



Christian
Reformed
Church

Agenda for Synod 2024



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Christian
Reformed
Church

May 29, June 5, and June 14-20, 2024
Calvin University
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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PREFACE

It is with gratitude to God that we look forward to coming together as delegates and advisers to synod for conversation and deliberation and to celebrate the continued ministry of the Christian Reformed Church.

The *Agenda for Synod 2024* provides 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.

The Council of Delegates of the CRCNA decided in February 2024 that, due to the anticipation of a weighty agenda, Synod 2024 will begin with a virtual convening session on Wednesday, May 29, at 7:00 p.m. (EDT). In addition, a virtual advisory committee meeting will take place on Wednesday, June 5, at 7:00 p.m. Reverend Steve DeVries, pastor of Lee Street CRC, Wyoming, Michigan, 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 14, at 8:15 a.m. in the Calvin Chapel on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A community-wide Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise will be held Sunday, June 16, 2024, at 6:30 p.m. at Lee Street CRC, 1261 Lee Street SW, Wyoming, Michigan.

Prior to the convening session, *all* delegates and advisers to synod are encouraged to take time to view the video orientations 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, special 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 9 and 16. 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.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:1-2:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

May we bring our Lord and Savior joy during Synod 2024 by demonstrating love, compassion, and care for one another. And may we give account for the Spirit's work among us during the joyful and difficult conversations.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
(Eph. 3: 20-21)

Zachary J. King
General Secretary of the CRCNA

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I. Welcome

Thank you for serving as a delegate to Synod 2024. 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 delegates of the classes that 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. Most of all, it is a time to discern the Holy Spirit's leading by listening to God through the voices of our brothers and sisters in Christ, in prayer, and through careful application of Scripture. 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 Scott DeVries, 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 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 2024 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 non-delegates 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 General Secretary 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. 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 2024:

Wednesday, May 29

7:00 -10:30 p.m.	Virtual convening session
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Wednesday, June 5

7:00 - 8:00 p.m.	Virtual advisory committee meeting
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Thursday check-in, June 13

3:00 - 5:00 p.m.	Orientation for first-time delegates
5:30 - 7:00 p.m.	Orientation during supper for advisory committee chairs, reporters, and their alternates

5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:00 - 8:30 p.m.	Ministry Fair/Ice Cream Social
<i>Convening Friday, June 14</i>	
8:15 - 10:45 a.m.	Opening worship and plenary
10:45 - 12:00 p.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
<i>Saturday</i>	
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 - 5:15 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	President's Picnic
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Advisory committee meetings or tentative plenary session
<i>Sunday</i>	
Morning worship at area CRC churches	
12:15 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.	Lunch
5:00 - 6:00 p.m.	Supper
6:30 - 8:30 p.m.	Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise, followed by light refreshments at Lee Street CRC
<i>Monday - Wednesday</i>	
8:15 - 11:45 a.m.	Plenary session
11:45 a.m. - 12:45 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
<i>Thursday</i>	
8:15 - 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 3:30 p.m. on Thursday.	

DELEGATES TO SYNOD 2024

Alberta North

Minister - Henry P. Kranenburg
Minister - Ken G. Douma
Elder - Art VanLoo
Deacon - Daniel K. Harder

Alternate - Tony Maan
Alternate - Arthur L. Verboon
Alternate - Helen M. Doef
Alternate - Nathan Harmata

Alberta South/Saskatchewan

Minister - Paul W. T. Verhoef
Minister - Paul J. Droogers
Elder - Judith L. Heim
Deacon - Grace Miedema

Alternate - David J. Swinney
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Lee C. Himbeault
Alternate - Joshua Johnson

Arizona

Minister - Anthony R. DeKorte
Minister - Jose Rayas
Elder - Rodney J. Huguen
Elder - Philip G. Fritschle

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Atlantic Northeast

Minister - Willard H. Barham
Minister - Matthew D. Burns
Elder - Clyde H. Williams
Deacon - Adrian L. VandenBout

Alternate - Nicholas W. Monsma
Alternate - Michael R. Saville
Alternate - Lucille J. Huizinga
Alternate - _____

B.C. North-West

Minister - Michelle R. Ellis
Minister - Paul D. DeWeerd
Elder - Shelley K. Hempstead
Deacon - Robin de Haan

Alternate - Jesse M. Pals
Alternate - Andrew E. Beunk
Alternate - Jack A. Beeksma
Alternate - David P. Mayer

B.C. South-East

Minister - Christopher W. deWinter
Minister - Seok Won Jung
Elder - Sonya J. Grypma
Elder - Andre VanRyk

Alternate - Nathan Elgersma
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

California South

Minister - Jeffery A. Kempton
Minister - Ralph E. Mack
Elder - William C. Henry

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Central California

Minister - Patrick D. Anthony
Minister - Aleah N. Marsden
Elder - Titus E. Davis
Deacon - Luann D. Sankey

Alternate - Mark Van Dyke
Alternate - Randolph A. Beumer
Alternate - Randall W. Postmus
Alternate - Jayne McClurg

Central Plains

Minister - Mark J. Jicinisky
Minister - Michael Bentley
Elder - Daniel Frieswick
Deacon - Robert T. Vander Veen

Alternate - Johnlo Xu
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Chicago South

Minister - Derek Buikema
Minister - Israel Ledee
Elder - Richard J. Dejong
Deacon - Elizabeth R. Koning

Alternate - Gary K. Foster
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Derk Deckinga
Alternate - _____

Columbia

Minister - Joel J. Sheeres
Minister - Jelmer P. Groenewold
Elder - Leonel Rodriguez
Deacon - Jeffrey A. Cutter

Alternate - John VanSchepen
Alternate - Roger D. Kramer
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Philip L. Dekker

Eastern Canada

Minister - Aaron M. Thompson
Minister - C. Gregg Lawson
Elder - Aaron Helleman
Elder - Karen L. Bastian

Alternate - Chris Schievink
Alternate - Joseph M. Groeneveld
Alternate - Kathy Vandergrift
Alternate - _____

Georgetown

Minister - Cory J. Nederveld
Minister - Samuel J. Krikke
Elder - Herb Kraker
Deacon - Eli Martiradoni

Alternate - Mark Elffers
Alternate - Jeremy Rhodes
Alternate - Roger Dykstra
Alternate - _____

Grand Rapids East

Minister - Ryan Schreiber
Elder - Cindy M. VanderKodde
Elder - Patricia L. Borgdorff
Deacon - Eric Walstra

Alternate - Nathan DeJong McCarron
Alternate - Shirley Roels
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Donna R. Anema

Grand Rapids North

Minister - John M. Mondt
Minister - Benjamin L. Gandy
Elder - Steven B. Den Besten
Deacon - Todd A. Ritzema

Alternate - Jonathan L. Huizenga
Alternate Elder - Brittany Clark
Alternate - Bryan R. Dam
Alternate - Shannon L. Rop

Grand Rapids South

Minister - Ronald G. Kool
Minister - Peter M. Jonker
Elder - Sidney J. Jansma, Jr.
Elder - John S. Dekker

Alternate - Willem de Vries
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Grandville

Minister - Rodolfo Galindo
Minister - Joseph Vanden Akker
Elder - Ruth M. Carr
Deacon - James P. Heyboer

Alternate - Brandon L. Haan
Alternate - Tom Vander Ploeg
Alternate - Carl L. Burgess
Alternate - Benjamin C. Quist

Greater Los Angeles

Minister - Joel D. Van Soelen
Minister - Erick D. Westra
Elder - Gene J. Van Essen
Deacon - Lucinda L. Fleming

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Tyler C. Bouma

Hackensack

Minister - Petr Kornilov
Minister - Gabriel Wang-Herrera
Elder - Glenn P. Palmer
Deacon - Patricia A. Bushouse

Alternate - Paul A. Van Dyken
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Hamilton

Minister - Doug J. Nieuwstraten
Minister - Hayden W. Regeling
Elder - Herb Grootenboer
Deacon - Eric Tisch

Alternate - Kenneth F. Benjamins
Alternate - Mark Verbruggen
Alternate - Peter Bulthuis
Alternate - Marian J. Simonffy

Hanmi

Minister - Jeong Ha Chun
Minister - Cheon Seon Lee
Elder - BooHwan Kwak
Deacon - In Chul Shin

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Heartland

Minister - Jesse L. Walhof
Minister - Aaron Greydanus
Elder - Daniel P. Tracy
Deacon - Gary K. Hibma

Alternate - Benjamin Wiersma
Alternate - John Klompein
Alternate - Michael V. Krommendyk
Alternate - _____

Holland

Minister - Christopher J. De Vos
Minister - Matthew Hochhalter
Elder - Jason Bruxvoort
Deacon - Dwayne L. Nienhuis

Alternate - Stephen M. Hasper
Alternate - Darren C. Kornelis
Alternate - Donald A. Bemis
Alternate - Ann M. Schenkel

Hudson

Minister - Sam Han
Minister - Jason Chung

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Huron

Minister - Sidney Couperus
Minister - Thomas W. Bomhof
Elder - John A. Tamming
Elder - Jeroen Oosterom

Alternate - Ray Vander Kooij
Alternate - Bart Eisen
Alternate - Ron Jack
Alternate - _____

Iakota

Minister - Kurt A. Monroe
Minister - Drew D. Hoekema
Elder - Stan L. Wynia
Deacon - Jevon Groenewold

Alternate - Steven A. Zwart
Alternate - Robert D. Drenton
Alternate - Neil Van Schouwen
Alternate - Cameron M. Stuive

Illiana

Minister - James C. Hollendoner
 Minister - Joshua M. Christoffels
 Elder - Joshua Dykstra
 Deacon - Nathan R. Dykstra

Alternate - Blake I. Campbell
 Alternate - Randall Bergsma
 Alternate - Gerrit H. De Vries
 Alternate - Paul J. Epley

Kalamazoo

Minister - Maria L. Bowater
 Minister - Simon Tuin
 Elder - Craig Lubben
 Elder - Bartel J. Huizenga

Alternate - Jeff Brower
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - Bruce Merchant
 Alternate - _____

Ko-Am

Minister - Kyung Ho Park
 Minister - Edward Yoon
 Elder - Jenny Yoon
 Deacon - Yong Soo Kim

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Lake Erie

Minister - Gerald W. Vander Hoek
 Minister - Harry R. Winters, Jr.
 Elder - James H. Brownlee

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Lake Superior

Minister - Daniel S. De Graff
 Minister - David M. Dick
 Elder - Rob R. Braun
 Deacon - Erica Snippe Juurako

Alternate - David P. Zigterman
 Alternate - David Huizenga
 Alternate - Gaye Hanson-Rieger
 Alternate - Samuel J. van Huizen

Minnkota

Minister - Chad Werkhoven
 Minister - C.J. Den Dulk
 Elder - David Bosma
 Deacon - John M. Meinders

Alternate - Shaun Furniss
 Alternate - Gregory P. Timmer
 Alternate - Joe Van Hoven
 Alternate - Jake Dykstra

Muskegon

Minister - Arthur J. Van Wolde
 Minister - Drew Sweetman
 Elder - Luke A. Eising
 Elder - David A. Zoller

Alternate - Jeffery A. Hough
 Alternate - Matthew J. Eenigenburg
 Alternate - Beth Rinsema
 Alternate - Patricia J. Cavanaugh

Niagara

Minister - Robert J. Loerts
 Minister - Colin Vander Ploeg
 Elder - Blair C. Schiebel
 Elder - Gabrielle Veldboom

Alternate - Janet A. Ryzebol
 Alternate - Michael Vandyk
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

North Cascades

Minister - Jonathan Young
 Elder - Michael Jager
 Elder - Marco Daniel
 Deacon - Rob Hilverda

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Northcentral Iowa

Minister - Stewart J. DeJong
 Minister - Lora Copley
 Elder - Herbert W. Schreur
 Elder - Duane VanderPloeg

Alternate - Steven J. Mulder
 Alternate - Jason T. Semans
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Northern Illinois

Minister - Diego B. Flores
 Minister - Matthew Lanser
 Elder - Craig Buma
 Deacon - Marv Tazelaar

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - Al Diepstra
 Alternate - Dirk Rauglas

Northern Michigan

Minister - Steven J. Datema
 Minister - Mark A. Bonnes
 Elder - Scott J. Chandler
 Elder - Jared Yaple

Alternate - John Kostelyk
 Alternate - Kenneth Koning
 Alternate - Andy Liimata
 Alternate - _____

Ontario Southwest

Minister - Michael G. Borgert
 Minister - Andrew Zomerman
 Elder - Ronald Middel
 Deacon - James R. Poelman

Alternate - Ralph S. Wigboldus
 Alternate - Nathaniel E. Van Denend
 Alternate - Sara J. Stelpstra
 Alternate - Jenica Groot-Nibbelink

Pacific Northwest

Minister - Douglas E. Fakkema
 Minister - Mark Mohrlang
 Elder - Jonathan Westra
 Elder - Leroy Vanden Bosch

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Quinte

Minister - Joshua C. Tuininga
 Minister - Elizabeth A. Guillaume-Koene
 Elder - Donald G. Harnden
 Deacon - Cherri L. Le Forestier

Alternate - Daniel G. Brown
 Alternate - John VanderWindt
 Alternate - Peter Bouma
 Alternate - _____

Red Mesa

Minister - Ram S. Aryal
 Minister - Omar Tsosie
 Elder - Sherry TenClay
 Deacon - Lynn H. Johnson-Yazzie

Alternate - Caleb N. Dickson
 Alternate - James H. Kuiper
 Alternate - Kyu S. Paek
 Alternate - Julia Alonzo

Rocky Mountain

Minister - Greg Brady
 Minister - George N. Den Oudsten
 Elder - Ronald J. Nydam
 Deacon - Patrick A. Bredenberg

Alternate - Christian Sebastia
 Alternate - Mike Slofstra
 Alternate - Mary L. Gallegos
 Alternate - _____

Southeast U.S.

Minister - Kristin J. Vos
 Minister - Juan Sierra
 Elder - Jesus Bayona
 Deacon - Erik Pluemer

Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____
 Alternate - _____

Thornapple Valley

Minister - R. Scott Greenway
Minister - David J. Bosscher
Elder - Ren Tubergen

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Toronto

Minister - Ruth Hofman
Minister - David Salverda
Elder - Maarten Reinders
Elder - Phyllis Alberts-Meijers

Alternate - Richard Grift
Alternate - Harry Frielink
Alternate - Anita VanZeumeren
Alternate - _____

Wisconsin

Minister - Evan Tinklenberg
Minister - Joshua Van Engen
Elder - Ben Van Weelden
Deacon - Kevin Riemersma

Alternate - Jason Ruis
Alternate - Kurtis Ritsema
Alternate - _____
Alternate - Deborah Fennema

Yellowstone

Minister - Andrew R. Sytsma
Minister - Steve Bussis
Elder - James L. Reed
Deacon - Robert A. Kincaid

Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____
Alternate - _____

Zeeland

Minister - Stephen F. Terpstra
Minister - Lloyd H. Hemstreet
Elder - Steven J. Schrotenboer
Deacon - Andrew Visser

Alternate - Tyler J. Wagenmaker
Alternate - Mark Vande Zande
Alternate - Matt A. Vander Jagt
Alternate - _____

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 six at-large members. The ministry matters addressed by the COD include governance matters regarding ReFrame Ministries, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive along with other matters concerning the ministries of the CRCNA.

The COD presents the following report as a summary of its work in the interim between the synods of 2023 and 2024.

I. Introduction

A. Governing on behalf of synod

The COD serves as the interim committee of synod. Any given synod exists to take action and make decisions only during the time it is constituted—currently only for one week. Throughout the rest of the year the Council of Delegates ensures a continuity of denominational leadership over matters that cannot await action by the next synod. This leadership is accomplished in two ways. First, by carrying out or supervising matters that were assigned by a previous synod to the COD or to other denominational committees or staff. Second, by acting on behalf of synod regarding matters that need decisions or actions before the next synod can meet. All of these matters are subjected to the oversight of the following synod by way of this report and the upcoming COD Supplement report.

Recent synods have agreed to a division of the responsibilities traditionally given to the COD—namely, ecclesiastical responsibilities and organizational responsibilities. This manifests in a COD structure wherein the full COD handles ecclesiastical matters, but organizational matters are handled by the Canadian and U.S. ministry boards. The ministry boards are the legal boards of trustees over the CRCNA and ReFrame corporations in Canada and the United States. The ministry boards are made up of the COD delegates from their respective nations. This is done to ensure compliance with national laws while also ensuring ecclesiastical unity. These legal entities in Canada and the United States interact via joint ministry agreements to provide organizational governance to ReFrame and to the CRCNA ministries that are shared across the national borders.

It is also worth noting the distinction between the kind of governance the COD and ministry boards provide (board-level governance) and the kind of

governance provided by staff leadership. The people serving on the COD and on the ministry boards chart the direction and set the policies for the denomination as directed by synod. Conversely, the administration and staff handle the management functions, serving as implementers, working within the contours of COD-set policies toward the goals and limitations identified by synod in conjunction with the CRC constituency. As the COD sets direction and evaluates the effectiveness of outcomes, staff and administration attend to context, making recommendations and providing analysis to the COD in ways that consider national contexts, diversity, and the like.

The COD provides denominational oversight on behalf of synod throughout the year. The Office of General Secretary (OGS) serves as the primary link between the COD and the denomination's ministries. The OGS is responsible for ensuring that all ministries and legal entities are appropriately implementing synodical decisions and ecclesiastical mandates.

The Council of Delegates met two times since May 2023—in regular meetings in October 2023 and in February 2024. A third regular meeting is scheduled for May 2024, an account of which will come via the COD Supplement report to synod.

The COD's agenda items are first reviewed by one of eight committees: Executive, Governance, Finance, Synodical Services, Thrive, ReFrame, Resonate, and Connections. These committees hear and study reports regarding the mission, vision, and values of our various ministries; the ways our ministries are integrated into and evaluated according to a strategic ministry plan; and the ways in which the COD responds both to synod and constituents. Committees present their recommendations to the full COD for information and any required action. In addition, the COD is responsible for overseeing the work of the general secretary of the CRCNA.

The COD meeting schedule also incorporates time for delegates to meet separately with their legal ministry boards incorporated nationally, as mentioned above. The ministry boards focus on nonecclesiastical matters such as reviewing the financial status, administrative leadership, and nonecclesiastical aspects of organizational health. In compliance with Canadian regulations, the Canadian ministry boards review and approve all actions relative to providing effective national direction and control for collective ministry and any other matters that relate directly to uniquely national matters of law.

The COD, as synod's agent, is grateful for the opportunity to serve the entire church. This report is laid out primarily according to the COD's work on the four milestones of the CRCNA Ministry Plan, *Our Journey 2025*, along with synodically mandated work falling outside of that ministry plan, and activities that are comprehensive of all of our work.

II. COD activities related to *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

The denominational Ministry Plan, *Our Journey 2025*, was endorsed by the COD acting on behalf of Synod 2020, and is well under way (see 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 the current five-year period, churches and classes helped to identify four “milestones” that we are working 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. Leaders in each of the four areas are also sharing the “stories, stats, and opportunities” that are arising out of these efforts. Visit crcna.org/OurJourney to learn more about sharing in the excitement!

In October the Council of Delegates received a recommendation from the Ministries Leadership Council (CRCNA agency and institution leaders) to extend *Our Journey 2025* to the year 2030. The COD is recommending this proposal to synod as well (see Recommendation C). The early years of the current ministry plan were slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the four milestones still represent a timely, critical, and ongoing call for the whole of the CRCNA. In addition, this would be an inopportune time to develop a new ministry plan while the current one fits well in the present context and is oriented toward the kind of congregational renewal envisioned in recent synodical directives such as reversing membership decline.

A. Cultivate practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

One cause for joy in the CRCNA is that in recent years the Holy Spirit seems to be increasing the desire for prayer and other practices of spiritual discipline in the hearts of many members and leaders. That desire was heard quite clearly in the many listening sessions leading up to the creation of this ministry plan, and we see signs of it continuing to build throughout the denomination.

The COD is being intentional about focusing on board development at the beginning of each of its meetings. In February for its development session the COD invited Sean Baker, Thrive ministry consultant, and Jon Hoekema, the CRCNA prayer shepherd, to present and share about good spiritual practices in board government. We were taught solid prayer practices for grounding our decisions in seeking God's will rather than our own, for remaining in Christ, and for loving one another.

B. Listen to the voices of all generations

The family of God has members from infancy through old age. This is both wonderful and challenging. Many families have multiple generations worshipping God together each Sunday in the same congregation. There are also numerous stories of children growing up with surrogate "grandparents" through their local church. Yet there can also be challenges in listening across generational divides. The desire to faithfully face these challenges so as to facilitate the joys of being a multigenerational family of God has been another priority identified by churches and classes in the ministry plan.

Young adult representatives to Synod 2024

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 appointed the following persons to serve as young adult representatives to synod (* indicates service in this capacity in 2023). We express gratitude for their commitment and gracious willingness to serve the denomination in this way.

Ireland Bosworth
Verity Johnston
Eric Katerberg

Lain Martinez
Iain Monroe

Gavin Schaefer*
Samantha Sebastia*

C. Grow in diversity and unity

1. Ethnic advisers to synod

Determination of the need for the appointment of ethnic advisers to synod is based on a rolling three-year average of having more than 25 ethnically diverse delegates appointed to synod. The Council of Delegates appointed the following as ethnic advisers to Synod 2024: Joao Pedro Macimiano Trabbold and Patrick Lin. We are grateful for their willingness to offer their unique perspectives to the issues before synod.

2. 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 general secretary, 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 general secretary, 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.

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

Synod 2016 tasked the administration with requesting “an annual diversity report from each agency and ministry” and including a summary of these reports to COD each February (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 829).

Data for the board diversity report (with regard to gender and ethnic diversity) for the 2023-2024 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 148 denominationally appointed board members (not including the JMC count), and the JMC, elected from the World Renew Board of Delegates, has 13 members. Among a total of 161 members, 51 (32%) are women, and 29 (18%) are people of color. The data received for the 2023-2024 board term reflects a *decrease* in 8 board members (169 total members in 2022-2023), a *decrease* of 5 percent in women delegates, and an *increase* of 1 percent in delegates who are people of color on our denominational boards in comparison to the 2022-2023 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

current board membership of Calvin Theological Seminary is 25 percent ethnic minority (a 1% *increase* as compared to 2022-2023); Calvin University, 19 percent (a 3% *increase*); World Renew (JMC), 31 percent (an 11% *increase*); and the COD, 14 percent (a 4% *decrease*).

4. “One Family Conversation” update

The COD Supplement report to Synod 2022 noted that many classis participants from non-Caucasian backgrounds feel they are treated as guests rather than members. The COD tasked the general secretary to

facilitate a “One Family Conversation” related to the topic of diversity and its key place in the CRCNA, both now and in the future. The conversation will include the following:

- How the gifts and challenges of living in a diverse community can be fully included in our classes.
- How to structure listening sessions, facilitated by an outside group, at classis meetings in order to find out what is really happening with regard to diversity and the inclusion of ethnic-minority leaders.
- How to structure the sharing of resources with fledgling churches from various backgrounds.
- A review of the CRC’s historical perspective and synodical reports.

(*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 709)

The plan for this conversation was included as Appendix E in the COD report to Synod 2023 (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 80-82). Several classes have already begun engaging in this work, but there are still many to go. Staff continue to meet regularly to strategize on appropriate ways to support classes and classis leaders in this very important work.

5. Resources and tools for pastoral ministry with and to our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors

Synod 2023 directed the Office of General Secretary to “develop resources and tools, or endorse existing external resources and tools, that align with our Reformed doctrinal standards (as articulated in previous synodical decisions), to equip congregations for pastoral ministry with and to our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023).

On December 1, 2023, the general secretary released a communication to all CRC congregations restating the pastoral positions of Synod 2023 regarding human sexuality and inviting churches to explore a list of suggested resources in fulfillment of synod’s direction (crcna.org/SexualityResources). Thrive is working to identify resources that are already being utilized by CRCNA congregations.

D. Share the gospel

1. Response to membership decline

Synod 2023 directed the general secretary to “work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, and churches and classes to develop a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 976). In partnership with our CRCNA agencies, the general secretary is rolling out a program to gather classes together to help address membership decline in our churches. This initiative will be called “Gather” (crcna.org/gather) and will be spearheaded by Rev. Elaine May of Thrive. Ten gatherings of groups of fifteen people from five classes at a time will meet to encounter God together, to be empowered to gather their own congregation and classis in a similar way, to hear examples of God renewing CRC congregations, to return with a helpful imagination for renewal, and to strengthen relationship through fellowship. The gatherings will happen between April 2024 and May 2025. Feedback will be compiled by staff and reviewed by the COD. This plan is detailed in Appendix A.

COD members agreed to take specific steps to promote “Gather” and to encourage classis participation. They also agreed to provide assistance in selecting appropriate classis leaders to participate and to make every effort to participate themselves.

2. Report on Virtual Churches

Synod 2023 instructed the Office of General Secretary to “oversee the creation of a report that gives thought to and a theological framework for the possibilities and parameters of a virtual church: ‘A church which, by design, meets only online.’” The report was also given certain parameters. It is required to have input from faculty or staff of Calvin Theological Seminary, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive. It needs to “address the marks of the true church articulated in the Belgic Confession.” And it “might address similarities and differences between online ministry and a virtual church, exploring opportunities and pitfalls for each” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 979). Synod also acknowledged that “online ministry remains an emerging mission field, but the possibility of virtual community and an entirely virtual church remain untested areas of exploration within the CRCNA” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 980).

Synod noted that the report “should be presented to the COD for discernment” without specifying a date. A progress report came to COD in February. At that time, the staff currently involved had determined that the team working on the report needed more members and input from pastors currently in church leadership in CRCNA congregations. The COD approved a recommendation to expand the team’s mandate to “address the important theological, missiological, pastoral, and polity implications of a virtual

church.” The COD will stay apprised of this important work and expects a draft report in February 2025.

3. Materials to support bivocational pastors

The Study of Bivocationality Task Force report (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314; crcna.org/sites/default/files/study_of_bivocationality_task_force_2021.pdf) points out the many ways our bivocational pastors help to share the gospel. Synod 2023 adopted several ways recommendations on how the CRCNA can better support our bivocational pastors and their ministries.

One important way to support bivocational pastors is through recognizing them and their ministry appropriately in the Church Order. Synod 2023 adopted and has recommended several such changes to the Church Order for adoption by Synod 2024 (see Recommendation E).

The Office of General Secretary is currently working on other assignments from Synod 2023 to support bivocational pastors and their ministries. These include creating “an exit interview/ministry postmortem learning process for classes, churches, leaders, and their families to use when burnout occurs in bivocational ministry,” providing “a ministry wellness assessment for pastors in bivocational ministry and their supervisory councils to use as part of their regular conversations,” and working “with the pension boards, in consultation with clergy couples, to find a just and equitable solution that recognizes the ordination of both spouses who are ministers of the Word.” Further updates are expected through the COD Supplement report to synod.

4. Report of the Bible Translation Committee

The translation of the Bible into common languages was a crucial part of the Reformation. The importance of translation continues to this day, and the Bible Translation Committee exists to review Bible translations that CRCNA churches, classes, or synod have become interested in.

The Bible Translation Committee has been asked to review the Easy-to-Read version of the Bible. A report of this review is planned for the May COD meeting and will be included the COD Supplement report to synod.

The COD accepted the resignation of Dr. Sarah Schreiber from the Bible Translation Committee in February. Dr. Gabriela Tijerina-Pike was appointed to fill the vacancy.

III. COD activities related to Our Calling (ministry priorities)

The work to which God has called the CRCNA extends beyond the four milestones of *Our Journey 2025*, the current ministry plan. Since 2014, synod has recognized five ministry priorities as calling areas into which our shared ministry falls. Our agencies and institutions have synodical mandates, in many cases extending back generations. And each synod delegates

aspects of the work on important current issues to the COD or the Office of General Secretary.

Our Calling as a denomination includes five calling areas that serve 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). These calling areas are described as follows:

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.

All of the features of the CRCNA Ministry Plan connect at various points within this broader calling, and significant work in these calling areas is taking place as outlined below.

A. Faith formation

Beyond some of the faith-formation focused activities related to the Ministry Plan, the COD has had no particular assignments from synod related to faith formation. Many other important initiatives in this area are built into the mandates of our agencies and institutions and are included in their reports to Synod 2024.

B. Servant leadership

Raising up, training, and supporting servant leaders is something the CRCNA has always been serious about. This can be seen in our history of promoting good parenting, developing Sunday school education materials, setting up Christian day schools and institutions of higher education, and ensuring that church leaders have opportunities to continue growing and serving. Along with the considerable work being done by Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin University, ReFrame, Resonate, Thrive, World Renew, and other associated organizations and institutions, included here are some

examples of the ways the COD supports leaders by attending to our polity and governance.

1. Church Order Review Task Force

Synod 2022 directed the COD to “form a task force to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their supplements.” The task force was also directed to “develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions and more effective oversight of individuals in specialized ministries, including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849).

The Church Order Review Task Force report is included in Appendix B. The recommendations of this task force are not repeated in this COD report to synod, but the COD does recommend that synod take up this report and its recommendations for adoption (see Recommendation F).

2. Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters

Synod 2023 directed the Office of General Secretary to “appoint a team of staff and subject-matter experts to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address matters related to *church in communion* status, Church Order matters regarding “orderly exchange” of officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8), and other matters related to benefits of CRC officebearers” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 990).

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee handles matters pertaining to *church in communion* status, so the appointed team focused on matters related to Church Order, pensions, and benefits.

The report of the Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters is included in Appendix C. The report finds that no changes are currently necessary to the Church Order or to pensions or other benefits in order to allow the full participation of congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials who may wish to maintain affiliation with the CRCNA. The COD recommends that synod receive this report as information (see Recommendation G).

C. Global mission

The CRC has a long and vibrant dedication to mission work at home and abroad. This is most obvious in the historic and ongoing efforts of Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame, and World Renew. These ministries arose out of a heart for the world shared by myriad CRCNA members, churches, and classes. It is a privilege for the COD and denominational staff to help provide leadership to these godly ambitions.

Global Vision Team

For well over 100 years the focus of mission work outside of North America was to establish and support existing or new denominations in other geo-

graphical areas. Happily, many of these denominations came to have ecumenical relations with the CRCNA as churches in cooperation or communion.

In recent years various changes have led churches from outside of North America to seek affiliation with the CRCNA. In response to this development the Council of Delegates instructed the General Secretary “to gather a discussion group to study the integration of international churches into the composition of the CRC.” The General Secretary assembled a binational team of globally experienced and connected CRC leaders—called the Global Vision Team—to develop “a conceptual framework for a global Christian Reformed Church. The framework would include general principles/models of partnership, shared ministry, organization, governance, and communication.” In February the COD gave the team some feedback on initial findings and ideas. A report to the COD is expected in May for possible approval and inclusion in the COD Supplement report to synod.

D. Mercy and justice

1. 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.

Edward Bosveld and Cindy de Jong are completing a second term in 2024 and are not eligible for reappointment. Kim Rhodes is completing a first term in 2024 and has decided not to pursue a second term. It is recommended that synod express gratitude for their years of service to the denomination (see Recommendation H).

The COD Synodical Services Committee, on behalf of the COD, has solicited nominees for the anticipated vacancies of two persons trained in law. The Council of Delegates recommends that synod appoint the following single nominee to a position on the Judicial Code Committee, for a first term of three years (see Recommendation I):

Arlyn Bossenbrook is a retired attorney from East Lansing, Michigan. He currently spends half the year in Florida and the other half in South Haven, Michigan. He is a Calvin University Graduate (1964) and received a Juris Doctorate from Wayne State University Law School. He is a founding member of WealthCounsel LLC and has experience working with the Meals on Wheels program and the Cristo Rey Community Center. He and his wife have two adult children and five grandchildren.

The COD anticipates presenting two other nominations by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

b. Reappointment to a second term

The Council of Delegates recommends the following JCC member for reappointment to a second term of three years: Richard Bodini (see Recommendation J).

2. Judicial Code Review Team

Synod 2019 initiated a plan to review the Judicial Code every five years (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 763). This was delayed in order to allow the Council of Delegates to complete a review of the appeal process, but a task force was formed in late 2022 and has held ten virtual meetings since January 2023. The task force reviewed the existing Judicial Code line by line and is currently writing recommendations for revisions. Their report is planned for submission to the COD prior to its May 2024 meeting for inclusion in the COD Supplement report to synod.

3. Appeals of discipline

Synod 2023 directed the Office of General Secretary to “assemble a task force (or similar body) to design and/or clarify an appeals process for church members under discipline. This body shall address processes for members under general discipline” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1013).

The recommendations of such a task force would have implications for both the regular appeals process (Church Order Art. 30-a) and the Judicial Code appeals process (Art. 30-c). Since any changes to the Judicial Code would fit within the mandate of the existing Judicial Code Review Team, they have been asked to design or clarify the appeals process of general discipline under the Judicial Code. Their report, including this matter, is expected to be ready for the COD Supplement report to synod.

After receiving the recommendations of the Judicial Code Review Team on this matter, the COD aims to determine whether those recommendations might simply be adapted to Church Order Article 30-a or if another team should be formed for that portion of the work.

4. Abuse of power

In response to the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee Synod 2019 adopted an extensive plan for working against abuses of power within the CRCNA. Every synod since then has received reporting on the

implementation of many parts of that plan. The COD recommends that synod take note of the ongoing work being done on abuse of power as reported in this section (see Recommendation K).

a. Monitoring implementation

Under the new COD structure and with Thrive taking on certain responsibilities from Safe Church Ministry, synod's instruction to monitor progress at each COD meeting (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 799) will now be fulfilled through notes in Thrive reports to the COD. This will include an annual update on safe church advocacy regarding how Thrive is supporting classis-based leadership roles and networks of volunteers, including safe church coordinators.

b. Abuse of power training

Thanks largely to the efforts of Thrive's Amanda Benckhuysen, a course titled *Power to Do Good* has been developed and is required for all candidates entering ordained ministry in the CRCNA. There is a goal to create Korean and Spanish editions as well.

c. Dignity Team

In response to Synod 2019's directive that the COD "establish a team that would act as a guardian of our commitment to foster a culture characterized by respect for all and mutual service" (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 798), the Abuse of Power Ad Hoc Committee proposed the creation of a denominational Dignity Team, and the COD, on behalf of Synod 2021, adopted that proposal (*Agenda for Synod 2021*, pp. 63-68; *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, pp. 634-37). This team began its work in summer 2022. It is currently working with staff and the COD to clarify its mandate.

d. Code of Conduct

Also in connection with addressing the abuse of power Synod 2023 adopted the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, encouraging councils and classes to implement it "for all staff (nonordained as well as ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church or classis," and mandating the Office of General Secretary to "oversee the development of training modules that orient ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 992-94).

- 1) Thrive staff have drafted a plan to create orientation materials for councils and other ministry leaders to use at the beginning of conversations about the Code of Conduct. The materials are expected to be made available through a Network post in the summer or fall.
- 2) Synod 2023 proposed adding the Code of Conduct to the Church Order (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 992-93). The specific changes are included in Recommendation L of this report.

5. Conflict of interest

In response to discussions about the abuse of power the COD adopted a Conflict of Interest Policy in 2021, and this was recognized by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 931; see *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, pp. 556-58). Synod 2022 asked that “a Conflict of Interest Policy for delegates to synod” be adapted from the COD conflict of interest policy for implementation at synod (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 931). This seemed a straightforward task, but because of the differing nature of synod as an ecclesiastical *assembly* in comparison to the COD as an interim *committee* whose members are also members of *legal boards*, staff and the COD have found that the potential for conflicts of interest is considerably different for delegates to synod than for members of the COD. The COD also recognized that it is unclear how such a policy would relate to synodical delegates who may also be involved in external advocacy groups, including but not limited to groups advocating for different positions on human sexuality. As such, while our best effort at drafting a Conflict of Interest Policy for Delegates to Synod is shared for information in Appendix D, we recommend that synod reassess the necessity of this policy for synodical delegates (see Recommendation M).

6. Assisted suicide

a. Position statement

Synod 2023 tasked the Office of General Secretary “to promptly create a position statement on assisted suicide based on the good work of previous synods on abortion (Synods 1972, 1997, 2010, etc.), life issues (Synods 2000, 2003), and previous pastoral advice given (Synods 2000, 2003)” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 981).

Staff quickly created a statement to include with the Synod 2023 FAQ document (crcna.org/synod-2023-faq-document) and included the statement later in the annual update to the CRCNA’s Position Statements at crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements.

b. Assisted Suicide Task Force

Synod 2023 appointed a task force “to make a definitive and comprehensive report on the practice of assisted suicide in all its forms” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 981). The task force is making progress and intends to meet its deadline of submitting a report by February 15, 2025, to be included on the agenda for Synod 2025.

Synod required that the task force “consist of two theologians, two health-care professionals, two lawyers, and two additional ad hoc members.” Due to an unusual number of resignations during the first months of the Assisted Suicide Task Force, the COD deemed it necessary to fill the vacancies. The task force now includes Brian Dijkema (ad hoc), Deb Fennema (health-care), David Shin (theologian), Caroline Short (ad hoc), Doug Vande Griend (lawyer), Stephen Vander Klippe (health-care), and

David Van Der Woerd (lawyer). At the writing of this report the COD is working to solicit one more pastor/theologian to complete the task force.

E. Gospel proclamation and worship

Beyond some of the Ministry Plan initiatives that relate to gospel proclamation and worship, the COD has had no particular assignments from synod related to this area of Our Calling. Many other important initiatives in this area are built into the mandates of our agencies and institutions and included in their reports to Synod 2024.

IV. COD activities related to polity, policies, and procedures

A. Current COD membership

The members of the Council of Delegates from the classes include Matthew T. Ackerman (Lake Erie), Jesus Bayona (Southeast U.S.), Rachel Bouwkamp (Grandville), Wayne A. Brower (Holland), Steve Bussis (Yellowstone), Thomas Byma (Greater Los Angeles), Paula Coldagelli (Wisconsin), Janet deVries (Niagara), Jeff Dykema (Arizona), Sherry E. Fakkema (Pacific Northwest), Jill Feikema (Illiana), Roy G. Heerema (Hudson) Michael Irshad (Toronto), Joyce G. Jackson (Hackensack), John Jansen (California South), Casey Jen (Thornapple Valley), Michael Johnson (Rocky Mountain), Jeanne Kallemeyn (Georgetown), Debbie Karambowich (Alberta South/Saskatchewan), Ronald Karelse (Grand Rapids North), Jonathan J. Kim (Ko-Am), Hyung-Jun Kim (B.C. North-West), Michael D. Koetje (Kalamazoo), William T. Koopmans (Hamilton), John R. Lee (Iakota), Thea Leunk (Grand Rapids East), Jessica Maddox (Grand Rapids South), Tabitha Manuelito (Red Mesa), Peter Meerveld (Huron), Amy Nydam (Alberta North), Herbert W. Schreur (Northcentral Iowa), Anthony T. Selvaggio (Atlantic Northeast), Bonnie Zigterman (Northern Illinois), Drew Sweetman (Muskegon), Rob J. Toornstra (Columbia), Arie A. Vander Zouwen (North Cascades), Mark VanDyke (Central California), Andre VanRyk (B.C. South-East), Loren Veldhuizen (Heartland), Tyler J. Wagenmaker (Zeeland), Jim Winkel (Northern Michigan), and Bonnie Zigterman (Northern Illinois).

The following persons are serving as *interim* delegates until Synod 2024 can act on their appointments (presented in section IV, B, 1 below): Phil Apoll (Ontario Southwest), William Krahne (Lake Superior), Sally Larsen (Chicago South), and Ronald Van Auken (Quinte).

The delegate positions for Classes Eastern Canada, Central Plains, Hanmi, and Minnkota are currently vacant due to the resignations of Daniel Meinema (Eastern Canada), Thomas Wolhuis (Central Plains), Paul K. Im (Hanmi), and Ryan Blom (Minnkota). The COD anticipates presenting nominations to fill the recent vacancies by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

Seven at-large members currently serve the COD. They include Henry Eygenraam, Greta Luimes, Melissa Van Dyk, Roberta Vriesema, Ralph S.

Wigboldus in Canada, and Christian Sebastia and Michael L. Ten Haken in the U.S.

The denomination's general secretary (Zachary J. King) serves as an ex officio member of the Council of Delegates (without vote). The general secretary also serves the CRCNA U.S. Ministry Board and the ReFrame U.S. Ministry Board and is invited as a guest to the meetings of the CRCNA Canada and ReFrame Ministries Canada ministry boards.

In addition, guest representatives from three denominational boards attend the meetings of the COD and serve on the COD's Connections committee: Robert Drenten from the Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees; Kevin J. Adams and E. Wayne Coleman 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 committee and plenary meetings.

The following serve as officers of the COD and of the respective ministry boards for the 2023-2024 term:

1. COD officers: Michael L. Ten Haken, chair; Greta Luimes, vice chair; John R. Lee, secretary; Henry Eygenraam, treasurer.
2. Ministry board officers
 - a. CRCNA Canada Ministry Board: Greta Luimes, president; Ralph Wigboldus, vice president; Henry Eygenraam, treasurer; Roberta Vriesema, secretary.
 - b. CRCNA U.S. Ministry Board: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Jill Feikema, vice president; Drew Sweetman, secretary; John R. Lee, treasurer.
 - c. ReFrame Ministries Canada Ministry Board: Greta Luimes, president; Ralph Wigboldus, vice president; Henry Eygenraam, treasurer; Roberta Vriesema, secretary.
 - d. ReFrame Ministries U.S. Ministry Board: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Jill Feikema, vice president; Drew Sweetman, secretary; John R. Lee, treasurer.
3. Executive Committee: Michael L. Ten Haken, chair; Greta Luimes, vice chair; Henry Eygenraam; Michael Irshad; Michael D. Koetje; and John R. Lee. Zachary J. King and Shirley DeVries serve ex officio.

B. COD nominations

1. Interim nominations

The COD appointed the following persons as interim delegates and recommends these interim members to synod for appointment to the specific terms as indicated (see Recommendations N, O):

Classis Chicago South

(First term will conclude June 30, 2024; a second term is not being sought.)

Sally Larsen is a member of Hope CRC in Oak Forest, Illinois, and has served as an elder, clerk of council, and vice president of council. She also represented Classis Chicago South as a delegate to Synod 2022. Previously, while part of Bethel CRC in Lansing, Illinois, where she was a member for 48 years, Sally served as a Stephen minister, a Coffee Break leader, and on several committees including Congregational Life and Worship Planning. She represented Classis Illiana as a delegate to the Council of Delegates for three years and as a delegate to the ReFrame Ministries board for two years. Sally is married to Dave Larsen. They have a blended family of five children, their spouses, and 11 grandchildren. Sally is a retired information technology professor.

Classis Lake Superior

(First term will conclude June 30, 2026, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

William Krahnke is a member of Pease (Minn.) CRC. He has significant experience working in youth ministry and worship ministry. He has served as a young adult representative and as an ethnic adviser to synod. He is currently employed as a lumber worker in Minnesota and serves on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee.

Classis Ontario Southwest

(First term will conclude June 30, 2026, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

Phil Apoll is the pastor of Hope Community CRC in Mount Brydges, Ontario. He completed a doctorate of ministry degree at Knox Theological Seminary. He has a passion for college students, having served on the Campus Ministry Board of the University of Toronto and the Board of Governors for Redeemer University.

Classis Quinte

(First term will conclude June 30, 2026, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

Ronald VanAuken is a member of Hebron CRC in Oshawa, Ontario. He has experience in strategic planning and executive directorship. He has worked in both the U.S. and Canada, with the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. He has experience on many boards and committees inside and outside of the church and currently serves on the Classis Quinte visitation restorative team.

2. New-term nominations

The COD Synodical 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.

Concluding service after two terms on the Council of Delegates in June 2024 are the following members:

<i>Classis</i>	<i>Member</i>
Holland	Wayne A. Brower
Iakota	John R. Lee
Pacific Northwest	Sherry Fakkema
Wisconsin	Paula Coldagelli
Zeeland	Tyler J. Wagenmaker
Canada at-large	Ralph S. Wigboldus

Casey Jen (Thornapple Valley) and Sally Larsen (Chicago South) are completing a first term on the COD and have decided not to serve a second term.

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 (see Recommendation P).

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

Classis Pacific Northwest

Doug Fakkema is the pastor at Anacortes (Wash.) CRC. He is a longtime pastor, has served on the ministry multiplication committee of his classis as chair, and has a deep love for the church.

Classis Thornapple Valley

Steven Hull is the lead pastor at Princeton CRC in Kentwood, Michigan. He has extensive experience serving on various classis teams, largely related to church planting and renewal. He has also served on the EPMC Facilitation Team, working with candidates in the CRCNA coming from other denominations.

Classis Zeeland

Lloyd Hemstreet serves as the pastor at Coopersville (Mich.) CRC. A graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary, he has served Classis Zeeland on the student fund committee and presently serves on the healthy churches committee. He has served as the president of council for the past seven years, and he served as a delegate to Synod 2023.

The COD recommends the following members for reappointment to a second term of three years (see Recommendation Q):

<i>Classis</i>	<i>Member</i>
Central California	Mark VanDyke
Columbia	Rob J. Toornstra

Georgetown	Jeanne Kallemeyn
Hudson	Roy G. Heerema
Huron	Peter Meerveld
Toronto	Michael Irshad
Canada at-large	A. Henry Eygenraam

C. Polity matters

1. Ecclesiastical marriage

Synod 2023 adopted the report of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 961-62; see *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 251-84; crcna.org/sites/default/files/ecclesiastical_marriage_task_force_2021.pdf). Synod instructed the Office of General Secretary to disseminate the report and a letter of warning to pastors and councils “regarding the potential legal ramifications of solemnizing an ecclesiastical marriage” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 962). That letter is planned for distribution this spring.

2. Convening churches and locations of synod

a. Synod 2025

Synod 2022 had approved Covenant CRC, Sioux Center, Iowa, as the convening church of Synod 2025, to be held at Dordt University in Sioux Center (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 940). However, due to a construction project, Dordt University will not be able to host Synod 2025. As COD wrestled with other options and opportunities, Covenant CRC graciously withdrew their invitation to convene Synod 2025, making room for a celebration of the CRC in Ontario, Canada.

The year 2026 will mark coinciding milestone anniversaries of 100 years for First CRC in Chatham, Ontario, and 150 years for Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University. The COD suggested that a celebration of the Ontario anniversary kick off one year early at Synod 2025. As the first Christian Reformed church established in Ontario, First CRC in Chatham has graciously agreed to invite synod to accept them as the new convening church for Synod 2025, to be held at Redeemer University in Ancaster, Ontario. The COD recommends that synod approve its work in securing a site for Synod 2025 (see Recommendation R) and accept the invitation of First CRC, Chatham, as the convening church of Synod 2025 (see Recommendation S).

b. Synod 2026

Calvin University is being recommended as the host site for Synod 2026. Along with Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin University is hoping that Synod 2026 can join in the celebration of their 150 years of providing Christian higher education together (see Recommendation T).

3. COD Governance Handbook updates

The following updates to the COD Governance Handbook are presented as items for the consent agenda for Synod 2024.

a. *Governance Charter*

- 1) Add a new bullet point to section 4.d. Steward post-meeting COD surveys.

Grounds:

- a) The Executive Committee assigned this role to Governance in October 2023.
 - b) This fits naturally under Governance Committee's mandate to "assess board effectiveness" (GVC Charter 4.d).
- 2) Edit section 4.e, second bullet. ~~Nominate~~ Facilitate the nomination process for COD members for election as officers.

Grounds:

- a) This is in keeping with the intent of the original wording.
 - b) This clarifies that the role of Governance is not to unilaterally nominate an officer slate but rather to facilitate a process of nomination and election by the COD as a whole.
- 3) Edit section 4.f, second bullet. Appoint non-COD members to serve on committees and ensure agreement with Statement of Agreement with Beliefs of the CRCNA, the Code of Conduct, and signing the Conflict of Interest.

Grounds:

- a) This provides transparency and clarity of expectations to both nominating boards and non-COD nominees.
- b) This ensures a set of shared expectations across all voting members within COD governance structures.

b. *Synodical Services Charter*

- 1) Add section 4.b. Process reporting on directives provided by synod to the Office of General Secretary as appropriate.
- 2) Edit section 4.g.h. ~~Develop and oversee communication plans and activities~~ Make recommendations to improve and strengthen the overall functioning of denominational communications including during and after synod, COD, and classis gatherings.
- 3) Edit the wording in the note behind the Synodical Services Committee in the Committee Membership Matrix table on page 21 of the COD Governance Handbook to read "Ordinarily 50/50 balance between CDN and US."

Grounds:

- a) This maintains a normative expectation of intentional binationality in Synodical Services as a matter of wisdom.

- b) This minimizes departure from precedent under the prior Ministry Plan, Communications, and Synodical Services Committee (MPC).
 - c) This provides future flexibility to assign members to committees based on member interest or organizational need when there is compelling rationale.
- c. *Connections Committee Charter*
- Edit section 4.e. ~~Annual report to synod: Submit an annual written report to the COD and synod addressing the following topics:~~ Matters to be discussed in preparation for annual synodical reports: Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, and World Renew submit annual reports to synod via its agenda and supplemental agenda (Rules for Synodical Procedure, pp. 9-12). These annual reports, submitted to the Office of General Secretary, include:
- Mandate and mission – How the agency is fulfilling its mandate and mission.
 - Ministry plan and ministry goals – How the organization is aligned with the ministry plan and its calling areas and milestones.
 - Leadership – Leadership plans and changes in leadership structure.
 - Financial – An annual financial overview including a balance sheet, revenue and expenses, and advancement activities.
 - Organizational governance updates as required and appropriate.
- When necessary, some of these items should come to the attention of the Council of Delegates for information and/or endorsement, such as changes in leadership (as required by organizational bylaws and synodical procedures), requests for changes in synodical mandates, and changes to organizational bylaws (when required). Such items should be included in the Connections Committee agenda and be processed by COD in the report of the Connections Committee to the plenary COD.
- Grounds:*
- 1) This aligns the content of synodical reporting with the purpose of the Connections Committee.
 - 2) Reduces duplication of existing board governance.
 - 3) Clarifies that COD committees report to synod via the COD.
- d. *All Committee Charters*
- Edit Sections 7 (Banner Advisory, Bible Translations), 8 (Executive, Thrive, ReFrame, Resonate, Connections), or 9 (Governance, Finance, Synodical Services). The _____ Committee charter is intended to

be a dynamic document. As such, the charter should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis by the committee. In consultation with the Governance Committee, recommended changes can be made to the COD for review and approval.

Grounds:

- 1) As the shepherd of board policies and practices, Governance Committee can serve committees as they explore changes to their mandates.
- 2) This ensures a consistency of editorial language and governance process across the whole of the Governance Handbook.

e. *COD Policy Updates*

- 1) Financial Reserve Policy (Appendix E)
- 2) Cash Holding Policy (Appendix F)
- 3) Fundraising Ethical Guidelines Policy (Appendix G)
- 4) Investment Policy (Appendix H)

4. Calvin University Board of Trustees interim appointments

Synod 2023 inadvertently missed voting on two appointments to the Calvin University Board of Trustees. The COD exercised its role as the interim committee of synod to make these appointments on an interim basis and presents them to Synod 2024 for ratification (see Recommendation U).

Region 1

Jack Beeksmas is a 1978 graduate of Calvin University with a bachelor of arts degree in education. He received his master's degree in teaching in 1992 while teaching in Nigeria with Christian Reformed World Missions. He spent 35 years teaching in Christian schools in Calgary, Alberta; Nigeria; and Prince George, British Columbia. He has a love for the Reformed faith and has been a lifetime member of the Christian Reformed Church. He served on councils in Calgary and Prince George. He has a deep gratitude to Calvin for shaping his faith and giving direction to his life. He is currently a member of the Christian Reformed Church of Prince George.

Region 5 at-large trustee

Adam Ramirez is a graduate of Northwestern College (Iowa) with a bachelor of arts in history and biblical studies. He is from Pipestone, Minnesota. He earned a master in theological studies degree from Calvin Theological Seminary and is currently finishing his doctorate in worship studies from Robert E. Webber Institute. He currently serves as a home missionary and church consultant for spiritual formation and cross-cultural rural ministry with Classis Minnkota at Nueva Vida en Jesus Christian Reformed Church in Pipestone, Minnesota, in collaboration with Resonate Global Mission and the CRC's Consejo Latino. He has a passion for building bridges between the Latino community and the Christian Reformed Church. He is in the

process of transferring his membership to Faith Community Christian Reformed Church in Colton, South Dakota.

5. Synodical deputy and alternate interim appointments

On behalf of synod, the COD has ratified the following classical appointments of synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies* and presents them for synodical approval (see Recommendation V):

<i>Classis</i>	<i>Member</i>	<i>Alternate</i>	<i>Term</i>
Alberta South/ Saskatchewan	Rev. Gary van Leeuwen	Rev. David Swinney	2027(1)
Hudson	Rev. Albert (John) Sideco, Jr.		2026(2)
Huron	Rev. Sid Couperus	Rev. Victor Laarman	2025(2)
Illiana	Rev. Josh Christoffels		2025(2)
Quinte	Rev. Josh Tuininga	Vacant	2025(2)
Wisconsin	Rev. Greg Schuringa		2025(2)

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

The COD Supplement report to synod is expected to include further actions whereby COD ratified, on behalf of synod, the classical appointments of synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies.

6. Compliance with biblical guidelines on same-sex relationships

Churches and classes have had questions regarding Synod 2023's instruction to "guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1029). The primary interpreters of this decision must be the leaders of each classis. Keeping that thought central, denominational staff have provided some helpful guidelines in the Synod 2023 FAQ document (crcna.org/synod-2023-faq-document). Staff have also worked with classis stated clerks, church visitors, regional pastors, and others to empower them in addressing this instruction. In addition, the Office of General Secretary has produced a video (crcna.org/SexualityResources) summarizing the denominational position and providing helpful guidance for ongoing discussion. The COD has endorsed these materials and extends its gratitude to the staff for their efforts in creating and curating these resources.

7. 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 general secretary 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 General Secretary.

8. Adding Thrive to the Rules for Synodical Procedure

The COD recommends adding Thrive to the Rules for Synodical Procedure in order to include this new agency among those reporting to synod through the COD (see Recommendation W).

D. Staffing and leadership

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	# of positions	# below target	# at target
E1	1	1	0
E2	5	5	0
E3	6	6	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 for the current fiscal year are as follows:

2023-2024 Salary Grade and Range Structure

<i>Level</i>	<i>U.S. Range</i>		<i>Canadian Range</i>	
	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Target</i>
E1	\$163,294	\$204,117		
E2	\$147,361	\$184,201	\$141,762	\$177,202
E3	\$124,881	\$156,103	\$124,220	\$155,275
H	\$105,833	\$132,290	\$106,471	\$133,089
I	\$89,688	\$112,110	\$91,258	\$114,073
J	\$76,007	\$95,008	\$78,219	\$97,774
K	\$64,413	\$80,516	\$67,043	\$83,804
L	\$54,587	\$68,233	\$57,464	\$71,830
M	\$46,260	\$57,825	\$49,253	\$61,567
N	\$39,204	\$49,004	\$42,216	\$52,770
O	\$33,224	\$41,530	\$36,184	\$45,230

E. 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 2024—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

2025 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025). In addition, synod will be asked to approve a schedule for one or more above-ministry-share offerings for the ministries of the denomination and a quarterly offering for World Renew in lieu of ministry-share support (see Recommendation X). Additional financial information and/or recommendations will also be included in the Council of Delegates Supplement report to synod in May.

2. Ministry shares system

- a. Synod 2023 directed the Office of General Secretary to “provide greater flexibility in the pledge process cycle, allowing churches to determine their pledge cycle based on their fiscal year,” to “suggest to the churches what would be a reasonable amount to cover basic/core denominational operational costs as part of their pledge,” and to “provide to the churches and classes more information on pledges and giving results, including what comprises the basic/core denominational costs” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 987).

Classes have now been informed that they can tell the appropriate denominational staff what timeframe their pledge cycle will cover. (The classis remains responsible for collecting pledges.)

Staff are working to determine how best to convey costs that are essential to being a denomination. Staff are also working to communicate this amount in a manner that is consistent on both sides of the border and provides transparency and a clear message while not discouraging churches who already give faithfully.

Quarterly reports providing churches and classes with more information on pledges and giving results have begun to be shared in the United States and will begin to be shared in Canada in April.

- b. Synod 2023 directed the COD “to continue the Review of Ministry Shares Reimagined” by conducting a survey or making personal contacts to churches not currently participating in the ministry-share program and by comparing our system with the ministry funding mechanisms of other denominations. Based on the findings of those tasks the COD is to “make recommendations for further changes to the ministry-share program” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 987-88).

Staff have begun categorizing churches that are not participating in the ministry-share system. This will enable surveys that are more likely to engage these churches. COD members may also be asked to contact specific churches in their classes.

Information has been gathered from the Reformed Church in America, the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church on how their funding mechanisms are planned and how well they are utilized. More information may still be gathered from additional denominations.

3. Criteria for vetting charitable organizations

Synod 2023 discontinued the practice of having staff vet and recommend charitable organizations to CRC churches for offerings (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 986). Synod also directed the Office of General Secretary to provide the vetting criteria used by CRCNA staff so that churches can more easily vet organizations themselves. These criteria are posted on The Network at network.crcna.org/topic/church-administration/church-admin-finance/church-guidance-vetting-organizations-donations.

4. Sale and purchase of the U.S. ministry building

Stemming from Synod 2016's instructions to the then Board of Trustees to reduce the institutional footprint of the CRCNA, one item that came under scrutiny was the size and use of the current Grand Rapids, Michigan, facility and property. Previous plans for a major remodel, including tearing down one wing of the building, were scrapped because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today the space required is much less than was used prior to the pandemic. This situation has led to a decision to sell the existing building and to seek a ministry facility more suitable to the needs and goals of the CRCNA U.S. ministries today.

The building at the corner of Kalamazoo Avenue and 28th Street in Grand Rapids is for sale at the time of this report. Options for relocation somewhere within the greater Grand Rapids area are being considered. Preparations for a move are well under way.

5. Condensed financial statements

The condensed financial statements of the agencies and institutions of the CRCNA are shared for information in Appendix I (see Recommendation Y).

F. Ministry oversight

1. Ministry presentations at synod

Presentations by CRC ministries play an important role in the function of synod. Reports provide the means for accountability, celebration, prayer support, encouragement, and increased understanding. In a world that increasingly questions the relevance of the church, reports on the work of the church allow us to display the difference the church is making in our world. It has often been reflected that God has blessed the CRCNA, a relatively small denomination, with the ability to make a big impact. Delegates to Synod 2024 will receive presentations from Calvin Theological Seminary and the Candidacy Committee.

2. Ministry evaluation

Synod 2018 instructed the COD and the general secretary "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. After a one-year pause to finalize the COD reorganization, the Office of General Secretary continues to review this practice in light of a new Council of Delegates reporting process and the consolidation of nine congregational ministries into Thrive.

G. Publications and services

1. 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), and in online format (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 days. The online format includes the Church Finder feature (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 be accessed or downloaded at 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.

2. Church Order and Its Supplements and Rules for Synodical Procedure

The *Church Order and Its Supplements 2023* reflects revisions to the Church Order adopted by Synod 2023. The latest version of the *Church Order and Its Supplements*, published by the Office of Synodical Services, is in process of distribution to the churches at this time of writing. It will also be translated into Korean and Spanish.

The *Rules for Synodical Procedure*, last updated following decisions of Synod 2023, is available in digital format only. Both the *Church Order and Its Supplements* and the *Rules for Synodical Procedure* are available for download at crcna.org/SynodResources.

3. *Agenda for Synod* and *Acts of Synod*

The publication of the *Agenda for Synod* and the *Acts of Synod* is the responsibility of the director of synodical services under the direction of the general secretary. From time to time some decisions need to be made by the general secretary about which material properly belongs in the *Agenda for Synod*.

The general secretary may consult with the COD or Program Committee (officers of the previous synod) 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.

Synod 2019 decided that to improve the connections between synod, 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.

4. *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 2023 by the Office of Synodical Services. Anyone desiring to access or download a copy of this tool for the classes may do so by way of the stated clerk and synodical deputy webpage at crcna.org/SynodicalDeputies.

5. *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 through Synod 2019 that have been incorporated into the Church Order. The manual has now been revised by Kathy Smith, polity professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and hopefully will be available for purchase by late spring 2024. We are grateful to Rev. Smith and Dr. De Moor for their contributions in 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 explanations of guidelines and decisions made by synod over the years. The manual is available for reading in the CRC Digital Library (crcna.org/DigitalLibrary), and print and downloadable versions are available through Faith Alive (faithaliveresources.org).

6. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*

Henry DeMoor updated the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* in 2020. 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), and print and downloadable versions are available through Faith Alive (faithaliveresources.org).

H. *Denominational survey summary results*

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 2023 denominational survey at crcna.org/survey/survey-results. The 2024 survey was distributed in February and March, and results will be available soon.

I. *Legal entity to house the Office of General Secretary*

Synod 2022 tasked the Council of Delegates with the formation of a separate legal entity to house the Office of General Secretary (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 929). This task has not been completed because there are likely implications related to the Global Visioning process. When that work is complete or at least much further along, we will be able to understand the implications that work will have on the creation of a distinct legal entity to house the work of the Office of General Secretary. We are therefore postponing the completion of this task until that time.

J. *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.

b. *The Banner*

The Banner, the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church, currently prints and distributes more than 60,000 copies of its paper version. Website pageviews average more than 85,000 per month, and more than 12,000 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); monthly, the app is receiving more than 10,000 pageviews.

We are most thankful for a huge show of support from *Banner* readers, as around 5,000 donors gave approximately \$470,000 for the annual appeal fundraiser in 2023.

c. Faith Alive and Libros Desafio

Synod 2013 approved the dissolution of the Faith Alive Christian Resources board and transitioned critical functions of Faith Alive to MSS. We continue to sell and reprint resources that were already published, support the ongoing development of the *Dwell* Sunday school curriculum and Discover Your Bible series, and publish a small number of new titles as requested by our ministries. Sales of older products continue to decline, and the pandemic radically halted sales of curriculum and other church-based resources. Those sales have now bounced back, but not to pre-pandemic levels. Thrive and MSS continue to pour energy into the *Dwell* curriculum, including further development of *Dwell Flex* (for smaller churches and multi-age contexts) and *Dwell Digital* (the online version of our *Dwell* leader materials).

Similarly, Libros Desafio has ceased publishing new titles but continues to sell and reprint backlisted titles for as long as it is economically viable. We are exploring options for selling our translated works to other Spanish-language publishers so that they can continue to be made available throughout Latin America and beyond.

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. Since the start of the pandemic we have 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 practical aspects of doing church ministry. Although the half-time community manager now reports into the CRC Communications office, Ministry Support Services staff continue to be involved in the technical aspects of the website. The site

receives about one million pageviews per year, as folks across the denomination read, ask questions, and share ideas with each other about their congregation's ministries.

V. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Michael L. Ten Haken, chair of the Council of Delegates; Greta Luimes, vice chair of the Council of Delegates; Zachary J. King, general secretary; and members of the executive staff as needed when matters pertaining to the Council of Delegates, Re-Frame Ministries, Resonate Global Mission, or other ministries of the CRCNA 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 2024.

C. That synod extend the *Our Journey 2025* Ministry Plan to 2030 with the appropriate evaluation and updated communications strategy (II).

Grounds:

1. The *Our Journey 2025* Ministry Plan was developed with feedback from the congregations and classes during 2018 and 2019. It was approved by the Council of Delegates on behalf of synod at its special meeting in June 2020 (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2020*, pp. 421-23). However, implementation of the ministry plan in its early years was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The milestones of *Our Journey 2025* still represent a timely, critical, and ongoing call for CRCNA congregations, classes, agencies, and institutions.
3. Now is not an opportune time to develop a new ministry plan while the current one fits well in the present context. Staff time would better be spent evaluating and strengthening the current ministry plan.
4. Recent synodical directives such as developing a plan to reverse membership decline (Synod 2023) call for a ministry plan that is oriented toward congregational renewal like *Our Journey 2025*.
5. The Ministry Leadership Council has made this recommendation.

D. That synod receive for information the plan for conversational gatherings in 2024-2025 pertaining to growing the denomination (II, D, 1; Appendix A).

E. That synod adopt the following changes to Church Order Articles 14, 15, and 23 and their Supplements as proposed by Synod 2023 in support of bivocational pastors (with additions indicated by underline and deletions by ~~striketrough~~) (II, D, 3).

Proposed Article 14-d

A minister of the Word who has entered upon a vocation which classis judges to be nonministerial and forsakes the calling of a minister of the Word shall be released from office within one year of that judgment. The concurring advice of the synodical deputies shall be obtained at the time of the judgment.

Grounds:

- a. Without this addition, Article 14 implies that a nonministerial vocation is in conflict with the work and ordination of a minister of the Word.
- b. The addition clarifies that forsaking the office is cause for a minister to be released.

Proposed Article 15

Each church through its council shall ~~provide for~~ attend to the proper support of its minister(s). ~~By way of exception and with the approval of classis, a church and minister may agree that a minister obtain primary or supplemental income by means of other employment. Ordinarily the foregoing exception shall be limited to churches that cannot obtain assistance adequate to support their minister.~~

Grounds:

- a. The change in phrasing maintains the covenantal relationship between pastor and congregation while giving flexibility with regard to where “proper support” is coming from.
- b. The removed section discriminates against bivocational ministry as an “exception” rather than recognizing it as a desired, missional choice.

Proposed Supplement, Article 15

“Proper Support” Defined

Proper support of a church’s minister is to include an adequate salary, medical insurance, disability insurance, a housing provision, ~~payment to the denomination’s ministers’ pension plan~~ payment to an appropriate pension or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items.

To “attend to” proper support does not imply that the calling church is responsible to provide all of these items of support. Rather, the calling church is responsible to ensure that the minister has a plan that addresses these items. In many ministries the local church itself accepts these responsibilities in order to facilitate full-time or part-time ministerial service. In other settings—such as church planting,

various forms of chaplaincy, bivocational arrangements, multipoint ministries, and so on—the financial plan will include income and benefits provided by a variety of potential sources. The financial plan should be carefully reviewed and signed by the classical counselor when a call to ministry is made or when a pastor and church decide to change their financial arrangement.

Guidelines for Churches ~~Whose Ministers Receive Salary Support from Other Employment~~ in Conversations with Pastors about “Proper Support”

- ~~1. The church is responsible for a total compensation package proportionate to the time spent in ministry to the church (forty eight hours equals full time). The compensation package shall ordinarily be based on synodically stated minimum salary, fringe benefits, and housing costs.~~
- ~~2. Since the compensation package includes a percentage allowance for health insurance, the minister is expected to secure adequate health insurance for the minister and the minister’s family.~~
- ~~31. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.~~
- ~~42. The minister shall receive pension credits in the Ministers’ Pension Fund proportionate to the percentage of time devoted to the duties of the church. Eligibility for full pension credit may be secured if full contribution to the Ministers’ Pension Plan is made.~~
- ~~53. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) other than ministry shall be specified shall be mutually discerned by minister(s) and the supervising council. The support plan in the letter of call, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by the classical counselor, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and nonministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.~~
4. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of ministers, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

Grounds:

- a. These revisions address issues described in section VIII of the task force report (“Financial Considerations”).
- b. These revisions provide further clarity to the proposed Article 15.
- c. These revisions promote flexibility while also promoting the covenantal arrangement between the minister and the calling church.

Proposed Article 23-d

Each church through its council shall attend to the proper support of its commissioned pastor.

Grounds:

- a. The proposed addition calls for the proper support of commissioned pastors.
- b. The proposed addition parallels the proposal for Article 15.

Proposed Supplement, Article 23-d

“Proper Support” Defined

Proper support of a commissioned pastor is to include an adequate salary, medical insurance, disability insurance, a housing provision, payment to an appropriate pension or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items.

To “attend to” proper support does not imply that the calling church is responsible to provide all of these items of support. Rather, the calling church is responsible to ensure that the commissioned pastor has a plan that addresses these items. In many ministries the local church itself accepts these responsibilities in order to facilitate full-time or part-time ministry service. In other settings—such as church planting, various forms of chaplaincy, bivocational arrangements, multipoint ministries, and so on—the financial plan will include income and benefits provided by a variety of potential sources. The calling church’s support of the financial plan should be carefully reviewed at the time classis approves the commissioned pastor’s position. This includes a call to bivocational ministry or when a pastor and church decide to change their financial arrangement.

Guidelines for Churches in Conversations with Pastors about “Proper Support”

1. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.
2. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) shall be mutually discerned by the commissioned pastor(s) and the supervising council. The support plan, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by classis along with the position description, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and non-ministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.
3. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of commissioned pastors, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

Grounds:

- a. This addition provides further clarity to the proposed Article 23-d.
- b. This addition promotes flexibility while also promoting the covenantal arrangement between the commissioned pastor and the calling church.
- c. The proposed supplement reflects similar proposed changes to Supplement, Article 15.

F. That synod receive the report of the Church Order Review Task Force and its recommendations for adoption, including dismissal of the task force with gratitude for their work (III, B, 1; Appendix B).

G. That synod receive the report of the Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters for information, with gratitude for their work (III, B, 2; Appendix C).

H. That synod express gratitude to Edward Bosveld, Cindy de Jong, and Kim Rhodes for their years of service to the denomination on the Judicial Code Committee (III, D, 1, a).

I. That synod by way of the ballot appoint Arlyn Bossenbrook to the Judicial Code Committee for a first term of three years (III, D, 1, a).

J. That synod reappoint Richard Bodini to a second term of three years on the Judicial Code Committee (III, D, 1, b).

K. That synod take note of the updates on addressing Synod 2019's directives regarding abuse of power (III, D, 4).

L. That synod adopt the following changes to the Church Order proposed by Synod 2023 in relation to the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (III, D, 4, d, 2).

Proposed changes to Article 5 and its Supplement

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; additions are indicated by underline).

Article 5-b

All officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

Supplement, Article 5-b

[The full text of the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, as presented in the Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 998-1002, would become the text of Church Order Supplement, Article 5-b.]

Proposed change to Church Order Supplement, Article 13-c, section c
(addition indicated by underline)

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 as articulated in the Code of Conduct.

M. That synod receive the Draft Conflict of Interest Policy for Delegates to Synod (Appendix D) for information and reassesses the necessity of this policy for synodical delegates (III, D, 5).

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022 asked that "a Conflict of Interest Policy for delegates to synod" be adapted from the COD's recently adopted Conflict of Interest Policy (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 931).
2. Much of the COD's Conflict of Interest Policy addresses the role of each COD delegate as a member of a legal corporation of the CRCNA (Canada or U.S.) and of ReFrame (Canada or U.S.), whereas synodical delegates do not have the same interest in these legal corporations. Moreover, in distinction from COD delegates, synodical delegates are required to be members of a council (which is also a legal board) and are also sometimes members of the legal boards of their classes—and these situations create a confluence of interests aligned with our doctrine of the church as the one body of Christ. These findings have shown that the potential conflicts of interest for synodical delegates and COD delegates are considerably different and that a simple adaptation of the COD Conflict of Interest Policy is not possible.
3. Considering that a simple adaptation is not possible, we believe this matter should return to synod for reassessment.
4. While we have not previously had a synodical conflict of interest policy, we recognize that the work of outside advocacy organizations in which synodical delegates might be involved may warrant a task force review on the advisability of such a policy.

N. That synod approve the work of the COD regarding the interim appointment of Sally Larsen as the Classis Chicago South delegate. Her term ends June 30, 2024, and she decided not to pursue a second term (IV, B, 1).

O. That synod by way of the ballot appoint Phil Apoll (Ontario Southwest), William Krahne (Lake Superior), and Ronald VanAuken (Quinte), each previously appointed as an interim COD classical delegate, to a modified first term, eligible for reappointment to a second three-year term (IV, B, 1).

P. 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 (IV, B, 2).

Q. 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 (IV, B, 2).

R. That synod approve the work of the COD in securing Redeemer University in Ancaster, Ontario, as the location for Synod 2025 (IV, C, 2, a).

Grounds:

1. Due to a construction project, Dordt University is no longer able to host Synod 2025, as approved by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 940).
 2. Planning and contracts with the venue needed to begin immediately to ensure a successful synod in 2025, and this change of plans aligned with the COD's mandate to make decisions that cannot await action by the next synod.
 3. This change aligns with the request of First CRC in Chatham, Ontario, to be the convening church of Synod 2025 in anticipation of celebrating 100 years of the Christian Reformed Church in Ontario.
- S. That synod accept the invitation of First CRC in Chatham, Ontario, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2025, to be held in Ancaster, Ontario, on the campus of Redeemer University (IV, C, 2, a).

Ground:

First CRC of Chatham will celebrate 100 years in 2026. This marks not only 100 years for First CRC but also 100 years of the Christian Reformed Church in Ontario.

One hundred years ago Classis Grand Rapids East and Oakdale Park CRC took an interest in a small group of immigrants in Chatham and provided them with financial and spiritual support. First CRC was established in 1926. In the late 1940s and early 1950s First CRC sent representatives to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to greet new Dutch immigrants and help them find work and land.

Since then CRC members, many of whom spent time at First CRC in Chatham or had relatives who did, established Christian Reformed churches and Christian schools throughout Ontario.

We would like to celebrate not only our 100-year anniversary but also 100 years of God's faithfulness to the CRC and its members in Ontario.

T. That synod approve Calvin University as the location for Synod 2026 (IV, C, 2, b).

Grounds:

1. Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary started as one school in 1876. They have asked to host synod as a way to cap off their joint celebration of 150 years.
2. This request aligns with the decision of Synod 2019 to have no more than one in four synods outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan.
3. The estimated savings of having Synod 2026 meet at Calvin University would exceed \$150,000.

U. That synod approve Jack Beeksmā (Region 1) and Adam Ramirez (Region 5 at-large) as board members to the Calvin University Board of Trustees, previously approved by the COD as interim members, each for a first term ending June 30, 2026, eligible for a second three-year term (IV, C, 4).

V. That synod approve the interim appointments made by the COD for synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies (IV, C, 5).

W. That synod update the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 10 (“Supplementary Reports”), to include Thrive among the agencies reporting to synod through the COD (additions in underline, deletions in ~~striketrough~~) (IV, C, 8).

The Council of Delegates of the CRCNA, including reports by ReFrame Ministries, ~~and~~ Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive; the Board of Trustees of Calvin Theological Seminary; the Board of Trustees of Calvin University; the Board of World Renew; the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee; the Historical Committee; and the Candidacy Committee are permitted to file a supplementary report after March 15. These boards and standing committees are expected to incorporate as much of their materials as possible in the printed *Agenda*, and matters for the supplementary reports must be kept to a minimum.

X. 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 2024 (IV, E, 1).

Y. That synod receive as information the condensed financial statements of the agencies and educational institutions (IV, E, 5; Appendix I).

Council of Delegates of the
Christian Reformed Church in North America
Michael L. Ten Haken, chair

Conversational Gatherings 2024-2025: An Overview for the Council of Delegates

Since the mid-1990s, the CRCNA has experienced a steady decline in membership. Cultural divisions, demographic challenges, struggles with evangelism and church planting, and differing views on women in ministry have all played a role. Political polarization, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty, and debates around human sexuality are the most recent issues affecting us and our ability to engage mission locally and globally.

Our churches are feeling the impacts of this reality. In fact, they sent a request to Synod 2023 asking for help to “arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about . . . membership growth” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 392). Yet we know there are significant pockets of renewal and growth in our churches even in the midst of such challenges. As staff and leaders of the CRCNA, we would like to develop a replicable, grassroots, storytelling process to help our churches learn from one another how to move faithfully into the future. We need your help.

Our plan is to convene ten regional gatherings with lay and ordained leaders throughout the United States and Canada. Each two-day event will include prayer, worship, fellowship, storytelling, and facilitated dialogue. The goal will be to facilitate a process of discovery for congregations and leaders, revealing to them and us how God is already at work renewing the church. As we build a culture of narrative testimony, we anticipate that churches and classes will develop a receptive, open, and hopeful imagination based on the existing work of God in our midst.

Throughout these events, we will be identifying what is happening on the leading edge of missional ministry, how God is renewing his church, and what our role in that work should be. We will be watching for barriers to renewal that our churches are experiencing, and we will be seeking to discover how to overcome those barriers. This project will leverage the CRCNA’s regional strategy and strengthen our corporate discernment practices so that together we can evaluate, clarify, and align the churches of the CRCNA with God’s ongoing missional purposes.

But, most importantly, churches will listen to and learn from each other. Each participant who attends an event will be inspired by others to create an action plan that they can take back to their local congregation. In addition, data from the gatherings will be collected and reviewed for themes of renewal. The discoveries from this initiative will be integrated to inform the development of an adaptable renewal strategy for congregations as requested by synod. It is our hope that having representatives participate in

these gatherings will help congregations and classes develop interest and buy-in for the synodical plan or pathway.

A donor has come forward with a substantial gift to get us started. However, we are approaching other donors, including foundations and endowments, to cover the remaining costs. Our hope is to hold these events at no cost to individual participants and without diverting any funds from ministry.

Elaine May (Thrive) has been charged with leading this initiative and is already at work planning the first event, which we hope to hold in April 2024. She is consulting with leaders from all the CRCNA agencies to ensure appropriate buy-in and participation. She will also invite representatives from all six CRCNA geographic regions to the first event to help ensure that there are “local” people who can discuss their experience and encourage others to attend.

We need the Council of Delegates’ assistance in promoting this initiative and identifying people to attend.

Recommendation

In response to Synod 2023’s direction to “work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, and churches and classes to develop a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 976), we ask COD members to do the following:

- promote and encourage full participation in the upcoming classis gatherings at their classis meetings using materials provided by the Office of General Secretary
- reach out to all the churches in their classes through an appropriate medium and inform them using materials provided by the Office of General Secretary
- have personal conversations with the appropriate classis leaders about the plans for classis gatherings
- provide assistance as needed in selecting appropriate classis leaders to participate
- attend the gathering in which their particular classis is taking part and participate as requested

Church Order Review Task Force Report

Report Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. Mandate, observations, and background
- III. Accountability and supervision
- IV. Transitions and release from ministry
- V. Concluding observations
- VI. Recommendations

Addenda

- A. Updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and Their Supplements
- B. Updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, and 42 and Their Supplements
- C. Covenant of Joint Supervision for Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors Serving in Noncongregational Ministry Positions
- D. Separation Agreement Template
- E. Guidelines for Pastors and Congregations in Times of Conflict
- F. Resources and Forms Related to the Calling, Supervision, and Release of Ministers

I. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the Christian Reformed Church in North America has seen an increase in the number of issues and concerns related to the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word in what are often called “specialized ministries,” and to the release of ministers from congregations and/or from the denomination as a whole. One of the more common concerns relates to Article 17 of the Church Order because actions related to this provision often bear a stigma for pastors and churches. This concern has caused a number of individuals and churches to suggest changes to our way of handling these kinds of situations as a denomination. Some of the concerns and suggested changes are highlighted in Overtures 4, 5, and 6 deferred from 2020 to be addressed by Synod 2022, and in Overture 10 to Synod 2022. These overtures suggest that our churches and classes would be helped by clearer guidelines and possible changes to Church Order provisions related to the supervision and release of ministers.

