before Daniel passed away. My brother never returned to a CRC, but he and Daniel were able to join an affirming church in Toronto. They belonged to a beautiful community of LGBTQ+ believers.*

*In the early 2000s, our beautiful daughter Stephanie told us she was gay. From the beginning, we affirmed our love for her — that would never change, but, truthfully, this new reality was not easy. Admittedly, we had prayed that God would take this “burden” away from her. We feared a repeat of my brother’s experience of rejection and a downward spiral. It took us a number of years to slowly “come out of the closet” as parents. We feared judgment for our daughter. We tested the waters to find out who/where it was safe to share that our daughter was gay. We grappled with the conflicting emotions: our love for our daughter versus the voice of the church and its doctrine that taught us that homosexuality is a sin.*

*Thankfully, our relationship with our daughter has been honest and real. We welcome Steph’s LGBTQ+ friends into our home and our lives. Steph is in a loving committed relationship with an amazing woman. We celebrate their love. Her partner is a blessing to our family!*

*I (Liz) work in a Christian ministry office. We are members of the CRC community, home church group, and various social media groups with fellow Christians. However, these environments have been places of wounding. We hear statements of condemnation, rejection, and homophobic sentiments. These words are hard to hear when it relates to someone you love. The Human Sexuality report submitted to synod is a major disappointment and setback. Thankfully, in these same environments, we have heard voices of God’s love, grace, inclusion, and advocacy that give us hope and encouragement.*

*We thank God that over the course of time we have learned so much and have met and interacted with inspirational LGBTQ+ Christians and allies. We have pored through Christian resources that have revealed a new understanding and narrative of God’s love and inclusion. It is our desire to see our LGBTQ+ loved ones welcomed as full participating members of our denomination.*

*Today, Steph identifies as queer nonbinary. We are confident that our God who knit her in my womb created her to be blonde, blue-eyed, athletic, fiercely independent, AND queer nonbinary. Our God loves her deeply. Steph knows this to be true as well. We believe God loves his church and its LGBTQ+ sons and daughters. The church and the LGBTQ+ community belong together in grace, hope, and love! To worship and serve him in unity!*

*We are so proud of our daughter and those who identify as LGBTQ+ and their continued courage to share their stories to be the catalysts for change in our Christian denominations.*

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**Matthew Deroo\***

\*A pseudonym. Matthew wants his story shared publicly, but attaching his name would negatively affect family members in the CRC.

*My story begins like so many others: a childhood being raised in a Christian family and attending the nearby Christian Reformed church every week. My world seemed to revolve around the CRC community. Our family friends were mostly from within the CRC, and my extended family – top to bottom – was Christian Reformed. Needless to say, nearly my entire life growing up was informed by the doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church – that is, until I came out as gay.*

*It took many years of pain and isolated struggle to come to grips with who I am. But when I finally did, it became clear to me that the CRC doctrine I had previously relied on for truth and stability no longer provided me that. To the contrary, it seemed to have abandoned me altogether – unable to love me for who I was or to recognize me as an equal brother in Christ. I came to realize that the church and its teachings were largely responsible for why my journey had been so painful and so lonely. I was taught that I was inherently sinful – not in the same way that everyone else is sinful but in a much worse and more shameful way. Through a culture of bigotry that ran just beneath the surface in the Christian community around me (conveniently hidden beneath smiles and pleasantries), it was clear to me that I would be cast out and condemned if anyone knew the truth. As a result, I knew even as a child that I had no choice but to suffer alone, drowning in self-hatred and shame. This was deeply traumatic and has left me with scars that still hurt to this day.*

*Fortunately, I grew up. I moved on from my Christian high school, attended Christian university, and ultimately attended a large secular university for postgraduate studies. Along the way I met so many amazing people – some Christian and some not. I learned a lot from these people. They each brought with them a worldview shaped by experiences that were different from my own. Honestly, it was a relief to learn that life existed outside of the CRC and that there was not just one way to follow God. The secret that the church had tried to keep from me – that there were queer people like me everywhere authentically living their life for Jesus – was finally discovered. What's more is that I also found Christians who were straight, white, and cisgendered who loved and affirmed me for exactly who I was. Coming from the church I grew up in, this was earth-shattering. For the first time I was seen, understood, and truly loved by my Christian community. It was then that I truly left the CRC behind. I saw that God had prepared a table for me, and I went running. I have never looked back since.*

*It was in Christian spaces outside of the CRC that I first encountered other Christians like me. If I'm being honest, it was in these spaces that I first encountered Jesus. Well, at least a version of Jesus that finally made sense: one that loved radically, challenged religious authorities, and lived in the margins. This, I thought, is the Jesus of the Bible and the one I was always meant to meet. I have walked with him ever since.*

*But our path has not been without its obstacles. The deep-rooted trauma I experienced as a young, gay Christian has had its toll. There are times when I am so consumed with hurt and anger towards the church and its people that I find it difficult to continue holding the hand of my Savior. Like a child in a fit of rage I want to throw away my Father's hand and get as far away as possible. This has led to times of spiritual drought and distance from Christ that leave me feeling broken and alone again. Even now, years after leaving behind the churches that hurt me, I can still fall into self-inflicted isolation from Christ: a remnant of the loneliness I felt as a closeted Christian. As much as this reality pains me, it is a part of my story just as it is for so many others.*

*However, I am fortunate in ways that not everyone like me is. I have a loving, supportive, and faithful husband who can be my spiritual rock when I falter. Contrary to the belief that same-sex relationships are inherently sinful and separate people from God, my husband challenges me to be a better Christian when I feel like giving up. He picks me up off the floor and pushes me back into Christ's outstretched arms when I am struggling to do so myself. He does this for me like I did for him when we met and he had fallen away from his faith. When one is weak, the other is strong. When one becomes complacent, the other encourages them back into relationship with Christ. If you think it impossible for a same-sex marriage to lead people toward Christ, I can assure you that you are wrong. My husband has helped to heal so many of the wounds inflicted on me by the church, and that is one of the greatest gifts that the Lord has given to me. When we met, I had resigned myself to the reality that I would never see the deepest desires of my heart realized because I was taught that I could not follow Christ and have a family of my own. It was in this exact moment that God brought him into my life and told me He had other plans. We choose to follow Him, regardless of the rejection we face within the Christian community, because He brought us together when hope was nearly lost and has blessed us beyond measure. When fear and pain threatened to consume us entirely, God saved us. For this reason, and so many more, we strive to live by faith and to make Christ the centre of our marriage.*

*Leaving the CRC was not a decision I took lightly, but it was a decision I made easily. Despite the hurt caused to me by the church, I did not leave because I thought the CRC was a lost cause. I left because I felt that the CRC saw me as a lost cause. I felt that if I could not either change or deny my true self, I was beyond salvation in their eyes. This message still rings loud and clear from the CRC despite recent attempts to right their previous wrongs. As a gay Christian, I feel it is important to let the CRC know that these attempts, although well-intentioned, have done very little to right these wrongs. Forming a committee made entirely of people with views that align with the traditional CRC beliefs, claiming to have given each side an equal voice, and then ultimately changing nothing does not make queer people feel any safer or any more welcome in the church. Acknowledging the pain and suffering that has been caused and listening to stories like mine, while a necessary step, can feel more like*

*an inauthentic “checking of boxes” if nothing is then done to prevent that pain in the future. If I could ask one thing of the CRC, it would be to genuinely examine the fruit that your tree is bearing. When it comes to the topic of LGBTQ+ Christians, that fruit looks a lot like hurt, condemnation, isolation from Christ, abandonment of faith, and, in some cases, death. We are suffering and we are dying because of these long-held beliefs, and that cannot be changed simply by being “progressive” enough to finally acknowledge our pain. I am past the point of applauding churches for being willing to even say the word gay. More needs to be done. We deserve better.*

*I am writing my story not because I need to have my hurt acknowledged. I no longer seek apologies or retribution for the wrongs done to me. I write this for one reason and one reason only: for the kids in church today who are struggling like I did. My only prayer is that my words can somehow, in some way, ease their suffering and maybe prevent that suffering in the first place. Luckily for people like us, there are places where this pain does not exist. Leaving the CRC allowed me to find a church and a community where real change is happening. I have finally been invited to join a table where there is a seat set aside just for me—exactly as I am. A church where my son will never be made to feel condemned, rejected, or alone like I did. I thank the Lord every day that I no longer have to hide myself or my family. Where there was once pain, there is now joy. He has replaced friends and family who rejected me with others who embrace me. He has shown me how to love myself as the person he created me to be. He has made me strong where I was once weak. Although there are many who would think me lost or spiritually misguided, I am not. I am right where God wants me to be. I can now say with joy in my heart that I am profoundly grateful that God gifted me with being gay. It has opened my heart, made me into the person I am today, and shown me what it truly means to love as Christ intends us to love.*

## **Overture 39: Do Not Adopt the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Overture**

Classis Grand Rapids East recommends that Synod 2022 not adopt the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

Member congregations of Classis Grand Rapids East have been prayerfully discerning how to respond to the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) in a manner that cultivates the fruit of the Spirit. We recognize that the report has been received differently by congregations across our denomination, as well as by our own congregations. Our deep desire is that, by God’s grace, all discussions of the report will be characterized by humility, prayer, empathetic listening, honest conversation, and a focus on our shared life in Christ, in whom all things hold together.

Though there may be various reasons to ask synod not to adopt the HSR, Classis Grand Rapids East focuses this overture specifically on the use of science in the report. After careful study of the HSR, we have concluded that it does not sufficiently meet the need for thorough engagement with science.

The Christian Reformed Church has historically taken learning and science seriously. Colleges and universities associated with the CRC are known for excellent and courageous research. This courageous approach has been

grounded in the conviction that God teaches us through both Scripture and creation. This is evidenced in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.5.1, which states that "the final goal of the blessed life rests in the knowledge of God" and that God "revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe." Furthermore, Article 2 of the Belgic Confession affirms that we know God through two means: "First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe . . . in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God," and, "Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word." We recognize that it is challenging to walk in the world of science and theology with balance, listening to God's voice in both Word and creation in the knowledge that special and general revelation emanate from the same source. But our calling has been to keep exploring and keep doing science, confident that new learning may lead to new insights about God and God's world.

The CRC's Report 42 from the Committee to Study Homosexuality,<sup>1</sup> presented in 1973, was noteworthy for many reasons. Significantly, it set the precedent that our denomination takes scientific consensus around topics of sexual orientation very seriously. The synodical action came in the same year that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual's list of mental illnesses. That APA action happened in December 1973<sup>2</sup>; the synodical study committee was appointed in 1970 and made its report in mid-1973, using research that influenced the APA as well. Thus our historical practice and the precedent set by the 1973 report has been, wherever possible, to listen to rather than argue against the scientific consensus.

In the 48 years since the 1973 synodical report, research into the science of sexuality and gender has been prolific and productive.<sup>3</sup> Christians who engage this science are making important discoveries about human nature, discoveries that have deep theological and philosophical implications.<sup>4</sup> The HSR was commissioned to discern the underlying rationale for our denomination's position on issues of human sexuality; a significant part of this rationale must, because of the nature of the subject matter, be a serious engagement with science. Further, the HSR should not foreclose answers to current and coming research; rather, it should encourage the kind of courageous work that the Reformed tradition makes possible.

Unfortunately, as we chronicle below, the HSR's engagement with scientific research on human sexuality, especially regarding sexual attraction and gender identity, is limited, and the relevant science is at times inaccurately presented. Therefore, the HSR represents a missed opportunity to engage challenging research in areas of great importance to contemporary culture

<sup>1</sup> *Agenda for Synod 1973*, pp. 609-33.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality," *Behavioral Sciences (Basel)* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565-575.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, L. S. Mayer and P. R. McHugh, "Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences," *The New Atlantis* 50 (2016): 10-143.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Patricia Beattie Jung and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *God, Science, Sex, Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

and church practice. We believe that our denomination could find deeper places of nuanced resonance between science and Scripture, and therefore we urge the CRC not to adopt the HSR report. We do not believe that science should be given prominence over Scripture. We simply believe, as suggested in the study committee's mandate, that on these particular issues the knowledge we get from natural revelation is necessarily a significant share of the information we need in order to respond faithfully to the things God has revealed.

*Grounds:*

1. The approach to science in the HSR is not consistent with a Reformed approach to science and does not sufficiently meet the study committee's mandate to "dialogue with . . . conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific research."

The HSR study committee was given the following mandate with regard to scientific research:

Dialogue with, and potential critique of, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies.  
(HSR, p. 315)

In introducing its approach to scientific evidence, the HSR committee includes these words from the 1972 CRC synodical report on *The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority*:

Motivated by these convictions we often discover that the results of scientific investigation become the occasion for reviewing and sometimes, upon further biblical reflection, even revising certain standing interpretations of the Bible. When in faithful obedience to God's full-orbed revelation we are led to a re-evaluation of certain biblical data, we should not resist such insights as lead us to a clearer understanding of both Scripture and creation in their revelational unity.

(As quoted by HSR, p. 350)

This is a fitting quote and a worthy goal for an integrative report discussing the complexities of human sexuality. Unfortunately, the HSR does not succeed in meeting this goal.

Within the Reformed tradition and the history of Christianity more broadly, there is a long history of learning from science and letting scientific insights enrich and clarify our theological understandings. For example, as Christians have learned about the shape of the solar system and the movement of the earth, the evolutionary processes in nature, the creational need for predator/prey relationships, the cycles of death and regeneration, and diversity and mutations in development, we have enriched and clarified our theological understanding of God's work in creation. It is because of this mutual enrichment between the books of creation and Scripture that our denominational scientists have felt the call to learn more about God's world and the freedom to explore topics that may be controversial in other settings.

This same eagerness to engage with challenging science is rarely evident in the report, as we explore below in further detail. The report says that the study committee viewed scientific findings through the lens of Scripture and gave theology priority when science and theology

seemed to disagree. We are concerned that this approach can promote predetermined theological positions by turning away from some of what God has revealed. Because the HSR does not engage meaningfully with an appropriately wide range of scientific research, the report does not adequately fulfill its mandate.

2. The use of scientific research related to *sexual orientation* is limited and frequently misinterpreted, and is disconnected from the conclusions of the report.

The long history of scientific inquiry into sexual orientation includes research on the biological and social origins of sexual orientation, developmental pathways in children, adolescents, and adults, the conditions that contribute to thriving and distress, sexual pairing in the animal world, and many other areas. This research is extensive, and it is understandable that the HSR cannot address all of this work in depth. Nevertheless, the body of research that the HSR does use is relatively narrow in scope, and it is not clear how the presented research relates to the report's conclusions about sexual orientation, theology, and church policy.

Extensive research has examined possible biological causes for sexual orientation. Most current writers in this area conclude that this body of research is suggestive but not conclusive about specific biological causes for sexual orientation. Here is a recent summary quote from Bogaert and Skorska, 2020:

These studies, taken together, have provided substantial support for biological influences underlying the development of sexual orientation, but questions remain unanswered, including how biological mechanisms may differ in contributing to men's and women's sexual orientation development. . . . However, although not our main emphasis here, we do not discount that there are well-conducted, large-scale studies showing little clear evidence that psychosocial factors account for variation in sexual orientation development and that these studies also have some relevance to understanding a biological basis of sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup>

The HSR, in contrast to most summary studies of sexual orientation, appears to dismiss biological causation for sexual orientation. After referencing a large study of genetic markers for sexual orientation, the HSR concludes:

Quite the opposite, the claim that attraction to the same sex has a biological cause has been seriously challenged by recent research. For example, a team of scientists from MIT and Harvard recently studied the genetic material of an extremely large sample group—almost half a million individuals.<sup>160</sup> Their findings affirm the results of previous research that strongly call into question the commonly held assumption that being gay is an innate condition which is controlled or compelled by one's genetic makeup. To put it in colloquial terms, this study weakens the contemporary cultural idea that people are born this way.  
(HSR, p. 405)

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony F. Bogaert and Malvina N. Skorska, "A Short Review of Biological Research on the Development of Sexual Orientation," *Hormones and Behavior* 119 (March 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yhbeh.2019.104659>.

This particular study has drawn wide attention in both the scientific and popular press.<sup>6</sup> But the HSR misinterprets this study's findings. While the study may demonstrate that there is no single "gay gene," the authors of the study actually suggest that same-sex behavior is related to, though not determined by, multiple genetic factors interacting in a complex way. The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard summarizes the research report as follows:<sup>7</sup>

In a peer-reviewed study published in *Science*, researchers found evidence that many genetic variants contribute to same-sex sexual behavior, but each has a small influence. When taken together, the variants explain only a minority of a person's likelihood of ever engaging in sexual behavior with a person of the same sex. The study concludes that both genetics and non-genetic factors play important roles. Five locations in the human genome were associated with this trait at a statistically significant level, but these five loci capture only a tiny fraction of the genome's overall contribution (far less than one percent). The analysis further revealed that thousands of other variants also make tiny contributions that, together with the five loci, account for between 8 and 25 percent of the variation in self-reported same-sex sexual behavior. Much of the remainder is likely due to non-genetic factors. These results do not make any conclusive statements about the degree to which "nature" and "nurture" influence sexual orientation or behavior, but indicate that both are likely to play a role. These genetic results—likely thousands of variants, each with a very small effect—are similar to those for many other complex traits, like height, and indicate that same-sex sexual behavior is a normal part of human variation.

The issue of causation dominates the HSR—so much so that the report includes an extensive appendix, *What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?* (Appendix A). Here the HSR reviews more of the biological research and rightly demonstrates that causation claims are complex and multifaceted, involving multiple genes, epigenetics, prenatal hormones, birth order, and brain anatomy and physiology. Following this discussion of causation, Appendix A includes a discussion of sexual fluidity, romantic versus sexual attraction, proceptivity and receptivity, and hormonal influences on attraction and desire. Indeed, these are interesting and important areas of inquiry into the complexities of sexuality. Yet the report draws no clear conclusions from this research. Instead, the implied message seems to be that if sexual orientation is complex and culturally influenced, then, given the right conditions, individuals should be able to change. This is not a conclusion that can be drawn from this research, as the position put forward in the 1973 synodical report correctly anticipated.

Many significant areas of scientific research related to sexual orientation do not appear in the report. Some of these areas of research also have implications for theology and practice related to sexual

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Steven M. Phelps and Robbee Wedow, "What Genetics is Teaching Us about Sexuality," August 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/29/opinion/genetics-sexual-orientation-study.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Broad Communications, "Perspectives on the Complex Genetics of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior," August 29, 2019, <https://www.broadinstitute.org/news/perspectives-complex-genetics-same-sex-sexual-behavior>.

orientation and same-sex marriage, and deserve further engagement. For example, these areas of research would be profitable for consideration:

- Much current research on sexual orientation augments causal investigations with the study of conditions that support thriving by LGBTQ+ individuals. This research demonstrates that family and social support are central to addressing alienation, depression, and the risk of suicide. Sociological and psychological research on the benefits of marriage for most individuals is also relevant here. This research was carefully presented and discussed in a Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report of 2016<sup>8</sup> but is not adequately addressed in the HSR.
  - Change attempts, including conversion therapies, are not successful and have been harmful. Because of this documented harm, most professional therapy organizations have declared that this practice is unethical, and some jurisdictions have made conversion therapy illegal.<sup>8</sup> Although the HSR does not suggest that the CRC endorse conversion therapy, its analysis might sometimes appear to be consistent with conversion therapy, and it does not go far enough in speaking against this kind of therapy and its treatment goals.
3. The use of scientific research related to *gender identity* is limited and frequently misinterpreted and is disconnected from the conclusions of the report.

The HSR begins its discussion of gender identity with a description of the pain and suffering experienced by those whose felt gender identity at odds with their sex assigned at birth. However, following this compassionate description, the report shifts its focus to the Western cultural movement toward individualism and human freedom:

Enhancing the freedom to establish one's identity extends not only to one's choices regarding sexual practices and partners but also to one's identity as male, female, or something else entirely. . . . The modern pursuit of human autonomy freed from all constraints to create one's own identity is one of the radical strands of the sexual revolution.

(HSR, p. 374)

This sets the stage for a presentation of the “gender unicorn,” a metaphor and diagram often used by educators to demonstrate that our sexual and gender identities have many parts—genetics, internal and external bodily structures, hormones, presentation, social role, attraction, and so on. While many of us experience these different aspects to be congruent, individuals with gender dysphoria may experience these aspects as incongruent. However, the HSR dismisses these multiple aspects of gender identity and describes them as “choices.”

<sup>8</sup> “Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage,” Jan. 2016; [classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf](http://classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, David Jenkins and Lon B. Johnston, “Unethical Treatment of Gay and Lesbian People with Conversion Therapy,” *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 85, no. 4 (Oct. 1, 2004): 557-561, [doi.org/10.1177/014438940408500414](https://doi.org/10.1177/014438940408500414).

The gender unicorn illustrates the range of choices available to individuals in five areas: identity, expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction.

(HSR, p. 379)

This underlying assumption of *choice*, presumably facilitated by a postmodern individualistic culture, pervades much of the HSR's discussion of gender identity and affects the report's engagement with the science of gender identity. The 1973 synodical action was skeptical of the notion that sexual orientation is a matter of personal choice. While the report raises the invocation of choice, it neither resolves nor explains why it raised the issue.

In addition to making problematic assumptions about choice, the HSR often makes questionable judgments about which sources to rely on for credible research on gender identity. For example:

- In its discussion of the causes of gender dysphoria, the HSR suggests that one current cause is social contagion through media. The single research article cited has been widely critiqued, and its author has revised the conclusions<sup>10</sup> and stressed that any causal claims cannot be made based on this research.
- In its discussion of the persistence of dysphoria beyond childhood, the HSR relies on research by Steensma et al.<sup>11</sup> But this study too is flawed and widely critiqued.<sup>12</sup> The authors defined any children who did not continue with the study as “desisters” (i.e., adolescents who change their mind about transitions) without acknowledging that there are many reasons that children might not continue in a research program.
- The HSR upholds the clinical recommendations of the American College of Pediatricians without reference to that group's qualifications. However, the ACP is not a professional clinical organization on par with an organization such as the American Academy of Pediatrics. It is, rather, a small advocacy organization that has been critiqued by many scientists, including Christians, for its misrepresentation of data.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, a large professional and scientific organization, do

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Littman, “Correction: Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria,” PLOS ONE, Mar. 19, 2019; doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214157. See also Harriet Hall, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria and Squelching Controversial Evidence,” Sept. 18, 2018; sciencebasedmedicine.org/rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-and-squelching-controversial-evidence.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas D. Steensma et al., “Factors Associated with Desistance and Persistence of Childhood Gender Dysphoria: A Quantitative Follow-Up Study,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52, no. 6 (2013): 582-590; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016>; cited on p. 383 of the HSR.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Julia Temple Newhook et al., “A Critical Commentary on Follow-Up Studies and ‘Desistance’ Theories about Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Children,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 19, no. 2 (2018): 212-224; doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1456390.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Southern Poverty Law Center, “American College of Pediatricians,” accessed Nov. 19, 2021, [splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/american-college-pediatricians](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/american-college-pediatricians).

not appear in the HSR; nor do the recommendations of professional organizations of psychiatrists and psychologists.