As a result of these discussions, Synod 2022 approved the establishment of a Church Order Review Task Force (CORTF) (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). Following the parameters of composition and membership delineated by synod, the task force was formed with the following members: Rev. Laura

de Jong, Rev. Chelsey Harmon, Pastor James Jones, Mr. Casey Jen, Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink (reporter), Rev. John Sideco, Rev. Kathy Smith (ex-officio), and Rev. Joel Vande Werken (chair). The task force was also assisted by advisors Rev. Dave Den Haan (Thrive) and Rev. Susan LaClear (Candidacy Committee), and we gratefully acknowledge the administrative assistance provided by Cassie Beadle and the wisdom of other denominational staff with whom we consulted.

The mandate of the task force has been as follows:

to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their Supplements in conversation with Pastor Church Resources [now called Thrive] and relevant voices, and to bring an interim report to Synod 2023 through the COD and a final report to Synod 2024.

The task force shall develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions and more effective oversight of individuals in specialized ministries, including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8.

(*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849)

The task force met on a number of occasions via Zoom (Nov. 7 and Dec. 5, 2022; Feb. 28, Apr. 11, May 23, July 17, Aug. 22, Sept. 25, Oct. 30, Nov. 9, and Nov. 20, 2023) and conducted one in-person meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Feb. 1-2, 2023). The task force submitted an interim report through the COD to Synod 2023 (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 72-73). And here, following regular updates to the Council of Delegates and interactions with a number of individuals across the CRCNA, the Church Order Review Task Force presents its full report to Synod 2024.

II. Mandate, observations, and background

A. Initial Observations

The Church Order addresses a wide variety of situations in Articles 12-17. While it is important for the church to have agreed-upon processes to regulate its organization, it is not possible to create a separate set of rules or procedures to address every situation. In fact, it is expressly *not* the purpose of the Christian Reformed Church Order to do so. Dating back to the time of John Calvin, the purposeful practice within the Reformed tradition has been to create guidelines grounded in theological commitments that enable the church to function in a healthy and peaceful way (1 Cor. 14:40) and which allow for both flexibility and wisdom to be used in any particular situation.

Because our polity is rooted in a deep commitment to the creeds and confessions, these statements of faith provide the conceptual guidance that allows us to have a relatively “thin” Church Order that does not need to

anticipate or address every eventuality but provides general guidance, with the assumption that other denominational resources will be available for particular situations. As the introduction to the Church Order states, these articles contain the “collective wisdom of the church” so that this wisdom might be “passed on from generation to generation.” The task force committed to carrying out its mandate in the same spirit. Thus we recognize that the following guidelines may seem too general for some situations, but we believe this approach is necessary and appropriate within a covenant community seeking the wisdom of God’s Spirit for their particular situation. And while we believe that good structures and policies can contribute to healthy church life, we also humbly recognize the limits of Church Order to address concerns that may arise. On many occasions as we carried out our work, we were reminded of the importance of covenant community and relationship building, and we encourage pastors, councils, classes, and any others who are involved in the issues addressed in this report to recognize Church Order as no more than a tool—a good tool, but only a tool—that points us toward deeper and healthier relationships rooted in Christ.

One particular issue the task force was asked to recognize was “the increasing use of Article 17 and its often-perceived stigma” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). Of all the areas covered in this report, the discussion concerning appropriate application of Article 17 arouses the strongest feelings, because the article is often applied in situations of conflict and pain for both pastors and churches. While synod’s mandate primarily addresses the need for administrative guidelines and potential updates to the Church Order, the task force is also keenly aware that behind every situation involving transition and supervision are real people and real ministry situations. Our goal is to help churches and pastors find ways to address these situations in community rather than in isolation, with a balance of grace and truth that reflects the ministry of Christ. We also acknowledge that the increased use of Article 17 is due in part to a rise in the release of ministers for nonconflict related reasons, such as the pursuit of further degree studies, family care leave, spousal job changes, and the disbanding or disaffiliation of congregations.

1. Organization of this report

As we began our work, we recognized two broad areas of discussion within our mandate. First, we faced several issues dealing with supervision, accountability, and support for ministers of the Word in noncongregational settings. These issues roughly corresponded (but were not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 12-13. Second, we identified a number of issues related to transitions in ministry, especially when a minister of the Word is released from a particular call without another call in place, or when a minister resigns from ordained ministry in the denomination as a whole. These issues roughly corresponded to (but were not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 14 and 17. This report will largely use these two areas as a

framework for organizing the material we reviewed as we carried out synod's assignment. For each of these two main sections, we will attempt to meet four objectives:

- provide background observations and theological reflections
- identify key issues, observations, and concerns arising in today's context, with particular attention to those named in the overtures referred to the task force
- note resources and guidance available within the denomination
- provide recommendations for the improvement of the Church Order and its Supplements, as well as potential action steps by denominational assemblies or staff

We also intend, in this first main section of our report, to offer observations about the theology of office and ordination that guides our thinking as a denomination. While there are a number of practical and pastoral considerations to keep in mind as we process matters related to a specific call, or to a release from a specific ministry, it is essential for the work of the church that we keep in mind the overall goal of advancing the work of God's kingdom. Thus we want to ground all of our work, including those matters that appear more administrative in nature, in the testimony of Scripture and in the wisdom of theological reflection done within the Reformed tradition over the years. We hope to return to some of these reflections in the concluding section of our report as well (see section V, B), before providing a summary of our final recommendations to synod.

2. The limits of our mandate

It is also helpful to recognize the limits of our mandate. First, we note that a number of issues that could be related to the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word are not covered in the articles of Church Order assigned in our mandate. To begin with, we were not tasked to reconsider the definition of the "ministry of the Word" (Art. 11). Thus we will assume the validity and usefulness of that definition. Nor does our mandate cover issues related to bivocationality and the support of bivocational ministers by their councils (Art. 15). Those topics have already been addressed by the Study of Bivocationality Task Force (see *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314; *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962-67, 975), and we found that their report provided helpful observations and insights about the changing nature of ministry today. Our mandate also does not specifically call us to address the supervision of retired ministers (Art. 18), though we will make some observations about this task (see section V, A, 2). In addition, with Overture 4 (deferred from 2020): "Amend Church Order Articles 12, 13, 14, and 17 with Respect to Supervision and Transition of Ministers," we observed that many of our discussions about ministers of the Word could foster similar dialogues about commissioned pastors, a subject to which we will return in our conclusion (see section V, A, 1). Because these matters are outside the scope of

our mandate, we will explore only in limited detail the applications of our work in those areas.

3. Terminology

For the sake of simplicity, we will use the terms “pastor” and “minister” throughout this report as synonyms for “minister of the Word,” the technical term for the office under discussion in Articles 12-17. We recognize that these terms could also apply to some persons serving in the office of commissioned pastor, so we want to clarify at the beginning of this report that, unless otherwise noted, our observations about officebearers in the CRCNA are limited to the single office under consideration in Articles 12-17.

We also tried to determine the best way to describe pastors who are not serving in a local CRC setting. For many years the CRC described these positions as “extraordinary” (for example, see *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 55, 643). More recently, the language of “specialized” ministries has been used (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 13-b). Neither term, however, is satisfactory in our present context. “Extraordinary” implies there is something unusual or unique about a particular calling, but such a term hardly seems appropriate for a rapidly growing number of positions beyond the local congregation. Additionally, congregations are increasingly creating “specialized” ministry positions, bringing confusion when the term is only intended to apply to positions outside the local congregation. Thus we have chosen to identify these roles as “noncongregational,” with the understanding that this term also has limits because it may include calls to congregations outside the CRC. However, we believe the term is the best one available to describe positions outside a local CRC congregation, provided we bear in mind the term’s application to the on-loan or orderly-exchange provisions as well.

Finally, as Overture 4 observes, the language of Church Order has been somewhat inconsistent in the way it refers to the nature of calling and supervision, and churches and pastors could benefit from further clarity about the church polity expectations involved in these related concepts. Again, there are limits to any terminology we might choose, and some of the confusion about terminology reflects the growing influence of corporate structures on the organization of the church. However, we also recognize that there is no single theological term that applies to the specific avenues for ministerial service covered in Church Order Articles 12-17. Thus, while we will use a variety of terms in this report—including “role,” “work,” “task,” and “ministry”—we have opted to recommend changes to the Church Order that use the term “position” consistently to refer to the specific call in which a pastor is supervised.

B. Theological reflection on the nature of office

The present version of the Church Order has its basis in the revisions approved by synod in 1965, but the principles behind our Church Order date back much further. We begin with a theological consideration of the nature of office as a recognition that our Church Order and practice must flow from our theology, and not the other way around. The Belgic Confession (Art. 30) teaches that the work of a pastor is to “preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.” Together with the elders and deacons, pastors “make up the council of the church” and provide for the faithful ministry of the church. The Belgic Confession draws on biblical principles emphasizing the need for leaders who “preach the Word” and who “correct, rebuke, and encourage” the development of sound doctrine and care for God’s people (2 Tim. 4:2-5; see also Acts 6:4; Matt. 18:18). Traditional forms used in the CRC for the ordination of ministers of the Word similarly emphasize the tasks of preaching, administering the sacraments, prayer, and shepherding the people of God in the Christian life (see *Psalter Hymnal* 1987, pp. 992-93, 995-96). These tasks receive a formal summary in Church Order Article 11, which declares: “The calling of a minister of the Word is to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture in order to gather in and equip the members so that the church of Jesus Christ may be built up.”

The CRC’s understanding of the nature of ecclesiastical office is based to a significant extent on two synodical study committee reports. Synod 1973 received a report titled “Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination,” which looked at the “nature of ecclesiastical office and the meaning of ordination as taught in Scripture and as exhibited in the history of the church of Christ” and considered “the question of the ministerial status of ministers engaged in extraordinary types of service—like Bible teaching in high schools or administrative duties” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 635; see *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 55, 643). Synod acknowledged that while some individuals are appointed to special tasks, the offices are to be understood in terms of functionality and “are primarily characterized by service, rather than by status, dominance, or privilege. The authority . . . associated with the special ministries is an authority defined by love and service” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 715).

Twenty-eight years later, Synod 2001 received the report of the Committee to Study Ordination and “Official Acts of Ministry” and adopted “guidelines for understanding the nature of, and relationships among, the concepts and practices of ordination, the ‘official acts of ministry,’ and church office” (*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 503). Among several recommendations adopted by Synod 2001 from that report, these two regarding leadership continue to define our view of office and leadership today:

Leadership is centrally a relationship of trust and responsibility. Leaders are entrusted by Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, to take pastoral responsibility for a part of his flock. With this responsibility

comes the authority of Christ for the purposes to which the leader has been called. . . .

Leaders must at the same time be recognized and trusted by the people of God as those who come with authority and blessings from the Lord. This dual relationship of leader to Christ and leader to the people is what above all defines leadership in the church. Leaders are those who have both the call of Christ and the call of the people.

(Acts of Synod 2001, pp. 503-4)

These reports offer a helpful summary of the CRC's understanding of the nature of ordained ministry, which guides the application of Church Order to particular situations. And the important emphases on service and leadership continue to shape our denomination's approach to ordained ministry, especially to the work of a minister of the Word, to varying degrees in varying situations in the present context. This theological and pastoral summary leads to some additional reflections on specific theological issues to which we will return throughout this report.

1. The nature of a minister's call

In the Reformed tradition the office of minister of the Word is shaped by both an internal call—that is, a personal sense of the Spirit's nudging toward leadership in the church—and an external call, extended by the church through its assemblies. Thus a call to ministry, and to a specific ministry, is not simply a matter for personal discernment but one that also involves congregations, councils, and classes in the deliberative process. Ministry has historically been seen as a lifetime vocation that can be given up only in exceptional circumstances, as reflected in the language of Church Order that refers to pastors who "forsake the office" (Art. 14-c). Because ministers of the Word exercise their office on behalf of the wider church, it is also the office most specifically and extensively regulated by Church Order, both in terms of training and of accountability to the assemblies.

Because a minister's call is one considered in conjunction with other church leaders, the church has a special role to play in discerning calls to noncongregational positions. However, the classis and synodical deputies play an additional role of discerning whether a position outside the local congregation provides an appropriate avenue for service in ministerial tasks with the endorsement of the church. Some positions are considered to be preapproved for ministers of the Word, such as missions, chaplaincy, specialized transitional ministry, and synodical appointments or appointments ratified by synod (Art. 12-b). Other positions must be approved by classis with the concurrence of the synodical deputies as work that is "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" (Art. 12-c). In all calls, whether to congregational or noncongregational positions, the classis plays a role through its designated counselor (Art. 9).

Collective discernment is also required as ministers transition out of a particular call. The relationship between church and pastor is different from the relationship between a typical employer and employee. The CRC holds that pastors are not simply hired but that God is acting through the call of the congregation to bring a pastor into a specific place of ministry. This understanding is reflected in the questions asked of a pastor at an ordination or installation service. Thus ministers may not leave an existing call without the consent of the council that issued the particular call (Art. 14-a). Further, CRC polity also prevents a congregation from dismissing a pastor simply because they no longer appreciate his or her ministry. The calling process and polity assume that both a community left behind and a community being entered should take part in the discernment process concerning a pastor's ministry. In addition, the wider church participates in this discernment through the involvement of classis functionaries or, on specific occasions, synodical deputies.

2. Ordination clings to a role in the church

CRC theology and practice tie ordination to an office, not an individual. Not only are the church assemblies involved in discerning a general calling into ministry, but also each ordained pastor requires a valid call from a church council in order to maintain standing as a minister of the Word in the CRC. This means that both pastors and councils must take the calling process seriously enough to see it as more than just a decision to "hire" or "fire" a church employee, or to "accept a position" with a particular employer. A pastor is not a "free agent" who can decide on the basis of personal preference where and when to serve in ministry. Thus Church Order insists that only those "officially called and ordained" may exercise office (Art. 3-b) and requires the consent of a council even when a pastor leaves a particular congregation (Art. 14-a). These requirements reflect Scripture's warning about persons who seek to represent the church on their own personal authority (see Rom. 16:17-18; 2 John 10-11).

Further, though the ministry of the Word has traditionally been seen as a lifetime vocation, the CRC has never considered lifetime ordination as an automatic privilege (although this principle comes to expression in different ways for a minister of the Word than for the other offices). Synod 1973, as it considered a significant study on the nature of ecclesiastical office and ordination, observed that ordination recognizes a minister's calling to a particular task—namely, that of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments in a certain setting. Thus ordination confers not a special status on an individual but rather the fact of their being set apart for a particular ministry that is strategic for the accomplishment of the church's total ministry (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 62-64). It should be noted that the CRC is somewhat different in this regard from other denominations, including many Presbyterian polities, in which the offices of pastor and elder are understood to have lifetime tenure. Though most ministers of the Word are called for

indefinite terms, unlike the specific terms typically used with elders and deacons—ministerial term calls are also sometimes used (Supplement, Art. 8, C). The principle of limited tenure comes to expression in our polity for ministers of the Word in that ministers are ordained *for a certain role* and retain their ordination only as long as they serve in a position which is “ministerial” in nature, consistent with this role.

3. The supervision of ministers of the Word

Because the ministry of the Word is a labor in and for the church, pastors exercise their office in close coordination with elders and deacons, who provide supervision and accountability as well as support and encouragement to those in the pastoral office. In distinction from other Reformed and Presbyterian polities, pastors in the CRCNA are supervised directly by a council rather than by a major assembly. This is true not only of pastors called to serve directly in a local congregation but also of those called to noncongregational service such as chaplains, professors of theology, ministers engaged in denominational work, or those serving in the growing number of other such noncongregational positions (as is clear by comparing Art. 13-a and 13-b). This local oversight of pastors places a significant responsibility on elders and deacons to understand their role in providing supervision and support as it relates to ministerial work, and this is evident in such responsibilities as the requirement of a council’s approval for release from a call (Art. 14-a; 17-a).

Synod 1978 dealt in some detail with the issue of the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” tasks of ministers of the Word (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 474-83). Among the key observations made to that synod was the principle that a minister of the Word is set apart by and for the church, for official tasks assigned by God to the church. While recognizing the challenge of supervising the work of noncongregational ministers at times, the study committee reminded synod of the importance of ecclesiastical oversight for all who represent the official ministry of the church (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 477-78). This reminder is perhaps even more important today, as the church has come to accept an increasing diversity of positions in which an individual may retain official standing as a representative of the institutional church. This reality affects both those ministers who serve in noncongregational positions (Art. 12-13) as well as those who are between calls because of a release from active ministry service in a congregation or other institution (Art. 17-a).

C. New cultural realities and shifts in thinking about ministerial office

Along with an increasing diversity of ministry positions in the church, there have been many other changes in the church and in wider culture since the substantial revisions to Church Order were adopted in 1965. Some of these changes are cultural; others are specific to the life of the church or of the Christian Reformed denomination. These changes have naturally shaped

the way the church views office and ordination in our present context, as noted particularly in Overture 5 (deferred from 2020): “Appoint a Study Committee to Review Church Order Articles 12-17.” We highlight several of these changes here:

1. Growing use of “business” language and expectations in church leadership

One of the most notable shifts is the application of business principles to the life of the church. This is evident in churches using the language of “hiring” or “firing” a pastor rather than “calling” an individual to serve and “releasing” an individual from his or her call. It is seen in pastors who go about a “job search” without consulting their fellow officebearers, and in “pastor job descriptions” that resemble the job descriptions of corporate officers. A business model often emerges from a kind of pragmatism or desire for efficiency on the part of both churches and pastors, and from a loss of appreciation for the spiritual nature of ecclesiastical office or a respect for the individual holding office in the church. While pragmatism and efficiency have their place, such priorities can obscure the role of God in the life of his people and thus diminish the significance of the calling to a “ministry of the Word,” and to the sometimes difficult work of laboring together as witnesses to the grace of Jesus Christ. It may also result in unrealistic or unsustainable expectations from congregations, eventually resulting in conflict between pastors and churches. While there is much the church can learn from a variety of sources, including the business world, it is important to hold to a biblically and theologically informed view of the church and of ordained ministry when in the process of calling and supervising ministers of the Word. The church is a spiritual reality shaped by different principles, driven by different goals, and assessed according to different measurements. In a business model “hiring” and “firing” are pragmatic responses to a perception about how ministry is going and may not allow room to see how God’s Spirit may be at work in prophetic ways that challenge the understanding we have of ourselves as individuals and as church communities.

2. Significant differentiation of ministry positions within and beyond the local congregation

As in many occupations, ministry has seen increasing specialization in the past several decades. Whereas it was common for churches to have only a solo pastor, it is now becoming common for churches to be served by several individuals who may each bear a title such as “Pastor of _____.” The number of noncongregational ministry positions is also expanding, with pastors serving in denominational positions, as faculty in higher-education institutions, and with other ministry organizations. This requires the church to reframe its thinking about the specific tasks of ministers even as it continues to reflect on what lies at the center of those tasks. Individuals who serve

in ministry both hold an “office” (an ecclesiastical designation) and a “position” (an organizational designation).

3. Diminished longevity in any occupation or career

In today’s job environment, adults will typically change jobs a number of times in their lifetime. This reality is also reflected in the church. While once it could be assumed that ordained ministry was a call to dedicate one’s life and full-time labor to the work of the institutional church, that is no longer the case. Further, life circumstances such as a spouse’s career opportunities, a desire for further education, or the need to care for children or elderly parents can affect one’s sense of continued calling to the traditional tasks of ordained ministry in ways not envisioned several decades ago. And as the Study of Bivocationality Task Force noted, the ministerial calling is increasingly seen as one that can be fulfilled in combination with other occupations which may or may not be related to positions traditionally seen as pastoral (see *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 294-96). Yet despite the growing number of reasons for leaving a particular congregation or ordained ministry altogether, there remains a certain stigma attached to such a departure. Our single process for separation from a specific call means that the suspicion of conflict may attach to pastors who leave any ministry role, even if conflict played no part in the decisions. We will explore this reality in more detail in section IV, B, 4, below.

4. Increased concern over ministerial “fit”

Just as pastoral ministry is becoming increasingly specialized, congregations are sensing a uniqueness in their own calling, such that pastoral calls must include increasing awareness of the particular local needs of a congregation. As individual CRC congregations increasingly see themselves as having a unique culture and set of expectations, they become more particular about their minister’s alignment with the congregation’s values. Pastor search processes take longer, and fewer opportunities exist for pastors to move to a congregation that will offer a better fit. In addition, pastors, who have become more particular themselves, are less likely to accept new calls. This situation can create a sense of impatience at times on the part of a congregation, a pastor, or both, when there is a sense of misalignment between them.

5. Anxiety from increased pace of change

The speed with which the surrounding culture moves has created in many churches a reactionary impulse to move just as quickly, diminishing the capacity to bear with one another and look prayerfully for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Churches in North America face a season of declining membership, and congregations sometimes believe that a change in pastoral leadership may be the needed catalyst for renewal or growth.

6. Decreased awareness of or appreciation for church procedures

As Overture 5 notes, “Church leadership is often undertrained in Church Order which, in times of conflict or dissatisfaction with the pastor, can result in (1) failure to use the tools Church Order provides, such as church visitors and/or the wisdom of classis and other classical functionaries, and (2) deferring instead to Pastor Church Resources [now Thrive] for a quick solution.” Sometimes assemblies and pastors opt for pragmatic solutions, perhaps in an effort to avoid conflict or avoid the awkwardness or formality prescribed by Church Order. Unfortunately, as was emphasized to our task force on several occasions by classis leaders and denominational staff, sometimes the “shortcuts” — which seem convenient at the time — result in more work later on as informal solutions lead to uncertainties about what was actually decided, or how to implement agreements concluded upon assumptions rather than clear decisions. As one denominational staff member observed, “In a world full of devices and apps, we need to resist the temptation to find quick fixes that allow us to bypass the hard work of discernment and discipleship that’s done as we seek the Spirit’s guidance in messy community.” It is important to recognize that Church Order, similarly, cannot provide a “quick fix.” Rather, it offers a framework for doing the kind of discernment and discipleship necessary to identify ways in which God’s Spirit may be working in a particular situation.

7. Increasing ethnic and cultural diversity within the denomination

CRC theology and ecclesiology are heavily shaped by Reformed thinking that has emerged from a Dutch-American and Dutch-Canadian context. Nevertheless, our community of faith is not identical to that of the generations before us. All facets of our church life and identity have changed and are changing, from theological understanding, biblical interpretation, and mandates in Church Order, to cultural and societal values that call us to faithful witness in the world. Some find that the CRC they know from the past is not the CRC they are experiencing in the present. Likewise, we have become more diverse as God has enfolded people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and congregations in new geographic regions, into the Christian Reformed Church. Such diversity, from the past to the present and across ethnic and cultural contexts, results in diversity of thought and practice, and all of this changes the cultural context for CRC congregations as well as for the denomination as a whole.

Beyond the simplistic generalization of Western individual rights versus Eastern communal responsibilities, within various cultures there are different emphases on law and guilt versus interpersonal relationships, democratic egalitarianism versus hierarchical structures, and leaders’ authority versus servanthood, to name but a few. With this in mind, we want to note that the application of the Church Order should take cultural context into consideration, and the processes should be held loosely in any particular situation rather than tightly across all situations. Our structures of

accountability are important, but these should not be reduced to the confines of paperwork and reports. As followers of Christ, we commit to live out an accountability that is marked by a posture of “one another” and the productive stewardship of relationships. The values articulated in the 1996 synodical report that is now published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* (see crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf; *Acts of Synod 1996*, pp. 510-515, 595-619) provide a helpful framework for living out this call in the application of Church Order to an increasingly diverse number of situations in the CRC today.

Conclusion

We want to emphasize that a number of these shifting realities are not, in and of themselves, either good or bad. They are simply changes that we need to be aware of because they affect our understanding about the relationship between Christ’s church and the world today and thus also affect the way we think about the nature of ministry and leadership in and for the church. In the next two sections of this report we will identify some of the ways these cultural changes may call us to rethink the practical workings of Church Order in relation to the supervision of ministers and releases from calls. Again, our desire in this process is not simply to create different procedures but to recognize these procedures as tools to help pastors, churches, and assemblies feel a deep sense of connection and belonging as we collectively discern how to serve faithfully in the CRC.

D. Methodology

As our task force began its work, we spent a significant amount of time reviewing classis and denominational records in order to understand the current landscape of ministry in the CRCNA as it relates to matters addressed in Articles 12-17. In addition, the task force requested feedback from the stated clerks through an online survey and through an in-person discussion at the stated clerks’ conference in January 2023. Hearing stories was a necessary part of our process; we solicited these through our networks. Direct feedback and stories came from individuals via emails, conversations, denominational representatives, and classis contacts.

Because the topics covered in this report affect specific groups of individuals, the task force also consulted with denominational leaders with experience in the areas of chaplaincy (Tim Rietkerk) and diversity (Reginald Smith). We corresponded with the leadership of Resonate Global Mission with regard to its understanding about how calls to missions should be processed, with ethnic ministry leaders from various non-Anglo communities across the CRC, with denominational Human Resources personnel in both the U.S. and Canada regarding employment best practices, and with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee concerning implications of changes proposed to the present Church Order Article 13-c. We gratefully

acknowledge the contributions they have made to this report, as well as the input of all who shared stories of ministry from which we could learn.

Finally, the task force looked at a significant amount of data from classis minutes, from the CRCNA *Yearbook*, and from the *Acts of Synod* to help us understand trends related to noncongregational ministries and the frequency with which classes address specific requests related to Articles 12-17 of the Church Order. Relevant findings will be reported at appropriate points as they affect the recommendations presented later in this report. The task force is thankful for the work of the *Yearbook* staff and other denominational employees for their assistance in collecting the data relevant to our discussions.

III. Accountability and supervision

A. Background and theological observations

As noted in the introduction, one key area of our task force's mandate involves the calling, supervision, and support of pastors serving in settings outside a local CRC congregation. Within this area of focus, we will first explore the subject of calling (Art. 12) and then move on to issues of accountability and support (Art. 13).

The CRC's understanding of all ministry is rooted in the perspective described in section II of this report: ordained ministry recognizes both the call to serve the risen Lord and the responsibility to represent that risen Lord in a position of trust and authority. Since the time of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), Reformed churches have recognized a legitimate place for ministry in settings other than the local congregation. However, the CRC has always experienced a certain tension about such positions, as it has sought to discern which positions should be deemed "ministerial" and how to apply such discernment to changing cultural situations.

The historic tension in the CRC over what has been called "extraordinary" ministry is evident in past reports to synod (see *Agenda for Synod 1930*, pp. 30-49; *Acts of Synod 1950*, pp. 322-43; *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 233-52; *Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 474-83). These reports provide helpful background for our present work and thinking on these matters.

1. Calling ministers to serve in noncongregational settings (Art. 12)

a. The nature of ordained ministry

Church Order Article 12 addresses the specific tasks and callings of a minister of the Word. Article 12-a describes the tasks of a minister in a CRC congregation, which has historically been the work of most CRC ministers: to "preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth," and other similar responsibilities. Exceptions were granted for ministers serving in the work of missions, in denominational leadership, or in chaplaincy positions deemed clearly "ecclesiastical" — generally these positions were, by definition, "extraordinary" and their ministerial character was undefined. As a

result, synod heard recurrent concerns about the consistency of the standards applied to determine what work was, indeed, genuinely “ministerial” (see *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 324; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 56).

When it adopted the present reading of Articles 11-12, Synod 1978 helpfully observed that the CRC recognizes only one class of ministers. What distinguishes pastors of congregations from other ministers is not their call to minister the Word but rather the *setting* (either the local congregation, or some other setting) and the *specific tasks* (either general congregational ministry, or some “specialized” work applying the message of the Word to the world). Synod 1978 therefore abandoned the traditional language requiring that positions outside the local CRC congregation be “spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling,” and concentrated instead on attempting to ensure that “each approved ministry position will be in fact a meaningful and appropriate expression of the essential nature (purpose and primary task) of the ministry of the Word” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 479). This shift in language provides a helpful starting point for our own current reflections on ways to connect ministry outside the local congregation to the work of the wider church.

One recurrent emphasis in the discussions of synod has been the expectation that fields of labor beyond the local church still require a formal call from and accountability to “the church as an organization” through a local consistory [now council] (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 477-78; cf. *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 58). We note that this is different from the practice in other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, which place the supervision of pastors at the classis level. Because this issue needs further definition, we will return to it below (see section III, C, 1).

b. Two categories of “extraordinary” positions

Synod has been hesitant to identify all of the specific types of positions in which a pastor may serve beyond the local congregation in an ordained capacity, preferring to leave such decisions to the classis. There are, however, some positions that synod has granted blanket endorsement. As such, synod has developed two basic categories of noncongregational service: those which have prior synodical endorsement (Art. 12-b), and those which require the classis to judge the merits of the position’s connection to ordained ministry (Art. 12-c). This distinction first originated in 1947, when synod approved the position of radio minister as being ministerial and subsequently determined that its ruling applied retroactively to other synodically appointed positions and to missionaries; later, chaplains and specialized transitional ministers were also added (*Acts of Synod 1947*, pp. 21, 59-60, 71; see also *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 249-53 and section III, B, 7 below). All other positions are covered in Article 12-c and require a specific declaration from the classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, that the position being filled “is consistent with the

calling of a minister of the Word " and is in keeping with other synodical requirements.

- c. Limitations on approval of ministry positions outside a congregation
Ordained ministry must be focused on the Word and sacraments (Art. 11); as an earlier synodical report puts it, such ministry has a focus on the "welfare of the church" rather than on the welfare of another institution (*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 248; cf. *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 477). At the same time, the growth of bivocational (or multivocational) ministry makes clear that ordination as a minister of the Word does not require that a pastor be focused *only* on the welfare of the church or on the Word and sacraments. But this understanding does provide at least a helpful starting point for evaluating a new request for a "noncongregational" position. It is further worth noting that Article 12-c expects that a vacancy in such a position will lead to a review by classis and the synodical deputies before another call to that position is issued (current Supplement, Art. 12-c, a, 4).

- d. Ministers serving on loan

The current Article 13-c was added to the Church Order in 1976. The study committee reporting to that synod (see *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 32-34, 497-517) noted that while there is overlap among ministers serving on loan to non-CRC congregations and ministers serving the CRC in non-congregational positions, the question for those on loan is consistency with the work of a CRC minister rather than consistency with the work of a minister in general. We would note that this category of pastors serving on loan is also similar to, but distinct from, that governed by provisions for the "Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers," which allows CRC pastors to receive calls to RCA congregations (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D).

Synod agreed that such loans to other denominations could be consistent with CRC ministry, but with the stipulation that these provisions are temporary and serve the cause of a *Reformed* witness in the context of the non-CRC congregation (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 510-11). Put simply, the CRC did not intend to train and ordain ministers or to supervise pastors' work in positions in other denominations, and synod thus attempted to put specific criteria in place to ensure that the loaning of pastors to churches outside the CRC did not become a general practice. The challenges of enforcing this latter provision is a subject to which we will return below (see section III, C, 4).

Summary

The issues noted here indicate the basic understandings of the nature of called ministry positions in the CRC. While the nature of ecclesiastical office involves service to the Lord, ordination also confers a representative function on those who serve in ecclesiastical offices. Ministers of the Word

visibly represent and speak for the institutional church. Thus ordination requires some kind of significant connection to the gospel witness *of the wider denomination*. This reality will affect the way councils and classes discern whether a particular position fits our denominational understanding of the ministry of the Word, and will affect the nature of supervision for such positions.

2. The nature of supervision (Art. 13)

Ministers of the Word are required to submit themselves to continuing supervision as they carry out their work. As observed in section II of this report, ordained servants in the church are not simply “free agents” but representatives of the church whose position therefore requires them to be in contact with other church leaders who can encourage, support, and supervise them in their service to the Lord. Article 13 identifies some key principles that guide the outworking of this supervision:

a. Accountable to the local council

One key element of the CRC view of ministers in noncongregational positions is the recognition that they remain under the supervision of the local council. Article 13-a summarizes the supervisory arrangements of pastors in congregational settings by noting that such pastors are “directly accountable to the calling church, and therefore shall be supervised in life, doctrine, and duties by that church.” With the exception of supervising duties, this summarizes the CRC’s view of all noncongregational pastors as well: each minister of the Word is accountable to, and supervised by, the council of the local church, which has “primary responsibility” for overseeing the minister’s doctrine and life (Art. 13-b).

b. For the ministry of the Word

Recalling that Article 11 governs this whole section of the Church Order, we could say that the council is regularly to consider how a pastor’s work of proclaiming, explaining, and applying Holy Scripture fulfills the ministerial calling to “gather in and equip the members so that the church of Jesus Christ may be built up.” As we have noted before, the ministry of the *Word* is central to the calling of this office: while all Christians are to be people of the Word, there is a particular responsibility of ministers to live and work in a way that allows the Word of God to be displayed at the center of their vocation.

c. Joint supervision

The current Articles 13-b and 13-c address the situation of pastors whose position is not in a local CRC congregation and is therefore subject to the authority of more than one body. The supervising organization may be a denominational agency, an educational institution, a hospital, the military, a corporation, or another congregation. In all of these cases, Church Order and synodical regulations distinguish between supervision of life and doctrine, which remains with a local CRC council, and supervision

of duties, which is exercised by the “partner(s) in supervision” (see Supplement, Art. 13-b). This distinction means that ecclesiastical discipline remains the responsibility of the council. While the current Church Order Supplement only notes this disciplinary responsibility in the section of the Supplement describing the joint supervision of pastors on loan to other denominations (Supplement, Art. 13-c, f), the principle is implied in all joint-supervision arrangements.

d. Continued adherence to CRC doctrine and polity

We list this consideration separately in order to call particular attention to it. Though this expectation is currently only spelled out in regard to ministers serving on loan (Supplement, Art. 13-c, c), the CRC clearly expects all its officebearers to adhere to the doctrine and polity commitments of the denomination as indicated by their commitment to the Covenant for Officebearers (Art. 5). Missionaries, chaplains, and other CRC ministers who serve outside a local CRC congregation are no less bound to these commitments than are congregational pastors or those serving on loan.

e. “Proper support”

The CRC expects that councils shall attend to the “proper support” of the work of ministers of the Word (Art. 15). While this is not, strictly speaking, a matter of accountability, it is a matter that speaks to the relationship between the pastor and the council of the calling church. Again, these issues are not covered directly by the Church Order but are implied in portions of the Supplement that address participation in the Christian Reformed Church ministers’ pension plan and other benefits (e.g., see Supplement, Art. 13-c, g; and Supplement, Art. 15). In the past, synod has recognized that salary and benefits support for ordained clergy are the primary responsibility of the employing organization (*Acts of Synod 1969*, p. 48; *Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 622-23; *Acts of Synod 2005*, pp. 742-43). Thus the calling church’s main duty in the matter of “proper support” is to work with the ministers it calls to ensure that the matters addressed in Article 15 and its Supplement have been sufficiently addressed in the calling process (see also *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 963-64).

It should be noted, however, that the support of ministers of the Word is not just a matter of salary and benefits. For this reason we encourage congregations to consider ways to support the work of noncongregational ministers through prayer and other relational support (see section III, C, 6 below).

Conclusions

Articles 12 and 13 identify a number of important principles for the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word in the CRC, and in particular in how the local church is called to support and oversee the work of pastors not in the direct service of a CRC congregation. However, as we shall see,

the context in which calling and supervision occur today has continued to grow in complexity and scope. Thus it is important to note the principles we have identified above as we consider particular questions that arise in the present context.

B. Issues and Observations

The cultural realities and changes in thinking about the ministerial office (mentioned in the opening section of this report) present a number of issues and questions about the supervision and accountability of pastors.

1. Growth in the number and variety of “other called positions”

In 1950 the vast majority of pastors in the CRC served in a congregational setting. As the chart below indicates, the number of CRC pastors serving in “other called positions” increased dramatically between 1950 and 1975, and that number has continued to grow (though not as significantly, particularly as a percentage) in the years since. This increase appears somewhat less significant when considering a roughly corresponding decrease in the percentage of CRC pastors serving in world missions, but the rise still indicates an expansion of the areas in which CRC ministers serve. The CRC has a significant number of active pastors ordained as chaplains (almost 9%) and a roughly similar number serving as professors, administrators of Christian organizations, or ministers on loan to congregations outside the CRC (about 3% in each of these categories).

	1950	1975	2000	2023
Congregational Ministry#	283	580	612	808
Missions^	34	57	45	34
Other called positions*	29	147	236	273
Eligible for call but not serving+	0	19	48	93
Emeritus	42	169	368	786

#This number includes church planters whose credentials are held by another church.

^Numbers for 1950 include home missionaries without a set charge.

*This includes chaplains, educators, denominational personnel, and other similar positions.

+This largely includes those who are eligible for call via Article 17 but not actively serving in a called ministry position.

(Source: CRC *Yearbook* for years shown)

When combining the numbers of missionaries and of pastors who have no call with the number of “other called positions,” the result is that almost a third of all active (not retired) CRC pastors have their primary responsibility outside the ministry of a local congregation. (This does not take into account those serving in such positions as commissioned pastors.) This dramatic shift means that some questions that have long accompanied our understanding of ordained ministry, and how such positions are related to

the local church, have now come to the fore in new ways. The sheer number of “other called positions” also means that local congregations are faced with both the challenge and the opportunity of determining how best to provide accountability and encouragement for the significant number of pastors whose ministry may not be readily visible to the local congregation. Our task force identified a number of positions for which a significant portion of the responsibilities are supervised outside of a local CRC congregation, while the official responsibility for doctrine and life remains with the council:

- Chaplains
 - Military, hospital, or workplace chaplains (Art. 12-b)
 - Other institutional chaplains (Art. 12-c)
- Pastors serving congregations other than the CRC congregation that holds their credentials
 - Missionaries (Art. 12-b or 12-c)
 - Church planters (Art. 38-a)
 - Serving churches in the RCA (Art. 8)
 - On loan to other denominations (current Art. 13-c)
 - Specialized transitional ministers (Art. 12-b)
 - Pastors serving two congregations (either within or outside the CRC)
 - Interim pastors (often retired or sometimes between calls, cf. Art. 17 or 18)
- Pastors serving in educational settings
 - Theology professors at Calvin Theological Seminary (Art. 12-b)
 - Theology professors at other institutions (Art. 12-c)
 - Christian school teachers (Art. 12-c)
 - University campus ministry leaders (Art. 12-c)
- Pastors working in administrative settings
 - Denominational employees (Art. 12-b or 12-c)
 - Employees of other nonprofit organizations (Art. 12-c)
- Bivocational pastors (proposed Supplement, Art. 15, Guideline 3)
- Pastors without a current call
 - Released from a congregation (Art. 17)
 - Term call concluded (Art. 8)
- Retired pastors (Art. 18)

(For a representative list of specific positions approved over the years, see the *Index of Synodical Decisions 1857-2000*, pp. 404-10.)

As is evident from this list, many but not all of these positions are regulated by Articles 12-13 of the Church Order. For some types of positions, the regulations may be covered by more than one area of Church Order; for others, wisdom is required to determine how best to address each situation. In

addition, we observe synod's existing expectation that church visitors inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and that appropriate action is taken in cases that do not conform to synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

2. A "patchwork" of regulations

Because of the growth in noncongregational positions over the past several decades, the Church Order articles and supplements addressing these situations have developed in an ad hoc fashion rather than as a coherent approach to ordained ministry in noncongregational positions. We note the following gaps and inconsistencies:

- The current Supplement to Article 12-c contains regulations for "other called positions," but it is clear that its calling process, in general, also applies to those positions covered in Article 12-b.
- While most regulations for pastoral responsibilities are addressed in the current Article 12, some other situations are covered elsewhere in the Church Order. Most notably, the calling process for ministers serving on loan to other denominations is covered in the current Article 13-c, and calls for CRC pastors serving in the RCA are covered in the Supplement to Article 8.
- The current Supplement to Article 13-b contains a variety of regulations addressing both the calling process and the supervision of ministers in a way that focuses especially on service in a CRC agency or in an institutional chaplaincy. This material could be more appropriately divided between Article 12 and Article 13 and their Supplements, and it could be articulated in a way that makes it more generally applicable to all ministers in noncongregational service.
- Calls extended via Article 13 and the orderly exchange process in Supplement, Article 8, D, currently lack specific reference to the mechanism of a classis counselor who would normally review the terms of call on behalf of the classis.
- Regulations for participation in the ministers' pension plan, which is a matter applicable to the call process for all pastors, is currently addressed only in the supervisory portions related to ministers serving on loan (Supplement, Art. 13-c).

In our recommendations concerning Church Order, we have attempted to standardize the approach to the material in Articles 12-13 so that, as much as possible, all material related to the calling of pastors appears in Article 12 and its Supplements and so that all material related to supervision appears in Article 13 and its Supplements. Further, we have tried to express principles of calling and supervision in ways that make them generally applicable to as many situations as possible.

3. Determining the scope and parameters of an ordained position

Perhaps the most basic question to be considered is what it means for an individual to serve in ordained ministry. The CRC has long had an unclear sense of the boundaries of ordained ministry. Almost every study committee reporting on this topic has called synod's attention to the challenges of determining which positions are acceptable expressions of the ministerial office, and which ones are not. Noting the complexity of determining what is or is not a ministerial calling, and the "growing elasticity in what constitutes the work of a chaplain," the advisory committee for Synod 1978 challenged the classes to "prevent the development of many pseudo-ministerial positions which may be proposed as being consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 45-46).

As the Church Order indicates, the denomination has determined that certain kinds of noncongregational positions are, indeed, ministerial and do not require special permission from a classis before a call is extended (Art. 12-b). This informal list of "approved positions," which historically included educators, missionaries, and chaplains, was expanded in 1978 and again in 2002 to include appointments made or ratified by synod (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 45-48; *Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 469) and again in 2013 to include specialized transitional ministers (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 614).

Yet this growing support for nontraditional views of ordained ministry still leaves unanswered some of the basic questions: Which areas of service qualify for "ordained ministry of the Word," and which ones do not? What lies at the center of all ordained ministry? While Church Order makes clear that service in a particular congregation is not essential to ordination as a minister of the Word, it is less clear at what point a noncongregational minister no longer serves to "gather in and equip the members" for the building up of Christ's church (cf. Art. 11). We will return to this question in section III, C, 1, below.

4. Balancing an individual's personal sense of call versus ecclesiastical discernment processes

The Reformed tradition has long emphasized the importance of corporate discernment in the calling process. But as the landscape of ministry changes to include an increasing desire for flexibility in career paths, there are a growing number of occasions in which a person takes what would have been considered a nonministerial job, but for various reasons wishes to maintain ordained status as he or she engages in that position. The calling church must therefore determine if a position fits within the scope of ministry as outlined by the Church Order. Such requests for consideration, however, often come after the person has accepted the position, and there may be a lack of clarity regarding how that position is consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word. Situations like that can leave the church in an awkward position and without a real sense that they have extended a call; it may seem rather like they are merely rubber-stamping an action that has

already been taken, and with limited input into or a sense of ownership over the call being extended. That is unfortunate for both the church and the individual receiving the call, who then loses the support and encouragement that the calling process is designed to offer.

Church Order Article 14-a also requires that a minister seek the permission of the calling church before leaving an approved position. As Overture 4 (deferred from 2020) points out, however, ministers can have their position in an organization terminated or radically changed solely at the discretion of the organization without prior consultation with either the minister or the calling church. In any case, whether the change in status is effected unilaterally or upon prior consultation, it still renders the minister without a call to a specific position, prompting the need to redefine the relationship between the noncongregational minister and the calling church. The sometimes-abrupt nature of such transitions and the inconsistent nature of some organizations' communications with the noncongregational ministers' calling or supervising churches can place churches and classes in an awkward position. At the same time, we note, councils and classes can still choose not to succumb to outside pressures to bypass the processes spelled out in the Church Order, and they can work with individual pastors to discern how best to provide both support and accountability as they serve in CRC ministry.

5. Congregational responsibilities for pastoral calls

In addition, congregations are sometimes hesitant to extend calls for noncongregational ministry positions due to concerns over financial requirements such as housing allowance, pension, or insurance for the pastor being called. This concern extends perhaps especially to matters of liability—financial and pastoral—should a ministry position be terminated by another institution, perhaps even while a pastor is serving in a position at a nonchurch institution. Traditionally, the CRC denomination assumed a great amount of responsibility for the financial support of its pastors, even to the point of funding pensions for those employed outside the local church until just a few decades ago (*Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 622-23). As noted above, synod has indicated that primary responsibility for providing “proper support” for all pastors who serve outside a local CRC congregation lies with the employing organization, not with the calling church (see above, section III, A, 2, e). Nevertheless, these concerns are real. We will attempt to address some of these issues when we return to our recommendations and resources below (see Section III, C).

6. When to involve synodical deputies

One issue in particular that deserves mention here is the role of the classis and the synodical deputies in the approval of chaplaincy positions as consistent with the ministry of the Word. Originally the CRC's Church Order allowed for ministers to serve “institutions of mercy or otherwise” as long as they had a valid call from a local congregation (pre-1965 Church Order

Art. 6). To this provision synod added the regulation that the classis should review the “spiritual character” of the specific assignment, a measure to which the concurrence of synodical deputies was later added (see *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 138). Further, Synod 1978 specifically noted that ecclesiastical endorsement of chaplains was *not* intended to be a substitute for the process of ecclesiastical discernment about the appropriateness of an ordained minister serving in that position (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46), a position still accepted by the CRC’s chaplain support ministries through Thrive. The subsequent amendment of Article 12-b to include mention of chaplaincy (see *Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 687), however, gives the impression that endorsement as a chaplain is, in fact, a synodically authorized endorsement of all such positions for ordained pastors. And while synodical regulations specifically address the issue of chaplaincy, we would note that the growth in the types of mission positions, as well as the development of specialized transitional ministries, means that there is additional need to clarify the distinction between which of these positions are covered by Article 12-b and which are addressed by Article 12-c.

7. Joint supervision of pastors in noncongregational ministry positions

As noncongregational ministry positions become increasingly common, so does the need for joint-supervisory relationships between the calling church and the hiring organization. Article 13-b states that in such cases, “the council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties.” It is sometimes unclear, however, what the responsibility of each party is to inform the other of changes or problems that have arisen in the scope of their supervision, and by what means this reporting happens. In some settings, such as military chaplaincy, the employing institution does not feel bound to ecclesiastical processes before implementing changes that might affect a pastor’s call from the church. If there is a change in job description or a termination of a position, the pastor called to that position can suddenly find they are without the position to which they were ordained, thus making their ordination status unclear. If the calling church is similarly unaware of this situation, it can become even more difficult to navigate. This requires some measure of flexibility from the institutional church as well as pastors.

Synod 2002 considered the overlap between legal and ecclesiastical aspects of employment for ministers serving as denominational staff. Such pastors are, in legal terms, “at-will employees” who may be dismissed from employment due to internal considerations, subject to procedures that protect against arbitrary or capricious decision making by the employer (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 43-47). As increasing numbers of CRC pastors are employed by institutions outside the denomination, however, calling churches face a correspondingly growing number of potential employment scenarios to navigate as they carry out the responsibilities inherent in the calls they have

extended. This requires wise consideration as churches develop systems of joint support and supervision for pastors in noncongregational positions, and it calls for diligence on the part of churches and pastors to live out the commitments they have made for support and supervision. This consideration is currently articulated specifically in the Supplement to Article 13-b, which was put in place by Synod 2002 to ensure that each ministry partner in supervision would inform the other about any deviations in doctrine, life, or duties “before any action is taken” that would affect the minister’s status (see *Acts of Synod 2002*, pp. 469-70).

8. Geographical considerations

Since oversight of the everyday duties of a minister in a noncongregational position happens by the hiring organization, the calling church’s supervision can happen from a greater distance and with less frequent direct reporting. Thus it is possible for a minister to be called to a position and have their credentials held by a church significantly outside any geographic proximity to where they work, perhaps because of prior affiliation with or affinity to that congregation. This raises questions regarding membership—can a person called by one church be a member at another church (including one outside the CRC)?—and, in turn, regarding classis engagement and the importance of local congregations’ knowing who is ministering in their midst or on their behalf elsewhere. While the Church Order presently expects that pastors serving on loan to a congregation “in close proximity to a Christian Reformed congregation of another classis” gain “approval” from that classis as well as from the classis of his or her own calling church (Supplement, Art. 13-c, d), we note that synod has, in the past, endorsed the principle of geographic proximity in all noncongregational calls (*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 58; *Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58). While notification may feel burdensome at times, particularly when classes lie in close geographic proximity to one another, there is wisdom in synod’s suggestion for respectful communication when official ministry takes place on behalf of the CRC within the bounds of another classis.

9. Encouragement, not just regulation

While we believe that the intent behind our Church Order has always been mutual support and encouragement for those serving the Lord and his church, the current framework of these portions of Church Order leans heavily in the direction of regulation and discipline. This is most evident in the current Supplement to Article 13-b, which leads by focusing on disciplinary situations, but even a quick glance at this portion of the Church Order reveals that encouragement of pastors has not been a stated priority. While we recognize the necessity of regulation, we believe that both pastors and churches would be well served to have at least some mention of the importance of mutual encouragement in the Church Order. Holding the ministerial credentials for a minister in noncongregational service should be seen as an opportunity for a congregation, not a burden. This is especially

true given the increasing diversity of the CRC. As outlined in the previous section, processes of supervision and accountability should be seen not simply as matters of administrative paperwork but as opportunities to build relationships and to invest in ministry together. Where cultural gaps exist between a pastor and the calling church, the intentionality required in such relationships only grows.

C. Resources and guidance

As we work toward our recommendations concerning the calling and supervision of pastors whose position lies outside a local CRC congregation, we want to highlight some resources to assist councils, classes, and pastors in applying the principles of Church Order to the context of ministry today. But, first, we want to address some matters of terminology. There are two phrases used frequently in Church Order and synodical pronouncements that would benefit from further definition as we consider accountability and supervision for ministers in noncongregational positions.

1. “Consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” (current Art. 12-c) This phrase is intended to convey a distinction between work that is done by a representative of the CRC’s ministry, and that which is done as part of the general office of all believers. As noted above, there is no firm distinction between a position that is “ministerial” and one that is not. However, we agree with past synods that it is important to maintain the character of the ministerial office as one that is more than just an endorsement of one’s service as a valuable Christian witness but also contributes significantly and officially to the church’s witness to the Word of God. As Synod 1978 put it, “The real nature of ministry [is] proclamation under the authority of the church . . .” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 45). In keeping with the understanding of office and ordination outlined in the previous section (II, B), a good working definition of “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” could be as follows:

Positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ.

Thus we suggest some key questions to help discern whether a position under consideration is indeed “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word,” and particularly with that calling *as a CRC minister* (which is a key part of our common ecclesiastical discernment):

- a. Does the position involve a significant degree of proclamation of the Word in preaching, public worship, pastoral care, or other contexts in which the minister is understood to be a representative of the church of Christ?

- b. Does the position help to gather in and equip members for the church of Jesus Christ so that the body may be built up?
- c. Does the individual in this position intend to carry out these tasks in cooperation with a local congregation, and under the authority of a CRC council, with the appropriate training and gifts?
- d. Do the tasks assigned under the position conflict in any way with the commitment a minister makes as a signatory of the CRC's Covenant for Officebearers?

We have drawn these questions from Church Order Article 11 and from the CRC's liturgical forms for the installation of ministers of the Word. In posing these questions, we suggest that they might serve as a kind of template by which to discern, in conversation with the pastor and the assemblies of the church, whether the intention of the position is to continue in the formal service of the local congregation or to serve the Lord in some other way.

We could also note here some of the positions that classes and synods have judged to be nonministerial in character, such as "spiritual director," "spiritual care practitioner," "pastoral counselor," professors of nontheological subjects, teachers at non-Reformed educational institutions, school administrators, fundraising positions for Christian organizations, and editorial positions for publishing houses (cf. *Acts of Synod 1928*, pp. 140-41; *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; Henry De Moor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* [2nd Edition, 2020], p. 80); it should be noted that these positions would also apply to discussions about Article 14-d. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does make clear that persons who choose to serve the Lord in such capacities may not necessarily be able to keep or establish ministerial credentials or be called by local congregations in those capacities. The church should also be aware of ways in which expectations for chaplains are changing: in an increasing number of cases, public institutions prefer that chaplains be seen as "psychospiritual therapists" rather than as representatives of a particular Christian church. Such an employer expectation would then clash with the church's desire that its ordained leaders faithfully extend the ministry of the body of Christ.

2. "Called in the regular manner" (current Art. 12-b)

The "regular" means of extending a call are not identified in any single place in the Church Order, but the basic pattern can be established from various articles:

- A council extends a call to a pastor by presenting a nomination to the congregation (Art. 4-a), who affirms the council's call by means of a congregational vote (Art. 4-c; Art. 37).
- Candidates elected to office are ordained or installed in a public worship service of the church (Art. 4-d).
- The classis is involved in these matters through the work of a classical counselor, who is an officebearer from another congregation

who acts on behalf of the classis to see that ecclesiastical regulations have been followed (Art. 9; Art. 42-c).

- The ordination of candidates and the installation of ministers are regulated according to Articles 10-a and 10-b.

This may sound burdensome at first glance, but these steps actually provide an opportunity for the congregation to embrace the way its ministry is extended through the specialized service of the individual being called. These regulations also provide protection for both the local church and the pastor being called by ensuring that various aspects of “proper support” and potential issues in joint supervision have been adequately addressed during the calling process. The involvement of the classis, through the classical counselor, provides one additional level of awareness and support to that of the other parties involved in these discussions. By means of the denomination’s letter of call and other documents that draw on the wisdom of numerous conversations about the nature of ministry, the calling process encourages clarity about the arrangements for a noncongregational call and hopefully avoids misunderstandings that could lead to hurt and confusion further on.

With the exception of the liturgical forms listed below, it should be noted that the letter of call and other documents are not synodically approved in the sense that they need to be used in a specific form. Rather, they are templates that reflect the priorities synod has expressed in the past for providing proper support and accountability for pastors in various tasks within and outside the local CRC congregation. The denomination’s website includes sample letters of call as well as a template for a covenant of joint supervision, for chaplains. The denomination also provides liturgical forms for the ordination of ministers of the Word, not just in local congregations but for other areas of service as well. We suggest that these forms be adapted for use in a variety of ministry settings and collected in one place on the denominational website.

Some of the current resources that exist are listed in Addendum F. We will be recommending some templates for adoption, but it should be understood that the documents we are recommending do not need to replace the existing ones already developed to address more specific situations.

3. Distinction between Article 12-b and Article 12-c positions

One area of confusion has to do with trying to determine which calls require classis approval and synodical deputy concurrence, and which do not. As noted above, Article 12-b reflects a long-standing recognition in the Reformed tradition that missions and chaplaincy offer important ways for the church to extend its witness beyond the local congregation. However, Article 12-b is not intended to bypass the question of whether a *particular position* fits the ministerial calling or not; it merely leaves that question fully

in the hands of the local assemblies rather than requiring classis approval with the additional concurrence of synodical deputies.

As a task force, we recommend the following guidelines for determining whether a position can be approved under Article 12-b or 12-c:

- a. When Article 12-b refers to “the work of missions, chaplaincy, or specialized transitional ministry,” we understand it to be indicating positions in which ministers specifically represent the CRC in work ordinarily recognizable as fitting into those categories of service. This article, then, would cover such positions as missionary pastors; chaplains in health care, military, or prison settings; and trained STMs—and only those endorsed by an appropriate denominational agency. All other missions, chaplaincy, and transitional ministry positions should be reviewed through Article 12-c.
- b. When Article 12-b refers to those appointed by synod directly, or ratified by synod, it is referring to those individuals for whom synodical approval is required in some formal way. This includes the general secretary and other executive leaders of the CRC, as well as theology professors at Calvin Theological Seminary who also serve as ministers of the Word. All other denominational staff positions, as well as positions for professors of theology at other institutions, should be processed via Article 12-c.
- c. Synod has spoken in the past about the importance of classis discernment even in chaplaincy positions. We would suggest, therefore, that even for positions covered by Article 12-b, the classis take note in its minutes that a call has been extended that is consistent with the work of a minister of the Word. We believe this could happen quite naturally if all pastors are “called in the regular manner,” as such noncongregational calls would also then be reported to the classis as part of the work of the classis counselor.
- d. Endorsement by a denominational agency does not necessarily imply that a position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.” Some individuals may meet the professional requirements for chaplaincy endorsement but may be invited to serve in institutions where the distinctive witness of the Christian church is not welcome. Councils and classes should exercise discernment in each individual case, particularly when considering whether “spiritual care practitioners,” “spiritual directors,” transitional ministers not endorsed by Thrive, or positions in counseling or academic settings are “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” as required by Article 12-c.

4. Provisions for loaning pastors beyond the CRC

The provisions under which CRC pastors may serve on loan outside the denomination have not been reviewed in any significant way since they were adopted in 1976. In particular, the requirement that the “inviting body” (to

use the language of “orderly exchange” with the RCA—Supplement, Art. 8, D) “seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church” (Supplement, Art. 13-c, a) requires new consideration. In the context of growing ecumenicity and increasingly porous boundaries between denominations, this requirement now seems unnecessarily restrictive and increasingly unenforceable.

We note further that the CRC allows its own pastors to be loaned to another denomination but does not allow another denomination’s pastors, except for those in the RCA, to accept a call to a CRC congregation. This too seems at first glance to be unnecessarily restrictive. However, this policy reflects an intentional decision on the part of the denomination: our understanding of office requires that those who serve in church office must be, first of all, “confessing members of the church” (Art. 3-a; *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 506). Thus any congregation that desires to call a non-CRC or non-RCA minister is asked to follow the procedures of Article 8 and its Supplement before simply pursuing the services of a non-CRC minister.

Extended service beyond the boundaries of the CRC, like all noncongregational service in the CRC, requires discernment not only on the part of the minister of the Word but also on the part of the assemblies placing a call. This is explicitly stated in the regulations concerning the orderly exchange of ministers with the RCA, which require “consultation with and . . . concurrence of the” calling church (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7). The precise mechanism for such consultation and concurrence is not specified in the case of an “orderly exchange.” Thus we suggest that, for any call beyond the local CRC, there is wisdom in obtaining some kind of formal concurrence from both the calling church and the classis. This approach would include the kinds of informal arrangements that sometimes happen when neighboring churches who share an ethnic community might invite a CRC pastor to fill the pulpit on an extended basis. In the case of on-loan service, a second installation by the calling church would be an unnecessary step; however, formal representation by the calling church at an installation service, and a notification in the minutes of the council and classis, would seem a wise and helpful way to indicate the CRC’s encouragement and official support for this kind of ministry.

5. Guidance for participation in the major assemblies

One area of uncertainty lies in how best to apply the privileges of officebearers in relation to the major assemblies. For a number of years the Church Order has allowed classes, at their discretion, to allow the delegation of officebearers from emerging churches (Supplement, Art. 40-a, c). These officebearers (ministers of the Word or commissioned pastors serving as church planters) are delegated by the supervising church council on behalf of the emerging church they serve. However, though other noncongregational pastors may serve a variety of functions within a classis, they may serve as delegates only if the council holding their credentials delegates a

chaplain, missionary, or other noncongregational pastor in place of the congregation's own pastor. This practice makes clear the CRC understanding that classis be a gathering of *churches* rather than of *ministers* (see *Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 57, pp. 167-70). Though classes have often utilized the provision of Article 40-a that allows noncongregational ministers an "advisory voice," there are occasionally awkward moments when nondelegated officebearers have different expectations than what is allowed by Church Order (classis has discretion about whether to allow such officebearers to remain for executive session, but as guests of the classis they are not permitted to vote).

Though we want to be sensitive to the contributions such officebearers may make to a classis meeting, we would reaffirm the principle of Church Order that major assemblies are composed of officebearers from the *constituent* minor assemblies (Art. 34). The classis is a gathering of neighboring churches (Art. 39), not a ministerial gathering, and therefore delegates must be officebearers of the local congregation which has sent them (Art. 40-a). This means that most ministers serving in institutions other than the local congregation are not eligible to serve as delegates unless they are serving as an elder or deacon in that congregation. STMs and other interim pastors, because their credentials are not held in the local congregation, cannot serve as delegates to a classis meeting (though we recognize the wisdom of such ministers attending classis and presenting, in an advisory fashion, the insights they have as the temporary leaders of a local congregation), nor to a gathering of synod. One exception to this rule is that RCA ministers serving as pastors of CRC congregations are allowed to serve as delegates to classis and synod (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 10; Supplement, Art. 38-g, 1, k; Supplement, Art. 38-h, h).

6. Encouragement, not just regulation

It is impossible for the Church Order to offer a full list of ways in which congregations can provide ongoing support and encouragement for ministers whose primary service is somewhere other than the local church that holds their credentials. However, the following list identifies some of the practices which churches or pastors in noncongregational ministries have found helpful:

- Preaching opportunities
- Opportunities to participate in the administration of sacraments
- Opportunities to share reports about the work of ministry and to gain encouragement for that work
- Opportunities to equip the congregation and/or classis for Christian witness and service in the world
- Dinner with council representatives
- Regular contact from church leaders
- Prayer support
- Pastoral ministry in cases of need

- Opportunities to serve the classis (e.g., assisting with a candidate's examination, or as a church visitor, etc.)

Scripture in several places instructs the church to honor the work of those who serve in ministry and to find ways to encourage and support their work (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17). Our congregations have long embraced the idea of supportive care in response to missionaries; we would encourage churches to take a similar attitude toward chaplains, professors, pastors serving on loan, denominational employees, and other such ministers. The church visitors can help to keep this encouragement in front of churches by making the support of noncongregational ministers one topic addressed in the annual conversation with the council (see *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

Because all ministry involves relationships that take time to build, we offer these suggestions not as regulatory material but as ideas for how to make these relationships more meaningful, so that the concept of call is honored more effectively, ministers in noncongregational service are blessed and encouraged, and the calling church is aware of its ministry "reach" via the ministers whose credentials it holds. A covenant of joint supervision has relationship at its core, and should be seen by both churches and pastors as an invitation to supportive ministry relationships rather than just a contract spelling out required details of a calling process. For this reason we are encouraging covenants of joint supervision for all pastors called to serve beyond a local congregation. While such covenants may have mixed results depending on the degree to which they are embraced by both ministers and churches, they are helpful in identifying the specific issues that all parties need to think through.

In addition, "proper support" recognizes the value of a regular review of the terms of joint supervision for pastors serving outside a local congregation. The chaplaincy support team at Thrive requires a formal review of the terms of endorsement every five years. While no such requirements exist for other positions outside the local congregation, we note the wisdom of including such a regular review as part of the initial calling process. Including relationship-building opportunities, such as the ones listed above, will help to facilitate such reviews and hopefully to identify potential concerns before they become serious issues.

Summary

As this section indicates, the changing nature of ordained ministry presents pastors, churches, and classes with an increasingly complex task of identifying ways to support, encourage, and hold accountable those who represent the church of Christ in ministries beyond its institutional boundaries. However, the complexity of the task should not discourage churches from also recognizing the important opportunities gained by commissioning ministers of the Word to serve in such contexts, and by viewing such pastors as

agents of the local church who extend the congregation's ministry where other members of the church may find it difficult to go. It is our desire that the following recommendations will call attention to these opportunities and encourage congregations and pastors to work together to serve the Lord of the church faithfully in settings beyond the local church.

D. Recommendations concerning accountability for pastors in noncongregational settings

Synod's mandate charges this task force to provide, among other things, suggestions for "more effective oversight of individuals in [noncongregational] ministries" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). We have also attempted to engage with the suggestions of Overture 4 (deferred from 2020), which addressed concerns about inconsistency of language related to noncongregational positions, the desire for a Covenant of Joint Supervision for all pastors in such settings, and a clear instruction to communicate with the calling church when significant changes are made to a position outside the local congregation. In fulfillment of this portion of our mandate, we will be making the following recommendations to synod regarding ministers of the Word in noncongregational positions (see section VI. Recommendations, below, for the full text):

- changes to the wording of Articles 12-17 to clarify the distinction between the "work" of a minister and the "position" to which a pastor is called
- rearrangement of the material in Articles 12-13 and their Supplements to provide greater clarity and consistency in matters related to the supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings
- proposed formal definitions of the concepts of being "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" and being "called in the regular manner"
- requirement of a Covenant of Joint Supervision for all pastors in noncongregational positions
- commendation of identified resources to celebrate and support the ministry of pastors in noncongregational settings

It is our prayer that these updates and reflections will enable the church better to support and celebrate the work God is doing beyond the bounds of the local church in order to gather in and equip the members of Christ's church so that the kingdom of God may grow.

IV. Transitions and release from ministry

A. Background and theological observations

The second key area of our task force's mandate relates to the release of ministers of the Word from ministry positions or from service in the denomination as a whole. As noted in the introduction, the issues addressed here roughly correspond to matters addressed by Church Order Articles 14-

17, though they are not strictly limited to those portions of the Church Order.

In section II of this report, we identified some aspects of a Reformed understanding of the nature of a minister's call, and these inform our understanding of how and when a pastor may be released from a call. As noted there, ordination is understood as a long-term (traditionally lifetime) calling exercised on behalf of the church, and ordination is tied not to an individual but to a specific set of ministry roles. Therefore the release of a pastor from a congregation or from service in the denomination is not a light matter.

As we move on to discuss the Church Order articles pertaining to the separation of ministers of the Word from their ministry positions, we begin with a few stories. These stories are compilations of accounts that many have experienced during an Article 17 or 14 separation — and the names in these stories are fictitious.

Story 1

Pastor Liam wasn't expecting the Article 17 separation request issued by his council. Even after nearly three years of increasing disagreement with his council over the future of the church, Pastor Liam was surprised that his council sent a formal request to classis asking for his removal as their pastor. They cited his lack of leadership and their lack of trust in him. At the next classis meeting, in executive session, Pastor Liam shared his perspective on the situation. No one spoke on his behalf. In the discussion that followed, there appeared to be little room for Spirit-led discernment and conversation, and no possibility of reconciliation. Classis approved the Article 17 separation with three-months' salary and benefits, and they appointed an oversight committee for him but not one for the church. The classis minutes did not include a reason for the separation. A year later, the classis oversight committee recommended to classis that he be allowed to take another call, and classis approved. Fifteen years later, Liam and his family are still extremely discouraged and hurting. In every one of his applications for another call, Liam cannot share about the healthy years of his ministry without questions about his Article 17 separation, thus reopening his and his family's wounds in every interview. There is no healing and no closure for them.

Story 2

The council of Lakewood CRC wasn't expecting the Article 17 separation request issued by Pastor Ethan. There had always been some level of disagreement between Pastor Ethan and the council on matters of both leadership style and theology, but the council was surprised when Pastor Ethan said it had reached a point where he didn't think those disagreements could be resolved. At the next classis meeting, in executive session, both Pastor Ethan and council representatives shared their perspectives on the situation, but the classis found it difficult to know what to discuss. Classis

approved Pastor Ethan's Article 17 separation with three-months' salary and benefits, recommended the church retain a specialized transitional minister, and appointed an oversight committee for both Pastor Ethan and the church. The classis minutes did not include a reason for the separation. Six months later, the classis oversight committee recommended to classis that the church be allowed to call another minister, and classis approved. Years later, church members remain confused about what really happened with Pastor Ethan, and some still wonder what they did to make him want to leave. There is no healing and no closure for the church.

Story 3

Pastor Val was very confused and discouraged. After four years of trying to start and grow a church plant, it was becoming clear to everyone that this church plant would struggle to become a stable church. Whenever a new person showed up at the church, it seemed that a previously committed attendee would move on. Pastor Val was not sure what she should do next. Had she misheard God's call to be a church planter and a proclaimer of the good news? She and her sponsoring church's council could ask classis for an Article 17 separation of her call to the church plant, with a two-year eligibility period to receive a call to another ministry in the denomination. Or they could ask classis for an Article 14 separation of her call from the ministry to enter a nonministerial vocation or to serve in another denomination. Should she go for more education and training, using either an Article 17 separation to allow her to work toward a second theological degree, or an Article 14 separation enabling her to contemplate a completely different career? Or should she take extended time off from pastoral ministry through either Article 14 or 17 and use her time to care for her young children and aging parents? If she did, what would her identity be? What were her gifts to use in the kingdom? What was her next calling, and where? But, most importantly, where was God in all of this?

The issues raised in these composite stories are not new. Synod has received significant reports on matters related to the release of ministers several times in the past few decades (see *Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 581-89; *Acts of Synod 1987*, pp. 422-30; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-400). In addition, the pastor and church support team at Thrive has developed a number of resources that provide valuable guidance for various situations leading to separation from a ministry setting. These reports provide important background for the reflections of this present task force, which we summarize here:

1. The reality of separations

Though Reformed church polity has historically held that neither churches nor pastors should ordinarily break the ministry partnership to which they have mutually committed in the calling process, the Church Order has always provided space for separations by way of exception. Synod has recognized that situations may exist that would warrant the separation of a

pastor and a church without requiring discipline or rendering the pastor ineligible to receive another call (*Acts of Synod 1960*, p. 46). Prior to 1965 the Church Order required “proper support” for pastors by preventing councils from dismissing a minister from service “without the knowledge and approbation of classis” and the synodical deputies (pre-1965 Church Order, Art. 11). By the time a revision of the Church Order was adopted in 1965, the matter of separation was given more formal attention, and the procedures now outlined in Article 17 had begun to take shape (see *Acts of Synod 1960*, p. 139, for background).

In addition, the Church Order has always provided for release from office in the case of “weighty reasons” (pre-1965 Church Order, Art. 12). At one time, such releases required only the approval of the classis; in 1965 the concurrence of synodical deputies was added to what became Article 14 in order to provide further safeguards for pastors. Recent decades have seen an increase in releases from office for various reasons, and the Church Order has become more specific in identifying which pastors may leave CRC ministry for a ministry outside the denomination (Art. 14-b) and which ones may leave for a nonministerial vocation (Art. 14-c or 14-d). In both situations, reentry into CRC ministry is possible via Article 8 for those who have been ordained in another denomination, or via Article 14-e for those who have left to pursue a nonministerial vocation.

The growing number of both Article 17 and Article 14 separations has attracted a great deal of attention and concern in recent years. Data from the *Acts of Synod* offers a picture of the dramatic rate of growth in such separations in recent decades:

CO Art.	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
14-b	4	5	14	12	9	8	6	7	11	13	14
14-c			1	6	0	3	3	4	6	7	5
14-d				0	1	1	2	0	0	3	0
17-a	2	3	0	15	17	20	13	13	23	19	20
17-c extension					6	12	14	11	12	12	17
17-c/d release					5	0	4	3	1	4	1

Note: Some subsections of the present Church Order Articles 14 and 17 were not in force in the earlier periods covered by this chart and so are left blank.

Classis and synod minutes for the past 10 years (2013-2022) show a yearly average of seventeen Article 14-b/-c/-d processes and sixteen Article 17-a processes. As the chart above indicates, this represents a significant increase in separations from just a few decades ago.

2. Many reasons for separations

As noted above (in section II, C), the increase in these situations of separation can be attributed, in part, to a changing cultural context. The CRC has traditionally recognized the call to ordained ministry of the Word as a life-long calling (Art. 14-c). But there is a growing sense that people may be called to different roles and tasks during their lifetime. In fact, Synod 1978 added Article 14-c precisely to call attention to legitimate reasons why a pastor might leave ordained ministry, and synod observed that there is no biblical warrant to say that a minister of the Word must be expected to serve in this office for life (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 47).

As the ministerial role has evolved in different ways, so has the congregational setting. In section II, C of this report we discussed increased concern over ministerial “fit” and the corresponding decrease in tolerance for situations perceived to be a less-than-ideal “fit,” leading to an increase in Article 17 separations. But similar to Article 14 releases, there are a number of reasons why a pastor and congregation might part ways:

- A pastor might need to step away from ministry for a time while elderly parents require extensive care.
- A pastor may choose to be a stay-at-home parent.
- A pastor might leave to pursue further education.
- A pastor’s giftedness and the church’s ministry context might not align. “No minister can be expected to be able to serve any and every congregation” (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 586).
- A church closure or disaffiliation, or downsizing of staff, may mean that a pastor’s ministry position ends.
- God may be leading a pastor to consider a new vocation.
- A pastor’s spouse’s career or education path may necessitate a move.

There may be a combination of factors, opportunities, and needs that would necessitate a separation between church and pastor. As the Thrive website notes, “Whatever the reason, these separations are always significant, and therefore require substantial discernment from the pastor, the council, the classis, and the synodical deputies.” Thus the Church Order wisely avoids naming specific situations and instead generalizes that releases may be allowed for “weighty reasons.”

	14-b release To outside CRC	14-c release Nonministerial	14-d release Nonministerial one year	14-e re-eligible After nonministerial	17-a release From congregation	17-c extend Eligibility	17-c Release from office	17-d release From ministry	Totals
Conflict	2	1	0	0	35	0	0	0	38
Another denomination	42	1	0	0	2	1	2	0	48
Calling	1	1	1	8	4	15	3	0	33
Chaplaincy	0	1	1	0	19	7	3	0	31
Church closing									
No call	10	8	0	0	2	4	8	0	33
Resign									
Another vocation	1	5	2	1	9	10	2	0	30
Education									
Personal									
Child care	8	4	0	0	6	6	0	0	26
Church disaffiliate									
Church financials									
Godly conduct, Safe Church									
Health, Retirement									
Immigration issues									
Moved, Loan/term end									
Theology									
Reasons:	64	21	4	9	77	43	18	0	239
No reason given	44	17	10	5	67	59	7	6	215
Total	108	38	14	14	144	102	25	6	454
Pct with Reason	59%	55%	29%	64%	53%	42%	72%	0%	53%

Drawing on classis records, the preceding chart reflects the growing number of reasons for ministerial separations. From the materials available, reasons could be determined for only about 52 percent of the Article 14 and 17 actions (239 of 454), so we should be cautious about placing too much emphasis on this small set of data. A wide range of reasons for separation were declared, including chaplaincy, pursuit of another vocation, church closure or disaffiliation, family reasons, and further education. Only about 15 percent of the reasons (38 of 239) appeared to be related to conflict between a pastor and a congregation, and yet at the same time, about 52 percent of Article 17-a separations (81 of 156) involved an oversight committee for the pastor, church, or both. To summarize the data in this chart: Articles 14 and 17 provide for a wide range of situations and circumstances—anything that does not qualify as retirement (Art. 18) or a situation involving special discipline (Art. 82-84). Yet the assumptions of many in our denomination are that releases are related to conflict, a perception reinforced by the fact that much of the denominational resources assume conflict as an underlying cause of a release from a call.

It should be noted that the ministerial role is unique in that the consent of the council is required for a minister of the Word to be released from a given call (Art. 14-a). This provision extends as well to any separation between a church and a minister (including calls to noncongregational settings) regardless of who initiates the separation. This provision also recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the call to ministry and the covenantal nature of the relationship between a pastor and the calling church (see section II, B above). Further, ministers cannot simply be released from their call by a council without discernment from the wider church through its assemblies and synodical deputies. Thus situations in which “fit” may be an issue are predisposed to potential conflict as pastors and churches seek to discern how to maintain a ministry partnership from which there is no simple exit.

3. Resignations and leaves of absence

The Church Order contains several articles regulating releases from ministry, whether temporary or permanent, depending on the circumstances of the separation. Releases from congregational ministry have received the majority of attention in the overtures assigned to this task force by Synod 2022. Article 17 is used to address the separation between a calling church and a minister of the Word, but it is worth noting that this article governs the release from any call (including calls to noncongregational positions). Ministers released under Article 17 retain their ordination, are not under discipline, and are expected to return to active ministerial service.

When a longer absence from CRC ministry is anticipated, a minister might resign to enter either a ministry outside the denomination or a nonministerial vocation. These situations are handled through Article 14. Church Order requires that a declaration be made “reflecting the resigned minister’s status that is appropriate to the way and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including the minister’s resignation from office” (Supplement, Art. 14-b, c, 2). Such declarations provide a context for potential future discussions about readmission to ministry, should a pastor sense, once more, a calling to serve in the CRC.

Church Order also allows for a temporary leave of absence processed by the local council through Article 16. In no case was this article intended to offer an indefinite or terminal leave of absence. Some of the overtures assigned to this task force suggest that something like Article 16 might offer a mechanism to grant a permanent separation without the stigma of Article 17 (see, for example, Overture 6 from 2020). We observe, however, that past synods have addressed this matter with regard to educational leave, and for a time the CRC even attempted to create a system that allowed Article 16 to be used for certain terminal leaves of absence (see *Acts of Synod 1987*, pp. 425-27; cf. *Acts of Synod 1928*, p. 141). It became clear, however, that use of Article 16 as a mechanism for permanent release from a particular call was being used to circumvent the process of separation in Article 17, so,

after a decade, synod decided to return to the system now in place (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400).

It should be noted that Article 17 is itself a kind of temporary leave of absence, except there is no official call to which the minister will return and no set time frame for how long the leave should last. But, as with Article 16, eligibility for call following a pastoral separation is not indefinite. Article 17-c specifies that the term of eligibility shall last for two years, with the possibility of annual extensions with the approval of the classis and synodical deputies. This time frame was first adopted by synod in 1982, which recognized the importance of a consistent guideline for how long a pastor may remain without a congregational call before the call to “ministry in general” may be questioned by the wider church assemblies (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 585-87).

4. Disciplinary actions

Articles 14 and 17 are intended to address situations in which pastors are not “worthy of discipline” (Art. 17-a). However, it must be recognized that the “release from ministry” through Articles 14 and 17, despite the attached stigma, may sometimes be used to circumvent the even greater stigma of formal ecclesiastical discipline. Our task force was specifically asked to note this concern (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849, ground 3). As synod has observed, when doctrinal or ethical behavior is not recognized and addressed openly and honestly, the church as a whole suffers, and in particular future congregations served by the pastor may be affected by a failure to apply discipline where it is required (see *Acts of Synod 1996*, pp. 578-79). In 1978 synod instructed churches and classes to adopt a “resolution of dismissal” in all cases of resignation. This instruction was given a more formal definition in 1994 when synod adopted the four potential declarations regarding the status of released ministers—“honorably released,” “released,” “dismissed,” or “in the status of one deposed”—which are now listed in Supplement, Article 14-b (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73; *Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 581-82). The chart on the next page indicates the frequency of the use of each of these categories. While the use of the categories “dismissed” or “in the status of one deposed” suggests that a release *may* have occurred for reasons for which a pastor would otherwise be subject to discipline, it should be noted that the declaration is technically related to the “manner and spirit” in which a pastor resigned and may not necessarily indicate the reason for the resignation.

Because it is assumed that ministers released under Article 17 are not “worthy of discipline,” no similar declarations currently apply to releases from a particular call.

Situations requiring disciplinary action are processed through Church Order Articles 82-84. While the Supplement to Article 14 currently focuses on ministers who resign from the denomination because of doctrinal differences or schismatic activities, in recent years the CRC has become increasingly aware of the potential for ministers to resign due to moral failings. This task force calls attention once again to the instructions of Synod 2016 that guide the responses of the church assemblies to pastors who resign rather than allowing the process of formal discipline to run its course (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 866; see Supplement, Art. 14-e). Our confessions remind us of the validity of Christian discipline, indeed even as a tool used by God to bring about repentance and reform in the church (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31; Belgic Confession, Art. 29). We also recognize that sin has consequences on one's interactions with the community, and in some cases being forgiven does not necessarily mean that an offending pastor can or should continue representing Christ in the official ministry of the church.