- The HSR claims that there is little research to support the success of gender transitions for those who experience gender dysphoria. But there is, in fact, extensive evidence, described in multiple studies and meta-analytic work. The 2022 overture on gender identity submitted by Classis Hackensack provides the following summary:

In fact, the quantity of literature on post-transition outcomes far exceeds the literature that other sections of the report represent as settled science (i.e., neuroscience of pornography). Also, the study that the report uses to suggest that transition does not improve, and may worsen, psychiatric outcomes is a single study with a very small sample size. In contrast, meta-analytic work (a research approach that uses statistics to summarize results from multiple studies allowing for greater confidence in findings) examining psychological outcomes post-transition found “that, although the levels of psychopathology and psychiatric disorders in trans people attending [medical] services at the time of assessment are higher than in the cis population, they do improve following gender-confirming medical intervention, in many cases reaching normative values.”<sup>14</sup>

- The usual standard for discussion of science would be peer-reviewed, published research. The HSR sometimes repeats assertions from blog posts and advocacy organizations, creating the impression that these informal sources are just as credible as scientific reports.<sup>15</sup>

The HSR does not consider the social science that speaks to the social conditions for human thriving by transgender persons. The report includes descriptions of the suffering that individuals and families experience, but it does not reference the literature on the flourishing that can and does happen when conditions of acceptance and belonging are created.<sup>16</sup>

Appendix B of the HSR (*Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications*) presents some of the science of intersex conditions. These conditions illustrate the biological complexity of sex/gender. In the broader culture and for some theologians these conditions are sometimes described as illustrating a biological continuum for sex/gender in nature, or as grounds for the breakdown of rigid placement of all animals into male or female categories.<sup>17</sup>

The HSR rejects these interpretations and does not allow for a possible creational continuum of gender identity. Instead, it describes variations of sex and gender through a “disorder” lens. According to

<sup>14</sup> See Cecilia Dhejne et al., “Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria: A Review of the Literature,” *International Review of Psychiatry* 28 (2016): 44; doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1115753.

<sup>15</sup> Thank you to Classis Hackensack, and to Dr. Emily Helder, whose analysis of the HSR’s use of the science of gender identity were helpful for this section of the overture.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Inés Aristegui et al., “Resources to Cope with Stigma Related to HIV Status, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation in Gay Men and Transgender Women,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 23, no. 6 (Oct. 2017); doi.org/10.1177/1359105317736782.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Renata Ziemska, “Beyond Dimorphism: Intersex Persons and the Continuum of Sex Characteristics,” *International Journal of Gender and Women’s Studies* 6, no. 1 (June 2018): 176-184.

the HSR, an essential maleness and femaleness is built into the very nature of the created world, and anything else is a result of the fall. Both transgender and intersex are presented as caused by the fall:

Tragically, due to the fall, through no fault of their own, some people experience a disconnect between their gender identity and their sex. Nevertheless, there is no redemption in embracing this disconnect as a sign of God's good intent.

(HSR Summary, p. 318)

Here is an area where careful theological work is needed. Biological science is telling us much about the inherent complexities of our created world. How might sexual and gender diversity be a natural part of the world God created? Why do we insist that these conditions are a result of the fall, when we do not make this claim for other kinds of genetic and biological diversities?

Christian scientists are currently exploring these questions as they examine the great diversity in the created world. While we recognize that not all of these issues have been definitively resolved, this overture humbly asks synod to assume a stance of openness to what science is disclosing to us about the nature of gender.

## II. Conclusion

The Christian Reformed Church has a long and commendable history of taking learning and science seriously. An important part of our calling has been to explore and engage science, confident that new learning affirms Calvin's view that the "blessed life rests in the knowledge of God" and of God's world. Given this rich heritage, we believe that the HSR should not foreclose answers to current and future research; rather, it should encourage the kind of courageous work that the Reformed tradition makes possible. We recognize that human sexuality is a rapidly expanding and challenging arena of scientific inquiry. Yet we humbly believe and trust that the one triune God who holds all things together can lead us into even more fruitful dialogues between science and theology. Thus Classis Grand Rapids East asks Synod 2022 not to adopt the Human Sexuality Report.

Classis Grand Rapids East  
Robert A. Arbogast, stated clerk

## Overture 40: Do Not Accede to the HSR Report and Its Recommendations

### I. Background

Member congregations of Classis Grand Rapids East have engaged in careful study of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) since it was completed in fall 2020. Church councils and entire congregations have read and discussed the report, some of them using the *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* from Pastor Church Resources as a guide. While congregations may find themselves in agreement with the report's treatment of several subjects (e.g., pornography, singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, and polyamory), on the whole, from their engagement with the report as it deals with the subjects of

homosexuality, gender identity, and divorce, they find it to be unhelpful for the church at this time.

## II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Grand Rapids Easts overtures Synod 2022 to reject the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality.

### *Grounds:*

1. We find the report lacks the grace, humility, and pastoral sensitivity of previous synodical study committees over the years. On such a sensitive topic as human sexuality, we are seeking language that helps the church treat each other with deep respect as fellow imagebearers of God. Some of us agree with the biblical theology of the report, and some of us do not. Even among those who agree, some find the tone to be judgmental and therefore unhelpful for the mission of the church currently. We long for a greater spirit of humility in the conversations in our denomination about human sexuality (Phil. 2:1-8).
2. The report is too divisive. We find the report unhelpful for member congregations which include a variety of understandings of the calling of gay and lesbian Christians. In this sense, we find the report to be divisive. We are learning to trust that our siblings in Christ take the Scriptures seriously and love their LGBTQA+ neighbors sincerely, even when our exegesis on particular passages of Scripture differs. We continue to seek clarity, but we do it in an environment in which different voices are represented by people we know and love. The report does not serve us well as we learn how to live with our differences. (See John 17:20-23; Eph. 4:1-5.) We need to hear a report that fosters the unity that Jesus prayed for his followers, that we would be one (John 17:20-23). Our common bond of faith in Christ our Lord through the Holy Spirit is stronger than any theological debate.
3. We find the report's approach to the confessional status of the CRCNA's position on homosexuality to be inaccurate. We also find it to take the confessions less seriously than we believe they should be taken. In fact, Synod 1975 clarified that the 1973 report on homosexuality has the status of "pastoral guidance," and the Heidelberg Catechism's prohibition of "unchastity" is interpreted in various ways today by confessional churches in the Reformed tradition. We believe that our denomination's unity in fidelity to the Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, and Heidelberg Catechism is at risk when we say that synodical statements are also confessional (see CRCNA Covenant for Officebearers, Church Order Supplement, Article 5).
4. The report argues against what are considered "revisionist" interpretations of Scripture and defends the "traditional" interpretations. These adjectives themselves reveal the assumptions and biases the committee brings to their interpretation of Scripture. The report does not include a "revisionist" response to the conclusions in the report. (This shortcoming is a result of the unfair limits placed on the committee in requiring it to agree with the 1973 Report on Homosexuality.)

5. The report lacks pastoral compassion. The report does not read like a report on fully human sexuality—humans who are created in the image of God and have thoughts, feelings, and experiences that should be considered as tender and beautiful and respected as deeply personal. The report has pained the LGBTQA+ community and some of their siblings in Christ. While the committee listened to CRC members who identify as LGBTQA+, its report limits gender to two choices, male or female, thus excluding nonbinary members and not taking seriously their faith and experience as Christians. Nor does it reflect God’s grace and compassion for all of us as sinners, which is the main message of Scripture: we are all imagebearers of God (Gen. 1:26; James 3:7-10; 2 Cor. 5:49); God is a just, gracious, and loving God who welcomes all who sincerely seek God (1 John 4:16; 1 Pet. 5:10; Rom. 10:11-13); Christ died to redeem all sinners who call on him for forgiveness (John 3:16; Ps. 130:3-4; Matt. 9:2); we are called to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves (1 John 4:7; John 13:34-35; Mark 12:30-31).
6. The report effectively brings pain and harm to church members and their families and friends. The fruit of this report’s position and pastoral care approach will be what the church has already experienced: marital conflict between parents of gay children, broken parental marriages, sibling conflict and alienation, and, for some gay Christians, despair related to low self-esteem and self-loathing, clinical depression, increased suicidal thoughts and behaviors, spiritual turmoil over whether God loves them, rejection of Christian faith altogether, and a deeper sense of shame.
7. The report’s biblical theology gives a specific interpretation of some Scriptures but does not pay adequate attention to other Scriptures or Reformed theologians who have different interpretations of the Scripture passages cited. In addition, in at least a couple of places the report’s biblical theology is inconsistent:
  - a. The report acknowledges that Jesus did not talk about gender identity or “homosexuality” and then writes about what Jesus would have said as a Jew in his day. It is dangerous and irresponsible exegesis to fill in the gaps of what Jesus “would have said.” We do not know. Where Jesus is silent, we need to respect and listen to his silence. God calls us to listen to Jesus’ words and actions. His words and actions reveal deep love, wide mercy, and spacious inclusion. At Jesus’ transfiguration we read, “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (Mark 9:7).
  - b. The report uses Romans 1:18-32 as one of the seven key passages that condemn “homosexual” behavior, as Paul writes about the sinfulness of all humanity. The report stops short of heeding Romans 2:1-4:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think

you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

The report does judge others, which was not Paul's intent in writing these words.

- c. The report focuses on certain biblical passages and does not take into account other biblical passages whose voices express a fuller counsel of God. Some other relevant passages are the following:
  - He [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40).
  - “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).
  - “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).
  - See also Galatians 3:23-29; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 8:35-39.
8. The report returns the CRC to a time when members who were divorced, without adultery as grounds, were treated harshly even as they lived with pain, loss, and personal shame resulting from the divorce. The CRCNA has been realistic about the harsh realities of life in a sinful world, has had compassion for those who suffer from divorce, and has known that local pastors and elders understand best the divorced persons and their situations. The CRCNA has wisely left it up to a congregation's elders to discern if there is cause for discipline. We are concerned that the report presents a universally applied judgment about divorce without understanding a couple's marriage dynamics or having compassion for the brokenness, suffering, and pain occurring in the marriage that led to the divorce. We believe this report harms our ministry to persons struggling within their marriages. Our current report on divorce and remarriage realistically balances a high value of marriage and an awareness of the need for grace when marriages break down.
9. The report discounts or ignores current knowledge developed from research in biology and social science regarding gender and sexuality. The science of gender identity is discounted or misused. Though science informs us that a person can be intersex at birth and that human sexuality occurs on a continuum, the report does not accept these realities in its understanding of human sexuality. The report defines sexuality as male or female, a binary choice, excluding other sexual identities and people who identify as neither male nor female. The report quotes selective pieces of research, takes some of the results out of context, and uses some materials that have been discredited by their scientific fields.
10. We know of same-sex attracted couples who confess Jesus as Lord, seek to serve God, and desire to belong to a church where their faith

can be nurtured and they can fully join in worshiping and loving our God. We are concerned that the report essentially excludes such persons, even our covenant children, from the body of Christ that is the CRC. The church follows Jesus, its head, when it welcomes and accepts all sinners and does not cancel God's grace and salvation in Christ. As the "All Are Welcome" hymn declares: "Let us build a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live. . . . Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face." Salvation is a gift from God by grace through faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). God looks at our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7): "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Classis Grand Rapids East  
Robert A. Arbogast, stated clerk

### **Overture 41: Do Not Accept the Human Sexuality Report or Its Recommendations**

After prayerfully considering the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) in light of ministerial needs, diversity in denominational unity, and the nature of denominational confessions, Classis Rocky Mountain strongly recommends that Synod 2022 not accept the report or its recommendations.

#### *Grounds:*

1. This report prohibits ministry by forcing churches to choose between denominational identity and service ministry.
  - a. This report draws definitive lines which limit the church's capacity to wrestle with people around important questions of faith, prohibiting important formational growth.
    - 1) Faith development requires that we open lines of inquiry and we fully engage all people within our churches and broader communities.
    - 2) Drawing definitive confessional lines diminishes the church's capacity to have necessary conversations relevant to the faith questions of seekers and younger church members.
  - b. Sunrise CRC extensively and expansively works with marginalized communities—primarily people who are experiencing homelessness and/or are in recovery.
    - 1) Sunrise CRC handles 47.3 percent of all housing assessments in Travis County.
    - 2) Sunrise offers day services for at least 50 percent of those experiencing homelessness in Austin, Texas. This translates to seeing approximately 430 individuals per week and culminates in a client list of approximately 3,000.
      - 28 percent of LGBTQ+ youth experience homelessness and/or home insecurity at some point in their lives, and those who do attempt suicide at 3.5 times the rate ([thetrevorproject.org/](http://thetrevorproject.org/)

blog/new-report-shows-homelessness-housing-instability-linked-to-increased-suicide-risk-among-lgbtq-youth/).

- c. Accepting this report would limit our ability to work with other agencies, NGOs, and ministry partners. Many of these partners require that we sign non-discrimination policies pertaining to the clients we serve and are directly tied to our services, service providers, and funding.
2. The report does not represent the diversity of voices present in the Christian Reformed Church, and accepting it will divide members within local church bodies, split churches in the denomination, and sever relationships with churches outside our denomination.
  - a. Accepting this report disregards Christ's prayer for all believers, that "all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21).
  - b. This report reflects an inherent bias that overlooks variety and difference present in our church locally and denominationally.
    - 1) This study only allowed for members who already subscribed to the 1973 report conclusions, intentionally excluding a range of experiences, conversation partners, and important theological research.
    - 2) Younger generations were not represented in this study. No one under the age of 40 signed the HSR.
    - 3) The HSR does not include stories or actual experiences that represent the full range of LGBTQ+ expressions, their experiences with local church bodies, or their faith.
  - c. By not accepting this report, we can continue having conversations and relationships with both conservative denominations and liberal denominations. Accepting it will firmly place us on one theological side and sever connections.
3. This report elevates a specific social sin to confessional status, ultimately diminishing the center of our Christian identity: confession of faith in a triune God and the saving actions of Jesus Christ.
  - a. Church confession summarizes the message of the gospel, amplifying the person and work of Jesus Christ at the center of our faith.
  - b. While all human sin is certainly grievous to God, confessionally highlighting specific sins dangerously leads to legalism and distracts us from our core focus, which should be on the personhood of Jesus.
  - c. Confessions claim a unique identity personally found in a relationship to Christ and communally found within a people of God.

The HSR reverses the method of confession by pointing to specific social identities to describe who we are not rather than who we are, highlighting one particular group when we as Christians claim a much wider distinctive identity.

We hope that synod takes the letters and overtures sent as representative of the variety of voices present in our denomination. This reflects the complexity of engagement, responses, and positions and should lead our governing bodies to discern that this report ultimately does not uniformly

reflect our denomination. This reality, alongside several key issues highlighted above, is why Classis Rocky Mountain asks that Synod 2022 not accept the report or its recommendations.

Classis Rocky Mountain  
Mark W. Hilbelink, stated clerk

## **Overture 42: Recommit the Transgender Portion of the Human Sexuality Report to an Interdisciplinary Team for Further Study**

The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality recommends “that synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives.” We believe that sections VIII through X covering gender identity will better serve our churches if it is first recommended to an interdisciplinary study committee composed of professing members of the CRCNA with expertise in relevant fields. Additionally, this committee should include professing members of the CRCNA who identify as transgender or gender nonbinary or are close family members who have cared for such individuals.

### **I. Background**

We are grateful that the committee recognized the need to provide biblical and theological resources for congregations addressing the pastoral needs of CRCNA members who are diagnosed with gender dysphoria and/or identify as transgender or gender nonbinary, and of family members and broader church communities who journey beside these members, while also addressing the church’s overall witness to a watching world and care for hurting people. Discussion of gender identity, while related in some ways to the CRCNA’s previous studies of sexual identity, demands careful, comprehensive review of new and diverse fields of inquiry. Gender identity raises questions encompassing multiple scholarly disciplines. As the study points out, these fields include medicine, theology, psychology, social science, anthropology, gender studies, linguistics, media, public policy, health, education, social services, philosophy, neuroscience, endocrinology, genetics, and psychiatry, among others. We appreciate the efforts made by the committee to begin asking necessary questions that could lead to a holistic and biblically grounded framework for pastoral guidance to churches, especially acknowledging that, in most cases, committee members were working outside their own area of expertise.

We stand with the committee in its stated goal to “help the church discern how it should navigate questions of gender identity in a manner that is faithful to the gospel, consistent with the best science, and life-giving for persons who are struggling with questions related to gender identity” (p. 372). The remainder of this overture will set forth the ways an interdisciplinary approach would help the denomination better meet these goals.

## A. *Faithful to the gospel*

### 1. Biblical study

Although this report acknowledges that when it comes to contemporary questions of sex and gender, “there is very little that the Bible explicitly says about these issues” (p. 387), the authors ultimately draw their pastoral guidance from “Scripture’s clear teaching that humanity has been created as male and female” (p. 396). The committee holds strongly to the binary nature of biological sex while also cautioning the church to consider the way rigid gender stereotypes create harm. The committee concludes that modern, more fluid conceptions of gender push us to “dig deeper to understand the assumptions behind various approaches to gender difference” (p. 374). The report does an admirable job raising these important questions but leaves the reader without much guidance moving forward. How should readers untangle what belongs to an immutable biological binary of sex and what may be permitted as freedom within—or even from—a culture’s gender paradigms? It seems, then, that pastoral guidance pertaining to the scope and limits of social transition might be better facilitated by a professing member of the CRCNA with expertise, experience, and education in the field of gender studies, sociology, or anthropology serving on an interdisciplinary study committee.

Subsequent to the report’s foundation-laying conclusion about the binary nature of biological sex from the opening chapters of Genesis, the report argues at length that Matthew 19, with its reference to eunuchs, is better applied to questions of marriage than to contemporary concerns of transgender individuals. It makes only brief reference to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion in Acts 8 as an example of “the general truth that in the kingdom of God the powerful legal and social barriers that divide men and women and that exclude persons who suffer from various disorders collapse” (p. 391). Yet Acts 8 provides rich biblical resources: What does it mean that one who had so recently been denied entrance to the temple in Jerusalem was now wading into the waters of baptism? In this story, the eunuch reads from the book of Isaiah, in which the Lord promises, “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off” (Isa. 56:4-5). Surely this rich promise, and perhaps other portions of Scripture skimmed over in this report, deserve another pass by a biblical scholar who can focus exclusively on issues related to gender identity.

### 2. Theological inquiry

On the whole, this report attempts to recognize the currently evolving nature of scientific and social understanding of gender identity, offering its pastoral guidance with admirable humility. “Relatively few theologians have studied and written about persons who experience gender dysphoria or are gender nonconforming. Thus, what we offer here with regard to pastoral care, we offer cautiously” (p. 395). It hardly seems possible that this stated approach could follow from the report’s definitive statement two pages prior: “There is no redemption in trying to live as a male when God has given one the body of a female, or in trying to live

as a female when God has given one the body of a male. We do not help people flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another. To transition is merely to intensify the problem” (p. 393). The report fails to nuance the language of transition, leading the reader to wonder whether all transition, including modest attempts to present contrary to whatever culture dictates it means to “live as a male” or “live as a female” are included in this prohibition. Is there any pastoral guidance left to provide, cautiously or otherwise, after this definitive pronouncement?

Discussions about sexuality and gender are, at their root, discussions about identity: Who am I? Where do I belong? Whom do I love? How will I live? The current report, therefore, is noticeably lacking in that it provides no theological foundation in baptism or union with Christ. For the Christian, baptismal identity and/or identity in Christ are deep and foundational convictions upon which any subsequent question of ethnic, cultural, sexual, or gender identity must be premised. To attempt a foundation-laying theology without making use of this rich—and Reformed—theme threaded through Scripture and our confessions is akin to pouring a foundation without cement. However, a theologian tasked to serve on an interdisciplinary study committee might reintroduce this theological theme, as well as other relevant themes, to create a sturdy and winsome foundation for necessary but cautious pastoral guidance.

### 3. Philosophical underpinnings

An overview of the gender identity section of the human sexuality report demonstrates that more than half of the section’s 33 pages are taken up with definitions, cultural analysis, worldview presuppositions, and implications. This makes sense given the newness of this content by comparison, say, to 50 years of accumulated study about homosexuality in the CRCNA. But then what are the philosophical underpinnings of this report, and how do they go on to shape the report’s interpretation of Scripture and implementation of pastoral guidance?

The report leads with a posture that can best be described by what H. Richard Niebuhr calls “Christ against culture,” a truthful claim that we cannot trust everything that comes to us from culture in its myriad forms: media, public policy, academia, etc. In its more extreme form, a “Christ against culture” stance adopts an unspecified suspicion of “broader cultural trends” (p. 379) that can cause Christians to overestimate the ways they are being persecuted or belittled by the world around them. This, then, shapes biblical interpretation and pastoral guidance in reaction to the perception of threat. In its most winsome form, Reformed theology leads us away from fear into a posture of curiosity, what Niebuhr would call “Christ in culture.” This approach allows believers to interrogate the culture around them, weeding out what is unhelpful and pursuing what may prove, by common grace, truthful and therefore helpful to those who are working to promote human flourishing. Our engagement with culture, which is itself a philosophical underpinning of any theological inquiry, will be best served by those who are curious and equipped to engage the myriad disciplines of scholarship touched upon by the more recent study of gender identity.

The gender identity section of the human sexuality report delves deeply into the relationship of body and mind, a philosophical conundrum at least as old as the Gnostics and reemergent in every generation since. The committee rightly asserts that, for too long, Christians have privileged the soul over the body and that, in providing counsel to transgender people, we must encourage them to be “reconciled to their created self” (p. 396). This rightly means that what someone feels about their body is not the only true thing about them, but neither is it the case that a “created self” can be reduced down to chromosomes and genitalia. Scientists have discovered and are still learning the myriad and interconnected aspects of what it means to be a “created self,” which must include neurobiology as well as biology, epigenetics as well as genetics. In an attempt to reclaim the dignity of the body in the longstanding body-mind dualism, the report misses the opportunity to interrogate the existence of a dualism altogether. Our overture suggests an alternative: that the denomination learn from what science—and transgender people—can teach us, that human beings are not so easily or neatly categorized as any philosophical dualism might suggest. This is a reminder that the church is well served by those who can place general revelation and special revelation in careful conversation.

*B. Consistent with the best science*

Referring sections VIII through X of the report to an interdisciplinary committee for further study, especially if that committee includes social and natural scientists with expertise in this area, should allow a more accurate and complete engagement with the rich and deep empirical literature on gender identity and gender dysphoria.

Presently the report either ignores or misrepresents the conclusions of existing research or uses correlation to prove causation. For example, in discussing causes of gender dysphoria (p. 381), the report relies on a study (Littman, footnote 96) to conclude that children and teens are strongly influenced by media regarding gender identity and to advocate for the existence of “rapid-onset” gender dysphoria. The study that the report writers use to support these claims was retracted and corrected, not due to “lack of sensitivity” (as the report alleges in the footnotes) but because of problems with biased participant recruitment, reliance solely on parent report for outcomes, and because the significant methodological limitations of the study had not been adequately covered in the discussion section of the study when it was originally published.<sup>1</sup> Additionally this study was descriptive in nature and, as the author of the study stated in her correction, “descriptive studies often represent a first inquiry into an area of research, and the findings of descriptive studies are used to generate new hypotheses that can be tested in subsequent research. Because of the known limitations of descriptive studies, claims about causal associations cannot be made” (Correction, Littman, 2019). In summary, the study that the report writers use to support their causal claims about media influence on gender dysphoria is not designed to support causal claims and was of insufficient quality for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

<sup>1</sup> [psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-15819-001](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-15819-001)

Repeatedly, when the report draws on research, it relies on studies of questionable quality and represents them as settled science, ignoring the overwhelming consensus of research findings reaching the opposite conclusion. For example, the report summarizes the existing recommendations by the American Medical Association (AMA) and Pediatric Endocrine Society (p. 383) supporting social transition for transgender individuals but then criticizes these statements, saying that “very little research has yet been done,” and the footnotes (for example, footnote 109) suggest that “for a sizeable group psychological morbidity is unaffected by—or actually increases after surgical transition.” In fact, the quantity of literature on post-transition outcomes far exceeds the literature that other sections of the report represent as settled science (i.e., neuroscience of pornography). Also, the study that the report uses to suggest that transition does not improve, and may worsen, psychiatric outcomes is a single study with a very small sample size. In contrast, meta-analytic work (a research approach that uses statistics to summarize results from multiple studies allowing for greater confidence in findings) examining psychological outcomes post-transition found that “although the levels of psychopathology and psychiatric disorders in trans people attending [medical] services at the time of assessment are higher than in the cis population, they do improve following gender-confirming medical intervention, in many cases reaching normative values.”<sup>2</sup> A second example emerges when the report attempts to make the case that gender dysphoria desists in “almost all children” (p. 383), citing Steensma, et al. In this study, writers defined persisters as participants who, after presenting to the clinic with gender dysphoria as children, returned as teens for medical treatment; defining those who did not come back to the clinic as teens as “desisters.” This study has been critiqued by Temple-Newhook, et al. (2018) for this assumption,<sup>3</sup> as clearly there are many reasons those participants may not have returned to that clinic but still self-identified as transgender or gender fluid. In response to the critiques of their study, Steensma clarified that in their study “using the term desistence in this way does not imply anything about the identity of the desisters. The children could still be hesitating, searching, fluctuating, or exploring with regard to their gender experience and expression, and trying to figure out how they wanted to live. Apparently, they no longer desired some form of gender-affirming treatment at that point in their lives. The assumption that we considered all desisters as having a fixed cis-gender identity is therefore an incorrect one.”<sup>4</sup> Thus there are problems with the study that the report utilizes to support its claim of “almost all children with gender dysphoria will be comfortable with their anatomical sex,” and even the study’s own authors clearly do not want their study to be used to support that claim.