Article												
Type of Release	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Totals	Pct
14-b release to outside CRC												
honorably released	5	4	5	6	6	8	7	1	8		50	44%
released		1		4	6	4	15	3	3		36	32%
dismissed	1	1		3			1				6	5%
in the status of one deposed	1					2		3			6	5%
(empty)	2		1							13	16	14%
14-c release nonministerial												
honorably released		3	3	2	1	3	1	4	3	3	23	53%
released					1	2	2		1	2	8	19%
dismissed				2	1	1			2	2	8	19%
in the status of one deposed		1									1	2%
(empty)	3										3	7%
14-d release nonministerial one year												
honorably released	2	3			2	1					8	53%
released			2		1		1				4	27%
(empty)										3	3	20%
14-e re-eligible after nonministerial												
(empty)	1	1		1	1	3	3	2	1	2	15	
Total Result	15	14	11	18	19	24	30	13	18	25	187	
Percent of All	8%	7%	6%	10%	10%	13%	16%	7%	10%	13%	100%	

B. Issues and observations

While our theology provides a foundation for how the CRC responds to issues of leadership transition and longevity in the ministerial calling, these issues are also affected by cultural realities and changes in thinking about the ministerial office. Section II of this report identified, in a general way, a number of these changes. We now turn our attention to issues and concerns particular to the processes addressed by Articles 14, 16, and 17.

1. Uncertainty about process

At face value, the process usually followed for any separation is relatively straightforward: a request for a pastor's release is made to classis (Art. 14-b/c or Art. 17-a), along with a proposal "for the support of a released minister" (Art. 17-b), and the classis and synodical deputies consider whether

these arrangements meet their approval. The Supplements for Article 14 and 17 contain additional guidance concerning the involvement of church visitors, the appropriate responses of classis to the “manner and spirit” of a separation, potential oversight for a minister or a congregation after a separation occurs, and the proper support for a released pastor.

The actual details of a separation, however, can be much more challenging in particular situations. Especially in the case of Article 17 separations, a pastor and congregation may not always agree on the specifics of the separation agreement required by Article 17-b, or even on the reasons for the separation itself. Synod wisely called the attention of the churches to a separation agreement template (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935), but the existence of such a document is not well known among churches; nor is the process for working through differences of opinion well defined. In some cases, pastors and councils come to a classis meeting in general agreement about the necessity and terms of a separation but with lingering frustrations over the reasons and terms of the separation agreement. That can place classis delegates in an awkward situation as they try to discern who can address classis, and at what times, and who else may be in the room to overhear such conversations.

In this regard, it is helpful to remember that a classis meeting is a gathering of *churches* (Art. 39), so the official presentations on the floor of classis must be matters first addressed by a council. Though Article 17-a speaks of the possibility of a release initiated by a pastor, such releases are formally processed by the council in keeping with the principle that no minister should leave a call without the consent of the council that originally issued that call (Art. 14-a). Thus separation agreements are formally a request of a council to its classis even if initially requested by a pastor. In cases where a pastor disagrees with the reasons or terms of a separation, that disagreement would formally become an appeal to be processed by the classis under the procedures of Church Order Article 30. This means that a classis may, at times, exclude a pastor from executive-session proceedings in which his or her future is discussed by the classis delegates. Such governance is sound in theological principle (Belgic Confession, Art. 30) but may leave pastors feeling vulnerable as their ministry future is determined without their input. It is worth noting that entrance to ministry is similarly handled by assemblies who discuss the future of a candidate while the individual is not in the room (Supplement, Art. 10).

Another area of uncertainty involves release from a call issued jointly with another agency or a congregation outside the CRC. While Article 14-a expects that significant changes not be made to a pastor’s call without the consent of the council holding the minister’s credentials, the reality is that outside employers do not always consult the calling church before adjusting terms of employment. This is particularly the case with government employees and with those who work for large institutions. In such cases, the

calling church and pastor should simply do their best to honor the principles of joint supervision even when the release (employment termination) process does not fully align with the expectations of Church Order or with our theological convictions about ministry. Again, it is helpful to remember that just as all calls to noncongregational positions should be processed “in the regular manner,” so also Church Order expects that all releases from such positions should occur in keeping with synodical regulations.

Even when the pastor is supervised by another ecclesiastical entity, the precise process for a release is sometimes not clear. Church Order Supplement, Article 8, D, which governs the orderly exchange of ministers with the RCA, indicates that the polity of the calling church should be used for processing separations, adding that the calling church should act “in consultation with the sending church” (D, 7). This statement was added in response to confusion about the process of terminating a call in a unique setting—a call issued jointly by two denominations (*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 564-65). It is worth noting that pastors facing release from calls in union congregations or dually affiliated congregations (Art. 38-g or 38-h) could face similar issues even if the specific steps of release are different—though we are unaware of any situations in which this has developed in such congregations. In such situations it seems wise to expect that the process of “consultation” be conducted in a manner parallel to that of the role synodical deputies play in our own polity: receiving the documentation describing the proposed release, and taking part in the deliberations of the assembly processing that release. Because these situations are unusual, we do not believe it is necessary to develop regulations around them but merely to observe the importance of using similar situations to develop a wise response in whatever cases may arise.

2. Severance agreements

One of the most difficult aspects of an Article 17 separation is the establishment of a severance agreement. The Supplement to Article 17-a refers to guidelines adopted by Synod 1998 (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and updated by Synod 2010 (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). Though this information has been made easier to find through its inclusion on the Thrive website, historically its omission from the Church Order Supplement made it difficult for individual churches to access if they were unfamiliar with past acts of synod. In addition, some of the guidance provided may no longer fit today’s context. Specifically, while synodical guidelines on this matter require a minimum of thirteen weeks’ severance, that does not address the question of what a *fair* severance amount in today’s environment would be. As the calling process today increasingly takes more time, we may need to consider that the minimum severance amount required by synod may no longer meet the financial needs that arise in Article 17 situations today.

In some cases, pastors and church leaders have cited a “rule of thumb” that suggests a month of severance for each year served in that ministry (see DeMoor’s *Church Order Commentary*, pp. 103-4). But this “rule of thumb” is not an actual guideline, and in some cases a longer severance may place undue financial burdens on a church, especially in cases where a separation occurs after a long term of service or when a classis recommends that a church contract with (and pay) a specialized transitional minister. Conversely, depending on the situation, a minister and council might agree that a smaller severance package is appropriate and will provide a just compromise between meeting the needs of the pastor and the congregation. Though local situations may determine the appropriate amount, it is wise to recognize that any “rule of thumb” may have an upper limit. (For instance, some denominations specifically cap severance at no more than six months; others specify no more than nine).

Past guidance from synod and from Thrive identifies several principles that could be taken into account when deciding on an appropriate amount of severance. We offer the following purposes of severance for synod’s consideration as official guidance toward assisting councils and classes in their deliberations about these matters:

- a. Ministers are viewed not merely as employees but as individuals with calls from God that have been affirmed by the church. As part of the responsibility to provide “proper support” (Art. 15), councils and classes should seek to honor a minister’s ordination (see Art. 17-c; also 1 Cor. 9:10; Luke 10:7).
- b. Severance is a means for the releasing congregation to provide for the released minister during a period of time after the release, when the minister might otherwise be left without reliable income.
- c. Providing adequate financial resources for a limited period of time after a pastor is released from a call creates space for healing and for discernment about God’s call and the church’s continued call in the midst of possible anxiety and grief. Historically, synod has stated that a minimum of thirteen weeks of severance should be offered to allow for such a healing process to begin (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 394).
- d. While severance may be somewhat related to the amount of time served, it is not primarily intended to honor the length of service in a particular call, nor to be seen primarily as an indication of where the “blame” for the release belongs. The final determination of a severance amount requires discernment by the church assemblies with attention to all of the local variables involved.
- e. These guidelines for the severance package “may not apply in every circumstance of separation such as when a pastor leaves for purely personal reasons” (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16.) Some ministers receive no severance or choose not to request or to receive any compensation, due

to their personal reasons. In addition, the provision of a severance arrangement to pastors in noncongregational positions is ordinarily the responsibility of the employing organization rather than the council which has called the minister.

- f. Synodical regulations require that severance ordinarily be paid from the date of the classis meeting at which the separation agreement is approved. In some cases, such as when a pastor has been placed on a leave of absence prior to classis approval of the separation, it may be appropriate to consider any prior paid leave in discerning the final amount provided to the pastor.
- g. Some jurisdictions have specific rules governing the minimum size of an employee's severance. Churches and classes should consult local regulations to ensure that the arrangements for severance comply with any applicable laws.
- h. Because publicly stated reasons for a release from a call may not offer a full picture of the situation that led to a separation, the discernment of classis in decisions about the severance package is an important step and should not be neglected (Art. 17-b).

In the end, as with other matters related to calling and release, the amount of severance is intended to be a matter of common discernment and prayerful discussion among church leaders, focused on the thriving of the minister and the congregation.

Whenever possible, details of severance should be worked out ahead of a classis meeting as part of a separation agreement that receives formal approval from the classis as it processes the separation. In some cases, severance may not be needed at all (such as when a pastor intends to wait to pursue another call because of family circumstances or in order to seek further education), though it may still be a gracious gesture. In each situation, it may be helpful for the council to explain the factors leading to the decision to recommend a specific severance package. Since looks may be deceiving, it is helpful for a classis to follow all of the procedures prescribed for Article 17 for all such requests. Churches and classes seeking additional information should consult the guidance available online and in person through Thrive.

Our task force received requests from some correspondents to consider whether the severance ordinarily given for Article 17 separations was adequate, and whether to recommend the establishment of classis funds to provide additional funding in order to allow pastors a longer time to transition between calls. While it may be wise for classes to consider such special requests, a synodical requirement in this regard could place an undue burden on classes that already face increasing strains on available funds. We recognize that unfortunately the financial resources of churches and classes are limited and that sufficient funds may not be available to provide the

desired level of support to cover a lengthy time of transition. Churches and pastors facing unusually long periods of transition are encouraged to communicate transparently about the needs and expectations of financial support and to think creatively about ways to meet those needs.

3. Continued eligibility for call

Church Order specifies that pastors are eligible for call for two years following an Article 17 separation, and annual requests are allowed for an extension of eligibility after the initial two-year period. This time limit was adopted in 1982; prior to that time, the Church Order stated that a pastor should be released to enter a secular vocation via Article 14 if a call was not “eventually” forthcoming (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 586). The growing variety of circumstances leading to Article 17 separation today, however, means that the appropriate length of eligibility for call is not necessarily the same in each situation and requires continued discernment on the part of the church assemblies in conversation with the pastor. It should also be noted that the conclusion of a term call initiates a similar process to Article 17 with regard to oversight and continued eligibility for call (see Supplement, Art. 8, C, 3).

The limitations on eligibility for call reflect our theological conviction that pastors are not “free agents” and that ordination clings to the office rather than to a person (see section II, B, 2). Synod 1982 deemed two years to be sufficient for a pastor to ordinarily receive a new call. Though the data is difficult to interpret precisely, it appears that somewhere between half and two-thirds of pastors who experience an Article 17 separation receive a call within the next year; about 25-30 percent either choose retirement (Art. 18) or release from ministry (Art. 14-b/c/d) before facing the potential of a release from ministry due to the end of a period of eligibility for call (Art. 17-c). This suggests that the two-year time frame is likely sufficient and that the mechanism of continued requests for eligibility (Art. 17-d) is normally able to handle those situations in which further time may be appropriate to allow a pastor to receive a call.

Some situations will, inherently, anticipate a longer time frame between calls. If a pastor leaves a call in order to pursue further studies, for example, a period of five years or more may not be unusual before seeking another call. It should be noted that at some points in our history, educational leave was granted via what is now Article 16 rather than Article 17. Because Article 16 is not intended for indefinite leaves of absence, however, synod required pastors leaving congregational ministry for further study to request a release from ministry rather than a leave of absence (*Acts of Synod 1928*, p. 141; *Acts of Synod 1932*, p. 165). While this decision of synod has never formally been rescinded, it appears that an increasing number of pastors are using Article 17 for just such an extended leave. The same could be true when Article 17 is used to address certain life changes such as family leave, though synod has never formally addressed such situations.

Determining when the two-year period of eligibility begins poses another challenge for classes. While acknowledging there may be exceptions (such as when a pastor has been on leave for a lengthy period prior to the classis meeting), it seems most consistent to set the time period to commence on the date of the classis action. If the Article 17 request is approved without restrictions, the pastor would be eligible for two years from the date of that classis meeting. If an oversight committee is appointed, the pastor would be eligible for two years from the date of the classis meeting at which he or she is declared eligible for call following the period of oversight.

We are aware that in some situations, such as educational leave, classes have occasionally granted a term of eligibility longer than two years in order to avoid the need for continued extensions. Our task force received some feedback suggesting that a mechanism should be provided for granting “extended family leave” or “long-term study leave” — something with a time frame longer than two years. The challenge remains in determining when in fact an individual ceases to serve in the kinds of positions traditionally expected of someone serving as an ordained representative of the church (see section II, B, 2). We have therefore resisted creating an additional set of regulations that would determine in what situations a longer period of eligibility might be appropriate. Instead, we encourage pastors and churches to keep in mind that “eligibility for call” indicates that an individual is, indeed, actively intending to seek a call, and that ordination clings to such calls and not to the individuals. In cases where an extended period of eligibility is anticipated, continued conversation is helpful about what it means to do the work of a minister during a season of transition, and how to provide opportunities for ongoing encouragement and accountability (in line with section III, C, 6, above). We encourage pastors and congregations to consult the wisdom provided by past synodical studies on bivocationality (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314) and term calls (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 587-88) for further reflection on how such arrangements might provide avenues for continued service in positions consistent with the ministry of the Word for pastors in transition.

4. The perceived stigma

Despite the various reasons for which an Article 17 separation is a valid and helpful process, there remains a perceived stigma attached to an Article 17 separation. One likely source is the continued association of this article with what earlier versions of Church Order identified as an “intolerable situation” (the reading of Art. 17 from 1965 through 1983), as well as the association in many minds connecting conflict situations with Article 17. This stigma has led some to describe Article 17 as the “scarlet number” (see, for example, *The Banner*, Feb. 2012).

For many in the church, the assignment of an oversight committee would also signal to future ministry partners that something was “wrong” with the pastor or the church that needed to be fixed, and there would be

lingering doubts as to whether those “problems” were actually resolved. Further, our cultural stigmas against feeling in any way inadequate, inferior, or wrong can be strong shame triggers. However, this stigma runs counter to what we know about the Christian life individually and communally: the Spirit is continuously inviting us to grow and mature, and we are all called to be constantly learning and changing so that we, as the church, might grow up into the mature body of him who is our head, the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ. With this in mind, when oversight committees are assigned, we could describe their work as being similar to a vocational coach, spiritual director, and accountability partner for church councils and pastors.

Another source of the stigma comes from the misuse of Article 17 to impose disciplinary measures on a pastor instead of going through the steps of formal discipline outlined in Church Order Articles 82-84. Other churches and pastors have used Article 17 from an unwillingness to engage in conflict or challenge, retreating to Article 17 to escape from a moment when God may be prompting his people to grow and change. The general knowledge that this has happened has led to doubts about the integrity of Article 17 separations and has fed its unhealthy—and unhelpful—stigma. In addition, many of us have heard from churches, pastors, and pastor families who have deeply unsettling stories related to past Article 17 releases. Such stories form a “cloud of concern” around all Article 17 separations.

The task force weighed several options for addressing this perceived stigma. First, we considered a change in wording. The term “weighty reasons,” used to describe valid reasons for release from active ministerial service in a congregation, can carry a negative connotation. But “weighty reasons” are to be understood as valid or substantive reasons, many of which are not negative at all. After reviewing various options, we are recommending a change in the language of Articles 14-17 to refer to “valid” reasons, in a manner consistent with the use of that term elsewhere in Church Order. While we acknowledge that new terminology may take on the same negative connotations of past wording, we hope that this minor change may indicate a slight shift in the way Article 17 separations are perceived by removing some of the “weight” from these situations.

Second, we looked at the possibility of a terminal leave of absence in lieu of an outright release from a ministry position. A revised version of Article 16 has sometimes been suggested as a means of graciously allowing a pastor to separate from a call without the stigma of Article 17. But as was noted above (section IV, A, 3), Article 16 is not designed to provide an indefinite or terminal leave of absence. There are possibilities for using this article in a wider way than is currently practiced (see IV, C, 1, e, below), but such uses, we believe, would not replace a substantial number of Article 17 requests. In addition, a leave of absence without an intent to return to the ministry

position to which a pastor has been called could create additional confusion about his or her status. Therefore we largely rejected that possibility.

Some overtures (see *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 438, 446-48) also suggested that we create a new mechanism for the more “routine” separations between a pastor and a particular call, distinguishing such a release from those addressing conflicted situations. In some ways, this idea seems appealing because it could create an alternative means of handling separations that would avoid the stigma of Article 17. A two-track option, however, could also create a means to avoid naming the real reasons in situations where conflict is indeed a factor. This is not a new concern. In fact, the CRC attempted just such a two-track approach between 1988 and 1998 and decided to abandon the experiment and revert to the single approach for all separations (see *Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 550; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 578; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400). As recently as 2012, synod considered the option again and rejected it on the basis of not wanting to single out any one special reason for release (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 749). We believe that the combined wisdom of past synods still provides sufficient reason to resist a multiple-track approach to releases.

In the end our task force concluded that the system we have in place now—namely, a single-track process for addressing all separation requests—remains the best and fairest system despite its drawbacks. Nor is our system unusual; other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations have taken a similar approach (see, for example, *RCA Book of Order*, 1, II, 15, 8; *PCUSA Book of Order*, G-2.09). Instead, we believe, the most fruitful approach to the issue of stigma will be to emphasize the variety of situations covered by Article 17 and the reality that many situations do not arise out of conflict. Proper use of this article, including a recognition of the place of formal discipline (Art. 82-84) when appropriate, can also help to limit the stigma by ensuring that Article 17 is not associated with inappropriate doctrine or behavior.

At the same time, denominational records indicate that some pastors and churches find themselves going through multiple Article 17 separations. The existence of a pattern may justify some measure of caution for ministers or churches as they explore subsequent calls. Perhaps the most important step the CRC can take is to foster a greater spirit of trust and transparency about the reasons for separations and to strengthen the work of church visitors and oversight committees so that churches and pastors can consider how God may be at work in these situations—and particularly in situations where conflict is a reality.

5. The reality of conflict and the need for healing

While this report attempts to emphasize that Article 17 separations occur for a variety of situations, the reality remains that there are times when a lack of compatibility between a church and pastor, or between members of

the ministry staff, is, in fact, the reason for the separation. We must also take into consideration that traumatic events, both in the personal lives of pastors and their families, or occurring during their work in ministry, can require permanent separations in order to bring about healing. We avoid or ignore these realities to the detriment of both pastor and church. As the Thrive website notes, an Article 17 process often becomes the formal acknowledgment that a pastor and council who once shared a common understanding of God's call no longer do or can share that understanding. In itself, that different sense of calling is enough to generate feelings of frustration and pain, even abandonment or rejection. Failing to address such a difficult situation can cause harm in the subsequent ministries of both the pastor and the church.

CRC polity has long recognized the possibility of conflict. Earlier editions of Church Order recognized that situations may arise that "make it impossible or undesirable that a minister continue to serve . . . [a] Church, even though these troubles and difficulties are not of such a nature that the minister must be suspended" (*Church Order Commentary*, 1941 edition, p. 55, on pre-1965 Art. 11). In the early years of the CRC, classes were permitted to take active steps to transfer a minister from one call to another in extreme situations. This was changed by Synod 1914 due to a growing recognition that the "hierarchical" nature of this process could be seen to be at odds with the CRC's deliberative polity (see pre-1914 Church Order Art. 11 and Van Delen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 1967 ed., p. 72). The involvement of classis and the synodical deputies was required in order to provide protection and "proper support" for the released minister. Subsequent to the adoption of the 1965 edition of the Church Order, synod recognized the challenge that could be posed when a council continued to hold the credentials of a pastor released due to conflict, and allowed for the transfer of credentials in such situations (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 35).

While a separation may be the most gracious and fruitful way to address the hurts and disappointments of a breakdown between church and pastor, the administrative process of separation can sometimes be in tension with pastoral care. Processing an Article 17 release requires a balance of transparency and confidentiality. In times of conflict, it may be helpful to consider the wisdom of earlier editions of the Church Order, which viewed separations in the context of "proper support" (pre-1965 Art. 11).

A 1982 report on Article 17, which led to the creation of the Pastor Church Relations office (now combined with other specialized ministries into Thrive), emphasized two key themes of *prevention* and *healing* (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 581-89). This applies prior to conflict as well as in the midst of conflict and is reflected in our current procedures. For instance, as soon as one or the other begins to wonder if they're "stuck," the council and pastor are expected to honor their high view of God's call by inviting church visitors to come and help them reconcile their diverging impressions of God's call.

It should also be noted that a pastor should reach out to the regional pastor for support. Only after inviting the classis' support may the pastor or church begin the formal Article 17 process.

Once a pastor and council recognize that separation is inevitable, it is important to be mindful of the painful aspects of such a process. While it is difficult for an assembly to fully address the pain that results from a pastoral separation, it is pastorally wise to at least take some formal note of this reality. Synodical guidance advises that a pastor going through a separation identify an advocate—perhaps the regional pastor or another trusted advisor in the classis—who can be a liaison between the pastor, the council, and the classis (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 395; see c, 4, c).

The oversight committee may also play an important role in providing healing as they walk alongside a pastor and/or a church after a separation. While part of the oversight committee's role is "evaluation," the committee is also asked to address areas of "assistance" (Supplement, Art. 17-a, a and b). Thrive notes that pastors, during or after an Article 17 process, may experience difficulty in establishing healthy rhythms of sabbath and personal discipleship, inattentiveness to family and friends, a lack of self-awareness, or inattention to physical, emotional, and mental health. (This can be true for all pastors or church leaders undergoing an Article 17 process, regardless of whether conflict was a factor.) While an oversight committee cannot be expected to resolve every personal challenge faced by a separated pastor or council, it can play a role in asking helpful questions and connecting the people to healing resources in the denomination or beyond.

It is important to recognize that congregations too, may face deep wounds as a result of an Article 17 process. These wounds can present significant challenges for a community because various members of a church may process their emotions in radically different ways. Specialized transitional ministers (see Article 12-b) may help with this process, as they are trained to address challenges particular to a church in transition. Other denominational resources (see below) can help congregations identify areas where growth or spiritual renewal may be needed to confront any sinful patterns or hurt inflicted during the time of conflict.

Though much of the attention of the Church Order Review Task Force has been directed to issues related to Article 17, it should be noted that Article 14 releases from office may arouse similar emotions and concerns in both pastors and congregations. While the situations are different when a pastor has left formal ministry in the CRC altogether, it may be helpful for a classis to keep in mind the importance of finding ways to maintain connections and relationships through which God may bring about healing or reconciliation. As a people who proclaim that God can and does use conflict to accomplish his work in us, we need not fear conflict if we are able to see it as a

tool, albeit a sometimes painful one, to make something of God's character and care for us as his people.

6. Supervision of pastors in between calls

As the rate of Article 17 separations increases, so too does the eventuality of pastors without a formal call. This situation creates some theological tension in light of our conviction that ordination clings to a role and not to a person. It is therefore important for churches and classes to consider the importance of continued supervision for ministers whose credentials they hold but who do not have a current call, and especially for those who continue to do ministerial work during a transitional period (such as during educational leave). It may also be important for pastors without a call to be honest about their intentions if a lengthy period of eligibility is anticipated, and to request an Article 14 release from office instead of seeking continued eligibility when they are not actually pursuing a call.

It is not always clear what ministry limits, if any, exist for a pastor separated from a congregation. As Thrive resources note, some kind of temporary restrictions on public ministry tasks can sometimes help a pastor rebuild relationships with God and others in nonprofessional ways. If a pastor is not eligible for call, it follows that some kind of restriction on formal ministry may be in place: a long-term role as stated supply in a church, for example, would seem to be against the spirit of such restrictions. These restrictions may be unique to each situation, preventing a set of standard guidelines, but should be discerned and clearly stated in the separation agreement. It would be wise for pastors under oversight to communicate regularly with the oversight committee to discern together what opportunities would be appropriate and would help the pastor become ready to re-engage ministry, and what should be declined at particular stages in the process of evaluating readiness for renewed ministry work. It should also be noted that pastors may refuse to cooperate with the expectations of a classis oversight committee. In such situations, a classis may find it has little choice but to release the pastor from ordained ministry via Article 17-d. Though unfortunate, this is a reasonable response by a classis in line with our understanding about the importance of discernment by church assemblies. At other times, pastors may decide to resign (Art. 14) or retire (Art. 18) rather than to follow through with the oversight process. Classes then can follow the process for a release from office with an appropriate declaration, or decide whether or not to approve of a retirement with retention of the title of the office and the authority to perform official acts of ministry.

Many of the principles for supervision of pastors in noncongregational positions outlined in section III, C, 6 would apply to the kinds of care, accountability, and oversight a council could give to a pastor whose credentials it holds while the pastor is without an active call. In situations following a release, it may be necessary to consider additional aspects of care specific to the emotions of ministry transitions. Recognizing that the

calling church may, at times, not be in the best position to offer such care, it is also possible that the classis could include such considerations in the mandate of an oversight committee, or bring them to the attention of the regional pastor. We also note that the Supplement to Article 17-a allows for the transfer of ministerial credentials to another church during this time of transition—within the classis only, if the minister is under oversight. In addition, we observe synod’s previous expectation that church visitors inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and to take appropriate action in cases that do not conform to synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

7. Reinstatement

When pastors experience an Article 17 separation, the hope is that there will be an eventual return to called ministry. While a new call may not resolve all the pain of a separation, it does provide a continued public affirmation of a pastor’s sense of calling and of his or her service to the wider church.

Article 14 creates a different kind of situation for pastors seeking reinstatement. Synodical regulations currently stipulate that pastors released to service in other denominations (Art. 14-b) be readmitted through the procedures outlined in Article 8 (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 491-92; see also *Agenda for Synod 2014*, pp. 467-68). Pastors released for a “non-ministerial vocation” (Art. 14-c or 14-d) seek readmission to CRC ministry through Article 14-e, processed through the classis that originally released the minister. As *Overture 10 (Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 514-15) notes, this creates an inconsistency in how the “manner and spirit” of the minister’s conduct leading up to and during a release is considered during the request for reinstatement process. It also means that any new synodical requirements for ordination added in the intervening years (such as abuse of power training or diversity training) may be overlooked.

While it is difficult to create a standard process for handling the variety of cases that may arise during a request for reinstatement to CRC ministry, some additional consistency in the process would be helpful. One important step would be the requirement of a similar examination of the “circumstances surrounding the release” (Art. 14-e) for pastors being readmitted from other denominations, as is currently the expectation for former pastors who resign for nonministerial vocations. We recognize that the classis which released the former pastor is best suited for this task, since they would presumably have the best access to local leaders with memory of the “circumstances surrounding the release” as well as to any records or classis executive session minutes regarding the release. It is also important that this process of declaring a person re-eligible for call is done in a manner consistent with the current standards set by synod. This function is ordinarily handled by the denominational Candidacy Committee.

Our task force examined a number of different options for processing such requests for re-eligibility for call. In the end, we determined that the local classis that released the pastor is the best judge of the minister's readiness for re-eligibility for call, in keeping with the patterns also established with regard to reinstatement in cases of discipline (see Supplement, Art. 82-84, h). Thus our recommendations will reflect our conclusions that all pastors released from CRC ministry via Article 14-b/c/d or 17-c/d follow the same pattern of requesting to be declared re-eligible for call through Article 14-e. A proposed new Supplement to Article 14-e outlines the process: the classis interview currently required by Article 14-e (with concurrence required from the synodical deputies) would be followed by a referral to the Candidacy Committee, which would oversee the completion of any additional requirements for ordination imposed by synod since the pastor's original admission to ministry in the CRC. Then, once these requirements have been completed, the pastor may be declared eligible for call and may receive and accept a call. As is the case for other pastors "called in the regular manner," the classis of the calling church, through its counselor and interim committee, would be responsible for ensuring that all ecclesiastical requirements for ministry have been met before the (re)ordination may proceed.

Conclusion

As with issues of supervision and accountability (Art. 12-13), the situations related to separation from a call or from CRC ministry are varied and unique, making it difficult to provide specific answers that would address every occasion. This report attempts to identify some of the important issues above, and in the remainder of this section attention will be given to some additional resources and recommendations that may potentially offer churches and pastors assistance as they work through a process that can be confusing and even painful. In the end we recognize again how even the best processes are limited by the people who are responsible for implementing them. Pastors who lack self-awareness or members of a church council who act in bad faith can misuse any set of procedures in ways that cause harm and sow distrust. While we cannot prevent such misuse, it is our hope, as authors of this report, that these reflections will offer opportunities for better communication and discernment of God's will on occasions when pastors and churches find it necessary to work toward a formal separation.

C. Resources and guidance

The mandate of the Church Order Review Task Force includes the charge to "develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849), a request echoing Overture 5 (deferred from 2020). As we review the existing materials, our task force believes that a number of such guidelines already exist and that the issue is not necessarily a lack of guidelines but a limited awareness of the resources and guidance that have

already been adopted. In this section we highlight some of these resources while also commending a few updated processes to the churches for consideration:

1. Resources for Prevention

Our high view of calling and ministry invites us as churches and pastors to make use of resources that aid discernment. When diverging impressions of God's call arise, our shared commitment to the work of Christ in his church should lead us to seek ways to reconcile these impressions in order to continue shared ministry for the Lord's sake. Churches and pastors, then, should carefully and prayerfully consider the nature of called ministry (see section II, B above), acknowledging its origin in God's call and cultivating a curiosity about God's ways, especially in seasons of difficulty or disagreement.

Concretely this means using the resources available in our church polity to work toward healing and reconciliation in times of conflict. Those resources include the following:

- a. *Church visitors*: Church visitors represent the care and concern of the classis, and churches should avail themselves of the support and advice of church visitors. Church Order Article 42-b describes the involvement of church visitors in terms of permission: churches "are free to call on the church visitors whenever serious challenges arise. . . ." As reflected in this report's recommendations, we believe that stronger encouragement to make use of church visitors would be appropriate, indicating that churches are expected to seek the wise counsel of the wider church in times of difficulty or tension.

The CRC's *Guide for Church Visiting* contains a number of suggested questions that can help churches and pastors discern the health of a ministry setting. We suggest that this resource be reviewed and updated to include questions that would assist church visitors and others in working through situations of pastoral discernment, especially in the face of growing tension. As synod has observed, such early intervention can provide "a possibility of healthy resolution that becomes less likely after tensions have risen to a breaking point" (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 755).

- b. *Regional pastors*: Regional pastors serve as "pastors to pastors," coming alongside pastors in their classes as advocates and as supports for their spiritual, emotional, mental, and even physical health. The expertise and advice of regional pastors are a wonderful resource for ministers who encounter challenges in ministry and want to discern more clearly God's will for them in their ministry career.
- c. *Thrive*: The CRCNA agency Thrive provides support to pastors and congregations, implementing a commitment to promote healthy relationships, encourage one another in ministry, and aid in the discernment of next steps in seasons of growth, transition, or challenge.

- d. *Classical counselors*: This functionary role is designed to provide wise guidance to churches and pastors as a call is being processed, and to foster healthy relationships between a church and a pastor at the beginning of a call. Some classes have identified one or two individuals to whom all classical counselor assignments are given, in order to assure that all councils in need of counsel have access to an individual familiar with “ecclesiastical regulations and sound process” (Art. 42-c) to guide them through the calling process. While we do not believe this arrangement is always necessary, we see it as a helpful model to follow. At the very least, we encourage classes to recognize the importance of this functionary role and to value counselors who have the same kind of “experience and counsel” that Church Order currently expects of church visitors (Art. 42-b). We encourage classical counselors to understand the significance of their role, to be available to councils throughout the search and calling process, and to help churches send calls that will lead to fruitful relationships between the churches and pastors.
- e. *Leaves of absence*: Church Order Article 16 provides a process whereby a pastor can request a temporary leave of absence. In times of personal difficulty or church conflict, a leave of absence may provide valuable time and space to both a church and a minister. A period of rest can provide the soul care a minister may need, and that can allow both the church and the minister the opportunity to evaluate the present situation or to work through the challenges of discerning God’s will in a particular call. We are aware of a small but growing number of situations where councils have required a pastor to take a leave of absence. While we recognize the dangers of such a council-imposed leave, we believe there are times when a council may be in a better position than a pastor to discern the wisdom of a leave. Our recommendations will reflect this conviction, with the expectation of additional concurrence from classis functionaries as a safeguard against abuse.

2. Process questions

If indeed a church and pastor determine that the best course of action is separation, it is extremely important to have a healthy process in place in order to limit harm to either party, to honor the dignity and worth of all involved, and to ensure the most potential for fruitful ministry after the separation. In response to questions and uncertainties about the separation process, this report recommends several revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements. Synod 1998 adopted a series of guidelines for the separation of churches and pastors; these were updated slightly by Synod 2010 (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96; *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). As we reviewed these guidelines, it became clear that some of the material actually provided suggestions for addressing conflict before a separation between church and pastor became inevitable. As a result of our discussions, we have revised these guidelines substantially and have included additional provisions

aimed at resolving conflict before it reaches the point of a separation (see Addendum E). We include these updates in the hope that they will bless both the pastor's and the church's ministry when conflict plays a role in an Article 14 or 17 separation.

It should also be noted that the denomination has already produced many valuable resources to help address situations of separation. Because churches and classes may be uncertain about how to access the information, we list them here to highlight the particular aspects of guidance already available to churches. These documents can be found on the denominational website (see Addendum F).

Again, we highlight the fact that many of the issues and emotions that arise in an Article 17 separation have parallels in Article 14 situations. Because each of these situations is unique, we encourage church leaders—particularly those in councils and classes—to utilize the written resources identified above and to call on those with greater experience in such situations (such as the denominational staff of Thrive) when questions arise or greater guidance may be necessary. We would, further, encourage a regular review of these resources in order to identify areas where updates may be needed.

3. Separation agreements

The use of a separation agreement in times of conflict already has the strong encouragement of synod (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 393-95), and a template for separation agreements was approved by Synod 2022 (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58). Such templates are not only useful in situations of conflict but could be helpful in providing clarity in any time of separation, so we are recommending the use of this template for all Article 17 separations. Separation agreements can also help to supply an important means by which a council can provide “proper support” (Art. 15; Art. 17-b) for a pastor in a time of transition.

The separation agreement template presented in Addendum D may be adapted to specific situations. We also observe that the provision for non-disclosure in statement 5 of this template may strike some as unwise. Non-disclosure agreements are not prohibitions against all conversations related to a separation but, rather, about the terms of the agreement (especially those related to finances) and about demonstrably false statements that foster questions about the character of the other party.¹ The text of the proposed template places boundaries around those forms of speech in order to allow for healthy conversations about separation that bring clarity to the community. We encourage councils and pastors with concerns about issues

¹ For more on nondisclosure agreements as they relate to the proposed template, see the article written by Thrive's Dave Den Haan on the CRC Network (network.crcna.org): “Who Gets to Say What, to Whom? New Separation Agreement Template” (9/23/2022, updated 12/11/2023)

of communication to draw on the wisdom of denominational resources such as Thrive in such situations.

As part of this report, our task force has developed an updated version of the template to address some of the issues of process identified above (see especially sections IV, B, 1-2 and IV, B, 6), and we recommend that the Church Order be updated to stipulate that separation agreements should be used in all Article 17 situations. Because Article 14 releases sometimes involve issues similar to those in Article 17 separations, we would also encourage churches and classes to consider whether a similar separation agreement might be helpful for managing an Article 14 release as well.

4. After the separation

After a declaration of release has been made by the classis, a number of issues will require ongoing discernment and care, particularly if the release is due to conflict.

- a. *Oversight committees:* When a classis processes an Article 17 separation, the classis may choose to set up a committee to work with the church, or the minister, or both, to provide feedback and guidance in order to work toward a healthier calling process for subsequent ministry. Oversight committees are not simply intended to provide accountability but to work on creating positive transitions as well. These committees are charged with the responsibility of recommending whether a released pastor should be eligible for call and, if so, when. When assigned to a releasing congregation, an oversight committee is charged with recommending whether the congregation is ready to extend another call. The Thrive website includes a number of documents to guide this important work.
- b. *Finishing well together:* When a pastor and congregation separate from one another by way of an Article 17 release, it is important to bring the minister-congregation relationship to a close as well as possible. This will almost always involve a process involving prayer, discernment, and conversation rather than focusing on a single event. It may, especially in times of conflict, require attention to the work of reconciliation and to the need to provide pastoral care to the minister and the minister's family. Thrive is a valuable resource in such matters, and tools such as restorative conversation are valuable as well.

Yet particular events may, at times, provide a means of bringing closure. In some denominational traditions, including that of the Reformed Church in America, liturgies focusing on a "release from service to a congregation" are available to offer ways to publicly recognize the close of a season of ministry. Such liturgies also provide opportunities, though perhaps limited, to express a need for forgiveness and healing where necessary. Our task force is aware of some cases in which churches have utilized an informal liturgy of release, but it appears to us that in many

cases (especially awkward ones) churches in our denomination tend to move quickly to the “business” aspects of release without bringing these situations into times of worship. While liturgical resources focusing on release may not be applicable to every situation, we would encourage churches and pastors to consider these or similar means to lean into the spiritual nature of releases from ministry and to find appropriate ways to help pastors and congregations celebrate what God has done through a past season of ministry and to look for divine grace to sustain each party in the future. Such liturgies can help to reinforce our theology of calling and remind churches and pastors that just as God’s voice leads them to a call, we can expect God to work through a release as well.

If the separation is a particularly painful one, it will be critical for council leaders, with the help of church visitors, to discern the nature of the released minister’s involvement in the final worship service. Will the released pastor lead, preach at, participate in, contribute to, or simply be acknowledged in that final worship service together? What will enable the congregation to move toward thriving? What will provide the minister with the opportunity to bid farewell? What will be the best way for the minister and the congregation to speak to and listen to God together in the context of corporate worship?

- c. *Specialized transitional ministers*: Specialized transitional ministers (STMs) are trained to help congregations who have experienced the departure of a pastor due to resignation or release from call. Their work is to help congregations navigate the transitions from conflict to peace, from grief to joy, from unhealth to health, and from mission confusion to mission clarity. Thrive can help churches connect with STMs, and more information can be found at the STM website (crcna.org/pcr/stm).
- d. *Resources for vocational assessment and discernment*: Thrive has identified a number of resources to assist pastors in the process of self-understanding and discernment about God’s leading in the internal call to ministry. A number of these resources are listed in Addendum F. In addition, pastors should remember that an external call to ministry should be discerned in careful discussion and prayer with other church leaders. Thus pastors should actively seek to engage their councils in conversation when thinking about changes to their position (Art. 14-a).

5. Prayer

We echo the comment of the Synod 1987 advisory committee that noted it “would like to have seen more attention given . . . to the role of the Holy Spirit in calling, the nature of calling, and the covenantal nature of the relationship between a pastor and a calling church . . .” (*Acts of Synod 1987*, p. 574). Though much of our reflection to this point has focused on procedure and policy, we reaffirm our comments made at the beginning of this report that the discernment of ministry calling is first and foremost a

spiritual matter. Through Thrive there are a number of options to aid both churches and pastors at various stages of ministry in prayerful discernment. When we neglect this spiritual aspect, we can easily overlook what God might be doing in a particular situation.

Conclusion

The denomination has developed a wide variety of resources and guidance to assist churches and pastors in times of transition. Unfortunately many of these resources are unfamiliar or underutilized. This may be due, in part, to the awkwardness of many releases (even ones taken for relatively positive reasons) and the desire to simply bring a process to completion. We encourage both churches and pastors also to take the time to look for God's work in the changing circumstances of ministry.

D. Recommendations related to transitions and release from ministry

Synod's mandate charges this task force to provide, among other things, "suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions . . . including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). In addition, we reviewed the requests of the overtures that led to the formation of this task force, which included (in addition to the items assigned by synod's mandate) suggestions about distinguishing between "routine" and "complex" Article 17 separations (Overtures 4-6) and addressing instances of inappropriate avoidance of special discipline (Overture 5).

Our recommendations at the end of this report address these instructions and requests in the following ways:

1. Suggestions for clearer guidelines in times of conflict

Though synod has already adopted a number of helpful guidelines over the years, many of these instructions have not been readily accessible to councils and classes. Other aspects of this guidance may have been generally understood by some church leaders but not spelled out in Church Order or in synodical regulations. We have attempted to remedy this by recommending the following:

- additions to the Church Order Supplement, Article 17-a to clarify how requests for release from a call are to be processed through church assemblies, and to require separation agreements in all situations of release from call (see Addendum B, proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 1 and a, 3)
- guidance for release from a call issued jointly by congregations in different denominations (see Addendum B, proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 5)
- changes to the Separation Agreement Template that clarify process questions (see Addendum D; also proposed updates to the guidance of Synod 1998 in Addendum E, C, 4)

- principles for determination of severance for consideration by synod (see section IV, B, 2)
- a reminder to the churches that Articles 14 and 17 are not appropriate tools for the avoidance of special discipline (Recommendation J, 3)

Grounds for these recommendations will be provided at the conclusion of the report.

2. Assistance for positive pastoral transitions

As noted above, we understand this portion of our mandate to be focused on transitions related to release from ministry and not from those related to acceptance of a call to a new church or ministry position (Art. 14-a). Inherent in this part of our mandate is also the underlying concern over stigma from Article 17 releases that, in some cases, inhibits positive pastoral transitions. Our recommendations will include the following:

- proposed changes to existing guidance from Synod 1998 to highlight the possibility of reconciliation even in the documentation focused on release from a call, and to note the importance of continued care for pastors and congregations in the time following a release (see proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 2 and a, 6)
- a proposed requirement that classis minutes record specific and publicly acknowledged reasons for a release from a call in order to help distinguish between “routine” or “complex” Article 17 processes (see proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 4)
- recognition of the growing variety of reasons for which Article 17 separations may occur, including cultural factors that do not include conflict as an underlying cause
- commendation of templates for oversight committee mandates and liturgical resources that can assist with the process for Spirit-led discernment and celebration of ministry transitions
- proposed changes to Church Order Article 16 to allow a council to initiate a leave of absence for a pastor in certain situations
- resources for vocational assessment and discernment

Grounds for these recommendations will be provided at the conclusion of the report.

3. Readmission of pastors via Article 8

We are recommending that synod adopt a process that directs all who have left ordained ministry in the CRC, either for service in another denomination or for nonministerial work, to a single consistent process for readmission via Article 14-e. We are further recommending that this process be spelled out in the Church Order Supplement.

The Recommendations section at the end of this report will provide greater detail and more specific grounds regarding these items.

V. Concluding observations

As we conclude this report, we observe again that the sections of Church Order we were asked to review cover a wide variety of situations, and, despite our best intentions, it is not possible to address all of them by means of synodical regulations or through this report. We recognize, then, that much of what we have said still requires the wise application of church leaders in their own local contexts, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in each individual situation.

In our mandate, synod asked that we review the Church Order articles and their Supplements related to supervision and accountability, as well as those related to ministers' releases, and to make recommendations about how to more effectively offer support, supervision, and positive assistance in times of conflict. We hope that the proposals and resources we identified throughout this report, and especially in our closing recommendations, provide the kind of support and guidelines requested by synod. In this report we have also attempted to interact with the overtures that prompted synod to form this task force, as well as with input we received from others across the denomination.

A. Issues for future consideration

Despite the many issues we have been able to attend to in this lengthy report, we found there are also several issues that either fall outside our mandate or that we were unable to address in the time we were assigned.

1. Commissioned pastor impact

While the distinctive nature of the office of commissioned pastor means that not all the principles in this report apply to that office, we acknowledge along with Overture 4 (deferred from 2020) that some of the issues that affect ministers of the Word in noncongregational settings also affect commissioned pastors.

- a. The boundaries of "ministerial" work and the significance of ordination may provide assistance in giving further definition to the kinds of job descriptions that meet synodical guidelines (see Art. 23-a and its Supplement).
- b. The discussion of "proper support" and encouragement for commissioned pastors who serve in roles beyond the local congregation has aspects similar to those of ministers of the Word who serve in similar roles.
- c. The guidelines offered in Articles 14, 16, and 17 pertaining to both release from a call and reordination provide additional material to help councils and classes process the release of a commissioned pastor (Art. 24-d).

We recommend that synod task the Candidacy Committee with considering whether an update of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook would be appropriate for taking these matters into account.

2. Retired pastors

Though matters related to Article 18 are beyond the scope of this task force, we note that councils and classes face similar issues and concerns regarding retired pastors as for those regarding ministers who serve in noncongregational settings. Many retired pastors, though not serving in an active call, still serve in ways that officially represent the CRCNA and the wider church through a ministry of the Word, sacraments, and pastoral presence. “Providing honorably for [these pastors’] support” (Art. 18-b) goes beyond the provision of a pension, which is the main intention of Article 18; it also means supporting ministry in many of the ways identified above (section III, C, 6). As with noncongregational ministries, some congregations do well at providing support and accountability; other congregations, however, view retired ministers as a category that no longer requires such support.

Of course, retired pastors themselves may also benefit from the reminder that they remain under the “supervision” of a council as long as they retain the “title . . . and the authority” to perform official actions on behalf of the church (Art. 18-b). Today many retired pastors are not as closely connected to a local congregation as they would have been in a different generation. Some retire far from a CRC or use retirement to pursue other avenues of service that would not have been possible while in called ministry. In such cases, supervision and accountability may be somewhat challenging. So while it is technically outside our mandate to make observations about Article 18, we would note the importance of good communication and supportive relationships between retired pastors and the councils to which they remain accountable in faith and life.

3. Reinstatement of pastors released under special discipline

Just as our task force has noted the inconsistencies of our existing procedures regarding readmission of pastors who were released under various provisions of Article 14, we also note that the readmission process for ministers deposed under Articles 82-84 is not always clear. The current provisions of Church Order and synodical regulations presume but do not specify a process similar to what we have proposed as a supplement to Article 14-e. Though we believe that matters of readmission are properly the purview of the releasing classis, we also recognize the wisdom of having denominational staff (with greater resources and experience) provide a more consistent review of readmission applications, and in such a way as provides for a restored pastor's completion of synodical requirements imposed since the initial ordination. We believe that the denomination would be well served by a review of these procedures although they are beyond the scope of our mandate.

4. New trends in the calling process

An additional dynamic that came to the attention of our task force as we discussed the meaning of being “called in the regular manner” is a changing understanding of the call process. In churches shaped by different

cultural expectations, but also in an increasing number of other situations, leadership transitions sometimes occur when a pastor or a council works to “raise up” the next leader of the church, or for a given ministry. This approach seems scriptural in terms of the church identifying gifts and encouraging their expression and use, but it also seems to run against the Church Order requirement of having a number of names of suitable candidates presented to the congregation. We sense that care must be taken to ensure that the process of raising up leaders is open to communal discernment throughout. Such discernment can lead to ongoing refinement of a trainee’s sense of call, transparent assessment of the trainee’s readiness for next steps, and confidence within the trainee that ministry really is what he or she is called to.

In other contexts, councils have sought assistance from church staffing consultants to find suitable candidates in times of pastoral transition. Here too we recognize the benefits to be gained from seeking guidance and direction from “experts” with more experience than the typical search committee in looking at pastoral candidates. However, such a process can bypass the covenantal obligations we have as a denomination to give priority to CRC-ordained or -eligible candidates, and it can overlook the discernment we expect from the denominational assemblies that have confirmed the sense of God’s call to specific individuals on behalf of our churches. In addition, challenges arise when staffing consultants fail to acknowledge any disparities between a given candidate and the denomination in terms of theological commitments, educational expectations, and assumptions about the role of the minister within the congregation. This has further implications too for the ability of those released from call (Art. 17) to receive a new call, since there is an increasingly wide pool of potential pastoral candidates from which churches feel free to choose.

In some ways, these trends may be neither good nor bad but may simply reflect the reality of current cultural pressures. Therefore we do not believe that these issues currently need additional regulation from synod. But to the extent that these trends reflect the growing influence of business models that may at times be in tension with our theological commitments as a church, we encourage the churches and classes to take note of these trends and to exercise wise discernment as church leaders.

5. Church Order changes proposed by Synod 2023

Two decisions of Synod 2023 specifically affect the work of this task force. Synod 2023 proposed changes to Church Order Article 14-d and to Supplement, Article 13-c for adoption by Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962, 993). The wording of Article 14-d falls within our mandate to review, and we agree with the basic premise that Article 14 intends to address situations in which a minister has forsaken the office completely and not those in which a pastor is intentionally pursuing bivocational ministry (see Addendum B). With regard to the proposed changes to Supplement, Article 13-c,

we recognize that the specific changes there are intended to address whether and how to include the Code of Conduct in our Church Order, and that that particular discussion is beyond the scope of our task force's mandate. However, in this report we are proposing that the material in Supplement, Article 13-c be shifted to Article 12 and its Supplements, and we have stated the requirements to adhere to the "faith and practice" of the CRC in a way that applies to all pastors in noncongregational settings, not only to those serving on loan to a congregation in another denomination (see Addendum A).

We call synod's attention to these issues in order that the impact of the decisions of Synod 2023 requiring a later synod's adoption are clear as synod takes action on our proposals this year.

B. Additional observations

As noted at the beginning of this report, we observe again that ecclesiastical processes have limited power to transform realities; these processes are worthwhile and significant only to the degree that they help to support relationships from which wholeness and healing may result. This is why our Church Order must be set in the light of Scripture and the confessions, which call us into relationship with the living God in Christ. It is out of our shared relationship in Christ that ministry flows, and through this relationship supervision and even releases become pathways to encouragement and even hope in the God who raises the dead.

Because we recognize that processes depend on people to implement them faithfully, and that the aim of the Church Order is to foster a framework for healthy relationships within the body of Christ, we highlight again the importance of building bridges especially in situations where issues of supervision, accountability, and release are being applied across cultures. We would encourage the denomination to ensure ready access in multiple languages to the Church Order and to synodically approved templates and guidance identified in this report. The CRC has sought, at various times, to provide resources in a variety of languages, and we are aware of work being done by the Office of General Secretary to develop internal capacity for translation services and to provide lists of theological and church polity terms in various languages for consistency in translation. Often these resources have been provided by leaders within these language groups, whose benefit to the denomination cannot be overstated. The principle of providing translations of such resources was, until 1965, even part of our Church Order (pre-1965 Art. 52; see also *Acts of Synod 1902*, p. 77; *Acts of Synod 1989*, p. 308). Unfortunately, that process has often proven costlier and more time intensive than expected (see *Acts of Synod 1990*, p. 598; *Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 215-16). While recognizing the challenges inherent in developing access to resources in a variety of languages, we would encourage a renewed look at the ways in which even translation software

can provide the beginning of such translations into languages frequently used in the CRC (such as Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Navajo) and to actively collect such resources on the denomination's website. With the Candidacy Committee report of a decade ago, we commend this matter to the churches and synod for discussion and consideration in the coming year (see *Acts Synod 2012*, p. 216).

In response to the increasing diversity of the denomination it is essential to recognize the need to listen to people who represent nonmajority cultures, and to mentor congregations and church leaders who are new to the CRC, in order to be sensitive to their own particular experiences. When a council or classis is dealing with an issue involving a congregation or pastor of a nonmajority cultural or language background, it may be helpful to seek assistance from other denominational leaders who can facilitate conversations in first languages with the requisite knowledge of cultural factors as well as CRC polity and practice. Ethnic minority leaders (such as those employed by Resonate) would not replace classis functionaries but should be seen as guides to help provide the relational ties that are essential to help Church Order function in a healthy manner. The denomination should continue to regularly update translations of the Church Order and its Supplements and make them easily available to non-Anglo congregations and classes. Finally, we encourage majority-culture churches to work together with nonmajority churches to bridge cultural gaps so that churches whose ethnic background is not Anglo may feel adequately supported and invested in the processes of church polity.

We would furthermore recommend an update to the introduction of the Church Order to highlight for readers the importance of seeking out such language and cultural resources as would help foster a deeper understanding of and trust in the systems established by synod to promote healthy ministry and address conflict. The more that local councils and classes can gain a sense of ownership over these processes, the easier it will be to discover the gift of healing and hope that God provides through the collective discernment and witness of the wider church. This is true even in situations where cross-cultural issues are not in play. For many churches and classes, supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings and questions of release from call are not everyday realities, so it is important to seek out the wisdom and learned experience from others in the wider denomination. This is also an important reason to continue to develop training resources for stated clerks, synodical deputies, regional pastors, church visitors, and other classis leaders who can assist churches and pastors in seasons of discernment and uncertainty. In some cases, that process could be assisted by updates to materials such as the *Manual for Synodical Deputies* or the *Guide for Conducting Church Visiting*, which should be reviewed in light of the changes proposed and the commentary provided by this report.

As we wrap up this report, we return to an observation we made as we began—that our overall goal in any regulations regarding ministry and leadership is to advance the work of God’s kingdom. Thus we want to ground all of our work, including those matters that appear more administrative in nature, in the testimony of Scripture and the wisdom of theological reflection done within the Reformed tradition over the years. In this regard, we echo the observations of a previous study committee addressing issues similar to ours: “The issues faced . . . are very complex and involve many facets of our church’s polity. Our primary concern is the welfare of God’s church and the individual ministers, congregations, and other parties concerned in stressful situations. . . . The success of these recommendations, it must be observed, will depend in the final analysis upon the local churches, their consistories, and pastors working together to do what is right and best” (Report of the Healing Ministries Committee, *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 582). We reiterate the fact that the situations we are addressing depend, in the end, on the faithfulness and integrity of those tasked with carrying out the processes mandated by synod.

Unfortunately, in a sinful world there will always be ways in which our actions in a particular situation do not match our Christian commitment to truth and justice. No measure of regulation can prevent pastors or church assemblies from a sinful application of church regulations. What we can do, however, is provide guidance and regulations that help to foster the kind of Christlike conversation that brings about appropriate measures of support and accountability for people in ordained leadership that goes beyond a “quick fix” mentality. We can also encourage churches and leaders to slow down enough to listen to each other in order to bring their stories together in ways that create space for mutual discernment, following the lead of the Holy Spirit and drawing on the collective wisdom of past denominational policies as well as the collaborative experience of our various cultural contexts and individual situations in which God has placed us. We believe that our report and recommendations offer assistance in developing the types of practices that foster such mutual discernment and space for careful listening, and we pray that God’s Spirit directs our churches and pastors to applications of this guidance in ways that honor Christ and glorify him in the public ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

May God bless the work of his people in leadership and in our churches so that “the peace of Christ may rule in [our] hearts, since as members of one body [we are] called to peace.” And in all we do, as our church assemblies process matters of supervision or release, “whether in word or deed,” may it be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:15-17).

VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Joel Vande Werken (chair) and Rita Klein-Geltink (reporter) when matters related to the Church Order Review Task Force report are considered.

B. That synod commend the report of the Church Order Review Task Force to the churches as a resource for addressing questions and concerns about the calling and supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings, for thinking about situations that may lead to a pastor's release from a call, and for considering the cultural factors that contribute to the complexity of these issues today.

Grounds:

1. The report identifies and reaffirms much of the wisdom of past decisions of synod regarding the calling and supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings and regarding issues related to a pastor's release from a call.
2. The report presents in accessible form many of the resources pertaining to matters in the task force mandate.

C. That synod remind the churches that the Church Order and other polity resources identified in this report exist for the purpose of supporting ministry, giving shape to our church community, and fostering Spirit-led discernment and transparent conversation about the nature of ordained ministry and the work of building God's kingdom. These resources should be used in conjunction with diligent prayer and concerted efforts to deepen relationships for the reign of Christ among his people (sections II, A; V, B).

D. That synod reaffirm the following principles related to the calling, supervision, and release of ministers of the Word, with the understanding that these regulations form the basis for the proposed revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements that follow in later recommendations:

1. There is only one category of CRC ministers—that of minister of the Word—and the ministry of this office comes to expression in different settings within the service of the part of Christ's body known as the Christian Reformed Church (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 478; see section III, A, 1, a).
2. All ministers of the Word, whether serving in a local CRC congregation or in some other organization or congregation beyond the CRC, are expected to adhere to CRC doctrine and polity as indicated in the Covenant for Officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 502; see section III, A, 2, d).
3. All calls to ministers of the Word should be processed "in the regular manner," which requires a formal call from a council and congregation with accountability to the classis (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58; see section III, C, 2).

4. Participation in the major assemblies of the church is limited to officebearers of the constituent minor assemblies (with the exception of RCA ministers serving as pastors of CRC churches, per Supplement, Art. 8, D, 10). While other CRC officebearers who are not delegated may attend classis and be given an advisory voice, the participation of such officebearers is subject to the discernment and regulations of each classis (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 57; section III, C, 5).
5. Councils are responsible for ensuring that “proper support” has been provided for all active ministers whose credentials they hold, and to provide encouragement for the ministry done by those pastors, whether within or beyond the local CRC congregation (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 967; see section III, A, 2, e; B, 5; C, 2).
6. Church visitors should inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and should take steps to ensure that councils are providing appropriate “proper support” and encouragement and that situations comply with all synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72; see section IV, B, 6; C, 6).
7. Ecclesiastical endorsement for chaplains, specialized transitional ministers, and other such positions is not intended as a replacement for the discernment of the church assemblies to determine whether a particular position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46; see section III, B, 6; C, 3).
8. When feasible, ministers of the Word should ordinarily be called by a local church in close geographic proximity to the congregation, institution, or agency being served, and the pastor’s membership should normally reside with the calling church (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58; see section III, B, 8).
9. Classes are assemblies composed of delegates from the constituent councils; therefore the business to be conducted is that of the councils. This means that an individual pastor may be allowed to address the classis in a matter related to their call or release, but the matters considered by the classis are those brought to it by a council, except in cases of appeal (see Church Order Art. 39; section IV, B, 1).
10. Pastors are called by both God and the church as the Spirit speaks through the church’s members. It should be a weighty matter, therefore, requiring discernment from the wider church through its assemblies, when a pastor leaves a particular call or when a congregation requests permission to release a pastor. It is also important that the church avoid business language such as “hiring” to refer to the calling of a pastor (see Church Order Art. 14-a; section IV, A, 1).
11. The call to ministry, either in a local congregation or in the service of the wider church, is not necessarily a lifetime call. Therefore it should be understood that people following the call of God may be led into

different kinds of work over the course of a lifetime, and should welcome the wisdom of the wider church and its assemblies in the process of discernment when leaving a call (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 47; see section IV, A, 2).

12. Ordination clings to a role in the church, not to any specific individual. Because the ministry of the Word is a calling connected to the official service of the CRC and is not simply a professional credential, pastors who are not actively engaged in such service should seek to discern, in cooperation with the assemblies of the church, at what point a release from ministry would be more appropriate than continued ordination (*Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 586; see section II, B, 2).

E. That synod adopt the following regulations with regard to the calling, supervision, and release of ministers of the Word, with the understanding that these regulations form the basis for the proposed revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements that follow in later recommendations:

1. The basic pattern of what it means to be “called in the regular manner” (proposed Supplement, Art. 12, A; see section III, C, 2).
 - A council extends a call to a pastor by presenting a nomination to the congregation (Church Order Art. 4-a), who affirms the council’s call by means of a congregational vote (Art. 4-c; Art. 37).
 - Candidates elected to office are ordained or installed in a public worship service of the church (Art. 4-d).
 - The classis is involved in these matters through the work of a classical counselor, who is an officebearer from another congregation who acts on behalf of the classis to see that ecclesiastical regulations have been followed (Art. 9; Art. 42-c).
 - The ordination of candidates and the installation of ministers are regulated according to Church Order Articles 10-a and -b.

Ground: This gathers the regulations regarding the call process into one location in the Church Order.

2. The definition stating that positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ (see proposed Supplement, Art. 12, A). The questions for discernment as presented in section III, C, 1 of this report are key to this definition.

Ground: This definition reflects the general outline of the calling of a minister in Church Order Article 11 and aligns with past declarations of synod.

3. The requirement that all calls to positions beyond the bounds of a single local CRC congregation, whether such service is the minister’s

primary service or part of a bivocational or temporary arrangement, include a Covenant for Joint Supervision. This requirement also includes all pastors serving congregations outside the CRC, as well as pastors serving multiple congregations within the CRC (see section III, B, 6; C, 4).

Grounds:

- a. Such covenants protect both pastors and churches by ensuring that proper boundaries are in place and expectations are clearly spelled out to prevent misunderstanding or burnout, and to strengthen the encouragement a church provides for the ministry carried out in its name outside the local congregation.
 - b. While these covenants are currently required only of chaplains and denominational staff, there are benefits to the clarity gained for any minister whose ecclesiastical supervision and work lie with different organizations.
 - c. Though Church Order currently specifies the nature of supervision for pastors serving in RCA congregations (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 9; Supplement, Art. 13-c, f), the expectation of regular reporting to the sending council is not made explicit.
 - d. Synod 2023 recognized the importance of regular engagement concerning the “health and welfare” of pastors as part of conversations about the provision of “proper support” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 967).
4. The stipulation that approval of a position according to Article 12-b or 12-c requires a formal declaration that the position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” as part of the process of calling “in the regular manner” (section III, C, 3).

Grounds:

- a. It is the task of the assemblies to discern what positions outside the local congregation are “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.”
- b. This procedure is consistent with previous declarations of synod (*Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46) and with the current understanding of chaplaincy supported through Thrive, but this is not often understood to be part of the calling process for Article 12-b positions today.
- c. Requiring a formal note about the ministerial nature of all such positions helps to strengthen practices of oversight and support for ministers in noncongregational settings.
- d. Article 12-b recognizes that there is general agreement about the ministerial nature of certain kinds of work in missions, chaplaincy, or transitional ministry that do not require the extra discernment of synodical deputies.

5. The provision that ministers of the Word being loaned to non-CRC congregations, either as a primary call or as part of an arrangement to serve multiple churches, should serve only congregations who recognize the value of a Reformed witness and allow the minister to serve in a way consistent with the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church, ordinarily articulated through statements of faith in harmony with those of the Christian Reformed denomination. Such churches are not, however, required to be actively contemplating affiliation with the CRCNA as currently expected by Church Order (section III, C, 4).

Grounds:

- a. Though CRC pastors must remain true to the doctrinal commitments made in the Covenant for Officebearers, our current expectation that the receiving congregation “seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church” (current Supplement, Art. 13-c, a and b) is increasingly unrealistic.
 - b. This provision offers pastors, particularly in smaller non-Anglo churches who may face requests for long-term service in congregations outside the Reformed theological tradition, with a means of discernment from the wider church regarding the appropriateness of such arrangements.
6. The updated guidelines from Synod 1998 dealing with the separation of pastors and churches, which have been expanded to include matters related to prevention and healing for pastors and churches in times of conflict without the presumption of an inevitable separation, as presented in Addendum E (see section IV, C, 2).

Grounds:

- a. Synod 2022 specifically requested that the task force provide clearer guidelines for pastors and churches in times of conflict.
 - b. Though the title of the regulations adopted by Synod 1998 indicates their usefulness in guiding the process of separation between pastors and churches, the document also includes a number of helpful remarks aimed at helping churches and pastors through conflict without the presumption that a separation will be necessary.
 - c. The guidelines have not been substantially reviewed since 1998, despite significant shifts in ministry culture since that time.
7. The purposes of severance identified in section IV, B, 2 of this report.

Ground: While the appropriate amount of severance requires the discernment of council and classis with regard to the specific details of each unique situation, a clear sense of the purposes of severance arrangements can assist church leaders in providing just and gracious provisions for pastors released from a call.

8. The updated readmission process for those who have been previously released from CRC ministry (see section IV, B, 7 and Addendum B, Proposed Supplement, Art. 14-e).

Grounds:

- a. Current regulations provide no requirement that candidates for re-admission complete the synodical requirements for ordination imposed since the initial admission to the ministry.
 - b. This will provide consistency in the way that all releases from CRC ministry are handled, thereby rescinding the previous directives that ministers released to another denomination should be readmitted through Article 8 rather than Article 14-e (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 491-92).
9. The expectation that pastors and councils have a mutual responsibility to formulate and conclude a separation agreement that meets the approval of classis in all situations where a release from a call is necessary (section IV, C, 4).

Grounds:

- a. Synodical guidelines currently imply, but do not mandate, that separation agreements be used for all Article 17 situations (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-95).
 - b. Requiring a separation agreement in all situations fosters mutual discernment between pastors, councils, and classes about the circumstances of a release from a call.
 - c. A mutually agreed-upon separation agreement provides clarity of expectations and provisions for the pastor and council moving forward.
10. The process of “consultation,” in situations of release from calls issued jointly by both a CRC council and a congregation in another denomination (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7), requires receiving the documentation describing the proposed release, and taking part in the deliberations of the assembly processing that release, in order to provide some measure of formal communication and mutual discernment between the appropriate assemblies in each denomination (section IV, B, 1).

Ground: As joint ministry opportunities become more common, it is helpful to have guidelines to address ministerial supervision and release in such situations.

F. That synod propose the updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and their Supplements for adoption by Synod 2025, as presented in Addendum A. It is understood that where these regulations place new expectations on councils or pastors (such as a Covenant of Joint Supervision), they apply only to new calls placed after the formal adoption of these changes by synod.

Grounds:

1. These changes explicitly incorporate the principles of earlier synods as well as the new regulations recommended above (see Recommendations D, 1-8; E, 1-5).
 2. These updates standardize the language of the Church Order and Its Supplements with regard to the “work” or “position” of a pastor, and they provide consistency in the descriptions given to service outside the local CRC congregation (section II, A, 3).
 3. Moving the present Article 13-c into Article 12 places all of the Church Order material related to the calling process in the same article (section III, B, 2).
 4. The new material in the proposed Supplement, Article 12 clarifies the universal nature of expectations about the council’s responsibility of “proper support” for all called positions, as well as the general applicability of regulatory processes that Church Order currently addresses to specific situations (section III, C, 2 and Recommendation 3, a).
 5. The order of the proposed Supplement, Article 13-b makes clear that the priority of the church is care and support rather than discipline (section III, C, 6).
 6. Applying these changes only to new calls placed after the effective date of these Church Order changes reduces the administrative burden on churches and pastors whose current calls were formulated under different expectations.
 7. Because the proposed Supplements are tightly bound up with the proposed updates to the Church Order, it makes sense to combine final approval of both until 2025 even though synod has already adopted the principles and regulations undergirding these revisions.
- G. That synod propose the updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, 42 and their Supplements for adoption by Synod 2025, as presented in Addendum B.

Grounds:

1. These changes explicitly incorporate the principles of earlier synods as well as the new regulations recommended above (see Recommendations D, 9-12; E, 6-9).
2. Church Order Articles 14 and 17 do not currently state explicitly that changes to and releases from a call to a noncongregational position are handled according to the same principles as those governing changes to and releases from a call to congregational ministry.
3. Replacing the word “weighty” with the word “valid” offsets the negative connotation that causes many to resist the procedures of Articles 14 and 17.

4. While pastors currently have the option of requesting a leave of absence, no provisions currently exist in Church Order to allow a council to provide an administrative leave in situations where discipline does not apply.
5. Because the proposed Supplements are tightly bound up with the proposed updates to the Church Order, it makes sense to combine final approval of both until 2025 even though synod has already adopted the principles and regulations undergirding these revisions.

H. That synod commend to the churches the following templates as models for use in the situations identified in this report, with the recognition that additional templates may already exist to address similar particular situations (sections III, A, 2; B, 7; C, 2; IV, B, 1-2; C, 3):

1. The model Covenant of Joint Supervision (Addendum C)
2. The updated Separation Agreement Template (Addendum D)

Grounds:

- a. These resources provide churches and classes with a basic format for mutual discernment in situations of noncongregational ministry or releases from service, while recognizing the value of templates that already exist to address specific situations.
- b. This recommendation follows the pattern established by synod in adopting the sample letter of call and allows flexibility in applying sample documents to particular circumstances.
- c. The Separation Agreement Template was formally adopted by synod and thus requires synodical approval to be updated (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935).

I. That synod commend to the churches the resources for letters of call, liturgical forms, suggestions for encouragement in ministry, and reporting templates found in Addendum F of this report (sections III, C, 2; IV, C, 2, 4).

Ground: Synod 2022 requested that the task force provide resources for more effective supervision of pastors in noncongregational positions.

J. That synod take the following steps to address the growing number of Article 17 releases, and to address concerns over the stigma of releases via Article 17 (sections IV, B, 4-7).

1. Note the variety of reasons why a minister might be released from a particular call, and that many of these reasons are related to cultural and ecclesiastical changes not associated with relationship tension or a lack of fit between the congregation and the pastor (see section IV, A, 2). These realities mean that separations between churches and pastors may continue to rise despite efforts to address them.
2. Remind classes and congregations of the importance of consistent and transparent application of the principles of Article 17, its Supplement,

and other synodical guidance in ways that assist churches and pastors to see the work of Christ even in difficult situations (section IV, A, 1).

3. Remind churches that Article 17 is not intended to serve as a mechanism to address violations of the Covenant for Officebearers, and that issues of special discipline should be addressed through the procedures of Church Order Articles 82-84 (section IV, A, 4).
4. Commend to the churches the resources identified in this report for addressing concerns about the relationship between a minister and a congregation, particularly those aimed at preventing and managing conflict, noting especially the assistance for churches that is available through church visitors, regional pastors, and denominational support staff at Thrive. See Addendum F for a full list (sections IV, C, 1-2).
5. Direct the Office of General Secretary to develop resources and guidance for Articles 14 and 17 where conflict is not the presenting issue, in order to reinforce the fact that conflict is not always the root cause of release from ministry (section IV, A, 2).
6. Direct the Office of General Secretary to develop materials to assist church visitors in identifying and working through conflict between pastors and churches (sections IV, B, 5; C, 1, a).
7. Remind churches of the need for continued prayer and mutual discernment regarding transitions in ministry, and of the importance of spiritual care for released ministers and their families (sections IV, B, 3-4; C, 5).

Grounds:

- a. The growing number of separations between churches and pastors, while concerning, stem in part from greater trends within the wider culture that will likely lead to continued growth in these requests despite efforts to address the issue.
 - b. Many people in our churches continue to see a stigma for congregations and pastors who have experienced an Article 17 separation.
 - c. Our single process for release of pastors from a call resembles that of other denominations, and synod has previously reaffirmed the validity of this approach to releases from call (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400; *Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 749).
 - d. Synod specifically asked this task force to take note of the temptation to use Articles 14 and 17 inappropriately as means of avoiding special discipline (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849).
- K. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to gather the resources identified above (Recommendations H; I; J, 4-5) into a single place on the CRC website for ready access by the churches, classes, and others who might use them (sections III, C, 2; C, 6).

Ground: These resources are not currently accessible in a single place on the denominational website.

L. That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to review any denominational policies for the translation of the Church Order and Its Supplements, and materials such as the key principles and regulations affirmed above (Recommendations D-E), with the goal of providing improved access to such materials for non-English speakers (section V, B).

Grounds:

1. The CRC has long recognized the importance of access to such documents in the languages in use in local contexts (*Acts of Synod 1902*, p. 77; *Acts of Synod 1989*, p. 308).
2. Though synod has been encouraged to consider the importance of intentional translation of documents (*Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 215-16), our task force was unable to find policies related to that instruction.
3. Many in the wider denomination do not appear to be familiar with the existing translations of such resources in other languages (see crcna.org/synodresources; crcna.org/languages).

M. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to update the introduction to the Church Order to call attention to the translations of church polity materials available on the CRC website (crcna.org/synodresources; crcna.org/languages), and to highlight the importance of consulting with ethnic ministry leaders when addressing situations of cultural and linguistic complexity, bringing these updates for approval by Synod 2025 (section II, C, 7).

Grounds:

1. This highlights the importance of consultation and conversation, particularly in situations where language or cultural differences may add greater complexity to already challenging situations.
2. The introduction to the Church Order has previous synodical approval (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 912-15).
3. Many in the wider denomination do not appear to be familiar with the existing translations of such resources in other languages.

N. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to review the forms for synodical deputies, guide for church visiting, training resources for classis personnel, and other relevant documents in order to make appropriate updates in light of the recommendations of this report (section V, B).

O. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee, while recognizing the differences that exist between the office of minister of the Word and the office of commissioned pastor, to note the implications of this task force's work on the boundaries of ministerial work, the nature of "proper support," and the regulations pertaining to release from a call, as it relates to commissioned pastors, and to bring to Synod 2025 any updates necessary to

the Commissioned Pastor Handbook as a result of this task force's observations and recommendations (section V, A, 1).

P. That synod note the implications of the process for declaring formerly released ministers as eligible for call in the proposed Supplement, Article 14-e and instruct the Council of Delegates to review Article 84 and its Supplement and propose appropriate updates to synod to bring the process for reinstatement of disciplined pastors into harmony with the procedures for re-admission of released pastors (section V, A, 3).

Q. That synod note the impact of this report's proposals on the changes to Church Order Article 14-d and to Supplement, Article 13-c being considered for adoption by Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962, 993) and incorporate those changes appropriately as it considers the proposed changes to the Church Order in this report (section V, A, 5).

R. That synod declare the mandate of the Church Order Review Task Force fulfilled and dismiss the members of the task force with thanks.

ADDENDUM A

Updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and Their Supplements

Note: In the following Church Order materials, proposed additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~striketrough~~.

Article 12

a. *[unchanged]*

b. A minister of the Word who (1) accepts a position endorsed by the CRC related to ~~enters into the work of~~ missions, chaplaincy, or specialized transitional ministry; or (2) is appointed directly by synod; or (3) accepts an appointment that is ratified by synod shall be called in the regular manner by a local church, which acts in cooperation with the appropriate committees of classis or synod to ensure that provisions for accountability to the calling church are in place.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12

c. A minister of the Word may also serve the church in other positions that relate work which relates directly to the calling of a minister. Such ministers shall be called in the regular manner by a local church, but only after the calling church has demonstrated to the satisfaction of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, that the said work is consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word, that provisions for accountability to the calling church are in place, and that the duties of

the position do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12-e

[The following proposed Article 12-d has been moved and adapted from the previous Article 13-c.]

~~de. A minister of the Word may be loaned temporarily by the calling church to serve as pastor of a congregation outside the Christian Reformed Church, provided that the duties of the position do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church. Such ministers shall also be called in the regular manner by a local church, but only with the approval of classis, the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, and in accordance with synodical regulations, including the concurring advice of the synodical deputies when necessary. Although the specific duties may be regulated in cooperation with the other congregation, the supervision of doctrine and life rests with the calling church.~~

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12

Article 13

a. *[unchanged]*

b. A minister of the Word whose position work is with a congregation, institution, or agency other than the calling church shall be supervised by the calling church in cooperation with any other congregations, institutions, or agencies involved. The council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 13-b

[Article 13-c has been moved and adapted to become the proposed Article 12-d.]

~~c. A minister of the Word may be loaned temporarily by the calling church to serve as pastor of a congregation outside of the Christian Reformed Church, but only with the approval of classis, the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, and in accordance with the synodical regulations. Although the specific duties may be regulated in cooperation with the other congregation, the supervision of doctrine and life rests with the calling church.~~

—Cf. Supplement, Article 13-c

Proposed changes to Supplement, Articles 12-13

The task force is proposing significant changes (with new text, adaptations, and reorganization) to the Supplements to Articles 12-13. The following table indicates where the various parts of the current Supplements are

moved, replaced, or adapted in the proposed Supplements. In the proposed Supplements below, additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~striketrough~~.

<i>Current Supplement</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>Proposed Supplement</i>
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a and a,1)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1 and 1, a
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 2)	replaced by	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, c
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 3)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, b
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 4)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, d
Suppl., Art. 12-c, b	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, e
Suppl., Art. 12-c, c	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, B, 2
Suppl., Art. 12-c, d	moved to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, C
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 1	moved to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, B, 1
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 2	replaced by	Suppl., Art. 13-b, A
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 3	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, G
Suppl., Art. 13-c, para. 1	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, para. 1
Suppl., Art. 13-c, a-b	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, a
Suppl., Art. 13-c, c	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, D
Suppl., Art. 13-c, d	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, E
Suppl., Art. 13-c, e	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, b
Suppl., Art. 13-c, f	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, B, 2
Suppl., Art. 13-c, g	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, F

Supplement, Article 12-~~e~~

Regulations for the application of Article 12-~~e~~ of the Church Order to specific tasks and situations:

A. To be “called in the regular manner” means that a minister of the Word, whether called to serve a congregation or to serve in a noncongregational ministry, requires the following (see Church Order Articles 4, 9-10) in addition to the fulfillment of any other synodical regulations or classical approvals:

1. Nomination by the council and election by the congregation
2. An extension of a call by the council
3. Approval of the counselor who acts on behalf of classis
4. Ordination or installation in a public worship service

The requirement for a separate installation service during a CRC worship service is optional in the case of a minister serving on loan to a congregation in another denomination.

Noncongregational positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves beyond a local CRC congregation to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ.

B. Positions that do not require concurrence of the synodical deputies

1. Types of ministry positions

- a. Positions regulated by Articles 9-10 of the Church Order. This includes congregational positions, whether solo-pastor positions or additional staff ministry positions; or also those of pastors serving multiple CRC congregations or in multiple vocational settings.
- b. Positions regulated by Article 12-b of the Church Order. These include positions that have the endorsement of a synodically authorized body, such as those of chaplains, missionaries, and specialized transition ministers endorsed or accredited by the CRC denomination; or positions whose appointees are approved by or ratified by synod itself (such as professors of theology or other CRC executive staff positions requiring ratification by synod). Classis minutes should note that the position is deemed consistent with the ministry of the Word.
- c. Calls regulated by Article 8-b of the Church Order and its supplemental rules. These include ministers who participate in the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America. Classis minutes should indicate the concurrence of the sending body (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7).

2. Prior to calling a minister of the Word to any noncongregational position ~~chaplaincy ministry~~, the calling church is required to ensure that the minister has secured any necessary endorsements from accrediting institutions within or outside the Christian Reformed Church, and that all synodical regulations have been followed. A Covenant of Joint Supervision shall be mutually agreed to and signed by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, Section D; Supplement, Art. 13-b). ~~obtain the endorsement of the Office of Chaplaincy Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church (Acts of Synod 1973, p. 56; amended Acts of Synod 1998, p. 391).~~

C. Positions that require specific approval of the classis and concurrence of synodical deputies

1. In all other cases of noncongregational positions, ~~t~~The calling church shall secure the prior approval of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, for each new ministerial position, by providing classis with the following information:

- a. The description of the official position (purposes, duties, qualifications, etc.) as determined by the calling church in consultation with cooperating agencies as applicable.
 - b. The demonstration that the position will be consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.
 - c. A Covenant of Joint Supervision that shall be mutually agreed to and signed by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization (cf. Supplement, Art. 13-b).~~The evidence that the minister will be directly accountable to the calling church, including an outline of requirements for reporting to the calling church, and supervision by the calling church, in consultation with cooperating agencies as applicable.~~
 - d. When any position having been declared by a classis to be “spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling” . . . becomes vacant, this position shall be reviewed by the classis and synodical deputies in light of Articles 11-14 of the Church Order before another call is issued.
 - e. When a new ministry opportunity can be met only by immediate action, the calling church (and the appropriate denominational agency) may obtain provisional approval from the classical interim committee, subject to subsequent approval by classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. The letter of call must indicate the provisional nature of this call if such approval has not yet been granted. In the event that the provisional approval is not sustained and the minister desires to continue in the position, the minister may be ~~honorably~~ released from office and may be readmitted according to the regulations of the Church Order. (Cf. Article 14-e.)
2. Ministers ~~A minister~~ whose service is requested by a congregation outside the Christian Reformed Church may be loaned temporarily to serve such a church while still retaining ministerial status in the Christian Reformed Church in keeping with the following regulations:
- a. The congregation seeking the services of the Christian Reformed minister recognizes the value of a Reformed witness and allows the minister to serve in a way consistent with the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church, ordinarily articulated through statements of faith in harmony with those of the Christian Reformed denomination. ~~is desirous of the Reformed faith and seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church or some other Reformed denomination, or is already in a Reformed denomination and seeks to be strengthened in the Reformed faith.~~
 - b. ~~The minister contemplating service in a nondenominational church acknowledges this as an opportunity to encourage such a church to~~

~~affiliate with either the Christian Reformed Church or a Reformed denomination similar to the Christian Reformed Church.~~

- b. The loaning of such ministerial services may be for a period of time not to exceed two years. Extension of not more than two years each may be granted if circumstances warrant, with the approval of classis and the synodical deputies.
- c. These regulations also apply when pastors whose credentials are held in the CRC receive a request to serve simultaneously in an additional congregation outside the CRC.
- d. If the requested service is in the Reformed Church in America, calls shall be processed in keeping with the regulations for the Orderly Exchange of Ministers (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D).

D. In all cases, the minister shall be called in the regular manner, and the council and the counselor shall render to classis an account of all matters processed. Classis minutes should reflect the work of the counselor in accordance with Church Order Article 42-c.

E. Where it is possible and feasible, ministers of the Word should ordinarily be called by a local church in close geographic proximity to the congregation, institution, or agency being served, and the pastor's membership should normally reside with the calling church. If the ministry position ~~congregation to be served is in close proximity to a Christian Reformed congregation of another~~ is located in a classis other than that of the calling church, the approval of that classis shall be required, in addition to the approval of the classis of the minister's calling church, and the synodical deputies.

F. Continuation under the Christian Reformed Church Pension Plan shall require that the minister, or the ~~congregation, institution, or agency non-Christian Reformed church~~ which is being served, shall contribute to the ministers' pension fund the amount which is determined annually by the Ministers' Pension Funds committees for ministers serving in noncongregational ~~extraordinary~~ positions ~~outside of our denomination~~.

G. Supervision of a minister in noncongregational ~~specialized~~ ministry may be transferred, at the request of the minister or of the calling church, to another church. Such a tTransfer of ministerial credentials requires the regular calling process of the local church and must be approved by both councils and classes.

H. If a noncongregational ministry position is eliminated, the minister should be formally released according to the regulations of the Church Order appropriate to the situation.

Supplement, Article 13-b

A. Provisions for cooperative supervision of ministers of the Word working for agencies and institutions not directly under the authority of the synod of

~~the CRCNA are to be formulated and processed according to the regulations contained in Church Order Supplement, Article 12-c and the provisions regarding chaplains adopted by Synod 1998 (see Acts of Synod 1998, pp. 391-92, 457-60).~~ When the position of a minister of the Word is with other than the calling church, the position shall be regulated by a Covenant of Joint Supervision as approved by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization, with concurrence of the classis. Any changes to the status of the Covenant of Joint Supervision, as soon as they are known, shall be submitted to all parties for review and concurrence.

B. Situations requiring a change in status of a CRC minister in a noncongregational setting

1. If any council, agency, or institution of the CRC involved in the cooperative supervision of a minister of the Word learns about significant deviation in doctrine, life, or duties, it shall officially inform in writing its partner(s) in that supervision about such deviation before any action is taken that affects that minister's status and future. A similar communication officially informing its partner(s) in supervision is expected from an agency or institution when a minister's status is altered at a time of downsizing or position elimination.
2. Should ~~a the minister serving a non-CRC congregation or noncongregational ministry~~ become subject to discipline, the ~~supervising institution non-Christian Reformed congregation~~ which is being served shall have the right to suspend the minister from ~~serviceserving that church~~, but suspension from office and deposition may be applied only by the calling church council that is part of the Christian Reformed Church. A similar communication is requested when a minister's status is altered, whether due to a change in the job description or at a time of downsizing or position elimination.
3. In all cases of discipline or other changes in status regarding a ministry position, the minister should be formally released from the call or issued a new call according to the appropriate provisions of the Church Order.

C. The church visitors of classis shall inquire annually into the supervision of the calling church toward said minister(s) as well as the reporting of said minister(s) to the calling church. The church visitors shall inform classis of departure from the approved provisions for supervision and reporting.

Note: The change at the end of the following subsection D has already been proposed to Synod 2024 (Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 993).

D. All pastors serving in noncongregational positions remain bound to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church as required by one's signature to the Covenant for Officebearers and as articulated in the Code of Conduct.

ADDENDUM B

Updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, and 42 and Their Supplements

Note: In the following Church Order materials, proposed additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~striketrough~~.

Proposed Article 14

- a. A minister of the Word shall not leave the call ~~the congregation~~ with which the minister is connected for another position ~~church~~ without the consent of the council which issued the call.
- b. *[unchanged]*
- c. A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, may not forsake the office. A minister may, however, be released from office to enter upon a non-ministerial vocation for such valid ~~weighty~~ reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-c

Note: The change in Article 14-d has already been proposed to Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962-63).

- d. A minister of the Word who has entered upon a vocation which classis judges to be non-ministerial and forsakes the calling of a minister of the Word shall be released from office within one year of that judgment. The concurring advice of the synodical deputies shall be obtained at the time of the judgment.
- e. A former minister of the Word who was released from office may be declared eligible for call upon approval of the classis by which such action was taken, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. The classis, in the presence of the deputies, shall conduct an interview that examines the circumstances surrounding the release and the renewed desire to serve in ministry, and shall ensure that all synodical regulations have been met. Upon acceptance of a call, the person shall be reordained.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-e

Proposed Article 16

A minister who for valid reasons desires a temporary leave of absence from service to the congregation must have the approval of the council, which shall continue to have supervision over the minister. A council may also, in consultation with the minister, initiate the process of granting a temporary leave of absence when it believes that the situation warrants such an arrangement. In all cases of a temporary leave of absence the intention shall be that the minister shall return to service in that congregation.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 16

Proposed Article 17

- a. Ministers who are neither eligible for retirement nor worthy of discipline may for valid ~~weighty~~ reasons be released from active ministerial service in a position to which they have been called by a congregation, through action initiated by themselves, by a council, or jointly. Such release shall be given only with the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, and in accordance with synodical regulations.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 17-a

- b. *[unchanged]*

- c. A minister of the Word who has been released from active ministerial service ~~in a congregation~~ shall be eligible for call for a period of two years, after which time the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, shall declare the minister to be released from the ministerial office. For valid ~~weighty~~ reasons the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, may extend the eligibility for call on a yearly basis.

- d. *[unchanged]*

Proposed Article 42-b

- b. The church visitors shall consist of one or more teams of officebearers chosen for their experience and counsel. Team composition shall include a minister of the Word and at least one other officebearer. Their task shall be to ascertain whether the officebearers of the church faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe the provisions of the Church Order, and promote the building up of the body of Christ and the extension of God's kingdom. Churches are ~~free~~ to call on the church visitors whenever serious challenges arise that would benefit from their advice. The church visitors shall provide classis a written report of their work.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 42-b

Proposed Supplement, Article 8, D, 7

7. Approval for extended service must be done in consultation with and with the concurrence of the sending body. (In the CRC, the sending body is the calling church council; in the RCA, it is the classis holding the pastor's membership.) The minister remains accountable to the sending body for continuation of ministerial status. In the event of termination of a call, the polity of the calling church shall be followed, in consultation with the sending church and in accordance with synodically established procedures.

(*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 564-65)

Proposed Supplement, Article 14-b, a-b

Changes are proposed to sections a and b; sections c and d of Supplement, Article 14-b would remain unchanged.

- a. ~~Synod directed the churches and classes dealing with ministers who depart from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) in order to seek ordination in the ministry of the Word in another church to take note of the statement made by Synod 1978 that “Synod has instructed “all our churches and classes that in all cases of resignation a proper resolution of dismissal must be adopted with the concurring advice of synodical deputies.” and to realize that this~~ This resolution statement allows for a broad degree of flexibility in responding to such situations (cf. *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73).
- b. ~~In making such a resolution, Synod directed the churches and classes should~~ to take into account the manner and spirit in which a minister has acted during the time leading up to and including departure from office when determining what action to take. (Some situations may require a deposition; others may require only a simple release from office.)

Proposed Supplement, Article 14-e

Process for reentry into CRC ministry after a release from office via Article 14 or 17:

1. A former minister who was released through the provisions of Article 14-b, 14-c, or 14-d or Article 17-c or 17-d and desires readmission to CRCNA ministry should be interviewed by the classis in which the original action was taken. The interview should examine the following:
 - a. the circumstances surrounding the release
 - b. the applicant’s theological and ministerial journey since the release
 - c. the sense of call and renewed commitment to service in the CRCThe classis, with the concurrence of the synodical deputies, shall then make a decision regarding whether to endorse the request to begin the process for readmission.
2. If approval is given to proceed, the classis shall notify the Candidacy Committee to guide the applicant through the completion of any requirements for ministry imposed by synod subsequent to the original ordination. If the applicant has served in ministry outside the CRC, the Candidacy Committee should also receive and review recommendations from the church and regional body last served by the minister.
3. The Candidacy Committee shall notify the releasing classis once all requirements are complete and favorable recommendations have been received.

4. Upon completion of all requirements, the releasing classis shall declare the former minister eligible for call. A former minister shall not be nominated for a call until the releasing classis and the Candidacy Committee have approved the applicant's eligibility for call. Eligibility for call shall be for a period of two years. An individual who has not received and accepted a call within that time and who desires to continue eligibility for call, must request an extension through the classis that approved the request for eligibility for call.
5. The ordination and installation of a former minister who has been declared eligible for call shall require the approval of the calling church's classis counselor or the calling church's classis interim committee, which shall see that all synodical requirements have been met.
6. The provisions of Supplement, Article 84 related to reinstatement of ministers who have been deposed also apply to ministers who resign under discipline or to avoid discipline and later seek reordination by way of Article 14-e.

(Acts of Synod 2016, p. 866)

Proposed Supplement, Article 16

A council may initiate the process of granting a leave of absence only after seeking the advice of the church visitors, who should inform the classis of the situation when a written report is provided to the assembly (Church Order Art. 42-b). An initial leave of absence should be granted for no more than six weeks, with any extension of this time requiring additional advice of the church visitors. In no case may a leave of absence initiated by the council extend for a period of longer than twelve weeks.

Proposed Supplement, Article 17-a

A new section a is proposed; the current sections a and b would become sections b and c, respectively, and their content would remain unchanged, except as where indicated in subsection c, 2. The current *Note* at the end of Supplement, Article 17-a would be moved to section a, 4, as shown.

Provisions regulating release from ministerial service in a congregation

a. General Provisions

- 1) All Article 17 separations, even those requested by a pastor or those jointly initiated by a pastor and council, are formally a request of the calling council and shall be handled as such by the classis.
- 2) Pastors, churches, and classes are encouraged to take note of denominational resources available that provide assistance in the process of Article 17 separations, and to call upon outside resources or mediators when necessary (in addition to the involvement of classis representatives).

- 3) In all situations, councils and pastors shall utilize a formal separation agreement that identifies the publicly stated reason(s) for the separation, the effective date of the separation, the financial arrangements agreed upon by all parties, and other relevant information. This document shall be submitted to classis for its approval when the council formally requests the Article 17 separation. If the pastor and council disagree on specific matters, the areas of disagreement shall be clearly identified, and classis shall adjudicate those matters separately.
- 4) Classis minutes will concisely record the grounds for the separation—for example, family situation, conflict, continuing education, church closure, etc. Article 17 separations will be processed according to the guidelines set forth by synod and the appropriate denominational agencies. Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding “release from ministerial service” adopted by Synod 2024 (see *Acts of Synod 2024*, p.) and Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and as amended by Synod 2010 (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16).
- 5) Releases from calls issued jointly between a CRC council and a congregation in another denomination should be processed in accordance with the principles established by Synod 2024 (see *Acts of Synod 2024*, pp.).
- 6) If a separation does occur, it is important to recognize that there are continuing needs. The members of the congregation require continued support, opportunity to grieve, and guidance for future planning. The separated pastor and his/her family should not be forgotten as they leave the congregation and seek another call. The congregation and classis should covenant to provide continuing ministry and care for them, assisting in any way possible to encourage personal healing and further opportunities for ministry.

ba. [unchanged]

cb. {unchanged} . . .

- 2) In conjunction with the church council, the committee shall secure interim pastoral leadership, preferably a specialized interim pastor, and set goals. (~~Thrive~~Pastor Church Relations is able to assist with securing pastoral leadership.)
- 3) {unchanged} . . .

~~Note: Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding “release from ministerial service” adopted by Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and as amended by Synod 2010 (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16).~~

ADDENDUM C

Covenant of Joint Supervision for Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors Serving in Noncongregational Ministry Positions

This Covenant of Joint Supervision is a basic resource for churches and pastors to use in the calling and supervision of CRC ministers of the Word (MW) and commissioned pastors (CP) who serve in ministry positions with agencies, institutions, or organizations other than their calling church, and in keeping with CRC Church Order Articles 12, 13, 14, 23, and relevant Supplements. These noncongregational ministry positions include but are not limited to those of denominational leaders, missionaries, chaplains, campus pastors, church planters, theological professors, specialized transitional ministers, Bible teachers, and ministry leaders with Christian nonprofit organizations. This Covenant of Joint Supervision also applies to pastors serving on loan with other denominations and could be adapted for use in other ministry settings as well.

As a template, this document should be tailored to the specific situation in which the calling church and the MW/CP is involved. In addition, the calling church may consider whether new or expanded provisions should be included, and it should ensure that federal, state, and provincial laws are observed.

The expectations and responsibilities listed below are designed to facilitate effective supervision of noncongregational ministers/ministries, as stipulated in Church Order Article 13-b:

A minister of the Word whose position work is with a congregation, institution, or agency other than the calling church shall be supervised by the calling church in cooperation with any other congregations, institutions, or agencies involved. The council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties.

A. Expectations of the Minister of the Word/Commissioned Pastor:

(name)

1. Submit your position description to the council of your calling church, accompanied by (a) your employing organization's mission statement, (b) your letter of appointment, and (c) a summary description for information to the congregation.
2. Inform your organization of the contact person(s) for your calling church.

3. Request that your calling church extend to you a letter of call for the ministry position. Upon receiving such a letter, submit a letter of acceptance to your calling church, provisional *as applicable* upon classis approval of the position description and, if necessary, upon sustaining an examination for ordination.
4. Submit an annual report to the council of the calling church, if possible with input from the employing organization, detailing the work you are doing as part of the call issued by the church to the noncongregational position (see also section C, 3 below).
5. Meet with the council of the calling church at least once annually, in the manner stipulated in section B, 4 below to review, discuss, and pray regarding the following:
 - a. your personal and spiritual life, including family joys and concerns
 - b. your professional life, including a summary of your annual work review as provided by your employing organization
6. Participate in the congregational life and ministry of your calling church in keeping with gifting and availability, and as mutually agreed (cf. section B, 5). When the MW/CP and the calling church are not in geographic proximity to one another, the MW/CP and council should identify specific steps to allow the congregation to provide appropriate support and care for the MW/CP. This may require a partnership with a congregation that is near the MW/CP and is willing to act on behalf of the calling church. In the case of specialized transitional ministers this may be the contracting church.
7. Inform your calling church, *as soon as known*, of an impending change or conclusion to your ministry position or appointment, and/or of your desire or intention to resign your ministry position for educational, professional, personal/family, or other reasons.
8. Inform your employing organization in the event of transferring your church membership and ecclesiastical credentials to a different calling church.
9. Meet other expectations of your calling church and employing organization, if any, as stipulated:

Examples include a code of ethics as required of CRC chaplains, joint supervision for ordained CRCNA staff (signature required), a code of conduct or other expectations and concerns as stipulated by the respective organization.

B. Responsibilities of the Calling Church: _____
(name)

1. Extend a letter of call to the MW/CP “in the regular manner,” in keeping with synodical regulations (Church Order Art. 12 and Supplement) and, *as applicable*,
 - a. recommend the noncongregational ministry position for classis approval.
 - b. request that classis examine the MW/CP candidate for ordination.
2. Prior to proceeding with the installation of a previously ordained MW/CP, have in hand the classis-approved ecclesiastical credentials or other required approval.
3. Arrange for the formal installation of the MW/CP in the position to which they have been called, ordinarily in a public worship service with the use of the prescribed ecclesiastical forms (Church Order Art. 4-d).
4. Arrange to meet with the MW/CP at least once annually for reporting, support, and prayer (cf. section A, 5 above) regarding the following:
 - a. the MW/CP’s personal and spiritual life, including family joys and concerns.
 - b. the MW/CP’s professional life, including a brief description of their annual work as provided by their employing organization

These meetings shall take place with the council or its appointed representatives, as stipulated below, in fulfillment of the above purposes.

-
5. Invite and encourage the MW/CP to participate in your congregational life and ministry in keeping with their gifting and availability, and as mutually agreed (cf. section A, 6).
 6. Meet other responsibilities toward the MW/CP or the employing organization, if any, as stipulated:

-
7. If the calling church notes significant concerns regarding the MW/CP’s doctrine and life, the calling church will summarize those concerns to the employing organization and may request a joint meeting with the MW/CP to address those concerns.

Note: The calling church should also discuss with the employing organization on what matters, if any, it would expect to receive communications regarding any concerns about a MW/CP’s doctrine and life, while noting that an organization’s ability to communicate any such concerns may be limited by

applicable employment law and/or internal policies. In the case of a church council, agency, or institution of the CRCNA, however, such communications are expected (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 13-b).

8. Inquire directly of the MW/CP and the employing organization regarding reasons for significant changes, or for the conclusion of the ministry position or its termination by the employing organization, or for the resignation of the MW/CP from the ministry appointment (cf. section C, 3 below).
9. In the event of the conclusion of the position, or its termination, or of resignation by the MW/CP, the calling church shall obtain the concurrence of the classis prior to declaring the MW/CP eligible for call to a new ministry position.

C. Responsibilities of the Employing Organization: _____
(name)

1. Provide the MW/CP with appropriate compensation and support.
2. Provide the MW/CP with required training, reporting protocol, and professional support, as stipulated:

-
3. Inform the calling church in writing when the position of a MW/CP is being altered or eliminated (cf. section B, 8 above).

Note: This protocol is not intended to interfere with the employing organization's right (and potential need) to take immediate employment action when necessary for compliance with applicable laws, protection of other staff, or other compelling reasons.

4. Meet other responsibilities toward the MW/CP or calling church, if any, as stipulated:
-

D. Responsibilities of the Classis

Through the work of the classis-appointed counselor, ensure that all synodical regulations related to calling procedures have been followed by the council prior to the installation of a MW/CP in a noncongregational position.

Review the description of the position to which the MW/CP has been called to ensure alignment with regulations of Church Order and to verify that protocols related to the accountability of the MW/CP to the calling church are in place (Art. 12-b and 12-c). In situations where the Church Order

requires the involvement of synodical deputies, the classis should arrange for their involvement.

Inquire annually, through the church visitors, into the supervision and reporting of noncongregational ministers to the local council, and inform classis of any departure from synodical regulations (Supplement, Art. 13-b, C).

Required Signatures:

MW/CP _____ Date _____

Calling Church _____ Date _____

Organization _____ Date _____

This completed Covenant of Joint Supervision has been approved by the following authorized designee of classis:

(Printed name)

(Signature)

(Classis position)

ADDENDUM D

Separation Agreement Template

Note: In the following proposed document, textual additions to the template adopted by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935) are indicated by underline.

I. Introduction

This separation agreement template is a basic resource for churches and pastors and should be tailored to address the specific circumstances of any particular pastor's departure. Churches would be wise to engage legal counsel to address whether new or expanded provisions should be included, and to ensure that federal, state, and provincial laws are observed.

This template is grounded in the work of Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-94) and in subsequent work to update the specific guidelines adopted at that time. It should be noted that this agreement could become void in the event that the pastor, after signing it, were to act in violation of his/her ordination vows, act in violation of the agreement, renounce the jurisdiction of the Christian Reformed Church, or become the subject of criminal charges.

From the standpoint of ecclesiastical procedure, this template is a resolution adopted by the council, asking that its classis take a particular action regarding its minister. Though ideally ministers and councils would fully agree on the terms of a separation, it is possible that both parties may agree on the need for separation without fully agreeing on details related to the separation. Where there is disagreement, the council and minister should clearly indicate, at a point sufficiently ahead of the classis meeting, any differences in understanding and expectations concerning the terms of the separation. At the classis meeting, any differences from the arrangements proposed by council would be adjudicated by classis (if necessary, through the appeals processes of Church Order Art. 30, or through similar procedures developed by the classis interim committee). The process for adjudication should be communicated to all parties prior to the classis meeting at which any differences of opinion between pastor and council are discussed.

II. Principles regarding the use of this resource

It is hoped that the agreement that arises from this resource provides for a separation that is characterized by love, respect, and care for one another. It is also hoped that all communications leading up to and following from this agreement will be marked by both truth and grace. These hopes can be expressed as principles:

1. Church has a legitimate interest in
 - a. minister speaking truthfully and graciously about it.
 - b. minister avoiding all false statements about the church, its leaders, and/or the reasons behind the separation.
2. Minister has a legitimate interest in
 - a. church, through its council, speaking truthfully and graciously about him/her.
 - b. church, through its council, avoiding all false statements about the minister and/or the reasons behind the separation.
3. The Christian Reformed Church in North America and its member congregations have a legitimate interest in allowing churches and ministers who separate from one another to provide truthful information about one another and the reason(s) for the separation. Congregations shall be expected to do this through their councils and classes, and synod shall be expected to do this through procedures (either formally prescribed by Church Order or informally adopted for a particular situation) that allow all the parties involved to be heard.
4. This template is a resource for discussing matters that must receive the approval of classis, as required by Church Order. Thus, it is a proposal and does not come into effect until classis grants the approval required by Article 17, its Supplement, and other relevant synodical or

classical regulations. Any changes made by classis or by synod supersede the proposals in this document.

Sample Separation Agreement

This Separation Agreement is made as of the date executed below between _____ Christian Reformed Church ("Church") and Reverend _____ ("Minister") and will become effective as of the date of Classis _____ approval.

1. **Termination:** Termination of Minister's service to Church will become effective on _____, when he/she will be relieved of all duties and benefits of the position, except as expressly preserved in this Agreement. The parties will work together to agree upon an appropriate communication to the congregation and any identified external parties.

This separation, as printed in the public records of the CRC's assemblies, is taking place for the following reason(s):

(Indicate whether this request originated from the pastor, the council, or both.)

- Educational leave
- Family leave
- Challenges in the relationship between church and pastor
- Theological difference between church and pastor
- Spouse's work situation requires a change
- Congregational financial difficulties or church closing
- Church disbands or disaffiliates from the CRC
- Other (please specify)

Additional information (included for the synodical deputies or for the confidential records of councils and classis):

This "additional information" will not become part of the public record but may be shared with classis personnel (classis delegates, church counselor, regional pastor, etc.). These notes will not be released to individuals outside the classis without classis' authorization. Note that disciplinary reasons for separation should be dealt with according to the procedures of the Church Order Articles 82-84.

2. **Date of Last Service:** Minister will conduct his/her final act of service to Church on _____.

3. **Financial Provision:** Church will provide Minister with a total of \$____, representing Minister's salary for ____ weeks/months [including/excluding such things as book allowance, mileage expenses, etc.]. This severance will be paid in weekly/biweekly installments of \$____, less appropriate payroll deductions. For ____ weeks/months, Church will also continue these benefits for Minister: _____. Minister may remain in the Church parsonage until _____, when it must be vacated.
4. **General Release:** On behalf of himself/herself and anyone who could claim through him/her, Minister waives and releases Church, Classis _____, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America ("CRCNA") from all claims and damages. This is intended as a general release covering all claims whatsoever.
5. **Confidentiality:** Minister agrees to maintain the confidentiality of the terms of this agreement and of the nonpublic matters of Church that came to his/her attention during the course of his/her ministerial service. Church, through its Council, agrees not to disclose the terms of this Agreement.
6. **Public Communications:** Minister agrees not to make, or encourage others to make, false statements about Church, Classis _____, or the CRCNA. Church, through its Council, agrees not to make, or encourage others to make, false statements about Minister.
7. **Non-Recruitment:** Minister agrees not to directly or indirectly engage in any activity designed to cause any Church member to relinquish membership or cause any person not to become a member of Church.
8. **Public Ministry:** The council and pastor have currently discussed the following allowances and/or restrictions on public ministry. It should be noted that any final decisions about public ministry or any future adjustments to this arrangement are the prerogative of classis itself, or its oversight committee, if one is appointed.
9. **Dispute and Venue:** This Agreement constitutes the entire understanding of the parties. Any dispute regarding this Agreement which cannot be resolved by the parties will be reconciled by Classis _____ or, on appeal, by synod. The decision of synod is final and binding on the parties.

Date: _____ Signature of Minister _____

Date: _____ On behalf of Church _____

_____ No reservations from council's proposal

_____ With reservations as noted (see statement 8 above):

ADDENDUM E

Guidelines for Pastors and Congregations in Times of Conflict

The following guidelines expand on work done by Synod 1998 (cf. *Agenda for Synod 1998*, pp. 152-156; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and Synod 2010 (cf. *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). Though originally intended to offer guidance during the process of separations, the counsel given by these synods is expanded upon here in the hope that God might provide healing in some situations of conflict and thus prevent separations between pastors and congregations. To this end, all parties are encouraged to note the following resources and suggestions that aim toward restoration (A, 1-4; B, 1-4; C, 1-3) rather than assuming that separation is inevitable.

A. Responsibilities of the pastor

1. Promptly inform the regional pastor and church visitors when signs of conflict arise, and maintain regular communication (see Church Order Art. 42).
2. Conduct oneself so as not to disrupt further the peace and unity of the congregation, and work with the council to discern the reasons for the conflict (see B, 3 below).
3. Identify a personal advocate who can assist in the process. This individual may or may not be the regional pastor. The personal advocate may also be a different individual than the liaison designated by classis to help facilitate communication between all parties (see C, 4, c below).
4. Be amenable to career counseling and/or personal counseling, and to the guidance of church assemblies and their representatives.
5. Update the Pastoral Profile and contact the Ministerial Information Service (Thrive) if relocation becomes necessary.
6. Help formulate and sign a separation agreement with the council if there is a separation (see B, 5 below).
7. Cooperate with any oversight committee that might be established by the classis (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 17-a).
8. A pastor who moves to another region shall inform the releasing council and classis, as well as the classis in the new region into which the pastor has moved. The councils and classes involved shall communicate with the pastor to discern whether a transfer of membership and ministry credentials would be appropriate, depending on whether the pastor is under oversight by the classis (see Supplement, Art. 17-a, b, 5-6).

B. Responsibilities of the council

1. Seek assistance from the classical church visitors and regional pastor when signs of conflict begin (see Church Order Art. 42).

2. Be willing to work with designated person(s) (e.g., Thrive staff, classical regional pastor and church visitors, mediation specialists) toward reconciliation. This includes accepting both the time and cost required by such intervention.
3. Along with the pastor, determine the reasons for the conflict and/or separation (see also A, 2).
 - a. This step requires accountability from both council and pastor.
 - b. Depending on the causes of the conflict, councils should determine whether a leave of absence for pastoral purposes (Art. 16) may be an appropriate response to the problems that have arisen. In situations of special discipline, the procedures of Articles 82-84 should be followed rather than those of Article 16 or 17.
 - c. The council should, in consultation with the church visitors, define the relationship of the pastor to the church during this process, including the extent to which normal ministerial duties would continue.
4. Inform the congregation of decisions that are being made about the relationship to the pastor. This should be done in a timely manner, in consultation with the pastor, and members should be apprised of the process (see Art. 37).
5. If a decision is made to release the pastor from active ministerial service in the congregation (Art. 17-a), the council shall prepare a separation agreement with the pastor, addressing the issues noted in the separation agreement template adopted by synod (see Separation Agreement Template).
6. Present to the classis the specific reasons for the separation. This involves the dynamics and behaviors of both the pastor and the council/congregation. Since the separation commences with the official decision by classis, this may necessitate a special meeting of classis to process the separation in a timely manner.
7. Consider engaging the services of a specialized transitional minister (STM) who has been trained to guide the congregation in processing the reasons for any conflict, working toward interpersonal healing, and preparing for a strong relationship with its next minister. In some cases, classis may direct the church to delay calling another pastor until such transitional work is completed.
8. Provide a compensation package (see Art. 16-b and 17-b) that includes the following:
 - a. Cash salary—a minimum of thirteen (13) weeks from the official decision of classis is ordinarily required, with the specific details determined in discussion between the parties. Any recommendation must be approved by the full classis.

- b. Parsonage occupancy or housing allowance.
- c. Provision for continuation of medical- and dental-insurance benefits.
- d. Provision for continuation of Ministers' Pension benefits.
- e. The church served at the time of separation is responsible for the severance compensation.

Note: This package may not apply in every circumstance of separation, such as when a pastor leaves for purely personal reasons (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). It may at times also be appropriate to use a date other than the date of the classis meeting in calculating the duration of a severance payment, particularly if the release is requested after a lengthy leave of absence. Denominational resources are also available to assist with determining an appropriate amount of severance, in accordance with the principles established by Synod ____ (*Acts of Synod* ____, pp. ____).

C. Responsibilities of classis

1. Church visitors should be available to assist or may take initiative if necessary when there is an indication of conflict or other relationship difficulty. They may be involved in reconciliation or mediation, or they may recommend that there be others who can assist the pastor and congregation in this process—for example, a committee from the classis or outside resource persons such as representatives of Thrive or mediation specialists.
2. Concurrent with the work of the church visitors, the regional pastor should be called to provide emotional support and guidance for the pastor. The regional pastor, often one of the first persons aware of tensions, can serve as a gatekeeper and adviser for the pastor in the process of mediation.
3. Church visitors should continue to provide support and guidance for the council and congregation. They may assist the council in communication with the congregation.
4. If a separation of the pastor from the congregation is recommended, the classis shall do the following:
 - a. Assist the council in determining whether a separation is appropriate. If it is appropriate, give guidance as to whether there should be a release or a suspension (see B, 3, b above).
 - b. If necessary, call a special meeting of classis to process the separation in a timely manner.
 - c. Assign an individual (not the regional pastor) or team to serve as a liaison between the pastor, the congregation, and the classis in the process of the separation. Such a liaison should be acceptable to all

parties involved (see A, 3 above). Because a classis is a gathering of churches (Church Order Art. 39), it is not necessarily the case that the pastor should expect to be present for the entire discussion of the request for release. Just as a classis discusses a pastor's admission to ministry without the individual present, so also it may be inappropriate for the pastor to remain for a discussion in which he or she is particularly involved (Art. 34).

- d. Determine the framework for discussion at the classis meeting. Sensitive matters should be addressed in executive session, and the classis interim committee should seek to keep all parties informed about who will be present at various times, and who may be authorized to speak. Such arrangements may be particularly important in situations where the pastor and council do not agree on particular terms of the separation agreement. In such cases, the classis church visitors should work with the council and the pastor to form an agreement that is agreeable to all. Should no agreement be realized, then the council may proceed with its proposal, but the rules for appeal (Art. 30) may be invoked by the pastor after the classis has rendered its decision on the council's proposal.
 - e. Approve a separation agreement between pastor and council, and record in the records of classis specific reasons for the separation in keeping with the regulations of Church Order Article 17 and its Supplement (see B, 5 above). A separation agreement template was approved by Synod ____ (*Acts of Synod* ____, pp. ____).
- Note:* Copies of this agreement should be given to the pastor, the council, the classis, and the Thrive office.
- f. Encourage the pastor and/or the congregation to seek continued help in learning from this situation and facing their responsibilities. In some cases, this may require appointing an oversight committee for evaluation and assistance to plan and monitor progress toward eligibility for call and/or readiness to extend a call. (This will often require specific recommendations and continued involvement; see Supplement, Art. 17-a, b-c.)
 - g. Recommend, when appropriate, specific follow-up for the congregation, such as a specialized transitional minister (STM) to help with healing and preparing for the future.

D. A pastoral note

It is important that ecclesiastical due process be followed in the separation procedure. When Synod 1996 asked that the preceding guidelines be prepared, it did so against a background of concern for the possibility of healing for both pastors and congregations. When signs of conflict or disagreements arise, it is crucial that the pastor, council, and classis take prompt

action to deal with these issues. When there is early intervention and open communication, reconciliation is a greater possibility.

If the pastor and council or congregation are not able to mediate differences, it may be advisable to bring in outside resource persons. If a separation does occur, it is important to recognize that there are continuing needs. The members of the congregation require continued support, opportunity to grieve, and guidance for future planning. The separated pastor and the pastor's family should not be forgotten as they leave the congregation and seek another call. The congregation and classis should covenant to provide continuing ministry and care for them, assisting in any way possible to encourage personal healing and further opportunities for ministry.

ADDENDUM F

Resources and Forms Related to the Calling, Supervision, and Release of Ministers

Church Order and polity resources

1. Church Order and synodical resources

Synod Resources, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org/synod resources](http://crcna.org/synod-resources)), includes Church Order in English, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese

Guide for Conducting Church Visiting (crcna.org)

Manual for Synodical Deputies (crcna.org)

2. Principles related to calling and release

Definition of "called in the regular manner" (Report, section III, C, 2)

Definition of "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" (Report, section III, C, 1)

Questions for discernment of consistency with ministry of the Word (Report, section III, C, 1)

Differentiation of Article 12-b and 12-c positions (Report, section III, C, 3)

Observations about joint supervision (Report, section III, C, 7)

Geographic proximity (Report, section III, C, 8)

3. Synodical guidance on calling and release

1998 Synodical Guidelines, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (proposed for updating by this report)

Readmission process for ministers released from CRC (Report, section IV, C, 7)

Guidelines for pastors loaned to congregations outside the CRC (Report, section III, C, 4)

Guidelines for consultation in cases of calls issued jointly (Report, section IV, B, 1)

Representative list of noncongregational positions (Report, section III, B, 1)

Guidelines for participation in major assemblies (Report, section III, C, 5)

Resources for calling, support, and accountability in noncongregational settings

1. Letters of call

CRCNA Letter of Call (2021)

Chaplains

Specialized transitional ministers (STMs)

2. Liturgical forms

Synodically approved forms for ordination/installation

Ordination/installation for missionary, church planter, professor of theology

Ordination/installation for chaplains

Commissioning, installation, and blessing for specialized transitional ministers

3. Covenants of Joint Supervision

Chaplains

CRC staff positions

Campus ministry

4. Reporting templates

Chaplains annual report form

5. Suggestions for encouragement in ministry

Thrive

Resources, Chaplain support, Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)

Church resources (resonateglobalmission.org)

Recommendations in this report (see section III, C, 6)

Observations concerning “proper support” (Report, sections III, A, 2, e; B, 5)

Resources for addressing situations of conflict and/or release from call

1. Preventative resources

Church visitors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)

Classis counselors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)

Regional pastors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)

- Thrive's pastor and church support team consultation process overview (videos)
- 2. Changes to noncongregational calls
 - Observations regarding joint supervision (Report, section III, C, 7)
- 3. Guidelines for separation processes
 - Article 17 guidance, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
 - An introduction to Article 17, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
 - Severance, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org) (proposed for updating by this report)
 - Addendum D—Separation Agreement Template
 - Purposes of severance (Report, section IV, B, 2)
- 4. Transition and discernment materials
 - Oversight committees for churches, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
 - Oversight committees for pastors, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
 - Pastor Oversight Committee Sample Mandate (crcna.org)
 - Specialized transitional ministers, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
 - Observations concerning reasons for separation (Report, section IV, A, 2)
 - Restorative Practices in Faith Communities, CRC Network (network.crcna.org)
- 5. Liturgical forms
 - Service of Farewell and Godspeed for Pastor and Congregation, Reformed Church in America (rca.org)
- 6. Resources for vocational assessment and discernment (contact Thrive for additional information)
 - Peer discussion and discernment, in the form of SPE groups
 - Vocational ministry assessments such as the Birkman Assessment
 - Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit
 - Pastor sabbaticals

Report of the Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters

I. Executive summary

Our team has reviewed Church Order, benefits, and pension matters to address any challenges to having an orderly exchange of officebearers should the Alliance of Reformed Churches (or other former Reformed Church in America congregations or networks of congregations) become a church in communion with the CRCNA. We looked especially at the situations of congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials that have left the RCA for the Alliance but wish to maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA. In our view no changes are necessary to Church Order, benefits, or pension matters until the Alliance of Reformed Churches might become a church in communion with the CRCNA.

II. Background and mandate

Congregations leaving the Reformed Church in America over the past few years have begun joining together in at least a couple of groups that appear to be becoming new denominations. The largest of these groups is currently the Alliance of Reformed Churches and has been in discussion with the CRCNA through the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee and in other ways. There are already a few cases of CRC ministers' being on loan to an RCA congregation that has joined the Alliance, and there may be situations in which congregations that are currently dually affiliated with the CRC and RCA wish to be dually affiliated with the CRC and the Alliance instead. In order to give guidance to the practical realities facing current and future cases, Synod 2023 asked for a team to look into possible challenges that might occur, considering current rules in the Church Order, pension documents, and benefits agreements. Synod directed the Office of General Secretary to do the following:

... to appoint a team of staff and subject-matter experts to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address matters related to *church in communion* status, Church Order matters regarding "orderly exchange" of officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8), and other matters related to benefits of CRC officebearers. In addition, if a former RCA congregation or network requests it in the next year, this team is authorized to address the same matters with them.

Grounds:

- a. Synod has asked the EIRC to facilitate good ecumenical relations with bodies of former RCA congregations.
- b. This body testifies to being Reformed in persuasion and ministry.
- c. This body describes itself as an association and is developing their vision, values, frameworks, and other documents.

- d. This satisfies the immediate needs of affiliated officebearers and congregations while providing a space for discernment of future relationships.

Our team, consisting of people acquainted with the EIRC's work with the Alliance, Church Order matters, pension matters, and benefits matters, was assembled to look into the various details of this request.

III. Discussion

A. Benefits

Even before our team had the opportunity to meet for the first time, the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) board, which includes pastors from the Alliance of Reformed Churches, made all the necessary arrangements to provide benefits to pastors from the Alliance. RBA is an independent organization created to serve as the benefits provider for CRC and RCA pastors and was within its rights to extend this provision to Alliance pastors, most of whom were already enrolled with RBA before they and their congregations moved to the Alliance.

This move also simplified the question regarding CRC ministers who may be serving in RCA congregations that leave for the Alliance. Church Order Supplement, Article 8, D, 11 states that the pension and benefits of the minister remain with the denomination that holds their credentials. Since these ministers would be considered "on loan" (Church Order Article 13-c) rather than part of the "orderly exchange" of ministers with the RCA (Church Order, Supplement Article 8, D), their benefits status would no longer be directly addressed. But since both CRC and Alliance pastors are allowed to receive benefits through RBA, there is really no question now, or in the foreseeable future, about a significant change to their benefits status.

B. Pension

CRC ministers are allowed to remain in the CRC Pension Fund regardless of whether they are "on loan" or in an "orderly exchange." The only stipulation is that the minister or the church being served contributes the required amount as "determined annually by the Ministers' Pension Funds committees for ministers serving in extraordinary positions outside of our denomination" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 13-c, g).

Team members checked pension language and details carefully, and it was confirmed that they do not specify service in a Christian Reformed congregation or ministry.

C. Church Order

Synod 2023 decided, "by way of exception, that while [the Alliance of Reformed Churches is] designated as a church in cooperation, congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials [may] maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 990).

Future synods will likely be asked to determine whether the CRC's relationship with the Alliance should remain as a church in cooperation or be designated as a church in communion. At that time it might be wise to consider whether Church Order Article 8-b and Church Order Supplement, Article 8, D should be changed to include the Alliance of Reformed Churches. But until the Alliance might become a church in communion with the CRCNA, those changes would be premature.

For the time being, the stipulations of Church Order Article 13-c (ministers "on loan") are sufficient to cover the needs of any current or future CRC pastors who find themselves in a congregation moving from the RCA to the Alliance. This would apply similarly to any CRC ministers whose RCA congregation moved into another group of former RCA congregations, such as the Kingdom Network, or moved to be independent.

The EIRC will continue to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to see whether *church in communion* status might be advisable in the future. The EIRC will also work with other groups of former RCA congregations, by request, to determine and recommend the appropriate status of the relationship between those groups and the CRCNA.

D. Canada

Our team also considered how the pension and benefits rules might be affected in Canadian churches of the CRCNA and the RCA. Our team contacted an Alliance representative, who determined there are currently no CRC ministers serving churches in Canada that have moved to the Alliance from the RCA. The Canadian government is the primary health benefit provider, so health benefits would remain unaffected. In addition, it does not appear that other benefits or pension matters would be affected in the future if a CRC minister might be serving in a Canadian RCA that moves to the Alliance of Reformed Churches.

IV. Recommendations

A. That the COD communicate to synod that no changes are currently necessary to Church Order, benefits, or pension matters in order to allow full participation of congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials who wish to maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA.

B. That the COD accept this report as fulfilling the mandate of the Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters and dismiss the team with wholehearted thanks.

Team on Alliance of Reformed Churches Matters

Wendy Batchelder
John Bolt

Shirley De Vries (convener)
Scott DeVries
William Koopmans

Draft Synodical Policy

Conflict of Interest and Disclosure Policy for Delegates to Synod	Policy No: TBD
	Date Approved: February 2024
	Revision No:
	Number of Pages:
	Policy Owner: Synod
	Responsible: Director of Synodical Services

Date	Revision No.	Modification

1. Introduction and background information

In the church, there exists a dynamic confluence of interests wherein the interests of the organization and the person are interdependent and inseparable (cf. 1 Cor. 12). The organization was created to meet the spiritual, social, and physical needs of its members; and the person was created to participate and contribute in such an organization (e.g., a community led by Christ). However, in a broken world personal and organizational interests can easily become out of sync to where the interests of one interfere with the true needs of the other.

The confluence of interests natural to the church exists not only in an individual’s relationship to the organization but also in a very similar way in the relationship between the narrower assemblies (council and classis) and the broadest assembly (synod). As a delegate often has naturally closer ties to the narrower assemblies, it also ought to be recognized that the interests of the narrower assemblies can sometimes exceed or interfere with the needs of the broadest assembly, which is to say that the interests of a council (local church) or classis in regards to their ecclesiastical relationships and other responsibilities can sometimes exceed or interfere with the needs of the corporations, agencies, institutions, and ecclesiastical relationships representative of the whole Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Synod 2022 adopted a motion: “That synod implement a Conflict of Interest Policy for delegates to synod, adapted from the policy in Appendix E to the SALT Report, which was adopted by the Council of Delegates (COD Supplement 2021, section I, G and Appendix A)” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 931).

Recognizing that classes carefully and prayerfully select synodical delegates and relying upon the trust of nominating assemblies in their integrity, judgment, and courage, synod reasonably expects that no delegate would ever use his or her position for personal gain or the advancement of personal opinions. However, to avoid any misunderstanding, this policy statement is communicated and adopted.

The resulting following policy was adopted by the COD in February 2024.

2. Definitions and terms

- a. *Synod*: Synod is the broadest ecclesiastical assembly of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and manages the mandates of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, its corporations, agencies, institutions, as well as the ecclesiastical relationships of its classes and churches. These ecclesiastical relationships and mandates, as described through the Church Order, the Rules for Synodical Procedure, and Ecclesiastical Mandate Letters, also give synod responsibilities concerning the appointment, approval, or supervision of certain leadership positions which are established through the various mandates, organizational bylaws, and/or Church Order.
- b. *Synodical delegate*: A synodical delegate is an officebearer in a Christian Reformed congregation appointed by their classis to attend synod.
- c. *Duties of a synodical delegate*: Synodical delegates are fiduciaries who must hold a position of trust and exercise a duty of care, including a general obligation to avoid conflicts of interest.
 - 1) Synodical delegates have the duty of guiding the agencies’/institutions’ mandates in such a manner as to achieve the mandated objectives of the agency/institution. Synodical delegates have a fiduciary duty to act honestly, in good faith and in the best interests of the agency/institution, and to be loyal to the agency/institution.
 - 2) Synodical delegates have the duty of guiding the ecclesiastical relationships of classes and churches in accordance with biblical and confessional principles as well as the Church Order. Synodical delegates have a duty to act honestly, in good faith and in the best interests of the denominational relationship as described in Scripture, the confessions, and the Church Order; and to be loyal to this denominational relationship so described.
 - 3) Honesty is the first component of these fiduciary duties. A synodical delegate must disclose the entire truth and avoid fraudulent transactions or misleading representation.

- 4) Good faith is the second component of these fiduciary duties. Synodical delegates must pursue the best interests of the agencies, institutions, and denominational relationships. This means that a synodical delegate may not pursue any improper purpose while acting on behalf of agencies, institutions, synod, classes, or churches.
 - 5) The duty of loyalty and the avoidance of conflicts of interest mean that a synodical delegate must give loyalty to the agencies, institutions, synod, classes, and churches and must not subordinate the interests of any of these to his or her personal interests.
 - 6) Even when conflicts do not exist, synodical delegates should understand that synodical decisions may affect the business or affairs of a synodical delegate. The impact could be financial, social, or political gain; and any of these may violate the fiduciary duty. Synodical delegates must avoid direct or indirect benefits to relatives, friends, and associates.
- d. *Conflict of interest:* Synodical conflicts of interest involve distinguishing between needs and interests. Needs are defined here as whatever is necessary to the mandated functions of the corporations, agencies, institutions, synod, classes, or churches. Interests include needs, but also things that may be desirable or helpful, but are not necessary. A conflict of interest with synodical duties exists when a synodical delegate has a personal interest of any kind that has the potential to be inconsistent in any degree with the duties of synod—i.e., the needs of the corporations, agencies, institutions, synod, classes, or churches. When a synodical delegate's personal interests, whether real or perceived, could supersede or conflict with his or her dedication to the needs of the corporations, agencies, institutions, synod, classes, or churches that comprise in different ways the Christian Reformed Church in North America, a conflict of interest arises. The test of a conflict of interest is not just in whether a personal interest actually influences a synodical delegate but also in whether circumstances lend themselves to such a possibility.
- 1) Examples:
 - a) Conflicting financial interests
 - b) Use of confidential information for personal gain
 - c) Unauthorized disclosure of confidential information
 - 2) A conflict of interest with synodical duties also exists when a synodical delegate represents the interests of his or her council or classis in any way that supersedes or conflicts with his or her dedication to the needs of the corporations, agencies, institutions, and ecclesiastical relationships representative of the whole Christian Reformed Church in North America. Because of the complexity of these relationships,

the test of this kind of conflict of interest is whether it can be demonstrated that the delegate was influenced in such a way as to negatively affect the needs of the corporations, agencies, institutions, and ecclesiastical relationships representative of the whole Christian Reformed Church in North America.

- 3) The appearance of a conflict of interest, even when it may not exist, can be equally damaging to the corporations, agencies, institutions, synod, classes, churches, or the relationships between them and is therefore considered the same as a conflict of interest.

3. Policy

- a. A synodical delegate shall not solicit or be a party, directly or indirectly, to any financial or other opportunity between a corporation, agency, or institution of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and
 - 1) himself or herself or a family member
 - 2) any firm (meaning copartnership or other unincorporated association) of which he or she or any family member is a partner, member, employee, or agent
 - 3) any not-for-profit organization, of which he or she or member(s) of his or her immediate family is an officer, director, employee, or agent, with the exception of a local Christian Reformed Church or classis.
 - 4) any for-profit corporation in which he or she is an officer, director, employee, agent, or stockholder owning more than one percent (1%) or the total outstanding stock of any class, if the stock is not listed on a stock exchange, or stock with a present total value in excess of \$25,000 if the stock is listed on a stock exchange.
 - 5) any trust of which he or she is a grantor, beneficiary, or trustee
- b. A synodical delegate must report to the chair of the advisory committee or to the officers of synod (in plenary sessions) to recuse him or herself from any discussions or decisions in which he or she reasonably could conclude that any kind of obligation might improperly affect his or her judgment on behalf of the corporations, agencies, institutions, or ecclesiastical relationships of the classes and churches of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Each person must examine his or her own activities and those of his or her immediate family, congregation, and classis to ensure that no condition exists which creates a potential conflict of interest or a potentially embarrassing situation with respect to transactions between the synodical delegate and corporations, agencies, institutions, classes, and churches of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

- c. In the event that a conflict of interest (including potential or perceived) exists

- 1) The affected synodical delegate shall
 - a) not participate in any way on behalf of the corporation, agency, or institution of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in the discussion or negotiation of the contract or arrangement or in the approval of the contract or arrangement
 - b) promptly disclose in writing any financial, personal, or pecuniary interest in the contract or arrangement to the advisory committee chair or officers of synod, whichever has the power to approve the contract or arrangement
- 2) The contract or arrangement related to the conflict or potential conflict of interest must be approved by a vote of not less than a majority (50% + 1) of the delegates to synod, or of the advisory committee, without the vote of the affected synodical delegate.
- 3) A written record of a recusal shall be added by the committee reporter to any relevant advisory committee report if in the advisory committee or by the clerk of synod if during the plenary session.
 - a) These records of recusal shall be part of the public record in the *Acts of Synod* either as a note on an advisory committee report or as a note following the action taken in plenary proceedings. The note shall read simply, "The following delegate(s) was recused from the discussion and decision: [Delegate's Name (Classis)]."
 - b) If the recusal relates to a conflict of interest stemming from contracts or arrangements, the record of the recusal shall also include
 - i. the name of each party involved in the contract or arrangements
 - ii. the terms of the contract or arrangements, including duration, financial consideration between the parties, facilities or services of the entity included in the contract, and the nature and degree of assignment of employees of the corporation, agency, or institution of the Christian Reformed Church in North America for fulfillment of the contract
 - iii. the nature of the synodical delegate's financial, personal, or pecuniary interest
- d. A synodical delegate shall not engage in a business transaction or arrangement in which the delegate may profit from his or her delegation to synod or benefit financially from confidential information that the delegate has obtained or may obtain by reason of such delegation.
- e. Synodical delegates shall sign and complete the attached Conflict of Interest Statement form before beginning their service on synod.

4. Policy roles and responsibilities

- a. The Office of General Secretary administers a synodically approved Conflict of Interest Policy for all delegates to synod.
- b. The Office of General Secretary is required to implement this requirement during the period of delegate registration for an upcoming synod.
- c. Officers of synod and the chairs of advisory committees are responsible for following this policy during the duration of synod.
- d. The director of Synodical Services along with the officers and advisory committee chairs, is responsible for ensuring that the written record is in place when required by this policy.

5. Procedures

- a. The Office of General Secretary is required to implement this requirement during the period of delegate registration for an upcoming synod.
- b. The Office of General Secretary will retain the Conflict of Interest Statements for seven (7) years after signing.
- c. Sample Conflict of Interest Statement:

Conflict of Interest Statement

I have read and understand this Conflict of Interest and Disclosure Policy. There are no present or future potential conflicts of interest other than those listed below. I have and will continue to observe the Conflict of Interest and Disclosure Policy carefully and report any conflicts of interest discovered in the course of my duties as a synodical delegate.

Disclosure(s): Indicate none if applicable; otherwise please give a full explanation of the conflict(s):

Signature

Printed name

Date

Approved by _____

Approved date _____

Note: Completed forms will be retained for seven (7) years from date of signing.

Council of Delegates Governance Policy

Financial Reserve Policy	Policy No: TBD
	Original Date Approved: Feb 1999
	Revision No: 1.4 / Approved: 02/16/2024
	Number of Pages: 3
	Policy Owner: Ministry Boards (defined below)
	COD Committee Responsible: Finance Committee This committee is responsible for ensuring that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Date	Revision No.	Modification
Sept 2007	1.1	
Dec 2007	1.2	Amended by BOT Executive Committee
Oct 2017	1.3	Included in the COD Governance Handbook
1/4/2024	1.4	Put into the new policy template and updated terms and responsibilities to match the new organizational structure

1. Introduction and background information

In February 1999, the Board of Trustees approved the Financial Reserve Policy that governs the level of cash and financial investments of CRCNA agencies. In September 2007, the Board of Trustees amended the policy to allocate Agency [term used at that time] monies into three funds: Regular, Special/Long-Term, and Endowment. Each fund is the recipient of specific types of revenue and is used to finance specific expenditures. The policy is further revised as of October 12, 2017, by the Council of Delegates [new formulation of the BOT].

2. Definitions and terms

Ministry Board or ministry boards refers to any and all of the following:

- Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
- U.S. Ministry Board (a Michigan corporation)
- ReFrame Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
- ReFrame U.S. Ministry Board (an Illinois corporation)

3. Policy

The following three funds hold all the cash and financial investments of the ministry boards.

- a. *Regular Fund*: The Regular Fund is the primary account through which ministry financial activity flows.

The Regular Fund Revenues come from Ministry Shares, Above Ministry Share gifts, estate gifts, sales, tuition, and other general donations as well as the transfer of assets from the Special/Long-term Fund.

The Regular Fund Expenditures are used to finance ministry programs, management, general expenses, and fundraising costs not covered by designated or restricted monies from the Regular Fund.

The balance held by the Regular Fund at the beginning of the fiscal year is not to exceed 25 percent of the budgeted expenditures for the year. Designated or restricted funds are not included in this calculation.

If the balance held by the Regular Fund at the beginning of the fiscal year is projected to be less than 20 percent of the budgeted expenditure for the year, the ministry may transfer surplus funds from the Special/Long-term fund, if available, to bring the Regular Fund balance to the 25 percent level. Designated or restricted funds are not included in the calculation.

Allowing the Regular Fund's beginning-of-year balance to remain below 20 percent of unrestricted annual expenditure may put at risk the going concern status of the organization. If the Regular Fund balance can not be brought to the 20 percent minimum beginning balance described above, the ministry board will initiate a plan to generate the cash needed to meet the 25 percent level. They will apprise the Finance Committee of COD of their detailed plans for achieving the targeted level.

- b. *Special/Long-term Fund*: The Special/Long-term Fund holds all designated grants, specifically designated disaster response gifts, gifts designated by the donor for a specific use, and any surplus from the Regular Fund.

The Special/Long-term fund provides financing for all one-off program expenditures, all capital expenditures, and any amounts needed to satisfy non-program contractual obligations such as charitable gift annuities. In addition, the Special/Long-term Fund may be used to finance the

cost of new programs during their initial start-up or to increase the beginning-of-year balance in the Regular Fund as noted above.

The level of funds held by the Special/Long-term Fund is not limited.

- c. *Endowment Fund*: Specific program expenditures, with the pre-approval of the ministry board executive or the ministry board, may be financed through the Endowment Fund.

The pre-approval authority to establish endowments resides with the ministry board executive director for any endowment with initial funding of up to \$500,000.

The pre-approval of endowments with funding in excess of \$500,000 requires the approval of the relevant ministry board.

- d. Naming of the funds: The-ministry boards are free to rename the funds to better aid their advancement efforts and should apprise the COD Finance Committee of such changes.

4. Policy roles and responsibilities

This policy is implemented by the ministry boards.

Because of its vested interest in the sustainability of the denomination's ministry and mission, if any changes are needed in the policy, those changes are to be brought to the Finance Committee of COD.

The Finance Committee of COD monitors and coordinates this policy to ensure that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Council of Delegates Governance Policy

Cash Holding Policy	Policy No: TBD
	Date Approved: May 2019
	Revision No: 1.2 / Approved: 02/16/2024
	Number of Pages: 3
	Policy Owner: Ministry Boards (defined below)
	COD Committee Responsible: Finance Committee This committee is responsible for ensuring that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Date	Revision No.	Modification
Oct 2019	1.1	
1/4/2024	1.2	Put in the new format updated terms to match the new organizational structure

1. Definitions and terms

- a. *Ministry Board* or *ministry boards* refers to any and all of the following:
 - i. Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
 - ii. US Ministry Board (a Michigan corporation)
 - iii. ReFrame Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
 - iv. ReFrame US Ministry Board (an Illinois corporation)
- b. *Fund Types*
 Funds received by the institutions and agencies generally fall into two categories: those that are unconstrained by a donor's wishes other than to use them as best supports the ministry; and those that have a designation by the donor to a specific portion of the ministry program. The definition of classifications of contributions is below.
 - i. *Unrestricted Gifts*: Any donation given without donor restriction is considered unrestricted when received. This includes ministry

shares, church offerings and individual gifts. Unrestricted funds received as bequests should be managed as listed below.

- ii. *Donor Restricted Gifts:* A gift that is offered to the organization by a donor to be used for a particular purpose is considered as Donor Restricted.
- iii. *Board Designated Funds:* The governing ministry board may allocate certain unrestricted funds to a designated purpose. This is often the case with major capital expenditures such as building renovations, large equipment purchases, or major program initiatives.

2. Policy

a. *Donor Restricted Gifts*

- i. A gift that is offered to the organization by a donor to be used for a particular purpose can be accepted if and only if the ministry purpose stated by the donor is in line with the mission and vision of the organization as approved by the governing board and is consistent with its strategic or tactical plans.
- ii. Acceptance of such a gift must include agreement on the steps to take if the funds cannot be fully used for the purpose designated. Options include allowing the surplus funds to be used where needed most by the organization; and designating them for another ministry board-approved purpose.

b. *Board Designated Funds*

When a ministry board designates funds, the designation must include the expected timing for expenditure as well as any limitations placed on the expenditure by the board.

c. *Endowments*

The governing board may elect to establish an endowment for a specific purpose. An endowment may be either permanent or time-limited. Permanent endowments generally fund activities that are a central component of a ministry and not subject to significant variation. An example is funding the director's position. Permanent endowments are held in a special account with only the earnings on the corpus being made available to fund the intended ministry.

A time-limited endowment is usually for 10 to 15 years and is sometimes established to help fund a program that is multiyear in duration and does not require a permanent status.

While an endowment is established by a governing ministry board, it is to be funded by donations received after such action is taken.

If a donor wishes to suggest the creation of an endowment for a specific program or project, the governing ministry board may approve the implementation of such an endowment. A written proposal and

agreement delineating the terms and expectations must be in place before funding it.

d. *Bequests (also known as estate gifts)*

The size and timing of bequests are usually not known and may represent a unique cash management situation for leadership. Since these gifts are very unpredictable, bequests should not generally be included as part of the annual budget revenue for the organization. Large unexpected gifts that lead to significant spikes in spending not matched by long-term incremental gift revenue have been found to be detrimental to the long-term financial health of the organization. Such spikes can introduce increases in programs that are not readily reduced when cash flows drop.

Large bequests are best managed in a way that provides for a spend-down of monies received over a relatively long time period which is more conducive to sustained ministry. Below, in section 4 there is a list of funds being managed this way.

Bequests can come as donor-restricted or unrestricted. Acceptance of a donor-restricted bequest is to be processed through an acceptance protocol the same as any other restricted gift type.

3. Policy roles and responsibilities

This policy is implemented by the ministry boards.

Because of its vested interest in the sustainability of the denomination's ministry and mission, if any changes are needed in the policy, those changes are to be brought to the Finance Committee of COD.

The Finance Committee of COD monitors and coordinates this policy to ensure that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

4. Procedures

Bequest/Estate Gift Spending Protocol examples

- a. ReFrame Ministries' Stewardship Fund is funded mainly with estate gifts above budgeted amounts (beginning with the FY18 excess) and also contains designated gifts. They draw down 10 percent per year for ten years. As the fund grows, the yearly draw will reduce budgeted estate giving.
- b. Resonate Global Mission has created the Mission Investment Fund. This will be used to collect the undesignated estate gifts. Estate gifts would be drawn down over a period of seven years.
- c. CRCNA places estate gifts in the Heritage Fund. The percentage of any estate gift to be drawn down in any year is at the discretion of the executive director(s) of the ministry boards.

- d. World Renew uses their Joseph Fund to accept proceeds of estate gifts. The funds are drawn down by taking 10 percent in the fiscal year received, and the balance is drawn down in the next six fiscal years.

APPENDIX G

Council of Delegates Governance Policy

Fundraising Ethical Guidelines Policy	Policy No: TBD
	Original Approval Date: assumed to be when COD was formed or before, but there is no specific documentation within the existing document
	Revision No: 1.2 / Approved: 02/16/2024
	Number of Pages: 4
	Policy Owner: Ministry Boards (defined below)
	COD Committee Finance Committee This committee is responsible for ensuring that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Date	Revision No.	Modification
1/4/2024	1.2	Put into the new policy template and updated terms and responsibilities to match the new organizational structure.

1. Introduction and background information

a. Introduction

In gratitude for the remission of sin and the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, the development professionals of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) seek to build God's kingdom through the causes they serve. Through their dedication, they seek to inspire others. They are committed to the improvement of their professional knowledge and skills. They recognize their stewardship responsibility to ensure that needed resources are vigorously and ethically

sought and that the intent of the donor is honestly fulfilled. They practice their profession with integrity, honesty, truthfulness, and adherence to the obligation to safeguard the trust that is placed in them.

b. **Background**

These guidelines, affirmations, and standards are based upon the ethical principles and standards developed by the Association of Fundraising Professionals. This organization has offices in Toronto, Ontario, and Arlington, Virginia. They use the Code of Ethical Principles and Standards of Professional Practice of the National Society of Fund-Raising Executives.

2. Policy

Staff responsible for generating philanthropic support will show their agreement to abide by **Ethical guidelines for Fundraising in the Christian Reformed Church** by signing the agreement (Appendix A).

3. Definitions and Terms

It should be noted that the terms fundraising, development, and generating philanthropic support used in this document all refer to the same activity of raising funds for the mission and ministry of the Christian Reformed Church.

4. Policy roles and responsibilities

This policy is implemented by the ministry boards through their executive staff.

Because of its vested interest in the sustainability of the denomination's ministry and mission, if any changes are needed in the policy, those changes are to be brought to the Finance Committee of COD.

The Finance Committee of COD monitors and coordinates this policy to ensure that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

5. Procedures

Hiring managers are to obtain signatures on the document in Appendix A from their appropriate staff.

Fundraising professionals are expected to engage in regular professional development.

**FUNDRAISING ETHICAL GUIDELINES POLICY
APPENDIX A**

Ethical Guidelines for Fundraising in the Christian Reformed Church

The following guidelines and professional practices are essential to working with integrity when fundraising for the Christian Reformed Church.

As employees of the CRCNA, fundraising professionals are to:

- a. Bring credit to their Lord and the causes they serve by their public demeanor.
- b. Affirm through their personal giving a commitment to Christian stewardship.
- c. Manifest support for the work of all the denominational agencies, refrain from criticism and pass along helpful information when appropriate.
- d. Adhere to the spirit as well as the letter of all applicable laws and regulations.
- e. Put the mission of the ministry above any personal gain.
- f. Not allow any personal preference they may have amongst the potential ministries being considered by the donor to influence their recommendations.
- g. Recognize their individual boundaries of competence and be forthcoming about their professional qualifications, credentials, experience, and expertise. In situations where legal or accounting expertise is indicated by the nature of the planned gift, encourage the donor to solicit the advice and opinion of their professional advisors. If the donor does not have such a relationship, the development professional may provide contact information for a minimum of two appropriate professionals so that the donor may choose whom they wish to deal with. A single recommendation should not be made because of the potential perception of a conflict of interest.
- h. Value the privacy, freedom of choice, and interest of all affected by their actions.
- i. Disclose to the employer and to the donor all relationships that do or might constitute conflicts of interest.
- j. Encourage their colleagues in the practice of these ethical principles.

The fundraising professionals of the CRCNA also adhere to the following standards of professional practice:

- a. Act according to the standards and visions of their institution, profession, and Christian commitment.
- b. Avoid even the appearance of criminal offense or professional misconduct.
- c. Advocate within their organization adherence to applicable laws and regulations.
- d. Receive compensation in salary only and do not accept any other form of compensation such as commissions, fees, or bonuses.
- e. Neither seek nor accept finder's fees and discourage their organizations from paying such fees.

- f. Disclose conflicts of interest.
- g. Accurately state their professional experience, qualifications, and expertise.
- h. Adhere to the principle that donor and prospect information created by, or on behalf of, an organization is the property of that organization.
- i. Give donors the opportunity to have their names removed from the organization's mailing list.
- j. Keep confidential the list of donors to their organization (with the understanding that appropriate public donor recognition may occur).
- k. Will not disclose privileged information to unauthorized parties.
- l. Ensure that all solicitation materials are accurate and correctly reflect the organization's mission and use of solicited funds.
- m. Ensure that contributions are used in accordance with donors' intentions.
- n. Ensure proper stewardship of charitable contributions, including timely reporting on the use and management of funds and explicit consent by the donor before altering the conditions of a gift.
- o. Ensure that donors receive informed and ethical advice about the value and tax implications of potential gifts.
- p. Not exploit for personal benefit any relationship with a donor, prospect, or volunteer.
- q. In stating fundraising results, use accurate and consistent accounting methods that conform to standard accounting practice in the United States and Canada.
- r. And all of the above notwithstanding, comply with applicable local, state, provincial, and federal civil and criminal law.

As a person responsible for generating philanthropic support, I pledge to act in accordance with The Ethical Guidelines for Fundraising in the Christian Reformed Church.

_____ Name of hiring organization

_____ Fundraising Staff Name (typed)

_____ Fundraising Staff Name Signature

_____ Date

Council of Delegates Governance Policy

Investment Policy	Policy No: TBD
	Date Approved: 1998 (by Synod), last update 2011 by BOT
	Revision No: 1.2 /Approved 02/16/2024
	Number of Pages: 7
	Policy Owner: Ministry Boards (defined below)
	COD Committee Responsible: Finance Committee This committee is responsible for ensuring that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Date	Revision No.	Modification
2009, Sept	1.1	Revised by BOT (previous name of COD)
2011, Feb	1.2	Revised by BOT (previous name of COD)
1/4/2024	1.3	Put into the new policy template and updated terms and responsibilities to match the new organizational structure

1. Introduction and background information

The members and supporters of the Christian Reformed Church in North America provide the funds to carry out the mission of the denomination. Therefore great care and stewardship should be accorded these funds.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to set forth the broad guidelines under which the funds of the denomination shall be managed. The investment objectives are as follows:

- a. To preserve the principal value of funds.
- b. To earn a reasonable return with appropriate levels of portfolio risk.

- c. To invest the funds in a manner consistent with the values of the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church.
- d. Ensure that these funds are managed in a highly professional manner

3. Definitions and terms

- a. *Ministry Board* or *ministry boards* refers to any and all of the following:
 - i. Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
 - ii. US Ministry Board (a Michigan corporation)
 - iii. ReFrame Canada Ministry Board (a Canadian corporation)
 - iv. ReFrame US Ministry Board (an Illinois corporation)
 - v. World Renew Canada Board (a Canadian corporation)
 - vi. World Renew US Board (a Michigan corporation)
 - vii. Canadian Pension Board of the Christian Reformed Church
 - viii. US Pension Board of the Christian Reformed Church
- b. *Institutions of the Christian Reformed Church* refer to the following:
 - i. Calvin University (in Grand Rapids, Michigan)
 - ii. Calvin Theological Seminary (in Grand Rapids, Michigan)

4. Policy

- a. This policy shall apply to all ministry boards and institutions associated with the ministries that are part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA).
- b. There are good reasons for Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, the two pension boards, and the World Renew boards to conduct their investment programs separately if they so choose. All other ministry boards will have their funds invested under the umbrella vehicles of the CRCNA (The CRCNA LLC in the U.S. and the CIBC church fund account in Canada). These investment vehicles will be under the supervision of the respective ministry office controller and senior executive. They will use professional financial managers to provide expertise and to ensure appropriate professionalism, efficiency, and compliance with the policies of the Christian Reformed Church and compliance with legal requirements in each country. The rationale for this consolidation and the use of professional financial managers is that we are called to steward these funds well, however, the work involved on a daily basis is not of sufficient magnitude to require or develop the core competencies needed to properly diversify and monitor the funds using internal staff.
- c. The overall responsibility of the controllers and senior executives is to carry out the investment policy for the denomination within the context of the U.S. and Canadian financial and regulatory environments.
- d. If institutions named in 2.b. above, elect to conduct their own investment programs, such programs shall be subject to this investment policy. In addition, there shall be at least an annual report to the respective

governing boards and to the Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church in North America regarding the investments.

- e. This investment policy makes no provision for the placement of denominational funds in private investments. When such investments are donated, it shall be the practice to liquidate such gifts as soon as feasible. The advice of the donor may be sought to determine the appropriate time for such liquidation.
- f. Generally, all funds and investments of the denomination, with the permissible exception (as defined in 2.b. above) shall be managed under this policy. However, each ministry board can give direction for the investments and management of the fund. The custody and management of the funds shall be performed under the umbrella vehicles listed in 2.b. above except as approved in advance by the ministry boards. Any changes are to be reported to the Finance Committee of the Council of Delegates.
- g. Ministry boards are permitted to have bank accounts to carry on their mandates, but excess funds are subject to this policy.
- h. In accordance with the preceding, the following are expected to be the principal types of funds managed by the umbrella vehicles listed in 2.b. Above:
 - i. Funds or assets not needed for near-term operations by the agencies or other entities of the CRCNA, including reserves and endowments.
 - ii. Funds or assets given to the CRCNA as a denomination, rather than a particular agency, for endowment or other longer-term purposes by the donor.
 - iii. Short-term funds are intended to be passed through to agencies or ministries of the CRCNA by the donor. Such funds would be received and passed to the appropriate parties in a timely fashion.
- i. Designation of investment pools. Because the funds to be invested have many different characteristics, there are likely to be a number of investment pools. These investment pools will likely be accounted for and managed differently. The initial pools shall be as follows:
 - i. Short-term cash utilized to operate the CRCNA
 - ii. Excess seasonal funds, which are expected to be required by ministries within one year
 - iii. Intermediate-term funds, which may be held for ministry needs within the next few years
 - iv. Long-term funds, which may be invested over longer periods of time (e.g., an endowment)
 - v. Funds held for specific denominational programs.

- vi. It is possible that different pools will have similar investment objectives for portions of their portfolio, such as ownership of fixed-income securities of intermediate duration. If so, it may be desirable to place such funds from more than one pool with the same investment manager for efficiency and ease of management.
- vii. Since the members of the CRCNA have given and entrusted these funds for kingdom work, the safety of the principal shall be given great consideration, especially in shorter-term investments. The Finance Committee of COD, with access to outside expertise, will develop and monitor guidelines that list the appropriate investment vehicles for each of these pools.
- j. Asset allocation.
 - i. The funds invested shall employ a balanced and diversified investment approach. The asset pools are expected to utilize differing investments and allocations. Funds for various needs and projects should have an asset allocation in keeping with the time frame the funds are to be invested. In all cases, the investment allocation should take into account that these are church-related funds.
 - ii. The allocation of funds shall be reported to the ministry boards, COD, and Synod after the end of each calendar year.
- k. Investment advisers and performance measurement
 - i. Since the investment of funds is a specialized field, it is expected that outside investment advisers and/or funds will be utilized to implement this policy, especially for the larger amounts and intermediate- or longer-term funds.
 - ii. The ministry office controller and senior executive will select advisers to manage funds assigned to them. Such funds will be managed by them on a fully discretionary basis within the overall parameters of fiduciary responsibility and the policies set forth in this investment policy.
 - iii. The investment results of each manager shall be compared at least quarterly with appropriate benchmarks for the type of manager and investments. The benchmarks shall be agreed upon between the ministry office controller and senior executive and each adviser at the point of hiring.
 - 1) Performance should be measured over a period of years
 - 2) Any adviser with continual below-benchmark performance will be considered for replacement.
 - 3) From time to time, each manager may be requested to present their current portfolio strategy and results to the ministry board (or to the Finance Committee of COD).

- l. Approved investments
 - i. The major portion of the overall portfolio shall be readily marketable and traded on major security exchanges.
 - ii. The portfolio investment strategy shall consider appropriate levels of liquidity and risk.
 - iii. Funds may be invested in the following financial assets:
 - 1) Short-term investments
 - a) U.S. Treasury bills and their Canadian counterpart
 - b) Commercial paper in the highest grade as rated by Standard & Poors or Moody
 - c) CDs and other bank or savings-and-loan deposits, provided they are government-insured institutions. If more than the insured amount is invested with an institution, the institution should be of high quality.
 - d) Other approved short-term investments of high quality and marketability.
 - 2) Publicly traded common stocks, preferred stocks, and convertible equity securities of companies that have capable and ethical management and are not subject to undue risk.
 - 3) Publicly traded bonds and notes of investment grade. In most cases, it is expected that the investments will be at least A-rated securities.
- m. Gifts received directly from donors
 - i. At times gifts of assets other than cash will be received directly from donors.
 - ii. No gifts of real or tangible personal property or non-publicly traded stocks, bonds, or notes may be accepted until approved by the ministry office controller
 - iii. In the case of such donations, the following guidelines shall govern:
 - 1) In the case of publicly traded securities, they should generally be transferred to the appropriate investment manager for retention or sale as the manager deems appropriate.
 - 2) In the case of non-publicly traded securities, the controller may request the advice of the donor regarding how and when the securities can be converted to usable funds.
 - 3) In the case of a proposed donation of property or physical assets, it shall not be accepted until approved by legal counsel.
 - a) The controller shall request, in writing, an opinion as to liens, litigation, and environmental issues before deciding whether to accept the proposed donation.

- b) If there is not positive cash flow, a plan for funding the cash needs of the proposed donation shall be approved prior to acceptance.
 - c) In some instances, a donor may wish to contribute real estate or financial assets with investment specifications (including, but not limited to, retention of the asset) inconsistent with the Investment Policy of the CRCNA. Compliance with such donor specifications will require approval of the ministry board prior to acceptance of the gift. The Finance Committee of the Council of Delegates can be used as a resource in this decision-making process.
 - d) The goal is to convert all such donations to cash at the earliest practical date to minimize the management and monitoring responsibilities imposed on the staff.
- n. Restrictions on investments
 - i. Investments shall not be made in companies or institutions that are not compatible with the values or mission of the CRCNA. Examples of inappropriate investments would be institutions engaged in or promoting abortion, gambling, tobacco, or pornography.
 - ii. Not more than 5 percent of any investment pool may be invested in a single company or investment, except under the following circumstances:
 - 1) No limits shall be placed on investments in U.S. or Canadian government securities or bonds. This shall include securities backed by them.
 - 2) Investments in mutual funds or similar approved pools of assets shall not be considered to be in violation of this standard if said mutual funds or similar approved pools include a broad base of assets in the funds.
 - iii. The fixed-income portfolio shall be invested in securities rated “investment grade.”
 - iv. Investments will not be made in warrants, options, or commodity futures, nor will purchases be made on margin or securities sold short unless such investments and transactions are made in mutual funds or similar approved pools of assets.
 - v. No investments shall be made that could place in jeopardy the tax-exempt/charitable status of the CRCNA, its ministry boards, or affiliates.
 - vi. No investments shall be made for the purpose of exercising control over corporate management.
 - vii. The sale of a security whose quality or rating falls below CRCNA policy standards shall be completed within 30 days of such change unless the investment manager receives approval from the controller

to delay such sale. In such an event, the controller and ministry office senior executive along with the investment manager shall be expected to reevaluate the retention of the security on a regular basis.

5. Policy roles and responsibilities

This policy is implemented by the controller and senior executive of each ministry office. Each ministry board is responsible for ensuring that it is implemented.

Because of its vested interest in the sustainability of the denomination's ministry and mission, if any changes are needed in the policy, those changes are to be brought to the Finance Committee of COD.

The Finance Committee of COD monitors and coordinates this policy to ensure that the ministry boards are administering the funds in a consistent manner.

Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, the pension boards, and the World Renew boards may elect to conduct their own cash management and investment programs within the broad parameters of this policy.

6. Procedures

The controller [most senior financial staff person] and the senior executive will maintain cash management and investment programs as necessary to comply with the regulations and laws.

Ministry departments are permitted to have bank accounts to carry on their mandates, but excess funds are subject to this policy.

The ministry office controller and senior executive will

- Use outside professional money managers. The selection of managers and specific mutual funds will be the responsibility of the ministry office controller and senior executive.
- Report on investment results and allocation of funds will be provided to the ministry board and to the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA at least annually.

The ministry boards and the Finance Committee of the Council of Delegates will seek guest members as needed to enhance their ability to do this type of governance. The Christian Reformed Church in North America is fortunate to have a number of members who can provide broad guidance and oversight as needed.

The ministry office controller and senior executive will work with each ministry department to determine the appropriate investment pools to use to best meet the goals of the ministry department. If there is a difference of opinion, the parties can meet with the Finance Committee of COD for clarification and advice. If there is still no resolution, the decision will be made by the appropriate ministry board.