Also problematically, in place of research the report often relies heavily on biased opinion blogs or on statements by organizations that have been widely discredited for their misrepresentation of science. Specifically, when discussing the treatment of gender dysphoria in children (pp. 380-81), the report incorrectly portrays an even split between professionals advocating

<sup>2</sup> [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/09540261.2015.1115753?src=recsys](https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1115753?src=recsys)

<sup>3</sup> [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15532739.2018.1456390?src=recsys](https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1456390?src=recsys)

<sup>4</sup> [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15532739.2018.1468292](https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1468292)

for transition treatments for adolescents and those saying they are intrusive and harmful, citing the American College of Pediatricians (ACP). The ACP is an advocacy group with a handful of employees and 500 members and has been roundly criticized by the researchers whose science they cite to support their erroneous conclusions. Even Dr. Francis Collins, the director of the NIH and a deeply committed Christian, has publicly denounced the ACP for misrepresenting his work on homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> The fact that this report presents the ACP on equal footing as the American Academy of Pediatrics (which has >67,000 members and is responsible for the board certification process of pediatricians) and further advocates for the ACP (p. 385) as an “alternative to the more liberal American Academy of Pediatrics and its endorsement of progressive approaches to children and families” demonstrates the serious biases in this section of the report.

In addition to this example, the report repeatedly uses blog opinion posts (i.e., footnotes 98-100), some originating from websites with a particularly biased agenda (i.e., Public Discourse blog from Witherspoon Institute), to support scientific claims about the treatment of gender dysphoria and the neuroscience of sex and gender (p. 381). These types of evidence cannot and should not be used in the place of existing scientific literature on these topics.

In summary, the report currently lacks appropriate engagement with existing scientific literature regarding gender identity and gender dysphoria and is far too reliant on biased, discredited articles and blog posts. This weakens the report and leaves it open to the charge that it has misused science to reach a predetermined conclusion. Stating again the report’s goal that this pastoral guidance to churches be “consistent with the best science,” this overture recommends recruiting a group that has the expertise to engage with relevant literature in all its complexity and nuance and to summarize it carefully and thoughtfully.

### *C. Life-giving for persons struggling with questions related to gender identity*

#### 1. Avoid giving offense

The report cites statistics that transgender youth whose preferred names and pronouns are respected are 50 percent less likely to attempt suicide. The report follows this heartbreaking statistic by concluding that some congregations may choose this act of hospitality while “other congregations may choose not to do that but should avoid giving offense as much as possible” (p. 398). Any rationale for going against proven life-saving action should be substantial and clearly explained; however, the report provides no criteria for how a congregation might weigh this choice. In addition, the report models carelessness in its own inconsistent and seemingly unconsidered use of names and pronouns.

One specific and painful example of the report’s linguistic carelessness comes from the authors’ interchangeable use of the words “transgender” and “transgendered.” We recognize the deep history and harm associated with the linguistic difference between the terms “person of color” and “colored person”—the latter indicates ignorance in the best case and malintent in the worst. Similarly, “transgendered” is received as a form of

<sup>5</sup> [healthleadersmedia.com/strategy/nih-director-raps-american-college-pediatricians-distorting-research-homosexuality](https://healthleadersmedia.com/strategy/nih-director-raps-american-college-pediatricians-distorting-research-homosexuality)

verbal violence in the LGBTQ+ community. The use of a derogatory term nine times in 33 pages (excluding footnotes) fundamentally undermines the credibility of the report, which seeks to advance hospitality, mission, and spiritual care without modeling the same.

2. Guide pastors and congregations to provide wise counsel

In the arena of “life-giving support,” this report provides just one case study regarding the ethic of marriage and family life for those who are transgender, though the ethical implications of marriage for transgender people are numerous. In this single case study (p. 399) the guidance suggests that if a transgender woman (who remains anatomically male) wants to marry a woman, this should be viewed, by the church, as a lesbian relationship and therefore outside the bounds of Christian marriage. However, the report has previously and consistently argued that sex is fundamentally anatomical, regardless of external or social presentation. By this logic, wouldn’t the marriage presented in the case study be the correct coupling of biological sexes? Additionally, what advice do we provide for a married couple if one partner seeks transition? Should this couple remain married, though they will appear to the world as a same-sex couple, or should they dissolve their marriage covenant? These are the questions that require clear ethical guidance so that pastors and congregations may continue to offer life-giving support to real people in real, often heartbreaking and confusing, circumstances.

As discussed above, it seems clear that the authors of this report have chosen to lead with a “Christ against culture” posture. In particular, the report evidences suspicion that experts in secular fields like medicine, sociology, and psychology can or will provide ethical guidance, reflected by comments such as “Parents often face substantial internal and external pressure to help their children transition to the opposite gender” (p. 382) and “Health and social service workers, as well as teachers may tell parents . . . they should affirm and support that identity through social transitioning and later hormonal treatments and surgeries” (p. 383). This posture is far from life-giving in that it undermines wise pastors and lay-counselors who rightly recognize the limits of their own skills to address the mental health challenges of persons seeking their counsel in matters related to gender identity. To whom, then, can pastors refer for safe, ethical therapy at the end of their own expertise? An interdisciplinary study committee could provide helpful guidance to pastoral leaders by laying out evaluative questions that pastors, leaders, and individuals seeking counseling might ask of local mental health practitioners to determine whether they will be a good moral and ethical fit for ongoing support.

Rather than retreat from the insights of secular scholarship, might we ask professing members in the CRCNA who are properly licensed, credentialed, and working in the field of science, medicine, social science, and mental health to bless the church with their professional competence? We believe doing so would more properly meet the stated goal of this report, to “help the church discern how it should navigate questions of gender identity in a manner that is faithful to the gospel, consistent with the best science, and life-giving for persons who are struggling with questions related to gender identity” (p. 372).

## II. Overture

Classis Hackensack overtures synod to recommit the transgender portion of the report by the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality to an interdisciplinary team for further study before recommending it to churches for pastoral guidance.

*Grounds:*

1. An interdisciplinary committee would serve the church well by offering biblical, theological, and philosophical arguments, adding to those brought forward in this report, addressing as yet unasked or unanswered questions, and exploring new avenues of inquiry.
2. An interdisciplinary committee would serve the church well by carefully and competently addressing matters of science, medicine, psychology, and gender on behalf of those who might otherwise fear what they do not understand.
3. An interdisciplinary committee would possess compassionate competence in addressing the tender and, in some cases, the truly life-threatening needs of transgender and nonbinary individuals, equipping pastors and congregations to do the same by way of careful modeling and comprehensive guidance.

Classis Hackensack  
Sheila E. Holmes, stated clerk

### **Overture 43: Recommend the Human Sexuality Report to the Churches as a Tool to Encourage Ongoing Learning, Discussion, and Guidance**

Classis Niagara overtures synod to recommend the Human Sexuality Report as a whole to the churches as a useful tool to help encourage ongoing learning, discussion, and guidance toward biblically faithful responses to such pastoral situations churches face.

*Grounds:*

1. There is much that can be learned from the Human Sexuality Report. It needs more study at the local church level, especially since many churches have not discussed these topics. The report can be used to facilitate more openness in this regard.
2. Pastoral responses in ministry are always locally contextualized. The report gives guidance as to what those responses could look like without mandating specific actions in every situation.
3. Some areas covered by the report are relatively new areas even in our culture (e.g., some gender questions). More needs to be learned and shared about what these things mean. The report offers a good introduction to these areas and lists many resources for ongoing learning.

Classis Niagara  
Wendy de Jong, stated clerk

## **Overture 44: Postpone Decision on the Human Sexuality Report**

Classis Huron overtures synod to postpone the decision on acceptance of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality for a minimum of one year.

### *Grounds:*

1. Due to the continuation of the global pandemic and the difficulty in having in-person discussions, our churches need more time for proper dialogue.
2. The stakes are very high, since the human sexuality report is asking for the positions laid out in the report be given confessional status. The consequences of adopting the HSR needs to be more clearly spelled out.
3. Classis has heard many positive comments around conversations on this report and believes good dialogue will be fruitful.

Classis Huron

Fred Vander Sterre, stated clerk

## **Overture 45: Table the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Appreciation**

The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (hereafter “the committee”) produced its report and submitted it to Synod 2021. The committee conducted its work over a four-year period (2016–2020) and produced valuable material for the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) to consider and use as members and congregations of the CRCNA respond to issues of sexuality in the present day. The committee’s treatment on pornography (pp. 341-71) has enriched the resources available to the CRCNA for dealing with a challenge that has dramatically increased since the 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality (Report 42: Committee to Study Homosexuality, *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 609-33 [hereafter “the 1973 report”). Further, the committee’s treatments of premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, and polyamory have given much helpful direction to the CRCNA as its members and churches face these issues. In addition, the committee’s detailed proposals for pastoral care offer options for responding to various issues regarding sexuality (pp. 362-71, 394-404, 426-39), resources not offered in the 1973 report. Moreover, the two appendices (pp. 461-87) relate scientific information not otherwise readily available to interested CRCNA readers about issues dealt with in the committee’s report. For all of this, and for the efforts the committee has collectively poured into their work, the CRCNA can be grateful to the committee.

### **II. Concerns**

Many CRCNA members know people—brothers or sisters in Christ—who are in committed, long-term, monogamous same-sex marriages or partnerships; some of these same-sex couples attend services at or are members of CRCNA congregations. At the least, many CRCNA members, across the

spectrum of sexual orientations, hoped the committee would engage in some responsible consideration, even within the bounds of the 1973 report, of such same-sex relationships.

The committee's report recognizes this as a significant question, stating (under Current Context, pp. 318-19), "Many of us have questions about sexuality or about the church's response to changing realities," and going on to offer, as the next to last of a series of questions, "The gay couples I know seem happier than most of the straight couples I know, so how can their love not be from God?" (p. 319). Even so, the report does not give any indication that the committee interviewed any such Christian, same-sex married couples.

We see this as a significant and harmful omission from this report, for the following reasons:

First, listening well to one another is a necessary expression of Christian love. Our congregation has been following the recommendation of this report to participate in *Challenging Conversations* listening circles, using the materials provided by CRC Pastor Church Resources (PCR). Every week, as our listening circles engaged with the Human Sexuality Report, these materials reminded each listening circle to listen well to the report, imagining the report's authors were in the room with us:

As fallen sinners in a sinful world, we often struggle to listen well to others, especially others with whom we disagree. Instead, we tend to create flimsy caricatures of other people's arguments and criticize those caricatures. But, of course, Jesus calls us to love both our neighbor and our enemy. (Certainly those we disagree with fit into at least one of those groups!)

One expression of Christian love is to listen well. Listening well is a straightforward but difficult part of loving my neighbor as myself. Listening well does not mean you must agree with what someone says. Rather, it means you seek to understand them as well as you'd like them to seek to understand you.

The report does not demonstrate such listening, and it generally portrays same-sex marriage negatively and thus as not worth listening to, by either casting it aside (p. 339) or considering it as part of what the committee calls "the overall biblical association of homosexual conduct with human perversity" (p. 410)—pointing to the Genesis 19 story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story tells of gang-rape and the violation of hospitality as violent displays of human perversity. The report observes that the story is not an ideal text to guide contemporary sexual ethics (p. 410), though it then goes on to quote that "we don't have to prove that homosexual practice was the only sin to show that it was one of them" that led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. (With respect to the question the committee had indicated it would consider in its report, the only reference to a same-sex couple in a committed monogamous, long-term relationship is in the cautious advice given [pp. 430-31] on how to respond to interests expressed by a lesbian couple attending a CRCNA congregation.)

In its failure to *listen well* to same-sex married couples, this report hinders our ability to love our neighbor. The report clearly describes the positions the authors would like their "neighbors"—same-sex attracted and otherwise—to understand. But the report does not demonstrate the corresponding attempt to *listen well* so that we can *seek to understand* our same-sex married neighbor as we'd like them to seek to understand us.

Another reason that the stories of same-sex married couples should be included in this report is that it would demonstrate an understanding that the

social and legal realities in both Canada and the United States have changed considerably when it comes to same-sex marriage. Since the adoption of the 1973 report, same-sex marriage has become legal in Canada and the United States, though not all states in the USA have complied with the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court legalization of same-sex marriage. Over the past several years, many such marriages have taken place, and committed, long term, monogamous same-sex couples are no longer an unlikely possibility (as they would have been in 1973): they have become, by 2022, relatively common. Although unanticipated by the 1973 report, these changed social and legal realities need to be taken into consideration. Changed social and legal realities do not *require* us as a denomination to change our theological positions; however, we are called to *respond* to changing cultural realities by wrestling with new scientific evidence and biblical interpretation.

As the committee recognizes, this has led to many CRCNA members asking the question the committee itself identifies (p. 319). But the committee has not dealt with that question, except to rule it out of consideration. That is not an appropriate response, either to our cultural situation in 2022 or to the CRCNA members who honestly ask the question.

### III. Overture

Classis Hamilton overtures Synod 2022 to do the following:

- A. Table the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, with expression of appreciation to the committee for its service.
- B. Appoint a new, intergenerational committee to meet with and interview couples involved in long-term, monogamous, same-sex marriages/relationships, and to report to synod what the committee has found out about such couples' love for and commitment to each other, to Christ, and to the church, and to serve synod with advice about how the CRCNA should relate to such couples.
- C. Consider both reports together at a subsequent synod.

#### *Grounds:*

1. Listening well to our neighbor is an important spiritual discipline for handling these issues, especially those with whom we may disagree. The report itself recommends the use of listening circles for these issues. We recognize that such listening goes beyond the 1973 guidelines. Nevertheless, such couples are our CRCNA brothers and sisters, and their voices need to be heard and understood.
2. The report does not share the stories of Christian married same-sex couples; this is a significant omission because Scripture calls us to listening as an expression of Christian hospitality.
3. Supplementing the report with a summary of such interviews, and then discussing the report with this addendum would build capacity for a fuller, more holistic conversation.

Classis Hamilton  
Ben Ponsen, meeting clerk

*Note:* The Classis Hamilton stated clerk position is currently vacant.

## Overture 46: Withhold Action on the Human Sexuality Report

Synod 2016 adopted the following in response to an overture from Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan:

That synod advise the classes and congregations to invite, as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA.

(Acts of Synod 2016, p. 929)

### I. Introduction

Sonlight CRC in Regina, Saskatchewan, is a small but diverse congregation in the heart of the Canadian prairies with a strong desire for unity and inclusion. We do not agree on everything, and, notably, we do not claim to have one mind about the topics presented in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR), but we have committed to work and worship together peaceably and humbly to the glory of God. We are concerned about how the recommendations of the HSR will affect our ability to encourage ongoing discussion and engagement with difficult topics as we strive to promote unity and inclusion for all God's children.

In 2016, Sonlight CRC created an overture which was approved by Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan and adopted by synod as noted above. The overture was part of the discussion surrounding the report on pastoral guidance regarding same-sex marriage that was presented to synod that year, and it was therefore also one of the catalysts for commissioning the committee that created the Human Sexuality Report. Given our unique relationship with this report, we feel moved to respond to it and express our concerns about acting on its recommendations.

### II. Background

In 1973 "Report 42" was adopted by the denomination and declared that each sexual minority Christian "be wholeheartedly received by the church as a person for whom Christ died." It instructs us that "churches should recognize that their homosexual members . . . are to be given opportunity to render within the offices and structures of the congregation the same service that is expected from heterosexuals" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 51-52). There have long been hopes expressed for greater acceptance and integration of these children of God that would reflect the report's calls to action, but the denomination has repeatedly recognized that this has been lacking.

Over the past decade or so there has been an increasing desire to address the gap between what Report 42 hoped for and the situation that currently exists. This has revealed deep disagreements between churches and members on questions about the acceptance and participation of sexual minority persons in the CRCNA. Some wish to find one final, incontrovertible answer and seem to feel that an end to the discussion will mean an end to the need to struggle with this issue. By adopting the recommendation from Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, however, Synod 2016 strove to widen the discussion rather than limit it. In fact, they committed to inviting *as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex members*. They recognized that the offices and structures of the church have not afforded homosexuals

or other sexual minority Christians an adequate avenue for being heard, and once again put the burden on churches to seek out engagement.

When synod established the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, however, its criteria for who could be appointed effectively limited the discussion. As Nicholas Wolterstorff indicates in his white paper, “this present committee was destined to fail us when issuing moral counsel,” because its members were required to commit themselves in advance to a particular moral interpretation. As such, he points out, “the committee’s mandate ensured that it would engage in results-orientated interpretation.” Essentially, the conclusions were made before the work began because diverse interpretations were excluded. The single-perspective committee that synod created does a great disservice to the CRCNA’s rich and fearlessly engaged scholarly tradition. Furthermore, it fails to live up to its commitment to involve the voices of those whose lives will be subject to the moral counsel delivered by the report (Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Response to the CRCNA Human Sexuality Report to Synod 2020,” Dec. 2020; [libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=59367502](http://libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content_id=59367502)).

Guided by the moral interpretation required of them, the committee commissioned by synod to author the HSR failed to invite the presence and involvement of diverse thinkers and theologians of our own and other Christian denominations through their choice of resources. For example, the report references as an authority the “Great Lakes Catechism of Marriage and Sexuality” of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which supports the committee’s conclusions but which had not been accepted by the RCA at the time of writing. However, the report does not include similar documents accepted by other denominations, like the “Social Statement on Human Sexuality,” which was accepted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada in 2011 but which does not share the same conclusions. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a denomination in dialogue with the CRCNA, but there is no evidence of engagement with them or their scholarship on this topic, though we are having many of the same discussions right now. In addition, the scholars whose work buttresses the findings of this report are given preference over those whose work does not. Experts who come to different conclusions are mainly referenced in one of two instances—when they share a point of agreement with others whose work is in alignment with this report’s conclusions, or when the committee wishes to rebut their conclusions.

The committee who authored the HSR also failed to adequately invite the presence and involvement of sexual minority Christian siblings through their presentation of the personal stories included throughout the report. Our best count indicates that there are 39 stories included. Of these, approximately (we use this word to allow for some slight difference of opinion on how certain stories are categorized) 35 reinforce the conclusions of the report, and four have no clear resolution but do not question the conclusions. In particular, the stories of homosexual and transgender Christians are misleading and disproportionately support what the report concludes about acceptable Christian norms. Our findings are as follows: 6 of 15 stories about homosexual people glorify someone who ended or will end a committed relationship, apparently as a result of spiritual growth; 4 others end with the subject either marrying or seeking to marry a heterosexual partner, also as a result of spiritual growth. The others highlight people living celibate lifestyles.

In addition, 3 of 8 stories about persons suffering from gender dysphoria suggest that peer pressure caused their gender issues; 4 others imply that their gender dysphoria can or will be cured by the presence of sympathetic friends, while 2 demonstrate that a person's gender issues cause distress to the people around them; 1 indicates that we should be careful because sometimes transgender people are actually predators trying to fly under the radar. In every case, the subject of the story is broken, distressed, confused, and weak in faith.

There are no stories that represent healthy, committed, Christian same-sex relationships. There are no stories about transgender believers who are healthy and accepted and active members of their church families. There is no one who is affirmed in their same-sex relationship or their gender transformation as they grow spiritually. Their perspectives are missing; they have been excluded from this report. Although individuals may read certain of the stories in ways that slightly change our interpretations, and there are other stories not highlighted here, the narrative of this report was strongly biased toward one narrow portrayal of the experiences of sexual minority Christians. The committee failed to seek "as much as possible" other diverse voices that could have expanded our mutual understanding as the family of God.

The authors of the HSR acknowledge our shortcomings as a denomination in creating the inclusive and supportive community called for in Report 42, but the solution they recommend is to exclude and silence conversations about the complex components of human sexuality. Their recommendations, particularly advocating that their interpretations hold confessional status, require conformity rather than unity. Without prayerfully engaging and including a variety of voices from among our sexual minority siblings, not just once or twice but repeatedly and over a lengthy period of time, we are not ready to support such far-reaching conclusions as a denomination. Adopting the recommendations of the HSR at this time will only serve to hasten the division we all fear.

### III. Overture

The Council of Sonlight CRC, Regina, Saskatchewan, overtures synod to withhold action on the Human Sexuality Report.

#### *Grounds:*

1. Synod can choose to receive a report as information, to recommend a report to the CRCNA, to act on recommendations, to adopt recommendations, and to reject the report recommendations. We are asking synod to withhold action on this report—to not act on it at all.
2. The intention of the overture to Synod 2016 from Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan was to encourage the CRCNA to be in healthy and prolonged dialogue with the many voices engaged in a conversation around human sexuality. We deem this committee to have failed to achieve the expectation synod set for our congregations and classes—that is, to "invite, as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 929, emphasis added).

3. This committee did not interact fully or carefully with the work of denominations engaged in similar discussions about same-sex marriage. They prioritized works that agreed with their own conclusions and ignored those that differ.
4. This committee failed to meaningfully involve the voices of allies and affirming theologians. It grants significant weight to thinkers and theologians whose work buttresses the findings of this report and minimizes the significance of those thinkers and theologians that disagree with its findings.
5. This committee shared many stories but only selected stories that either affirmed their conclusions or, at minimum, did not contradict these conclusions. We know, however, that there are many God-fearing sexual minority people who faithfully live out their Christian calling and whose stories do not reinforce the conclusions of this report. The bias of this report mutes the very stories that help shape the challenging questions the church faces.
6. Adopting the recommendations of this report effectively curtails future dialogue on these topics and silences dissenting voices. Declaring a *status confessionis* is not only premature and poorly supported, but it also poses an immediate threat to the unity of the body of Christ.

Council of Sonlight CRC, Regina, Saskatchewan  
Marina Katerberg, clerk

*Note:* The above overture was presented to Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan at its March meeting but was not adopted.

## **Overture 47: Delay a Decision on the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Background**

Attached is a personal overture that was originally signed by eighteen confessing members of the Kitchener (Ont.) CRC. Essentially it encourages synod to delay a decision on the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) at this time and to first study and report on a number of other important and missing HSR gaps, questions, and relevant biblical teachings.

By way of background, this overture was submitted to both the administrative council of Kitchener CRC and to Classis Huron, to secure their support and endorsement. Both bodies decided not to endorse this and other overtures, as they each felt that endorsing more than one overture was inappropriate.