APPENDIX I**Condensed Financial Statements of the Agencies and Institutions****Schedule 1****THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Fiscal Year: 22-23****Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 6,643	\$ 2,349	\$ 504
Investments	\$ 63,546	\$ 58,491	\$ 68,328
Other	\$ 12,256	\$ 18,067	\$ 21,905
Total Assets	\$ 82,445	\$ 78,907	\$ 90,737
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 747	\$ 690	\$ 254
Other Payables	\$ 1,525	\$ 1,279	\$ 6,135
Total Payables	\$ 2,272	\$ 1,969	\$ 6,389
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 56,589	\$ 57,530	\$ 83,215
Unrestricted	\$ 23,584	\$ 19,408	\$ 1,133
Total Net Assets	\$ 80,173	\$ 76,938	\$ 84,348
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 82,445	\$ 78,907	\$ 90,737

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ 2,277	\$ 2,143	\$ 2,208	\$ 1,920	\$ 1,603
% of Total Income	30.6%	27.5%	27.4%	28.7%	24.7%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 1,365	\$ 1,330	\$ 1,386	\$ 1,848	\$ 1,753
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 171	\$ 198	\$ 300	\$ -	\$ 128
Total Gift Income	1,536	1,528	1,686	1,848	1,881
% of Total Income	20.7%	19.6%	20.9%	27.6%	29.0%
Other Income:					
Tuition/Sales	\$ 2,526	\$ 2,413	\$ 2,230	\$ 1,898	\$ 1,839
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 1,092	\$ 1,699	\$ 1,926	\$ 1,022	\$ 1,157
Total Other Income	3,618	4,112	4,156	2,920	2,996
% of Total Income	48.7%	52.8%	51.6%	43.7%	46.2%
TOTAL INCOME	7,430	7,783	8,051	6,688	6,480
EXPENSES					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ 5,139	\$ 5,274	\$ 4,877	\$ 4,904	\$ 2,657
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 625
Total Program Service	5,139	5,274	4,877	4,904	3,282
% of Total \$	76.8%	73.7%	68.9%	68.3%	44.0%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 995	\$ 902	\$ 1,162	\$ 1,330	\$ 3,003
Plant Operations	\$ 555	\$ 482	\$ 594	\$ 463	\$ 604
Fund-raising	\$ 573	\$ 494	\$ 447	\$ 480	\$ 575
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	1,550	1,878	2,203	2,273	4,182
% of Total Expenditures	23.2%	26.3%	31.1%	31.7%	56.0%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	6,689	7,152	7,080	7,177	7,464
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 741	\$ 631	\$ 971	\$ (489)	\$ (984)
Total Program Service FTE's	32	32	32	32	29
Total Support Service FTE's	16	16	16	16	14
TOTAL FTE's	48	48	48	48	43

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Calvin University
Balance Sheet (000s)

	20-21 Actual	21-22 Actual	22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 10,174	\$ 3,624	\$ 38,892
Investments	\$ 346,519	\$ 354,149	\$ 335,717
Other	\$ 229,681	\$ 225,129	\$ 226,976
Total Assets	\$ 586,374	\$ 582,902	\$ 601,585
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 3,860	\$ 2,967	\$ 4,287
Other Payables	\$ 131,477	\$ 128,545	\$ 119,823
Total Payables	\$ 135,337	\$ 131,512	\$ 124,110
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 177,219	\$ 176,642	\$ 304,395
Unrestricted	\$ 273,818	\$ 274,748	\$ 173,080
Total Net Assets	\$ 451,037	\$ 451,390	\$ 477,475
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 586,374	\$ 582,902	\$ 601,585

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Calvin University
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
INCOME:						
Ministry Share	\$ 2,221	\$ 2,075	\$ 2,436	\$ 2,102	\$ 1,801	\$ 1,442
% of Total Income	2.1%	2.1%	2.3%	2.4%	2.0%	1.7%
Other Gift Income:						
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 3,451	\$ 3,678	\$ 3,481	\$ 5,825	\$ 7,052	\$ 3,292
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	3,451	3,678	3,481	5,825	7,052	3,292
% of Total Income	3.3%	3.8%	3.4%	6.6%	8.0%	3.8%
Other Income:						
Tuition & Sales	\$ 92,175	\$ 82,887	\$ 93,626	\$ 75,976	\$ 73,199	\$ 70,455
Grants	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Miscellaneous	\$ 5,803	\$ 8,411	\$ 4,256	\$ 4,674	\$ 6,004	\$ 10,462
Total Other Income	97,978	91,298	97,882	80,650	79,203	80,917
% of Total Income	94.5%	94.1%	94.3%	91.1%	89.9%	94.5%
TOTAL INCOME	103,650	\$ 97,051	\$ 103,799	\$ 88,577	\$ 88,056	\$ 85,651
EXPENSES						
Program Services:						
Education	\$ 85,342	\$ 80,841	\$ 78,992	\$ 64,780	\$ 67,694	\$ 76,264
Interenational	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 85,342	\$ 80,841	\$ 78,992	\$ 64,780	\$ 67,694	\$ 76,264
% of Total Expenditures	82.8%	82.8%	76.6%	78.7%	81.3%	82.8%
Support Services:						
Management & General	\$ 2,105	\$ 2,302	\$ 8,326	\$ 2,327	\$ 2,713	\$ 2,890
Plant Operations	\$ 7,491	\$ 6,862	\$ 7,603	\$ 7,035	\$ 8,133	\$ 1,163
Fund-raising	\$ 2,817	\$ 2,298	\$ 2,898	\$ 2,898	\$ 2,137	\$ 9,060
Debt Service	\$ 5,355	\$ 5,326	\$ 5,300	\$ 5,300	\$ 2,600	\$ 2,774
Total Support Service	17,768	16,788	24,127	17,560	15,583	15,887
% of Total Expenditures	17.2%	17.2%	23.4%	21.3%	18.7%	17.2%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 103,110	\$ 97,629	\$ 103,119	\$ 82,340	\$ 83,277	\$ 92,151
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 540	\$ (578)	\$ 680	\$ 6,237	\$ 4,779	\$ (6,500)
Total Program Service FTE's	528	528	520	517	479	503
Total Support Service FTE's	143	143	135	132	120	126
TOTAL FTE's	671	671	655	649	599	629

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Central Services
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697
INCOME:			
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%
TOTAL INCOME	6,989	7,143	8,219
EXPENSES:			
Program Services:			
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%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 6,989	\$ 7,158	\$ 8,219
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ -	\$ (15)	\$ -
Total Program Service FTE's	45	43	41
Total Support Service FTE's	3	4	2
TOTAL FTE's	48	47	43

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Grants****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 2,254	\$ -	\$ 1,155
Investments	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Assets	\$ 2,254	\$ 2,618	\$ 1,155
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other Payables	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Payables	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 2,254	\$ 2,618	\$ 1,115
Unrestricted			
Total Net Assets	\$ 2,254	\$ 2,618	\$ 1,115
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 2,254	\$ 2,618	\$ 1,115

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Grants
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @ .7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @ .7430
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	\$ -	\$ 3	\$ 43	\$ 154
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	\$ -	\$ 3	\$ 43	\$ 154
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.2%	6.3%	31.3%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales	\$ 3	\$ -	\$ 348	\$ 338
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ 314	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 1,674	\$ 1,003	\$ 291	\$ -
Total Other Income	\$ 1,677	\$ 1,317	\$ 639	\$ 338
% of Total Income	5.8%	0.0%		
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 1,677	\$ 1,320	\$ 682	\$ 492
EXPENSES:				
Program Services:				
Education	\$ 1,798	\$ 1,644	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,104
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 1,798	\$ 1,644	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,104
% 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%	0.0%	0.0%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 1,798	\$ 1,644	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,104
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ (121)	\$ (324)	\$ (1,318)	\$ (612)
Total Program Service FTEs	2	2	2	1
Total Support Service FTEs	-	-	-	-
TOTAL FTEs	2	2	2	1

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
SUMMARY OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURES (in 000s of U.S.\$)
FISCAL YEAR ENDING IN 2023

	Ministry Share	Gift Income	Other Income	Total Income	Program Services	Support Services	Total Expenses	Planned Net Revenue (Expense)
Calvin Theological Seminary*	1,603 24.7%	1,881 29.0%	2,996 46.2%	6,480 100.0%	3,282 44.0%	4,182 56.0%	7,464 100.0%	(984)
Calvin University*	1,442 1.7%	3,292 3.8%	80,917 94.5%	85,651 100.0%	76,264 82.8%	15,887 17.2%	92,151 100.0%	(6,500)
Loan Fund*	- 0.0%	- 0.0%	551 100.0%	551 100.0%	261 54.5%	218 45.5%	479 100.0%	72
Office of General Secretary	3,107 75.1%	463 11.2%	567 13.7%	4,137 100.0%	1,535 31.1%	3,406 68.9%	4,941 100.0%	(804)
Resonate Global Missions	6,606 30.1%	11,910 54.2%	3,454 15.7%	21,970 100.0%	13,397 77.9%	3,792 22.1%	17,189 100.0%	4,781
ReFrame Ministries	1,392 21.4%	4,333 66.7%	775 11.9%	6,500 100.0%	4,002 68.7%	1,821 31.3%	5,823 100.0%	677
Thrive	5,383 72.4%	738 9.9%	1,318 17.7%	7,439 100.0%	5,772 85.1%	1,013 14.9%	6,785 100.0%	654
World Renew	- 0.0%	26,757 60.8%	17,252 39.2%	44,009 100.0%	35,796 82.6%	7,540 17.4%	43,336 100.0%	673
Total	19,533	49,374	107,830	176,737	140,309	37,859	178,168	(1,431)
	11.05%	27.94%	61.01%	100.00%	78.8%	21.2%	100.0%	

* denotes US only operations

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
SUMMARY OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURES (in 000s of U.S.\$)
CALENDAR YEAR ENDING IN 2023

	Ministry Share	Employer Contributions	Participant Contributions	Investment Earnings	Total Income	Distributions	Management General	Total Expenses	Planned Net Revenue (Expense)
Ministers Pension Fund Canada	-	597		(8,443)	(7,846)	3,186	895	4,081	(11,927)
	0.0%	-7.6%	0.0%	107.6%	100.0%	78.1%	21.9%	100.0%	
Ministers Pension Fund US	-	4,516		18,035	22,551	11,213	1,837	13,050	9,501
	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	80.0%	100.0%	85.9%	14.1%	100.0%	
Special Assistance Fund Canada	11	-		36	47	40	-	40	7
	23.4%	0.0%	0.0%	76.6%	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
Special Assistance Fund US	9	-		13	22	109	2	111	(89)
	40.9%	0.0%	0.0%	59.1%	100.0%	98.2%	1.8%	100.0%	
Total	20	5,113	-	9,641	14,774	14,548	2,734	17,282	(2,508)
	0.14%	34.61%	0.00%	65.26%	100.00%	84.2%	15.8%	100.0%	

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Loan Fund
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 6,350	\$ 9,263	\$ 3,982
Investments	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 3,500
Other	\$ 15,400	\$ 10,806	\$ 9,783
Total Assets	\$ 21,750	\$ 20,069	\$ 17,265
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 40	\$ 36	\$ 15
Other Payables	\$ 16,000	\$ 14,355	\$ 11,500
Total Payables	\$ 16,040	\$ 14,391	\$ 11,515
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Unrestricted	\$ 5,710	\$ 5,678	\$ 5,750
Total Net Assets	\$ 5,710	\$ 5,678	\$ 5,750
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 21,750	\$ 20,069	\$ 17,265

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Loan Fund
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	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%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Income:					
Tuition & Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Miscellaneous	\$ 852	\$ 831	\$ 771	\$ 718	\$ 551
Total Other Income	\$ 852	\$ 831	\$ 771	\$ 718	\$ 551
% of Total Income	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 852	\$ 831	\$ 771	\$ 718	\$ 551
EXPENSES:					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 400	\$ 1,017	\$ 521	\$ 321	\$ 261
Total Program Service	\$ 400	\$ 1,017	\$ 521	\$ 321	\$ 261
% of Total Expenditures	51.5%	81.6%	68.6%	44.1%	54.5%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 376	\$ 230	\$ 238	\$ 407	\$ 218
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 376	\$ 230	\$ 238	\$ 407	\$ 218
% of Total Expenditures	48.5%	18.4%	31.4%	55.9%	45.5%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 776	\$ 1,247	\$ 759	\$ 728	\$ 479
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 76	\$ (416)	\$ 12	\$ (10)	\$ 72
 Total Program Service FTEs					
Total Support Service FTEs	2	2	2	1	1
TOTAL FTEs	2	2	2	1	1

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	\$ 1,814	\$ 2,566
Investments	\$ 86,038	\$ 73,405
Other	\$ 81	\$ 81
Total Assets	\$ 87,933	\$ 76,052
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables	\$ 216	\$ 262
Total Payables	\$ 216	\$ 262
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	\$ 87,717	\$ 75,791
Total Net Assets	\$ 87,717	\$ 75,791
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 87,933	\$ 76,053

Schedule 2**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	MPF 2019 Actual	MPF 2020 Actual	MPF 2021 Actual	MPF 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	\$ 2,582	\$ 2,592	\$ 2,547	\$ 597
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 11,125	\$ 8,664	\$ 13,420	\$ (8,443)
TOTAL ADDITIONS	13,707	11,256	15,967	(7,846)
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	\$ 2,943	\$ 3,018	\$ 3,098	\$ 3,186
Management & General	\$ 891	\$ 952	\$ 1,086	\$ 895
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	\$ 3,834	\$ 3,970	\$ 4,184	\$ 4,081
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION)	\$ 9,873	\$ 7,286	\$ 11,783	\$ (11,927)

TOTAL FTE's	1	1	1	1
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FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US) (MPF-US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual	Year 2023 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 4,128	\$ 4,863	\$ 5,181
Investments	\$ 138,124	\$ 111,698	\$120,135
Other	\$ 240	\$ 944	\$ 346
Total Assets	\$ 142,492	\$ 117,505	\$125,662
Liabilities			
Trade Payables			
Other Payables	\$ 70	\$ 236	\$ 16
Total Payables	\$ 70	\$ 236	\$ 16
Net Assets			
Donor Designated			
Unrestricted	\$ 142,422	\$ 117,269	\$125,646
Total Net Assets	\$ 142,422	\$ 117,269	\$125,646
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 142,492	\$ 117,505	\$125,662

Schedule 2**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US) (MPF-US)****Additions and Deductions (000s)**

	Year 2019 Actual	Year 2020 Actual	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	\$ 5,117	\$ 5,037	\$ 4,914	\$ 4,701
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 21,122	\$ 15,010	\$ 23,995	\$ (18,046)
TOTAL ADDITIONS	26,239	20,047	28,909	(13,345)
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	\$ 10,271	\$ 10,570	\$ 10,636	\$ 10,718
Management & General	\$ 1,176	\$ 1,223	\$ 1,545	\$ 1,090
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	\$ 11,447	\$ 11,793	\$ 12,181	\$ 11,808
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION)	\$ 14,792	\$ 8,254	\$ 16,728	\$ (25,153)

TOTAL FTE's	2	3	3	2
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FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Office of General Secretary/Cong Min****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 6,905	\$ 8,699	\$ 7,503
Investments	\$ 1,062	\$ (932)	\$ (876)
Other	\$ 6,492	8,319	6,485
Total Assets	\$ 14,459	\$ 16,086	\$ 13,112
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 582	\$ 226	\$ 516
Other Payables	\$ 2,722	\$ 2,363	\$ 2,614
Total Payables	\$ 3,304	\$ 2,589	\$ 3,130
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 377	\$ 215	\$ 175
Unrestricted	\$ 10,778	\$ 13,282	\$ 9,807
Total Net Assets	\$ 11,155	\$ 13,497	\$ 9,982
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 14,459	\$ 16,086	\$ 13,112

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Office of General Secretary
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @ .7430
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ 2,300	\$ 2,283	\$ 2,694	\$ 2,658	\$ 3,107
% of Total Income	54.5%	34.1%	44.7%	69.0%	75.1%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 306	\$ -	\$ 150	\$ 595	\$ 463
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 3	\$ -	\$ -
Total Gift Income	\$ 306	\$ -	\$ 153	\$ 595	\$ 463
% of Total Income	7.2%	0.0%	2.5%	15.5%	11.2%
Other Income:					
Tuition & Sales	\$ 63	\$ 1,592	\$ 24	\$ 461	\$ 435
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ 1,573	\$ 1,131	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Misellaneous	\$ 1,554	\$ 1,246	\$ 2,026	\$ 136	\$ 132
Total Other Income	\$ 1,617	\$ 4,411	\$ 3,181	\$ 597	\$ 567
% of Total Income	38.3%	65.9%	52.8%	15.5%	13.7%
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 4,223	\$ 6,694	\$ 6,028	\$ 3,850	\$ 4,137
EXPENSES:					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ 1,670	\$ 1,169	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 199	\$ 1,403	\$ 1,535
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 35	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 1,705	\$ 1,169	\$ 199	\$ 1,403	\$ 1,535
% of Total Expenditures	52.7%	16.6%	4.5%	31.1%	31.1%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 1,304	\$ 3,768	\$ 4,236	\$ 3,113	\$ 3,406
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	\$ -	\$ 1,822	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 224	\$ 293	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 1,528	\$ 5,883	\$ 4,236	\$ 3,113	\$ 3,406
% of Total Expenditures	47.3%	83.4%	95.5%	68.9%	68.9%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 3,233	\$ 7,052	\$ 4,435	\$ 4,516	\$ 4,941
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 990	\$ (358)	\$ 1,593	\$ (666)	\$ (804)
Total Program Service FTE's	11	11	9	7	11
Total Support Service FTE's	-	-	-	18	6
TOTAL FTE's	11	11	9	25	17

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: ReFrame Ministries****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 2,750	\$ 4,170	\$ 3,758
Investments	\$ 8,350	\$ 8,563	\$ 9,264
Other	\$ 663	\$ 727	\$ 1,294
Total Assets	\$ 11,763	\$ 13,460	\$ 14,316
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 183	\$ 67	\$ 116
Other Payables	\$ 450	\$ 631	\$ 509
Total Payables	\$ 633	\$ 698	\$ 625
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 1,418	\$ 1,637	\$ 1,767
Unrestricted	\$ 9,712	\$ 11,125	\$ 11,924
Total Net Assets	11,130	12,762	13,691
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 11,763	\$ 13,460	\$ 14,316

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: ReFrame Ministries
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @.7430
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ 2,795	\$ 2,611	\$ 2,709	2,182	1,392
% of Total Income	28.8%	29.8%	26.7%	30.4%	21.4%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 3,259	\$ 3,365	\$ 3,598	\$ 3,422	\$ 2,518
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 3,280	\$ 2,035	\$ 2,188	\$ 2,246	\$ 1,815
Total Gift Income	6,539	5,400	5,786	5,668	4,333
% of Total Income	67.5%	61.6%	57.0%	78.9%	66.7%
Other Income:					
Tuition/Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 357	\$ 750	\$ 1,664	\$ (669)	\$ 775
Total Other Income	357	750	1,664	(669)	775
% of Total Income	3.7%	8.6%	16.4%	-9.3%	11.9%
TOTAL INCOME	9,691	8,761	10,159	7,181	6,500
EXPENSES					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ 165	\$ 120	\$ 75	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ 3,093	\$ 3,130	\$ 2,774	\$ 2,840	\$ 1,893
Domestic Ministries	\$ 2,257	\$ 2,400	\$ 2,299	\$ 2,775	\$ 2,109
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 5,515	\$ 5,650	\$ 5,148	\$ 5,615	\$ 4,002
% of Total Expenditures	69.5%	69.0%	70.7%	70.9%	68.7%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 880	\$ 990	\$ 887	\$ 906	\$ 843
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 1,538	\$ 1,545	\$ 1,246	\$ 1,404	\$ 978
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	2,418	2,535	2,133	2,310	1,821
% of Total Expenditures	30.5%	31.0%	29.3%	29.1%	31.3%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 7,933	\$ 8,185	\$ 7,281	\$ 7,925	\$ 5,823
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 1,758	\$ 576	\$ 2,878	\$ (744)	\$ 677
Total Program Service FTE's	21	20	18	24	21
Total Support Service FTE's	10	10	12	6	14
TOTAL FTE's	31	30	30	30	35

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Resonate Global Mission****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 6,415	\$ 6,024	\$ 5,850
Investments	\$ 18,376	\$ 16,822	\$ 15,821
Other	\$ 556	\$ 414	\$ 2
Total Assets	\$ 25,347	\$ 23,260	\$ 21,673
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 1,388	\$ 644	\$ 680
Other Payables	\$ 773	\$ 1,688	\$ 1,347
Total Payables	\$ 2,161	\$ 2,332	\$ 2,027
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 4,456	\$ 4,495	\$ 8,738
Unrestricted	\$ 18,730	\$ 16,433	\$ 10,908
Total Net Assets	\$ 23,186	\$ 20,928	\$ 19,646
Total Liab's, NetAssets	\$ 25,347	\$ 23,260	\$ 21,673

Schedule 2

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Agency: Resonate Global Mission

Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @.7430
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ 6,792	\$ 6,343	\$ 6,606	5,229	2,168
% of Total Income	32.9%	30.3%	30.1%	32.5%	13.8%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 9,923	\$ 10,196	\$ 10,183	\$ 11,071	\$ 10,194
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 3,135	\$ 2,701	\$ 1,727	\$ 1,124	\$ 1,582
Total Gift Income	\$ 13,058	\$ 12,897	\$ 11,910	\$ 12,195	\$ 11,776
% of Total Income	63.3%	61.6%	54.2%	75.7%	75.2%
Other Income:					
Tuition/Sales	\$ 75	\$ 38	\$ 21	\$ 175	\$ 58
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 715	\$ 1,651	\$ 3,433	\$ (1,489)	\$ 1,653
Total Other Income	\$ 790	\$ 1,689	\$ 3,454	\$ (1,314)	\$ 1,711
% of Total Income	3.8%	8.1%	15.7%	-8.2%	10.9%
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 20,640	\$ 20,929	\$ 21,970	\$ 16,110	\$ 15,655
EXPENSES (FTE = Full Time Employee):					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ 846	\$ 770	\$ 636	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ 10,119	\$ 9,459	\$ 8,902	\$ 9,908	\$ 11,114
Domestic Ministries	\$ 4,262	\$ 4,122	\$ 2,331	\$ 4,180	\$ 4,906
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,528	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 15,227	\$ 14,351	\$ 13,397	\$ 14,088	\$ 16,020
% of Total Expenditures	79%	77%	78%	76%	78%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 1,641	\$ 1,796	\$ 1,819	\$ 2,175	\$ 2,715
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 2,338	\$ 2,439	\$ 1,973	\$ 2,240	\$ 1,874
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service \$	\$ 3,979	\$ 4,235	\$ 3,792	\$ 4,415	\$ 4,589
% of Total \$	20.7%	22.8%	22.1%	23.9%	22.3%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 19,206	\$ 18,586	\$ 17,189	\$ 18,503	\$ 20,609
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 1,434	\$ 2,343	\$ 4,781	\$ (2,393)	\$ (4,954)
Total Program Service FTEs					
	77	81	81	72	74
Total Support Service FTEs					
	25	23	23	27	24
	102	104	104	99	98

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars) (SAF-CA)****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual	Year 2023 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 417	\$ 396	\$ 390
Investments	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 1	\$ -	\$ -
Total Assets	\$ 418	\$ 396	\$ 390
Liabilities			
Trade Payables			
Other Payables	\$ 10	\$ -	\$ -
Total Payables	\$ 10	\$ -	\$ -
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Unrestricted	\$ 408	\$ 396	\$ 390
Total Net Assets	\$ 408	\$ 396	\$ 390
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 418	\$ 396	\$ 390

Schedule 2**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA**

Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars) (SAF-CA)

Additions and Deductions (000s)

	SAF 2019 Actual	SAF 2020 Actual	SAF 2021 Actual	SAF 2022 Actual	SAF 2023 Actual
ADDITIONS:					
Employer Contributions	\$ 85	\$ 87	\$ 63	\$ 6	\$ 11
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Investment Earnings	\$ 6	\$ 5	\$ 4	\$ 16	\$ 36
TOTAL ADDITIONS	91	92	67	22	47
DEDUCTIONS:					
Distributions	\$ 23	\$ 28	\$ 107	\$ 34	\$ 40
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	\$ 23	\$ 28	\$ 107	\$ 34	\$ 40
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION)	\$ 68	\$ 64	\$ (40)	\$ (12)	\$ 7

TOTAL FTE's - - - - -

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1**THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA****Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US) (SAF-US)****Balance Sheet (000s)**

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual	Year 2023 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 290	\$ 186	\$ 170
Investments	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ 37	\$ 36	\$ 35
Total Assets	\$ 327	\$ 222	\$ 205
Liabilities			
Trade Payables			
Other Payables	\$ 28	\$ -	\$ -
Total Payables	\$ 28	\$ -	\$ -
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Unrestricted	\$ 299	\$ 222	\$ 205
Total Net Assets	\$ 299	\$ 222	\$ 205
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 327	\$ 222	\$ 205

Schedule 2

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US)

Additions and Deductions (000s)

	Year 2019 Actual	Year 2020 Actual	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual	Year 2023 Actual
ADDITIONS:					
Employer Contributions	\$ 162	\$ 159	\$ 137	9	9
Participant Contributions	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -		
Investment Earnings	\$ 2	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 13
TOTAL ADDITIONS	164	159	137	9	22
DEDUCTIONS:					
Distributions	\$ 105	\$ 92	\$ 74	87	109
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1	\$ 1	\$ 2
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	\$ 105	\$ 92	\$ 75	\$ 88	\$ 111
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION)	\$ 59	\$ 67	\$ 62	\$ (79)	\$ (89)

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: Thrive (Cong Min)
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @.7430
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ 4,960	\$ 4,812	\$ 4,926	\$ 5,228	\$ 5,383
% of Total Income	43.9%	46.1%	69.1%	74.1%	72.4%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 1,442	\$ 2,105	\$ 882	\$ 758	\$ 682
Disaster Gifts	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Estate Gifts	\$ 2	\$ -	\$ 20	\$ 7	\$ 56
Total Gift Income	\$ 1,444	\$ 2,105	\$ 902	\$ 765	\$ 738
% of Total Income	12.8%	20.2%	12.7%	10.8%	9.9%
Other Income:					
Tuition/Sales	\$ 4,730	\$ 3,525	\$ 559	\$ 958	\$ 1,122
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 164	\$ -	\$ 742	\$ 101	\$ 196
Total Other Income	\$ 4,894	\$ 3,525	\$ 1,301	\$ 1,059	\$ 1,318
% of Total Income	43.3%	33.8%	18.2%	15.0%	17.7%
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 11,298	\$ 10,442	\$ 7,129	\$ 7,052	\$ 7,439
EXPENSES:					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
International	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Domestic Ministries	\$ 11,429	\$ 11,771	\$ 6,312	\$ 6,225	\$ 5,772
Disaster	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Program Service	\$ 11,429	\$ 11,771	\$ 6,312	\$ 6,225	\$ 5,772
% of Total Expenditures	95.6%	100.0%	88.1%	90.8%	85.1%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 560	\$ 192	\$ 609
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 523	\$ -	\$ 294	\$ 436	\$ 404
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Total Support Service	\$ 523	\$ -	\$ 854	\$ 628	\$ 1,013
% of Total Expenditures	4.4%	0.0%	11.9%	9.2%	14.9%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 11,952	\$ 11,771	\$ 7,166	\$ 6,853	\$ 6,785
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ (654)	\$ (1,329)	\$ (37)	\$ 199	\$ 654
Total Program Service FTE's	54	55	51	24	17
Total Support Service FTE's	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL FTE's	54	55	51	24	18

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: World Renew
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual	Fiscal 22-23 Actual
Assets			
Cash	\$ 4,886	\$ 15,095	\$ 24,000
Investments	\$ 27,908	\$ 20,197	\$ 26,501
Other	\$ 3,299	\$ 8,122	\$ 7,888
Total Assets	\$ 36,093	\$ 43,414	\$ 58,389
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	\$ 1,133	\$ 1,860	\$ 1,721
Other Payables	\$ 259	\$ 3,000	\$ 2,668
Total Payables	\$ 1,392	\$ 4,860	\$ 4,389
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	\$ 12,948	\$ 16,627	\$ 15,354
Unrestricted	\$ 21,753	\$ 21,927	\$ 38,646
Total Net Assets	\$ 34,701	\$ 38,554	\$ 54,000
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 36,093	\$ 43,414	\$ 58,389

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Agency: World Renew
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760	Fiscal 22-23 Actual @.7430
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
% of Total Income	-	-	-	-	-
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	\$ 12,093	\$ 12,226	\$ 13,588	\$ 15,941	\$ 14,581
Disaster Gifts	\$ 12,318	\$ 13,897	\$ 13,918	\$ 20,122	\$ 6,486
Estate Gifts	\$ 5,397	\$ 2,877	\$ 3,480	\$ 5,650	\$ 5,690
Total Gift Income	29,808	\$ 29,000	\$ 30,986	\$ 41,713	\$ 26,757
% of Total Income	90.8%	88.9%	84.1%	101.5%	60.8%
Other Income:					
Tuition/Sales	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 51
Agency Services	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 81
Grants/Miscellaneous	\$ 3,035	\$ 3,625	\$ 5,862	\$ (636)	\$ 17,120
Total Other Income	\$ 3,035	\$ 3,625	\$ 5,862	\$ (636)	\$ 17,252
% of Total Income	9.2%	11.1%	15.9%	-1.5%	39.2%
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 32,843	\$ 32,625	\$ 36,848	\$ 41,077	\$ 44,009
EXPENSES:					
Program Services:					
Education	\$ 1,443	\$ 1,993	\$ 1,924	\$ 1,890	\$ 1,997
International	\$ 11,273	\$ 11,765	\$ 11,339	\$ 12,015	\$ 12,769
Domestic Ministries	\$ 312	\$ 372	\$ 254	\$ 253	\$ 270
Disaster	\$ 13,974	\$ 15,614	\$ 14,784	\$ 16,728	\$ 20,495
Other	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 265
Total Program Service	\$ 27,002	\$ 29,744	\$ 28,301	\$ 30,886	\$ 35,796
% of Total Expenditures	84.7%	83.9%	82.2%	82.5%	82.6%
Support Services:					
Management & General	\$ 1,892	\$ 1,982	\$ 2,048	\$ 2,384	\$ 3,288
Plant Operations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Fund-raising	\$ 2,974	\$ 3,710	\$ 4,083	\$ 4,170	\$ 4,088
Debt Service	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 164
Total Support Service \$	4,866	\$ 5,692	\$ 6,131	\$ 6,554	\$ 7,540
% of Total Expenditures	15.3%	16.1%	17.8%	17.5%	17.4%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 31,868	\$ 35,436	\$ 34,432	\$ 37,440	\$ 43,336
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	\$ 975	\$ (2,811)	\$ 2,416	\$ 3,637	\$ 673
Total Program Service FTEs	69	78	56	89	68
Total Support Service FTEs	36	37	19	31	45
TOTAL FTEs	105	115	75	120	113

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 in North America.

Zachary J. King
General Secretary of the CRCNA

Calvin Theological Seminary

I. Introduction – Mission statement

The Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees presents this report to Synod 2024 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 (CTS) has been involved in the training, teaching, and formation of students for ministry for 148 years since 1876 and was the very first agency or institution developed by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. As God so leads, we look forward to a 150th-anniversary celebration of God’s faithfulness and for affirming the tie between church and seminary.

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. Highlights from the past ministry year

We continue to be grateful for our fully remodeled building facility featuring updated technology and collaborative learning spaces that serve residential students, online students, and students in “flex” learning situations, where both residential and online students meet in the same classroom.

We are grateful as well for the investment made many years ago in an online delivery system of education as we mark our 10-year anniversary of providing “distance” learning. More than ever, a Calvin Theological Seminary education is just a “click” away.

May 20, 2023, marked only the second in-person CTS commencement since 2019 because of the pandemic. We were able to celebrate the completion of programs of study for 46 graduates attending from twelve different nations: Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Myanmar, South Korea, and the United States.

Another highlight was the presentation and approval of two faculty candidates at Synod 2023: Dr. Danny Daley, now serving as assistant professor of New Testament; and Dr. Gabriela Tijerina-Pike, now serving as associate professor of New Testament and director of Latino Ministries.

The Latino Ministry Program 2.0 is an online Spanish-language certificate program that can lead to a master of arts in leadership formation program while embodying values of hospitality, excellence, and accessibility. For more information on these new faculty members, see the following articles published in *The Banner*:

- thebanner.org/news/2023/06/daniel-daley-appointed-assistant-professor-of-new-testament
- thebanner.org/news/2023/06/gabriela-tijerina-pike-joins-calvin-theological-seminary-as-latino-ministry-director

At the time of this writing, a faculty search in the area of theology is occurring as Dr. Mary Vandenberg has provided notice of her intention to retire in July 2025. We anticipate an update on this search to be presented by way of our supplemental report to Synod 2024.

Calvin Theological Seminary's new master of arts in clinical mental health counseling (MCMHC) degree launched this past fall (2023). The professional and theologically grounded degree offers coursework in religious and theological foundations, clinical counseling, and clinical practice. Graduates of the program could serve as clinical mental health therapists, clinical mental health counselors, addiction counselors, behavior counselors, or in other mental health roles.

Dr. Danjuma Gibson, who directs this program, said the goal is "to train students who will be competent and skilled in the ethical integration of Christian faith, spirituality, and counseling in a way that promotes healing and shalom in the lives of individuals and communities." If you would like to know more about this program, please contact Dr. Gibson at dgg085@calvinseminary.edu.

The Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP), directed by Scott Hoezee, received an additional grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., bringing nearly \$1.25 million in total grant receipts for the Compelling Preaching Initiative. The Lilly Endowment grant will provide CEP with resources to explore how to "tune-up tried and true and to build new skill sets" in preaching and to develop resources for pastors to help them surmount communication challenges that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. The additional grant will also help support our work in Latino/a ministry for resources in Spanish.

During the fall 2023 semester, CTS launched a competency-based theological education (CBTE) program called Empower. This program offers students the opportunity to earn a certificate or a master of arts in Christian leadership degree by demonstrating competence in program outcomes. This approach is designed to make ministry training more collaborative, flexible, accessible, and integrated.

During the pilot phase of this program, enrollment is initially limited to students participating through contextualized partnerships with Grand Valley State University Campus Ministry (Grand Rapids, Mich.) and Sunlight Community Church (Port St. Lucie, Fla.). Students work with a CTS faculty mentor and two partner mentors to complete learning experiences that develop competence—head, hands, and heart—for ministry. Our partners

provide contextualized learning experiences, localized mentoring, and regular and substantive student support.

To learn more about CBTE as well as our new Life-Long Learning initiative, please contact Dr. Aaron Einfeld at ame084@calvinseminary.edu.

This past year, the Calvin Seminary Faculty and Board of Trustees decided to partner with the Missional Training Center (MTC), which provides Reformed theological education in Phoenix, Arizona.

The MTC is an outgrowth of the Surge Network (surgenetwork.com), an association of more than 100 churches in the greater Phoenix area working together to train laity to be effective witnesses. Ten years ago the Surge Network started MTC in order to provide more in-depth leadership training through a master of arts in missional theology program. Dr. Michael Goheen was the founding professor and serves as MTC's current director of theological education. Dr. Goheen previously served on the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary, as well as on the faculties of Dordt University and Redeemer University, and he is an ordained pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Sixty-five students are currently enrolled at MTC. For more information about MTC, see missionaltraining.org.

This partnership strengthens both CTS and MTC. For example, MTC's missional curriculum and supporting churches will assist CTS and the CRCNA in their ongoing efforts to equip pastors and laity for effective witness in the world. The partnership will also expand the visibility of CTS in new churches and to potential students who are interested in Reformed education. MTC will be an extension site of CTS, and CTS's accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools will extend to MTC's program. The partnership is pending final approval by the Association of Theological Schools.

At present, Calvin Theological Seminary is exploring the opportunity to build new residential housing on property it has owned for nearly twenty years across Burton Street from the existing campus. A recent sale of housing apartments off 28th Street has also allowed us to look at providing long-term housing that meets long-term needs, is safe, convenient, and affordable to students. We are considering, as well, how to address remodeling needs at some other housing units (Bavinck, Berkhof, Kuyper, Sigma, and Omega buildings) that we have available near the edge of campus.

Finally, we want to acknowledge and give thanks for the ongoing, faithful support we receive 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. Response to a Synod 2023 matter deferred to Synod 2024—

Statement of Confessional Commitment

At Synod 2023, Advisory Committee 8 in its majority report presented the following recommendation: “That synod encourage Calvin Theological Seminary to clarify its position on synod’s decision regarding the confessional status on same-sex marriage by December 2023” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1037).

While this item was among many others deferred to Synod 2024, the topic had already been considered by the CTS faculty and the CTS Board of Trustees before being presented at Synod 2023.

At its business meeting on February 3, 2023, the Calvin Theological Seminary faculty had approved the following statement:

A Statement on Our Confessional Commitment by the CTS Faculty

Since 1876, Calvin Theological Seminary has been the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Its teaching faculty have been interviewed and approved by synod, and its faculty have served the church in numerous capacities, including service as advisors to synod.

As CTS faculty committed to the Covenant for Officebearers, we profess the teachings of Scripture summarized by the Reformed confessions as interpreted by the decisions of synod. We commit to teaching, preaching, counseling, and writing within these covenantal bounds, whether in the classroom, church, or beyond.

We hold a variety of opinions and ideas on many matters, including past and possible future decisions of synod, and we are encouraged to express these views via official channels such as through overtures or communications from the congregations and classes to which we belong, through raising thoughtful questions for the church to ponder in future deliberations, or through theological conversations as a faculty, with the understanding that such communications will not undermine our good standing with one another as faculty.

CTS Faculty Minute #9354: The faculty reviewed and discussed the “Statement on Our Confessional Commitments by the CTS Faculty.” A motion was made and seconded to approve the Statement and share it with the Board of Trustees for information. *Adopted.*

At the CTS Board of Trustees meeting on October 27, 2023, the board again reviewed and approved the above statement. The board then proceeded to adopt the statement as its own and directed that this statement should be included in its Calvin Theological Seminary report to Synod 2024.

We believe that these actions and this statement are in keeping with the request to clarify the ongoing confessional commitment of both the CTS faculty and the CTS Board of Trustees.

IV. 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 are represented in the student body of Calvin Theological

Seminary. This past year nearly 45 percent of our degree-seeking students came from outside the U.S. and Canada. 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 (M.Div.) degree, which helps to form preachers and teachers of the gospel.

In addition to the foregoing, Calvin Theological Seminary recently retained the consulting services of Mr. Chris Bosch of Chisel Strategic Planning. Following a process of data review, personal interviews, surveys to stakeholders, and work with a strategic planning team, the goal is to develop a focused strategic plan as we enter into a key period of celebration and challenge at CTS.

V. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025*

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—led by director Geoff Vandermolen, associate director Samantha DeJong McCarron, administrative coordinator Chris Wright, and administrative coordinator Jennifer DeJong—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:

- Bethel CRC, Brockville, Ontario
- Bethel CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Bradenton CRC, Bradenton, Florida
- Brookside CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Caledonia CRC, Caledonia, Michigan
- Calvin CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cascade Fellowship, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Christ Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Church of the Servant, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Creston Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Eagle's Wings Church, Holland, Michigan
 Encounter Church, Kentwood, Michigan
 Faith on 44th Street, Kentwood, Michigan
 Fuller Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 First CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Heritage CRC, Byron Center, Michigan
 Korean Faith Community Church, Wyoming, Michigan
 Korean Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Lee Street CRC, Wyoming, Michigan
 Living Water CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Maranatha CRC, Cambridge, Ontario
 MountainView CRC, Grimsby, Ontario
 Mouw Institute/ Worship for Workers—Fuller Theological Seminary
 Princeton CRC, Kentwood, Michigan
 ReFrame Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 River Rock Church, Rockford, Michigan
 Seymour CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Shanghai Luke Church, Shanghai, China
 Sunlight Ministries, Port St. Lucie, Florida
 Sussex CRC, Sussex, New Jersey

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:

Albuquerque Chinese Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico
 Dominican Center, Marywood, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 East African Christian College, Kigali, Rwanda
 Grand Rapids Chinese Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
 Hope Pregnancy and Family Support Centre, Brantford, Ontario
 Monastery of Christ in the Desert, New Mexico
 Ray of Hope, Kitchener, Ontario
 Reformed Presbyterian Fellowship, Shanghai, China
 Second CRC, Fremont, Michigan
 Soroti, Uganda (Resonate Ministries)
 Tears of Eden, St. Louis, Missouri
 The Way, Saint Paul, Minnesota
 The Refuge, Oshawa, Ontario

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 (vocationalformation@calvinseminary.edu or 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 Scott Hoezee. CEP continues to serve as one of the premier Reformed preaching sites in North America (cepreaching.org). In 2024 CEP will mark the twentieth anniversary of its founding. 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 spark 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 resources, including weekly contributions by a team of writers and translators. Every week new sermon commentaries are made available in English, Spanish, and Korean. The monthly traffic to the CEP website has risen dramatically in the past two years. In 2023 the website surpassed 1 million visits, and the monthly number of different visitors to the site is consistently upwards of 70,000, with one month in 2023 setting a record of 81,400 unique visitors. We are grateful for the international reputation of CEP.

CEP is also overseeing a grant program from Lilly Endowment Inc. called "The Compelling Preaching Initiative." The five-year grant program will include on-campus colloquia and seminars but has a primary focus of overseeing Peer Learning Groups of pastors who gather at least four times per year to discuss assigned topics that tie in with the challenges and opportunities for preaching in today's world and culture. In 2023 sixteen groups were convened involving around 165 pastors from a wide ecumenical array. In fall 2023 CEP was granted another \$250,000 to begin a Spanish-speaking component to the program in 2024. This will be done in partnership with Latino Ministries director Gabriela Tijerina-Pike.

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, Burlington, and Peterborough, Ontario.

Rev. Brix has been a key encourager and staff support, coming alongside donors in the development of a new initiative whereby tuition for Canadian students will be at par between Canadian and U.S. dollars. We are grateful for this opportunity to remove one of the key barriers for Canadian students in their discernment about attending Calvin Seminary.

VI. Additional program and ministry highlights

Calvin Theological Seminary moved forward into the following new key initiatives:

1. Lilly Endowment Inc. recently opened a grant program called “Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative” to aid seminaries as we look toward an uncertain future. CTS is one of 234 schools to receive a planning grant and one of 84 schools (out of the 234) to receive a million-dollar grant in response to our 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 award helps us take more and even new steps in that service! A press release listing funded proposals is available at 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 lifelong education from Michigan State University, and his doctoral research focused on adult learning and development in online environments.

2. CTS recently completed its master of arts and master of divinity curriculum revision.

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 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.

3. During the fall 2023 semester, CTS launched a competency-based theological education (CBTE) program called Empower. This program offers students the opportunity to earn a certificate or a master of arts in Christian leadership by demonstrating competence in program outcomes. This approach is designed to make ministry training more collaborative, flexible, accessible, and integrated.

As we near the end of a pilot phase, we are seeking additional opportunities and partnerships. Our partners provide contextualized learning experiences, localized mentoring, and regular and substantive student support.

4. The doctor of ministry program at CTS continues to develop with programming, coursework, and student research in service of effective ministry praxis across a plurality of contexts. The expectation is that the first program graduates be granted their degrees in spring 2024 (see calvin-seminary.edu/academics/doctor-of-ministry).
5. 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 94 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, 60 students have

earned bachelor's degrees, and 87 students have earned associate degrees in faith and community leadership. Program graduates serve prison communities across Michigan from Muskegon to Jackson 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. Seven of our formation group leaders are pastors, and eight are seminary faculty/administration members. They include Ruth Boven, Gloria Curry, Cara DeHaan, Samantha DeJong McCarron, Dorothy Jenkins, Layne Kilbreath, Jessica Maddox, David Rylaarsdam, Heather Strooboscher, Albert Strydhorst, and Lisa Taylor.

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.

VII. Administration

The seminary administration includes Rev. Julius Medenblik, president; Dr. Margaret Mwenda, chief operating officer; Dr. Yudha Thianto, chief academic officer; Joan Beelen, dean of academic services and registrar; Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, director of vocational formation; Robert Knor, director of development; Rev. Jeff Sajdak, dean of students; and Sarah Chun, dean of international students and scholar services.

VIII. Faculty

The seminary faculty continues to serve the church in numerous ways. Although 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.

IX. Board of trustees

The board met in plenary session online in October 2023 and via conference call in February 2024. It plans to hold an in-person/flex plenary session in May 2024.

The board officers are Dave Morren, chair; Scott Greenway, vice-chair; and Susan Keesen, secretary.

Trustee Julius Umawing (Region 6) is completing his first term on the board and is eligible for reappointment to a second three-year term. The board recommends that synod reappoint him to an additional three-year term.

Trustee Arthur J. Van Wolde (Region 10) is completing his first term on the board and is eligible for reappointment for a second three-year term. The board recommends that synod reappoint him for an additional term.

Regional at-large trustee Brian Verheul (Region 4) is completing his first term on the board and is eligible for reappointment for a second three-year term. The board recommends that synod reappoint him for an additional term.

Completing a second term on the board are Theresa Rottschäfer (Region 7), Robert Drenten (Region 8), Charles Veenstra (Region 8 at-large), Paul Boersma (Region 9) and David Morren (Region 11 at-large). We are grateful for their service and wise counsel to the seminary and to the church.

The following dual nominees have been submitted to the classes in various regions for a vote. The results of the election will be presented to Synod 2024 for ratification.

Region 7 – clergy

Rev. Daniel Bud is the senior pastor of Cragmor CRC in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and has served there since 2021. From 2009 to 2021, he served as a pastor at Hillside Community CRC in Cutlerville, Michigan. Rev. Bud graduated with a M.Div. degree from Calvin Seminary in 2009. As someone who was born and raised in Romania, he notes with understanding the challenges of being an international student at Calvin Theological Seminary. Besides church and classis responsibilities, Rev. Bud has been active in Alpha ministry and was a member of the regional Alpha Board in West Michigan. He also served as cochair of the counseling committee for CityFest West Michigan in 2018 for an event with the Luis Palau Association.

Rev. Joel Schreurs has served as the senior pastor of First Christian Reformed Church in Denver, Colorado, since 2006. He took up that charge following his graduation with an M.Div. degree from Calvin Seminary in 2006. Rev. Schreurs served as chair of the Classis Rocky Mountain interim committee (2007-2013) and currently serves as chair of the Classis Rocky Mountain ministerial leadership team (2016-present). In 2023, Rev. Schreurs completed a D.Min. degree from Fuller Theological Seminary.

Region 8 – clergy

Rev. John Lee has served as the senior pastor of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa, since 2009. Between college and seminary, he served with Resonate/World Renew in Nicaragua (2001-2004) at the Nehemiah Center, including work with the Nicaraguan CRC to develop a theological education program for pastors. Rev. Lee has served on the

Dordt University Board of Trustees (2010-2020), the Classis Iakota interim committee (2017-2023), the Classis Iakota ministerial leadership team (2009-2016), and the CRCNA Council of Delegates (2018-2024).

Rev. Brian Ochsner has served as the lead pastor of Faith Christian Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa, since 2021. Previously he served as a pastor at Brookside CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and in Sully, Iowa, following his graduation from Calvin Theological Seminary in 2006. Rev. Ochsner has served in various capacities, including the CRCNA Council of Delegates (5 years), the COD Congregational Ministries Subcommittee (chair—3 years), the classical interim committee (chair—6 years), and the classical finance team (chair—6 years). He currently serves as a regional pastor for Classis Central Plains.

Region 9 – clergy

Rev. Derek Buikema has served as the lead pastor of Orland Park (Ill.) Christian Reformed Church since his ordination in 2013. He served as vice-president of Synod 2022 and as a synodical delegate in 2016. He is currently chair of the Classis Chicago South ministerial leadership team and is a member of the Classis Chicago South interim committee.

Rev. Joshua Christoffels has served as the senior pastor of Hammond (Ind.) CRC since 2021. Previously he served the Chandler (Minn.) CRC from the time of his ordination in 2015. Rev. Christoffels has served as a Home Missions committee member, classical church visitor, outreach committee member, and worship committee chair. He was also a teacher and earned a master's degree in education from the University of Sioux Falls in 2008. He served as a university English teacher in partnership with Resonate Global Mission in China from 2002-2004 and again from 2009-2010 before studying for his master of divinity degree.

Regions 8, 10, and 11 – at-large

Regional at-large nominees are presented by the CTS Board of Trustees to synod for appointment.

Synod has approved that Calvin Theological Seminary is permitted to present a single nomination where a region has multiple trustee positions. The CTS Board of Trustees hopes to present such at-large nominees for regions 8, 10 and 11 for approval by synod by way of the supplemental report to Synod 2024.

X. Students 2023-2024

The composition of the seminary's student body indicates a growing national and ethnic diversity. The following statistics from fall 2023 indicate the impact the seminary is having beyond the Christian Reformed Church:

A. Denominational affiliation

Christian Reformed: 137 (45%)

Presbyterian: 72
RCA: 7
Other Reformed: 13
Pentecostal: 9
Other/None listed: 50
(23+ total denominations)

B. Geographical information

U.S. students: 154 (50%)
Canadian students: 28 (9%)
Korean: 48 (16%)
Chile: 15 (5%)
Mexico: 14 (4.5%)
Nigeria: 7 (2.3%)
Chinese: 7 (2.3%)
Other: 32 (10.5%)

Total countries represented: 28—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Indonesia, India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Uganda, Ukraine, United States, Venezuela

C. Student body

Male students: 215 (70%)
Female students: 90 (30%)

D. Programs and students enrolled

M.Div.: 80
Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy: 20
M.A. (English): 22
M.A. (Spanish): 40
M.T.S.: 16
Th.M.: 26
Ph.D.: 37
D.Min.: 22
Hybrid/Distance learning: 60 (this number does not reflect residential students who also take a hybrid/distance class)
English Certificate: 3
CBTE Certificate: 15
Non-degree seeking: 9

E. Prison initiative

In addition, we have 94 students who are part of the joint Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary program known as the Calvin Prison Initiative.

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

Calvin University

I. A message from the president

Thank you for your denominational support for the work of Calvin University. It makes a difference for our remarkable students, who are being nurtured as Christ's agents of renewal in the world.

We are eager to share these updates with you, our denominational partners. Being an institution of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) is deeply meaningful to us. It is the foundation of our ambitious mission to renew every square inch for Christ, a mission lived out daily on campus and by our alumni, who are serving and leading in every sector and space around the world.

By God's grace across our Grand Rapids campus, Handlon campus (home of the Calvin Prison Initiative), and global campus, we have carried forward our mission this past year from a position of growth, strength, and momentum. We intend to carry this momentum forward into the coming years. Our success in an increasingly difficult period for American higher education in general, and Christian higher education in particular, will require focused support from the denomination and increased collaboration with our CRCNA partners. We look to our church for increased prayer and financial support, as well as encouragement to high-school-age CRCNA members to recognize Calvin as their school. We welcome other forms of partnership to ensure we thrive in the midst of significant headwinds.

I am convinced that by working together and building each other up, we can collectively rise and increase the impact and influence of the ministry not only of the university but also of the entire denomination. And we do this work remembering the words of the psalmist: "Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Psalm 115:1).

As we do this work, we recognize that any and all of these efforts are established and held together by Christ Jesus: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Col. 1:17-18). In Christ, therefore, we offer our hearts and minds promptly and sincerely, trusting that he will establish our steps. Thank you for using your gifts to strengthen Calvin University, the denomination, and the global church.

II. Executive summary

For nearly 150 years Calvin University has been committed to equipping students to think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal. As we look to the future, Calvin is uniquely positioned to raise up Christian leaders through educational training grounded in biblical wisdom and Reformed theology, and to prepare them for participation

in Christ's work of redemption and reconciliation within every corner of society.

Since the time of our last synod report, we at Calvin University have lived out our calling through general university strengthening and a specific focus on the student experience. Therefore, this report will present general updates about the ongoing momentum at Calvin University as well as student experience highlights. The report will conclude with updates from the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

At Calvin University we have experienced an exciting year of growth and connection on campus, in our local community, and around the globe. We also have needed to show perseverance, most notably in the face of the challenge of an abrupt presidential transition. Through this trial we have seen our Calvin community show incredible resilience. We also have seen the broader Calvin community and the denomination offer excellent support. For this, we are thankful.

We are grateful to be *the* university of the denomination and the finest Reformed university in the world. The growth in the number of non-CRCNA students at Calvin is witness to the university's compelling value proposition—one that centers Reformed theology, integration of faith and learning, and mission.

We had a record-breaking year of growth for the 2023 incoming class—over 15 percent year-on-year growth for incoming students, the largest single-year growth in decades. In addition, we had an overall enrollment growth of 5 percent. Growth segments included CRCNA students, Michigan residents, athletes, and first-generation college students, among other key groups. This incoming class was also our most international and diverse. Further, we had great growth in our faculty—with 122 new employees, including 25 new faculty coming on board. This marks the largest new influx of faculty since 2008—and the most diverse and international incoming faculty group ever.

In terms of enrollment for 2024, the admissions team has been on the road traveling and has enjoyed strong responses both near and far. The number of applications and admissions for fall 2024 is already well ahead of last year's record-setting season and ahead of our goals. Our financial aid team has also been working on FAFSA simplification for a better user experience for applicants.

Admissions success is coupled with Calvin's outstanding retention rate of 88.5 percent, which is well above the national average of 76 percent. Eighty-five percent of our students graduate having had at least one internship, and this number is far higher than the average for schools in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). In addition, employers seek

out Calvin students, as evidenced by the fact that 99.3 percent of our graduates report being employed or in graduate school within nine months of graduation.

Our growth has also continued through capital projects. Our Grand Rapids, Michigan, campus is currently implementing Phase 1 of the Commons Union project (library renovation) and designing Phase 2 (new construction including a dining hall with public access, campus store, and meeting spaces). In October 2022 the Calvin University Board of Trustees approved the university's athletics strategic plan, which added women's acrobatics and tumbling, men's volleyball, and men's football to its portfolio of NCAA Division III athletic offerings, and included major upgrades to the university's outdoor athletic facilities, featuring a new turf soccer field, football building, soccer stadium, and track.

Calvin also committed to geothermal heating for new athletics buildings on the north side of campus. This installation will be our first building-scale implementation of this important technology for sustainable heating and cooling. If successful, this system will provide a prototype for future geothermal systems on campus. Real-time updates on these capital projects can be found at calvin.edu/construction.

III. State of the university

A. Enrollment growth

Calvin welcomed more than 1,100 new students for the 2023-2024 academic year, setting university records in the diversity of learners. Our 2023-2024 first-year class represented an increase of more than 15 percent in the number of incoming first-year students year-on-year. The new class also demonstrated university growth in first-generation students, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students, international students, student-athletes, students from the CRCNA, and students from the state of Michigan.

Calvin received applications for fall 2023 from students in more than 90 countries—an institutional record. Students who entered Calvin this academic year hail from 36 countries and 39 U.S. states. In total, the current student body at Calvin represents 55 countries and 48 U.S. states.

B. Local and global engagement

Each year Calvin reaches out to pursue deeper engagement with local and global neighbors for mutual flourishing. Our vision explicitly states that we want to come alongside groups of all Christian traditions from across the world and to ask how we can best partner with them to promote flourishing. Therefore we are strengthening Calvin's connections in Kent County, Michigan, in greater Michigan, and around the globe.

1. Kent County (Calvin University's county)

The Service-Learning Center continues to provide Calvin students with opportunities to engage with local nonprofits through the annual StreetFest, a program that's part of new-student orientation, and through year-round service-learning opportunities.

This year a cross-divisional group of faculty, staff, and campus administration launched the 49507 Initiative, an introductory recommitment from Calvin to seek the welfare of the city through increasing higher educational accessibility in the neighboring ZIP code with the lowest educational attainment in Kent County. The first step of the initiative involved collecting data from adult residents located in and around 49507 regarding their desires for educational opportunities and the barriers they face to achieving their goals. Nearly 100 residents participated in eight listening sessions or completed an online survey giving their perspectives to shape Calvin's reentry in the city. A class of junior and senior sociology and social work students analyzed the data for themes and compiled an analysis for the research team. Based on the community's identified barriers, Calvin will pilot the Wayfinder program at the Women's Resource Center in 49507 in July 2024. Wayfinder offers eight free college credits in the humanities as an entry point into higher education for income-eligible adult learners. The program eliminates many barriers by including childcare, transportation, books, technology, and dinner during class.

Calvin also launched a new President's Community Advisory Council, designed to engage key community members and BIPOC leaders in a two-way dialogue on how Calvin University can be a trusted partner.

In September 2023 the nursing department finished a three-year grant through which twelve women from our neighborhood partnerships were trained as lay mental-health ambassadors. This resulted in more than 2,800 connections in the community regarding depression and anxiety. The nursing department is currently working with the Kent County Health Department to integrate a resident-driven, evidence-based support group for depression and anxiety called Women Supporting Women into the Maternal Infant Health Program.

2. Ionia County (neighboring county)

Last year students in the Calvin Prison Initiative in Ionia County earned 15 bachelor's degrees, 12 associate degrees, and 28 certificates in faith and community leadership. In fall 2023 the Calvin Prison Initiative expanded its curriculum to add a second major, human services, to its bachelor's degree in faith and community leadership. As graduates receive a degree with both majors, they will be well equipped to serve their peers in the prison context, accomplishing one of the program's goals: to transform the prison's internal culture.

In May 2023 the Calvin Prison Initiative hosted a Conference on Higher Education in Prison, with 150 guests attending from Michigan schools, CCCU schools, and the Michigan Department of Corrections. The Calvin Prison Initiative shared best practices for offering high quality, transformative education to incarcerated students.

3. Globally

This year Calvin signed agreements with Christian universities in Indonesia, Honduras, Hungary, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Korea as a step toward deepened global relationships and enhanced opportunities for educational exchange. In the process of engaging with these globally respected institutions, several of them much older and/or much larger than Calvin, it became clear how revered Calvin University is among peer institutions around the world. We truly are the pinnacle of Reformed higher education.

In the 2023 calendar year alumni around the world gathered through nearly 50 events in 34 different cities and nine countries on four continents. The immense impact our alumni are having in every corner of Canada, the United States, and around the world is matched by the diversity of sectors in which they are leaders making a difference.

C. Finances

Calvin University is committed to excellent stewardship of resources, including finances. Calvin remains grateful to the denomination, donors, and grant institutions that continue to support our mission in remarkable ways.

Here are some financial highlights from the 2022–2023 fiscal year:

- In total, \$49.8 million was received in grants and donations, \$25.1 million of which represents new grants to the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship from Lilly Foundation Inc.
- This includes just under \$1 million in ministry shares from the denomination.
- \$17.8 million in total institutional aid was awarded to CRCNA students.

Of the \$25.1 million from Lilly Foundation Inc., \$18.6 million was awarded for the Shalom Worship Initiative and \$6.5 million for the Compelling Preaching Initiative. The purpose of these grants is to stimulate thoughtful, creative work in strengthening Christian worship practices and preaching.

In December, Calvin's Plaster Creek Stewards—in conjunction with biology and engineering faculty—also received a \$674,817 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for green projects connecting urban and upstream communities.

In 2024 we will be launching a new multiyear comprehensive campaign: *Going Beyond*. This campaign will strengthen academics, deliver new outdoor athletic facilities and student community spaces, provide holistic stu-

dent support, nurture an engaged community, and steward our critical resources and infrastructure. We look forward to support for this campaign from across the denomination.

IV. Student experience

A. Faith, worship, and church partnerships

Calvin University is animated by a Reformed Christian faith that seeks understanding and promotes the welfare of the city and the healing of the world. In doing so, our educational community reflects the CRCNA's ministry priorities: faith formation, servant leadership, global mission, mercy and justice, and gospel proclamation and worship.

The mission of the Calvin community intersects with local churches throughout the year via student and faculty scholarship; centers and institutes; service partnerships; and personal church attendance and engagement by students, faculty, and staff.

We continually seek to connect with other CRCNA ministries and churches, including through our popular student Church Fair, our recently updated church directory, and our partnership with local churches that sponsor communion for our LOFT services. In addition to our full-time Campus Ministries staff, which includes two ordained ministers of the Word in the CRCNA and a Calvin Theological Seminary M.Div. student, Calvin has three pastoral partners, two of whom are CRCNA pastors. This team oversees worship, Bible studies, pastoral care to students, and more. Faith formation is provided by all faculty, staff, and administrators in all that they do in their interactions with students.

Our commitment to the historic Reformed faith and active faith formation is lived out through campus living and learning. Campus Ministries programming like LOFT, chapel, and dorm worship services bring us together and point us to God in meaningful ways. Student Worship Apprentices and other students on our chapel teams plan 75 worship services a semester for their peers and for faculty and staff. This year also featured two campus-wide prayer events and a silent prayer retreat.

Student Barnabas leaders in the residence halls continue to disciple other students in their faith every year, led by a group of Discipleship Assistants (upperclass students). Our campus-wide Bible study on the Psalms has seen increased engagement, reaching more than double the number of participants from last year.

As interim president, I continue to represent Calvin University at the monthly denominational Ministries Leadership Council meetings. Along with my leadership team, I am also actively engaging with other denominational ministries to find opportunities for increased collaboration. We are also visiting CRCNA churches around North America.

B. Student engagement

At Calvin we gather student experience data from the National Survey on Student Engagement, which allows us to compare ourselves to three groups: a national sample, the Carnegie classification, and fellow CCCU institutions. The results provide data points about student engagement, academic challenge, high-impact learning practices, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus environment. Our data showed this year that 95 percent of Calvin seniors have reported engaging in two or more high-impact activities, compared with 68 percent of students at other CCCU institutions.

In response to survey data and as a result of our desire for constant innovation, the Student Life division recently launched a job-shadowing program matching students with alumni and community employers. Calvin hosted three career fairs and increased the Career Scholars Program capacity. Student Life also launched a slate of weekly “drop-in” floor events, floor dinners, and other community-focused gatherings in the residence halls.

Globally our off-campus programs continue to be a highlight of students’ faith-infused learning, engagement, and immersion through semester programs both domestic (e.g., Washington, D.C.) and international (e.g., Peru, UK, Spain, France, Hungary) and through short-term programs in either January or May (e.g., Hollywood, Mexico, Germany, Nepal, Kenya). Our students also participate in off-campus programs through various partnerships with other schools and programs.

C. Scholarship

Calvin has long been a leader in scholarship among Christian institutions. By all measures our faculty continue to excel in this area. Between April and December 2023 at least 68 Calvin faculty completed scholarly work in the form of presentations, productions, and publications. These have included artistic productions and creative writing, invited lectures, book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and books with Yale University Press, Cambridge University Press, Baker Academic, and InterVarsity Press.

This scholarship is supported by internal resources and external grants and fellowships. Alongside support for research materials and travel, as well as grants for Christian scholarship, this year we awarded a record allocation of Calvin Research Fellowships, which allow faculty to devote additional time to scholarship and sabbaticals.

We have also secured a substantial number of external grants to support faculty research, curricular projects, and programmatic initiatives. The following table provides an overview of activity between July 1, 2023, and January 10, 2024.

	External Grants		Unique Investigators (#)	
	#	Value	Faculty	Students
Active Awards	68	\$52,641,492	48	3
Proposals submitted	35	\$9,045,978	23	6
New Awards	17	\$6,718,177	11	0

Grant funding can strengthen scholarship, improve facilities, bolster community outreach and partnerships, and increase opportunities for undergraduate students. Examples of faculty supported by new awards include the following:

- Ken Arnold (Computer Science): Interactive Natural Language Technology for Supporting Writers in Structuring and Revising Documents; \$175,000 from National Science Foundation
- Kevin den Dulk (Calvin Global Campus) and Jason VanHorn (Geology, Geography, and Environment): Mapping Applications for Offenders; \$155,000 from Michigan Department of Corrections
- Stacy De Ruiter (Mathematics and Statistics): Marine Mammal Monitoring on Navy Ranges; \$15,450 from Foundation for Marine Ecology with funds from Office of Naval Research
- Tyler Greenway (Psychology): Planning Grant: Cultivating Gratitude, Generosity, and Spirituality in Digital Spaces: Charting a Course for Translational Research to Promote Human Flourishing; \$44,463 from Baylor University with funds from Templeton World Charity Foundation
- Jonathan Hill (Sociology): Applied Research on Intellectual Humility; \$57,986 from Georgia State University with funds from Templeton Religion Trust
- Gail Zandee (Nursing) and Mary Molewyk Doornbos (Nursing): Women Supporting Women in the Maternal Infant Health Program; \$199,999 from Michigan Health Endowment Fund

At Calvin, scholarship reflects our commitments to engage with God's creation with wonder, in awe of what he is already doing in the world. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve as Christ's agents of renewal through the impact of our research.

The impact of the scholarship produced by Calvin's faculty is far-reaching. While it is often difficult to assess this impact, as the results of our faculty efforts are dispersed among myriad outlets and academic journals, Hekman Library's new Calvin Digital Commons gives us one way to measure our reach.

Data from Calvin's institutional repository gives us a sense of the global reach of this impact. In 2023, faculty publications housed in Calvin's Digital Commons have been downloaded 9,640 times by users in 132 countries (see the diagram below for a rough geography of downloads). Seventy percent

World map showing the number of international tourists per country in 2014. The map uses colored circles with numbers to represent tourist counts. Green circles indicate high tourist numbers (e.g., 1248 for France, 1817 for the United States, 3435 for Indonesia), while purple circles indicate low numbers (e.g., 3 for Mali, 1 for Bolivia). Orange circles represent intermediate numbers (e.g., 144 for Canada, 106 for India). The map includes labels for major countries and oceans.

Country	Number of International Tourists (2014)
Greenland	1
Iceland	1
Finland	228
Sweden	32
Norway	6
Poland	1248
Germany	58
France	1248
Italy	252
Ukraine	72
Kazakhstan	38
Russia	32
Mongolia	6
China	109
South Korea	109
Thailand	310
Indonesia	3435
Papua New Guinea	1
Australia	44
New Zealand	247
Canada	144
United States	1817
Mexico	144
Brazil	47
Argentina	20
Chile	20
Bolivia	1
Peru	52
Colombia	52
Venezuela	52
Algeria	3
Libya	3
Egypt	3
Saudi Arabia	3
Iran	3
Afghanistan	3
Pakistan	3
India	106
Maldives	3
Malawi	3
Niger	3
Chad	3
Sudan	3
Ethiopia	43
DRC	43
Tanzania	43
Angola	27
Namibia	27
Botswana	27
South Africa	27
Madagascar	27

As we continue to grow into this vision, our most important work is in the integration of faith and learning. In both teaching and scholarship, our faculty faithfully seek to express their commitments to Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Reformed confessions, which are not only boundaries for our work but also centers of our work. Calvin is blessed with a number of resources to support this effort, including the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, the Kuiper Seminar, and The de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development. While the Center for Christian Scholarship supports explicitly Christian, and often collaborative, research projects of Calvin faculty, the Kuiper and de Vries offerings develop faculty capacities for integration of faith and learning in a multiyear trajectory that prepares them for rigorous assessment as part of our tenure and promotion process. Moreover, the de Vries Institute extends much of this work beyond the Calvin community, putting a faith and learning imprint on Christian higher education around the world. This year institute activities included the following:

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second cohort (we received 78 applications for the six spots available in the 2024-2026 cohort)

- instituting a new series of faith and learning opportunities for Calvin adjunct faculty (in partnership with the provost's office)
- launching a Faith and Learning Collaboration Grants program for faculty at Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary to encourage enriched conversation about Christian faith in relation to the various forms of work that faculty groups do together
- teaching more than 200 participants in courses on the institute's online platform, *Reflecting Faith*
- launching a certificate in Faith and Higher Education (in partnership with the Calvin Global Campus)
- cosponsoring an online workshop on Christian faith and pedagogy in STEM disciplines (in partnership with INCHE and the Kuyers Institute), which had 87 registrants hailing from 13 countries

Few other institutions can match the resources Calvin has devoted to these essential efforts, and it is our aim to steward them well for the kingdom.

D. Arts

As part of our commitment to the liberal arts and the humanities, the arts are growing at Calvin University. We host more than 100 visual, musical, and theatrical performances throughout the year; offer over 20 arts organizations and campus groups; and have 38 uniquely designed spaces for students to practice, create, exhibit, and perform. In the past year we have hosted a variety of exhibitions in our Center Art Gallery, such as *The Architecture of Prayer* curated by Amanda Iglesias and *Botanica* by our own professor Jennifer Steensma Hoag.

Calvin offers 10 ensembles in vocal and instrumental music for students. Our community ensembles and events include Community Symphony, Alumni Choir, High School Honors Band, and Knollcrest Music Camps. In spring 2024 the Gospel Choir will tour southern California and perform for CRCNA churches and communities. In summer 2023 the Capella choir toured Italy, and their trip included performing a stand-alone concert to a full house at Santa Maria Maggiore, one of the oldest churches in Florence. Then, as part of a choral festival for which Dr. Pearl Shangkuan served as co-artistic director, the combined festival chorus performed a gala concert with an orchestra to a standing-room-only crowd at the cathedral of St. Francis in Assisi (where the friar is buried). The festival chorus also sang at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

We have also hired new arts staff in the past 12 months to bring support to community music, arts studios, music events, the Arts Collective, and the Calvin Theatre Company. The arts remain a hallmark of the Calvin experience.

E. Athletics

Calvin athletics enrich the experiences of student athletes and our entire community through a commitment to wellness and excellence. Calvin is a top-ranked school in the NCAA Division III, a highly competitive division with over 400 member universities, which allows students to be true student athletes.

Calvin is blessed to recruit and retain excellent coaches and athletes and to invest in them athletically, academically, and spiritually. Calvin student athletes continue athletic traditions of Bible study, mentorship, and team and leadership retreats year after year.

This September the first-ever Calvin University football scrimmage was held, with more than 3,500 people in attendance. We are busy preparing for the first-ever football season while continuing to support our women's and men's teams across the board.

We had numerous MIAA Championship teams in the 2023 calendar year, including men's and women's soccer, and men's and women's cross country. These four teams, along with the women's volleyball team, competed at the NCAA tournament level.

V. Board matters

A. Board officers

Board officers for the 2023–2024 year are Bruce Los, chair; Mary Tuuk Kuras, vice-chair; Gene Miyamoto, secretary; and Dirk Pruis, treasurer (Calvin's vice president for finance and chief financial officer).

B. Board membership

The following nominations for a new delegate from the region are presented to the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

1. Region 4

Andrea Karsten will be completing her term. The board presents the following nominees to the classes in Region 4 to be voted on at their spring classis meetings:

Ronald Baylor is a 1977 graduate of Calvin University. He attended Wayne State University Law School and graduated with a juris doctorate degree in 1980. He works at Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone and is semiretired. He has an extensive record of previous board or committee service at Third Christian Reformed Church, Kalamazoo Christian Schools Association, Pine Rest Christian Counseling Center, Kalamazoo County Bar Association, Friends of the Kal Haven Trail, and Junior Achievement of Southwest Michigan. He has served on the Alumni Association Board and the Board of Trustees for Calvin University. He attends Third Christian Reformed

Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and is completing a term as a shepherding elder. He and his wife, Mary Jane, were first-generation college students and are grateful for how Calvin has shaped their lives and home.

Rev. Timothy Blackmon earned a master of divinity degree from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1995. He is the senior pastor at Second Christian Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Michigan. He served on Advisory Committee 8 at Synod 2023. He married into a family of four generations of Calvin alumni and currently has a son attending Calvin. His prior experience was at Wheaton College, where he served as chaplain. He has significant senior-level experience with the challenges and opportunities of Christian institutions of higher learning.

Rev. Tyler Wagenmaker earned his bachelor's degree at Calvin University in 1996. He attended Calvin Theological Seminary, where he earned a master of divinity degree. He is the pastor at Beaverdam Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan. He served on the Grand Valley State University Campus Ministry oversight team and as Battalion Chaplain in the U.S. Army during the Iraq conflict. He is currently serving on the Council of Delegates, on the oversight team of Iglesia Todas Las Naciones, on the classical interim committee of Classis Zeeland, and as an advisory board member for the Grand Rapids area Campus Ministry.

2. Additional updates

Additional board membership updates will be included in the Calvin University supplemental report to synod.

3. New members

At the October 2023 board meeting we welcomed five new trustees after their confirmation by Synod 2023:

Jack Beeksmā of Prince George, British Columbia, is a retired elementary education teacher who taught for 37 years in three schools in British Columbia and Nigeria.

Tony Brookhouse of Whitinsville, Massachusetts, is co-owner and COO of the multistore Koopman Lumber, Inc., based in Whitinsville, where he oversees sales and general management.

Rev. Dr. Moses Chung of Cypress, California, is director of program and strategy for Resonate Global Mission and an ordained minister in the CRCNA. He has served as a pastor in various cultural contexts, including a traditional CRCNA congregation, immigrant ethnic congregations, a multi-ethnic church plant, and a megachurch in both North American and international settings.

Adam Ramirez of Pipestone, Minnesota, is a church consultant for regional development of cross-cultural rural ministry with Classis Minnkota and in collaboration with Classis Iakota, Resonate Global Mission, and the

CRCNA's Consejo Latino. As a Mexican of Lebanese descent, Ramirez is the first-ever Calvin board member with roots in the Middle East.

Jim Valk of Paw Paw, Michigan, is managing director with UHY Advisors, Inc., a national CPA firm. Valk started his career in public accounting with Ernst & Young and opened his own firm in 1994 with two partners. After growing the firm to the largest local firm in Kalamazoo, he merged the practice into UHY.

VI. Recommendation

That synod, by way of the ballot, elect new members, reappoint members for subsequent terms, and ratify the results of the classis elections for membership on the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

Calvin University
Greg Elzinga, interim president

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 in collaboration with the Committee for Contact with Government.

This year the Centre for Public Dialogue experienced a major transition with the departure of its longtime director, Mike Hogeterp. The committee is grateful for Mike's 21 years of service.

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.
2. Gathering local church members to tell stories and think together about Christ's call to justice through the *Do Justice* blog (dojustice.crcna.org). Through our *Do Justice* columnists initiative, writers from across North America regularly share the ways in which they are wrestling with the call to do justice in their own local contexts. Our seventeen regular columnists (including eight people of colour) focus on specific issues from poverty to climate change to Reformed theological reflections to refugee sponsorship. *Do Justice* also initiates these conversations through a podcast format. This year we focused on the long journey of justice work and stories of reconciliation.
3. Working closely with the Canadian Ministries justice mobilizer to develop and animate learning opportunities on justice and reconciliation. We continue to respond to church requests for virtual, in-person, and recorded materials. We are also engaged in longer-term projects with groups like the Act Five Christian gap-year program and with the community of practice cohorts.

B. Loving mercy; doing justice

We assist local churches in loving mercy and doing justice as follows:

1. Communicating with government officials through direct interaction with policy makers and shapers from our office in Ottawa, and in 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. We continue to raise the issue of equity in Indigenous education, including through the sending of Education Together campaign postcards to representatives.
2. Responding to requests for information from churches and members on current issues of concern. This has included requests for information on medical assistance in dying.
3. Working with CRCNA partners to bring justice-themed learning experiences to churches. We continue to offer *Faith in Action: Practicing Biblical Advocacy* through the Thinkific learning platform, which allows churches to advocate on issues they care about. The Hearts Exchanged program continues to be an important pillar of work in collaboration with Indigenous Ministries. In collaboration with Diaconal Ministries Canada we have developed *Justice: An Everyday Spiritual Journey*. This latest workshop provides a foundation to explore how the Bible talks about peace, justice, and faithful action.
4. This past year the Centre for Public Dialogue supported the Canadian National Gathering focused on reconciliation and belonging.

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

This year the Centre created space for imaginative worship at the Canadian National Gathering. We offer worship materials for Special Sunday observances. We also create space for prayer on the issues of the day through *Do Justice* weekly prayers.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

We continue to seek ways to connect with young people through the *Do Justice* blog, the *Do Justice* podcast, and an active social media presence. Justice and reconciliation mobilizer Cindy Stover regularly connects with campus groups and hosts workshops in churches.

C. Growing in diversity and unity

We regularly connect with churches across the country to help them seek justice through workshops, responses to inquiries, and learning opportunities. The Committee for Contact with the Government is committed to diversity and unity in the composition of its members. Justice and reconciliation mobilizer Cindy Stover also serves as one of the coaches of a

Multicultural Churches Cohort focused on helping congregations to increase intercultural connections and belonging.

D. Sharing the gospel

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.

Committee for Contact with the Government/
Centre for Public Dialogue

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 member 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, classes, and agencies of the CRCNA in the United States.

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 Jeffrey Feikens (2025/2), Carl Kromminga (2025/1), Layla Kuhl (2024/1), Howard Van Den Heuvel (2024/2), Dale Burghraef (2026/1), and Wayne Postma (2026/1).

Howard Van Den Heuvel is concluding his second term on the board and is not eligible for reappointment.

The board requests that synod appoint one board member from a slate of four nominees to serve a term of three years with eligibility for reappointment to a second term.

Andrew Storteboom is a member of Immanuel CRC in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he has served as an elder and as a deacon. He has served as part of the Family Selection Committee for Habitat for Humanity for the past 17 years, and he also served on the local Neighbor to Neighbor organization. Andrew earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and political science from Calvin University and is employed at Fairway Independent Mortgage as senior vice president area manager.

Jeffrey DeYoung is a member of Bethel CRC in Lansing, Illinois, where he has served as an elder and as a deacon. He also served as a Sunday school teacher for seventh graders for 15 years, and he has served as a Cadet counselor for the past 18 years. Jeffrey has served his community as a board member for Illiana Christian Schools, the PASS Pregnancy Centers, and the Illiana Christian School Foundation. He earned a bachelor of science degree from Indiana University in business administration and a graduate certificate from the University of Wisconsin Graduate School of Banking. He is employed at Grand Ridge National Bank as chief operations officer.

Sharon Visbeen is a member of Rockpoint Community CRC in North Haledon, New Jersey, where she has served as church treasurer, as head of the finance team, as head of discipleship, as Sunday school superintendent, and as a catechism teacher. Sharon has also served her community as the assistant teaching director of Community Bible School, as a core group

leader in Community Bible Study, and as the PTO president for Eastern Christian Schools. She is a graduate of Calvin University and works as a controller for KV Builders.

Michael Westra is a member of Restore Church in Midland Park, New Jersey, where he has served as an elder, a deacon, and a part of the praise team. He has also served on the Eastern Home Mission Board as part of Classis Hackensack, and on the boards of Holland Christian Homes and New City Kids. In addition, Michael has served the greater community on the boards of the Atlantic Stewardship Bank and the Columbia Bank Foundation. He graduated from Calvin University and is employed as president of Wayne Tile Company.

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 2023 fiscal year (June 30, 2023) a total of \$11,499,071 in interest-bearing Investment Certificates and accrued interest held by investors was outstanding. Interest rates vary from 3.00 percent to 4.00 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 nearly \$77 million to churches across the United States. As of June 30, 2023, the Loan Fund had \$9,931,041 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:

	2023	2022	2021
Cash and equivalents	\$7,481,890	\$9,263,219	\$5,199,045
Net loans and interest receivable	10,013,377	10,806,504	16,140,937
Other assets	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1,659</u>
Total assets	\$17,495,267	\$20,069,723	\$21,341,641
Certificates and interest payable	\$11,544,800	\$14,391,628	\$15,653,694
Net assets	<u>5,950,467</u>	<u>5,678,095</u>	<u>5,687,947</u>
Total liabilities and net assets	\$17,495,267	\$20,069,723	\$21,341,641

A summary of the audited financial report as of June 30, 2023, is available at crcna.org/welcome/governance/financial-statements.

IV. Sources of funding

Funds for the Loan Fund's operations are derived from the following sources:

- the sale of Investment Certificates in those states where legal approval to offer them has been obtained
- gifts and bequests made to the Loan Fund
- Investment of net assets

V. Staff

The Loan Fund is staffed by Alice M. Damsteegt, program coordinator, and Brian Van Doeselaar, interim director.

VI. Recommendation

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 appoint one board member from the slate of four nominees to a first term of three years, effective July 1, 2024.

Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.
Brian Van Doeselaar, interim director

Indigenous Ministry (Canada)

I. Introduction

The Indigenous Ministry is made up of a national committee (Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee), three Urban Indigenous Ministries, and a senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation, each using their strengths to support healing and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

A major event this year was the Canadian National Gathering. This gathering was focused on helping Canadian churches consider the opportunities to create communities of belonging within their unique local contexts using Hearts Exchanged as a springboard for thinking on these themes. A variety of Indigenous speakers and artists contributed to creating a fulsome event.

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 people as neighbours 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. A seasonal cycle of cohorts has continued this year with fourteen groups meeting across the country.
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministries continue to support growth in their local communities. For example, the Indigenous Family Centre engaged families in Circle of Security parenting training.

B. Loving Mercy; Doing 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. This year we featured several Indigenous voices regularly on the *Do Justice* blog and podcast to equip congregations for further justice conversations. We continue to hear appreciation for the way we share information and equip the church to move forward, such as this feedback from a church member:

The history you recounted was new to me when I participated in Hearts Exchanged last year, and I was glad to hear you explain the story and its implications in such a hopeful way.

May Settler and Indigenous sisters and brothers in the CRC hear and respond to the Good Shepherd speaking through you, and may those who have suffered, who are discouraged and grieving, be heartened as you join and support their labours.

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) involves working with a broad coalition of churches and Indigenous organizations to encourage public awareness and action in Indigenous education.
4. Creative and winsome programs continue at each of the Urban Indigenous Ministries. The Indigenous Christian Fellowship and Edmonton Native Healing Centre served meals in the thousands and offered other opportunities such as beading circles and exercise classes.