I am disappointed with this decision. I saw (and still see) no problem with any CRC or classis endorsing two or more overtures at the same time. In addition, I see this overture as being supportive of many other overtures. In fact, whether classis grants (or denies) the HSR as having “confessional status,” I see this overture as a natural follow-up and response to the question, “Now that we’ve decided to grant (not grant) the HSR confessional status, where do we go from here?” Another study report that fills in the missing theological questions that this overture has identified is a natural response to this question. I hope that Synod 2022 will see this overture in the same light.

It is my understanding that synod normally appoints an advisory committee to deal with incoming overtures and that this advisory committee will make recommendations to synod on how to proceed with the many overtures before it. Synod has sole responsibility to determine how to proceed with the many overtures before it. But I hope that the advisory committee and synod both see the wisdom of first considering those overtures that deal with granting (or not granting) the HSR “confessional status” and then follow that up by considering and dealing with the other overtures before it.

## II. Context

As all of you know, synod will consider the Human Sexuality Report in June 2022. This report essentially asks Synod 2022 to grant it “confessional status.” In preparation, a large number of CRCs are expected to submit overtures that either agree with or disagree with this recommendation. Unfortunately this pits one church against another, is divisive, and has the potential of splitting the CRCNA. This is not scriptural. God calls us to be united, not divided.

The attached overture is my response to this situation. It encourages synod to develop a fuller Scripture-based theology of human sexuality that takes into account the church’s primary role—the great commission. This overture is also based on three key realities:

1. The HSR is essentially consistent with the 1973 report on human sexuality. So if we grant it confessional status, that takes us back to 1973. And if synod denies the HSR confessional status, that also takes us back to 1973. Either way, it may be seen as a step backward.
2. The HSR covers a limited number of sexual sins: pornography, sexual identity, same-sex attraction (SSA). It fails to fully cover a range of other sexual sins (divorce, remarriage, adultery) and the related issue of equitable treatment for different lifestyle issues—that of adultery and that of gays/lesbians.
3. The HSR fails to cover a host of tensions, including the tension between (1) universal gospel exposure (Matt. 28) and limited salvation; (2) God’s call for perfection (Matt. 5-7) and the continuing reality of living in sin and a broken world (Rom. 7); (3) being an influence on culture and being influenced by culture; and (4) the church’s oversight responsibilities and Paul’s admonition that each of us work out our own salvation in fear and trembling.

We are standing at a crossroads. The same-sex attracted (SSA) question threatens to divide the denomination. One side holds up God’s demand for full perfection in conquering sin. The other side focuses on our sin-filled broken world that requires greater levels of compassion and understanding. The good news is that God’s Word combines these two “opposites” into one **single message and response**. This was beautifully illustrated when the Pharisees came to Jesus with a woman caught in adultery and asked Jesus to chose between stoning her (as per OT laws) and showing compassion (as per many NT passages). While the church leaders of the day chose option one (scriptural law enforcement), Jesus chose option two (compassion) as his primary response. He then followed that up with option one—saying

“sin no more” (or “strive for perfection”). Jesus replaced the divisiveness the religious leaders saw 2,000 years ago (and which the CRC experiences today) with **the unity** of God’s Word. Jesus combined compassion and perfection into one single message. Today God challenges us to do the same. We need to practice both perfect obedience and heartfelt compassion. They are not in conflict; they are two sides of the same spiritual coin. So let’s renew our vision, follow the example of Scripture (Jesus), and combine these two commands into **one united message** of salvation, healing, and renewal.

Our overture proposes that a second study committee report be set up to renew this biblical vision and understanding. Essentially the following overture proposes two things: that synod (1) temporarily delay the decision on the HSR, and (2) create a second synodical committee to study and report on the missing questions that the current HSR report fails to adequately cover (listed in paragraph 2 above). This would give the denomination fuller scriptural teaching on which to make an informed decision and forms the basis for a **more unified decision**.

### III. Overture

In this context, we overture Synod 2022 to do the following:

- A. Postpone the adoption of the HSR.
- B. Develop a second study committee (a cross-section of CRC members including SSA) to report on what Scripture says about the following:
  - the inclusiveness of the gospel
  - equity issues related to different sexual sins and lifestyles
  - scriptural direction/guidance on the four tensions mentioned above
  - what this all means for church membership and profession of faith (POF) status. (*Note: “Membership” refers to baptized members, professing members, and any other membership status the study committee feels Scripture includes, directs, or allows—including teaching, preaching, and leadership privileges, responsibilities, etc.—and associated changes, if any, to the POF forms.*)

#### *Grounds and additional context:*

1. Timing: The denomination is not ready for the divisive gay/lesbian question. The HSR provides biblical direction on the perfection God seeks, but there are a host of missing pieces that need to be flushed out. It is essential that decisions be made, based on full information.
2. Inclusiveness: Gospel access is for **all** sinners. As Paul said, there is no difference between men or women, slave or free, and (we may add) gay or straight in this world. We are **all** created in God’s image. We **all** need to hear the gospel. We are **all** in need of God’s salvation, forgiveness, and renewal. The church is for sinners—not the righteous. As Paul said, we **all** need to (individually) “work out our salvation in fear and trembling.”
3. Unity: God requires that we approach decision-making in unity. This requires faithfulness to God’s Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (who unifies). At present, one CRC is pitted against another, and this is not the way God wants us to proceed forward.

4. Equity issues: There are people in the CRC who go through divorce and remarriage while retaining their profession of faith (POF) membership status. There are also people who marry members of the same gender and who are denied POF membership status. Both are lifestyle issues that involve sexual sins. So the question is this: How can we (the church) justify this difference in treatment? Where in Scripture is the justification for this? On what grounds is one sexual sin worse than another? These questions must be addressed.
5. Sin and brokenness: Since we fall into sin, we live in a broken world. One of the consequences is that people, churches, and social institutions are confronted with difficult choices. Examples illustrate:
  - a. In World War II people hid Jews from the Nazis. When asked if they were hiding Jews, they had to choose between lying to save a life or accept responsibility for someone's death. Either option compromised one of God's commands.
  - b. Or take divorce. If you are living in a violent and abusive relationship and there is no hope for future change, what is worse—to continue to live in a destructive marriage or to protect the children, divorce, and look for an alternative? The proposed second study committee would provide biblical guidance as to how to deal with these "broken world" situations and how such guidance might apply to the SSA issue.
6. The typical faith journey: We are all on a journey of faith. This journey begins not with preconditions but with exposure to the power of God's Word. It is **after** hearing God's Word that change and renewal can begin. When God's Word penetrates, faith the size of a mustard seed begins to grow, and small steps in faith become evident. The point is this. Our journey of faith does not begin with "lifestyle" conditions. It begins with the all-inclusive gospel exposure that Matthew 28 envisages. God comes to us as we are and where we are—broken sinners in need of repair. Repentance and the will to "sin no more" follows—not precedes—gospel exposure.
7. Judging: No one is without sin. Often we see the sins of others more clearly than our own. The NA press tends to focus on church issues like divorce, adultery, and abortion. Yet the Scriptures expose all sins, including greed, consumerism, the environment, racism and others. The Bible makes it clear that while we should stimulate one another to greater levels of faith, there is no ground for judging others. That's God's prerogative.
8. Membership questions: The church has used many membership structures in its history. We can benefit by knowing which biblically allowed membership structures work well to accommodate the difficult choices the church needs to make in this 21st (increasingly secular) century. For example, is there merit in adding the Bible's teachings on our 21st-century culture's "popular" lifestyle issues (abortion, divorce, remarriage, same-sex marriage, etc.) to the POF forms? Should past or present sins have any bearing on qualifications for church leadership? Guidance on these and similar questions would be beneficial before making final decisions on the HSR.

On these grounds, I recommend that synod act wisely, delay the decision on the HSR, and first undertake a second study report that focuses on the missing, but equally important, scriptural directives that cover the broader range of missing items, questions, and tensions identified above. Only then—when both reports are available—are CRC members, classes, and synod in a better position to make a fully informed and more united decision.

On these grounds, I urge Synod 2022 to embrace this overture in June of this year. May God give each of you his wisdom and his guidance to deal graciously with this difficult issue.

Community CRC, Kitchener, Ontario  
Herman Jonker, member

## **Overture 48: Correct Apparent Contradiction Involving Cohabitation in the Human Sexuality Report**

### **I. Background**

First, Classis Central California wishes to thank the committee for their exhaustive work. They have done a great service to the CRCNA.

Second, there has been criticism raised against the pastoral care sections in that they do not go far enough. On the contrary, the pastoral care sections provide sufficient light posts for pastors to use appropriate discretion in each circumstance. Rather than provide pastors with a “here’s how to handle this” checklist, the pastoral care sections instead provide pastors sufficient background information on the particulars of each issue. The case studies throughout demonstrate that each situation shares a level of sameness with the others but also a level of uniqueness. The level of sameness in each situation provides pastors the appropriate trajectory, while the level of uniqueness frees pastors to use appropriate discretion along the lines of that trajectory.

In light of the above, there is one area of the section titled “Homosexuality: Pastoral Care” that is contradictory and needs amendment, for it allows for some what is disallowed for others.

Throughout the report, cohabitation (the practice of living with a significant other prior to marriage) is condemned as sinful *because* of its association with premarital sex. “Christians are called to flee all such sexual immorality,” which among other things includes “cohabitation” (p. 332). “Cohabitation is seen as a first step of commitment” and has “become the norm in the church”—the stated reason for the sinfulness of cohabitation is that “premarital sex is assumed” (p. 443). “Whether in dating relationships, hook-ups, or cohabitation, premarital sex is perhaps the most common sinful sexual practice in the contemporary church” (p. 445, emphasis ours). Again, the sinfulness of cohabitation is *because* of its association with premarital sex. The sinfulness of cohabitation is not because it preempts the aspect of commitment present with marriage but, rather, that it preempts the sexual intimacy rightly reserved for marriage. Therefore, it is not the “living together” that is itself sinful but, rather, its association with premarital sex. This is clearly and repeatedly articulated throughout the report.

Therefore, it is concerning that the “Homosexuality: Pastoral Care” section allows for the cohabitation of those who are same-sex attracted with others who are same-sex attracted. The text in question follows:

Some Christians who are committed to holiness report that by living in a nonsexual relationship with another believer of the same sex, they are actually freer from sexual temptation than when living alone, even if they could potentially find their housemate sexually attractive. This might seem dangerous or counterintuitive to some people. Yet virtually all believers struggle with sexual temptation at times, no matter their attraction or living situation. And many single believers living alone find that loneliness triggers temptation toward sexual sin via porn use, hook-ups, or other ungodly relationships. In contrast, the ordinary daily interaction of meals, chores, and prayers with a fellow Christ-follower can be a healthy way to meet the basic deep-rooted need for intimacy that all humans share. If the two persons share a desire to follow Jesus, they can support each other and can also use their home in hospitable ministry to others. *Caution: If you know that the person you would live with is also attracted to the same sex, honesty with yourself and with that person concerning your intentions for the relationship will be essential. In that case, other believers who know the status of your relationship and are holding you accountable will also be important in helping your living relationship to be healthy.*

(p. 436, emphasis ours)

This paragraph and surrounding related sections are wise in three areas. (1) This guidance is wise to identify that we can never create environments where temptation is 100 percent absent. Instead, we must always yearn for resisting temptation. (2) This guidance is wise to suggest (as in other places of the report) that the church has failed those with same-sex attraction and that rediscovering a theology of friendship and meaningful relationships/ community is critical for supporting all believers, but particularly those who are same-sex attracted. (3) This guidance is wise to identify that loneliness is more prone to produce temptation than living with others. In the report, this is conveyed with the appropriate trajectory that same-sex attracted believers ought to live with other believers—especially those from the local church. This could include living with those who are single, married, elderly, etc.

While the guidance correctly states that a same-sex attracted man committed to celibacy who lives with a single heterosexual man, for example, *may* become sexually attracted to the latter, the possibility for that *attraction* turning into an *activity* is removed. This is in line with the CRCNA’s historically held position that homosexual *activity* is sinful, whereas homosexual *attraction* is not. Therefore, it is appropriate for the same-sex attracted man in this example to live with a heterosexual single man because it can foster authentic relationships with minimized temptation to engage in sinful expressions of sexuality.

The paragraph, though, provides *misguidance* in the final portion, which is italicized above. While it is premised with a “caution,” it still nonetheless allows for a same-sex attracted man committed to celibacy, for example, to live with another same-sex attracted man committed to celibacy. Any form of sexual activity between the two would be a sinful expression of sexuality. Contrary to the example in our previous paragraph, the possibility for this *attraction* turning into an *activity* would still be present, and presumably at a strength comparable to the temptation of a heterosexual man and woman who live together to engage in premarital sex.

The report includes a footnote that the committee was not in total agreement on allowing for same-sex attracted cohabitation with other same-sex attracted individuals of the same gender (p. 436). They stated there should be accountability with a pastor and openness to the congregation about the arrangement. But even this is an *allowance* for same-sex attracted cohabitation.

This report gives those who are same-sex attracted “freedom” to thread the needle of sexual temptation in ways that are impermissible *and sinful* for heterosexuals.

## II. Overture

Therefore Classis Central California overtures synod to amend the report by removing the following portion and replacing it with guidance more consistent with the rest of the report (indicated by ~~strikethrough~~ and *italics*).

~~“Caution: If you know that the person you would live with is also attracted to the same sex, honesty with yourself and with that person concerning your intentions for the relationship will be essential. In that case, other believers who know the status of your relationship and are holding you accountable will also be important in helping your living relationship to be healthy.”~~

*It is advised that same-sex attracted believers should not knowingly live with another same-sex attracted individual of the same gender, for this would create an environment of unnecessary temptation that threatens the holiness of their celibacy.*

Classis Central California  
Larry M. Fryling, stated clerk

## Overture 49: Clarify Recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report

### I. Background

The following overture was presented to Classis Alberta North, which considered a number of overtures at a February 5, 2022, special meeting on the Human Sexuality Report. Classis Alberta North decided to withhold action on all of the overtures presented at this meeting without prejudice, with the understanding and encouragement that the overtures would be forwarded to synod.

### II. Overture

The councils of West End CRC, Edmonton, Alberta; Rimbey CRC, Rimbey, Alberta; Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta; and St. Albert CRC, St. Albert, Alberta, overture Synod 2022 to do the following with regard to the Human Sexuality Report:

A. Postpone processing Recommendation D until it has been clarified and sent to the churches for consideration, regarding precisely which part of the 175 pages are already considered to have confessional status.

*Grounds:*

1. It is not clear what exactly within the report would be considered confessional, assuming it is not every phrase of 175 pages. This would be important to determine for numerous reasons, not the least of which concerns the signing of the Covenant for Officebearers, which identifies agreement with and defense of the confessions.
2. With all of the turmoil already in discussions about these matters, it would be helpful not to spend significant time in churches or classes speculating as to what is considered to already have confessional status.
3. Once clarified, it would be important for the churches to have adequate time to review Recommendation D in order to both understand and to consider responses.

B. Consider the concerns and implications that have been a part of discussion regarding Recommendation D. These include the following:

- Synodical decisions do not ordinarily have confessional status; examples of decisions that have not been given confessional status are the Committee to Study Homosexuality (1973) and the Creation Stewardship Task Force (2012).
- Synod 2016 accepted the minority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-Sex Marriage but did not assume that this already had confessional status.
- Confessional status for the report will be difficult for those who are wrestling with Scripture especially with respect to committed same-sex relationships. This may make it difficult for officebearers, including pastors, to sign the Covenant for Officebearers.
- This recommendation by itself has the potential of causing severe division within the denomination.

May God bless the meeting of Synod 2022, and may the Holy Spirit lead and guide its discussions.

Council of West End CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
David van Berkel, clerk

Council of Rimbey CRC, Rimbey, Alberta  
Patty Schmidt, clerk

Council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta  
Henry Wisselink, clerk

Council of St. Albert CRC, St. Albert, Alberta  
Peter Buisman, clerk

### **Overture 50: Receive the Human Sexuality Report for Information**

Classis Eastern Canada at its March 4-5, 2022, meeting voted to overture synod to receive the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality for information and to take the following actions in response:

A. With respect to the topic of sexuality and God's church, give top priority to equipping all member churches to be welcoming spaces for persons of

all sexual orientations and gender identities to meet Jesus, fully participate in the worship of God, and contribute their gifts in kingdom service to God, others, and our world. To that end, form resources that focus on fostering strong primary relationships with Christ as Savior and respectful relationships with all God's created beings, with particular attention paid to assisting churches to create hospitable, empathetic, and nurturing contexts for adolescents and young adults who are developing multiple aspects of their identities.

B. To enable this, reject any recommendations to elevate any specific prescriptions about any specific sexual behaviors or gender identities to confessional status.

C. Undertake a broad-based intentional season of listening to understand the real-life experience of persons and families dealing with minority sexual orientations and gender identities within CRC congregations and facilitate local and regional dialogues on the issues that gave rise to the report, in order to enhance congregational cultures of belonging.

D. Review and update the approved CRC approach to hermeneutics as outlined in the 1972 synodical report titled "The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority."

*Grounds:*

1. The current report on human sexuality, the earlier 2016 report, and other documents have repeatedly identified the need to improve the culture of acceptance, belonging, hospitality, and openness to the full diversity of the communities in which our churches provide ministry. Giving this a high priority in response to this report is consistent with the model Jesus practiced for discipling people, with CRC teachings, and with adopted priorities in CRCNA mission strategies and strategic plans.
2. The repentance of past behaviors and attitudes toward persons with minority sexual orientation—both highlighted in this report—requires intentional actions of change in order to be genuine, in line with biblical understandings of repentance.
3. Changing culture within CRC churches requires sustained attention in addition to official statements of repentance at synods, as demonstrated in similar calls to repentance for abuse, racial discrimination, etc.
4. The report's findings and recommendation with regard to confessional status are widely contested; are *not* consistent with the model Jesus practiced for discipling people, with CRC teachings, or with adopted priorities in CRCNA mission strategies and strategic plans; and divert attention from the much-needed changes outlined above.
  - a. This report's finding that specific prescriptions on a range of specific sexual behaviors already have confessional status in the CRC contradicts synod's 1980 decisions on marriage and divorce. Synod explicitly chose to decline making any position on divorce a matter of confession and to endorse a local, pastoral approach based on the circumstances of each individual case. This approach would be consistent for other aspects of human sexuality as well.

- b. Elevating specific prohibitions of specific sexual behaviors to be conditions for salvation is not consistent with Belgic Confession Article 22, which reminds us that faith in Jesus Christ alone is sufficient for salvation.
  - c. The negative impacts of elevating specific prohibitions of specific sexual behaviors to confessional status for individual members of the CRC and for loving, respectful relationships are not adequately considered in this report.
  - d. Elevating the sexual aspects of Christian living over all other aspects of following Christ contradicts the Bible, which treats other areas of life, such as how we treat neighbors in need and how we steward God's gifts to us, as equally important expressions of our gratitude for Christ's salvation.
  - e. Other churches in close communion with the CRCNA, who subscribe to the same confessional standards, do not consider as confessional the matters suggested as already confessional in this report.
  - f. With synod having decided not to give confessional status to the Belhar Confession—with (a) its statements about injustice, oppression, and the equality of all imagebearers, and (b) in spite of the request from other denominations around the world—it is inconsistent, and offensive to those who experience prejudice, to give confessional status to beliefs about human sexuality.
  - g. The report gives no consideration to the impact that declaring this matter to be confessional will have on officebearers and members of the CRC as well as on staff and faculty of denominational agencies and institutions. Declaring that the report already has confessional status puts many, many people in the peculiar position of somehow retroactively being in violation of confessional commitment and ordination vows.
5. Additional, more respectful listening is required because the anecdotes and experiential evidence in this report are inadequate to reflect good practices in pastoral care and the spirit of the guidance in Matthew 18.
    - a. Selective choices of anecdotes in the report exclude many existing members in the CRC community, such as persons living in faithful, same-sex relationships who are doing well and participating in the life of CRC churches. Ignoring their existence and refusing to listen and include their testimonies is hurtful and contrary to the way Christians are called to deal with fellow believers.
    - b. Members who are most directly affected by the report in Kanata Community CRC, All Nations CRC, John Calvin CRC, and other churches find the report hurtful and harmful, rather than helpful and healing.
    - c. Other churches in the Reformed family, such as the Presbyterian Church of Canada, have demonstrated the benefit of respectfully listening and engaging with fellow believers with minority sexual orientations and gender identities.
  6. While the report recommends a posture of love and hospitality in pastoral care, it practices the opposite in its approach to hermeneutics, based on its understanding of the allowable limits in how the Bible can

be interpreted and applied to ethical issues within the CRC. That suggests a need for review of the CRC approach to hermeneutics.

- a. The narrow approach to hermeneutics used as the basis for the recommendations in this report is not the only approach compatible with Reformed theology.
- b. The latest articulation of how CRC churches interpret Scripture to guide Christian living, the 1972 synodical report titled “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority,” does not take into account more recent learning in related fields of hermeneutics, biblical scholarship, and ethics. It does not speak to current questions about the interpretation of Scripture that live within our churches and the contexts within which they minister. For example, it does not consider the perspectives of Black and Indigenous CRC members and scholars on how Scripture relates to a wide array of different contexts and intercultural ministry.
- c. Review and revision of the report “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority” would assist CRC members and churches with answering what is and what is not acceptable within a Reformed approach to hermeneutics. Updated guidance for interpreting Scripture would assist CRC members and churches to deal with a range of current ethical challenges, as well as the issues in this particular report.

Classis Eastern Canada  
Bernie Bakker, stated clerk

### **Overture 51: Receive the Human Sexuality Report for Information Only**

The following overture was presented to Classis Alberta North in a special meeting on February 5, 2022, at which classis considered a number of overtures. Classis decided to withhold action, without prejudice, on all of the overtures presented, with the understanding and encouragement that the overtures be forwarded to Synod 2022.

#### **Overture**

Members of Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church in Leduc, Alberta, and the council of Covenant CRC in Edmonton, Alberta, having read and reflected on the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, overture Synod 2022 to receive the report for information only.

#### *Grounds:*

1. Although the report repeatedly claims that the Bible is clear on matters of human sexuality, other theologians such as Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff and Dr. James Brownson also employ a Reformed hermeneutic, arriving at different conclusions. We are all limited by imperfection, bias, and our preferred hermeneutical framework. A report that seeks to employ a biblical foundation of anything must employ the collective education and wisdom of all.
2. All committee members constructing the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) were mandated to adhere to the 1973 CRC standing on human

sexuality, and were therefore not free to accurately examine forty-eight years of theological and scientific developments, or to objectively engage with alternate CRC voices who might influence pre-determined outcomes.

3. Although the committee claims through a tenuous connection to the Heidelberg Catechism that the “the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status” (p. 458), a statement regarding same-sex relationships has never been given confessional status by synod. The 1973 report was accepted as “a position,” and as such, leaves room for respectful disagreement.
4. The HSR claims to understand the nature of “sexually disordered states,” yet it selectively excludes and misrepresents the lives of many LGBTQ+ CRC members. The report is peppered with examples of persons who struggle deeply with their sexual orientation/gender identity (pp. 396, 403, 429, 433-34, 447), but it neglects to include real life examples within our churches of same-sex partners living in healthy, committed relationships. These people are not filled with shame and do not wish to be viewed as “sexually broken” and in need of specialized pastoral care. They only long to be accepted as others are, and invited to participate in the full life and leadership of the church.
5. Pastoral care and advice to congregations is conflicting and misleading. As well, many LGBTQ+ examples are loaded with negative messages and stereotypes that, rather than being hopeful and freeing, are harmful and oppressive:

*Example 1:*

Although the report emphatically states that it is “wrong and very harmful to promote the idea that believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to experience attraction to the opposite sex as they mature spiritually” (p. 427), the report also makes the diametrically opposing statement “Most long-time Jesus-followers describe a lessening of the power of their same-sex attraction as they seek holiness . . .” (p. 435). The report is, in effect, endorsing harmful and debunked reparative therapies. HSR scenarios make this clear:

- a. Angela, a lesbian, changed the kind of movies she watched and the music she listened to, focused on spiritual things, nurtured Christian friendships, and later married a man (p. 433).
- b. Suzanne, a radical lesbian feminist, started hanging out with Christian friends. Some years later she married a man (p. 437).

*Example 2:*

Although the report emphatically states that “we must be careful to avoid situations and environments that might lead to the sins that so easily entangle us” (Heb. 12:1), it encourages same-sex attracted Christ followers to actually live together in celibacy, suggesting that the “ordinary daily interaction of meals, chores, and prayers can be a healthy way to meet basic deep-rooted needs for intimacy” (pp. 429, 436). One cannot imagine any heterosexual couple agreeing that the “daily interaction of meals, chores and prayers” would be equal to deep-rooted sexual intimacy. Suggesting this scenario for

homosexual couples is offensive and only sets them up for failure to the very standards the HSR is promoting.

*Example 3:*

Churches are advised that their primary goal with regard to same-sex attracted individuals is “not to change their behavior, but to love and serve them as befits followers of Christ” (p. 432), yet the report gives conflicting advice regarding same-sex couples who are seeking CRC membership. The report states that one needs to “be up front about the fact that [one’s] church does not recognize same-sex marriage” (p. 432). “If a gay couple asks about membership, explain why church members are held accountable to following Jesus in their sexuality . . . make sure they are committed to following Christ’s teaching in their lives . . . ensure they understand the grace of church discipline . . . remind them that membership is not for the perfect, but for the repentant” (pp. 432-33). These statements strongly imply that the church’s primary goal is indeed to change behavior, rather than to “love and serve them as befits the followers of Christ” (p. 432).

6. Acceptance of this report would result in a deep break in unity within the Christian Reformed denomination. Alternatively, Christians who live and worship together in community, while respectfully making room for differing perspectives, faithfully obey our Lord’s express command to remain “one,” as well as maintaining a strong witness to the world (John 17:20, 23).

Council of Covenant CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

Henry Wissilink, clerk

Members of Ebenezer CRC, Leduc, Alberta

Al DeBoer

Bryan Meetsma

Frank DeBoer

Freda Molenkamp-Oudman

Marianne DeBoer

Howard Oudman

Carolyn DeKlerk

Tamara Perry

Grace Deunk

Gea TerDenge

Joe Deunk

Jan TerDenge

KerryAnne Hoogland

Alice VandeKraats

Abel Horneman

Frank VandeKraats

Tena Horneman

Terry VandeKraats

Joanne Koopmans

Bea Vlieg

Ted Koopmans

Pete Vlieg

Heather Leddy

## **Overture 52: Encourage Use of Pastor Church Resources Curriculum for Discussion of the Human Sexuality Report**

Classis Chicago South overtures synod to adopt the following with regard to the synodical report regarding the biblical foundations of human sexuality:

That synod encourage the churches to make use of the curriculum prepared by Pastor Church Resources to help small groups study and discuss the committee's report with particular attention to how individuals and congregations can demonstrate repentance for past ill treatment of victims of sexual abuse (including use of pornography), and those who have struggled with sexual orientation or gender identity, or identify as LGBTQ, and how individuals and congregations can show hospitality to them and welcome them fully into the life of the church.

*Grounds:*

1. The committee itself recognizes the deep need for the church to repent of its treatment of people who identify as LGBTQ or have struggled with sexual orientation and gender identity, and its need to show them hospitality.
2. The report's biblical arguments rest on a very limited and narrow interpretation of Genesis 1-2 (particularly 1:27) as well as a limited and narrow view of the function of the law. These lead to an unwarranted view of sexuality as being strictly binary.
3. The committee gives contradictory advice with regard to gender identity. It first admonishes the church to be very cautious in its approach to and pronouncements upon issues regarding gender identity, but then takes a very firm stance regarding such issues.
4. Sexual orientation and gender identity are both relatively new issues that receive little to no direct address from the Bible.
5. Addressing such issues requires that the church community, including those who are LGBTQ, work through these issues at a local level, discerning God's direction and interpreting the Scriptures together.
6. The report works against its call to repentance and hospitality, erects barriers to open conversation, and continues to support a culture of shame by claiming the church's teaching on sexuality already has confessional status, by arguing sexual ethics are a matter of salvation, and by failing to address the issues of sexual abuse and harassment.
7. Synod failed to give the Belhar Confession confessional status.

Classis Chicago South  
Roger Nelson, stated clerk pro tem

## **Overture 53: Form an Additional Committee to Articulate a Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality**

### **I. Introduction**

We have reviewed the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. Many of the signatories of this overture have also participated in First Hamilton CRC's listening circles regarding the report.

In general, we appreciate and agree with much of the information, perspectives, and recommendations presented in the report. However, we are concerned about the portions of the report that address same-sex relationships, marriage, and gender identity. As such, we have prepared this overture based on the following grounds.

## II. Overture

The members of First Hamilton CRC who have signed this document overture Synod 2022 to form an additional committee to articulate a biblical theology of human sexuality, whose task would be to conduct research and prepare a report that articulates the biblical foundations and theological arguments for an affirming (or, as it is referred to in the existing committee's report, "revisionist") view of committed and monogamous same-sex marriage as well as transgender and nonbinary gender identities.

This additional committee would provide a perspective, grounded in biblical scholarship, that differs in some respects from that of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, without dismissing all that is good and true in the existing report. In accordance with this objective, the members of this committee would need to be members of the CRCNA who hold an affirming position on monogamous same-sex marriage as well as transgender and nonbinary gender identities. Ideally, the committee would also include members of the LGBTQIA+ community in order to adequately and holistically represent their perspective. This committee should also be composed of individuals with qualifications similar to those of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, including education in theology, philosophy, social sciences, pastoral care and counselling, etc.

### *Grounds:*

#### 1. Previous committee's structure

Synod 2016 adopted the following criteria for the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality: "The committee will be constituted of up to twelve individuals, CRC members who represent diversity in gender, ethnicity, binationality, and ministry location, and who adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships. These individuals will be gifted and suited for this task. . . ." (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 926-27; *Human Sexuality Report*, p. 315). As a result of the stipulation that committee members must "adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships," the committee was biased regarding matters of marriage and same-sex relationships. In addition, the requirement that the report be consistent with the findings of the 1973 report on homosexuality also implied the significance of historical precedent over the importance of ongoing surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit in research and deliberations taking place in our present context. Ultimately, it seems that the decision to require adherence to a previously established pattern indicated from the beginning that we as a denomination only wanted to receive the counsel and direction of the Spirit in these matters if that counsel and direction met our expectations, affirmed our preconceived ideas, and let us continue operating as we are. This is not a faithful posture for approaching God in prayer and discernment because it leaves little space for the Spirit's transforming work in our midst here and now.

Now that synod and CRC members have heard from a committee adopting the CRC's historical position on marriage and same-sex relationships, an additional committee, one that interprets Scripture's

instructions for the church differently on these matters, is necessary to allow for careful discernment. Listening equally to all perspectives should be a fundamental requirement of thoughtful discourse on any controversial matter as we trust the Spirit's guidance to ensure proper interpretation and application of Scripture.

2. Previous report's structure

Since the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality was biased by nature of its constitution regarding same-sex relationships and marriage, as outlined above, their report was predetermined on these matters. As a result, Section XII of the report is structured to illustrate why alternative (or "revisionist," as defined in the report) interpretations are "clearly wrong" (p. 410). The format of these "traditionalist" arguments are typically long and itemized, while the alternative interpretations are reduced to a few simplified words, sentences, or concepts that do not do justice to the scholarship of qualified individuals who have established these positions. In one of several similar examples, the report briefly and unconvincingly presents the following "revisionist" argument: "If homosexual activity is so bad, why didn't Jesus say anything about it?" (p. 413). This statement is followed by four clearly articulated arguments over five paragraphs explaining "how weak that argument actually is" (p. 413).

Since the report failed to articulate "revisionist" arguments with the same level of rigor as the "traditionalist" arguments, an additional report is required to provide a thorough and balanced foundation for synod to deliberate on with regard to matters such as same-sex relationships, marriage, and gender identity.

3. Pastoral and missional guidance

Part of the mandate for the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality was "to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance" (p. 315). Since the committee's position on same-sex relationships and marriage was predetermined as outlined above, these sections of the report were based on preconceived assumptions and conclusions regarding what constitutes sexual immorality.

While the committee attempted to be sensitive in addressing pastoral and missional guidance, we felt that certain recommendations remained unclear, contradictory, or harmful. For example:

- a. In the Gender Identity: Pastoral Care section: "Work to ensure that church is a safe place for children and young people in contrast to many areas of society in which these persons are at risk of physical harm and bullying. The Trevor Project notes that 40 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth (ages 13-24) report being physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their gender identity. Think about how your congregation speaks about nonbinary persons" (p. 400). There are several instances in the pastoral care sections of the report where the writers make vague statements like this. They are right; we need to consider this carefully in light of the statistic they have provided (as well as their earlier comments on the harm done by the church in its treatment of LGBTQIA+

individuals). However, readers are not given clear guidance regarding what thinking about how to speak “about nonbinary persons” might look like for a church. This is exactly the type of challenge for churches, made more challenging still by the report’s recommendations themselves, that demands clearer pastoral guidance.

b. In the Homosexuality: Pastoral Care section: “Be proactive. As church leaders, work through potential scenarios so that you are ready to respond honestly and lovingly when a gay couple wants to join your church or have their newborn baby baptized; when a lesbian couple attending your church asks to be married or wants prayer for adopting a child; when members of your church ask you to participate in or simply attend their same-sex wedding; when a member of the church tells you they are sexually active” (pp. 430-31). This is another example of potentially harmful vagueness in the report. If the teachings in this report are acknowledged to have confessional status or are given confessional status, there will be many churches at a complete loss as to how to respond in the circumstances outlined in this quote. Much clearer pastoral guidance is required in light of what the report writers have suggested is true about a biblical sexual ethic (and the church’s call to respond to those who violate it) to ensure consistent and compassionate treatment by church leaders and lay members across the denomination.

c. Also in the Homosexuality: Pastoral Care section: “If a gay couple starts attending your church, treat them as you would any other visitors. That is to say, show them hospitality! How would you treat a young man and woman who are living together outside of marriage, or a college student who does not believe in God, or a wealthy person who has spent their money on selfish and materialistic ends? Remember that we are all sinners in need of grace and love and that God wants all people to enjoy his salvation and full life in his kingdom (John 10:10; 1 Tim. 2:4). Invite them to participate in events and ministries and to build relationships with the members of your congregation. Show them the love by which Jesus said his disciples would be known (John 14:34-35). Again, do not focus on changing their behavior. Give them the freedom to wrestle with what it would mean to become disciples in a spirit of love and grace” (p. 432). This section goes on further to talk about how to eventually have conversations about membership and make it clear to the gay couple that they need to live according to the report’s definition of a biblical sexual ethic in order to be part of the church. This section is of profound concern because it tells churches to, in effect, follow a “bait-and-switch” method for bringing gay couples into the church. There are many gay Christians who have asked Christian communities not to do this. If churches do not intend to ultimately welcome gay couples into full membership in the church regardless of their relationship status, they should not initially behave in such a way that suggests that they might. A “bait-and-switch” approach is only

hospitable at a surface level because it is, whether intentionally or not, and even when done with the best of intentions, ultimately deceptive. It is likely to result in deeper harm to the gay couple and the church community as a whole. Being honest from the beginning, even if it appears harsh, is ultimately more compassionate because it does not promise unconditional relationship where that potential does not exist in reality.

Furthermore, the report's fourth recommendation, "That synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status" (p. 461), is of particular concern in terms of its practical implications. For example, would all current officebearers who hold an affirming perspective on same-sex marriage be required to step away from their positions? Would the proposed confessional status apply retroactively to remove church membership for those in disagreement with the report or only apply to new members? Would LGBTQIA+ members who do not feel called to celibacy have to leave the denomination? Would those employed at organizations associated with the CRCNA whose views differ from the conclusions of the report lose their jobs if the report is declared as having confessional status? The report doesn't answer, or even acknowledge, any of these potential questions or concerns, despite its mandate "to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance" (p. 315). This is a notable problem, given that the answers to some of these questions may have some of the most significant and far-reaching consequences for the denomination and its members.

It is our hope that an additional committee and report, with differing perspectives from that of the existing report, would provide useful pastoral and missional guidance to build on the good work already done by the existing committee. This additional information would enhance synod's deliberations with clearer and more holistic pastoral and missional guidance for the denomination, with particular attention to the impact of nonaffirming theology on the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies.

### **III. Conclusion**

We acknowledge that articulating a biblical sexual ethic in the 21st century is a complex matter, and we are grateful for the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality that has served our denomination thus far in our process of discernment. We also recognize that an additional report requires more time, resources, and deliberative efforts by a future synod. However, we believe that this additional effort will ultimately serve the denomination well and equip us with the necessary resources and holistic understanding of the issues at stake to be faithful to our commitment to serving God, our siblings in Christ, and the world around us.

We appreciate this opportunity to express our concerns and make this request for action. We thank you for your time, discernment, and leadership in Christ's service regarding these matters.

Members of First Hamilton (Ont.) CRC

Jedid-Jah Blom	Laura Shilton
Andrea Colyn	Theresa Stevens
Rachel Cook	Laura Stewart
Katrina Harsevoort	Jim Tigchelaar
Trish Heslinga	Mary-Jane Tigchelaar
Melissa Kuipers	Jessica Van de Hoef
Kim Mantel-Schat	Lisa Vanderzwaag
Em Noordam	Julie Van Huizen
Andrew Proper	Matt Van Huizen
Jessica Proper	George Van Kampen
Nella Sandrock	Deb Wiebenga
Kyra Schat	Petra Zantingh
Yvette Schat	Sandra Zuidema
Chris Shilton	

*Note:* This overture was processed through the council of First Hamilton (Ont.) CRC and through Classis Hamilton but was not adopted.

**Overture 54: Form a Study Committee to Provide In-Depth Pastoral Guidelines for Implementation of the Human Sexuality Report**

Classis B.C. North-West overtures synod to form a study committee to provide in-depth pastoral guidelines for implementation of the Human Sexuality Report because the guidelines in the report are inadequate.

*Grounds:*

1. The primary purpose of the Human Sexuality Report was not to provide pastoral guidelines for dealing with the various topics in the report. However, the report does include pastoral guidelines in most areas it discusses.
2. Through discussion of the report in our Challenging Conversation group, we determined that the pastoral guidelines in the report were found to be inadequate to guide a church on ministering to people covered by the report.
3. A study committee would provide better resources in this area for the churches of the denomination.

Classis B.C. North-West  
Kathy Smith, stated clerk

**Overture 55: Adopt in Principle a “Local Discernment” Approach, Appoint a Study Committee to Articulate the Best Biblical Rationale for *Traditional* and *Affirming* Viewpoints, and Continue Denomination-wide Prayer Initiative**

**I. Background**

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is one that the church is fond of quoting in the face of divisive issues. Whether amid the controversy regarding the eucharist in John Calvin’s day, or the disagreements that led to the CRC’s split from the RCA in the 1800s, or the CRC’s back-and-forth debates over women in office in the 1990s, Christians quickly grasp at Jesus’ “prayer for the unity of all believers” in an effort to preserve denominational ties.

We cling to this prayer, of course, because we know it goes to the very reason the church exists. According to Ephesians 1-4, the church is the centerpiece of God’s grand plan to reconcile all things to himself. Disunity in the church is so painful and so grievous to our Lord, and to us, because it is the exact opposite of what God created the church to be.

It’s safe to surmise that every CRC congregation today faces threats to unity. It has never been more important to remind ourselves that the unity of the church is not first of all our accomplishment but a gift of God; not our effort but the fruit of Christ’s work; not something we create but our union with Christ that we live into by faith.

At the same time, the unity of the church is our task, our work to do. The ecumenical charter of the CRC beautifully states that the unity of the universal church is both “gift and goal,” “gift and task” ([crcna.org/eirc/ecumenical-relations/ecumenical-charter](http://crcna.org/eirc/ecumenical-relations/ecumenical-charter))—a description that comforts and challenges all of our congregations as we seek to “work out our salvation” (Phil. 2:12).

While every church in Classis Grand Rapids East (hereafter “GR East”) struggles to embody this unity, Neland Avenue CRC (hereafter “Neland”) has been more in the public eye because of its struggle for unity around matters of LGBTQ+ inclusion and same-sex marriage. Classis GR East adopted and sent to Synod 2021 a communication (now before Synod 2022) that carefully tells the story of Neland’s journey leading to its decision in 2020 to ordain as a deacon one of its members who is in a same-sex marriage. Neland’s story is one of struggle and blessing in realizing the unity of the church in Christ.

Because it is deeply committed to the unity of the CRC, Classis GR East humbly submits to Synod 2022 the overture that follows. Classis GR East believes that the proposals in this overture offer a united path forward for CRC members and congregations who, like the people at Neland and in Classis GR East, do not agree on matters of human sexuality. One of the most compelling arguments for this overture is the fact that Neland and Classis GR East are already living the reality of what this overture points to—an underlying unity of purpose and mission despite differences of biblical interpretation among our members and congregations on matters of human sexuality and same-sex marriage.

We are hopeful that Neland’s and Classis GR East’s journey of discovering deep unity in Christ despite differences can be an encouragement to the broader CRC. Our encouragement comes not from false confidence or blind

optimism. We have lived (and are still living) with the struggle and blessing of that unity. Neland has acknowledged the grief of losing some members during this journey (including both those who believe Neland has been too progressive and those who believe Neland has been too conservative)—yet there is more to Neland’s story. In an effort to offer a vision for unity that is both aspirational and honest, Neland asked its members to share their stories of cost and blessing. Their testimonies are sprinkled throughout this overture. Being united with one another requires forgiveness and forbearance. Our journey—Neland’s and Classis GR East’s and the denomination’s—is not over.

One Neland member characterized that journey as “Joy and Pain.” Another wrote, “I struggle with what Christ would want us to do. We need to be careful not to judge harshly but also to follow the teachings of Christ. This really is my goal, and I am striving to make the decision that is what Christ would want. I would hope that others could respect me and show me the same grace.” Joy and pain. Struggle and grace. Cost and blessing. Our calling to imitate Christ, to “be brought to complete unity,” compels us to persevere with grace in our discernment together. And as we do so, we lean on the encouragement and the promise found in James 1:4-5: “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”

Through the overture that follows, Classis GRE proposes a way to frame denominational differences over LGBTQ+ matters that will enable the CRC to persevere in unity and mission.

## II. Overture

In an effort to foster mutual respect and create a way for Christian Reformed members and congregations to move forward together in the mission to which God has called us, despite differences around LGBTQ+ matters, Classis Grand Rapids East overtures synod to do the following:

- A. Adopt in principle a “local discernment” approach to differences over LGBTQ+ matters and ordination—namely, to declare that with respect to differences of biblical interpretation regarding LGBTQ+ matters and same-sex marriage, every classis shall respect the prerogative of its constituent churches to call and ordain officebearers according to their own biblical convictions.
- B. Appoint a study committee to articulate the best biblical rationale for *traditional* and *affirming* viewpoints regarding LGBTQ+ matters in ways that are acceptable (least objectionable) to the proponents of the respective options.
  1. Throughout its deliberations, committee members will interact with each other and engage one another’s opposing viewpoints in ways that model excellent scholarship, deep listening, respectful dialogue, and Christian forbearance and humility. The committee’s final report will include summaries of key interactions and engagements to give synod the best possible understanding of how these differing approaches seek to honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God.

2. The committee's composition will include LGBTQ+ members of the CRC who together represent the full range of viewpoints regarding LGBTQ+ matters so that the committee will be "talking with" and not merely "talking about" fellow LGBTQ+ church members.
  3. The committee's objective is to recommend that synod affirm that the approaches articulated in the report constitute (in the language of Synod 1995 with respect to women in office) "two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God."
  4. The committee will submit its final report to Synod 2025 (or to a subsequent synod should the committee decide to submit an interim report to Synod 2024 or 2025; one goal of an interim report would be to give synod the opportunity to dialogue with and provide feedback to the committee).
- C. Request that the denomination-wide prayer initiative (declared for June 2021-June 2022 by the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA in May 2021) be continued and expanded to include opportunities for listening to one another, in order to deepen our unity in Christ in the process of articulating and implementing this "local discernment" approach.

*Expanded grounds* (Summary grounds follow Overture Recommendations at the end of this overture):

1. This "local discernment" approach is one that the Christian Reformed Church has successfully employed before with differences over women in office (Church Order Supplement, Article 3).

The language of "respecting the prerogative of its constituent churches to call and ordain officebearers according to their own biblical convictions" is language the Supplement to Church Order Article 3-a uses to acknowledge and honor differing biblical convictions within the denomination around the question of women in office. This approach—acknowledging and respecting, even if not agreeing with, differing biblical interpretations regarding women in office—has largely succeeded in keeping our increasingly diverse denomination together on what remains a contentious issue for some members and churches. This same approach was also used in 1957, the centennial year of our denomination, when, after a seven-year debate, synod allowed but did not require women to vote in congregational meetings, leaving it to each local church to decide what practice was appropriate in that church at that time. In both of these historical instances, as in this proposed overture, the central role of the local council and congregation in the discernment and selection process for officebearers is upheld and strengthened.

2. A "local discernment" approach would acknowledge, in practice, that many members of the CRC use time-honored Reformed principles of biblical interpretation and come to differing conclusions than those of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) regarding matters of sexual orientation, gender identity, and same-sex marriage.
  - The HSR speaks for some members of the CRC, but not all. Many studies and/or books use time-honored Reformed principles of biblical interpretation (see Appendix) and come to different conclusions

than the HSR does. One such example is a comprehensive study commissioned in 2014 by Classis Grand Rapids East. The study report was sent to Synod 2016 as a communication from Classis GRE, which offered the report “to synod and member churches of the CRCNA as an additional resource for ongoing study and discussion regarding pastoral guidance for dealing with same-sex marriage and related matters” (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 663-68).<sup>1</sup> The study makes abundantly clear that people who honor the authority of Scripture and use sound Reformed principles of biblical interpretation can come to differing conclusions on the matters under discussion.

- The HSR’s conclusions and use of the label “revisionist” have driven a wedge in the denomination by suggesting that those who do not agree have departed from careful examination of Scripture. Yet discounting differing interpretations of Scripture does not invalidate those interpretations nor make those interpretations go away. It does, however, seriously undermine the mutual respect the church must cultivate as we work out what it means to build our unity on the foundation of Christ.
- It is worth noting that synods of the past have pleaded for this type of mutual respect and understanding. For example, the study committee on women in office that reported in 1984 wrote in its “Preliminary Plea”:

We urge everyone who is considering the question of the ordination of women to do so with charity and humility. We ask everyone to acknowledge that the matter is not crystal-clear. If it were, it would have been solved long ago. Some of the most gifted theological minds and pastoral hearts in our denomination have wrestled with this matter and have come to different conclusions. This alone should suffice to eliminate stridency from our discussions.

(*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 286)

Synod 1984’s advisory committee on women in office echoed that plea:

The advisory committee observes that gifted and devout students of the Bible do not agree on what the main passages say. . . . Humility, openness, and mutual respect are therefore appropriate attitudes as we seek, by the leading of God’s Spirit, a decision that will at the same time build us up and hold us together.

(*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 621)

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<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the vacuum of balanced biblical study on these matters at the synodical/denominational level, Classis GRE commissioned a comprehensive study in 2014 titled “Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage.” This study was commissioned after Synod 2011 did not accede to an overture from Classis GRE requesting a new synodical study committee to review the biblical teachings regarding homosexual orientation and practice. The 2014 Classis GRE study is not a biblical case for same-sex marriage per se, but it includes a concise statement of Reformed principles of biblical interpretation and a survey of a wide range of current biblical scholarship on key biblical passages, noting the strongest and weakest points as well as the wide range of similarities and differences between current scholarship and the Synod 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality.