C. Gospel Proclamation and Worship

1. Resources were created for Indigenous Ministry Sunday. The bulletin insert this year featured information about Hearts Exchanged.
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministry Centres in Winnipeg, Regina, and Edmonton help to meet the spiritual and social needs of Indigenous Canadians. These ministries are highly regarded by the communities they serve. Ministry participants value the dignity and respect they experience as they attend and participate in the programs and community activities.

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

Indigenous ministry regularly offers prayers and devotions for churches. These are available in print form and on our growing YouTube channel. Our third annual audio reflection for National Truth and Reconciliation Day was widely used. Each of the urban ministries regularly hosts culturally appropriate prayer opportunities.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

The Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee currently includes members from a mix of ages and backgrounds, including two members under age 30. 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 senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation regularly responds to community requests asking for regional support for reconciliation. This includes sermons, speaking engagements, and workshops.

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)

Adrian Jacobs, senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation

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 employees' retirement plans are governed by the U.S. Pension Trustees 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.

Darrel Raih is completing his second term on the U.S. Pension Trustees board in 2024 and is eligible and recommended for a third three-year term.

Hessel Kielstra and Jack Vanden Pol are completing their first terms on the Canadian Pension Trustees board in 2024 and are eligible and recommended for second three-year terms.

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, 2023, 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.

	<i>United States</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Total</i>
Active ministers	623	261	884
Ministers receiving benefit payments	641	165	806
Spouses and dependents	190	52	242
Withdrawn participants with vested benefits	<u>94</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>121</u>
Total	1,548	505	2,053

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, on a going concern basis, the actuarial liability totaled approximately \$139.1 million for the U.S. plan (as of Dec. 31, 2022) and approximately \$53.8 million for the Canadian plan (as of Dec. 31, 2022). 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:

	<i>December 31, 2023</i>	<i>December 31, 2022</i>
United States (U.S. \$)	\$125,333,000	\$117,364,000
Canada (Can. \$)	82,183,000	74,548,000

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 2024 (in local currency) 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. In the United States, contributions are paid into the two available defined-contribution 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 these defined-contribution 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, 2023, the balances in these plans totaled approximately \$42,585,000 in the United States and \$5,915,000 in Canada. As of that date, there were 351 participants in the U.S. plan and 103 in the Canadian plan, categorized as follows:

	<i>United States</i>	<i>Canada</i>
Active	206	87
Inactive	145	16

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

321 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 227 pastors and employees of local churches, 94 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and no retirees. 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 329 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 123 pastors and employees of local churches, 109 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and 97 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 when insurance matters and matters pertaining to insurance and retirement plans for ministers and employees are discussed.

B. That synod, by consenting to this report, will have designated up to 100 percent of a minister's early or normal retirement pension or disability pension for 2024 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, by consenting to this report, will have designated up to 100 percent of an ordained pastor's distributions from their CRC 403(b)(9) Retirement Income Plan in 2024 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 Darrel Raih to a third three-year term on the U.S. Pension Trustees and reappoint Hessel Kielstra and Jack Vanden Pol to a second three-year term on the Canadian Pension Trustees beginning July 1, 2024.

Pensions and Insurance
Shirley DeVries, chief administrative officer

ReFrame Ministries

I. Introduction—mission and mandate

ReFrame Ministries serves as the worldwide media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. ReFrame 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 in ten major languages that proclaim the gospel, disciple believers, and strengthen the church throughout the world. 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 found 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. We also have a few special translation projects in Korean and Urdu.

ReFrame leverages popular forms of communication to share the gospel globally, reaching countries where traditional Christian missions often face restrictions. Through radio, TV, the internet, mobile apps, and social media we bring the message of Jesus to people without access to a faith community. As people worldwide share their experiences of encountering Jesus for the first time through ReFrame's media resources, it's clear that God is at work through the CRC and ReFrame's partners.

1. ReFrame works with about 170 indigenous staff members and more than 300 volunteers 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 the 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 pages. ReFrame produces 49 audio programs, about half of which are aired on the radio, and 45 TV/video programs.
3. Together with our partners, ReFrame distributes nearly 2 million printed devotional booklets each year in six languages. In general, the number of printed daily devotions has decreased as we are able to reach more people in more places digitally through email, Facebook, and smartphone apps. We send more than 600,000 devotional emails daily.

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.

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 smartphone 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.

Since the war in Ukraine began, ReFrame's Russian-language ministry partners have been producing and broadcasting special pastoral and evangelistic programming for Ukrainian refugees. This year we are expanding our programming to also reach internally displaced women in Ukraine. The new radio program (featuring 50 hour-long programs and 50 five-minute programs) will be produced and distributed with the participation of a Kyiv-based producer.

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 material 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 daily reflection on God's Word.

For example, Charlene, a reader of our *Today* devotions, recently shared how the daily readings encouraged her in her faith. "I want to tell you how much I have enjoyed your devotions this month," Charleen wrote.

“I truly receive joy, encouragement, peace, and more than words can say from the *Today* devotions. God bless you.”

3. As video-based programs become increasingly popular and accessible, ReFrame and its partners now have 45 different video programs around the world. These programs range from daily, two-minute devotional reflections to hour-long church services for people who need 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 such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

In 2024, ReFrame's English ministry team is enhancing accessibility to devotional videos and other resources by launching a new app through *Kids Corner*. This app will assist parents, including Danielle, in discovering devotions, activities, and various other resources for their families.

“*Kids Corner* brings the Bible to life for kids,” Danielle wrote. “The episodes are accurately based on Bible stories, and the kids are pointed to Scripture at the end of each episode to learn more. I also appreciate that they cover not just your typical kids' Bible stories . . . but dive deeper into the Bible and ultimately point listeners to Jesus.”

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 in which ReFrame works.

1. International ministry leaders include Rev. Youssef Adel Hanna (Arabic); Pastor Jerry An (Chinese); Robin Basselin and Justin Sterenberg (English codirectors); Rev. Marc Nabie (French); Rev. Arliyanus Larosa (Indonesian); Rev. Masao Yamashita (Japanese); Rev. Hernandez Dias Lopes (Portuguese); Rev. Sergei Sosedkin (Russian); Rev. Huascar de la Cruz (Spanish); and a Hindi ministry leader whose name is withheld for security reasons.

We praise God for these leaders and for the partnerships that these leaders represent—partnerships with on-the-ground media ministry workers, denominations, and organizations.

2. 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 hosted Timothy Leadership Training Institute events in several West African nations.
 - b. In India and Egypt, ReFrame’s Hindi and Arabic ministry partners provided training and curriculum for vacation Bible school and Sunday school teachers.

- c. ReFrame’s Russian ministry team provided leadership seminars for Russian-speaking students and for future church leaders who are attending universities in Russia and Ukraine.
- d. Rev. Hernandes Dias Lopes leads online courses for church leaders and pastors in Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries.
- e. Pastor Jerry An facilitates and leads events for church leaders in both Asia and North America to promote the use of media for gospel outreach. In 2023 he cohosted an event to offer a Christian response to mental health issues that many Chinese-Americans face.

D. Loving mercy; doing 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 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. 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 makes a special effort to distribute food and sanitary equipment because many of their listeners are in the lowest castes of India’s society.
2. Our English ministry’s *Family Fire* staff has been producing materials for people experiencing pain and brokenness in marriage or in other family relationships.
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, which regularly offer discussions on issues related to biblical justice.

For example, in August 2023, *Think Christian*’s blog drew parallels from the popular *Final Fantasy* video-game series to a central divide in American Christianity during the Civil War. “I learned it wasn’t a good death we should be fighting for, but a better life,” a character says in the game — as pointed out in the *Think Christian* article — “It’s all very well a man reclaiming his fate.”

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 call people into a relationship with God.

1. We have increasingly moved to a model of partnership with local denominations and organizations in our international ministries. This provides 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 moves to a more paperless society, 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*

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 8,500 prayer partners in North America and throughout the world who pray for people who respond to our media outreach programs. This number has been growing exponentially over the past few years; the number of prayer requests coming in to the ministry has also increased.
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 350,000 people receive the *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 at 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) that provides resources to strengthen families spiritually through articles, devotions, email and social media interaction, and live retreat events.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

1. *Kids Corner* is a children's program directed 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* will launch a new app in 2024, making all of these features, as well as an accompanying parent blog, more readily available and accessible.
2. People of all ages respond to our *Today* devotional readings. A class of high school students responds to a new set of devotions each year by taking photos and writing reflections that relate to the topic presented that month. Students read the devotions, look for daily reminders of the content, snap photos, and write notes about what they have learned.

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 sister ministries within 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, in India and surrounding countries, and with house churches and Christian ministries in China.
2. ReFrame Ministries has partnered with the CRC's Korean Council since 2008 to publish a bilingual Korean-English version of the *Today* devotions.
3. ReFrame Ministries continues to broaden the reach of Faith Alive's *Seeking God's Face* devotional book. After launching an English-language website with the devotional content in 2021, ReFrame's Chinese, Arabic, and—in 2023—French ministry partners have also translated the content for their audiences.

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 to be intentional about using 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 (both online and through occasional in-person events), 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.

2. ReFrame's English-language ministry produces ebooks as downloadable pdfs. Several are also available in print for group discussion or personal growth. Topics from the newest resources include *The Lord of the Rings (Think Christian)*, *A Handbook of Biblical Parenting (Family Fire)*, *Waiting in Expectation (Today)*, and an updated version of *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 introduce the church to prospective visitors and seekers in the area 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. Recommendation

That synod grant the director of ReFrame Ministries, Kurt Selles, and the director of administration for ReFrame Ministries, Louise Wing, the privilege of the floor when matters pertaining to ReFrame Ministries are addressed.

Note: 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.

ReFrame Ministries,
Kurt Selles, director

Resonate Global Mission

I. Introduction

Synod has given Resonate the mandate to give leadership to the denomination to release our faith communities for holistic mission.

What does it mean to give leadership during this moment in the Christian Reformed Church in North America? At Resonate we see this mandate as an influencing role, to inspire, invite, innovate, and hold up a holy idealism so that **we as a church can embrace the future God has planned for us.**

That's why we declare in faith that the future is bright—not because we have everything in the CRC sorted out, or that our cultural context is not increasingly difficult, or that Resonate is perfect. The future is bright because Jesus Christ, who came into this world, who died, was buried and was raised to life, is coming again. And in the light of that hope we serve a missional God who invites every person in the CRCNA to discover their call to be his witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria —and to the ends of the earth (see Acts 1:8).

In our changed and changing world, we are sharpening our focus on the role of our Reformed faith in mission work. As your mission agency, we focus on the whole of life. We live out our faith in our homes, workplaces, communities, and everywhere. **This approach to mission work is like water on dry ground wherever your ministry leaders are at work.**

We also report that the future is bright because, as an organization, Resonate is in a strong position to serve our churches in the years to come. However, that is not without wrestling through ever-increasing financial challenges. Resonate is actively making the transition from dependence on ministry shares to a network of support from mission-minded congregations and individuals. But we also believe that our congregations and leaders want mission support to be a critical element of ministry share allocations. We encourage our churches to contribute to CRCNA ministry shares as a key strategy for supporting God's mission in North America and throughout the world. We are grateful for the generosity and care of this denomination through congregational and individual support as well as through ministry shares!

Thank you for all that you do—in your own neighborhood and around the world. Resonate partners with you, your church, and Christians in more than 40 countries who minister to people who have different faiths and cultures. And thank you for your prayers and gifts that make this ministry possible! Thanks to your support, the good news of Jesus is going out like an expanding, amplifying sound around the world!

II. Reflecting on our calling

When people learn for the first time that their work is a calling from God, that God wants to use them to bless their communities, and that God

watches over them in such a way that not a hair can fall from their head without his will—that changes lives forever.

Preaching this powerful gospel is not just the work of a few; it's a calling for each one of us. That's what makes your Christian Reformed mission agency unique: through Resonate you are fulfilling God's Great Commission to make disciples and to teach them to follow all of Christ's teachings.

We partner with churches in three key ways that we refer to as our core initiatives: mobilizing congregations, sending missionaries, and planting churches. These broad categories help us continue more than a century of passion for God's mission around the globe—leading the CRCNA in myriad ways to join in. In addition to these core initiatives we are also investing in programming and curriculum development, and our consolidation with Raise Up Global Ministries this year brings significant growth in this area.

A. Mobilizing congregations

We serve Christian Reformed churches by helping them respond to God's call to live and share the gospel in their own neighborhoods. We provide coaching, discernment, and partnership so that everyone may join God at work in their own community. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

- Leadership development and coaching: We are all missionaries, and our mission field is all around us! Resonate is investing in identifying and equipping individual leaders and teachers in our own congregations and worldwide.
- Regional engagement teams: Our team of missional experts lives and works across North America. Each staff member walks alongside congregations to encourage and equip them in fulfilling God's mission. Through these teams, Resonate is investing in walking alongside mission committees, forging partnerships, and working with young adults whom God is calling to mission work.
- Campus ministry: Resonate connects churches with universities and colleges in ministry on more than 40 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.

Example and story: Classis Huron Celebrates 50 Years of Campus Ministry (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/50years).

B. Sending missionaries

We help to send missionaries in North America and around the world to share the gospel with people from other cultures. We inspire, inform, equip, and support them to witness for Christ—and we are convicted that the gospel is at work not only for others but also for ourselves. The relationships

and imagination brought by engaging cross-culturally helps our denomination to continue to grow spiritually. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

- identifying, preparing, and sending mission workers on long-term career mission assignments and short-term volunteer opportunities
- establishing and coordinating ministry partnerships with congregations that guide missionary ministry and provide financial support
- offering a full suite of support for missionaries and volunteers, including training, visas, travel, housing, spiritual care, fundraising, and more so that they not only survive but also thrive on the field

Example and story: Planting Gospel Seeds (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/gospelseeds).

C. Planting churches

We partner with local congregations, classes, and leaders to establish new churches. Our goal is to cultivate a healthy church planting ecosystem that allows us to partner with Christian Reformed congregations with the resources and tools they need to form and lead new church plants. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

- Parent churches: We partner with established churches to identify church planting opportunities and the operational systems necessary to establish and sustain their ministry.
- Partner church plants: We come alongside church planters with networking, coaching, continuing education, and funding.
- New expressions of church: Church plants are one of the most effective ways we have to reach new groups of people, so we are developing new methods like micro-church plants, church planter training hubs, and multisite church plants.

Example and story: It Started on a Street Corner (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/streetcorner).

D. Learning programs

Resonate develops and deploys many different methods to support its three core initiatives. Program and curriculum development are key ways in which we help Christian Reformed churches engage in mission from a truly Reformed perspective, and our staff and partners in this area help us apply lessons and wisdom from across all our churches. Mission work in this area includes the following:

- developing ministry curriculum such as Timothy Leadership Training, Educational Care, and Global Coffee Break to be used by ministry staff across Resonate
- providing processes and tools that support and evaluate mission work in the CRCNA
- continuing innovation, education, and training

In 2023 the CRCNA chose to consolidate the programming of Raise Up Global Ministries with Resonate due to Raise Up's close connection and value to Resonate staff worldwide. The programs of Raise Up equip global church leaders by (1) developing biblically based interactive materials and (2) training leaders to facilitate learning and to support change in their lives and communities.

Example and story: Nasdya Wants to Study Genesis—Will You Help? (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/prague).

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025*

Resonate exists to serve CRC congregations as they share the gospel, live it missionally, and plant churches—a key goal of *Our Journey 2025*—but our work flows through all four aspects of this plan. Our Christian Reformed congregations are our most important ministry partners, and one of the most significant ways in which Resonate can help CRCNA congregations in mission is by equipping young people, supporting diaspora ministry, and engaging in ministry with ethnic minorities.

Our churches and society are struggling now with critical issues of diversity and justice. However, CRCNA churches have opportunities to share the life-giving gospel of Christ with people in their communities who may come from other nations and cultures. Together with you, we work toward God's vision for his church as a unified body of people "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9).

A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

This is an area of ministry into which Resonate has invested significantly over the past few years, especially in consolidating Raise Up Global Ministries as a part of Resonate Global Mission.

Programs including Timothy Leadership Training, Educational Care, Global Coffee Break, Go Local, the Witness Curriculum, and others are valuable resources that Christian Reformed congregations and missionaries use around the world to help people grow in faith.

Example and story: Discovering God at Work (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/discovering).

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

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. Resonate provides opportunities and encouragement to young Christians in a variety of areas, including campus ministry, cohort ministry, leadership development, and more. The future leaders of the Christian Reformed Church of ten, twenty, even fifty years from now are already in our churches, and together we can equip them to live out their faith and lead others.

Example and story: “God Remains the Same” (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/godremains).

C. Growing in diversity and unity

Resonate ministers with diaspora and ethnic communities. Working in partnership with our regional teams and established churches, we mobilize believers inside and outside communities of immigrants, migrants, refugees, and international students in a way that welcomes and embraces people, communicates God’s love, and calls them to faith in Christ.

One of the biggest opportunities for the CRCNA is to help churches work cross-culturally. Resonate has a variety of programs that specifically resource churches as they build relationships with their communities.

Example and story: Finding Jesus at Dinner Church (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/dinner).

D. Sharing the gospel, living it missionally, and planting new churches

Resonate Global Mission is your Christian Reformed mission agency, and we walk with your congregation on mission together, wherever God has called you.

Resonate can help 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. We can do more together than we can on our own!

Example and story: Transforming a Neighborhood Inch by Square Inch (read more at resonateglobalmission.org/moises).

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the chair of the Council of Delegates Global Missions Ministries Committee, Jill Feikema, and the director of Resonate Global Mission, Kevin DeRaaf, 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, the second Sunday in September, and the fourth Sunday in November.

Note: 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.

Resonate Global Mission
Kevin DeRaaf, director

Thrive

I. Introduction—Mandate and mission

Led by Dr. Chris Schoon (U.S. codirector) and Rev. Lesli van Milligen (Canada codirector), Thrive seeks “to engage and accompany Christian Reformed congregations as they seek to faithfully and holistically embody the gospel in their respective contexts” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 956). Approving the proposed mandate for this agency, Synod 2023 entrusted Thrive with the responsibility to provide expertise, wisdom, and compassionate support to congregations while remaining attentive to a wide range of opportunities and challenges facing the church today. More specifically, Thrive encourages and equips Christian Reformed congregations to do the following:

- practice lifelong faith formation and missional discipleship from a Reformed perspective, across all ages and stages of life, with particular attention to children, youth, and emerging adults
- practice worship that is inspired by the Spirit, directed toward God, biblically based, theologically Reformed, and contextually relevant
- identify and engage seasons of congregational renewal, growth, transition, or challenge
- cultivate communities of increased inclusivity where everybody belongs and everybody serves, across abilities, ethnicities, languages, ages, and genders
- engage in the work of dismantling the multitude of damaging causes and effects encountered within a disordered creation, such as racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism, particularly within the body of believers
- implement and integrate safe church practices that include abuse prevention, awareness, and response
- support and care for ministry leaders, whether they serve congregations in ordained or nonordained capacities, or in specialized ministry roles such as chaplaincy
- respond to God’s call to justice by advocating alongside and in support of people who are marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed

While Thrive’s primary focus is on local Christian Reformed congregations, Thrive’s capacity to encourage and equip congregations will be enriched and strengthened by engagement with external associations and partnerships, particularly those that focus on specialized aspects of Thrive’s responsibilities. (See *Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 78; *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 956-57.)

As can be seen from this mandate, synod charged Thrive to be attentive to a broad spectrum of congregational leadership roles and a wide array of congregational opportunities and needs. The underlying goal or mission that motivates Thrive’s efforts is to equip and encourage congregations in ways that help them thrive in their respective contexts.

In carrying out this mission, with a deliberate regional presence, Thrive engages Christian Reformed congregations through six primary activities: consultations and workshops for churches and classes; coaching and network facilitation for ministry leaders; and resource curation and creation for a wider range of audiences. During its first six months as a CRC ministry agency, Thrive has directly served more than 550 ministry leaders, provided consultation support related to safer church and other intervention and crisis response requests from 61 congregations, guided 39 churches through the PastorSearch process, and interacted with more than half of the Christian Reformed classes throughout Canada and the United States.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

By joining nine previously separate ministries into one ministry agency (see crcna.org/Thrive), Thrive is better able to holistically engage with and encourage congregations in the CRCNA's five ministry callings (Our Calling): faith formation, servant leadership, global mission, mercy and justice, and gospel proclamation and worship. Over the past year we have laid the foundation for a wraparound case-management approach to serving congregations that enables Thrive to be responsive in a timely manner to the various ministry needs and resources of Christian Reformed congregations. Whether through facilitated listening sessions, deeper consultation, or regular contact from our regional staff, Thrive is focused on equipping and encouraging congregations and their ministry leaders.

An example of this approach is our engagement with Barrhaven Fellowship CRC near Ottawa, Ontario. Leadership from Barrhaven Fellowship initially contacted Thrive for resources that would help them prepare for a time of transition with the anticipated retirement of their pastor of 10 years. This initial consultation allowed them to spend time in discernment focusing on possible ministry gaps they would want to address during their vacancy. In this process they identified a need for new leadership to share the load with the present council. Thrive staff called in new team members tasked with leading a group of 30 older and potential leaders in the *Thriving Essentials* course before the pastor retired. The result was not only an increase in the number of ministry leaders but also a stronger understanding of their shared mission as Barrhaven Fellowship entered this time of transition. This renewed energy eventually led the congregation to invite a specialized transitional minister to help them keep the momentum going. All of these various stages of resourcing occurred rather seamlessly and supported the congregation as it leaned into the CRCNA's five ministry callings with little to no anxiety.

Here are a few additional examples of how Thrive has lived into these ministry callings.

Thrive supported the **faith formation** efforts of our congregations in the following ways:

- Hosting parent listening groups to learn how Thrive can better support faith formation in the home with two congregations serving as pilot groups and setting the foundation for six more listening opportunities during 2024. These listening groups are a part of a broader initiative to help congregations better understand the faith formation needs of families and children.
- Supporting Sunday school efforts through the *Dwell* curriculum (for kindergarten – grade 5), which currently has nearly 500 subscribing churches, 60 percent of which are Christian Reformed congregations.
- Refreshing the *Dwell Dive* curriculum (for grades 6-8) is under way. The bulk of our work in 2023 focused on creating the scope and sequence for *Dive*, Year 3. The first two years of *Dive* materials introduce teaching from our ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions. The third year will focus on faith practices by leading young teens through the twelve practices identified in the Faith Practices Project (see crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject).
- Exploring *Worship and Wonder*, a newer curriculum for introducing children to the gospel through worship.

Thrive supported **servant leadership** and church renewal efforts in our congregations as follows:

- Facilitating *Thriving Essentials* workshops. From July 1 through December 31, 2023, Thrive facilitated *Thriving Essentials* with 145 participants from 25 congregations (11 Canada; 14 U.S.) and piloted *Deacon Essentials* with leaders from 16 churches (10 Canada; 6 U.S.). By the end of January 2024 nearly 1,000 individuals participated in this renewal program. For example, Classis Rocky Mountain went through *Thriving Essentials* at a classis meeting with 60 people representing 20 congregations. We are excited to see and hear the responses to this resource, and we hope congregational engagement with *Thriving Essentials* will grow in the coming years. The development of individual leaders in a church will result in more members available to serve on councils, greater ownership of and collaboration in ministry, and increased capacity for spiritual discernment.
- Hosting a Pastors' Conference for ministers of the Word, commissioned pastors, regional pastors, and chaplains, in which over 100 participants explored attending to healthy spiritual practices and daily rhythms to support their overall well-being in ministry, especially in today's environment of accelerated change and challenge.
- Supporting congregations and classis church visitors with next-step conversations and resources in response to the implementation of synod's decisions regarding human sexuality.

In the area of **gospel proclamation and worship** Thrive supported congregations in the following ways:

- Gathering worship leaders in twelve classes for resource sharing and mutual encouragement.
- Contributing to the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship's efforts through having multiple Thrive staff present at the annual Symposium on Worship.

Thrive supported congregations in the area of **mercy and justice** as follows:

- Translating *Power and Privilege* materials into Spanish.
- Facilitating disability and accessibility training to congregations across North America in an online format.
- Facilitating a peer-learning cohort of seven congregations who are exploring themes of disability and accessibility through a Thriving Congregations grant supported by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Thrive supported congregations in the area of **global mission** as well. Recognizing that global mission is at our doorstep, Thrive meets regularly with Resonate Global Mission staff in order to ensure that our efforts are aligned with each other and that Thrive is aware of resources and support that are necessary for congregations growing with newcomers to North America.

III. Connecting with churches

The Council of Delegates, with the endorsement of Synod 2023, tasked Thrive with leading the CRC in a robust effort to support and encourage church renewal that touches on the four milestones of the CRCNA Ministry Plan: *Our Journey 2025*. Renewal will come through deeper engagement with prayer and practices of discernment and through strengthening adult formation, which can in turn embolden witness and engagement with each congregation's mission in their context. Thrive also continues to find a variety of ways to listen both to emerging young adult leaders and to leaders from diverse backgrounds to help us understand the particular resources and postures necessary to grow healthy intergenerational and multicultural churches.

Leaning into Thrive's core posture of curious listening, Regional and Affinity Group Connectors in collaboration with Resonate engaged in a pastors' calling project by reaching out to approximately half of the CRCNA's pastors, including Korean, Latino, and Southeast Asian pastors. Of those contacted, 52 percent responded with stories of both post-COVID resilience and challenges, helping Thrive to be more responsive in discerning effective ways to accompany congregations during a season of accelerated change.

Thrive specifically supported **cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline** by means of the free, website-based Faith Practices Project (crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject). Launched in January 2021, this website has had over 70,000 pageviews and has been utilized by several Christian

Reformed congregations as the basis for sermon series and small-group discussion materials on spiritual disciplines. The accompanying *Faith Practices* book has sold over 2,100 copies in less than two years.

Thrive continues to **listen to the voices of every generation**:

- Generation Spark graduated four congregations from its first cohort and is currently supporting thirteen congregations in their intergenerational ministry goals.
- Thrive staff support a team of ten emerging adults (6, U.S.; 4, Canadian) for leadership formation and encouragement. This team also informs our work with Generation Spark and how best to engage in intergenerational ministry with younger people today.

Thrive promoted **growth in diversity, reconciliation, and welcome** in the following ways:

- In collaboration with Resonate, facilitating a peer-learning group made up of thirteen congregations and three microchurches beginning a ten-month journey of exploring together how to become healthy expressions of the Revelation 7 church of all nations.
- Initiating conversations with leaders from Spanish-speaking congregations so that four of our *Ten Ways* tools will be translated into Spanish.

Thrive supports **sharing the gospel** by supporting the work of Resonate, ReFrame, and World Renew. We are particularly attentive to and excited by the opportunities for collaboration in church renewal and in accompanying congregations as they discern how to integrate discipleship and mission within their respective contexts. While our primary focus is not on equipping and mobilizing congregations for mission, we operate with a missional understanding of Thrive's work with churches and ministry leaders.

Other significant activities

During the past year Thrive was awarded two grants from Lilly Endowment Inc. These grants support ministry initiatives that Thrive is committed to in relationship to faith formation and pastoral well-being. Thriving Together in Ministry (for pastoral well-being) is a sustaining grant to continue and expand our support of ordained leaders who are in seasons of discernment and transition related to their call. The Christian Parenting and Caregiver Initiative is for supporting home-based faith formation, with a particular emphasis on equipping church leaders to listen well to parents and caregivers.

Thrive is now stewarding four grant-supported initiatives that seek to better serve the congregations, ministry leaders, and families in the CRCNA and is participating in a fifth initiative (Generation Spark) in partnership with the Reformed Church in America.

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant Chris Schoon and Lesli van Milligen, codirectors of Thrive, the privilege of the floor when matters pertaining to Thrive are addressed.

B. That synod, along with the Council of Delegates, remind all Christian Reformed congregations that Thrive exists “to provide expertise, wisdom, and compassionate support to congregations while remaining attentive to a wide range of opportunities and challenges facing the church today”; and that synod encourage ministry leaders and CRC members to reach out to Thrive for support.

Note: 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.

Chris Schoon, U.S. codirector
Lesli van Milligen, Canada codirector

World Renew

I. Introduction

A. Mandate

In 1962, twelve years after 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), 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” (see *Acts of Synod 1962*, p. 333).

World Renew has fulfilled this mandate faithfully for more than 60 years, reaching out in Christ’s name to support vulnerable people around the world. In its essence and existence, World Renew works to respond to God’s call to live justly, love mercy, and serve Christ as the global community faces the challenges of injustice, hunger, displacement, and disaster. Because we serve a God whose heart is most concerned with people who are oppressed, we seek to help renew hope where there is despair, contributing to a world where every one of God’s people can flourish.

B. Mission and ministry

Three factors have led to a regression of sustainable development efforts in recent years: continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict in regions across the globe, and climate change. All of these factors contribute to a “perfect storm” that causes many people worldwide to struggle to feed their families.

With your prayers, involvement, and support in 2023, World Renew was able to partner globally with 66 Christian churches and outreach partners, helping 478,504 participants change their stories of fear, despair, and trauma to stories of newfound strength and hope. Walking alongside participants as they begin to flourish as God intended is an honor for our team.

World Renew strives to be an instrument of peace for God’s glory as we work to shift power to local partners and communities in the 29 countries where we have programs. Through the church worldwide and the servants called to ministry, lives are transformed, and all glory goes to God.

Aiming to fulfill our mandate, we believe that working with communities in the areas of food, economic opportunity, and health by means of community development, disaster response, and peace and justice is the key to opening doors for the Spirit to change lives in amazing ways.

Through community development programs in 1,200 communities, 221,652 participants in 19 countries received support in food security, economic opportunity, community health, and peace and justice. Additionally, 256,852

people who experienced war, drought, famine, hurricanes, earthquakes, or tornadoes in 21 countries were assisted with emergency supplies. These included emergency food, water, shelter, sanitation, economic assistance, and livelihood rehabilitation.

World Renew has never participated in the CRC ministry shares program. Instead, it depends primarily on the generous donations and offerings of God's people to support its work in communities of poverty. In 2023, in the face of remarkable economic uncertainty, World Renew was entrusted with millions of dollars in gifts from individuals and churches who understand that loving our neighbors includes helping people on the other side of the world. Our work was supported by 1,200 volunteers who donated their time and gifts to situations of need worldwide, totaling 93,390 hours or the equivalent of 39 full-time employees. Thirteen international relief managers volunteered their time to serve through volunteer training, remote project consulting, and travel to disaster sites to distribute emergency aid.

For a more detailed account of our work over the past year, please refer to the World Renew 2023 Ministry Report, at worldrenew.net (U.S.) and worldrenew.ca (Canada).

Compelled by God's deep passion for justice and mercy, World Renew works alongside partners and communities, building programs that encourage participants to tap into God-given resources and talents to find renewed hope for the future. Because of its integrated nature in addressing the whole person, World Renew's work not only touches all five of the CRC's ministry callings but also makes a focused contribution to the church's mercy and justice ministry and servant leadership development. World Renew's work is not only integrated; it is a fully fledged collaboration by the church of Jesus Christ with Christian partners who aim to help the most vulnerable people, advocate for justice, train local leaders, and develop biblically based community values to strengthen the impact of the local church around the world.

In 2023, 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." But the true mission leaders in our work are the project participants who decide that in faith, they will reimagine what's possible and live into the purposes for which God created them.

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.
—Proverbs 11:30

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

A. Faith formation

At World Renew, faith formation serves as a foundation for keeping our motivation for justice and mercy front and center. Our staff participate in

prayer times, devotions, small groups, book studies, and educational experiences that develop their faith. There are ongoing conversations around how we can ensure that our faith in God guides every step.

In North America, World Renew's faith formation resources include devotions, videos, webinars, in-person educational conversations, and curriculum for churches. Our Justice Team (U.S.) and our Church and Community Engagement Team (Canada) focus on how churches and Christian leaders can align their work with God's heart for people on the margins of society. In the United States, the Church with Community program held two cohorts with a total of 14 congregations to practice asset-based community development, mobilized 10 congregations to equip faith communities to work with their neighbors, and taught about advocacy and food insecurity. The Climate Witness Project (CWP) supported the Hunting Park Public Storytelling Project, including the release of a film series in early 2023 to share these stories of environmental justice. A six-week Bible study series accompanied the films, and the CWP organized regional film discussions and group studies.

In Canada, congregations are mobilized through the work of the Canadian justice mobilizer (a position held jointly between the CRCNA and World Renew) and the staff of World Renew's Church and Community Engagement team. These staff hosted 21 justice learning events last year with 261 participants, representing 30 Canadian churches and organizations. Our team offers instruction and interaction at schools and universities, including through the newly launched Equipped to Educate curriculum for K-12 that aligns biblical teachings on food security, water, and refugee resettlement with Canadian educational requirements.

Meanwhile, around the world, our World Renew ministry teams and partners offer a biblical basis for conservation agriculture, healthy families, good stewardship, and more so that community leaders can be inspired and led by the Holy Spirit to participate in activities that support the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health of their neighbors. Across all of our ministry teams, our annual event 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence has encouraged thought about how our faith should inform healthy, God-honoring relationships, particularly through the use of a devotional guide throughout the campaign. The *Do Justice* podcast, hosted by World Renew, Thrive, and the Centre for Public Dialogue, is a conversation starter for people wishing to pursue justice in and through the Christian church, find new ideas and perspectives, share better ways to engage in justice work, and grow in faith. This past season's panelists included World Renew staff Harouna Issaka and Andrew Reinstra as well as George de Vuyst of Resonate, Shannon Perez of Winnipeg's Indigenous Family Centre, and others.

At Jehová Shalom Church's elementary school where Joel Fanor Urtecho Garcia is a principal, there is a no-tolerance policy on fighting. As a member of the Jehová Shalom Church, Joel was able to participate in trainings on restorative practices, through World Renew's partner the Nehemiah Center. Joel shared that there was a fight at the school where one boy hit another boy so hard that he left him unconscious. The school's policy on such behavior is immediate expulsion. However, Joel said, "[Because] we were being trained in restorative practices . . . we were able to organize ourselves better to resolve the conflict."

The school analyzed the situation and figured out what had caused the fight. Administrators invited the parents of both children into a facilitated conversation to discuss the roots of the issue. They found it was easier to solve the conflict between the boys after the aggressor apologized; however, it took more discussion before the father of the battered boy accepted the outcome.

Joel said, "We learned to develop and facilitate restorative processes and use that language with others." A few months later, Joel reported that the two families have a good friendship.

It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. —3 John 3

B. Servant leadership

Recruiting and training servant leaders is one of the great joys of the World Renew team. Across the world, building leadership capacity is a fundamental part of our calling. This can mean training birth attendants to help serve women in labor, hiring interns to contribute to and learn from our teams, or supporting program participants as they pursue new skills to build income for their families.

Another significant way that World Renew nurtures servant leadership is through our volunteer programs. For instance, participants in our Global Volunteers Program take time and resources to come and learn from God's people in different contexts. World Renew's amazing international relief managers put their expertise to work for no personal gain except the experience of living and working with people in the most challenging of circumstances. And our Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program is run almost entirely by volunteers who raise support for newcomers to Canada, except for a small team to make World Renew's tremendous responsibilities as a Sponsorship Agreement Holder happen.

The majority of those who have volunteered with World Renew, though, are our "Green Shirts" —Disaster Response Services volunteers. These dedicated and hard-working individuals make our efforts to assist with long-term recovery after a disaster in North America possible.

The North Florida Inland Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) formed after Hurricane Michael struck the Florida Panhandle in 2018 as a category 5 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 161 mph. This organization needed outside resources to restore the nearly 75 percent of structures in Calhoun and Jackson counties that received significant to catastrophic damage from the storm. Because DRS seeks to strengthen the capacity of LTRGs after disasters, we provided a \$50,000 grant to help facilitate recovery projects, provide case management, and provide recovery assistance. One of these projects was the construction of a new house for Damarco, a single father of two young boys, which DRS volunteers built from the ground up over a six-week period.

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. . . .”

—Matthew 20:26

C. Global mission

At World Renew we believe that our call to be witnesses of Christ’s kingdom to the ends of the earth starts and ends with local churches and denominations. Whether in the Global North or the Global South, we work in partnership with churches, denominations, and networks to discern how biblical wisdom can inform our pursuit of living out the gospel. Our expertise is in building strong partnerships between churches from Grand Rapids to Guatemala, from Bangladesh to Burlington, and so many in between.

Our church partnerships are something we view as a long-term relationship, not a short-term visit. We plan and dream together, taking our lead from a community and then building a bridge with another party whose passions align with theirs. Some might call this fundraising, but at World Renew this part of our work often feels more like matchmaking as we seek to align kingdom purposes across the world. Some of these partnerships have been continuing for years, with congregations in Alberta or California connecting regularly with their counterparts in Uganda or Honduras.

World Renew both depends on and supports the church worldwide in times of crisis. When disasters occur, whether because of climate or conflict, we look for local denominations, congregations, and other organizations who are already responding, and we ask what they require to be able to do their God-honoring work of compassion more effectively.

When the Maranatha Christian Reformed Church community in Lethbridge, Alberta, was presented with the opportunity to sponsor the Mabiors, a young South Sudanese family of seven residing in a refugee camp in Kenya, one member of the refugee sponsorship committee said, “We needed to make only a few phone calls. . . . We believed that God was calling us to welcome this family to our community.”

Relying on the expertise and encouragement provided by World Renew's Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program team, the committee began fundraising. "People gave generously!" a committee member recounted. "Nevertheless, we faced plenty of challenges together: communicating with the family over differing time zones and with spotty cell phone coverage, overcoming language barriers, accessing photos, struggling with COVID restrictions, and learning about a new culture. Yet every time we hit a brick wall, God provided an answer to our problem through a church member or a community connection. We discovered that although God was using our individual gifts, he was also continually gifting us in surprising ways.

"When the Mabiors arrived in Canada, the work multiplied along with the joy. Our newcomers, though overwhelmed and tired after days of travel, immediately embraced our welcoming group at the airport as their friends. Even though it was summer, each member of the family remembers that first month as being 'so cold.' Besides adjusting to the cool weather here, the Mabior family says their biggest challenge is to learn English. At the same time, they agree that going to school is the best thing about their new life.

"We have discovered many cultural similarities between the Mabiors and ourselves and realize that differences enrich us. We have learned about the giving spirit in our church community. We have been inspired in our faith by working together. And we have new friends and family to love."

I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. . . .
—Ephesians 3:14-17

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, particularly for those who face extreme poverty, hunger, and the effects of disaster.

As an agency that firmly believes we are all imagebearers of God (Gen. 1:26), we emphasize gender justice through our programs. In 2023 we continued to implement our global gender strategy in all our programs by encouraging staff and partners to see gender justice connecting with the exclusion of other marginalized groups such as young people, seniors, and disabled persons.

The Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement Program in Canada embodies our justice work as it equips churches in and beyond the Christian Reformed Church to welcome newcomers who have fled their countries of origin in fear of their safety. Across North America the Climate Witness Program directs church communities wishing to steward the earth in thoughtful and creative ways. Our Community and Justice Team colleagues inform and inspire advocacy.

Prayer too is an essential part of the work of mercy and justice, so we offer devotional and prayer resources alongside our annual campaigns and designated Sunday offerings. When we bring the world's overwhelming issues of injustice before the Lord, our work can be blessed in incredible ways.

In many communities where World Renew works, girls and women are especially vulnerable to staying trapped in poverty—simply because traditional practices prevent them from flourishing. They are denied basic human rights, including the right to an education, to work, to live free from abuse, and to marry whom and when they choose.

The Very Young Adolescent (VYA) project is a Save the Children program designed to help adolescents ages 10 to 14 and their families recognize unhealthy gender norms. World Renew received a grant to learn and use the VYA approach through USAID-funded MOMENTUM County and Global Leadership. Joseph Stewards' gifts help us to implement programs like this around the world. In addition, Choices, Voices, Promises (CVP) is a new approach for World Renew Bangladesh, giving a new dimension to its VYA programming.

Shyamoli, 13, comes from a poor family. Her father is a rickshaw driver, and her mother catches river crabs to support their family. The family also struggles with discrimination. They are Mundas, and in their Hindu community they are considered lower caste.

Through CVP sessions, Shyamoli said, she and other adolescents have learned that “no one should be discriminated against.” She continued, “I am glad to learn that boys and girls are equal and should be treated equally and have equal opportunities. We need to work for unity to have a happy and better life.”

Peter [said] . . . “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”
— Acts 10:34-35

E. Gospel proclamation and worship

We proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ and seek to worship him in all we do. Since our life in Christ is for now and eternity, our worship offering is to contribute to the flourishing and fullness of life on earth, waiting for the day when Christ will return and complete the story of salvation.

When our neighbors around the world experience barriers to their well-being, how can they believe that God loves them and wants them to thrive?

Our work consists of many conversations, webinars, collaboration with deacons and Diaconal Ministries Canada, and events to explore together what God's great plan of justice involves—and then going out and doing it. This includes DRS working with local organizations to build the capacity of recovery groups, churches, and other groups as we step alongside them with resources, industry experience, and volunteer time and labor. This also includes staff and partners sitting down together to create strategies that will fortify churches in the Global South with minimal resources so that they grow creatively and so that they can serve the most vulnerable members of their congregations and communities. This justice work is a proclamation of Christ's unimaginable love for his people. And when justice is realized, the body of Christ praises God.

Deysi lives in Honduras with her husband, Nelson, and their two children, Anderson and Modesto. The family participates in the Strong Communities Program facilitated by World Renew's local partner, Asociación Para una Sociedad mas Justa (ASJ).

After noticing a lump on one of her breasts, Deysi decided it would go away in time. Then she attended a Strong Communities meeting where medical students discussed the early detection of breast cancer and what to do if one had a suspicious lump. Deysi decided she would no longer ignore the lump in her breast and visited the nearby Community Health Center. She was immediately referred to the San Felipe Hospital for a consultation and was scheduled for a biopsy.

The financial costs of going to the health center and the consultation were extremely worrying for Deysi. Her family struggled to meet their basic needs, and she felt hopeless to cover the cost of the biopsy. She shared her worries with the Strong Communities Program staff and was grateful when they worked to help cover the cost of the surgery. She felt even more blessed when the results came back negative—she did not have breast cancer. "God is my rock, my strength, and my Savior. We must always trust that he is working on our behalf, even though we are in times of tribulation," Deysi shared.

"If I had not entered the Strong Communities program, I would not have received that information and would not have been supported financially and psychologically to have the biopsy. Many times I doubted. But we believe that all God does is with a purpose, and my family has faith that he will continue to bless us," she said with a smile.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." —John 10:10

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

A. Cultivating practices of spiritual discipline

World Renew provides resources to churches such as devotions, prayer guides, and worship materials in connection with our designated Sundays and special offering resources. Throughout the world we integrate prayer and spiritual development into our work in communities. And we model prayer through resources and reminders to our supporters so that they can lift up the prayers and praises of our ministry teams.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

Through visits, videos, podcasts, and webinars, World Renew offers peer-to-peer learning opportunities. We collaborate with ministries such as Diac-onal Ministries Canada, Thrive, and the Centre for Public Dialogue to contribute to meaningful dialogue around living out our faith. Our volunteer opportunities have the exciting characteristic of often consisting of intergenerational groups who can come together to learn, experience, and reflect. In many of our communities elders are highly esteemed, but youth are often overlooked. Our youth engagement programming helps to motivate young people to pursue education, make healthy choices about sex and substances, and overcome trauma.

C. Growing in diversity and unity

World Renew is deeply committed to diversity, mandating that staff pursue gender and antiracism training each year. In our programs, peacebuilding and trauma healing allow participants to overcome differences and become unified in their visions for their communities. Through our communications, every effort is made to represent diversity and dignity and to highlight participants' experiences in their own voices whenever possible. We look for opportunities to support those who are most vulnerable so that each person, regardless of ability, ethnicity, gender, or age, can be welcomed by the body of Christ.

D. Sharing the gospel and living missionally

Contributing to the flourishing of all people as imagebearers of God is central to the good news that Christ came to bring us life in all its fullness, both in this world and the next. World Renew's global partnerships with churches give room for missional living in a remarkable way as communities across the world share with each other, pray for each other, and build each other up.

IV. Board matters

The World Renew Board of Delegates is a key support of our 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 thirteen members-at-large, who together constitute the Board of Delegates of World Renew.

The delegates are a vital communication link with CRC classes and churches. They select member national governing boards, with seven to nine members on the U.S. board and up to ten members on the Canadian board. The two boards together form the Joint Ministry Council (JMC), which provides governance for World Renew as a whole.

Board of Directors of World Renew-Canada

Andrew Geisterfer, president; Edmonton, Alberta

Darryl Beck, treasurer; Grimsby, Ontario

Margaret Van Oord, secretary; Jewetts Mills, New Brunswick

Echo MacLeod, board director; Ottawa, Ontario

Jeffrey Adams, board director; Calgary, Alberta

Harry Bergshoeff, board director; Burlington, Ontario

Board of Directors of World Renew-U.S.

Thomas Christian, president; Grandville, Michigan

Shanti Jost, vice president; North Haledon, New Jersey

Jeff Banaszak, treasurer; Holland, Michigan

Rudy Gonzalez, secretary; Moreno Valley, California

Bonny Mulder-Behnia, pastoral advisor; Bellflower, California

Ken Macbain, board director; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Charles Ude, member at large; Kentwood, Michigan

Charles Adams, board member emeritus; Sheboygan, Wisconsin

In January 2023 the World Renew-Canada Board of Directors approved Jamie McIntosh to the office of director of World Renew-Canada. He was introduced to the Council of Delegates in May and was ratified by synod.

A. Board nominations, reappointments, and term completions

1. Canada board delegate nomination

Cari Fydirchuk is nominated to be the pastoral advisor to the board.

2. Reappointment of Canada members

The following Canadian delegates are completing their first term on the board and are recommended for reappointment to a second three-year term: Darryl Beck, treasurer (member at large); Echo MacLeod (Classis Eastern Canada).

3. Canada members completing terms

World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board members on completing their second term of service: Margaret van Oord, secretary (member at large); Andrew Geisterfer, president (member at large); Ray Anema (Classis Hamilton).

4. U.S. delegate appointments

The Nomination Committee is in the process of actively recruiting for current and upcoming vacancies.

5. U.S. member opening

The following U.S. delegate is completing a first term on the board and has asked not to be recommended for a second three-year term: Glen Talsma (Classis Minnkota).

6. U.S. member completing term

World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board member on completing a second term of service: Carol Van Klompenburg (Classis Central Plains).

B. Financial matters

Salary disclosure

In accord with synod's mandate to report executive salary levels, World Renew reports the following:

<i>Job level</i>	<i>Number of positions</i>	<i>Number below target</i>	<i>Number at target</i>
E2	2	0	2
E3	2	0	2
H	7	6	1

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 goals set around its vision and mission.

World Renew has a rigorous recruiting process and successfully hired sixteen highly skilled staff last year. 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 continue to develop competencies across the organization.

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

The work of World Renew begins with hope. While the number of people living in hunger and poverty because of a changing climate and violent unrest increased dramatically last year, we keep hold of faith in Jesus Christ, who is the hope in every story. The stories of hope shared in this report

were made possible by your involvement, prayers, and gifts for the work of World Renew in communities of struggle worldwide.

World Renew is grateful and humbled to have received \$44 million (USD) from all sources in 2023, including individual gifts, church offerings, grants, and estates. This income was leveraged into even more ministry funding through our networks and collaborations, resulting in greater capacity among our on-field partners in disaster response, community development, and justice education.

World Renew's expenses last year totaled more than \$43 million (USD). Twenty-nine percent of ministry dollars were directed to international development programs, 47 percent went to responding to international and North American disasters, 17 percent was spent on fundraising and management, and the remaining 7 percent was used in education and other categories.

World Renew connected to international organizations such as Canadian Foodgrains Bank, ACT and Integral alliances, and Growing Hope Globally, providing technical and financial resources that expanded our reach to more people and communities. In 2023, as a member of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, World Renew committed \$14.1 million (CAD) in resources to food-related programming in 17 countries, while Growing Hope Globally supported World Renew with \$600,000 (USD) for food security programs in nine countries and regions.

In 2023, World Renew received accolades from nonprofit monitoring organizations for its financial and management practices. Charity Intelligence awarded World Renew five stars, their highest rating, in international aid. Charity Intelligence looks at how each charity spends the money they receive and rates their transparency in providing this information to their audiences.

In the U.S., World Renew achieved platinum transparency status with Candid (formerly GuideStar) and is an accredited charity with give.org. We also continue to maintain our excellent standing with Christian monitoring organizations—the Canadian Centre for Christian Charities and the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability in the U.S.

World Renew is committed to its mission and to carefully stewarding with absolute integrity the financial gifts we receive. We thank God for these recognitions of our values: faith, people flourishing, effectiveness, and stewardship.

V. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Thomas Christian, president of World Renew-U.S.; Andrew Geisterfer, president of World Renew-Canada; Carol Bremer-Bennett, director of World Renew-U.S.; and Jamie

McIntosh, 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, appoint and 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.

Carol Bremer-Bennett, director, World Renew-U.S.

Jamie McIntosh, director, World Renew-Canada

STANDING COMMITTEES

Candidacy Committee

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).

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. Henry Kranenburg (2025/1), Rev. Andy Sytsma (2025/1), Rev. Andrew Beunk (2024/1), Pastor Caleb Dickson (2024/1), Pastor Debra Chee (2024/1), Judy Cook (2025/2), Rev. Felix Fernandez (2025/2), Rev. Moon Kim (2026/2), Rev. Lora Copley (2026/1), Rev. Susan LaClear (staff), Rev. Jul Medenblik (ex officio, as the Calvin Theological Seminary representative), and Rev. Zachary King (ex officio, as general secretary).

III. Report on the Leadership Landscape of the CRCNA survey

A. Survey – background

In fall 2023 the Candidacy Committee set out to gain a clearer perspective on the current Leadership Landscape of the CRCNA by surveying a broad representation of classis leaders to learn about their experience with pastoral vacancies, leadership development, and facilitation of the candidacy pathways. Since leadership development is an integral factor in sustaining membership growth, we believe that an effort to understand the current trends and issues and to develop strategies for improvement will support Synod 2023's directives to CRCNA agencies to work toward the development of "a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 976). We hope that the data compiled through this survey can fuel conversations and inform strategies to move the denomination toward the desired positive growth trend. The Candidacy Committee has begun processing the insights gleaned through the survey in conversation with our partner in leadership development, Calvin Theological Seminary. We also intend to continue discussing, evaluating, and strategizing topics of the survey with Classis Ministerial Leadership Team (CMLT) leaders.

The survey went to all CMLT members, stated clerks, synodical deputies (and alternates), regional pastors, classis counselors, and church visitors; 82 leaders responded, representing 39 of the 49 classes. The following leaders

responded: 27 CMLT members, 15 stated clerks, 15 church counselors, 22 regional pastors, 10 synodical deputies, 9 synodical deputy alternates, and 18 other leaders within classes.

Questions on the following topics were included in the survey:

- Number of vacancies and reasons behind them
- Leadership development efforts of classes
- Classes' experience with leadership pathways (Art. 6, 23/24/8)

B. Vacancies

Many have inquired about the current ratio of vacant churches to ministers eligible for call, and there is a growing sense that the CRCNA has a “pastor shortage.” We discovered that our Candidacy database could not provide sufficient or accurate data to determine that ratio, since information about vacancies is gleaned through classis minutes and minister/church profiles, and not all vacancies are reported through those means. So in order to arrive at a more accurate figure, the survey asked respondents to report how many vacancies they were aware of in their classis. A vacant church was defined as a church with no ordained pastor (neither minister of the Word nor commissioned pastor) serving in a solo or senior role. The 38 classes represented in the survey reported 94-120 vacant churches (the variance in the reported numbers is due to a variance in the numbers reported by multiple respondents from the same classes). In addition, there are 34 vacancies currently listed in the database for the classes that didn't respond to the survey. Based on these figures, we have determined that approximately **128-154 CRC churches were vacant at the time of this report.**

The number of ministers available for call at the time of the survey was 86. This includes 10 new candidates, 12 extended candidates, and 64 ministers who are currently between calls. These figures support the observation that the CRCNA has a shortage of pastors. A significant number (12-15%) of CRCNA churches are vacant, and it is likely that at least one-third of these vacant churches will have difficulty filling those positions with eligible ministers. Further, survey respondents reported that about 40 percent of the churches currently searching for a pastor have been searching for more than two years. The reasons for these vacancies, as perceived by the respondents, included the following: 19 reported small size of church or limited resources as a contributing factor; 23 reported challenges due to the location of the church—either a rural context or an area where the cost of living was high; 9 reported a lack of quality, quantity, or willingness of candidates to serve; 5 reported challenging dynamics within the congregation; 3 reported difficulty in finding “a good fit”; and 2 mentioned a need for a bivocational pastor to serve.

Thrive consultant Sean Baker has also offered insights regarding the reasons for vacancies, as observed from his vantage point as a consultant for a broad range of churches:

- Boomer retirement—Many pastors (especially first-generation ethnic minority pastors) have been putting off retirement as long as possible, hoping to find a replacement. But those replacements are not forthcoming, and delaying further is proving impossible.
- Pastors are less likely to leave their church—Pastors today are much more likely than in generations past to own their own homes and to have a spouse who is working. Pastors are also much more likely to prioritize the needs of their families (both aging parents and children) than in generations past. All of these factors (which I think we'd mostly say are good developments) are sand in the gears of our pastor circulatory system. A pastor from Iowa is less willing to move to Alberta than they would have been 30 years ago. They want to stay in Iowa (just as the pastor from Alberta wants to stay in Alberta). That's a problem for any region of the U.S./Canada not producing a steady stream of homegrown leaders.
- High concern about “fit”—Pastors are much more particular about finding a perfect fit for their gifts, and churches are much more particular about finding just the right pastor. We have spent the past 30 years emphasizing the uniqueness of each pastor and each context. This means pastors and churches are not the fungible commodities we treated them as 30 years ago.
- Pastoring is less attractive as a profession—Post-COVID divisions/stresses have made ministry more difficult and less appealing to prospective candidates.
- Specialized roles—Interest in specialized roles and chaplaincy seems to be stronger in comparison to a weakening interest in congregational ministry.
- Human Sexuality Report stress and uncertainty—These stressors in the system continue to play a role in discouraging leaders from entering ministry.

An additional factor to consider is the prevalence of churches with multiple pastors on staff. This model requires more pastors overall, and it is not uncommon for some churches within a classis to have multiple pastoral staff while others have no ordained pastor.

The Candidacy director has also noted anxiety among prospective women candidates over the potential strains of ministering in a denomination that holds in tension two opposing positions on women in office. Some have voiced concerns about the security of their place in the CRCNA or have wondered if women ministers in the CRCNA receive adequate support to sustain them in ministry.

It is also important to consider all of these CRC-specific observations within the broader context of the trends within North America. According to a recent article (ats.edu/files/galleries/bright-spots-emerge-in-fall-2023-ats-enrollment-update.pdf) by Chris Meinzer, senior director and chief operating

officer of the Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,

The number of students enrolled in an MDiv program continues to decline across ATS, with a projected decline of 5.0% this year. If the projection of 26,266 MDiv students holds, it will be the lowest number of MDiv students reported since 1992, when ATS schools numbered 217 (versus nearly 280 schools today). . . . Enrollment in ATS schools is down overall. . . . Evangelical schools are down by 0.9%, mainline schools are down by 3.6%.

We must consider all of these statistics and observations as we seek to understand the challenges and opportunities before us in the area of leadership development.

C. Leadership development in classes

The Candidacy Committee recognizes that much of the formation of church leaders happens long before these individuals reach the seminary or candidacy track. Normally someone's gifts and call to ministry are first recognized by a pastor, teacher, or family member. As the individual's gifts become evident to a church staff or council, he or she is given opportunities to take on ministry roles, and their pastoral identity begins to take shape. Eventually, the person's passion for ministry may become so evident that they begin connecting with the CMLT of their classis to inquire about support for seminary training. In other cases, the church may create a commissioned pastor job description for the individual and then work with their CMLT to create an individualized learning plan that will train them for ordination into this role. Alternatively, in cases where the person seems gifted in preaching and teaching, the classis may arrange for an examination for licensure to exhort. This whole process of preseminary training is the foundation for leadership development in the denomination.

In the survey, classis leaders were asked about the level of their classis' engagement with the work of leadership development. Out of the 39 classes answering the survey, 31 (79%) reported that their classis regularly identifies and supports leaders, and only 8 (21%) reported that their classis rarely identifies or supports leaders. Only 4 (1%) of our classes surveyed reported a sense of discouragement in their efforts to raise up leaders. We are encouraged that such a high percentage of classes is active in supporting potential candidates for ministry through their candidacy journey. Financial support and encouragement from CMLTs has remained very strong. And the diversity and quantity of candidates reported through this survey confirm the data currently in our Candidacy database. Thanks be to God for the faithful work of CMLTs who serve in this way!

However, since the survey also sought more specific information about whether these classes had an "established program, method, or plan for

raising up leaders,” it is interesting that only 22 percent of respondents reported that their classis had such a method or plan in place. This likely indicates that much of the classis engagement cited in the preceding paragraph consists of (1) financial support and encouragement for those in seminary and (2) development of individual learning plans for commissioned pastors as the need arises. There may be no clear, consistent, accessible pathway in most of our classes for individuals who sense a call to ministry but are not yet ready to commit to seminary training, or who do not yet have a call to a specific commissioned-pastor job description.

Some of our classes (22%) indicated that they *have* developed their own contextual programs and/or connected with outside resources to create a clear pathway for preseminary leadership training. We wish to celebrate these initiatives! They include the following:

- a “Wednesday Breakfast” for potential pastors and church planters to come and be discipled, bringing their own learning objectives and questions to the table for discussion with an experienced pastor. This classis has also initiated a program to fund church interns for two years at \$25,000 per year.
- collaboration with Calvin Theological Seminary’s Empower Program
- the Luke 10 training program for development of Spanish-speaking leaders
- classis Leadership Development Networks to contextually train licensed preachers and commissioned pastors
- use of the Coram Deo leadership training program
- group mentorship meetings led by a classis leader
- CMLT initiatives to actively support and encourage potential leaders
- classis grants to help potential leaders “dip their toes” into vocational ministry to discern their calling

It is not surprising that the classes reporting intentional engagement with preseminary-level leadership development are also the classes experiencing higher numbers of candidates for ministry of the Word. Clear, consistent, accessible preseminary pathways enable those sensing a call to ministry to move forward with confidence, taking incremental steps in that direction.

The finding that 78 percent of responding classes do not have an established system for developing leaders at a preseminary level (apart from the excellent encouragement and financial assistance they provide for those attending seminary) may be a significant factor to consider as our denomination works to address our leadership shortage. It stands to reason that if more classes were to create preseminary training and support pathways, our denomination could move from having a pastor shortage toward ample supply, and eventually toward a trajectory of abundant growth.

With this vision in mind, *the Candidacy Committee encourages classes to hold conversations about how to create clear, consistent, accessible pathways for contextual, preseminary leadership development.*

The Candidacy Committee will be actively seeking ways to come alongside any classis desiring to strengthen their programs for leadership development, connecting them with resources and programs that can support and supplement their contextual leadership training efforts. We recognize that the work of leadership development within a classis normally falls on those who already serve as full-time pastors in local churches and have very limited time and energy for the enormous task of developing and supporting leaders outside their own churches. The work of mentoring, gathering resources, and supervising learning plans is substantial and can be overly burdensome for pastors in full-time ministry. We hope to explore ways to lessen the burden on classis pastors while still maintaining the value of having contextually rooted training pathways.

One such resource that we have been made aware of is Calvin Theological Seminary's Empower Program. Empower offers students at all educational levels the opportunity to earn a master's level certificate or M.A. in Christian leadership using a competency-based approach. The Empower format is designed to support a student in learning and proficiency within the student's ministry context. This means that students remain in their ministry while working with a three-person mentor team to develop competencies for ministry. The mentor team consists of a CTS faculty mentor and two mentors from the student's context. The team coaches the student through learning experiences that help the student develop competencies for ministry. Though all students are working toward the same competency, the learning path can vary, considering the student's prior experience, individual strengths and growth areas, ministry context, vocational goals, and more. Though a student is supported by the mentor team, successful students in the Empower program are self-motivated. More information and an application are available at calvinseminary.edu/empower.

D. Seminary-training pathway (Article 6)

Through the survey, the Candidacy Committee sought feedback regarding classes' experience with candidates who have completed seminary training (Art. 6), which includes either obtaining an M.Div. at Calvin Theological Seminary or obtaining an M.Div. at another seminary as well as completing the Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy (EPMC). This is the pathway our classes are most familiar with and experienced in navigating (76% of classes reported a high level of experience and confidence in navigating this pathway).

The survey also asked respondents if their classis had supported more students through Calvin Seminary or the EPMC in the past five years. Results showed that 40.5 percent of responding classes supported more candidates

through Calvin Seminary, while 26.6 percent supported more candidates through the EPMC. In addition, 32.9 percent supported students through both programs somewhat equally.

The Candidacy Committee is invested in encouraging potential candidates to complete their seminary training at Calvin Theological Seminary if possible. It is our conviction that our denominational seminary is best poised to train students in the CRC's particular "accent" of Reformed theology. However, we have seen that the EPMC program is necessary for those who, for some legitimate reason, have not had the opportunity to study at Calvin Seminary. The EPMC program was designed to provide at least a minimum level of training and connection to Calvin Seminary for those who attended other seminaries—so that they have opportunity for the ongoing support and resources that CTS provides CRC ministers.

Our survey responses indicated that 51 percent of the EPMC participants sponsored by classes had chosen that route because they had already completed an M.Div. from another seminary before deciding to pursue ordination in the CRC. Many of these had never heard of the CRC until well into their seminary training, or after completion. If not for the EPMC program, these leaders would very likely not have entered ministry in the CRCNA, so we are thankful for the Lord's provision of this program for situations such as these.

Our survey showed, further, that 49 percent of EPMC participants sponsored by classes had chosen seminaries local to them because they wanted to attend seminary in-person without having to relocate. There are advantages to in-residence learning that undoubtedly fuel that rationale, and yet Calvin Seminary's hybrid M.Div. option has been widely received and very successful in training students while they remain in their context. In addition, we find it noteworthy that 8 percent of survey respondents indicated they did not know Calvin Seminary provided a distance-learning option for acquiring an M.Div. degree.

Our survey found as well that a smaller percentage (27%) of those who had chosen seminaries other than Calvin Seminary did so intentionally for reasons of personal misalignment with what they perceived Calvin Seminary's theology or formation to include. The misalignments of these reported 27% had to do with the perception that CTS is leaning away from Reformed theology (36%) or becoming too theologically "liberal" (21%). These perceptions have been communicated to Calvin Theological Seminary.

The Candidacy Committee does not encourage the use of the EPMC program as a way for students with theological misalignment to intentionally bypass Calvin Seminary. When it is apparent that such concerns underlie a student's desire to attend a different seminary, the committee would encourage CMLTs to facilitate conversations between that student and Calvin

Seminary so that further clarity and understanding of the theological formation of our denomination's seminary can be reached.

The Candidacy Committee also sought to understand the effectiveness of the Article 6 pathway in helping students achieve key areas of ministerial readiness. The aspects of ministerial readiness that were most evident were as follows:

- 77 percent reported that “a sense of call and commitment to the CRC” was evident.
- 63 percent reported that “a confessionally Reformed biblical hermeneutic” was evident.
- 56 percent reported that “spiritual and emotional readiness for ministry” was evident.
- 55 percent reported that “knowledge of and connection to the CRC and its ministries” was evident.
- 50 percent reported that “competency in a range of areas of pastoral ministry” was evident.

E. Commissioned pastor pathway (Article 23/24)

Of key interest to the Candidacy Committee was classes' experience with the Article 23/24 pathway to ordain commissioned pastors. This pathway has been used increasingly over the past few decades, and 95 percent of classes reported that they are either “very” or “somewhat” familiar and confident in navigating this pathway.

However, the committee took note of the statistic that only 43 percent of responding classes reported having a consistent approach to the learning plans for all commissioned pastors, and 38 percent expressed a desire for more support in the training of commissioned pastors. We also noted that only 34 percent stated that the CMLT of their classis was instrumental and active in the development of commissioned pastor learning plans and the facilitation of the process toward ordaining commissioned pastors.

The Candidacy Committee has been very intentional about respecting the autonomy of the classes as they discern their own contextual methods to train commissioned pastors. The scope of our involvement has been to provide consultations and materials containing synodical guidelines and best practices, as well as a template for the learning plans of commissioned pastors. However, we recognize that it takes a substantial amount of time and effort to create and sustain a consistent training pathway for commissioned pastors. We also again recognize that the capacity of full-time ministers serving as CMLTs and in other classis positions is often limited. The Candidacy Committee is willing to come alongside any CMLT who desires additional support, resourcing, and connections to training programs that would help them meet their objectives for commissioned pastor training.

The survey asked respondents which ministerial competencies were most evident in the commissioned pastors in their classis. Their responses were as follows:

- 78 percent reported evidence of a pastoral heart and spiritual/emotional readiness for ministry
- 73 percent reported evidence of a Reformed perspective that shapes their life and ministry
- 66 percent reported evidence of pastoral skills
- 52 percent reported evidence of knowledge of Reformed creeds and confessions
- 42 percent reported evidence of a Reformed hermeneutic that shapes teaching/preaching
- 41 percent reported evidence of a knowledge of and connection to CRC ministries
- 21 percent reported evidence of knowledge of CRC polity
- 11 percent reported evidence of knowledge of CRC history

We note with joy the evidence that a pastoral heart, spiritual/emotional readiness, and a Reformed perspective are so evident in these individuals whom God has called to ministry in our classes. The deeply formational relationships that these individuals have developed with church members, pastors, and classis leaders have surely been a key factor in the development of these attributes. We have heard stories of deep investment from classis pastors. These have been instrumental in identifying and mentoring multiple commissioned pastors—sometimes spanning several generations—for ministry within the churches.

We note that the attributes least evident are those that come through study—for example, Reformed hermeneutics, CRC history, and CRC polity—and that Calvin Theological Seminary can provide helpful resources for these particular subjects. Besides actual courses, CTS has developed some video modules on these subjects, and these are included in the resources listed on the commissioned-pastor learning plan template. We hope that will be a useful resource in the individualized learning plans of commissioned pastors.

Some might argue that knowing CRC history and polity and Reformed hermeneutics is not as necessary for commissioned pastors because most serve in positions of pastoral support, not as lead or solo pastors. However, the committee has observed that knowledge of CRC polity and history are integral in equipping pastors to understand their ministry context and to function with more ease within our system of governance, empowering them to have a “seat at the table.” Even if the commissioned pastor’s job description does not include preaching, an understanding of Reformed hermeneutics informs other key tasks such as planning lessons, leading Bible studies, and providing pastoral counseling.

We wish to note as well that with the current pastoral shortage, the use of commissioned pastors to serve in solo/lead roles has been increasing.

F. Commissioned pastors serving as solo/lead in established congregations

At the time of this report, the denominational database showed there were 90 commissioned pastors serving in a solo or lead role in a church—46 serve emerging churches, and 44 serve established churches. Until 2018 the Church Order allowed commissioned pastors to serve in a solo/lead role in an organized church in only three scenarios:

- A church planter could continue serving as lead pastor for a reasonable period of time after the church organized.
- A commissioned pastor who served alongside a minister of the Word could assume the role in exceptional circumstances if the minister of the Word left.
- A commissioned pastor could serve in a solo/lead role in unique ministry contexts presenting barriers to theological education.

In 2019, synod approved a fourth scenario as it adopted changes to Church Order Articles 23-24. A commissioned pastor may now also serve in a solo/lead role by way of a term call that includes an agreement to make accountable progress toward completing “the requirements for ordination as a minister of the Word” (Art. 24-b). This scenario has sometimes been described as a “bridge ordination.”

Survey respondents were asked which of the scenarios were present in the ordaining of commissioned pastors to serve in a solo/lead role in an organized church in their classis. The most common scenario reported (45%) was the Article 24-b “bridge ordination” involving agreed-upon further training toward ordination as a minister of the Word. This statistic is encouraging because it means that a large percentage of commissioned pastors serving in solo/lead roles are continuing their education toward ordination as ministers of the Word, and in this way our denominational value of having theologically educated ministers has been upheld. The criteria of “unique ministry contexts” was represented in 38 percent of responses. In these situations there is usually a language or cultural barrier for leaders to receive theological training in our denomination’s seminary. In 27 percent of responses a commissioned pastor who was serving alongside a minister of the Word assumed the lead role after that person left the role. And in 21 percent of cases reported, a church planter continued to serve for a reasonable period of time after the church plant had become established.

Since the “bridge ordination” (Art. 24-b) is becoming more prominent on the denominational leadership landscape, the survey sought more feedback on how this scenario is working out in the classes. The following benefits have been noted:

- ease of transition for the church

- opportunity for the candidate to gain experience with the church while working toward ordination as minister of the Word
- benefits to ministry and education being done simultaneously
- allows for someone to seek ordination when life circumstances would keep them from the normal path, still ensuring that they are being prepared for the ministry of the Word
- provides a pathway in churches struggling with vacancy to call a pastor who is willing to work toward denominational ordination
- allows young leaders to gain experience and begin serving out their calling while completing the requirements for ordination
- establishes accountability
- allows those who can minister to unique cultural contexts a pathway to serve in the CRC

Some negative aspects have also been noted:

- The "term call" can put pressure on the new pastor during the first year or two of ministry, especially if this person is not motivated to pursue further education.
- In some cases, distance can make the accountability piece difficult.
- The classis can feel undue pressure to approve the person after more than two years of service to a church while in process.
- Churches have pastors who are not fully qualified or knowledgeable about the CRC and its theology for period of time.
- Some churches hire a commissioned pastor for the purpose of paying them a lower salary.
- This is not required of our ethnic minority churches—perhaps it should be.
- Some ministers of the Word feel negatively about someone being ordained as a commissioned pastor to serve in the same sort of role they are serving before completing the training/candidacy.
- In one case, a commissioned pastor was called who did not have strong ties with the CRC, balked at the requirements, and led the congregation to disaffiliate with the CRC.

The Candidacy Committee provides this information to synod for reflection and ongoing discernment.

G. Pathway for ministers to enter from other denominations (Article 8)

This pathway to ministry is the least common in the CRC. Only 25 percent of the survey respondents reported that their classis had navigated this pathway recently, and most classes reported that "0-2" pastors had entered via this pathway in recent years. The process for Article 8 entry into ministry was the least familiar to the classes surveyed. But respondents who had some experience with the recently developed "Article 8 process guide" said they found it clear, thorough, and helpful to follow for keeping parties on track with the necessary submissions and requirements.

An Article 8 entry requires that “need” be established in order for a church to call a minister from another denomination. The most common need reported (32%) was the need for Indigenous leadership in a multicultural or ethnic-minority context, and the second most common (22%) was the urgent need for congregational leadership after a sustained search. Alternatively, 16 percent reported “extraordinary qualifications of the minister” as the criteria for calling a minister from another denomination, and 12 percent reported church planting as the criteria. Other circumstances involved RCA pastors who had been serving according to the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8, D) deciding to affiliate with the CRC.

Competencies that were reported as especially evident in ministers entering through Article 8 were spiritual/emotional readiness (78%), knowledge of Reformed creeds and confessions (76%), and a confessionally Reformed biblical hermeneutic that shapes preaching/teaching (75%).

Competencies most noticeably lacking were knowledge/proficiency in CRC polity (63%), familiarity with CRC ministries (52%), and knowledge of CRC history (44%).

The Korean Institute in Ministry (KIM) program for Korean-speakers has been an excellent resource for many Korean pastors entering CRCNA ministry through Article 8 (it can also be used as the learning plan for Korean-speakers seeking ordination as commissioned pastors). This program, administered by Korean Ministries director Rev. Chris Choe, involves diligent study through online modules taught by Calvin Theological Seminary professors and an excellent seven-day in-person connection experience in which these pastors spend time with denominational staff and Calvin Seminary professors and engage in a “history tour” of the CRC.

Comments we have received from participants in the KIM program have been very positive. They seem to come away from their in-person connection experience feeling inspired, informed, and much more deeply connected with the CRCNA and its seminary.

Speakers of English and other languages who become ministers of the Word through Article 8 do not normally have organized connection experiences such as this, and for that reason they tend to feel less informed and connected to the wider denomination than is desirable. Last fall, a Classis Pacific Northwest pastor working toward Article 8 ordination joined one of the organized “EPMC Connection Trips” and found it very helpful. These trips are offered four times per year, led and organized by the Candidacy Office. The Candidacy Committee encourages classes that are working with a pastor toward Article 8 affiliation to include participation in one of these connection trips in the person’s individualized learning plan. In addition, the use of the Modified Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy

(MEPMC—involving coursework at Calvin Theological Seminary) has been very helpful and connective in Article 8 ordination preparation.

H. Additional feedback

Through the survey, respondents were invited to communicate feedback regarding any other issues pertaining to leadership development. This additional feedback helped us see that although there remains a narrative within some classes that the candidacy process is about “jumping through hoops” or “penance,” such impressions have begun to shift toward appreciation for clear pathways, hospitable connections, and meaningful learning experiences for candidates.

The following concerns were also expressed:

- that churches are not proactive enough in identifying and encouraging young leaders (high school and university students)
- that classes have become somewhat passive about their role in vetting candidates, letting “everyone pass exams”
- that candidates seem underprepared in some cases
- that a lack of theological unity has made it difficult for leaders to trust the systems of leadership development that are in place
- that classes have had to increasingly focus on their context, making the broader denomination a lesser priority

Some ideas were offered through the comments as well:

- to consider whether some current elders or deacons might be called toward pastoral leadership
- to begin using Church Order Article 7 more frequently
- to note that a classis renewal process resulted in a CMLT taking on a broader role in leadership development (elder/deacon training, exams, workshops, LDN, student fund, license to exhort, etc.)

The Candidacy Committee will continue to process all of this input, as well as additional input that may arise from synod or classis discussions on this topic. We seek to partner with the churches to support their initiatives and to facilitate connections to resources and partners in this work.

IV. EPMC Facilitation Team

The EPMC Facilitation Team, a subcommittee of the Candidacy Committee, is tasked with walking alongside participants in the program to advise, resource, and support them. They also serve to oversee and implement the strategies of the program. The Candidacy Committee is deeply grateful for the work and devotion of this team, which includes the following members:

Rev. Al Gelder, general member, Classis Grand Rapids East

Rev. Shawn Brix, staff adviser, Calvin Theological Seminary and Canadian church relations liaison for the seminary

Rev. Jose Rayas, general member, Classis Arizona

Rev. Daniel Mouw, general member, Classis Grandville

Rev. Maria Bowater, general member, Classis Kalamazoo
Rev. Marg Rekman, general member, Classis Lake Superior
Rev. Charles Dillender, general member, Classis Central California
Rev. Jack Van de Hoef, general member, Classis Eastern Canada
Rev. Timothy Kooiman, general member, Classis Wisconsin
Rev. Kelsi Jones, general member, Classis Chicago South
Rev. Michael Koot, general member, Classis B.C. Southeast
Rev. Timothy Joo, general member, Classis Hackensack
Rev. Benjamin Oliveira, general member, Classis Muskegon
Victor Chen, general member, Classis B.C. Northwest
Rev. Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy
Joan Beelen, staff adviser, Calvin Theological Seminary
Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, staff advisor, Calvin Theological Seminary

We are also deeply appreciative of the valuable contributions of the following members who completed their terms on the EPMC Facilitation Team in February 2024: Rev. Ernesto Hernandez, Rev. Debra Chee, Rev. Steven Hull, and Rev. Anthony VanderSchaaf.

V. Recommendation to revise Church Order Article 24

The office of commissioned pastor has become more widely used in recent years, and as the Candidacy Committee walks alongside classes to help them navigate guidelines and best practices for this office, we occasionally encounter situations that are not currently addressed in the Church Order or the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

One such situation is the process of reentry for commissioned pastors who have been released from a call without a new call in place. Unlike the ordination of a minister of the Word, a commissioned pastor's ordination is tied to a specific role, and they are examined in relation to the qualifications for that role. So when they are released from their particular call, they are no longer ordained. If they are called to a new position, the new church and classis may determine whether the commissioned pastor is qualified to serve in this new role through reexamination, or in some cases, through receiving adequate recommendations from the former church and classis. The Commissioned Pastor Handbook gives guidance for these situations in which a new call is imminent.

However, in some cases, a commissioned pastor is released without intention to secure a new call. They may decide to enter a nonministerial vocation or serve in a ministry outside the denomination, or for various reasons they may need to take a substantial amount of time away from ordained ministry. There may also be cases in which a commissioned pastor is released by their council for disciplinary reasons, or for reasons of misalignment or strained relationship with their council or classis. If, in any of those circumstances, the individual should decide at some point to reenter ministry in a

new commissioned pastor role, it would be important for the reasons and motivations for release to be addressed before reexamination occurs.

When a minister of the Word who was released from office decides to reenter ministry, a helpful process is available for this to occur (Church Order Article 14-e):

A former minister of the Word who was released from office may be declared eligible for call upon approval of the classis by which such action was taken, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. The classis, in the presence of the deputies, shall conduct an interview that examines the circumstances surrounding the release and the renewed desire to serve in ministry. Upon acceptance of a call, the person shall be reordained.

The Candidacy Committee would like to propose a similar process for commissioned pastors to reenter ministry after having been released. We propose adding the following as a new point e to Article 24 and renaming the current Article 24-e to Article 24-f.

Proposed Article 24-e

A former commissioned pastor who was released from office must receive approval of the classis by which such action was taken in order to be reexamined for commissioned-pastor ordination by the classis of the calling church. In the following cases, the former classis shall also conduct an interview that examines the circumstances surrounding the release and the renewed desire to serve in ministry:

- if the commissioned pastor was released to enter a nonministerial vocation or to serve in ministry outside the denomination
- if a substantial amount of time has passed since the individual served as a commissioned pastor
- if the former classis deems further conversation with the individual helpful or necessary to their discernment regarding approval
- in other cases in which there are reasons for release other than the pursuit of another call

Upon approval of the former classis, followed by approval of the position with synodical deputy concurrence, the individual shall complete any additional candidacy requirements not in place when last ordained; then, after a successful examination in the classis of the calling church, the individual may be reordained.

[*Note:* Synodical deputy approval is not stipulated in the proposed reentry process for commissioned pastors because the synodical deputies are tasked only to weigh in on the appropriateness of the job description for a commissioned pastor, not to assess the individual's qualifications for ministry, which are evaluated at a classis level only.]

Grounds:

1. The Church Order and the Commissioned Pastor Handbook currently present no clear pathway for the reordination of a commissioned pastor who was released from office (for reasons other than to accept another call).
2. As in the case of reentry for ministers of the Word (Art. 14-e), it is crucial for the former classis of the former commissioned pastor to have an opportunity to examine the circumstances of release and the individual's renewed desire to serve in ordained ministry by reentering for one of the reasons listed above.
3. The option to waive the examination of a commissioned pastor (described in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook) is only applicable in cases in which the person is released for the purpose of pursuing a new call. In all other cases, when a commissioned pastor who was released accepts a call, the calling classis must have the opportunity to examine (or reexamine, if the former classis and calling classis are the same) the person's current qualifications for ministry.

VI. Document updates

The Journey toward Ordination document was reviewed for any necessary updates, and only minor grammatical or compositional edits were deemed necessary. The new version will be added to the Candidacy forms and resources website.