Similarly, John Cooper, professor of philosophical theology at Calvin Seminary in 1991, wrote:

The differences within the CRC concerning the ordination of women emerge above a deeper unity. We remain united in confessing the inspiration and authority of Scripture and in employing legitimate Reformed methods of interpreting Scripture (hermeneutics). In other words, the differences among us have to do with the exegesis or interpretation of specific texts, not with hermeneutics, nor with our high view of the Bible. It is possible to have the same view of Scripture but disagree about what a particular passage means. . . . We may not like how other people read the texts pertaining to the role of women, but we may not automatically say that their ideas are unbiblical or unReformed. We must love and live with one another in spite of our differences.

*(A Cause for Division?, CRC Publications, 1991, p. 9)*

As a denomination, we are at a place of arriving at different conclusions regarding same-sex marriage—conclusions that are founded on sound Reformed interpretive principles. If our biblical and Spirit-led consciences no longer convict us of a uniform view on this matter, we should humbly accept that we, collectively, cannot claim certainty about this issue; and we therefore should adopt a posture of humility and openness that leaves room for one another.

3. A “local discernment” approach would underscore our true source of unity in the CRC.

By respecting the prerogative of local churches on LGBTQ+ matters (as it did on matters related to women in office) the Christian Reformed Church will once again be acknowledging our true Source of unity. Unity is not something we achieve by reaching agreement on complex ethical questions like women in office and same-sex marriage; requiring agreement on every issue would make our unity dependent on our own efforts. Respecting differences of biblical interpretation on these matters and recognizing that local churches may govern by their biblical convictions will clarify anew that the unity of the church is a sacred gift and mystery far deeper than anything we can accomplish. Relying on the power of Christ alone to bind us together will allow us to experience the glory he shares with us; it will deepen our praise of Christ and our appreciation of the mystery of the body of Christ.

4. A “local discernment” approach would align the church more with its historic commitment to never bind the conscience more than is absolutely necessary.

One of John Calvin’s great concerns, against the backdrop of the Roman Catholicism of his day, was that the church too often bound the consciences of believers more than Scripture did. One of the hallmarks of Calvinism and Reformed theology and polity has been to scrupulously avoid situations of the church binding the conscience where Scripture does not. In 1995, when the CRC acknowledged “two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist,” it began a process that has led to today’s “local discernment” approach because it acknowledged that “the Scriptures (Rom. 14) and previous synodical

decisions advocate a position of tolerance on nonconfessional issues” (*Acts of Synod 1995*, pp. 731-732).

5. A “local discernment” approach, with its acknowledgment of differing perspectives and convictions in the CRC, will free local Christian Reformed congregations to do ministry with our LGBTQ+ members and inquirers in a more welcoming environment.

Every synodical report dealing with LGBTQ+ matters (including our 1973 standard) has conceded the failure of the CRC to adequately minister to our LGBTQ+ members, including those who have committed to remaining celibate. It is time we stop conceding and start making changes to address the harm we have done. The Christian community, including the CRC, has not been a safe place for LGBTQ+ members. (See, for example, the report of a 2018 study in the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* that found that “greater religious feeling and engagement was tied to increased risk of suicidal thoughts and actions for participants who identified as LGBQ.”<sup>2</sup>) One Neland member, a college student, spoke about her experience of the CRC’s position: “With the musings going on in the church, from my understanding, I wasn’t allowed to be both queer and have a right relationship with God. I want you to know that ‘hate the sin, love the sinner’ feels a lot more like ‘hate the sin, shun the sinner.’”

The two most recent study committee reports—particularly the strong language about discipline and excommunication in the 2016 minority committee report (adopted by Synod 2016 as pastoral advice), and the unqualified warnings about endangering one’s salvation in the current 2021 study committee report—have added to the pain and trauma that LGBTQ+ persons have experienced in the church. Another Neland member wrote, “People see me as a stumbling block to their children, referencing Matthew 18, but many people who call themselves Christians have been a stumbling block to me and people like me. Neland’s embrace of my whole self now, and its support of using my gifts to their fullest, help me to feel stronger. But to have known that I was part of an openly welcoming and affirming denomination, and to be embraced immediately and encouraged to use my gifts as a young person who was questioning my sexuality, would have saved me much angst, anger, and sadness. It’s taken so much time and effort to remove the heavy cloak of the church’s shaming rather than using that time and effort for kingdom work.”

A Neland member who is a recent college graduate described the experience of growing up in a congregation that seemed welcoming, relative to the experience of many of her peers. She spoke with tears rolling down her cheeks: “I thought I didn’t carry the baggage that a lot of my friends at college did, whose churches were outright against LGBTQ+. But then during college I attended a church that is fully

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<sup>2</sup> *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 54:5 (Mar. 14, 2018); [ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(18\)30050-3/fulltext](http://ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(18)30050-3/fulltext); summarized at [reut.rs/314hmfo](http://reut.rs/314hmfo).

affirming, and I realized what church could be for me. It hurt a lot to realize that Neland isn't as safe as I thought. Would I be able to get married at Neland? I don't want to ask, because I don't want to experience the pain of being told no."

Family members too have endured this pain. One Neland parent shared the personal cost: "We wonder if we can be safe in any church at all. It's been difficult to know whether to leave the CRC for our mental and spiritual health. We are extremely uncertain about the testimony of the church, both the worldwide church and the Christian Reformed church, for many reasons, but especially because of the LGBTQ+ conversation. Its hypocrisy and harm to the LGBTQ+ community is unconscionable. And we do not, as a denomination, ever talk about that harm. We have not lived up to the 1973 synod decision, or we would have many more open LGBTQ+ people in the CRC modeling their faith to new generations. . . . Something I wonder about is if this idea of 'unity' is simply easier for those for whom the conversation and LGBTQ+ experience is abstract and not a lived experience."

6. A "local discernment" approach would honor a range of biblical interpretations that would dramatically reduce denominational crossfire on these matters, crossfire in which LGBTQ+ people are by definition in the middle. This approach would allow churches to discern their biblical convictions together, create room for some churches to fully embrace LGBTQ+ people according to those convictions, and offer the possibility of the CRC being a safer, more accepting, grace-filled denomination in which to minister to and do ministry with one another.

### III. Three formidable questions

This overture faces three formidable questions that must be addressed:

- How can synod adopt a "local discernment" approach when, to date, synod has not yet decided (as Synod 1995 did on women in office) that there are "different perspectives and convictions" that "honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God" in the case of LGBTQ+ matters facing the church today?
- Is not the required order of change first a synodical change in biblical interpretation and then a change in church practices?
- Upon what basis does Classis GRE believe that "local discernment" is practically feasible, given the deeply polarizing nature of this debate?

A. How can synod adopt a "local discernment" approach when, to date, synod has not yet decided (as Synod 1995 did on women in office) that there are "different perspectives and convictions" that "honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God" in the case of LGBTQ+ matters facing the church today?

This question goes to the heart of the problem we currently face as a denomination. Synod 1995 was only able to come to what we'll call "the two perspectives solution" with women in office after wrestling, for years, with what the Bible taught regarding women in office. During those years, primarily the 1980s and '90s, the study committees wrestled with Scripture and often generated majority and minority reports. Synod would decide upon a bold new direction one year and reverse itself the next year. It was

exhausting, difficult work, borne of genuine wrestling with the Scriptures. Out of that wrestling came “the two perspectives solution” and eventually the “local discernment” decision.

In contrast, synod has not seriously considered more than one interpretation of Scripture on LGBTQ+ matters since 1973. Despite differing biblical interpretations in the CRC, synod has not allowed those differences to make their way into the heart of synodical deliberation—as evidenced by the restriction that Synod 2016 placed on the membership of the HSR’s study committee (“CRC members who adhere to the CRC’s biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships”).

So what is synod to do now? Continue to deny the existence of different perspectives and convictions that honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God? Doing so will continue to erode trust in the institutional church, and congregations will increasingly have no choice but to follow their biblical conscience even when it conflicts with the positions of synod. Should synod now appoint a study committee consisting only of members who *disagree* with the Synod 1973 position? Of course not—this would merely drive the wedge further. Should synod appoint a more balanced study committee that has the potential for producing a majority and minority report? Probably not, given that such an approach sets us up to have a “winner” and “loser” on what is increasingly understood to be a “disputable matter”—a nonsalvation, noncreedal matter on which biblically serious Christians have honest and deep differences of biblical interpretation (see again Ground 2 above, particularly footnote 1).

In this current overture, Classis Grand Rapids East proposes a new synodical study committee with the mandate above because we believe it models the way the church should work together on a biblically disputable matter. The CRC needs a better way to deal with biblically disputable matters—a way that does not dishonor the other; a way “that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Cor. 13:7); a way that models mutual respect, forbearance, humility, gentleness, patience, and love (Eph. 4:1-6). We believe that adopting a “local discernment” approach in principle and appointing the study committee described above could help us toward this better way. This approach allows us to preserve important institutions while making space for challenging and encouraging one another in Christ.

*B.* Is not the required order of change first a synodical change in biblical interpretation and then a change in church practices?

Here again the CRC finds itself in a challenging predicament. While synod has so far excluded differing perspectives—namely, those that the HSR labels “revisionist”—the local church has continued to live and breathe and prayerfully wrestle with these matters for the past 49 years. Some congregations have long been wrestling with these matters and have come to peace with biblical perspectives and convictions that differ from the denomination’s.

Of course, this is not a new problem. Changes in church practice often precede the synodical decisions that sanction it. There is frequently a more dynamic, reciprocal relationship between synodical decisions and local practice. Consider these examples:

- When synod decided to invite baptized children to the Lord’s table in 2006 without first requiring profession of faith, many people were amazed to learn in a survey the following year that 25 percent of responding churches had already invited baptized children to the Lord’s table, even if on a limited basis or special occasion. After five more years of study through the shepherding work of the Faith Formation Committee, Synod 2011 finalized its biblical study and adopted Church Order changes that welcomed all baptized members with age- and ability-appropriate faith to the Lord’s Supper under the supervision of the elders. The decision allowed for “local discernment” in leaving implementation up to the local elders. In this case, divergent practice preceded synodical changes that addressed the heart of our covenantal theology and confessional reinterpretation and allowed for a diversity of perspectives and practices in the churches.
- The denomination wrestled for decades with its interpretation of Scripture regarding women in office. A few churches ordained women to office before synod allowed it the first time. A series of synodical decisions made in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s often directly reversed the previous decisions of synod. As a result, churches who had elected women to office found themselves in compliance or out of compliance with synod, depending on what year it happened to be and which “side” had the razor-thin margins of votes that year. Regardless of one’s position on women in office in those years, it was obvious that all of these synods, contradicting and reversing previous synods, could not be correct in their decisions. In its defense, the church was struggling mightily to understand not only the Word of God but the movement of the Spirit in the church at that time on this contested issue. But it was not an orderly process of change.
- The watershed decision of Synod 1995 established that “a classis may, in keeping with its understanding of the biblical position on the role of women in ecclesiastical office and in response to local needs and circumstances, *declare that the word male in Article 3-a of the Church Order is inoperative* and authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister, and ministry associate” even though a report on the biblical hermeneutics behind each perspective on women in office was not received and adopted until Synod 2000. The church allowed for “local discernment” even as it was still struggling to more fully understand the teaching of Scripture.
- Changes in very pointed Church Order regulations about Sunday-evening worship services and the use of the Heidelberg Catechism in preaching have trailed radical changes in the practices of local congregations. The reality is that a majority of CRC churches no longer hold a second service or follow the traditional practice of weekly catechism preaching. The most recent proposed adaptations of our regulations on these matters, which would delete the requirement for a second service and for weekly preaching from the catechism, still have not been formally approved by synod (as noted in the current Church Order Articles 51 and 53).

The same dynamic relationship between synodical decision and church practice currently exists with respect to LGBTQ+ decisions of synod. Consider the church's current response to Synod 2016's pastoral advice. Synod 2016's pastoral advice regarding same-sex married members of the Christian Reformed Church is straightforward:

If a member enters into a same-sex marriage, he or she becomes subject to the regular admonition and discipline of the church. As stated by Church Order Article 81-a, "Members who have sinned in life or doctrine shall be faithfully disciplined by the consistory and, if they persist in their sin, shall be excluded from membership in the church of Christ" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 442).

Church Order Article 81-a is a reference to excommunication, to declaring some to be excluded from membership not just from a local congregation but from the church of Christ. Synod 2016's pastoral advice also acknowledges that the church may withhold the table of the Lord from same-sex couples under discipline:

If the member is placed under discipline, this may also include informing the member that until he or she heeds the admonition and discipline of the church, the member is no longer in good standing and for the time being is not permitted to participate in communion (p. 443).

Have churches excommunicated their same-sex married members since 2016? Or prohibited them from taking communion? It seems safe to surmise that some churches have refrained from these actions because they disagree with synod's pastoral advice. At the very least, it's obvious that local church practice and the pastoral advice of synod are not in rigid lockstep with one another. It might be more accurate to say they are in dynamic conversation with one another.

Indeed, this is the nature of institutional life, and of change within an institution and in a culture. There often, perhaps even usually, is a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between policy and practice—a "push and pull" in which sometimes new synodical policy drives new practices, and in which other times new practices drive new synodical policy.

To the extent that changes in practice get out ahead of changes in synodical policy on LGBTQ+ matters, it is all the more incumbent on local churches to "suffer long" with the denomination. It is also incumbent upon synod to listen carefully and to seek discernment through both what local churches are telling the broader church by their actions and what the Spirit is teaching the church as a whole. Classis GR East believes that the way forward for the CRC is for synod to take whatever steps are needed to recognize different perspectives and convictions on LGBTQ+ matters that honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, and then implement a "local discernment" approach.

C. Upon what basis does Classis GR East believe that "local discernment" is practically feasible, given the deeply polarizing nature of this debate?

As answer to this question, we offer the testimony of one of Classis GR East's local churches, Neland Avenue CRC. At the heart of Neland's story is the reality that its members represent the full range of perspectives on

LGBTQ+ matters. In this way, Neland is a microcosm of Classis GR East and the denomination. We are hopeful that Neland's willingness to share their continuing story of discovering the cost and blessing of unity can give the broader church confidence that it is possible to live and flourish within the tension of differing perspectives.

As detailed in the communication sent by Classis GR East to Synod 2021, Neland has engaged in a decade-long process of intentional learning, listening, and conversation about LGBTQ+ matters. Neland, at this point in its journey, has found a way to be united together in the midst of their differences. Yet they acknowledge that it has not been easy—they have made mistakes, hurt each other, struggled to forgive. They don't claim to always have done the right thing at the right time—but they have persevered out of love for each other and from a spirit of trust that permeates their life together.

That spirit of trust requires a willingness to live within tension, and a humility that remains open to the words, thoughts, and feelings of others. As one Neland member wrote in a letter to council, "I appreciate what our chair of council wrote in his recent letter to the congregation, about living in the tensions. Our community and unity in Christ are more important than divisions over this. But of course it won't be easy. So, I guess I'm writing to let you know how it will be hard for me. I'm OK with differing views among Neland leaders on issues. . . . But usually we agree on what sin is, and can focus on encouraging each other to do what is right. I honestly don't know how to resolve this. I'll keep listening for the Holy Spirit and to others, and keep praying for wisdom for council."

Yet the simple fact is that attempting to have an open conversation about such a pastorally fraught topic creates the potential for hurting each other. Some Neland members felt that the conversation "seemed designed to prepare the church for the change more than to discern what we were going to do as a congregation," and that "it did not give much room for those who sustained a traditional opinion relative to what appears to be scriptural imperatives. There was even communal risk of ostracism in public forums if such discussion was proffered." One member said that they felt "very much alone. I sense that if you do not agree on this issue, many view you as being 'conservative' and a lesser person and [lesser] Christian."

Others, too, felt misunderstood: "It has been very hurtful to be treated as if I had an agenda. I've committed many years of my life to loving young people the best way I can, to help them see that Jesus loves them too. People were making assumptions about what I believed without ever talking to me about it."

Some "appreciated Neland's gentle approach toward those who have had questions or concerns about the decision to affirm same-sex marriage. Although some have left Neland because of the decision, Neland has tried to be respectful toward those who hold differing views, including those like us who have questions and concerns, but do not have a settled view on same-sex marriage."

But for others the pain of the conversations was intensely personal: "The conversation regarding the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people has been a very painful process. It is very traumatizing to be a part of Neland, and especially the CRC denomination, where your children are a 'topic,' a 'discussion,' an 'issue.' We never imagined that some of the people of Neland, who made

baptismal promises to our children, would see things differently years later because of the way God made them.” A Neland member who is gay recalled the trepidation of going to church: “My now wife and I didn’t know who was OK with us and who would be judging us if we took communion or prayed at the front of church or served in any way.”

For one longtime Neland member, the conversation brought back painful memories of division in their childhood church and raised fears of repeating history: “Our church family that we had been a part of was split, torn asunder by unholy argument. Opposing sides began to see and treat each other as enemies. To many, especially the younger generation, the light of God’s love was extinguished. Their faith faltered and for many never recovered. When one believer tells another believer that God has no place for you among us, the wounds cut deep. Love of neighbor and communion of saints begin to sound like so many empty words. . . . Should synod decide on a binding proscription, the denomination and congregations would be torn apart and the casualty list would be long. I covet a church where we may not all share the same understanding of Bible passages but where we share the love of God that binds us together, dedicated to one mission: to serve God by serving each other and God’s world, that the world may ‘know we are Christians by our love.’”

Indeed, for all who offered their reflections, love is a central theme of their experience at Neland. And, for all, that love—for God, for each other, for the church, for the world—motivates them to persevere in unity.

“The gay Christians I had come to know were more mature, more committed, and more self-sacrificing for their faith than I think I could ever claim to be. They had wrestled with God and their faith in ways I never had to, and they continued to serve the body of Christ in spite of the rejection they so often experienced. So when we began the discussions at Neland, I felt the pull of tradition, but I had also had my heart softened by people I had come to know and love.”

“I have come to love so many young people in my own congregation. Some of them identify as LGBTQ+. Am I to reject them? Tell them God says they are wrong? We have had God’s covenant children come through who are straight and gay. None of them have chosen their identities. Straight and gay, some of them have chosen the church, and some of them have turned away from the church. Is God’s plan for me to look at some of them who have committed to their faith in him and send them packing until they learn to ignore the way they were created?”

“We feel so much love for our Neland faith family and those who are our allies there, so we are still members. We love Neland and want the best for Neland, and they in turn have cared for us and our children on many different levels.”

“Having the space to care for our congregation in this way has given us the opportunity to hold each other in love amid the tension of disagreement, and to experience that our unity is not found in agreement but in something much more awesome and mysterious: Christ himself. It has provided a way for us to give witness to the fact that in Christ all things hold together.”

“I really believe that folks to whom you have made commitments when you make profession of faith, join a body in membership, and baptize children deserve to be sustained in spite of differences of opinion. When I

ponder the most significant reason for us to stay at Neland, it relates to our calling. My concern is that the denomination does not see what I believe is our single greatest imperative—and that is to be significantly engaged in the lives of folks near the corner of Neland Avenue and Watkins Street, creating generations of folks who see kingdom first. I hope everyone who has walked with us at Neland will remember that we were about that most of all.”

“I have been so heartened by the love and support of my Neland family. They, more than members of my own blood family, have been there to talk, hug, cry, and advocate for people like me in the CRC. Side by side, we have learned about this life journey we’re all on together, and even if we disagree about biblical interpretation, we can still worship and serve together.”

Even with all the talk of love and unity, Neland’s journey is still complicated—both for the congregation and for its individual members, as one college student shared:

“I am a queer individual. My journey has not been necessarily easy or smooth, but it has been significantly less detrimental than some of my friends’ experiences have been. I no longer try to hide who I am. If I am fearfully and wonderfully made, then that means all of me, not just the parts that jive with the traditional Christian faith. I will admit that being at Neland has been somewhat liberating. We have conversations in grace and understanding, and thoughts are shared in an open community. . . . Being at Neland is simultaneously frustrating. If it takes me coming out to Neland to try and convince people that queer individuals have as much right to God-given joy in marriage and intimate relationships, then I will absolutely do it, and this is me coming out. Dear Neland, all I ask for is your love. I don’t want schooling, I don’t want verses plucked from biblical passages to attempt to convince me out of my sexuality. Sexuality is not a choice, and I believe I am no less a child of God simply because I desire intimate companionship with someone of the same sex.”

Neland’s story, in the words of its own members, takes away any sentimental, romanticized notions of what it means to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). But it is possible. And it is the cost and blessing of being united with Christ.

#### **IV. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) and confessional status**

This overture is singularly focused on the “local discernment” recommendation above and is not intended to be an exhaustive critique of the HSR. Classis GR East does have concerns with the HSR report, especially concerns regarding the biblical theological framework employed by the HSR, the quality of engagement between the HSR and science, and the pastoral ramifications of the HSR report. Classis GR East forgoes any further elaboration of those concerns here, given that these concerns have already been addressed in other Classis GR East overtures sent to Synod 2021.

There is, however, one other concern with the HSR that must be briefly reiterated here—namely, the HSR’s proposal regarding confessional status. Classis GR East has grave concerns about the committee’s attempts to make the CRC’s teachings on LGBTQ+ matters confessional, including but not limited to the following:

- The historical and theological meaning of “confessional status” and “*status confessionis*” is unclear in the report, as well as in the church, and requires significantly more study before any serious consideration can be given to applying it to matters of human sexuality, especially as it relates to “salvation status.”
- It is historically inaccurate to claim that the committee’s theological positions already have confessional status, since synod has not made such a declaration to date. Endorsing the HSR’s proposal regarding confessional status will establish harmful precedent for the CRC on how it addresses controversial issues, as well as dangerous new norms for establishing confessional positions.
- The practical personal and pastoral impact of linking “confessional status” to the HSR’s list of sins is not adequately understood and addressed. For example: What is the “salvation status” and membership status of same-sex married members, divorced and remarried members, those who are cohabiting, those who have had premarital or extramarital sex, those involved in pornography, members and officebearers who support full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the church? What consequences might “confessional status” have for persons who support full inclusion and are employed by denominational institutions, or serve as officebearers in local churches, or are (or become) confessing members of those churches? Would agreement with the HSR be a requirement for profession of faith, ordination to office, and employment status in denominational agencies, offices, and educational institutions? What would happen with significant numbers of CRC pastors who disagree with the 1973 position (in both directions—some believing same-sex orientation itself is sinful, and others believing same-sex marriage is permissible)?
- Elevating the CRC’s position on this ethical matter from pastoral advice to the level of a confessional interpretation would divide a denomination so clearly not of one mind on this matter, and it would be spiritually harmful to LGBTQ+ members (particularly LGBTQ+ youth), their families, and their congregations.

## V. Overture recommendations

In an effort to foster mutual respect and create a way for Christian Reformed members and congregations to move forward together in the mission to which God has called us, despite differences around LGBTQ+ matters, Classis Grand Rapids East overtures synod to do the following:

A. Adopt in principle a “local discernment” approach to differences over LGBTQ+ matters and ordination; namely, to declare that with respect to differences of biblical interpretation regarding LGBTQ+ matters and same-sex marriage, every classis shall respect the prerogative of its constituent churches to call and ordain officebearers according to their own biblical convictions.

B. Appoint a study committee to articulate the best biblical rationale for “traditional” and “affirming” viewpoints regarding LGBTQ+ matters in ways that are acceptable (least objectionable) to the proponents of the respective options.