To simplify and clarify the process for preparing and ordaining a commissioned pastor, the Candidacy Office has created a new document called Article 23/24 Process Guide and Checklist. This document combines the content of several other documents that were formerly used to guide this process, outlining the responsibilities of classis, church, candidate, and mentor, and providing links to all necessary resources. The Candidacy Committee hopes this will facilitate a more seamless experience for the classes and for commissioned-pastor candidates as they navigate this pathway together.

The committee also wishes to draw the attention of classes to the CMLT Process Guide document, which can be used for the training and ongoing administration of classis ministerial leadership teams.

VII. Recommendations

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. 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 adopt the proposed Article 24-e to the Church Order (renaming the current Article 24-e to Article 24-f) so that a process for commis-

sioned pastors to reenter ministry after release from office can be clearly defined, similar to the Article 14-e process for ministers of the Word who wish to reenter ministry after release from office (see section V of this report).

C. That synod recognize that leadership development is an integral factor in sustaining membership growth. Further, that strategic conversations about leadership development are a necessary component of Synod 2023's directives to work toward the development of "a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 976).

D. That synod encourage CMLTs of all classes to review the Leadership Landscape of the CRCNA survey results in section III of this report and to discuss how to develop or strengthen the current pathways for contextual preseminary leadership development within their classes.

E. That synod encourage CRCNA councils to be intentional about recognizing potential leaders and connecting them to pathways of further training and formation, in consultation with the CMLTs of their classis and/or the Candidacy Committee.

Candidacy Committee
Susan LaClear, director

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee

I. Introduction

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 communion*—those with whom the CRC has a particular affinity or history. Churches that are so designated may be engaged in joint ventures with the CRC and/or its agencies, exchange delegates at synod, welcome each other’s members at the Lord’s Supper and each other’s pastors into the pulpit, and generally encourage each other in ministry and faithfulness. Second is the category of *churches in cooperation*—a classification that recognizes all the other varied bilateral relationships the CRC has with Christian churches. Some of these relationships have originated through correspondence around mutual interests, others from historic ties, and still others through mutual ministry, whether by way of ecclesiastical connection, the work of CRC agencies, or a specific memorandum of understanding. 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, 2024, are Jake Bentum (2025/1); Lyle Bierma (2025/2); Joy Engelsman (2024/1); Ruth Hofman (2024/1); James Joosse (2024/2); William Koopmans, chair (2024/2); William Krahne (2026/1); John Lee (2026/1); Shirley Roels (2025/1); and Yvonne Schenk (2026/2). The general secretary (Zachary King) and the executive director-Canada (Al Postma) serve as ex officio members of the EIRC. The EIRC met in person in October 2023 and virtually in February 2024. Another virtual meeting is scheduled to be held in April 2024.

III. Nominations for membership/protocols

William Koopmans and Jim Joosse are concluding two terms of service on the EIRC. The EIRC recommends that synod express its gratitude to them for their faithful service.

Joy Engelsman is completing her first term on the EIRC, and, given her contributions and willingness to continue, the EIRC recommends that synod reappoint her to a second three-year term.

Ruth Hofman is completing her first term on the EIRC and has elected not to serve a second 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 will present a slate of three nominees for the Canada East (2) and Canada West (1) positions in its supplementary report to Synod 2024.

IV. Bilateral relationships

The CRC maintains a relationship of *churches in communion* with 24 denominations and of *churches in cooperation* with 19 denominations/partners. Of these categories combined, we have 22 partners on the African continent; five partners in Central and South America (including the Caribbean); two partners in Europe; seven partners in Asia and the Pacific Rim; and seven partners in North America. A complete list is available on the “Relationships” page of the EIRC website (crcna.org/EIRC).

A. Activities with bilateral partners

Interchanges with three bilateral partners call for specific mention. In addition, CRCNA representatives had communications with several other partner churches.

1. Reformed Church in America

The CRCNA’s closest ecumenical relationship continues to be with the Reformed Church in America (RCA). While we have 23 other *churches in communion* relationships, no other Reformed denomination is mentioned in the Church Order (Art. 8-b). Synod 2014 and the RCA General Synod 2014 declared that “the principle that guides us, and the intention that motivates us, is to ‘act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately’” (*Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 504).

Both the RCA and the CRCNA are experiencing a significant time of upheaval. The RCA is in the midst of significant restructuring (rca.org/category/news/general-synod/restructuring-team/), and a proposal will come to its General Synod 2024. The CRCNA ecumenical delegate to the RCA General Synod 2023, Tom Wolthuis, shared both the hopes and the anxieties present in the RCA in his report. Similarly, CRCNA ministries have gone through significant restructuring in the past several years as

well. Unfortunately, all of the internal focus of our two denominations has resulted in decreased collaboration despite strong relationships between the leaders of these two denominations.

Ongoing collaborations include shared projects between Resonate Global Mission (CRCNA) and RCA Global Mission. Members of the CRCNA have benefited greatly in learning from the RCA's experience in engaging with member churches outside North America. The CRCNA and RCA continue to collaborate on ecumenical efforts, especially in the "interfaith" area (i.e., conversations between Christians and believers of other world religions such as Islam). CRCNA and RCA senior leaders met twice during the year to learn together about critical ministry challenges and opportunities facing our two denominations.

Finally, it should be noted that CRCNA leaders have been in ongoing discussions with RCA leadership about their efforts to engage the Alliance of Reformed Churches (the majority of which are former RCA congregations) in an ecumenical relationship in response to directives from Synod 2022 and 2023. CRCNA leaders have appreciated the gracious approach of RCA leadership, which characterized the RCA General Synod's own decisions with regard to congregations who desired to depart the denomination. We pray that God will use this tumultuous period in the life of our two denominations to strengthen them for future ministry and opportunities to aid each other.

2. During the 2023-2024 ministry year, the EIRC had a conversation with the Christian Reformed Church of the Dominican Republic about renewing its memorandum of understanding as a *church in cooperation*. The EIRC is thankful for the many years of collaboration achieved through the strong relationship between that denomination and Resonate Global Mission.
3. During the 2023-2024 ministry year, the EIRC noted with lament its confusion about a conflict within the Christian Reformed Church of East Africa. At this point, the EIRC is waiting to discern how it might connect with this denomination in the future.

B. Formal exchanges

1. Thomas Wolthuis was able to attend the general synod of the Reformed Church in America in June 2023.
2. In January 2024, EIRC chair William Koopmans participated in the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken), a new denomination that formed in spring 2023 from the merger of the Reformed Churches, liberated (GKv) and Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK). The CRCNA had an existing *church in communion* relationship with the Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK). The EIRC will continue to maintain contact with representatives of the newly merged denomination and provide updates to synod.

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 traditions. The organizations and dialogues with which we have made specific connection this past year are highlighted as follows:

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 (CANAAAC). As executive director emeritus of the CRCNA, Colin P. Watson, Sr., continues to serve on the steering committee of CANAAAC. In addition to attending a meeting of the WCRC Executive Committee held at Calvin University in May 2024, Zachary King will attend a meeting of CANAAAC in October 2024. The WCRC is preparing to hold its 27th General Council in October 2025 on the theme “Persevere Your Witness” (wcrc.ch/gc2025). In 2025 the WCRC will also be celebrating the 150th anniversary of its long history since its first parent organization, the Alliance of the Reformed Churches throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System, began, and the CRCNA has made extra efforts to provide financial support for the October 2025 gathering.

B. Canadian Council of Churches

Executive director-Canada Al Postma and 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.

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. Al Postma attended a denominational leaders meeting of the EFC.

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. He has indicated that he would like to conclude his term on the NAE at the end of 2024.

2. Al Postma and Ruth Hofman 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.
3. Al Postma represents the CRCNA to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).
4. The CRCNA does not have a representative currently serving on the World Reformed Fellowship board. The EIRC is working to identify a representative.
5. Ronald Feenstra is the ecumenical staff officer representative of the CRCNA to the United States Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. Two additional representatives include Matthew Lundberg and Clair Mesick.
6. Anthony Elenbaas is our CRCNA representative who engages in learning projects with Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. Thomas Wolthuis attended the Christian Churches Together Forum in October 2023.
7. It was decided that the EIRC will not actively seek a replacement for the Faith and Order group. This will be revisited in one year.

VI. Interfaith activities

The Interfaith subcommittee of the EIRC continues its work. Membership includes Zachary DeBruyne, Michael Kooy, Frans van Liere, Tim Reitkerk, Naji Umran, Cory Willson, and Zachary King, general secretary. The subcommittee met in May, August, and November of 2023. Another meeting is scheduled for April 2024. After many years of service, members Bernard Ayoola and Greg Sinclair concluded their terms at the end of 2023.

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.

The RCA Interreligious group and the CRC’s Interfaith subcommittee met in November 2023. Another meeting is scheduled for March 2024. 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.

VII. Synodical assignments

A. Alliance of Reformed Churches

Synod 2023 recognized “the Alliance of Reformed Churches as a church in cooperation for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a church in communion” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 990). As part of its work in the 2023-2024 ministry year, the EIRC as a committee and several of its members had significant conversations with the leadership of the Alliance of Reformed Churches. Some leadership turnover at the Alliance delayed these conversations in the fall and summer of 2023. However, Alliance leaders provided further information and explanation of the structure of the communion.

Synod 2023 also appointed a task force “to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address matters related to *church in communion* status, Church Order matters regarding ‘orderly exchange’ of officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8), and other matters related to benefits of CRC officebearers” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 990). Based on this instruction, the task force, which included William Koopmans (chair of the EIRC) along with several staff and lay leaders, developed a report and recommendations about the status of CRCNA pastors serving in Alliance churches under the Church Order provisions for orderly exchange of ministers with the RCA. Recommendations from this work were processed by the Council of Delegates and will be part of its report to Synod 2024. However, the initial piece of this instruction, “to address matters related to *church in communion* status,” is assigned to the EIRC for further reflection and discussion.

After ongoing conversations and deliberation by the EIRC, the committee determined that as the Alliance of Reformed Churches is currently in a period of significant change, which includes adding new member congregations, developing their structural guidelines, and formalizing the procedures for their ordination process, the status of *church in cooperation* should be maintained with a view toward transitioning to that of *church in communion* in the future.

VIII. Additional updates

A. Membership to the World Council of Churches

Following the visit of William Koopmans to the World Council of Churches gathering in Germany in fall 2022, the EIRC reflected on its possible future engagement with the WCC. After significant conversation, the EIRC determined that it is not in the best interest of the CRCNA to join the WCC at this time, for the following reasons: (1) the cost and human resources exceed the benefits; (2) the CRCNA is already involved with many multilateral relationships that put us in contact with some of the same people; and (3) the CRCNA can still send an observer if desired.

B. Christian Reformed Church in Liberia

Requests have been received from within the denomination to explore formal relations with the Christian Reformed Church in Liberia. Over the past year, meetings were held to draft a memorandum of understanding. The EIRC recommends that synod approve the Christian Reformed Church in Liberia as a *church in cooperation*.

IX. Recommendations

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to William T. Koopmans, chair, and Zachary J. King (ex officio), when matters relating to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee are discussed.
- B. That synod express its gratitude to William T. Koopmans, James Joosse, and Ruth Hofman for serving the cause of ecumenicity for the CRC.
- C. That synod reappoint Joy Engelsman to a second three-year term.
- D. That synod approve the Christian Reformed Church in Liberia as a *church in cooperation*.
- E. That synod take note of the EIRC's progress report regarding the relationship with the Alliance of Reformed Churches as a *church in cooperation*, with a view toward its transitioning to the status of *church in communion* in the future.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee
William T. Koopmans, chair
Zachary King, general secretary (ex officio)

Historical Committee

I. Introduction

The Historical Committee is the standing committee of the Christian Reformed Church established by Synod 1934. Its revised mandate, as approved by Synod 2022, states the following:

The Historical Committee and the [general secretary] 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 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.

Current synodically elected members of the committee, according to the concluding year and present term of their service, are James A. De Jong, secretary (2024/2); Herman De Vries (2025/2); Stanley Jim (2026/1); Tony Maan (2025/2); Christian Oh (2026/1); and Janet Sheeres, chair (2026/1).

Current administrative committee members are Greg Elzinga (ex officio, as interim president of Calvin University), William Katerberg (ex officio, without vote, as curator of Heritage Hall), Zachary King (ex officio, without vote, as general secretary of the CRCNA), and Jul Medenblik (ex officio, as president of Calvin Theological Seminary).

Since its 2023 report to synod, the committee met in person and via Zoom on September 13, 2023; November 28, 2023; and January 9, 2024.

II. Committee activities

A. Multiethnic initiatives

Both of last year's appointees have added ethnic expertise to the committee. They have been in conversation with the full committee and with Heritage Hall's curator, William Katerberg, concerning materials to assemble, archive, and share regarding their representative groups' participation in and contributions to our denomination.

Rev. Stanley Jim is identifying and gathering information related to our Indigenous American churches in Classis Red Mesa. He noted in his report to the committee the particular challenges he faces in this regard. The Indigenous American cultures have been predominantly oral in nature, while most of the archival records and published histories of missions among Navajo and Zuni peoples are written from the perspective of missionaries and church officials, especially material produced prior to the formation of Classis Red Mesa in 1982. Part of the challenge in gathering important oral

records is that we are losing elderly Indigenous members and leaders in these churches. Some of the important stories, teachings, and values can be preserved through interviewing present-day members of congregations in Classis Red Mesa to whom they have been passed along.

The committee hopes to support gathering this oral history with appropriate software, hardware, and technical expertise. The material would be archived in audio and transcript form. This will be an ongoing effort in collaboration with Heritage Hall staff. Several churches have been identified for commencing this work, and the plan now is to move forward with visiting a couple of churches each month in order to capture narratives of how God has blessed them and of the challenges and blessings they have experienced since 1957, the denomination's centennial anniversary.

Rev. Christian Oh is working on information about Korean ethnic congregations in the denomination and relations between the CRCNA and denominations in Korea. A direct Korean connection with the CRCNA dates from the 1930s through students studying at Calvin Theological Seminary. They typically were ordained and had divinity degrees from Korean seminaries and came to Calvin for further graduate work. These connections and a surge of immigration from Asia were significant catalysts for Korean involvement with the CRC in the decades after World War II.

Rev. Oh has begun by summarizing the early history of Reformed Christianity in Korea. He notes that this is essential for understanding the doctrine and piety shaping Korean immigrants and their children who are now a part of the denomination. Korean Protestant church history revolves around the work of Presbyterian missionaries in the 1880s, notably Horace Grant Underwood, a graduate of the Dutch Reformed Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In the early 1900s Samuel Moffat, another missionary, helped found Pyongyang Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In 1907 it graduated its first cohort of Korean clergy. Its legacy lives on today in a variety of seminaries and universities in Korea. Rev. Oh will continue his work on this history, building on the background noted here.

The Historical Committee has not yet decided how to make available the materials that Rev. Jim and Rev. Oh are gathering. It could be made available on the Heritage Hall website. Some of it might be published directly by the CRCNA, whether online or in print in some form. The committee expects that in the future it will pursue similar projects with other groups with the purpose of sharing the histories of the ethnically and racially diverse groups comprising the CRCNA today.

The committee also hopes to gather material related to Christian Reformed denominations globally, where CRCNA-sponsored missions played a significant role in those denominations' history. Examples include the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria, the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines, and the Christian Reformed Church in Cuba.

B. D.Min. degrees—identification and archiving

In addressing its mandate, the committee last year decided to attempt to identify CRCNA ministers who have received a D.Min. degree, their thesis topics, and the dates and schools from which their degrees were obtained. The committee considers these theses worth obtaining and archiving either in print or digitally, since collectively they are a repository of ministerial research and reflection on ministry during an era of significant change and adjustment in the ministerial vocation.

The D.Min. degree was developed in North American theological education in the 1970s to encourage serious academic reflection on the actual practice of ministry. Such reflection parallels some of the master's level work done at Calvin Theological Seminary, of which we possess records and copies. The committee believes that that body of material would be enhanced by the D.Min.-level work done at other seminaries by our pastors. With the help of Hekman Library staff, known recipients, our classical representatives, and our own research, we have so far been able to identify more than four dozen CRCNA pastors who have acquired a D.Min. degree from other schools. We will try to obtain copies of the theses of the remaining 50 percent of these identified people whose work is not already in our holdings.

C. Other advanced degrees awarded to our ministers

As a by-product of the foregoing project, we have begun compiling a list of former and current CRC ministers who have received advanced degrees and have written dissertations at universities and at theological schools other than Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS). We do have accessible records of such degrees (M.A., M.T.S., Th.M., Ph.D.) granted by CTS. Information on CTS Ph.D. degrees, titles, dates, and recipients is accessible online at digitalcommons.calvin.edu/cts_dissertations/, which also provides a brief summary and a PDF link for each dissertation. An identically structured site for CTS Th.M. theses is digitalcommons.calvin.edu/cts_theses/. On both sites the thesis dates begin at 1993, when the first CTS Ph.D. degrees were awarded.

In its January meeting this year, the committee decided that creating a similar record for advanced degree work beyond Calvin Seminary by CRCNA ministers would be another worthwhile endeavor. Like the advanced study of ministerial practice (D.Min.), other levels and angles of advanced theological and ecclesiastical reflection contribute to understanding and sharing our legacy, as the committee's mandate requires.

Both the D.Min. list and the list of other advanced degrees from other seminaries are ongoing projects, and we are considering how best to make the results more widely accessible.

III. Report of the curator, William Katerberg

A. Archives staff

The archives enjoyed staff continuity in 2023, with William Katerberg as curator and editor of *Origins*, the magazine Heritage Hall produces; Jen Vos as assistant archivist and digitization specialist; and Laurie Haan as an archival assistant who focuses on audio collections and the university collection. Late in the year, Alyssa Johansen joined the staff as an archival assistant; she also works for the Kent District Library system.

Volunteers and student workers continue to play important roles in Heritage Hall. Heritage Hall had two volunteers in 2023. Phil Erffmeyer collects and processes minutes from congregations and classes. He also processed new material related to the denomination and manuscript collections. Clarice Newhof works on cataloging our extensive photo collection. She finished the “People” collection and the “Seminary” collection and is now working on the “College” collection. Student employees worked on our online collections index (archives.calvin.edu/), organizing oversized photos, and digitization projects.

Churches can contact archives staff and Phil Erffmeyer through our general email address (crcarchives@calvin.edu) or individually (library.calvin.edu/hh/archives-staff).

B. Archival activity during 2023

1. Library renovations and the archives

The 100-300 levels of the Hekman Library are undergoing renovations during the 2023-2024 academic year, and all three are closed to patrons. The exception is Heritage Hall. The archives remain open for business. We have been harder to find, as the entrances to the library that most people are familiar with are closed. And construction noise has been occasionally inconvenient. The biggest impact has been that we have temporarily lost some secondary storage space. For this reason we have discouraged accessions of large collections of material for the year. We expect to be back to normal by fall 2024 when construction is completed.

2. Collections

We have had the usual variety of small accessions of manuscript material, genealogical and family history material, rare books, photographs, and so on—as well as repository material from the university, seminary, and denomination. Notable accessions in the first half of 2023 included material related to Christian Reformed missions, ethnic ministries, and home missions.

The CRCNA’s decision to sell the denominational building and property at 28th Street and Kalamazoo and the move to a smaller space will coincide with some significant accessions of material to Heritage Hall, notably the back catalog of Faith Alive/CRC Publications.

3. Research

In the past half-year researchers have been using the archives' collections related to Geerhardus Vos, Peter De Vries, H. Evan Runner, CRCNA missions in Japan, Dutch immigration to North America, and Christian Reformed church architecture as well as CRCNA- or Calvin university- and seminary-related periodicals. As usual, we have also had a couple dozen patrons working on genealogies and family histories, the history of their congregation, or something related to their student years at Calvin.

Heritage Hall is participating in plans for the 150th anniversary of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary in 2026. This will include digitization projects and a historical volume (which likely will include an associated website). Student staff will help in the digitization work.

In addition to editing *Origins*, the curator, William Katerberg, posted on *Origins Online* some history related to the CRCNA, the seminary, the university, and Dutch North American immigration and enclaves (origins.calvin.edu/). The spring 2024 issue of *Origins* magazine features Paul Jones, who was Calvin University's first Navajo student (1916-1918) when it was a junior college and preparatory academy. He became connected to the Christian Reformed Church through his relationship with Rev. Lee Huizenga, M.D., a medical missionary in Tohatchi, New Mexico, in the 1910s. Jones went on to become chair of the Navajo Tribal Council in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The curator also published a series of articles in *The Banner* on the history of belonging and identity in the CRCNA. His current research projects include relations between CRCNA missionaries and Navajo people and a history of Calvin University (with Karin Maag of the Meeter Center and Ron Feenstra of the seminary).

4. Digitization and indexing

Digitization continued in a variety of areas: building a database of Heritage Hall's photograph collections; finishing the compilation of an online catalog of our collections; and focusing on Calvin University records, the largest of the archive's collections (archives.calvin.edu/). There is a growing volume of material from the archives on the Digital Commons site of the Hekman Library (digitalcommons.calvin.edu/), along with other material from the CRCNA and from university and seminary departments, programs, and centers and institutes, such as the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

The work of indexing *The Banner* and various other magazines related to Reformed Christianity continues, with Hekman Library student staff doing the work. We hope to digitize *The Banner* in the next few years and have had discussions with staff at *The Banner* about this idea. The project will depend on finding funding. (Digitization is expensive.) We also hope to digitize several publications related to the university and seminary, such as *Chimes*, the student newspaper. Heritage Hall expects to pursue a variety of digitization projects in the next few years related to the 150th anniversary of

the seminary and university in 2026. This year we will begin with digitizing *Prism*, the annual yearbook of the college/university from 1920 to 2010. (It included seminary material until 1973.)

5. Promotion and Outreach

Staff worked with a variety of Calvin University faculty and their classes, doing presentations about archives and research in them, giving them tours of the collections and rare books areas, and providing them with material from collections.

Origins: Historical Magazine of the Archives and *Origins Online* (origins.calvin.edu) continue to be vibrant forms of outreach to a variety of audiences. The spring 2023 issue of the print magazine focused on A. C. Van Raalte, leader of the immigrant colony that founded the city of Holland and nearby towns. The fall 2023 issue has essays on a variety of topics, as will the spring 2024 issue. There also is a Heritage Hall Facebook page, which enables the blog to reach out to local audiences for some stories. Heritage Hall will continue to assess its social media presence and find ways to connect with denominational-, university-, and seminary-related audiences and people interested in the history of Dutch North Americans.

IV. Regional classical representatives and significant anniversaries

The Historical Committee continues to depend on classical representatives, most of whom are the classical stated clerks, to remind churches to submit minutes and records to Heritage Hall on a timely basis. We are grateful for their role in keeping our archives up to date and for encouraging compliance in this regard for churches' own backup protection as well as for the completeness of denominational records. On two occasions this past year the committee also requested the help of classical representatives in gathering information about ministers holding a D.Min. degree.

Once again the committee is grateful to Heritage Hall staff for providing the following information on forthcoming ordination and congregational anniversaries. We congratulate ministers and churches on reaching these milestones.

A. Ordained ministers—anniversaries of service

Names are listed according to years of ordained service in the CRCNA, with dates of prior ordination in another denomination indicated in parentheses.

50 years (1975-2025)

Blauw, Richard J.

Bratt, Karl H.

De Moor, Robert

Holleman, Jerry A.

Hommes, Edward R.

Howerzyl, Lawrence John
(inactive retired)

Meyer, Peter

Schram, Terry L.

Sieplinga, David J.

Troast, Leonard P.

Vander Schaaf, James
Van Niejenhuis, Herman
Vink, George G.
Weidenaar, Harry J
Willoughby, Karl K.

55 years (1970-2025)

Afman, Carl J.
Berends, John J.
Boertje, Robert
Chen, Jason Y.
Christoffels, LeRoy G.
De Jong, Bert
De Jong, James A.
Greidanus, Sidney
Heyboer, Gerry G.
Hutt, John C.
Kaastra, Thomas G.
Klompier, Carl J.
Koole, John
Lammers, Ronald J.
Likkel, Allen E.
Pols, Gordon
Petroelje, Allen
Post, Henry R.
Praamsma, Herman
Roelofs, Curtis G.
Schutt, Herman J.

Schweitzer, Anthony
Vander Zee, Leonard J.
Vriend, Harry
Walter, Robert, Sr.

60 years (1965-2025)

De Jong, Harold T.
Kiekover, Harvey
Vander Pol, Mike
Van Drunen, Peter
Van Zanten, Anthony
Wildeboer, Henry

65 years (1960-2025)

Entingh, Henry G.
Mulder, Alfred
Nederhood, Joel
Swierenga, Raymond

70 years (1955–2025)

Bylsma, John
Matheis, Jack J.
Stob, William K.
Van Dyk, Wilbert M.

75 years (1950–2025)

Bazuin, Lugene

B. Church anniversaries—at 25-year intervals

25th anniversary (2000-2025)

Rocky Mountain House, Alberta – Covenant
Burbank, California – Bethany
Holland, Michigan – Lao
Franklin, Massachusetts – New England Chapel
Ajax, Ontario – Crossroads Community
Grand Junction, Colorado – New Life
Kamloops, British Columbia – Sahali Fellowship

50th anniversary (1975-2025)

Flagstaff, Arizona – Hope Community
Hudsonville, Michigan – Georgetown
Norfolk, Virginia – Ocean View
Miami, Florida – Iglesia Cristiana Piedras Vivas
Lethbridge, Alberta – Maranatha

Grandville, Michigan – Fellowship
Burke, Virginia – Grace
Chatham, ON – Calvary

75th anniversary (1950-2025)

Barrhead, Alberta – Barrhead
Rocky Mountain House, Alberta – First
Abbotsford, British Columbia – Gateway Community
Delta, British Columbia – Ladner
Hamilton, Michigan – Hamilton
Langley, British Columbia – Willoughby
Oskaloosa, Iowa – Bethel
Orangeville, Ontario – Orangeville
West Des Moines, Iowa – Crossroads Fellowship
Brockville, Ontario – Bethel
Cornwall, Ontario – Immanuel
Bellflower, California – Rosewood
Oakville, Ontario – Clearview
Sussex, New Jersey – Sussex
Willmar, Minnesota – Rock of Life
Wheaton, Illinois – Wheaton
London, Ontario – Talbot Street
Kingston, Ontario – First
Zeeland, Michigan – Bethel
Barrie, Ontario – First
Toronto, Ontario – First
Bowmanville, Ontario – Rehoboth

V. Nomination

James A. De Jong is retiring after completing his second term on the committee this year. The committee presents the following slate of nominees for appointment to the Historical Committee for a first term of three years.

Wendy Veenstra Blankespoor was born in the Netherlands and immigrated with her family to Alberta at age three. She attended Dordt College and, after graduating, married and taught school in State Center, Iowa. She subsequently earned a master's degree in library science from the University of Wisconsin. When her husband was appointed to teach chemistry at Calvin University, the couple moved to Grand Rapids and joined Woodlawn CRC, where she served on committees and on council as a deacon and elder's assistant, led a women's Bible study, and wrote family histories for a church newsletter. In 1988 she began working at the Hekman Library reference desk, then in government documents, and for almost twenty-five years as a cataloging archivist at Heritage Hall. She has served as book review editor for *The Banner* and as a reference resource for *Christian Home and School*

magazine. She and her husband worked for World Renew in needs assessment for five years. Her interests include gardening, genealogy, family history, and reading.

Donald Sinnema is a professor of theology emeritus at Trinity Christian College and now lives in Holland, Michigan. His scholarship has focused on Post-Reformation studies and on Dutch-Canadian and Dutch-American studies. He has been active in the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies. He has written a number of articles in this field and has translated/edited *The First Dutch Settlement in Alberta: Letters from the Pioneer Years 1903-1914* (University of Calgary Press, 2005). He has written *Pioneer Church Life: The Beginnings of the First Christian Reformed Church in Canada 1903-1911* (2005) as well as church histories of the Granum (Alta.) CRC and the Parklane CRC of Portland, Oregon. He is also a general editor of the ten-volume series *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae 1618-1619* (2015-), which will include all the documents of the Synod of Dordrecht.

VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Janet Sheeres, chair, and to James A. De Jong, secretary, when matters pertaining to the mandate and work of the Historical Committee come before synod.

B. That synod by way of the ballot appoint new members to the Historical Committee from the slate of nominees presented to a first term of three years.

C. That synod take note of the activities on which the committee has embarked and encourage leaders and churches to offer the committee suggestions and information related to them.

D. That synod recognize with appreciation the service of retiring member James A. De Jong, who has served as secretary for his two terms on the committee, and of curator William Katerberg and the Heritage Hall staff and volunteers.

Historical Committee
Janet Sheeres, chair
James A. De Jong, secretary
Greg Elzinga
Herman De Vries
Stanley Jim
William Katerberg
Zachary J. King
Tony Maan
Jul Medenblik
Christian Oh

DENOMINATIONALLY RELATED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Dordt University

Greetings to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church! At Dordt University we are grateful for our continued connection to and close relationship with the CRCNA. We may not be the denomination's official institution of higher education, but we are deeply indebted to the CRC for our heritage. The CRC helped shape our founders' vision for education—"in the larger and deeper sense that all the class work, that all of the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

We are thankful for the many ways God has blessed Dordt University during the 2023-24 academic year. Once again Dordt experienced record enrollment: more than 1,900 students overall enrolled for the fall 2023 semester, exceeding the fall 2022 record of 1,858 students. To have Dordt's undergraduate enrollment grow by more than 15 percent over the past decade while higher education overall contracted by nearly 15 percent is an encouragement and is a tribute to God's faithfulness to Dordt through our faculty, staff, and supporting constituency who share in this vision of Christ-centered higher education.

We also concluded our "Planting for the Future" capital campaign in January. Raising more than \$103 million, the total significantly exceeded our fundraising goal of \$90 million (dordt.edu/news/dordt-university-surpasses-103-million-with-planting-for-the-future-capital-campaign), making our capital campaign the most successful campaign in Dordt's 68-year history. Contrary to national trends where the percentage of alumni making a financial gift of any size to their alma mater has dropped to 5.6 percent, Dordt University alumni give back at a rate of over three times the national average—18.89 percent (dordt.edu/news/dordt-university-alumni-give-back-at-an-astounding-rate).

With growth comes a need to expand. We have extended our residential facilities to include the "Every Square Inch Apartments" (known on campus as "the Squares"), four new buildings that house a total of 96 upperclassmen. This past fall Dordt officials broke ground on the new dining commons and B.J. Haan Auditorium expansion, and these are slated to be completed in 2025. We are also expanding our program offerings by adding a two-year agriculture service technology program (dordt.edu/academics/programs/agriculture-ba/agriculture-service-technology-as) as well as a graduate-level master of business administration (MBA) program (dordt.edu/news/dordt-university-launches-mba-program-with-a-ribbon-cutting-ceremony). Both are, like many programs at Dordt, practical and help prepare students to find employment after graduation. It was also announced that Dordt will add a swimming program (dordt.edu/news/dordt-university-to-add-womens-and-mens-swimming-to-varsity-athletics) in fall 2024; in fact, we just hired our first swim coach (dordt.edu/news/dordt-university-hires-its-first-ever-head-swim-coach). The Gaming Guild continues

to gain popularity on campus. This guild, which provides a community for gamers who are committed followers of Jesus, encourages students to think more broadly about their calling as gamers and to develop their own gaming-related gifts to serve God's kingdom.

Dordt maintains historic biblical and confessional values on cultural issues and champions scriptural and missional fidelity. We believe so strongly in the Reformed Christian perspective that we require our faculty and staff to belong to confessionally Reformed churches and to enroll their children in a Christian day school or homeschool setting. The Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE) has sought to live out Article 71 of the CRC's Church Order, which says, "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." CACE directors walk alongside Christian schools committed to teaching from a biblical perspective, aiding in the sustainability, improvement, innovation, advocacy, and promotion of Christian education at all levels of learning.

Please feel free to reach out to Reverend Todd Zuidema, director of church relations, whose goal is to strengthen relationships with supporting churches in the CRCNA. At Dordt we are grateful for the continued support of the CRC in our shared work of "expressing the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide." We are eager to maintain this shared vision into the future, as Dordt faculty and staff seek to fulfill our institutional 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

I. Overview

As a graduate school that shapes future intellectual leaders in the tradition of reformational thought, ICS is blessed to pursue a special mission in Christian higher education. With a charter from the Government of Ontario to grant M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in philosophy, ICS provides a rare space for graduate students to actively integrate their faith and learning. Beyond serving these students, ICS also strives to create opportunities for people from all walks of life to share and discuss the joys and challenges they face on their communal journeys of faith.

At the time of writing this report (Feb. 2024), we have recorded 91 course enrollments for the 2023-24 academic year. When we combine this figure with the number of full-time students in the post-coursework stage of their programs, our full-time-equivalency (FTE) student enrollment is roughly 21 students (an increase of two from the same time last year). The final FTE number for 2023-24 will be higher than this, because we do not yet have enrollment figures for courses we offer in April through June 2024. The final FTE figure for 2022-23 was 25 students, and we are on track to meet if not exceed that number this year.

Nineteen students are currently registered in our M.A. (Philosophy) (icscanada.edu/academics/master-of-arts-in-philosophy) program (13 of whom are enrolled in the “Educational Leadership” stream, or M.A.-E.L. [icscanada.edu/academics/educational-leadership], a professional development program for Christian K-12 schoolteachers and administrators); seven students are registered in our Ph.D. program (icscanada.edu/academics/phd-program); and three are registered in our Master of Worldview Studies program (icscanada.edu/academics/master-of-worldview-studies). In total, 58 students have taken at least one course at ICS so far this year.

At ICS our small size allows us to foster an intimate and nurturing academic community, including one-to-one graduate student mentoring that is essential for cultivating the next generation of academic leaders in the reformational thought tradition at the heart of ICS.

II. Welcoming new faculty

Following the retirement of Prof. Robert Sweetman, Prof. Neal DeRoo (icscanada.edu/neal-deroo) began his tenure as professor of philosophy on July 1, 2023. Prof. DeRoo completed his B.A. at Calvin University, his M.A. at ICS, and his Ph.D. at Boston College. He has previously served as a philosophy professor at Dordt University and at The King’s University. At Dordt he also served as director of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service, and at King’s he served as the Canada Research Chair in Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Religion. ICS is currently administering the Insight Grant Prof. DeRoo received from the Social Sciences and

Humanities Research Council of Canada, titled “Material Spirituality: A Phenomenology of Religion.” This year Prof. DeRoo also published two co-edited volumes of essays in the philosophy of religion.

III. Some highlights

ICS registered its first Calvin University student in one of its M.A.-E.L. courses as a result of its collaborative partnership with Calvin University’s Master of Education program, which allows M.Ed. students at Calvin to take ICS M.A.-E.L. courses for credit in their program while giving ICS students the opportunity to take Calvin’s M.Ed. courses for credit in their M.A. (Philosophy) in educational leadership program at ICS.

This year ICS also offered the experiential “Art in Orvieto” study abroad lifelong learning program, which took place in Orvieto, Italy, July 9-29. Led by Dr. Rebekah Smick, ICS associate professor of arts and culture, Art in Orvieto provided practicing artists and those otherwise interested in the arts an opportunity to explore the intersection of art, religion, and theology, an experience that included several excursions to view the rich history of religious art in Orvieto and surrounding regions.

IV. Outreach of the Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics

The ICS Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics (CPRSE) continues to produce, support, and promote Christian scholarship through its publications, events, and institutional collaborations. During the 2023-24 academic year, the CPRSE presented five public outreach events, added a collection of essays to its book series, and increased ICS’s impact through new and ongoing collaborations with like-minded institutions. Key institutional partners for this year included Martin Luther University College, the Society for Ricoeur Studies, Vision Ministries Canada, Citizens for Public Justice, and Shalem Mental Health Network.

The following is a summary of the CPRSE’s 2023-24 activities:

- In May 2023 the CPRSE presented a series of events on the occasion of the retirement of ICS senior member Robert Sweetman. This celebration of Prof. Sweetman’s scholarship and sterling career included a seminar on the gesture of Christian scholarship; a panel discussion on the legacy of his scholarly output with Dr. Nicholas Terpstra (University of Toronto), Dr. Jennifer Constantine-Jackson (Villanova University), and Dr. Eric Mabry (St. Mary’s Seminary and University); and a presentation of the festschrift *Gestures of Grace: Essays in Honour of Robert Sweetman* (Wipf & Stock, 2023), which is the latest addition to the CPRSE’s *Currents in Reformational Thought* book series.
- On October 12-14, the CPRSE hosted the 17th Annual Conference of the Society for Ricoeur Studies, “Ricoeur in Practice.” The event featured keynote speakers Dr. Stephanie Arel (Fordham University) and Dr. Scott Davidson (West Virginia University). As ICS President, I opened the conference and moderated a session; CPRSE associate director Héctor

- Acero Ferrer moderated one of the panels and presented a paper titled “‘Our-self as Another?’ Understanding the Development of Narrative Identity in Ecclesial Base Communities through the Lens of Paul Ricoeur”; and ICS alumnus Andrew Tebbutt presented a paper titled “Who Is the Subject of Recognition? Ricoeur’s Institutional Hermeneutics.”
- On October 16, CPRSE welcomed new senior member Neal DeRoo to lead our Fall 2023 Scripture, Faith, and Scholarship Symposium. In his presentation “The Heart of Philosophy/Philosophy of the Heart,” DeRoo reflected on the question “How can the biblical notion of the heart inform our understanding of philosophy, and how can philosophy help us think through all the implications of the biblical notion of the heart?”
 - On February 26, 2024, the CPRSE will welcome biblical scholar, activist, and farmer Dr. Sylvia Keesmaat to lead our Winter 2024 Scripture, Faith, and Scholarship Symposium. Dr. Keesmaat’s presentation, titled “Seeds of Resistance and Healing: Grounding the Bible,” explores key links between sacred Scripture and creation, considering questions such as “How does the desire of the Creator to inhabit and rejoice in the wondrous and diverse creation shape our response to the crisis of our age? And how does creation help us to understand the story of the Creator?”
 - On April 18-20, 2024, the CPRSE joins Martin Luther University College and Vision Ministries Canada in presenting the conference “Beyond Culture Wars: Fostering Solidarity in an Age of Polarization.” This event at the campus of Martin Luther University College (Wilfrid Laurier University) will provide an education and discussion forum for faith communities and the larger public to consider alternatives to the “culture war” mentality that contributes to social polarization, and to explore together more positive and mutually beneficial ways of relating religion to the broader society. The conference features keynote presentations by Dr. James K.A. Smith (Calvin University) and Dr. Kristin Kobes Du Mez (Calvin University) as well as workshops led by partner organizations Shalem Mental Health Network and Citizens for Public Justice.

V. Conclusion

On behalf of all who participate in and benefit from the academic ministry of ICS, I wish to thank the CRCNA for supporting ICS’s efforts to be an academic witness to the story of hope and renewal that our Maker and Redeemer calls us to embody. This support enables ICS to offer distinctively Christian educational programs to M.A. and Ph.D. graduate students, K-12 teachers and principals desiring meaningful professional development, and spiritually seeking lifelong learners. We thank God for his blessings in 2023-24 and pray that God grant synod wisdom in its deliberations this year.

Institute for Christian Studies
Ronald A. Kuipers, president

The King's University

Greetings from The King's University!

We are incredibly thankful for the growth in our incoming enrollment this past fall. We received an 11.5 percent increase in the number of new students this year compared to last year. This growth helped us to recover from some of our enrollment decline in the latter stages of the pandemic, and we are grateful for the 820 students who studied at King's this fall. We are hopeful for continued growth in our student enrollment next fall as we are experiencing a significant year-over-year increase in applications for next year.

Research continues to be a hallmark of The King's University, and it creates valuable and unique opportunities for our students. Dr. Cassidy Vander-Schee, assistant professor of chemistry, was awarded research grants from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for two separate projects. The \$152,500 NSERC grant was awarded for Vander-Schee's research into metals present in the Athabasca oilsands. Athabasca is a major site for mining and oil extraction activity, and during the extraction process, toxic substances are stored in tailings ponds until they can be remediated. The most common contaminants are naphthenic acids and metals such as vanadium. The research project seeks to understand how these substances interact and affect toxicity.

VanderSchee is also a coapplicant on a larger interdisciplinary research team that received a \$376,000 SSHRC grant. The team is identifying social determinants of lead poisoning in historical British colonial populations in the Caribbean. By studying both modern and historical populations, including British royal navy gravesites, they hope to determine whether there are correlations between lead-exposure levels and social determinants such as age, sex, and ancestry. VanderSchee's own role on the project is to determine the concentration of lead deposits in the human bone. The data will be measured at the University of Alberta and then processed at King's campus. King's students are key to VanderSchee's research, and seven students have already spent time in the lab creating samples, analyzing them using spectroscopic techniques, and processing the data. King's students Erin Pederson (4th-year chemistry) and Rio Bouwers (5th-year chemistry) had the opportunity to present their research at the 2023 Canadian Chemistry Conference and Exhibition in Vancouver this past June. "I couldn't do this by myself," says VanderSchee. "Research is done in teams. For students, it's a great chance to experience the research process. As a past King's student myself, doing research was what helped me decide my career path. I am excited to complete the circle and provide students with the same research opportunities I had access to."

King's offered another slate of public lectures hosted on campus over this past academic year. *Quandaries*, as the series is titled, explores some of the most important questions of our time and the myriad ways in which God is bringing renewal to our world. During this year's theme of "Collective Moral Conversations," our speakers discussed how our collective goods relate to personal interests and how we navigate multiple, and at times competing, moral priorities. The lectures take seriously the idea that there are moral conversations and tough dialogues that need to be engaged with, and these events offer guidelines for how to have these conversations well. The lectures take place at King's every month and are also available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. More information is available at kingsu.ca/quandaries.

We are deeply grateful for the Christian Reformed churches in western Canada who have continued to demonstrate the value they put into Christian higher education through maintaining their support of King's. Their financial investment is critically important in our efforts to keep a King's education an affordable option for anyone seeking a university degree grounded in the Christian faith. Thank you for your continued partnership.

The King's University
Melanie Humphreys, president

Kuyper College

With gratitude to God, the Kuyper College community is celebrating 85 years of preparing women and men for purposeful lives of learning, work, and service within every square inch of Christ's church and his world. That's something to celebrate!

In the 1930s, grassroots groups within the CRCNA appealed to synod to explore the possibility of a "complete program and budget for a real Missionary Training and Bible School." While synod did not support this initiative, leaders within the CRCNA, such as, Rev. H.J. Kuiper, Mark Fakkema, Dr. John DeKorne, Johanna Timmer, and leaders of the Chicago Helping Hand Mission passionately set out to establish the Reformed Bible Institute (RBI) in 1939.

The July/August 1939 issue of the *Young Calvinist* included this description of the purpose of RBI: "to provide such systematic Christian training as is not provided elsewhere in our Reformed circles." While much has changed over the past 85 years—our name, our location, our programs, and our students—we continue to foster and celebrate our niche as a Bible college within the Reformed tradition, providing all students with a deep biblical and theological foundation integrated with praxis-based service and ministry academic programs.

Now celebrating our 85th year, it is fitting for us to set the theme "A Life of Service." This theme honors our 4,500+ alumni and former faculty, staff, and board members who exemplified lives of service to God and neighbor, and it encourages us to follow Paul's advice in Romans 12:11—"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord"—as we continue our mission.

As we have completed another year of service at Kuyper College, I am pleased to report the following updates:

I. A refreshed mission statement

In June 2023 the Kuyper College Board of Trustees approved the following refreshed mission statement:

As a community of biblical higher education, Kuyper College forms lifelong learners for purposeful lives of work and service to God and neighbor.

These 23 words express up front that "community" is a vital and valued part of Kuyper's cultural "DNA." This mission statement also affirms our deep and integrated Bible and theology foundation, a hallmark of Kuyper College, which designates us a college of biblical higher education. And, no matter our role as students, staff, or faculty, we are learners who are being formed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Finally, in all that we do, we are living out God's call to intentional and meaningful work and service directed to God and our neighbor.

II. Purposeful learning

Significant enrollment growth

This fall we welcomed the largest class of first-year students since 2015. These students represent five countries and seven U.S. states.

New minors

This academic year we began offering three new minors—Christian community development, criminal justice, and sports management—that provide focused areas of study and augment our academic programs for students pursuing vocations in ministry, social work, and business leadership.

Partnerships for microcredentials

We are forging a partnership with a Christian organization of scholars and practitioners to offer an array of accredited microcredentials to students and other adult learners, particularly in the areas of service and ministry.

Launch of our athletics program

The Kuyper Cougars are back! As part of the NCCAA, we are celebrating the relaunch of athletics and the opportunity to deepen our engagement as a college community as we celebrate God's gifts of play and sport.

III. Purposeful work

New faculty and staff

We are pleased to welcome Dr. Anthony Bradley as research professor for interdisciplinary and theological studies. Dr. Bradley is an author, lecturer, and distinguished research fellow at the Acton Institute. In addition, Emily Perton is the new director of student success, having formerly served as executive director of Ready for Life, and Jim Steenbergen is the new chief advancement officer, bringing twenty years of experience in fund development with Christian organizations.

Theology of Work grant

A campus-wide project called "Faith, Work, and Learning: Kuyper College Faculty Collaborative Inquiry" is supported by a grant from the Work Colleges Consortium. Faculty participants have selected research topics related to the theology of work and how it applies to the vocational context of their teaching disciplines.

KuyperWorks promotion celebration

Recognizing the achievements of our student staff through their work-based learning is an important part of our KuyperWorks program. In December we celebrated students who were promoted to new levels of responsibility within their KuyperWorks positions.

The Van Halsema Legacy Society

We are pleased to announce our new legacy society, named in honor of Dr. Dick and Mrs. Thea Van Halsema, both of whom positively influenced many students and the broader Kuyper College community.

IV. Purposeful service

Student success and mental-health services

Data in a recent research study by the Kaiser Family Foundation states that 50 percent of young adults ages 18-24 reported anxiety and depression symptoms in 2023. And the 2023 Trends Report by the Higher Learning Commission, our regional accreditor, lists the top trend as student mental health. This is an important assessment of the reality of many college-age students and the demands on the faculty and staff who serve them. At Kuyper, we are earnestly putting into practice more tangible ways to help our students, staff, and faculty experience well-being through partnership with our counseling provider, redesigning our faith formation and service opportunities, holding a faculty retreat focused on self-care for educators, and hiring a director of student success.

New board members

This past year four highly qualified individuals joined our board of trustees. Their professional experience, skills, and unique backgrounds provide Kuyper College with a variety of perspectives as we seek to fulfill our mission. As well, our board is participating in the Association of Biblical Higher Education Board Governance Training Program.

V. Conclusion

Let me close with this brief story: in early January, I asked Corey, one of our first-year students, what he did over Christmas break. His face lit up as he told me that he and his younger brother were baptized on Christmas Eve at his home church. And, he added, with tears in his eyes, "I set three goals for myself this year: to go to a college like Kuyper, to play basketball, and to get baptized. God is so good!" Corey is on his way to fulfilling our end goal of education at Kuyper College—"to live faithfully for Jesus Christ in God's good world." Thanks be to God.

We are thankful for our continued partnership with the CRCNA and its churches, pastors, and members, and we look forward to more tangible ways to serve Christ's church and his world together as we share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Kuyper College
Patricia R. Harris, president

Redeemer University

Over the past year Redeemer University has experienced God's blessings through strong enrollment, bustling campus activity, new strategic initiatives, and more. Thank you for this opportunity to share how the Lord's provision, power, and faithfulness have been shaping Redeemer's journey.

I. Affordable tuition and a full residence

For the 2023-2024 academic year, Redeemer achieved a student enrollment of 1,052, made possible through continued tuition affordability efforts. Tuition has remained under \$10,000 (CAD), ensuring that a Christian university education remains accessible. A total of 553 students are calling campus home through Redeemer's residence program in the 2023-2024 academic year—a 10 percent increase from last year! More students have been able to experience the transformative impact of living in Christian community.

The university's bachelor of education (B.Ed.) program continues to receive a high volume of applications, resulting in consistent at-capacity cohorts. It has been exciting to see that applications from the west and east coasts have been growing, signifying Redeemer's expanding presence and reputation across the country, especially in the education field.

II. Innovation Centre grand opening

In October 2023, Redeemer celebrated the grand opening of its Innovation Centre. The Innovation Centre is located in the Charis Live and Learn Centre and is the campus hub for applied creativity and entrepreneurship. The centre hosts events, offers industry mentorship, and manages an interactive Makerspace. At the Makerspace students can learn about and use creative technologies, such as 3D printers, editing software, and a recording studio. Additionally, the Innovation Centre is now working to launch a for-profit, student-run digital storytelling venture.

III. New bachelor's degree program

In 2023 Redeemer introduced a new bachelor of communications and media studies (B.CoMS.) degree, expanding on the bachelor of arts major in this discipline. Redeemer is the only Christian university in Canada to offer this degree, further distinguishing itself as focusing on creative production.

IV. Supporting student mental health

Investment in mental-health supports and initiatives has continued to be a priority at Redeemer. Student mental-health services will see a significant expansion this year with the addition of a mental-health case manager who strategically cares for and assists students, helping to connect them with various mental-health supports and resources. By August 2024, Redeemer also plans to have upgraded and expanded the student health clinic to include space for mental-health services. These initiatives make up a significant portion of the \$1-million investment in mental-health supports announced by Redeemer in December 2022.

V. Relevant scholarship for the glory of Christ

Efforts in Christian research and scholarship have been a highlight this past year. The Albert M. Wolters Centre for Christian Scholarship awarded the 2023 Emerging Public Intellectual Award to Dr. Felipe do Vale, who also gave this year's annual "The World and Our Calling" lecture. Dr. do Vale is a Christian scholar from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who studies pressing issues of our time through the lens of love, as understood through the teaching of St. Augustine. Through multiple speaking engagements on January 24, 2024, Dr. do Vale helped the Redeemer community understand cultural issues in light of the drama of Scripture. In addition, Redeemer welcomed Dr. Jordan Ballor in fall 2023 as the speaker for the Wolters Centre Social Sciences Lecture; he discussed Abraham Kuyper, economics, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Finally, Redeemer's own academic contributions remain strong. For example, eight Redeemer faculty members and alumni contributed essays and creative works to the newly published collection *Christian Environmentalism and Human Responsibility in the 21st Century: Questions of Stewardship and Accountability*.

VI. Welcoming new Redeemer leadership

We are grateful to God for providing us with talented, committed individuals to fill a number of executive leadership positions. In July 2023, Redeemer welcomed Dr. Peter Neumann as vice president, academic. He brings to the role more than fourteen years of experience in academic leadership in Christian higher education and will lead Redeemer's academic mission with passion and excellence.

In addition, Redeemer celebrated the addition of Ms. Heidi de Vries as legal counsel and vice president, strategic initiatives, and Dr. Bill DeJong as faculty chaplain. Both of these roles, filled by gifted alumni, will further enable Redeemer to carry out its Reformed Christian mission strategically while remaining rooted in a spiritual community focused on growing together as believers.

Your ongoing prayers, support, and generosity are deeply appreciated by Redeemer University and its students. For the past forty-one years Redeemer has been committed to offering a transformative postsecondary education rooted in the Reformed Christian tradition, and this commitment remains. As has been the case historically, students from CRC churches represent the largest denominational group at Redeemer University. This speaks to how incredibly valuable Redeemer's strong partnership with the CRCNA continues to be. Thank you for supporting the mission of Redeemer where, through the power of Christ, minds are renewed, lives are transformed, and the world is redeemed.

Redeemer University
David Zietsma, president

Trinity Christian College

Greetings from Trinity Christian College. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide an update to Synod 2024 and for your continued partnership in equipping, training, and raising up leaders for the church and community through the ministry of Christian higher education.

Over the past year, Trinity Christian College has taken bold steps to eliminate reliance on student loan debt, to powerfully foreground student well-being and vocational readiness, and to create innovative partnerships that drive local business growth and entrepreneurial development for the sake of our neighborhoods. Three simple but bold structural innovations have transformed our model for addressing the economics of higher education, benefiting business development, and powerfully enhancing student well-being. We call this strategic vision the Transformative Colleges Initiative.

Through the Transformative Colleges Initiative, we lowered our tuition by 40 percent, moving away from the traditional model for pricing and financial aid that can often prove confusing and can be a particular barrier to first-generation college students and their families. We are striving to build a financial-aid practice that is as realistic, accessible, and transparent as possible. Our hope is that this will open doors even wider to the transformational good of Christian higher education.

We have also built a wide network of paid experiential education micro-internships and cooperative internships for our students. These paid experiential education opportunities powerfully affect both our students and our neighbors, as our students gain access to vocational formation and financial well-being while contributing to the development of the greater Chicago area. Trinity students are accessing these mutually beneficial internship experiences that (1) provide students with catalytic professional experience, (2) reduce student reliance on debt, (3) give donor-funded lift to early-stage entrepreneurs from marginalized neighborhoods, and (4) serve the hiring needs of partners. We call this initiative “Earn, Network, and Learn.” Students receive pay for this work, along with incredible hands-on learning. Entrepreneurs receive important lift for their businesses. Student-loan debt is reduced. It is such an exciting example of what can happen when we sync up with our ecosystem in ways that pursue mutual good. In the past semester alone, more than 130 students registered for micro-internships, and we have supported almost 60 entrepreneurs from economically disinvested neighborhoods.

Through the Transformative Colleges Initiative we also transformed our weekly schedule, no longer holding class on “Well-being Wednesday.” This gives students time for financial well-being as they engage with paid internships across the Chicago area. Well-being Wednesday also supports whole-person well-being for our students. As a result, we have seen dramatically reduced usage of our counseling center, dramatically reduced numbers of

students on academic risk lists, and dramatically decreased student attrition via dropouts or stop outs. In short, as we have operated with a generous vision of time, learning and well-being are being enhanced in ways that are resulting in deeper and broader student flourishing.

For decades, Trinity has welcomed students into a deeply Christian vision of learning and vocation, approaching every academic discipline and every profession through the lens of the Christian vision of the world. We see the Transformative Colleges Initiative as an extension of these Christian commitments, focusing on the ways our institutional structures, economics, and relationships are equally shaped by that Christian vision—particularly as it is fed by the abundance, generosity, and mutuality that is at home in God’s world. We are grateful that these strategies are showing strong results in student retention and academic and financial well-being as we open the doors wide to Christian higher education. Together these innovations are solving the challenge of student well-being and mental health and—thanks to a mutually beneficial partnership with our business community—eliminating the assumption that debt is the normal way to pay for higher education. Our data is showing that our students are more career ready, less hampered by debt that takes an average of 20 years to repay, and more likely to report their flourishing as whole people.

In support of these transformations and the campus enhancements that will embody these transformations, Trinity is embarking on its most significant capital campaign in its history to help establish the college as a leading voice for change in the challenged financial and student service model that characterizes large swaths of the higher education sector. Already the college has received the largest gifts in the history of the institution—a sign of the resonance this vision has with change-minded constituents. We are so grateful for this early support as we continue to learn that solving complex, systemic problems associated with higher education, business development, employment, and well-being requires us to consistently work with our entire ecosystem.

Day by day, God is at work in and through this campus community. We are grateful for the ways in which organizations such as the CRCNA are supporting the goal of seeing students thrive and encounter the love of Christ as they pursue their academic and professional callings. May God continue to bless all institutions working with a Christian vision for education and vocation.

Trinity Christian College
Aaron Kuecker, president

OVERTURES (*DEFERRED* *FROM* SYNOD 2023)

OVERTURES (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Note: The overtures in this section have been deferred to Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1039). Although some of these overtures may include phrases like “We overture Synod 2023 . . .” their deferral from Synod 2023 places them duly on the agenda of Synod 2024. (Classis Illiana requested that their overture here [i.e., Overture 55] be updated to address Synod 2024, and that change has been made.)

OVERTURE 49 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B

Classis Grandville overtures synod to adopt the following amendments to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B:

I. Background

The Christian Reformed Church has always held its officebearers to a high theological standard. As a condition for holding office, all CRC officebearers are required to take and abide by the terms of an oath called the Covenant for Officebearers (see Church Order Art. 5). By taking this oath, those elected to serve as officebearers affirm “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, Art. 5, A, 1). And they promise to “promote and defend [these] doctrines faithfully” (Supplement, Art. 5, Covenant for Officebearers).

The CRC has never allowed an officebearer to take exception to any of the doctrines contained in our creeds and confessions. Meeting less than four years after its founding, the CRC’s broadest assembly unanimously adopted a resolution requiring all officebearers to “unconditionally sign” the Form of Subscription/Covenant for Officebearers (*Assembly Minutes*, April 5, 1861, Art. 13). In adopting this resolution, the CRC was doing nothing more than following in the footsteps of the great Synod of Dort (1618-19) and of the 1834 *Afscheiding* (see, Godfrey, W. Robert, “Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall [Powder Springs, Ga.: The Covenant Foundation, 2018], pp. 93-104).

Unfortunately, following Synod 2022, the denominational offices published an online document undermining the CRC’s official policy regarding confessional subscription. The document is titled “Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report” (crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq, accessed Aug. 14, 2022), and it makes two claims that we find deeply problematic.

A. Confessional-difficulty gravamina

First, the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document claims that a council may grant an officebearer an exception to a doctrine contained in the confessions if that officebearer submits to their council a confessional-difficulty gravamen. According to the FAQ document, “A confessional-difficulty gravamen indicates that an officebearer personally has difficulty with something in the confessions or an interpretation of the confessions and wishes to go on record with his or her church council in that regard” (FAQ, Q/A 8). As both the history and text of the Church Order show, however, this understanding of a confessional-difficulty gravamen is incorrect.

As an official Church Order category, confessional-difficulty gravamina did not exist until Synod 1976. Prior to that synod, many churches simply assumed that if an officebearer had some “difficulty” with a confession, the only way for that officebearer to express that “difficulty” was for them to submit a gravamen calling for a *revision* of the confessions. In its report to Synod 1976, however, the Committee to Study Revision of the Form of Subscription rightly challenged this assumption.

According to the study committee, if an officebearer were to come to a “*settled conviction*” that some confessional teaching was wrong, then, of course, that officebearer should submit a gravamen calling for a revision of the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572). But suppose, the committee argued, an officebearer had not come to such a “settled conviction.” Instead, suppose they had merely developed “*serious doubts* about a point of doctrine taught in the confessions” or suppose that they were “*unsure* as to whether or not [some personal belief was compatible] with the church’s confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572, emphasis added). In those cases, the committee argued, what is called for is not a revision of the confessions, but rather for the officebearer to have “an open and frank” discussion with their council, “hopefully leading to the removal of [the officebearer’s] doubts” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572).

The 1976 advisory committee tasked with helping synod respond to this study committee report agreed with the study committee that there was a significant difference between someone’s having, on the one hand, a “settled conviction” or “objection” to the confessions and, on the other hand, their merely having “doubt” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 67). As a result, the advisory committee recommended that Synod 1976 create a new category of gravamina. In those cases when an officebearer has come to a “settled conviction” that the confessions are wrong, the officebearer should submit a “confessional-revision gravamen.” However, when an officebearer merely has “doubts” about something in the confessions, the officebearer should submit a “confessional-difficulty gravamen.” The aim of this new type of

gravamen would be for the church to provide an officebearer with whatever “information and/or clarification of the confession” was needed to resolve their doubts (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

Not only did Synod 1976 adopt this new distinction between “confessional-revision gravamina” and “confessional-difficulty gravamina,” they also applied the new distinction to a concrete case. In 1975, Dr. Harry Boer had sent a communication to synod asking synod “to inform him what ‘the express testimony of Scripture’ [was] for [the doctrine of reprobation]” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 105). Dr. Boer had gone to his consistory and classis with this request, but they had denied his request. In keeping with the common assumption of that day, they believed that Dr. Boer should have submitted his “difficulty” as a request to revise the confession. But this is not what Dr. Boer thought was needed. In a personal interview with the study committee tasked with examining his communication, Dr. Boer explained that “it [was] not his purpose in his letter to deny or object to the doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons, but to seek only the express testimony of Scripture which the Canons assert is available” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 623). In other words, Dr. Boer was not “objecting” to the doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons; nor did he have a “settled conviction” that the Canons were wrong. He simply had doubts about a point of doctrine and wanted the church to help him to resolve them.

Synod 1976 responded to Dr. Boer’s request in two ways. First, they decided to classify Dr. Boer’s communication as a “confessional-difficulty gravamen.” This made Dr. Boer’s communication the first-ever confessional-difficulty gravamen in CRC history. Second, they established a special committee to meet with Dr. Boer to help him resolve his doubts. Unfortunately, before the committee had a chance to meet with him, Dr. Boer had come to the conclusion that the strength of his views required him to call for a confessional revision.

Synod 1976’s handling of this first-ever confessional-difficulty gravamen shows that it did not understand the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a way for someone, like Dr. Boer, to take exception to a doctrine in our confessions. Instead, Synod 1976 understood confessional-difficulty gravamina as a personal request for help in resolving their doubts. And the way a council, classis, or synod was to do that was by providing the officebearer with the “information and/or clarification” of the confessions (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church’s creeds and confessions.

Why, then, does the FAQ document claim that a council can grant an exception to the confessions? We have heard two arguments. The first argument is that this interpretation merely reflects how some churches have used confessional-difficulty gravamina in the past. Apparently, some officebearers

have used this type of gravamen in order to avoid having to agree with infant baptism, limited atonement, and the doctrine of reprobation (among other doctrines). But let us be clear: this is an illegitimate use of the Church Order. And the fact that some councils have misused the Church Order in this way is no justification for the denominational offices to hold up that misuse as something for other councils and classes to copy.

Second, we have heard that this interpretation is implied by Supplement, Art. 5, B, 1. According to this regulation, when it comes to “the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen: . . . ministers . . . elders, or deacons shall submit their ‘difficulties’ to their councils for examination and judgment.” According to the denominational offices, the word “judgment” in this regulation implies that the council must decide whether to “accept” an officebearer’s difficulty (i.e., grant them an exception) or to place that officebearer under discipline.

The primary problem with this argument is that it assumes what needs to be proven. That is, the only way that the FAQ’s interpretation of the word “judgment” can mean what they say it means is if we start with the assumption that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a way for an officebearer to take an exception to the confessions. But this assumption is precisely what the denominational offices need to prove!

Instead, given both the text and history of the Supplement, the word “judgment” in this regulation is best interpreted as merely referring to the fact that a council must judge how to handle an officebearer’s proposed “difficulty.” Perhaps the council may “judge” that the officebearer has misunderstood what subscription requires. Or perhaps the council may judge that the officebearer’s “difficulty” is actually compatible with the confessions. Or perhaps the council may judge that there is a conflict between what the officebearer now thinks and what the confession says. Or perhaps they may judge that they need to send the gravamen to classis. In short, there are all kinds of “judgments” that a council might need to make in processing a confessional-difficulty gravamen.

The second problem with this argument is that it assumes that, short of granting an exception, the only other course of action a council can take is to put an officebearer under special discipline. But this is clearly false. As the Church Order says, “this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed” (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). In other words, having examined and judged the nature of the “difficulty” facing the officebearer, the council, classis, or synod is to deal with the officebearer “pastorally and personally,” providing them with whatever “information and/or clarification” may be needed to resolve their doubts or uncertainties (Church Order Art. 5, B, 2; *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572). And even if the council, classis, or synod cannot

provide what is needed to resolve those doubts, special discipline is still not the next natural course of action. In that case, the assembly should require the officebearer to submit a confessional-revision gravamen so that the entire denomination may examine and judge the issue.

In addition to the textual and historical problems facing the FAQ's interpretation of confessional-difficulty gravamina, we would also point out that the FAQ's interpretation would require councils to have authority to amend the Covenant for Officebearers. The Covenant for Officebearers requires subscribers to affirm all the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions as being doctrines that "fully agree with the Word of God." It also requires officebearers to declare that they "heartily believe" these doctrines and "will promote and defend [these] doctrines faithfully, conforming [their] preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them." Someone who takes an exception to the confessions cannot make those affirmations. Accordingly, in order for a council to grant an exception, they would need to amend the terms of the Covenant for Officebearers. That is, they would need to revise the covenant so that it read that the officebearer affirmed the doctrines in the confessions *in so far as* they agreed with the Word of God. Otherwise, by signing the Covenant for Officebearers, the officebearer would be committing perjury. But councils do not have authority to revise the Covenant for Officebearers. Therefore they do not have authority to grant exceptions to a doctrine contained in the creeds and confessions.

B. Delegating those with "exceptions" to classis and synod

The second problematic claim that the FAQ document makes is that an officebearer who objects to a doctrine in the confessions may be delegated to classis and synod provided that that officebearer's council has granted them an exception. According to the FAQ, "Those who have filed gravamina which have been accepted by their councils would be considered officebearers in good standing and therefore eligible to serve as delegates to the broader assemblies" (FAQ, Q/A 16).

The most pressing problem with this claim is that it encourages officebearers to violate the third and ninth commandments. When a person is delegated to classis or synod, they are required to retake their oath of office. At classis, this oath is the Covenant for Officebearers; at synod, it is the Public Declaration of Agreement. In both cases, the oaths require officebearers to "heartily believe" and affirm all the doctrines contained in the CRC's creeds and confessions as being doctrines that "fully agree with the Word of God." Obviously, an officebearer who has been granted an "exception" to the creeds and confessions cannot take those oaths. Accordingly, for a council or classis to delegate an officebearer to classis or synod whom they know cannot honestly take these oaths is for that council or classis to encourage that officebearer to blaspheme God's name and to commit perjury.

Furthermore, if allowed to stand, the FAQ's claim would undermine trust among CRC officebearers and churches. As a confessional church, the basic assumption of our assemblies is that "the doctrines contained in the confessions of [our] church fully agree with the Word of God" (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 1) and, therefore, that every delegate "affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). This is why, on their classical credentials form, synod requires every council to "testify that [their] council faithfully adheres to the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church . . ." (Supplement, Art. 41; see, *Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 55-63). And it is also why classes authorize their synodical delegates "to take part in all deliberations and transactions of synod" in so far as those transactions are "in agreement with the Word of God according to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church . . ." (Credentials for Synod Form; crcna.org/classis/stated-clerks/resources-stated-clerks/synod-delegates-overtures-communications). The FAQ's claim would undermine these basic confessional assumptions. And, consequently, delegates from one church or classes would now be justified in wondering whether their fellow delegates agree with them in doctrine and life.

Finally, if permitted to stand, the FAQ's claim would undermine the CRC's commitment to confessionalism. It would mean that an entire council could grant itself an exception to some doctrine or confessional interpretation and the council would never have to inform either its congregation or its classis. In fact, the Church Order *requires* that "in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church . . ." (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). This means that entire councils and, possibly, an entire classis, could take exception to infant baptism, limited atonement, or the doctrine of reprobation, among other doctrines, and synod would not be permitted to discuss it!

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Grandville overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

- A. Amend the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B by adding the following regulations:
 3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber's "doubts" about a doctrine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber's "settled conviction" that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

Grounds:

- a. Past synodical decisions, the Church Order, and the Covenant for Officebearers all assume and require unconditional subscription to our creeds and confessions (see Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1; C, 1).
 - b. When it crafted the Supplement to Article 5, Synod 1976 did not understand confessional-difficulty gravamina as providing a way for officebearers to take exception to the doctrines contained in our confessions.
 - c. To permit a council or classis to grant exceptions to the creeds and confessions would imply that councils and classes have authority to amend the Covenant for Officebearers. They do not have this authority.
4. A subscriber who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen may not be delegated to classis or synod until they can reaffirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. This shall be done by requiring the subscriber to re-sign the Covenant for Officebearers.

Grounds:

- a. Delegating officebearers to classis and synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for Officebearers is to encourage them to violate the third and ninth commandments.
 - b. Delegating officebearers to classis or synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for Officebearers undermines trust and unity among officebearers, churches, and classes.
 - c. Delegating officebearers to classis and synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for Officebearers undermines the CRC's confessional integrity.
 - d. "All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers" (Church Order Art. 5).
 - e. "The person signing 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, Art. 5, A, 1).
- B. Instruct the general secretary to correct the guidance given on the denominational website regarding confessional-difficulty gravamina so that it accords with the decisions of Synod 2023.

Ground: The advice to the churches on the denominational website has resulted in confusion and errors within councils and classes on matters that are fundamental to the good order and values of the CRC.

- C. Instruct the general secretary to send a letter to every council (a) explaining that a mistake was made in the original online advice given to churches and (b) informing them of the decisions of Synod 2023 with regard to confessional-difficulty gravamina.

Grounds:

1. The advice to the churches on the denominational website has resulted in confusion and errors within councils and classes on matters that are fundamental to the good order and values of the CRC.
2. Sending a letter to every council will better ensure that councils and classes are aware of Synod 2023's decisions regarding confessional-difficulty gravamina.

Classis Grandville
Daniel B. Mouw, stated clerk

OVERTURE 50 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Establish a Time of Discipleship for Officebearers with a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Introduction

Classis North Cascades is concerned about the recent usage of the gravamen process among faculty at Calvin University and among members of the Council of Delegates. We are concerned that the gravamen process is being utilized to reject or seek a personal exemption from the declarations of Synod 2022 regarding human sexuality as taught and understood by the Reformed churches for five centuries. This is not the intent of the process. To rightly understand its intended use, some historical background is in order.

II. Background

In 1914 the Church Order clearly declared, "The ministers of the Word of God and likewise the professors of theology (which also behooves the other professors and school teachers) shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity—namely, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, and the ministers of the Word who refuse to do so shall *de facto* be suspended from their office by the Consistory or Classis until they shall have given a full statement, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office" (Art. 53). Article 80 then goes on to state that "false doctrine or heresy, public schism

... adultery, fornication ... would be considered worthy of excommunication.”¹ Thus the foundation of the gravamen was to give a statement for a differing view, that if judged inconsistent with the Three Forms would lead to deposition.

In 1965, the synod adopted a new form of Church Order that is the basis of the order currently in use. Its version of Article 5 stated, “All office-bearers, on occasions stipulated by consistorial, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Form of Subscription.”² In adopting the new Church Order and a new Form of Subscription in 1965, for the first time synod made a way for office-bearers to reveal

... difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines ... to the consistory, classis, and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal of being by that very fact suspended from our office.

And further, if at any time the consistory, classis, or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity of doctrine, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the National Synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition ... and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed.”³

It is noteworthy that the Church Order of 1965 also recognized that violations of the Form of Subscription, as well as deviations from sound doctrine, were worthy of special discipline (Art. 89).⁴

Synod 1976 was the first synod to adopt the two types of gravamina which exist in our modern Church Order—the *confessional-difficulty* and the *confessional-revision*.⁵ That synod rightly understood that not all “difficulties and different sentiments” are a call to revise the church’s confessions but that sometimes these are requests for discipleship and further instruction. But what must be remembered is that in the case of a confessional-revision gravamen, if a council approves it, then it becomes an overture to the classis,

¹ Schaver, J.L. “Christian Reformed Church Order” in *The Polity of the Churches*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1937, 1947 ed.), pp. 50-51, 55-56.

² Spaan, H. *Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1968), p. 12.

³ Spaan, pp. 34-35.

⁴ Spaan, p. 30.

⁵ *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 66-70 (Art. 64).

and if classis approves the overture, then it automatically becomes an overture to the synod.⁶ Thus the synod clearly sought to ensure that doctrinal uniformity and consistency were maintained within the denomination, while also providing a way for continued discipleship of officebearers with significant questions.

In 1988, however, the synod made a subtle but important change to the Form of Subscription. Whereas in 1965 the Form called on officebearers to reveal their difficulties or different sentiments to “the consistory, classis, and synod,” in 1988, these difficulties or differing views are to be disclosed “to the council, classis, or synod for examination.” The change from “and synod” to “or synod” created a situation where gravamen could be adjudicated independently and did not require disclosure to all governing assemblies. The purpose of adjudicating gravamen appears to have been twofold. First, to grant officebearers an ability to seek genuine help in doctrinal understanding should such struggles arise. And second, to “maintain unity and purity in doctrine.”⁷ With this subtle change it appears the churches only envisioned *confessional-difficulty gravamina* being brought forth and therefore opened up a loophole in which a *confessional-revision gravamen* could be approved at one church assembly without automatically being presented to the next broader assembly. The synod forgot the wisdom of Synod 1976’s instruction that if approved, the next broader assembly must then decide upon it. Thus, the unity and purity of the church’s doctrine could be challenged locally without a proper check and balance. The seed of congregationalism and individualism was sown.

When the most recent form of subscription was ratified by Synod 2012, known as the Covenant for Officebearers, this entire provision was replaced with “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. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God’s Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. . . . Further, we promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.” This wording incorporates allusions to both gravamina. The confessional-difficulty gravamen seems to be addressed in the phraseology about presenting or receiving confessional difficulties. This is a call for discipleship and growth as iron sharpens iron. The confessional-revision gravamen appears to be discussed with reference to the Church Order. But underlying all of it is a call to submit to the broader body of Christ.

⁶ *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 69 (Art. 64, C, 3, c, 2-3. This is inferred from the explicit statement that if “the gravamen is *adopted* by the consistory and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies. . . .”

⁷ Form of Subscription, *Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 530-31.

This brings one to the present version of the Church Order (2022). Church Order Article 5 and its supplements deal with subscription and gravamina. It is important to remember that “no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.”⁸ Supplement, Article 5, B, 2 reminds the church that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is for “information and/or clarification,” not as a way for individuals to take exception to the confessions or to synod’s pronouncements related to them. Supplement, Article 5, C, 1 reminds the church that in a confessional-revision gravamen the “burden of proof . . . rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions.” Simply saying “I disagree with synod’s decision(s)” is not enough. Proof that the affirmation of the church is wrong and in violation of the Word of God is needed.

However, the supplement to Article 5 reclaimed the wisdom of Synod 1976 by causing the approval of a confessional-revision gravamen by one assembly to become an overture to the next broader assembly (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 3), and such approvals do not become binding until the synod adopts the gravamen revisions (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 6).

All of this background sets the stage for what follows: Gravamen are not new. But their usage appears to be on the increase. As Henry DeMoor noted in the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, “In our tradition the submission of formal gravamina is rare. Aside from Boer’s challenge, the only other notable statement of difficulty with the creeds was that of Dr. Dietrich H. Kromminga.”⁹ These occurred in 1976 and 1947, respectively. However, following Synod 2022, *The Banner* reported on October 19, 2022, that eight requests for exception had been sought by members of the Council of Delegates.¹⁰

On November 1, 2022, the Calvin *Chimes* reported that the Calvin University Board of Trustees “retained all faculty in the ‘pioneer cohort’ — a group of faculty who were the first to file statements of confessional difficulty in response to decisions made at synod in June.”¹¹ And later in the article it is reported that “about a dozen faculty filed gravamina.” This makes for close to 20 gravamina in less than a year when the entire history of the denomination considers this rare and the manuals and commentaries account for only two instances.

⁸ Church Order 2022, Supplement, Article 5, A, 3.

⁹ DeMoor, Henry. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2020), p. 48.

¹⁰ thebanner.org/news/2022/10/requesting-an-exception-to-synod-2022s-human-sexuality-decisions

¹¹ calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/

In addition, following Synod 2022, the denominational staff published a listing of “Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report.”¹² In this resource, *gravamen* and its plural, *gravamina*, are mentioned 63 times discussing the two kinds of *gravamina*, who has the right to decide upon them, and numerous other things. It is important to realize that no other resource has been published following other synodical decisions that inform officebearers on how to get around a synodical decision. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the FAQ document explicitly tells officebearers that if a local congregation accepts their *gravamen*, then it need not be disclosed to broader assemblies.¹³ While technically true for a *confessional-difficulty gravamen*, this is not true of a *confessional-revision gravamen*. The FAQ page distorted the Church Order instructions.

In summary, *confessional-difficulty gravamina* were never intended to be long-standing, perpetual ways for an individual to take exception to a doctrine or teaching of the church confessions. These were meant to clear up confusion and bring clarity to an individual concerning the teaching of the church. To persist with a *confessional-difficulty gravamen* is to deny the corporate nature of one’s faith and to fail to submit to the church or to hide the real intent of one’s *gravamen*, which is to seek *confessional revision*. If it is the former, then discipline is in order; if it is the latter, then clarity and instruction are needed so that the church can properly address the situation. Therefore, Classis North Cascades submits the following overture.

III. Overture

Classis North Cascades overtures synod to establish a one-year time frame for discipling officebearers, faculty, and staff members within our churches, institutions, and agencies who have filed a *confessional-difficulty gravamen* related to Synod 2022’s decisions regarding the *confessional* nature of pronouncements in the Human Sexuality Report.

That this may be implemented in an orderly fashion, the following points should also be noted:

- A. The assembly or board that receives the *confessional-difficulty gravamen* will establish proper mentoring and pastoral care for each officebearer’s unique situation.
- B. The one-year time frame will begin from the date of the *gravamen*’s filing or the date of synod’s approval of this overture, whichever is later.
- C. If at the end of the one-year discipleship period, any officebearer continues to express difficulty with synod’s decisions, either (1) the officebearer will file a *confessional-revision gravamen*, which will be heard by synod, or (2) the service, ministry, or job of said officebearer, faculty, or

¹² crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq

¹³ See crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq, Question 16.

staff in the church, seminary, or university will be ended honorably based on an inability to affirm “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, Art. 5, A, 1).

Grounds:

1. This is a compassionate way forward; it allows time for prayerful study and reflection but also places an end to any independent or congregational spirit that may be lurking in our midst.
2. This upholds the historic and recently reaffirmed understanding of human sexuality by Synod 2022.
3. This is consistent with what Church Order Article 29 clearly declares: “The decisions of the assemblies shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order.”
4. This preserves the unity of the church and the church’s doctrine and protects the church from independentism and congregationalism as David Engelhard and Leonard Hofman declared in the 2001 *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*: “The intent of Article 29 is clearly to protect the unity of the church and denominational integrity as over against independentism and congregationalism.”¹⁴
5. This is a discipleship-based approach.
 - a. If an officebearer, faculty, or staff member has difficulty with the decision of Synod 2022, then every assembly needs to engage in intentional prayer and discipleship of these officebearers to bring them back to a faithful and consistent confession.
 - b. Simply approving a confessional-difficulty gravamen without any discipleship is a failure of the church to exercise her ministry and leads to independentism or congregationalism.
6. This reiterates the binding nature of the confessions and the decisions of synod and will lead officebearers to clarify whether a confessional difficulty exists or if what was truly sought was a confessional revision, which the entire church must decide upon per the supplement to Church Order Article 5.

Classis North Cascades
J. Scott Roberts, stated clerk

¹⁴ Engelhard, David H., and Leonard J. Hofman, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 2001 revision (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 2001), p. 174.

Hold Officebearers to Biblical and Confessional Standards

I. Preamble

Every day we struggle with the sin in our lives. We also struggle to humbly uphold the standard to which our King has called us. Our God and King hates sin, yet he has graciously set us free from a yoke of slavery to sin. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). As a denomination we have clearly recognized sin in the various forms that adultery and unchastity take (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922); yet we have many in our corner of the church who refuse to recognize this in their life and ministry. There are also those who seek to publicly teach according to the standard that we as a body have agreed upon while privately modeling and teaching a different standard. Just as all of Scripture is singular in its witness for Christ, our lives should seek to be uniform in proclaiming our fallenness and God’s gracious work in Jesus Christ and his kingdom as witnessed by all of Scripture. We lie if we say we can teach one standard in one sphere of life and another standard in a different sphere of life.