1. Throughout its deliberations, committee members will interact with each other and engage one another's opposing viewpoints in ways that model excellent scholarship, deep listening, respectful dialogue, and Christian forbearance and humility. The committee's final report will include summaries of key interactions and engagements to give synod the best possible understanding of how these differing approaches seek to honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God.
  2. The committee's composition will include LGBTQ+ members of the CRC who together represent the full range of viewpoints regarding LGBTQ+ matters so that the committee will be "talking with" and not merely "talking about" fellow LGBTQ+ church members.
  3. The committee's objective is to recommend that synod affirm that the approaches articulated in the report constitute (in the language of Synod 1995 with respect to women in office) "two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God."
  4. The committee will submit its final report to Synod 2025 (or to a subsequent synod should the committee decide to submit an interim report to Synod 2024 or 2025; one goal of an interim report would be to give synod the opportunity to dialogue with and provide feedback to the committee).
- C. Request that the denomination-wide prayer initiative (declared for June 2021-June 2022 by the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA in May 2021) be continued and expanded to include opportunities for listening to one another, in order to deepen our unity in Christ in the process of articulating and implementing this "local discernment" approach.

*Summary grounds:*

1. This "local discernment" approach is one that the Christian Reformed Church has successfully employed before with differences over women in office (Church Order Article 3, Supplement).
2. A "local discernment" approach would acknowledge, in practice, that many members of the CRC use time-honored Reformed principles of biblical interpretation and come to differing conclusions than those of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) regarding matters of sexual orientation, gender identity, and same-sex marriage.
3. A "local discernment" approach would underscore our true source of unity in the CRC.
4. A "local discernment" approach would align the church more with its historic commitment to never bind the conscience more than is absolutely necessary.
5. A "local discernment" approach, with its acknowledgement of differing perspectives and convictions in the CRC, will free local Christian Reformed congregations to do ministry with our LGBTQ+ members and inquirers in a more welcoming environment.

Classis Grand Rapids East  
Robert A. Arbogast, stated clerk

## Appendix

Below is a summary of guidelines for interpreting Scripture, based on interpretive principles articulated in the CRCNA's Synod 1972 report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority. This appendix is Section 4 in the Classis Grand Rapids East Report on biblical and theological support for same-sex marriage. That report can be found at [classisgreast.org/downloads/ssmstudyreport2016.pdf](http://classisgreast.org/downloads/ssmstudyreport2016.pdf).

### **Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture According to a Reformed Hermeneutic**

As we seek to discern the Spirit's guidance on any topic, especially those that are controversial, we must always aim for the best understanding of Scripture, since it is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our committee maintains that a Reformed hermeneutic provides the reader with the best and most faithful understanding of Scripture. Therefore, we adhere to the interpretive principles articulated in the CRCNA's Synod 1972 report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority (Supplement Report 44, hereafter referred to as "Synod 1972 report") and in other works identifying a Reformed hermeneutic of Scripture. While we do not wish to repeat all that is found in the Synod 1972 report, we believe that it will be helpful to provide a summary of the key principles. The next section summarizing current scholarship on the relevant biblical passages will describe interpretive approaches more specific to the topic and passages. This section offers a basic overview of general interpretive principles that Reformed Christians should use when interpreting Scripture or when evaluating interpretations of Scripture. While applying these principles will not guarantee immediate and uniform agreement, they at least provide us with a basis for better conversation and a way to reduce unhealthy or distorted uses of Scripture. Therefore, we identify the following guidelines as essential principles to interpreting Scripture:

**1. God reveals in two forms:** The Reformed tradition holds that God has given two forms of revelation: general and special (Belgic Confession, Art. 2). Knowledge gained from the study of God's general revelation assists us in rightly interpreting Scripture. Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing the sciences as a form of revelation given by God and a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate (Synod 1972 report, p. 540). Findings of science may be the occasion for reexamining a traditional interpretation but should not be allowed to "control the interpretation of Scripture" (Synod 1972 report, pp. 515-516). God's special revelation must be taken as the highest authority, since it reveals God's saving work.

**2. The Bible is God's inspired and authoritative revelation:** The Bible is God's special revelation, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It therefore addresses the whole of humanity with divine authority. Scripture's authority is to be consistently applied and practiced in the ministry of the church and in every sphere of life and every human situation. This must be done in accordance with the purpose Scripture identifies for itself.

**3. Scripture's overall purpose is the redemptive revelation of God in Jesus Christ:** Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, and the redemptive activity of

God is the central theme of the whole of Scripture and every piece of Scripture. The key for the proper understanding of Scripture is to acknowledge this purpose. Any interpretation must do justice to the intent of Scripture to point to Jesus Christ as its unifying theme (Synod 1972 report, pp. 508-509). While Scripture touches every sphere of human life, it does so “in its own way and from its own perspective” (Synod 1972 report, p. 515). The Bible cannot simply be read as a book of rules or timeless statements but, rather, as the story of redemption.

**4. Scripture is both unified and diverse:** The Bible has an organic unity that can be properly described as the covenant history of redemption summarized by the structure of Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation. This redemptive history, however, has been progressively revealed over time by means of different languages, literary forms, and personalities in different historical, social, and cultural situations that addressed different topics at different stages in redemptive history. In addition, further revelation and greater clarity was given in the New Testament. Recognizing this organic nature of Scripture’s inspiration acknowledges that God accommodated what he revealed to human limitations, cultural understandings, and the world-views of the biblical writers in their historical settings.

**5. Scripture was originally addressed to people in specific cultural and historical contexts:** Since Bible passages were originally addressed to definite situations and to people living under particular circumstances (affecting what is said and how it was said), we must work to know as well as we can the original setting, using all the evidence the Bible itself provides and the knowledge provided by historical, geographical, linguistic, and archaeological research (Synod 1972 report, pp. 510-511). The interpreter must grasp the situations and concepts that were well known to those originally addressed. While all passages still contain an authoritative message for us, the form of how particular passages are applied will differ based on the difference in circumstances. The Synod 1972 report offers the example that “the manner in which [Old Testament law] applies has drastically changed” not only because it has been fulfilled in Christ, but also because Christians no longer live under the same circumstances (p. 511). A good interpretation of Scripture will identify the degree of continuity and discontinuity between the original context and today’s context.

**6. The meaning of Scripture must be understood in its grammatical and literary context:** Interpreting Scripture requires the reader to draw out (“exegete”) as definitively as possible the biblical author’s intended meaning from the words, sentences, grammar, and syntax in the context in which they were given by the divine author. This requires using documents contemporaneous with the biblical writings to shed light on meanings and usage of words and phrases. It also requires that one understands biblical passages in their literary forms (e.g., figures of speech, oracles, and commands) and genres (e.g., letters, poetry, prophecy, and law). This principle disallows one to read into (“eisegete”) Scripture whatever we want it to say. The Reformed tradition has insisted on the “plain” or “genuine” sense of the text as an essential way to combat allegorical or subjective readings of Scripture.

**7. Scripture interprets Scripture:** Any particular passage must be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture. The reader must recognize how a given passage fits within the progressive unfolding revelation. Likewise, biblical texts that quote, echo, or allude to other biblical texts must be understood in light of those texts. Scripture itself interprets as it narrates and unfolds. Any interpretation (and reexamination of an interpretation) must be judged in terms of whether it agrees with Scripture's own interpretation of itself and its view of reality.

**8. More obscure passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of clearer ones:** The Bible is clear on its most central matters related to the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, on other matters there are "things that are hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). The analogy of Scripture teaches that the whole of Scripture is the framework for its parts, and the parts of Scripture illuminate the overall message. There must be coherence between the parts and the whole. The reader must consider the cumulative teaching on a particular issue and how it fits with the whole of Scripture. A consistent and repeated perspective from a number of texts leads to a more definitive conclusion on a given topic (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus). On other topics, the cumulative force of the scope and teaching of Scripture as a whole may lead to the best interpretation, even if no specific part of Scripture explicitly states the teaching (e.g., slavery). The clarity on a specific matter is based on the number of passages addressing the issue, the distribution of those passages throughout Scripture, and the unanimity or correspondence among those passages.

**9. The Holy Spirit illuminates and guides the faithful reader of Scripture:** The Reformed tradition, following John Calvin and others, has insisted that the interpretation and application of Scripture is dependent on the Holy Spirit (e.g., Belgic Confession, Art. 5; Synod 1972 report, p. 504). The "inner testimony of the Spirit" enables the reader to receive God's Word as authoritative and to have a receptive attitude toward the message God wants to be heard and embraced. The same Spirit who inspired the biblical writers also "sheds light" on the texts as Spirit-dwelt Christians seek to live in light of Scripture's teaching.

For other summaries of Reformed hermeneutical principles, see also John W. Cooper, *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1991), pp. 13-24; and the chapter titled "Interpreting the Bible in Times of Controversy," in Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster-John Knox, 2009, rev.), pp. 52- 65.

For additional materials on the principles of interpreting Scripture, see the following:

Barthomelew, C.G., and Goheen, M.W. *The Drama of Scripture*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2014.

Strauss, M.L. *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2011.

Fee, G.D. and Stuart, D. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014.

Duvall, J.S. and Hays, J.D. *Grasping God's Word*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012.

## **Overture 56: Withhold Action on the Human Sexuality Report, Allow Councils to Make Their Own Decisions in Their Own Unique Settings**

### **I. Background**

The council of the Akron (Ohio) Christian Reformed Church overtures synod to withhold action on the Human Sexuality Report because any affirmation of this report will be unnecessarily divisive. We also urge synod to allow local congregations to make their own decisions concerning LGBTQ issues, according to their own unique ministry settings.

We believe that imposing a uniformity within the denomination where we all think and act in the same way is impossible in this age. Our churches are increasingly diverse, with fewer of the common touchstones that breed a common way of thinking.

It seems to us, therefore, that unity is the ability to recognize our brothers and sisters in the people with whom we worship, and who gather in our larger ecclesiastical bodies. We are united by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, not by our own intellectual assent to a set of ideas.

Our consistory does not view the synodical report as reflecting where Jesus, the King, and the Holy Spirit have led our congregation. We recognize that the Holy Spirit is the one who leads LGBTQ people into our midst. We did not go out shopping for this kind of diversity. We did not hang any particular flag in the front of our building. We did not make any declaration of openness.

Instead, the Holy Spirit gathered increasingly diverse people to us. The Holy Spirit led us to stand in the communion circle, week after week, seeing the body of Christ in our fellow believers, as we received the body and blood of Christ in the elements. The Holy Spirit led us to pray together, to sing together, to worship together, to cry together, to rejoice together. We learned to welcome whomever the Holy Spirit brings to us, which has reshaped us, by the power of King Jesus, into the body of Jesus Christ in our obscure little church in Akron, Ohio.

As a congregation we do not all agree on LGBTQ issues. There are those among us who have grave reservations about endorsing something like gay marriage. We do not all think alike. We are not united as a congregation in that manner. However, we all have learned to love whomever God's Holy Spirit brings to us. We've learned to discern the face of Jesus in every person who stands in the communion circle.

One of the features of the report that we find particularly troubling is the obsession it has with sex. We don't know of any lesbian or gay couples worshipping with us who define their relationship in terms of sex. Instead, they testify about their love for one another.

The other problem we have with this report is that a cultural concern has crept into our minds amplifying its significance far beyond a sensible position.

This leads us to wonder, "Why do we need a report on human sexuality, that desires to declare its findings as confessionally normative? Why haven't we written confessionally normative reports about climate change and environmental care? Why haven't we written confessionally normative reports about the systemic problem of racism in our churches, or about issues

concerning the wealthy in relationship with those who are not wealthy? Why haven't we written confessionally normative reports about business ethics? Why this issue? Those other issues truly are greater biblical concerns than LGBTQ issues.

We have heard some say that they cannot remain in a denomination with churches who have a different idea about LGBTQ issues. We have heard them say that they cannot stay in a denomination that allows the ordination of gay people. But we wonder, "Why not?" No one is threatening them with confessional unity if they do not agree with what some other congregation is doing. While at the same time, there are those within our churches, who are being threatened to be driven out if they cannot sign a new confessional standard that condemns gay marriage and ordination.

We believe that our congregation is called to love the neighbor that the Holy Spirit gathers to us, and one way that we do this is with a radical hospitality. Who are we to judge the people that God draws to us? How dare we to try and limit who comes to the table, or who is baptized, or who may serve within our congregation? If the Spirit is the one who creates us, how may we reject those who have a humble heart and who are called by the Spirit to worship and serve?

Radical hospitality is real and necessary in the church. Whomever the Spirit draws into communion, we serve them, and we bless them.

One of the ways we are able to arrive at this kind of thought is by watching our children. We look at their faith. We ask ourselves, "Whom would they exclude? Whom would they shun?" And this simple exercise opens our hearts and minds to diversity so that we may welcome all of God's gifts with great joy.

Finally, we find it rather dangerous to begin to claim that synodical reports and decisions are confessionally normative. We are raising to the level of orthodoxy a time-bound concern that will not stand the test of time.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What then must a Christian believe?" It answers, "Everything God promises us in the gospel. That gospel is summarized for us in the articles of our Christian faith—a creed beyond doubt, and confessed throughout the world" (Q. and A. 22).

Then, in Q. and A. 23, it reveals that these articles are found in the Apostle's Creed. But now, this report asks us to profess, "I believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the Human Sexuality Report of the CRC." Such an impulse trivializes our creeds and confessions.

A primary impetus for us to send this overture is a powerful essay from one of our members that explains what it's like to be a married lesbian in the Christian church. We have included it as an appendix to our overture.

## II. Overture

The council of the Akron CRC overtures synod to withhold action on the Human Sexuality Report.

### *Grounds:*

1. Any affirmation of this report, especially any proposal to give the report confessional status, will be unnecessarily divisive to the church.

2. Any affirmation of this report will harm Akron CRC's ministry to love and discern the face of Jesus in whomever God's Holy Spirit brings to us.

Council of the Akron (Ohio) CRC  
Jim Brownlee, clerk

*Note:* This overture was submitted to the March meeting of Classis Lake Erie but was not adopted.

## Appendix

### Response – Human Sexuality

*In response to the recent publication of a draft report from the committee on human sexuality, and synod's subsequent decision to postpone formal, collective, discussion on it, let me first say thank you for being willing to step back, take a breath, and not rush to hasty decisions.*

*I'm a lesbian, married to another woman with whom I've been partnered for 24+ years. I worship at a Christian Reformed church in my area, and I am eternally grateful for its welcome of me, my spouse, and all the baggage I bring. That welcome has not always been present at other churches I've attended, and I have faithfully and regularly attended church for my entire life.*

*In a nod to the apostle Paul offering his credentials to the Philippians, I'll offer mine to you. Among other things, I was raised in the Evangelical Christian tradition, had daily devotions and prayed regularly (and still do). I led Bible studies and gave talks in my Sunday school classes. As a part-time campus minister, I disciplined other Christians. I graduated from a well-respected Evangelical Christian liberal arts college and later attended a university that awarded me a master's degree in biblical counseling. I was, and am, a Hebrew of the Hebrews.*

*Within this evangelical environment, I was taught that homosexuality, or at least homosexual "activity," was wrong, an abomination, something to be delivered from and/or overcome, and certainly something that greatly displeased God. Marriage, and any intimate relationship, was only acceptable between one man and one woman. I believed and repeated that doctrine even as I was struggling with the possibility, and later the confirmation, that I was a lesbian.*

*What was curious to me in the context of this one-man-one-woman marriage rhetoric was that Scripture was replete with contradictions to this vaunted archetype. The patriarchs, whom the church has held up as exemplars of faithfulness and obedience to God, had numerous offspring from multiple wives and concubines. In the seemingly rare event that this contradiction was actually addressed within my evangelical circles, it was conveniently explained as being a function of the culture and times in which these patriarchs lived, and was a manifestation of the differences between the "old covenant" and the "new covenant."*

*At the time, I chalked up that explanation, along with similar hermeneutical gymnastics used to explain other seeming scriptural contradictions, to church leaders and "experts" having a deeper understanding of the nuances of Scripture and its interpretation. Clearly, I surmised, I was not their equal in discerning matters such as these.*

*I now realize that those explanations were, at best, a woeful and misguided attempt to be faithful to Scripture, and at worst, a cut/paste regurgitation of the*

*made-up stuff the church has been promulgating for years and passing off as sound theology.*

*Trust me when I say that I have wrestled with this issue—the intersection of same-sex relationships and faith—for a very long and angst-filled time. After a while, I just referred to this as “the struggle,” which was a decades-long slog through a quagmire of questions, long-held beliefs, competing emotions, and what felt like the stages of grief. Wondering what God would think of me, how my family would react, if my church would still welcome me, how my current and future employment might be impacted, were all considerations that wreaked havoc on my psyche as I struggled with this issue.*

*It’s difficult to dislodge decades of church teachings and messages couched as righteous biblical instruction. Over the years, those tentacled teachings meander into the crevices of our thinking, bind themselves securely to our emotions, and take up residence within our dearly held beliefs. To question or contradict them would seem to incite insurrection, an upending of all—or at least much—of what is thought to be true and right.*

*So the arrival of where I am today—happily married, loving Jesus, out to my family and friends, gainfully employed, actively involved in my church, and working out what it means to embody the kingdom of God in this world—has been a slow progression. That progression from then to now has been greatly aided by the experience of God’s grace lived out tofor me through my pastor, church members, and others.*

*I recognize that various Christian faith traditions, and even individuals within those traditions, read and interpret Scriptures differently. My reading of Scripture, however, suggests an overarching theme of loving God with your heart, soul, and mind, and loving others as yourself. Jesus tells us, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:40). The consistent, drumbeat message that runs through the law, the prophets, and the gospels seems to reveal what God deems most important.*

*Throughout its history, the church has had to address, and sometimes change course on, wide-ranging issues fraught with social and political implications. For example, and with some exceptions, it took the church in the United States a long time to denounce slavery, to view racial minorities as equal to Caucasians, to accept mixed-race couples, to view women as equal to men in ministry, to acknowledge that divorce was a sad but sometimes necessary decision in the course a relationship, to recognize our role in the rightful stewardship of the earth. Scripture was cited as whole doctrines were established around these issues that most of us now see as antiquated and long-since resolved (although there are, obviously, churches who still hold to views that many have since denounced).*

*Given this lens of history, the experience of grace offered to me, and my belief in the preeminence of the two commandments (love God, love others) which run through Scripture, I now wonder about those who wish to make pronouncements as to what God does/doesn’t think about same-sex relationships/marriage. I wonder, for instance, if churches/individuals have so successfully reached the pinnacle of fulfilling the commandments of loving God and loving others that they can now turn their attention to what seem to be lesser concerns like same-sex relationships. I wonder if they believe that the acceptance of same-sex relationships would somehow threaten the sovereignty and purpose of God and God’s kingdom. And, apart from the fact that it is politically fraught, and socially contentious, particularly within certain Christian circles, I wonder why this issue consumes so much time, commands so much scrutiny, and seems to provoke so much consternation.*

*My hope is that synod and those in CRC leadership would carefully and prayerfully consider the Human Sexuality Report and its implications in light of these wonderings. More specifically, I hope synod gives wide berth to the Holy Spirit's movement in individual churches and respects those churches' decisions about this issue as they prayerfully discern the Holy Spirit's leading for their respective congregation.*



## Communication 1: Classis Minnkota

The churches of Classis Minnkota affirm that men and women are created by God with equality in essence and dignity but with distinction in some roles. We praise God for the beautiful diversity he created when he made us male and female. These distinct roles are taught in Scripture, derive from God's creative will, and are to be manifest in complementary roles in the family and church. This belief is reflected in an accurate translation of the Belgic Confession, Article 30, which reads, "when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy." (See the original French wording, which refers to persons using the masculine gender.) This belief is therefore not rooted in chauvinism or patriarchy but in Scripture and in our historic confession of faith. It is our hope and prayer that this communication will provide a clear and respectful understanding of our convictions in this matter.

We believe that men and women are created equal as imagebearers of God and as heirs of salvation. We also believe that men and women complement each other in mutually enriching ways and that God has given each gender specific callings in the church and home. We seek to honor and glorify God by celebrating and using the gifts and abilities he has given to us within the roles he has established for us.

*A. As a classis we affirm the following convictions:*

1. That men and women equally bear the image of God and are called to serve him throughout their lives (Gen. 1:27-28).
2. That we are to follow Christ's example when he honored and respected women during his earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42) and as he continues to equip them for service in his church today (1 Cor. 12:4-7).
3. That the roles for men and women in the church must be defined solely by the Word of God and not by human ideologies such as feminism, male chauvinism, patriarchy, or sexist oppression (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
4. That from the beginning of creation God assigned headship to males in the family and in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:12-13; 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).
5. That the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" and then grounded this argument in the good created order (1 Tim. 2:12-13). The church, therefore, should not ordain women to its authoritative offices.

6. That the purpose of spiritual gifts is not self-fulfillment but service to God and others, to the end that God receives all the glory (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26).
7. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women is contrary to Scripture.

*B. We also offer the following observations:*

1. That even though Synod 1995 declared that both complementarian and egalitarian views are faithful interpretations of the Word of God, synodical practice since that time has become markedly egalitarian, making it difficult for complementarians to participate in good conscience.
2. That the complementarian position is held by many male and female members and by other officebearers, churches, and classes in the CRCNA.
3. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women has resulted in offense, division, strife, loss of members, and our expulsion from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council in 1997.
4. That celebration of the egalitarian position and practice through video and song (as done at Synod 2018) causes offense and pricks the consciences of those who hold to the historic complementarian position regarding women in church office.

As members of the body of Christ in the CRCNA, Classis Minnkota does not present this communication in order to offend our brothers and sisters who hold to the egalitarian view; rather we wish to explain that our convictions are rooted in the Word of God. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Minnkota

LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

*Note:* Classis Minnkota also submitted this communication to Synods 2020 and 2021, so it was decided to include the communication once here for the attention of Synod 2022.

## **Communication 2: Classis Hamilton**

Classis Hamilton met on March 10, 2022, to discuss overtures regarding denominational leadership structure and the work done by the Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT). We would let Synod 2022 know that it is our hope that the COD use the ministry structure endorsed by the COD in October 2020, which includes a national executive director in each of our two countries, and we share our thoughts and concerns in the grounds listed below.

*Grounds:*

1. The CRCNA Canada Corporation's request to allow time for input from Canadian stakeholders (citing specific concerns with proposed Structure and Leadership Taskforce [SALT] structure) was outvoted at the COD, with Canadian members having a minority vote.

2. A national conversation including delegates from every Canadian classis revealed there is very little support for the SALT structure in Canada.
3. Organizational changes of this magnitude and significance should, at the least, be reviewed and confirmed by synod rather than being adopted and acted upon by the COD. The significance of such changes outweighs the urgency to fill leadership roles.
4. Current and previous organizational structures (i.e., with only a Canadian director) have failed to fully provide the freedom necessary to articulate a localized and culturally relevant expression of ministry in Canada.
5. The terms of four previous Canadian ministries directors/executive directors of Canadian ministries have ended prematurely and under strain or duress due to an unbalanced organizational structure that hampered their ability to direct ministries in Canada.
6. The SALT structure disregards the lessons learned by other binational Christian denominations (Catholic Church, Mennonite Church, etc.), all of which found it necessary to give significant independence to Canadian churches for both CRA compliance and ministry effectiveness.
7. Although the joint ministry agreements (JMAs) supporting the contextualized ministry in Canada are purported to be significantly stronger, the lack of transparency that results from the confidential nature of these JMAs makes accountability difficult and undermines trust. There is no clarity on whether these JMAs are in compliance with CRA Guidance CG 004.
8. The SALT report, in referring to the CRCNA Canada Corporation as a subsidiary of the larger CRCNA organization, is not helpful to the governance discussion surrounding the place of that corporation within the broader CRCNA framework and is also incorrect because it does not sufficiently acknowledge the governance autonomy that the CRCNA Canada Corporation must legally maintain within that framework.
9. The organizational structure proposed by SALT still puts CRCNA Canada at risk of the Canada Revenue Agency's terminating the church's charitable organization status because it is unclear whether there is sufficient direction and control by CRCNA Canada over all its activities for which it issues charitable donation receipts.
10. There remain overlapping responsibilities for directing culturally contextualized ministry in Canada within the SALT structure.
11. Having two coequal executive directors, one responsible for leading the CRCNA U.S. Corporation and the other responsible for leading the CRCNA Canada Corporation, would also ensure that neither corporation can end up controlling the other.
12. A structure that includes two national and equal ministry directors would inherently foster the kind of collaborative binational and inter-organizational approach to the fulfillment of the CRCNA's ecclesiastical vision and Ministry Plan that the SALT report envisions.

Classis Hamilton

Gillian Bruce, president, Classis Interim Committee

*Note:* The Classis Hamilton stated clerk position is currently vacant.

### Communication 3: Council of Bethel CRC, Listowel, Ontario

Bethel CRC of Listowel, Ontario, wishes to express to synod its appreciation for the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. It is clear to the reader that a great deal of effort has been made by the members of the committee to faithfully reflect the truth about human sexuality, which is presented to us in God's Word.

It is our desire that the recommendations made by the committee would be accepted by synod, and that all members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America would be encouraged to study the report and to accept the positions toward human sexuality that the report articulates.

Council of Bethel CRC, Listowel, Ontario  
Wendy van Leeuwen, clerk

*Note:* The above communication was presented to the meeting of Classis Huron on February 16, 2022, but was not adopted.

### Communication 4: Classis Georgetown

We, the churches of Classis Georgetown, submit the following communication to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church:

1. We **affirm** that the report presented by the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (i.e., the "Report") accurately reflects the teachings of **Scripture** and the **pastoral care** necessary as it relates to the following areas:
  - God's design for marriage
  - God's design for the family
  - God's design for gender
  - God's design for human sexuality and sexual behavior
2. We **affirm** that the proper teachings on these matters, presented in the Report, are already **confessional** in status (i.e., *status confessionis*), have always been, and will continue to be so.
3. We **affirm** that the various assemblies of the Christian Reformed Church (councils, classes, synods, and extensions thereof) have the scriptural responsibility, confessional duty, and logistical power under Church Order to enact earnest, truth-filled, and loving **discipline** related to these matters—one of the marks of the true church of Jesus Christ. The CRCNA must be willing to govern itself by the "pure Word of God" and bear this mark for the sake of those God has entrusted under our care.

"The **true church** can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it **practices church discipline** for correcting faults. **In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.** By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church. . . ."

(Belgic Confession, Art. 29, emphasis ours)

May we, the CRCNA, be “recognized” as such a church by our Lord—both now and on the day of his return.

Classis Georgetown  
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

## **Communication 5: Classis Toronto**

### **I. Introductory explanation**

Classis Toronto sends this communication to synod because it is our wish for the delegates to Synod 2022 to hear and understand what one of our churches (First CRC, Toronto) has been experiencing and what they have come to biblically understand in their ministries. Though we are not in complete agreement with all the content of the communication from First CRC, Toronto, we hope that this leads to greater understanding of the potential deep impact that decisions flowing out of the Human Sexuality Report might have on a number of churches like First CRC. We pray that this will help to lead to unity in our denomination. The rest of this communication remains as written by First CRC. We have left it in their voice for best effect.

### **II. Communication**

From our beginning, people of different sexual orientations have belonged in our congregation. We have wrestled with the quiet death of a beloved member from HIV/ AIDS; been discipled by the chaplain of a prominent HIV hospice; received grace-filled, Spirit-led, and hard-to-hear sermons, examined the biblical text and story carefully again and again; held numerous sessions on “What does the Bible say about homosexuality?”; listened pastorally to the experiences of gay and lesbian members; prayerfully sought the Lord’s leading together with classis and denominational colleagues; suffered the departure of beloved members of our congregation; and received and wept over vitriolic messages of condemnation from believers we did not know—but, most of all, we have been blessed by the witness, fruits of the Spirit, gifts, and faithfulness of gay, lesbian, and straight members of the congregation.

We wanted to take a moment to tell you about our community—our faith and witness—all of which will be deeply affected by the decisions made at Synod 2022.

An event that brought our congregation to the floor of synod took place in 2003, when synod decided to withhold action on an overture from another classis calling for special discipline of the council of First CRC Toronto, preferring instead that Classis Toronto address the matter in the context of previous decisions and because “a major assembly shall deal only with those matters which concern its churches in common or which could not be finished in the minor assemblies” (Church Order Art. 28-b).

Classis Toronto then engaged in lengthy dialogue, discernment, and prayer with our church. The matter was resolved when Classis Toronto accepted the assurances from the council of First CRC Toronto that we would tailor our ministry to be within synodical guidelines, which effectively meant that we not elect a deacon or elder who is gay or lesbian and

in a relationship. Many of us have felt deprived of their leadership in those roles; since then we have been in regular dialogue about that decision, and we gladly count ourselves as an active, contributing congregation in this denomination.

Our anchor in biblical reflection, pastoral care, prayerful discernment, community ministry, and the leading of the Holy Spirit has been our 2002 Statement of Faith and Action as a congregation, inscribed prominently in the entryway to the church building:

*We believe that all people are created in the image of God and are unconditionally loved by God. We are committed to embrace people of all ages, races, genders, sexual orientation, differing abilities, ethnic origins, and economic circumstances. We affirm that all who seek to live faithfully, that is confessing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, are full participants in the life, membership, sacraments and leadership of this congregation. Our desire is to build community in the midst of differences and strive to honour God's greatest commandment, to love one another as Christ loves us.*

This statement of faith and action has done more than make us a one-issue church, known for our welcome of LGBTQ+ members. It has made us truly reflect and challenge ourselves to be as open and hospitable as the statement reads. To embrace new immigrants and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, to welcome visitors into our services from the many rental groups who use our building, to support refugees, to adjust our children's programming to be inclusive of differing abilities, to use different languages and translation in our services so that everyone understands what is being said, to engage in a process of understanding racism and how it appears in our church and how to change things. We don't always get it right, but even when it makes us uncomfortable, we do strive to offer hospitality and loving acceptance to all people in our community life.

We believe this call comes to us straight from the Bible. We resonate deeply with the historic teaching of the Reformed tradition. Regarding the authority of Scripture, Herman Bavinck wrote:

The revelation recorded in Scripture is a historical and organic whole. That is how it has to be read and interpreted. A dogma that comes to us with authority and intends to be a rule for our life and conduct must be rooted in and inferred from the entire organism of Scripture. The authority of Scripture is different from the authority of parliament or congress.

*(Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1, p. 460)*

The whole witness, the entire organism, of Scripture is God's movement in history toward wider inclusion in the kingdom of God through the Jewish people. The miracle, mystery, and testimony of Jesus Christ on earth recapitulates, reimagines, and fulfills that promise and movement.

We believe that God's love is unconditional. God's grace draws us all alike nearer to God. For example, the first chapters of Acts recount the work of the Holy Spirit moving out in concentric circles from the Jewish center. Then in Acts 8, we have the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Acts is the story of God's grace pushing outward from the Israelite center and crossing many boundaries, but Acts 8 is striking in this regard. The Holy Spirit guides Philip to the eunuch. As Philip explains the words of Scripture that the eunuch is reading, they come upon water, which is here a symbol for grace.

The eunuch's response to Philip is prescient: "Look here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" First, he notices the presence of the water as a sign of God's grace, and, second, he asks if there is anything *to keep him* from being baptized. This is an important aspect of the movement of grace in Scripture. Grace is always pushing outward against human boundaries.

We believe that Scripture points us to Christ, who is our salvation. And Christ's claim is total. The gospels recount numerous stories of Christ redefining and overcoming allegiances, including prescriptions of the chief priests and scribes, historic cultic and religious laws, and even family relations.

In the Gospels, family too is redefined by Christ's call and by grace. For example, when his family is looking for him, Jesus asserts that his family is none other than those who do the will of God (Mark 3:31-35; Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21). Indeed Jesus even admonishes a would-be disciple to "let the dead bury their own" when he asks for leave to bury his father instead of preaching the gospel (Luke 9:60). Jesus asserts that we will not be given and taken in heaven as we are in earthly marriage (Matt. 23:30). He tells his earthly parents that they ought to have expected to find him in his Father's house, that is, the temple (Luke 2:49). And, perhaps troublingly, he claims that he has come to bring not peace, but a sword and that may include "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:34-39).

Christ also reimagines family in the light of the kingdom of God. He does not disavow his earthly family but only reimagines family in light of his person and work for the kingdom. He reimagines the image of family as a radical identification with those who also work for the kingdom. This positive movement reaches its apex in John 19, where, amid the growing climax of the crucifixion story, the author inserts this: "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home (John 19:26-27). In the midst of the crucifixion narrative and as one of the last things Jesus does before he is crucified, we see him positively reimagining the boundaries of family for his followers.

We believe that God calls us to be the kind of community Jesus Christ showed us, one whose life supports and enables those that God loves to serve God. We believe that God calls us to be the kind of community that can create and support families, not based on our own categories but on service in and to the kingdom of God. We believe that God calls us to be the kind of community that honors and respects everyone as made in the image of God. And we seek to be the kind of community that can also call our denomination to do these things because we believe, based on Scripture, that this was the mission of God in Christ.

God's kingdom is open to everyone without any conditions attached. What God requires from us in return is that we obey the greatest commandment, the summary of the law, to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. The church includes all who accept God's love, and who lay their burdens at

the feet of Jesus. And thus we ought not attach any conditions for membership in our local churches, such as excluding believers who confess Jesus Christ from all the privileges of full membership, including positions of leadership in the church.

We believe that God calls us to stand up for what we are for: for the world he created in love and sent Jesus to save, not to condemn (John 3:17).

At this weighty moment in the history of our denomination and of the church, we are writing to share our experience, our journey, and to prayerfully request that synod examine the biblical insights that guide our life together, and to conclude that the matters before you concerning human sexuality and lifelong relationships are not settled.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. . . .

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

(2 Cor. 3:4-6, 17-18)

Classis Toronto

Richard Bodini, stated clerk

### Communication 6: Classis Lake Superior

Classis Lake Superior wishes to express to synod its gratitude for the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality and its support for adopting the final report and recommendations.

We are thankful for the report because it shows us that the issues it mentions in this report are not easily detached from people or circumstances. For those struggling with any of the sinful and broken tendencies, we recognize the devil desires to use these to drive a wedge of separation between us and God and his love. Yet for those whom God loves, there is nothing “in all creation [that will be able] to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). We are to continue being transformed “by the renewal of [our minds], that by testing [we] may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). This transformation and renewal involved in the saving work of God involves repentance— “[being] genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it”—and “wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according to the will of God by doing every kind of good work” (Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 89-90, emphasis added).

We are thankful because the committee’s report appropriately calls all of us to repent of where we haven’t been loving in calling out sin and discipling others, including where heterosexual believers—in singleness, outside of marriage, and within marriage—need to practice and pursue the holiness God has called us to. The warning for our denomination and its ordained leaders to not teach or allow that which is contrary to this report, and far

more importantly, contrary to Scripture and the confessions, was refreshing. To go against the biblically and confessionally based conclusions of this report, to fail to steer others away from the conclusions, and to encourage them, endangers us and the people we believe God has given us to shepherd and direct toward his grace and kingdom. We are not to remain in sin. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 1:11).

Classis Lake Superior  
Henry G. Gunnink, stated clerk

### **Communication 7: Classis Grand Rapids South**

*Note:* Classis Grand Rapids South, at its meeting held on March 10, 2022, voted to send "without prejudice" the following communication of appreciation from the Moline (Mich.) CRC as a communication to Synod 2022.

The Council of Moline (Mich.) CRC suggests a vote of affirmation for the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality as it is being brought before Synod 2022. We have read the twelve-page summary of their work and earnestly appreciate the biblical, scientific, and social pursuit of God's truth. While their work and conclusions represent a solid foundation for churches to minister to individuals in our congregations in this difficult area of sanctified living, it will almost certainly be met with a good deal of cultural opposition. For this reason, we wish to encourage Classis Grand Rapids South to go on record as being wholeheartedly in support of their work, and charging our synod representatives to give expression to this support.

Our support of the study committee's conclusions is based on the following observations:

- The study committee begins with a thorough Genesis-to-Revelation analysis of God's intent for human sexuality.
- There is an earnest consideration of science and social factors "through the lens of Scripture" that adds insights of God's intent for human sexuality.
- It aggressively addresses the often-neglected proliferation of pornography and its corrosive effects in our changing world.
- With regard to homosexuality the most compelling conclusion for which we stand in total agreement is this statement: "A survey of relevant biblical texts shows that Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful and not in agreement with God's will. The debate about same-sex sex, therefore, is not a situation in which there are two equally valid interpretations of the biblical evidence."
- The study is a call to take seriously the brokenness of divorce: "The CRCNA must act more intentionally to call married partners to reconciliation and renewed commitment to the marriage covenant."

- The study wisely embraces the “high honor” of the gift of singleness that was once valued and promoted by the early church. When churches create a loving familial environment within the church, we also create space for celibate homosexual members to live fulfilled lives of closeness and intimacy. The study committee’s encouragement is a high calling for all churches to strive toward.
- **Most of all**, we appreciate and respect the study committee’s ardently advocating for a “traditionalist” view of Scripture and warning of the dangers of a “revisionist” approach. The warning against ignoring the clear and consistent teaching in Scripture in search of a culturally preferred interpretation speaks to a host of not-yet-imagined issues the church can expect to face in the future.

Classis Grand Rapids South  
George G. Vink, stated clerk

## Communication 8: Council of Calvin CRC, Ottawa, Ontario

### I. Preamble from the Council of Calvin CRC, Ottawa, Ontario

We offer this communication as part of synod’s deliberation on whether or not to accede to the overture from Classis Eastern Canada regarding the denomination’s Human Sexuality Report (HSR) (see Overture 50). In short, we believe that synod should not accede to the overture. The following communication was presented to the March 2022 meeting of Classis Eastern Canada as part of the deliberations on the overture. Since the overture passed in contradiction to the recommendation of this communication, the council of Calvin CRC in Ottawa, Ontario, shares the following reflections for synod’s consideration.

### II. Background

We, the council of Calvin CRC, share with our brothers and sisters who supported the Classis Eastern Canada overture a desire to listen well and to care faithfully for those who are most directly affected by the subject matter in the HSR—particularly the sections on gender identity and homosexuality. As a council, we are in the process of moving toward adopting a set of what we have called “Desired Outcomes” that include things like *“enhancing church inclusion for LGBT+ people, increasing family acceptance, protecting against victimization, [and] nourishing faith identity in Christ.”* We have a lot to discuss yet in terms of what that looks like, but this is the direction in which we are committed to moving. To that end, we are committed to taking seriously the pastoral advice in the HSR and would welcome further wisdom at the classical and/or denominational levels. Both of our pastors have made use of the denominationally provided *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* (along with a handful of other pastors in our region of classis), after which similar discussion groups were held with members of our council and then our congregation. A few of our officebearers have also attended the *Posture Shift* conference and have shared their learning with the rest of us.

Where we depart from the overture is in our conviction that as we pursue the italicized outcomes above, we must also hold firmly to the historic Chris-

tian understanding of marriage and sexual intimacy as being exclusively between a man and a woman. We believe that a proper approach to good pastoral care ultimately depends upon this foundational understanding of God's good will for our lives. So, while we share much of the sentiment of the overture's points A and C, we also recognize that the inclusion of point B means we are not fundamentally talking about the same thing. In all matters of pastoral care, if we don't agree on the morality of a particular behavior, we will have a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to care well for someone inclined toward or engaged in such behavior.

### III. Addressing the overture

We recognize that there are disagreements among us (including within our own congregation) as to what the Bible teaches, particularly as it relates to the morality of same-sex marriage. It's beyond the scope of this communication to enter into the interpretive details of that debate. However, we can hopefully all agree that it matters tremendously *how* we determine these things and what kinds of arguments we consider compelling. By referring to previous synodical decisions, the overture illustrates that how we argue today will set a precedent for the way we think about and debate many other things in the years to come. Thus, in considering this overture, we have pondered this question: If synod accepts the Classis Eastern Canada overture, what precedents would it set, and how might those precedents impact questions that we're not even thinking about right now? And from that perspective, we would ask synod to consider the following concerns with this overture.

A. The prohibition of unchastity has always held confessional status in the CRC by virtue of the fact that it is explicitly condemned in Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism. By asking us not to elevate any specific sexual behavior to confessional status (point B), the overture seems to be asking that the denomination never identify any specific sexual behaviors as unchaste. However, what then does Lord's Day 41 actually address? What is the denomination asking officebearers to believe and teach when they subscribe to Lord's Day 41? Do we let local councils decide for themselves how they want their officebearers to define "unchaste"? If so, would that extend to the meaning of other confessional articles as well? A precedent which allows local councils to decide for themselves what the confessions mean would strike at the very foundation of what it is to be a confessional denomination.

B. The overture asks synod to overlook the HSR's biblical case without addressing it. Point B in the overture is directly at odds with recommendation D of the HSR (p. 461), and recommendation D is based on dozens of pages of biblical engagement. Consider the precedent that would be set if synod agreed that we can essentially ignore a detailed biblical argument on the basis of grounds that don't even address that biblical argument. We are very concerned about what such a precedent would represent in terms of our commitment to Scripture as the ultimate authority for how we determine truth from error.

C. The overture misrepresents the HSR when it accuses it of being in contradiction to Jesus' model of discipleship (ground 4), of being in contradiction

to salvation by faith in Jesus alone (ground 4, b), and of elevating sexuality over all other aspects of following Christ (ground 4, d). We disagree that the report does any of these things. What the HSR does (pp. 458-60) is issue warnings that come directly from Scripture—warnings about the incompatibility of unrepentant immorality (including but not limited to sexual immorality) and the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:5-7; Gal. 5:19-21). Far from being in contradiction to Jesus' model of discipleship, Jesus repeatedly taught that counting the cost of submitting entirely to him was among the very first steps of discipleship (e.g., Luke 9:57ff; 14:25ff; Matt. 19:16ff).

If one contends that the HSR misapplies these warnings to a particular behavior, that would require engagement with the report's biblical arguments. But the HSR can't simply be accused of contradicting the Bible when the warnings it issues come directly from Scripture.

D. The overture makes unjustified inferences from previous synodical decisions—specifically what Synod 1980 said about divorce and remarriage (ground 4, a) and what Synod 2012 said about the Belhar Confession (ground 4, f).

- What Synod 1980 left local councils to discern was how to apply the implications of Matthew 5:32; 19:9; and 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 to specific cases of divorce and remarriage. The refusal to make an exhaustive denomination-wide remarriage policy was specifically because of the challenge of interpreting those texts in that they “provide no simple law by which to regulate divorce and remarriage” (*Agenda for Synod 1980*, p. 327). From this, it is unjustified to infer that questions of sexual morality more broadly should be up to local councils to decide; nor has the CRC ever understood this to be the precedent in the 40-plus years since this report was adopted.
- Synod 2012's decision to make the Belhar Confession an ecumenical faith declaration (since updated to a contemporary testimony) rather than a fourth confession did not change the fact that matters of injustice, oppression, and prejudice have always held confessional status in the CRC (e.g., Lord's Days 40, 42, 43). To infer that the decision had anything to do with devaluing the importance of these matters runs contrary to the grounds synod gave for its decision (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 766-67). We also note again that it's misleading to say that the HSR would “give confessional status to beliefs about human sexuality.” It is Lord's Day 41 that gives confessional status to beliefs about human sexuality.

E. Ground 6 of the overture says that the HSR's posture is inherently the opposite of loving and hospitable because of its conclusion about Scripture's clarity on the immorality of certain sexual behaviors (and the need for the church to submit ourselves to that clarity). Without any engagement with the exegetical arguments of the report, the HSR's posture is simply called unloving and inhospitable, and therefore its hermeneutic is impugned. This would serve as a devastating precedent for how to determine that a hermeneutic needs revision.

What also gives us pause is the claim (ground 6, b) that such hermeneutic change is needed on the basis of more recent learnings in the fields of

hermeneutics and ethics. We're left without explanation as to what these more recent learnings are. Particularly with regard to the field of ethics, it's unclear if the overture means to say that we have new information about what the Lord requires of us that none of God's people had in or prior to 1972. If so, we would disagree.

We ask synod to consider how widespread across time and culture has been the church's consensus that the behaviors outlined in the report as unchaste are, in fact, unchaste. If we share the overture's concern (ground 6, b) that we interpret matters of sexual morality in a way that's considerate of the greatest breadth of Christian contexts and cultures, we would be wise to affirm the recommendations of the HSR.

In summary, we believe synod should not accede to the overture in light of these concerns.

Council of Calvin CRC, Ottawa, Ontario  
Philip Bulsink, clerk

*Note:* This communication was submitted to Classis Eastern Canada at its March 2022 meeting. When the classis voted to approve an overture contradicting this communication (see Overture 50), the council of Calvin CRC voted to forward this communication to synod.

### **Communication 9: Classis Rocky Mountain**

*The following communication, processed through Classis Rocky Mountain to Synod 2022, has been prepared by the council of Immanuel CRC, Fort Collins, Colorado, regarding the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) to be addressed in June 2022. Classis submits the communication as defined in the Rules for Synodical Procedure, Section V, Matters Legally before Synod.*

As the council of Immanuel CRC, to help us and our congregation better understand the content and intent of the HSR, we conducted two different rounds of congregational listening sessions from July through October 2021. We followed the process as recommended by the denomination, using the *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* as a resource. The listening sessions revealed a wide range of reactions to the content of the report, from general agreement to significant concerns in some areas of the report.

Following the listening sessions, our council considered what we learned from those sessions, had in-depth discussions of our own understanding of the report, and continued to receive input from members of our congregation. As is probably common in most congregations who study the report and have conversations, there are wide-ranging views of the report, as mentioned above.

As our council has continued deliberations over what action we should take in response to the report, concerns were expressed that any action by our council in response to the HSR is ripe for divisiveness in our church family. There are varying levels of concern about some sections of the report, but there is no consensus on unqualified support of the HSR as written or on which aspects or sections of the HSR should receive more consideration. This is undoubtedly a dilemma in a comprehensive report that addresses all

aspects of human sexuality in our contemporary world. Understanding biblical truth that guides our lives and learning how to apply it in our outreach to brothers and sisters who seek God's grace is vital to growing his kingdom.

We understand and support the denomination's desire to study for deeper understanding of these important human sexuality dimensions in light of Scripture. We are concerned that in the HSR the study committee did not adequately explore and discuss differing interpretations of Scripture by people who are also highly respected Reformed scholars and theologians. We sense a tone of finality in conclusions of the report that doesn't encourage continuing dialogue on matters of human sexuality. One of the hallmarks of our Reformed tradition is the continuing study of Scripture and seeking deeper understanding of God's Word and work in our lives today.

The report does acknowledge that we as a denomination have not done well or been effective in pastoral care in issues relating to human sexuality. In that sense it is disappointing that the report doesn't go further in discussing current science, culture, and understanding of human sexuality. This seems a lost opportunity for us to have encouragement and guidance on how to more effectively engage with people who are considered by some to be on the margin of mainstream culture and who are seeking God. This is a particular need as we have opportunities to interact with homosexuals who are in a committed relationship and want to be in a Christian community.

A summary of our concerns may best be captured in our desire to be a welcoming church to all people who earnestly seek God. We want to do that with open arms that invite people into a relationship with God and with us. If we have a screen or filter that discourages anyone from walking in our door, that is a lost opportunity to share the gospel in Christlike love and grace.

As we await the actions of Synod 2022 on the HSR, our church is planning to invest in more study and discussion of topics raised in the report. We continue to seek God's will and leading to be a welcoming place to those seeking a Christian community.

Classis Rocky Mountain  
Mark W. Hilbelink, stated clerk