There are many in our denomination and denominational bodies, agencies, and ministries who are seeking exception from the recognition of sin that we as a body have agreed upon in the synodical decision of 2022. They seek this exception by way of a confessional-difficulty gravamen, which is not designed as a route for exception but as a route for clarifying or being corrected in one’s beliefs in line with Scripture and the church’s confessions. Brothers and sisters, if we continue to allow this practice, we will surely become a hollow edifice that is the church in name only, as surely as if we wish one another food and shelter and do not provide it (James 2:14-17). If we do not call each other to seek after the standard Christ has set for us, then we have given up the race and have allowed each other to fall into sin rather than encouraging, refining, and building one another up. If we cease to fight the good fight, we no longer recognize God’s sanctifying grace over every sin in our lives. It is a sad sign of the state of the practice of discipline in our denomination when we allow such clear standards of Scripture to be easily overlooked for so long, thus fostering great pain in those who need such large correction. It is better to work the practice of discipline when the error is small and easily corrected.

Are we so bad at holding each other to the standard of our highest authority, Scripture, that we fear both giving and receiving discipline—no longer seeking it in our own lives and ministries and in the lives and ministries of others?

II. Background

The work of Synod 2022 maintained a faithful, biblical foundation in recognizing once again several areas of sexual sin that violate the seventh commandment and constitute lust. This work aids us in seeking the model Christ has set, building one another up in faithful discipleship of our Lord,

and revealing and confronting one another in our sins. However, some in our denomination have set a stumbling block for many, not in a matter of Christian liberty but in a matter that clearly violates the Spirit of adoption that we have in Christ, our co-heir (Rom. 8:12-18).

After the decisions of Synod 2022, the denominational office provided some FAQ responses that contribute to this stumbling block. Specifically, Question 8 of the FAQ document accurately states that according to Church Order (Supplement, Art. 5), a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a “personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession.” But the FAQ carries on, indicating that if a church council is “satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand.” This is not faithful to the signing of the Covenant of Officebearers in that it allows officers to sign the covenant while holding beliefs in direct conflict with those laid out by our standards. Confessional-difficulty gravamina are not designed to stand as declarations of exception but are a means by which the officer can seek personal correction or personal clarification to match Scripture and our confessions. A gravamen is an action item, not a note to be recognized or let stand.

This kind of behavior allowed for in Question 8 of the FAQ has already occurred within our body. An online *Banner* article from October 19, 2022, explained that the Council of Delegates voted to allow its executive committee to grant exceptions to the Statement of Agreement. Also, an article from the Calvin University *Chimes* from November 1, 2022, explains that the Calvin University Board of Trustees voted to permit gravamina from faculty to stand on this matter. This practice violates the signing of the Covenant of Officebearers, or in the case of university faculty, the similar Covenant of Faculty, by undermining the commitment to uphold the standards of Scripture as witnessed to and explained by the confessions.

III. Goal

With this overture it is our goal that the church can maintain a consistent witness regarding the definition of sin in our lives and with this consistent standard pursue faithfully the sanctification in the Holy Spirit that God is so graciously giving us.

IV. Overture

Classis Northcentral Iowa overtures Synod 2023 to take the following actions:

- A. Inform all councils, classes, agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities, that they are not to let stand gravamina from officebearers that register exceptions to the beliefs of our denomination.
- B. Develop a concrete course of action for judging confessional-difficulty gravamina from officebearers, including a proposed timeline for the inclusion or rejection of the candidate or appointee into ministry on the

basis of their conforming to confessional standards such that the issue addressed in the gravamen is settled.

- C. Inform the classes and future synods of the CRCNA that nominees and appointees to the agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other bodies of the CRCNA must agree in full with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA and may not take exception to them and shall not currently have a confessional-difficulty gravamen under the discernment of their governing council, board, or supervisory body.

Grounds:

1. Members of the church should not use instruments of church polity as a workaround of the faithfully held beliefs of the church. Confessional-difficulty gravamina are designed not as a means of exception to doctrine but a means of discipleship for officebearers and of maintaining scripturally founded confessions.
2. Because gravamina are only part of a process, there needs to be a well-defined follow-up for the filing of a gravamen. At the local council level, this can be built up as part of the officer candidate training and approval process with any difficulties addressed before the individual is called into service. On the classical or synodical level, if the one bringing the gravamen is already an officebearer, a time limit and definite decision need to be defined so that the matter can be judged in a timely and concise manner rather than being let to stand indefinitely.
3. Appointing to offices, boards, committees, and councils only those who are able to agree with our doctrines and beliefs will aid in maintaining a consistent witness throughout our denomination. The officebearer who develops a difficulty while in office is wholeheartedly invited to submit a confessional-difficulty gravamen in order to develop discernment and judgment on any element of our beliefs which may be unscriptural or which the officebearer needs aid in understanding or living in submission to.

V. Conclusion

This difficulty our denomination is currently working through reflects the work of the prophet Nehemiah. While God used him mightily to contribute to the revitalization of Jerusalem, the place where God's name dwells and his reign is represented, Nehemiah still had to work to reform God's people according to Scripture a second time. We as Christians are constantly forgetting the pleasant lines God has given us to live within and regularly need to seek correction and formation according to God's Word. We need to humbly seek to give and receive this correction throughout all of the life and body of the church.

Classis Northcentral Iowa
Steven J. Mulder, stated clerk

Require Confessional-Revision Gravamina on the Occasion of Clear Disagreement with the Confessions

I. Background

Synod 2022 in its adoption of the Human Sexuality Report provided clear biblical leadership when it comes to matters of sexuality. Synod recognized as already having confessional status the understanding that answer 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism in the word “unchastity” condemns adultery, polyamory, premarital sex, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. There was intense debate and disagreement, however, on the floor of synod regarding homosexual sex, and this disagreement persists within the CRCNA.

In an effort to bring clarity and peace to the situation, the Office of General Secretary produced a document titled “Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report.” In this document, a Church Order device called a *gravamen* (plural *gravamina*) is brought forward as a way for people to serve in good conscience as officebearers in the CRCNA despite disagreement with a teaching from the confessions. While a confessional-revision gravamen has a public path toward resolution in the Church Order Supplement to Article 5 (either the denomination agrees with the gravamen and changes the confession, or it does not), the confessional-difficulty gravamen is harder to figure out. In Supplement, Article 5, the confessional-difficulty gravamen is called “a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession,” and thus the matter is kept quiet and confidential (Supplement, Art. 5, *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina*, B, 2). The general secretary’s document treats the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a way for one to quietly disagree with the confessions on a point of doctrine indefinitely if one’s council permits. In answer 8, the document says of the officebearer’s council, “If they are satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand” (crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq).

Do gravamina get to “stand” indefinitely? We believe that they do not. Gravamina are to be judged (likely only to allow for information and/or clarification), withdrawn, or adopted as an overture on the way to revising an article in the confessions. The guidelines in Supplement, Article 5 present gravamina as processes that must have resolution. While it is true that the guidelines do not specify what happens if the officebearer continues to have difficulty with a doctrine, the guidelines do state that “the person signing 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”; and furthermore “no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise,

the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in" (*Guidelines*, A, 1, 3). The Covenant for Officebearers clearly aims for unity on the doctrines taught by our creeds and confessions. Gravamina exist to preserve unity in doctrine. The confessional-difficulty gravamen is "a personal request for information and/or clarification" to determine whether or not an officebearer fully understands a point of doctrine or discerns whether or not his or her own views are compatible with the church's teaching on that point. To use the confessional-difficulty gravamen to hide ongoing and determined disagreement as a quiet local option is dishonest and constitutes a violation of the Covenant for Officebearers.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2023 to direct officebearers who disagree with answer 108 in the Heidelberg Catechism (or any other teaching in our creeds and confessions) to employ the confessional-revision gravamen to seek resolution and not the confessional-difficulty gravamen. Also, instruct the Office of General Secretary to amend the "Frequently Asked Questions" document accordingly.

Grounds:

1. We are, and wish to remain, a confessional denomination.
2. The Covenant for Officebearers requires unity in doctrine, and gravamina must be used to achieve that unity, not resist it.

Classis Georgetown
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

OVERTURE 54 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Prohibit Exceptions and Gravamina in All Agencies, Ministries, Boards, Broader Assemblies, and Other Entities of the CRCNA

I. Background

For many years there have been discussions and disagreements in the CRCNA over human sexuality, most of which have centered on the issue of homosexual activity. Nevertheless, the denomination's official stance on this issue has remained unchanged since Synod 1973 adopted the position that homosexual practice "is incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Scripture."

In 2016 the report from the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage was considered by synod. Synod 2016 received the majority and minority reports as information but recommended to the churches "the pastoral guidance of the minority report . . . in conversation and in keeping with the synodical decisions of 1973, 1999, and 2002" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 917-18).

Additionally, however, Synod 2016 appointed a new study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20). This committee's work, often referred to as the Human Sexuality Report (HSR), was published in November 2020 and included, among many other things, an affirmation of the CRCNA's long-held position on the matter of homosexual activity. But because of the cancellation of Synod 2021, the report was not addressed officially until Synod 2022.

Synod 2022 took several actions centered on the HSR. These actions included recommending the HSR to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality. In addition, Synod 2022 affirmed that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment"; in so doing, synod declared this affirmation "'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status" in the CRCNA (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 922).

Following this decision of synod, the Office of General Secretary published an FAQ¹ document addressing the decisions of Synod 2022 regarding human sexuality. In this FAQ, questions 6-11 appear to essentially allow for exceptions to be taken to Synod 2022's decisions through the process of submitting confessional-difficulty gravamina. But then question 12 goes on to say something that appears to contradict this. The FAQ document has resulted in a great deal of confusion, and there remains a lack of clarity in the denomination concerning Synod 2022's decisions and their ramifications.

For example, the Council of Delegates (COD), at its October 2022 meeting, approved a "process for filing an exception to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA."² Similarly, Calvin University's board of trustees decided in October 2022 to retain faculty members who filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen in response to Synod 2022's decisions concerning human sexuality.³ In addition, some councils and classes are considering confessional-difficulty gravamina as a way to grant exceptions to officers who do not agree with Synod 2022's decisions regarding human sexuality.

¹ crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq

² crcna.org/news-and-events/news/council-delegates-meets-0?fbclid=IwAR1PhkGAYuE1e-QH0KFUUqIWfjAUjBoFpb-0rfwBIMvP5M3YpHQ3FP4OzoU

³ calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/?fbclid=IwAR0Gfwr5bLlzBLU7jGrvKRb2GY_ez_SIpM2ilON6uhCtECzCuDQ8eC5zDM

II. Overture

Classis Central Plains overtures Synod 2023 to take the following actions:

- A. Inform all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA—including, but not limited to, all classes and future synods, the COD, and the boards of trustees, faculties, and staff members of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary—that members of these various bodies of the CRCNA may not register exceptions to the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA but must affirm, without reservation, all the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA; nor may these bodies grant such exceptions to their members.
- B. Inform all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA—including, but not limited to, all classes and future synods, the COD, and the boards of trustees, faculties, and staff members of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary—of the following:
 - 1. Current members of these various bodies of the CRCNA who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina with their local councils must resolve the issue with their councils and/or classes by the end of calendar year 2023 or step down from the denominational body on which they serve.
 - 2. Future members of these various bodies of the CRCNA who submit confessional-difficulty gravamina with their local councils while already serving on one of these denominational bodies must resolve the issue with their councils and/or classes within six months of filing a gravamen or step down from the denominational body on which they serve.
 - 3. In the above two situations *resolve* means that those who have filed confessional-difficulty gravamina no longer have the doctrinal difficulty and are able to affirm, without reservation, their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA.
 - 4. No one having an active confessional-difficulty gravamen submitted to their local councils may be appointed to serve on these various bodies of the CRCNA.
- C. Require all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA to remove any members of these bodies who cannot or will not affirm, without reservation, their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA in the time periods specified in B, 1 and B, 2 above, and who will not voluntarily remove themselves from the denominational bodies they serve.
- D. Inform church councils that if an officer of the church has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen to the council and is serving on an agency, ministry, board, broader assembly, or other entity of the

CRCNA, or is being considered for appointment to such a denominational body, the council is required to inform that denominational body of the officer's gravamen, regardless of where the council and the officer are in the process laid out in Church Order Supplement, Article 5.

- E. Inform the classes and future synods of the CRCNA that nominees and appointees to all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA must affirm their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA, may not take any exceptions to these doctrines and beliefs, and must not have a confessional-difficulty gravamen submitted to their local council; rather, they must affirm, without reservation, all the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA.
- F. Instruct the Office of General Secretary to update the "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report" to reflect items A-E above.

Grounds:

- 1. The tradition and polity of the CRCNA does not allow its officers to take exceptions to the doctrines and beliefs of the denomination. By extension, this should not be permitted in any agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA.
- 2. The opening paragraph of the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA reads as follows: "We promise to do this work in obedience to the revealed will of our Lord Jesus Christ *and in full agreement with what the congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America confess.*"⁴
- 3. All officers of the CRCNA sign the Covenant for Officebearers—a covenant in which we affirm "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, A, 1).
- 4. "The decisions of the assemblies shall be considered *settled and binding*, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Church Order, Art. 29, emphasis added).
- 5. These actions not only address the response of some in the CRCNA to Synod 2022's decisions regarding human sexuality; they also address the dangerous and harmful precedent that is being set by this response. Thus, they serve as a safeguard against similar actions being taken in the future, should there be disagreement with other decisions of the assemblies and/or the doctrines of the church.

Classis Central Plains
Jonathan Spronk, stated clerk

⁴ cncna.org/sites/default/files/cod_statement_of_agreement_with_beliefs_of_the_crcna_7-17.pdf (emphasis added)

Do Not Accept Confessional Difficulties That Would Allow What the Church Confesses to Be Sin; Officebearers Who Cannot Agree with Our Beliefs Are to Resign or Be Released

I. Background

Synod 2022 set a faithful, biblical foundation by stating that we uphold the confessional belief of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement, and that several areas of sexual sin violate the seventh commandment as well as our confessions. This foundation has helped to teach us to walk alongside of and care for those who struggle with matters of faithful living. The problem is that our work has been hindered by some in our denomination who have distracted us from this mission of concern.

The CRC denominational office has posted an FAQ document in the aftermath of synod's decisions.¹ Question 8 of the FAQ document states that according to Church Order (Supplement, Art. 5), a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a "personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession." However, the FAQ goes on to state that if a church council is "satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand." This point of view is not stated in our Church Order. It means that any officebearer can continue to serve in good standing even though he or she holds personal convictions against what our confessions teach.

This inconsistency between private and public confessional beliefs has occurred in other areas of the CRC as well. For example, the Council of Delegates has voted to allow the council's executive committee to grant exceptions to the Council of Delegates Statement of Agreement.² And the Calvin University board has voted to allow gravamina from faculty to stand on this matter.³

The acceptance of gravamina in these areas has effectively undermined the commitments made by Synod 2022 and by the Covenant for Officebearers. As a matter of integrity, officebearers make an oath before God and the church that the confessions "fully agree with the Word of God" and that "we heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them."

¹ crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq

² thebanner.org/news/2022/10/requesting-an-exception-to-synod-2022s-human-sexuality-decisions

³ calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/

II. Overture

To help our denomination carry out the critical ministry of bringing the gospel to those struggling with sin, Classis Illiana overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

A. Inform all assemblies (councils, classes, and future synods) that they are not allowed, under any circumstances, to accept any confessional-difficulty gravamen from officebearers that would allow what the church clearly knows to be sin, or the promotion of sin. This would include the list of sins that Synod 2022 recognized as violations of the seventh commandment. We request that synod make the following clarifying changes to Church Order Supplement, Article 5:

1. Revise point 1 under “A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers” (italics added):
 1. The person signing 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.
“Without reservation” means that the CRC does not allow any exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.
2. Revise point 2 under “B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional difficulty-gravamen” (italics added):
 2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and \or clarification of the confession. *A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not to be used when one has settled convictions or objections to our confessions.* Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.

Grounds:

- a. The CRC has never allowed exceptions to our confessions but affirms in the Covenant for Officebearers that all the doctrines confessed fully agree with the Word of God.
- b. A gravamen was never meant to allow the acceptance or practice of beliefs contrary to what the church clearly knows to be sin.
- c. A 1976 study committee report that led to these supplemental guidelines said that if an officebearer has “settled convictions” about the confessions, that is a different matter than if one has serious doubts about a point of doctrine. In that case, it “does not call for a gravamen; it calls rather for an open and frank disclosure of his difficulties

by an officebearer to his consistory, hopefully leading to the removal of his doubts” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572).

B. Declare that no confessional difficulties will be accepted in the following instances where Synod 2022’s confessional decisions on human sexuality and penal substitutionary atonement may be objected to:

- by synod when delegates agree to the Public Declaration of Agreement
- by the Calvin University board of trustees when faculty have confessional difficulties with the Covenant for Faculty Members
- by the Council of Delegates executive committee when COD members have confessional difficulties with the Statement of Agreement
- in instances where other iterations of the Covenant for Officebearers are to be signed and/or agreed to, such as denominational staff and denominational boards

Ground: The personal beliefs of delegates, COD members, faculty, and staff should remain consistent with their public declaration and teaching on these matters.

C. Declare that if those making these agreements (an officebearer, faculty member, COD member, staff member, or board member) cannot personally agree with our confessional beliefs, including those of penal substitutionary atonement and human sexuality, they are to either request a release from ministry or position from the appropriate body (council, classis, or supervising body), or they are to be suspended and released from their office or position by December 31, 2023.

Ground: In the past synod has upheld the authority over councils or classes with regard to eligibility for office (see Church Order Articles 27-b and 83, *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 323-24; *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 28; *Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771; *Acts of Synod 1994*, p. 520).

D. Request of classes that all ministers who submit their request for release from ministry because of confessional difficulties be released under the status of one honorably released. Synod also encourages churches to follow the guidelines from Pastor-Church Resources for provisions of severance.

Ground: Ministers requesting release should be recognized as acting with honor and integrity.

Classis Illiana
Laryn G. Zoerhof, stated clerk

Note: Classis Illiana requested that the phrase “Classis Illiana overtures Synod 2023” be changed to “Classis Illiana overtures Synod 2024.”

Require Council of Delegates to Reverse the Process of Members' Taking Exception to the Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA

I. Background

The Council of Delegates (COD) is an ecclesiastical body that provides governance in the interim of synod. The membership of the COD includes one delegate from each of the 49 classes, as well as seven at-large members.

The COD met October 12-14, 2022, and approved a process for delegates to request an exception to the confessions of the CRCNA.¹ When a delegate requests an exception, the council's executive committee will decide whether to grant it, based on the centrality of the belief for which the exception is sought and the member's agreement not to publicly contradict or teach against the synodical position.

The executive committee's decision would be final and be documented in executive session minutes. Public minutes note only the number of exceptions requested and how many were granted or denied. Subsequently, the petitioner would enter their name in the Statement of Agreement signature book with an asterisk next to their name. The written exception would be kept in a confidential file until the member concludes service on the Council of Delegates.

This decision creates a process for exemptions first described in the COD Governance Handbook in February 2019, where individual members of the COD are granted "the privilege of indicating any personal exemptions from specific points contained within the Creeds, Confessions, and Contemporary Testimonies."²

Is the intent of this policy to allow a disunity of belief within the COD? It would be illogical to create an exception policy, only to then deny the applicants.

II. Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to require the Council of Delegates to immediately reverse the approval of a process for members of the COD to take exception to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA and call its members to uphold and heartily affirm the CRCNA's confessions by amending the COD Governance Handbook, bringing its exceptions policy into alignment with the CRCNA Church Order, which requires resolution of gravamen issues.

¹ Appendix B: Process for Submitting and Addressing Exceptions to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA; COD Minutes, Oct. 12-14, 2022.

² COD Governance Handbook, p. 98.

Grounds:

1. The COD executive committee is nowhere in our Church Order granted the authority to allow gravamen or confessional-difficulty exceptions. That power is granted only to councils, classes, and, ultimately, synod.³
2. The exceptions process that was laid out is not at all transparent. Classes will not even know if the delegate that represents them in the COD has an exception on file unless the delegate chooses to inform them.
3. This decision is bad for covenantal unity. We are a denomination united not around ethnicity or politics or culture but around a common set of beliefs. Now this would allow for a secret list of representative delegates who do not agree with our common set of beliefs. Of what use then is a covenant? What will then unite our church, if not our beliefs?
4. Granting exceptions to delegates who disagree with the confessions is an illegitimate and incorrect use of Church Order when it comes to gravamen. Synod (our broadest assembly) has made a decision that is binding on all members of the CRCNA. Exceptions (or gravamina) are designed to allow for a process to play out where an individual can express concern regarding a teaching that the CRC holds. But this process must result in one of the following conclusions:
 - a. Clarification is provided, resolving the difficulty in the heart of the delegate.
 - b. The confession is revised.
 - c. The gravamen is denied.

Notice how in each case there is a resolution to the matter. Our Church Order does not give the possibility for someone to simply “opt out” of believing in certain parts of the confessions. Rather, it lays out a process for handling a difficulty of belief, with a resolution being the result, not a secret list of people who don’t believe the same thing as everyone else. This would be completely destructive to covenantal unity, which is a unity of belief.

5. The COD serves synod by providing “governance by means of the authority delegated to it by synod.”⁴ How can the COD serve synod when it is granting for its own members immunity to the decisions of synod, from which it derives its delegated authority?
6. The COD itself has recognized in the past a lack of authority to act of its own accord. During the COVID-19 pandemic years when synod could not meet, the COD refused to make decisions regarding confessional and disciplinary matters, correctly understanding themselves not to have the proper authority to do so. To quote Paul De Vries, the first

³ CRCNA Church Order, Art. 5.

⁴ crcna.org/welcome/governance/council-delegates

chair of the COD, when he addressed Synod 2018: “We have no authority other than the authority you [synod] give us. . . . The important distinction is that ultimately the authority resides with you. . . . We follow your instruction. When we don’t, call us.”⁵

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 58 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Clarify the Usage of Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to clarify the usage of confessional-difficulty gravamina by amending the *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina* in Church Order Supplement, Article 5 (as described below), and by declaring that these revisions and clarifications also apply to all previously granted gravamina.

Grounds:

1. In the wake of Synod 2022’s decision regarding Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, many CRCNA officebearers, denominational agency employees, and Calvin University professors and board members have utilized the confessional-difficulty gravamen to effectively exempt themselves from the denomination’s position on the confessional status of human sexuality.
2. The use of confessional-difficulty gravamina to secretly shield settled personal convictions that are contrary to our confessions eviscerates the *quia* confessional subscription¹ that previous synods have consistently affirmed and shatters any sense of unity within our diverse denomination.
3. Confessional-difficulty gravamina should be a rarely utilized mechanism designed for short-term periods of guided discernment. A confessional-difficulty gravamen should always result in either a resolution of the difficulty, an upgrade to a confessional-revision gravamen, or the resignation of the subscriber from ordained office. If confessional-difficulty gravamina are allowed to remain unresolved, the result is three-fold: First, officebearers are allowed to remain in confusion or error of belief; Second, the public witness and oath of the officebearer is a false witness; and Third, the presumed and practiced unity of the church is

⁵ “Council of Delegates’ Authority Comes from Synod,” *The Banner*, June 11, 2018.

¹ A *quia* confessional subscription is one that stipulates that the doctrines of our confessions fully agree with the Word of God.

seriously undermined, on this topic and potentially a host of other beliefs.

Classis Minnkota specifically overtures Synod 2023 to adopt the following changes to the *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina* section of the Church Order supplement (pp. 14-16 of the *Church Order and Its Supplements 2022*) and immediately to implement them in the 2023 session.

The proposed additions to the text of the Supplement are indicated by underlining:

Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina

Synod declares that gravamina fall into at least two basic types:

1. A confessional-difficulty gravamen: a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not yet call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. A confessional-revision gravamen: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
- A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers:
1. The person signing 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.
 2. The signatory does not by affirming the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the signatory declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them.
 3. 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. However, no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.
- B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:
1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for examination and judgment. A confessional-difficulty gravamen may be granted by the council

for up to six months in order to give the subscriber the time and resources to resolve the difficulty.

- a. During this discernment period
 - 1) the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.
 - 2) both the subscriber and the council have responsibilities:
 - a) The council shall provide
 - i. reasonable time and resources for the subscriber to resolve the difficulty.
 - ii. pastoral support and care to the subscriber.
 - b) The subscriber
 - i. will submit a study plan to the council for resolving the confessional difficulty.
 - ii. will diligently seek to resolve the difficulty, obtaining competent biblical-theological counsel if necessary.
 - iii. will provide regular updates to the granting council.
 - iv. shall not accept any ecclesiastical delegations or appointments.
 - v. shall remain under the supervision of the granting council.
- b. If the subscriber resolves the confessional difficulty within the discernment period and is able to affirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God, the gravamen will expire.
- c. If the subscriber has not resolved the confessional difficulty within the six-month discernment period, the subscriber may either
 - 1) file for a confessional-revision gravamen as described in section C, or
 - 2) submit to church discipline, as described in Articles 78-81, or
 - 3) resign from office.

2. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
- C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:
1. The basic assumption of the church in requiring affirmation of the Covenant for Officebearers is that the doctrines contained in the confessions of the church fully agree with the Word of God. The burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions.
 2. Ministers (including missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their gravamina calling for revision of the confessions to their councils for examination and judgment. Should the council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, classis may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
 3. If the gravamen is adopted by the council and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies, and therefore it is open for discussion in the whole church.
 4. If the gravamen is rejected by the classis, it may be appealed to synod; and when the constituted synod declares the matter to be legally before it for action, all the signers of the Covenant for Officebearers shall be free to discuss it together with the whole church until adjudicated by synod.
 5. Since the subscriber has the right of appeal from the judgment of a council to classis and from classis to synod, the mere fact that the matter is being appealed shall not be a reason for suspending or otherwise disciplining an officebearer, provided other provisions of the Church Order are observed.
 6. A revision of the confessions shall not be adopted by synod until the whole church membership has had adequate opportunity to consider it.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Amend Church Order to Define *Gravamina*

I. Purpose of overture

The purpose of this overture is to amend the Church Order to define *gravamina* so that they may not be misused. This misuse will cause serious division. A proper definition will provide unity.

II. Background

In the CRC, *gravamina* were never intended to be used as a means to disagree with our unified confessional documents. They are merely a means to call “upon the church to justify or revise its confessions” (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 1). They are not a means to disagree with the confessions. This is obvious, since “the person signing the Covenant of Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church” (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). It is impossible to affirm our confessions without reservation while disagreeing with them (by means of a *gravamen* or otherwise). Affirming without reservation and disagreeing are contradictory. However, some in the CRCNA are seeking to use *gravamina* in a way that would be detrimental to the unity of the faith—namely, allowing persons of same-sex activity to become members and officebearers in the CRCNA, though this is not the only way one might use *gravamina* to undercut unity.

III. Overture

Classis Greater Los Angeles respectfully overtures Synod 2023 to amend the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section B, by adding the following:

3. A confessional-difficulty *gravamen* (or a confessional-revision *gravamen*) does not exempt anyone from affirming all of the doctrines contained in the confessions without reservation. Rather, it is an expression to the local governing body of “personal difficulty,” not disagreement. As such, the difficulty should attempt to be resolved. If the signatory cannot resolve this difficulty and his or her conscience bars him or her from signing the CRCNA confessional documents without reservation, he or she may not serve as an officebearer in the CRCNA.

Grounds:

1. *Gravamina* were never intended to allow members or officebearers to disagree with the CRCNA confessional documents.
2. Using *gravamina* in this way will cause a schism in the CRCNA.
3. Using *gravamina* in this way will unnecessarily burden the conscience of CRCNA churches who hold to the traditional view on human sexuality.

4. Using gravamina in this way will prevent CRCNA churches from reaching those in the community who expect biblical teaching that presents the traditional view on human sexuality, which was confirmed at Synod 2022.

Classis Greater Los Angeles
Sandi Ornee, stated clerk

OVERTURE 61 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Withhold Denominational Funding from Calvin University until Faculty and Staff Adhere to CRCNA Covenantal Standards

I. Background

On October 28, 2022, Calvin University's board of trustees voted to allow faculty members with confessional difficulties on human sexuality to remain in good standing within the institution. The board decision was characterized as "respectful of the university's covenantal partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, consistent with confessional commitment, congruent with existing policies and procedures, supportive of academic freedom, and reflective of constructive engagement."¹

This has allowed faculty who have filed a gravamen the continued ability to teach, work for, and minister to students, while at the same time allowing those same faculty to hold positions in opposition to our confessions. Furthermore, the board's decision is, in fact, contrary to confessional commitment and negates the authority structure set in place for how a gravamen is to be handled by the institution.

II. Overture

Classis Heartland overtures Synod 2023 to withhold all denominational funding from Calvin University beginning on September 1, 2024, with the provision that the university will be funded after this date upon the full adherence, without exception, to our covenantal standards by all faculty and staff members of Calvin University.

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022 affirmed the Christian Reformed Church's traditional understanding of unchastity as found in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and this understanding has confessional status.² This decision was made by the majority of classes at synod, and it is considered "settled and binding."³ As this is the position of the Christian Reformed Church, the

¹ crcna.org/news-and-events/news/calvin-board-responds-synod-2022

² *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922.

³ Church Order, Article 29.

- decision made by Calvin University's board of trustees, as outlined above, directly opposes the understanding of the Christian Reformed Church. Therefore, Calvin University can no longer be funded by the Christian Reformed Church because the covenantal relationship shared between the institutions has been severely damaged.
2. The decision by Calvin University's board of trustees is contrary to the position taken by 74 percent of the delegates to synod that represented much of the denomination.⁴ As the action by the board of trustees is incompatible with the Christian Reformed Church, Calvin University and the values and beliefs it holds are no longer representative of the denomination.
 3. The Calvin Faculty Handbook states, "Under the authority of Synod, the Church assigns authority for the life of the University to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees, in turn, assigns authority within the University's governance system, in which decisions about personnel and confessional interpretation are assigned to the Professional Status Committee (PSC)."⁵ Thus, authority for the registering of a gravamen falls ultimately under the authority of synod. As neither synod nor the Council of Delegates has received or reviewed any gravamen of either the confessional-difficulty nature or the confessional-revision nature, Calvin University has not adhered to the necessary policies and procedures, thereby further illustrating Calvin University's desire to no longer be overseen by the denomination.
 4. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is intended to be "a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession."⁶ In the case of a confessional-revision gravamen, "the burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions."⁷ In both cases, gravamina are intended to bring clarity and/or change our confessions. Calvin University faculty and staff have not used gravamina in this manner but have utilized them merely as a way of showing disagreement with the covenantal standards to which they must subscribe. Calvin University's board of trustees' decision to allow gravamina to be used in this manner further shows Calvin University's opposition to adhere to the Christian Reformed Church's confessional standards.

Classis Heartland
Phillip T. Westra, stated clerk

⁴ thebanner.org/news/2022/06/synod-2022-upholds-traditional-stance-on-same-sex-relationships

⁵ Calvin Faculty Handbook, p. 44, Article 3.5.1.1.

⁶ Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 2.

⁷ Church Order Supplement, Article 5, C, 1.

OVERTURE 62 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)**Restrict Delegates Who Have Not Signed the Covenant for Officebearers without Exception or Reservation**

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to restrict any delegate who has not signed the Covenant for Officebearers without exception or reservation in their local church or classis from being seated or recognized as a delegate at synod.

Grounds:

1. It is impossible to do the work of Christ Jesus as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church if officebearers are not willing to submit their life and doctrine to the clear teaching of God's Word and its summary in our creeds and confessions as agreed on in covenant with one another.
2. It is this covenantal foundation that gives us the wisdom and clarity of the Holy Spirit for any subsequent discussions and decisions made in and for the faithful unity of the body of the church before the face of Christ Jesus, our living head and Savior.
3. This is in accordance with a reasonable interpretation of Church Order Article 5.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 63 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)**Prohibit Officebearers Who Have Submitted Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina from Being Delegated to Higher Governing Bodies**

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to prohibit officebearers who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina to their local councils from being delegated to higher governing bodies—namely, classis and synod.

Grounds:

1. A gravamen is always a stated question asking for a clarifying response. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not a declaration of permitted dissent toward the rest of the local body or the broader classical and denominational bodies.
2. For the sake of the integrity of the covenant between officebearers at the classical and synodical levels, those seated at those delegations need to have full assurance that their fellow delegates do not harbor reserva-

- tions about the confessions that would threaten their confessional covenant. Likewise, the confessing members of the denomination should have the assurance that those leading and making decisions on behalf of synod (in denominational offices) are fully, and without reservation, committed to the doctrinal standards that form the covenant bond of unity in the denomination.
3. Without confessional covenantal integrity it is impossible to do the work of Christ Jesus as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 64 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Remind and Instruct Churches and Institutions about Rules for Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Background

Synod 2022 met, debated, and affirmed most of the recommendations of the Human Sexuality Report. This report provided clear ethical guidance for what constitutes holy and healthy Christian sexual expression. It also gave clear missional guidance and explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those questioning their sexuality or living in sin.

Synod 2022 also reaffirmed the 1973 synodical ruling on homosexuality. Since 1973 the CRC's position has been that homosexuality (homosexual sex) is sinful. Synod also added clarity to the definition of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which asks, "What is God's will for us in the seventh commandment?" ("You shall not commit adultery" — Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). The catechism answers the question by saying, in part, "God condemns all unchastity." Synod 2022 clarified that "unchastity" has always included "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex" — and that, therefore, this interpretation has always had confessional status.

Since this ruling of synod, some pastors, professors, teachers, and officebearers have filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a dissent or a personal disagreement in an area of the confessions which is submitted to their church's council, or other governing authority for teachers and professors. Our church guidelines do not permit that a council or governing authority simply "accept" these and continue to allow that person to continue to serve at the local level, even if that person agrees not to publicly teach or advocate against the confessional position. Regardless, there is a concern that this may be happening, and, if this is the case, it is critical to correct this misuse of our guidelines.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Southeast U.S. overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

- A. Remind church councils that the filing and acceptance of a confessional-difficulty gravamen does not allow a person to teach or advocate against the confessional position to which they dissent or with which they have a personal disagreement. Any officebearers who do so should be disciplined.
- B. Instruct the boards and presidents of both Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary to remove from their position any teacher or professor who files a confessional-difficulty gravamen pertaining to the CRC's position regarding the sin of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, if such teacher or professor, upon receiving information and clarification, does not heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position. Further, any teachers or professors who do not promote and defend this position in their preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living should be removed from their position.
- C. Declare that anyone who has filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen shall not be delegated to a broader assembly, including classis and synod until such time as they are able to heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position.
- D. Instruct the church councils to remove from their position any minister of the Word or commissioned pastor (together, "ministers") who files a confessional-difficulty gravamen pertaining to the CRC's position regarding the sin of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, if such ministers, upon receiving information and clarification, do not heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position. Further, any ministers who do not promote and defend this position in their preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living should be removed from their position.

Grounds:

1. There is currently a large potential for the misuse of the confessional-difficulty gravamen within our denomination. In a January 18, 2023, *Banner* article, Kathy Smith indicates that "the process of submitting a confessional-difficulty gravamen does not offer a 'local option' . . . There is an expectation that the officebearer will continue to uphold the confession of the church and the interpretations of the confessions." Therefore, the gravamen is not allowed to be used as a method for continuing in a position while holding a disagreement with a confession. Rather, as Kathy Smith goes on to state, "The guidelines say that a confessional-difficulty gravamen 'is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession.'"

2. The original intention of a gravamen was never meant to be widespread. A July 1, 2022, *Banner* article stated that a gravamen is "exceedingly rare" and indicated that Henry DeMoor noted that the church is not set up to handle large numbers of gravamina, going on to state that it would likely "lead to significant chaos."
3. To not hold our pastors, teachers, and professors firm on our confessional teaching can degrade the upbringing of our covenant children and harm future generations. Therefore, we cannot allow anyone a pulpit or classroom who cannot, in good conscience and in an honest manner, fully defend and promote all of our creeds and confessions. Furthermore, it is not sufficient for any pastor, teacher, or professor to abstain from teaching on certain topics or sections of our creeds or confessions, since our congregations and students need to be instructed on all that is necessary for the edification of the body of Christ.
4. Delegates to classis and synod are required to reaffirm their commitment to the confessions of the church. It is disingenuous for them to publicly affirm their commitments to the confessions at a broader assembly without revealing their reservations. And it is inappropriate that people who harbor significant confessional reservations be granted the right to debate and rule on the very matters about which they harbor reservations, unless they choose to file a confessional-revision gravamen laying out their reservations and asking that the confessions be changed.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

OVERTURE 66 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Require All Delegates to Synod 2023 to Sign the Covenant for Officebearers

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to require that all officebearers delegated to Synod 2023 sign the Covenant for Officebearers without reservation with the clear understanding of the decisions of Synod 2022 in view.

Grounds:

1. All leaders of the church sent to synod are required to be of one mind and heart in faith and covenant revealed in God's Word, taught by our Lord Jesus Christ and directed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2).
2. Synod 2022 gave clarity to the doctrines of penal substitutionary atonement and human sexuality that should be affirmed by all signers of the Covenant for Officebearers.

3. The goal of this re-signing is to highlight the covenant that we make with one another regarding our unity in fidelity to the full revelation of God's Word and our denominational confessions.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 67 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Amend Rules for Synodical Procedure to Suspend Delegates Whose Classes Have Not Adequately Implemented Discipline

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to add and immediately enact a provision to the Rules for Synodical Procedure stipulating that delegates from classes that have not adequately implemented discipline ordered by previous synods be suspended from full delegate privileges, including, but not limited to, voting, advisory committee assignments, and speaking from the floor. Overtures from suspended classes shall not be considered. These restrictions shall also apply to the classis' delegates to the Council of Delegates and all other denominational standing and study committees until such time that full privileges are restored to the classis by synod.

Grounds:

1. The synod, and the Council of Delegates that acts on synod's behalf when it is not in session, is a deliberative body representing the churches of all the classes (Church Order, Art. 45).
2. A primary function of the classis is to hold constituent churches accountable to the Word of God as interpreted by the Three Forms of Unity (Church Order, Art. 39; Belgic Confession, Art. 29).
3. Delegates from classes that have not implemented synodical instructions to discipline constituent churches have abdicated their responsibilities set forth in the Covenant for Officebearers and the Credentials for Synod form. When this disregard is not the product of ignorance or omission, it constitutes insubordination and disintegrates unity and trust among the classes.
4. Delegates from insubordinate classes should not be given the opportunity to vote on decisions, policies, or positions that obligate other congregations and classes when they do not submit to synodical decisions, policies, or positions themselves. These classes are in effect attempting to "lord it over" other churches and classes by forcing their own will rather than submitting to deliberated decisions (Church Order, Art. 85).

5. Church Order Article 27-b provides synod the authority to discipline classes. Suspending the privileges of delegates from an insubordinate classis is a reasonable act of discipline.
6. According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section VIII, N, the “Rules for Synodical Procedure may be suspended, amended, revised, or abrogated by a majority vote of synod.” In other words, synod may amend or change its rules at any time while it is constituted and in any way the majority sees fit.
7. The apostle Paul does not mince words as to how Christians ought to relate to those who refuse to repent from sinful behavior, warning us to “not be partners with them” (Eph. 5:7).

Classis Minnkota requests the following:

- A. That synod add the following paragraph to the duties of the president *pro tem* in the Rules for Synodical Procedure (section I, D), immediately after declaring the synodical assembly to have opened (paragraph 2) and before synod selects officers (paragraph 3):

The president *pro tem* shall read discipline instructions given to particular classes by the previous synod and request that a delegate(s) from these classes present a brief response as to how the disciplinary instructions have been implemented. As its first order of business, synod shall vote to determine the adequacy of the classis’ implementation of disciplinary instructions. Delegates from classes deemed to have inadequately responded to disciplinary instructions shall be suspended from advisory committee participation, as well as voting and speaking privileges. Such suspension will also carry over to the classis’ delegates to the Council of Delegates and all standing denominational committees. This suspension shall remain in effect until such time that synod declares that its disciplinary instructions have been adequately implemented.

- B. That synod declare these provisions immediately effective upon synodical approval and applicable to Synod 2023.
- C. Due to the concern that disciplinary instructions given by Synod 2022 have not been adequately implemented, that this overture bypass the advisory committee process and be considered by the full body as the first order of business for Synod 2023.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Shepherd Congregations into Another Denomination

I. Background

The issue of human sexuality has been a matter of contention throughout all of human history, and now in our own day it has become very much entangled with national laws, ordinances, and public pronouncements by individuals of all stripes. Culturally our Western society has seen a dramatic shift in terms of how it understands how the sexes are to relate, in terms of intimacy, sexuality, and legality. This broader cultural shift has made inroads into the Christian church here in the West, including the CRCNA, particularly with regard to persons who identify as LGBTQ+. This has created increased tensions and divisions that all other well-established denominations have been unable to navigate. We have fundamental disagreements about what is and isn't sin, about the role of special revelation in relation to general revelation, and about what God-honoring human sexuality looks like.

Humility teaches us that the CRCNA is not made up of a different sort of church member but that we as churches here in Canada and the United States are also affected by this growing rift and division. Our recent synods and Council of Delegate meetings have been the occasion of these tensions and divisions, to the point where an individual congregation and classis have recently been publicly admonished for their position on the issue of human sexuality. This is not a tension or a division evidenced in only one small locale of West Michigan; it is in fact evidenced throughout many of our churches and classes in both nations. And this division is only increasing as churches diverting from the CRC's confessional position on sexuality are now making it public that they wish to be identified as "open and affirming" congregations.

We truly believe that these congregations have come to these positions after much discussion and wrestling together regarding the direction they believe they (in good conscience) must go when it comes to ministering to our LGBTQ+ neighbors and fellow members. We take them at their word that they firmly believe they are most honoring God and loving their neighbor by moving in this new direction. And all attempts by our synod or their classis to force them to back away from these matters of conscience would do a disservice to them as congregations at this point.

II. Overture

Therefore, in acknowledging that some Christian Reformed Church officebearers, along with a majority of their congregations, are no longer able to in good conscience subscribe to the Covenant for Officebearers with the CRC's confessional position on human sexuality, and not wishing to see ac-

rimonious rancor and God-dishonoring hostilities grow in our beloved denomination and our communities of faith, and not wishing to see a public fight ensue over church assets, the council of Moline Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

- A. Create two parallel ad hoc committees (one in Canada and one in the United States), made up of knowledgeable members of the CRC holding to diverse viewpoints on human sexuality, to help shepherd into another existing denomination in a grace-filled way those congregations who can no longer in good conscience remain a part of the CRC because of matters of human sexuality.
 - 1. These two parallel committees would be knowledgeable of national church bodies that are available and might be a “good fit” in their own national contexts.
 - 2. These committees would be knowledgeable about matters of tax laws and legalities related to Articles of Incorporation and church separations.
 - 3. These committees are to be created and are to be in place by September 2023, with special offerings requested of the churches of our denomination (above and beyond existing ministry shares) to help finance the travels and stays of these committee members while they meet with these churches.
 - 4. These committees would develop a working relationship with the leadership teams of existing classes in their national contexts, working with these classes to help them facilitate a “bless and release” with those congregations in these classes who now need to look for another denominational home.
- B. These ad hoc committees are empowered to engage in conversation with congregations or classes they are contacted by or officially made aware of, without prejudice and in good faith, who might benefit from this counsel and assistance.
- C. These ad hoc committees will be in place until a future synod deems their necessary work having come to a conclusion, at which time they will be disbanded.

Council of Moline (Mich.) CRC
Bruce Jager, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 9, 2023, meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South but was not adopted.

Enable Listening to Facilitate Discernment

I. Introduction

Synod 2022 knew there was significant opposition to the “confessional status” recommendation in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). Indeed, many classes, congregations, and members had written overtures asking synod not to adopt that recommendation.¹ Yet by a majority vote on June 15, 2022, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 encompasses “homosexual sex” and named that interpretation explicitly as having “confessional status.”

While many congregations are already aligned with this decision, other communities are experiencing significant impacts.² Churches that have held space for diverse views on same-sex marriage are feeling frustrated. Office-bearers who had previously considered themselves fully in agreement with the confessions are now needing to write gravamina because of this adopted interpretation. The postures of some churches towards others have changed, affecting regional communities like classes.³

II. Proposed actions for this turbulent time

This is a turbulent time. No matter what decisions Synod 2023 makes, the CRC is likely to change: churches may seek realignment; some may leave; membership may be impacted.

In order to navigate this change wisely and reduce the amount of harmful impacts, we believe it is time to listen. *The following actions are intended to help us listen well.*

A. Action 1: Permit those who disagree to articulate their position collaboratively

The gravamen process was intended to equip individual officebearers to express their confessional difficulties as those difficulties arose. It was not

¹ This overture originated in River Park Church in Calgary, Alberta. River Park Church was one of those many churches who wrote an overture asking synod not to adopt the recommendation on “confessional status.” River Park Church has a diversity of views on human sexuality and has officebearers who have written confessional-difficulty gravamina since the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022.

² In Appendix 1 we have tried to articulate why this decision has been disruptive for many.

³ In River Park Church’s own classis, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan (ABSS), numerous councils have formally barred ministers within classis from their pulpits and have ceased supporting shared classical ministry, including ceasing financial support to the point of explicitly redirecting their classical funds elsewhere. The first meeting of Classis ABSS after Synod 2022 was so painfully divided that River Park Church sent an overture asking that Classis ABSS be dissolved so that healthier and fruitful realignments can be made.

created for a time when potentially hundreds of officebearers⁴ found themselves with the same confessional difficulty all at the same time. Do we want all these officebearers to correspond with synod individually?

But officebearers who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina do not know if they can openly discuss their disagreement with one another as each one considers if they desire to write a confessional-revision gravamen. This could mean that future synods will need to process individual confessional-revision gravamina from officebearers for years to come. Given this unusual circumstance that so many officebearers are simultaneously challenged by the same confessional interpretation, we consider it wise to explicitly permit them to collaborate if they desire to do so.

B. Action 2: Equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community

Many churches have been shaped by the assumption that there was “room for respectful disagreement” around our CRC position on homosexuality,⁵ and they likely desire a covenant community that fits with this orientation. Other churches desire to be in a covenant community that holds the same conviction around same-sex marriage. In this turbulent time, it is wise for synod to invite the churches to discern and articulate their hopes for a covenant community.⁶

We imagine that Pastor Church Resources could create a helpful toolkit to equip churches and councils to discern these hopes. This toolkit would support local congregations as they discern how to respond to the survey proposed in Action 3.

C. Action 3: Gather feedback from the churches and share feedback transparently

It will be helpful for the CRCNA to know the hopes of its member churches. We imagine the Office of General Secretary, in consultation with Pastor Church Resources, could develop a set of questions that allows local churches to express what sort of covenant community they desire. The resulting survey data should be transparently shared, and it could serve as the basis for future overtures, enabling a future synod to consider the most wise way to navigate our turbulent circumstances.⁷

⁴ The *Agenda for Synod 2016* details the 2014 survey of 700 ordained ministers in the CRCNA in which 98 of 700 ministers reported they would be in favor of same-sex marriage in the church. If 15 percent of *ministers* were okay with same-sex marriage in the church in 2014, there is the potential that hundreds of *officebearers* are okay with same-sex marriage in the church in 2023.

⁵ Please see Appendix 1 for further details.

⁶ This is similar to what each church of Classis ABSS was asked to do after our challenging meeting in October 2022.

⁷ River Park Church does not know what future suggestion makes the most sense, but already we have heard multiple ideas: realignments with other denominations (i.e., RCA and CRC realigning); a “gracious separation” into two or more separate denominations; a move toward “affinity” classes; or shifting from a denominational model to a looser affiliation that some have called a “network” model.

While there may be many more aspects helpful to know from each church, River Park Church considers these three things to be of key importance as we consider covenant realignment.

1. *Your church*—How would you identify your local church when it comes to perspectives on human sexuality?
 - a. When it comes to perspectives on same-sex marriage, is your church strongly “traditional,” a mix of “traditional” and “affirming” members, or strongly “affirming”?
 - b. When it comes to who is allowed on council, does your church allow only those with a “traditional” perspective, both “traditional” and “affirming” perspectives, or only an “affirming” perspective, and does your church desire to welcome same-sex married persons to be on council?
2. *Whom to covenant with*—Of the various types of churches (mixing 1, a-b above, there are likely at least five reasonable types that should be named explicitly), which ones are you willing to be in covenant community with?
3. *Larger assemblies*—If you choose to be with churches different from your own, what does “making room for respectful disagreement” look like when you are together (i.e., who can be delegated to classis)?

D. Action 4: Invite CRC institutions and ministries to articulate their challenges and hopes

Undoubtedly, some of our CRC institutions are feeling caught in the middle of this current turbulence. Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University are both in covenant with the CRC and may be experiencing impacts from Synod 2022.⁸ Our CRC ministries have also recently experienced variations in support. Synod should invite these (and other) institutions and ministries to create their own discernment process and, if they desire, communicate some of their results with synod.

E. Action 5: Leave discipline local for the present time

While we are naming this as the final action, this action enables some of the other actions. If synod is going to invite officebearers to collaborate as they write confessional-revision gravamina (or one gravamen together), those

⁸ Both Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) and Calvin University have boards appointed by the CRC synod, and both boards have approved policies that leave room for respectful disagreement with perspectives on homosexuality. For instance, in 2021 the CTS board of trustees affirmed a handful of guidelines as the HSR was being discussed, including that “CTS should strive to model a community of people who hold diverging views and can discuss them honestly and civilly.” And at Calvin University, a policy paper published in 2016 (*Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom: Principles and Practices at Calvin College*) articulates a similar posture.

officebearers need to be able to discern this action with their local council and trust that speaking openly will not enact synodical-level discipline. If we are assuming that there will be some covenant realignments (perhaps a “gracious separation”), local councils will need to be able to have healthy, open dialogue about their hopes without synod preempting those realignments by way of synodical-level discipline. That does not mean that we turn our back on Belgic Confession Article 29 and abandon the third mark of the true church. It does mean that, for the present time, we keep discipline at the level of the local church in matters related to the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022.

III. Overture

Therefore, River Park Church overtures Synod to consider the following actions designed to help us listen well:

- A. That synod explicitly permit those who wish to write confessional-revision gravamina in response to the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 to collaborate.

Grounds:

1. The “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 potentially put hundreds of officebearers into a place of disagreement with a confessional interpretation—all at the same time. The gravamen process was not intended for such high numbers.
 2. Permitting collaboration allows those who disagree to articulate their “best biblical and confessional case” together, rather than using time and resources to each write their own.
 3. Without granting permission to collaborate, future synodical agendas may be filled with responding to confessional-revision gravamina from potentially hundreds of individual officebearers.
 4. Explicit permission by synod is clarifying at a moment when we are unfamiliar with what amount of collaboration is allowed and when there is anxiousness about synod enacting discipline.
- B. That synod ask Pastor Church Resources to create a toolkit intended to equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community. This should be done as soon as possible.

Grounds:

1. If the CRCNA is approaching a time of covenant realignment, it is helpful for each church to discern what they hope for in a covenant community.
2. While no church would be required to use the toolkit, some churches may desire a process to help them discern how to respond to the survey (item C).

- C. That synod ask the Office of General Secretary to create a survey that will gather feedback from the churches, and then share that feedback transparently. This should be done as soon as possible, with results shared transparently by November 1, 2024, allowing overtures responding to the survey to come to Synod 2025.

Grounds:

1. In order to discern potential covenant realignments, we need to listen to the local churches.
 2. The transparency should be sufficient so that people can identify national and regional alignments.
 3. Sharing the results transparently will allow everyone to see the variety within the CRCNA and then potentially propose ways forward in this turbulent time.
- D. That synod invite institutions and ministries connected to the CRCNA to articulate their challenges and hopes in this turbulent time.

Grounds:

1. “Inviting” means that each institution and ministry can discern if they want to do this, and how to do so fittingly.
 2. Listening to our institutions and ministries may help us to discern a way forward.
- E. That synod refrain from enacting any synodical-level discipline if that discipline pertains to the decision of Synod 2022 regarding “confessional status.” This should stay in place until covenant realignment is discerned.

Grounds:

1. Many churches and officebearers have “in good faith” operated under the belief that our CRCNA position on homosexuality did not have confessional status (see Appendix 1).
2. As the CRCNA discerns covenant realignments, it is better to leave any discipline to the discernment of the local church.
3. It is better to allow the local church to go through a process of discernment for realignments rather than synod forcing realignment by way of synodical-level discipline during this process.

Council of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta
Joanne Spronk, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan but was not adopted.

APPENDIX

I. Two distinct visions of a covenant community

When it comes to perspectives on human sexuality in the CRC, and particularly homosexual sex within a same-sex marriage, we in the CRCNA not only disagree on the topic but we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters.

We disagree on the topic. This overture will use the words “traditional” and “affirming” as we talk about two different perspectives with respect to homosexual sex within a same-sex marriage. For the purposes of this overture, we will define these words in this way:

“traditional”⁹—a person holding a “traditional” perspective believes that “faithful sex” which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between one man and one woman, only between two persons of the opposite sex.

“affirming”¹⁰—a person holding an “affirming” perspective believes that “faithful sex” which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between any two persons, including between persons of the same sex.

Thus, these two perspectives disagree on whether God views “homosexual sex” within a same-sex marriage as a faithful Christian action.

But in the CRCNA **we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters.** And this overture focuses more on the conflict arising from that second disagreement. It is becoming apparent that there are two distinctly different Visions¹¹ of how the covenant community of the CRC should be shaped.

Vision 1—There is **room for respectful disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Most of those who desire Vision 1 are deeply distressed by the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 because that decision removes room for respectful disagreement.

Vision 2—There is **no room for any open disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Some of those who desire Vision 2 were openly considering leaving the CRC if the “confessional status” recommendation to Synod 2022 were voted down.

A majority of the current conflict in the CRC is not between the “traditional” and “affirming” persons. Indeed, many churches in the CRC are currently flourishing and have both “traditional” and “affirming” office-

⁹ This overture is aware that not all who identify as “traditional” fit this definition, but many do.

¹⁰ This overture is aware that not all who identify as “affirming” fit this definition, but many do.

¹¹ The word *Vision* will be capitalized throughout this appendix in order to remind the reader that we are using this word to identify Vision 1 and Vision 2.

bearers and members in that same community. The conflict is occurring because some desire the CRC to be a Vision 1 covenant community and others desire the CRC to be a Vision 2 covenant community.

The CRC has a long history of saying that our CRC position on homosexuality has not been confessional

In 2010, Dr. Henry DeMoor's *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* was published by the Christian Reformed Church. This commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Church Polity classes at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) since its publication.¹² As Dr. DeMoor discusses the "settled and binding" nature of synodical decisions (Church Order, Art. 29), he brings to the discussion the CRC's position on homosexuality. Here is what Dr. DeMoor writes:

It is significant, for example, that Synod 1973 twice framed all of its "statements" on homosexuality, including its "ethical stance," as "pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 51). It intentionally avoided referring to them as an "interpretation" of the Heidelberg Catechism's use of the term "unchastity" in Lord's Day 41. The possibility that this creed meant to include what the synod referred to as "homosexuality" is not denied. . . . It is just that the assembly chose not to be that resolute. It merely wanted to establish the "ground rules" for how all officebearers within the CRCNA ought to approach their pastoral responsibilities to those struggling with same-sex orientation. It expected a "healthy respect" for its decisions, not creedal attachment. Officebearers would not be subject to dismissal from office based on unorthodox views, but only on disrespect for what the synod decided.¹³

Dr. DeMoor writes that Synod 1973 "intentionally avoided" giving confessional status to our CRC position on homosexuality. In other words, CTS has been teaching that Synod 1973 was leaving "room for respectful disagreement."

And this was not just being taught in the Church Polity course at CTS, it was what CTS told to anyone who asked. If one sent an email to CTS asking, "How does our CRC position on homosexuality function for officebearers?" CTS would reply that the CRC position is one of pastoral advice and does not have confessional status.¹⁴

¹² As per an email exchange with current Church Order professor, Rev. Kathy Smith. In her reply of September 28, 2022, she writes, "Henry's commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Polity courses at CTS since it was published in 2010."

¹³ Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, 2nd. ed. (CRCNA, 2020), pp. 168-69.

¹⁴ In September 2018 the original author of this overture was made aware that a pastor in his classis (ABSS) had decided to perform a same-sex wedding. In preparation for our upcoming classis meeting in October, he asked faculty of CTS several questions to better

It is hard to know how long this position has been taught. Did Dr. DeMoor teach his students that the CRC has room for respectful disagreement before 2010? Probably; we do not imagine he first thought that thought when he published his commentary. But we know for sure that CTS was teaching that the CRC's position on homosexuality did not have confessional status from 2010 forward.

Thus, for the purposes of this overture, we will simply say what seems to be a verifiable fact: "For over a decade CTS has taught that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional both in the classroom and to anyone who asked."

Synod 2022 directly contradicts what CTS has been teaching for over a decade

So what happened next? CTS has been openly and widely teaching that the CRC's position on "homosexual sex" did not have confessional status. Then by a majority vote, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 encompasses "homosexual sex." It is now clear to all in the CRCNA that this interpretation of "unchastity" in Q&A 108 has confessional status in the CRCNA.

In other words, Synod 2022 directly contradicted what CTS has been teaching for over a decade.

Two distinct Visions of what shapes our covenant community

Again, our experience is that the major conflict in the CRC is not around the different perspectives: "affirming" or "traditional." The major conflict in the CRC at present is around Visions of how a covenant community deals with that difference in perspectives. It may help to see the conflict by drawing out the opposing implications of these Visions.

II. Opposing implications of Vision 1 and Vision 2

Many of our churches and institutions—even our members and officebearers—have been living with an assumption of how the CRC is shaped, an assumption based on either Vision 1 or Vision 2. As a denominational community, we have not been openly articulate about which Vision shapes the CRC until the decision of Synod 2022. For many, living with an assumption of Vision 2, there was no surprise when the HSR recommended that synod

understand how our CRC positions function, with a focus on our position on homosexuality. The thoughtful and thorough reply he received on September 30, 2018, included attachments to the *Acts of Synod 1975*, as well as this paragraph: "The matter of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, addressed by Synods 1973, 2002, and 2016, has been categorized each time by synod as pastoral advice and has never been addressed in relation to the confessions. The minority report to Synod 2016 was in error when it implied that people who disagreed with synod's decisions on same-sex marriage may be delinquent in doctrine. Synod has never addressed this as a matter of doctrine or an interpretation of the confessions. By Synod 1975's standards, pastoral advice is the last category of decisions mentioned and likely the least amount of agreement is expected."

declare that the church's teaching on homosexual sex “already” has confessional status. For others, this recommendation was not only a surprise; it was deeply concerning—because adopting that recommendation would disrupt their Vision 1 community.

Paralleling the following five implications might help us to see the vast difference between how Vision 1 and Vision 2 play out.

Reasonable implications from believing that the CRC position is not confessional
Let us ask, “What might be some common-sense implications of believing that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional?” Here are five implications that some have believed are reasonable:¹⁵

Implication 1—There is room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC’s position.

Implication 2—An openly “affirming” officebearer can be fully “confessional.”¹⁶

Implication 3—An openly “affirming” pastor can accept a call into the CRC “in good faith.”

Implication 4—An openly “affirming” CRC member could be an officebearer “in good standing.”

Implication 5—An “affirming” officebearer would not need to submit a gravamen.

Reasonable Implications that follow from Synod 2022’s “confessional status” decision

While Synod 2022 did not provide insight into what consequence would follow from their “confessional status” decision, certainly some who are speaking out since Synod 2022 would say the following are reasonable implications of that decision¹⁷ (the following implications are exactly the same as the ones listed above except for the changes that we have signified **in bold**):

Implication 1—There is **not** room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC’s position.

¹⁵ To be clear, we have not seen or heard that CTS taught these implications directly or openly. We are simply saying that these implications are reasonable *if one honestly believes that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional*.

¹⁶ If one believes that same-sex marriage is an acceptable Christian action, then sex within that same-sex marriage would not be considered “adultery” (sex against your marriage covenant), and one does not consider “homosexual sex” to be “unchaste.”

¹⁷ For instance, we believe these five implications align with the material published on the Abide Project website (abideproject.org). These also seem to be assumptions behind some of the actions (i.e., registered negative votes; attending “in protest”; extended concern listed in credentials) that occurred at the October 28-29, 2022, meeting of Classis ABSS (see minutes).

Implication 2—An openly “affirming” officebearer can **not** be fully “confessional.”

Implication 3—An openly “affirming” pastor can **not** accept a call into the CRC “in good faith.”

Implication 4—An openly “affirming” CRC member could **not** be an officebearer “in good standing.”

Implication 5—An “affirming” officebearer would **not** need to submit a gravamen.

Are we at an impasse?

For those who were living out Vision 1 in their local church community, the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 is a stunning reversal of what it means to be in the CRC covenant community. The change of implications is immensely impactful for their local church—and that impact hurts them.

At the same time, it has also become apparent that many in the CRC desire Vision 2 and strongly affirm the implications listed above. To many, the decision to make this “confessional” is a necessary decision to keep the church on the right path.

To some, being a Vision 1 community is a central conviction to what it means to be a faithful church. To others, being a Vision 2 community is just as central a conviction.

OVERTURE 73 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Decisions (*Deferred from 2021*)

I. Background

The November 2020 *Banner* article titled “Woman in Same-Sex Marriage Installed as Deacon” noted that the council of Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, does not believe it has “crossed any line of orthodoxy, only pastoral advice” and “that all synodical reports and decisions related to homosexuality have been *pastoral advice* given to the churches.” It is not clear to us that this distinction is a valid one—and if it is not, the decision of Neland CRC to break covenant is based on an incorrect understanding of the nature of synodical reports.

There is some history of a discussion. Synod 1973 appointed a committee “to study the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions” (*Acts of Synod* 1975, p. 595). That committee reported to Synod 1975, and its report states, “Guidelines for study, pastoral advice, and other decisions of this nature allow for varying measures of agreement. Officebearers are expected to ‘abide by’ certain specified deliverances of synod as well as to synodical decisions in general” (p. 602). The report seems to suggest that, although we

may not all agree on the pastoral advice offered in synodical reports, as officebearers we are expected to abide by them—and so they are binding in some respect.

Further, the second recommendation of that report states, “Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions and ‘shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order’ (Church Order, Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances” (p. 603).

Noting that the report to Synod 1975 still lacked clarity, Synod 1995 addressed the issue of clarifying what “settled and binding” means. A majority and minority report were presented, but both were defeated.

As a denomination, we are in need of such clarity.

II. Overture

Classis Chatham overtures Synod 2021 to clarify the distinctions in categories of synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice and the extent to which they bind the churches.

Grounds:

1. We are concerned that other churches may also make decisions based on an incomplete knowledge of which synodical decisions are binding and which are not.
2. This needs to be addressed separately from reports on the floor of synod because this is a matter of some urgency as other congregations wrestle with different issues.
3. As churches have conversations, they need to have strong, biblically supported guidance from the denomination.
4. Churches need to understand the clear boundaries of our synodical decisions as we move forward in covenant with one another.
5. Synod has not clearly articulated what it means that synodical decisions are considered settled and binding.

Classis Chatham
Ron Middel, stated clerk

**Adopt an Additional Supplement to Church Order
Articles 82-84** *(Deferred from 2020)***I. Observations**

The Reformed churches in continental Europe determined that mutual support and accountability were an important part of being Christ's church, so in the mid-16th century the idea of church officebearers signing a "Form of Subscription" began to take root. The Synod of Dordrecht 1574 determined that its officebearers must "attest" to the Reformed confessions, but it took the great Synod of Dort of 1618-19 to formally require all officebearers in the Dutch Reformed Churches to subscribe to a "Form of Subscription." In signing this form, officebearers were vowing before God and his people, in part, to hold one another accountable for their faith and doctrine, both lived out and taught. The Christian Reformed Church, at its inception as a denomination, also included the requirement that its officebearers sign a Form of Subscription. We took those promises seriously, including the pledge that "we are prepared moreover to submit to the judgment of the council, classis, or synod, realizing that the consequences of refusal to do so is suspension from office." Synod 2012 adopted an updated Form of Subscription, referred to as the Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, by which all officebearers serving the church likewise vow: "We promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority. We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Church Order Article 82 states, "All officebearers, in addition to being subject to general discipline, are subject to special discipline, which consists of suspension and deposition from office." Article 83 states, "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct." But what does this look like, when officebearers in one congregation or even in one classis might be lax in or refuse to hold its officebearers accountable to the confessional decisions of synods? There appears to be sufficient ambiguity in the Church Order to cause a paralysis of action in officebearers being able to hold one another accountable to the vow each made when signing the Covenant for Officebearers upon their ordination. What role does another council or classis have in helping to encourage or move forward special discipline when made aware of a failure in another council or classis to uphold our covenant together? Greater clarity is necessary.

We do have some guidance from past actions of synods. A brief study of the history of synodical decisions shows us that classes and synods have intervened in the decisions of local congregations, even when those decisions did not originate in the council itself. Synods in the past have decided that it

is permissible for a broader assembly to step in and impose special discipline on a narrower assembly, even if no one in a narrower assembly of the offending party has requested such intervention. Many of these decisions were highlighted by the Judicial Code Committee back in 1993, based on an appeal it received and then passed on to synod, about the ability of other assemblies to enforce the Form of Subscription's covenanted responsibilities (see *Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 523ff.).

1. Classis Muskegon deposed the minister and entire consistory of one of its churches in 1919 (with synod's later approval of the synodical deputies' work) when the consistory refused to depose its minister (see *Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 526).
2. Synod 1926 upheld Classis Grand Rapids West in its actions deposing a minister and the majority of his consistory. Synod stated that "Article 36 of the Church Order [currently Article 27-b] gives the classis jurisdiction over the consistory" (*Acts of Synod 1926*, p. 142).
3. Synod 1980 considered an appeal from elders of a church in Classis Huron who had been deposed by the classis. They found that the broader assembly of the classis was not guilty of abusing their God-given authority over the narrower assembly of the consistory by lording it over them based on the following grounds:
 - a. Classis did not exceed its authority when it engaged itself with the situation at Goderich CRC. Christ gave authority to the church as a whole and thereby entrusted authority to the occasions of its exercise in classis and synod as gatherings of the churches to maintain the unity of the congregations in both doctrine and discipline.
 - b. The gathering of churches and their representatives in Jerusalem set a pattern of authoritative decisions, which pattern is followed in principle in the deliberations and decisions of the major assemblies.
 - c. To contend that Classis Huron had no proper jurisdiction over the Goderich Consistory proceeds on a mistaken conception of the relation of the minor assembly to the major assembly. The same authority, constituting the same standards and the same goals, is applied by the several assemblies. Classis Huron adhered to the correct use of the authority delegated to them by Christ.
 - d. In the application of Article 17 (re the release of a minister) to the Goderich situation, it is in order that a classis act when a consistory fails to do so (Art. 27). Classis Huron's action was within the range of the delegated authority."

(*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 28-30)

4. Synod 1982 concurred with Synod 1980's ability to have authority over a consistory (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 55, 628-629).
5. Synod 1991 upheld the action of Classis Lake Erie in suspending the entire council of a church, and instructed the classis to immediately complete the discipline proceedings and deposition of an elder and a deacon (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771).
6. Synod 1993 heard an appeal from a church in Classis Hudson when the classis suspended and deposed its minister. Synod did not sustain the appeal. Some of the grounds included the following:
 - a. The Church Order does not specify that the local council is the only body that may initiate and impose special discipline.
 - b. Synodical precedents establish the authority of a classis to suspend and depose a minister without request or appeal from a member of the council or congregation of the church involved under circumstances such as those present in this matter.

(*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 529)
7. Synod 2004 instructed Classis Toronto to urge one of its churches to act in accordance with the guidelines of the reports on homosexuality of 1973 and 2002 (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 632). Synod 2005 appointed an *in loco* committee, and Classis Toronto passed their recommendation, stating that the biblical/ethical guidelines of Synod 1973 and Synod 2002 are considered settled and binding, and that the actions of First CRC of Toronto constituted a breaking of the denominational covenant (*Agenda for Synod 2006*, p. 459). Synod 2006 approved the work of the *In Loco* Committee after the church agreed to conform to the denomination's position (*Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 653).

More recently, Synod 2019 showed us the need for greater clarity in this manner, as it was confronted with a situation in which a minister was teaching Kinism and was not being disciplined for that false teaching by his council. Such teaching was doing great damage not only to that local congregation but also to our entire denomination. The classis had slowly begun a process of investigation, after this pastor had been publicly advocating this position for years, though it was contrary to what he had vowed to uphold when he signed the Covenant for Officebearers. But the question was raised, asking, What if a majority of this classis' delegates were also sympathetic to Kinism? What options would be available to another classis in the CRCNA to hold that officebearer accountable to the Covenant for Officebearers if his own council and classis refused to do so? This pastor's teaching was damaging the witness and reputation of our entire denomination. Synod 2019, beginning to acknowledge that, adopted the following guidance for the churches:

That synod, given the recent history of Kinist teaching in a particular church of the CRCNA, admonish councils and classes to promote confessional fidelity *and mutually to pursue special discipline of an office-bearer* [emphasis added] who is found to hold views contrary to our standard. (Acts of Synod 2019, p. 818)

Synod 2019 was presented with many recommendations for how we as a denomination might go about protecting our members and churches from abuse of power. In the process of wrestling with this, we were reminded how we are stronger together than apart, particularly when dealing with the matter of abuse. We need mutual accountability, and we need fellow brothers and sisters in other classes to hold one another accountable to the vows made in the Covenant for Officebearers when it comes to matters of abuse.

Synod 2019 saw a greater need, both with Kinism and the abuse of power, to broaden the contact that we have with one another, both on a congregational and a classical level. The need is great and pressing in this current age. We see the importance of clarifying this in our Church Order, detailing what it means to continue to covenant together as fellow officebearers in our respective classes when there is a failure to abide by the vows we have made in signing the Covenant for Officebearers.

There is clear scriptural instruction, Church Order mandate, and historical precedent that we should hold one another accountable to these mutual vows to Christ and his church, so that the honor of Jesus would be upheld and that the witness of his church, as represented in the Christian Reformed Church, would not be tarnished. The Church Order foundation, in Article 1, is that we are in “complete subjection to the Word of God.” The Church Order has always been intended as a means to that end and must never be allowed to be used as an excuse for permitting such gross recent affronts as Kinism or abuse of power to continue on technicalities. Let us hold ourselves to high standards and ensure that our Church Order not only allows but also encourages and enables us to live up to our covenant responsibilities.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2020 to adopt the following addition to Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84:

To carry out our mutual, covenanted responsibility, any narrower assembly may make a formal appeal to a broader assembly regarding the action or inaction of another assembly when an officebearer is deemed to be in violation of the Covenant for Officebearers. Such an appeal may proceed only after the perceived violation has been communicated to the council and classis of the officebearer. Synod shall be the final body of appeal in all matters.

Grounds:

1. There is consistent historical precedent in the CRCNA for broader assemblies to hold narrower assemblies accountable to the Form of Subscription/Covenant for Officebearers as an expression of our vows to covenant together as a Reformed denomination.
2. There is a pressing need for clarity to define the ability of one classis to hold another classis accountable to the enforcement of the Covenant for Officebearers, which all officebearers in all classes have signed, for the sake of our common witness and testimony in this world.
3. Synod is the final body to appeal to and is the proper avenue to appeal to, in carrying out our covenanted responsibilities.
4. Synod is the appropriate authoritative body that determines whether it will instruct a classis to a certain point of action regarding the imposition of special discipline on an officebearer within that classis, so synod has the ultimate authority to enforce that (Church Order Art. 27-b).
5. The appointment of synodical deputies (Art. 48) recognizes the vital importance and value of other classes, with synodical approval and authority, to speak into certain decisions of another classis, and has been deemed by synods past not to be an instance of one body “lording it over” another body (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 28).

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 75 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Evaluate Polity to Clarify Relationship of Assemblies

Classis Zeeland overtures synod to appoint a study committee to evaluate our church polity in light of the Scriptures, our theology, and our history, with the goal of clarifying the relationship between the council, classis, and synod. This should take particular note of the authority of the church and its various assemblies in light of the issue of discipline and excommunication on the local level, and church discipline and disaffiliation at the classical and synodical levels. The biblical and theological underpinnings should be analyzed first, turning then to recommendations for a proper polity that is biblically faithful and historically informed and addresses the issues the church is facing today. Based upon those conclusions, recommendations for structural changes should follow, including recommendations for changes to Church Order that reflect the biblical and theological and polity conclusions.

Grounds:

1. There is considerable confusion over the nature and authority of church assemblies today. This is causing chaos in the church and must be addressed.
2. These difficulties are deep and serious and can only be appropriately addressed by agreement at the biblical and theological level first, and then applied to our polity, Church Order, and practice.
3. Local churches and classes lack the time and resources to handle such an extensive biblical, theological, and historical task. It involves all our churches, so it must be addressed at the synodical level.
4. The task is significant in both weight, content, and impact, and it requires a full study committee to do it justice.

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 76 (DEFERRED FROM 2023)

Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly *(Deferred from 2022)*

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

OVERTURES AND COMMUNICATIONS

OVERTURE 1**Amend the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook to Clarify Their Role in the Nomination Process****I. Introduction**

In March of 2023, the interim committee of Classis Quinte submitted the name of our nomination for the Council of Delegates with the intention of ratifying that nomination at the next classis meeting. Before classis could deliberate, a communication was sent from the Council of Delegates indicating that this nomination had been declined.

It is not the intention of this overture to litigate or appeal this decision. Our purpose is to deal with an underlying governance issue. It is material to note, however, that at the May meeting of Classis Quinte we heard the grounds for the denial and the response from the member involved, and we do not believe that the grounds cited were a barrier to service nor were they an issue of the member's life, faith, excellence in ability, or capacity to serve.

It is also important to note that the responses of the Council of Delegates created an impression that the issue lay with the nominee. It did not, and instead was caused by the Council of Delegates' lack of timely response and involved an interpretation of its handbook contrary to the spirit of our polity in order to define their grounds as an issue at all.

Classis Quinte responded with a letter to the Council of Delegates on June 28, 2023 (Appendix A) in order to express our disagreement and concerns. The Council of Delegates, through its executive, responded on June 30, 2023 (Appendix B). At the September meeting of Classis Quinte it was decided that an overture to synod would be our response to the actions of and justifications provided by the Council of Delegates.

We believe that the Council of Delegates has acted outside of its authority to deny a classis its right to decide its own representation. Further, the Council of Delegates did not provide Classis Quinte or the honourable member due process to speak to the issues at hand, instead acting unilaterally and in a way that violates the spirit of Reformed polity and the purpose of the Council of Delegates.

II. Background

The synod of 2015 acted to replace the CRCNA Board of Trustees structure with a new Council of Delegates structure. The purpose of this structure was to act as an interim committee of synod in order to carry out the needs

of the church in much the same way an interim committee of classis acts. This Council of Delegates operates with a “delegated” authority from synod that is established in Church Order Article 33-b:

Each classis shall appoint a classical interim committee, and synod shall appoint the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA, to act for them in matters which cannot await action by the assemblies themselves. Such committees shall be given well-defined mandates and shall submit all their actions to the next meeting of the assembly for approval.

In this structure it is the synod that rightly approves the membership of the Council of Delegates. What makes this structure different from the Board of Trustees model that it replaced is that the Council of Delegates was intended to model the representative nature of synod itself, with trustees being replaced with delegates nominated by each classis. While properly its authority is derived from synod, its delegation is derived from the classes. This was a significant principle of moving to this structure: that it become more directly connected with the classes, both in composition and in accountability, to address the concerns of the churches that had observed a centralization of the decision-making process under the Board of Trustees model. This concern was addressed in the rationale in 2015.

One consistent question that we have faced is whether this approach is “centralization” with the implication that centralization is a danger to avoid. This proposal eliminates dual authority, which is different than centralization. If the recommendation of the [Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture] is adopted, the result will be a broader and more classically based inclusion of those who will have “delegated” authority of synod.

(Agenda for Synod 2015, p. 361)

The spirit of the Council of Delegates, at its very formation, was to avoid a self-selecting ecosystem and to ensure that the classes were to be included in that delegation of authority.

While foundational, the Council of Delegates chose to stray from this principle in its interpretation of the COD Governance Handbook in section 2.13. In the matter of Classis Quinte and our nominee it was decided that “with the assistance of the COD’s nominating committee” implied the ability to unilaterally reject a nomination and that the phrase “through the COD to synod” implied a gatekeeping authority rather than an administrative function.

In addition to its violation of the spirit of its formation, the interpretation of the COD in this matter created a nonjudicial process where they acted without oversight or accountability to the detriment of both the member and the classis. It is right that an appeal of the decision could have been made to synod, but practically this would leave the classis without representation for at least a year if another nominee was not found and the member was

without the ability to serve for three to six years, though prayerfully and properly selected by classis for this time.

It is our belief that synod must clarify the letter and the spirit of our polity in this area to ensure that the Council of Delegates understands the limits to its authority, that the integrity of our delegated authority is maintained, and that our confidence in our mutual covenant is restored. It is also our belief that while what has been done cannot be undone, there is damage to the member and to Classis Quinte through the actions of the Council of Delegates that needs to be addressed.

We, Classis Quinte, overture synod as follows:

- A. That synod add the following footnote to the COD Governance Handbook section 2.13 concerning the parentheses “(with the assistance of the COD’s nominating committee)”: “¹This assistance shall be interpreted as administrative and advisory only. It is the domain of the classis to select its own nominee.
- B. That synod add the following footnote to the COD Governance Handbook concerning the phrase “provide in a manner selected by the classis a nominee through the COD to synod”: “²The phrase “through the COD” shall be interpreted as administrative in function. The role of the COD and its nominating committee with respect to classical delegates shall be to receive nominations and forward them to synod.
- C. That synod instruct the COD to apologize to Classis Quinte for its interpretation and application of the guidelines in this matter.
- D. That synod instruct the COD to apologize to the nominee for its interpretation and application of the guidelines in this matter.

Grounds

- a. The spirit of our polity and the formation of the Council of Delegates is founded on the principle of classical inclusion.
- b. While the authority of the Council of Delegates is delegated by the synod, there are limits to that authority, especially with regard to its membership.
- c. If the interpretation used in this matter is not corrected by synod, it will create a system in which the Council of Delegates becomes a self-selecting body rather than a representative body.
- d. It may be the case that at times weighty reasons might exist such that a member ought not serve. Such matters ought properly be brought before the classis to weigh and synod to adjudicate (if necessary). It is not in the interest of the churches in either order or appearance for the Council of Delegates to make such a decision unilaterally.
- e. Harm has been done to Classis Quinte in being excluded from the decision-making process and from not being allowed its own representation.

- f. Harm has been done to the nominee both in the loss of opportunity to joyfully serve and, while surely unintentional, in loss to their reputation through the inappropriate denial of their service.

Classis Quinte
Joanne Adema, stated clerk

Amendment to This Overture (submitted by Classis Quinte):

The original overture was written detailing the interaction with the COD while the previous handbook was utilized in the decision made. The new COD Handbook (2023) has adopted language that entrenches this misinterpretation of our polity as well as the history and purpose of the COD. Our additional overture to synod is that synod review the language found in Chapter 1 of the 2023 handbook under “Membership, 1. Classical Members” regarding membership, strike the language “approved by the COD,” and include the footnotes in the original overture regarding the “assistance of the COD Governance Committee,” thus reminding the COD of their place within our polity.

APPENDIX A

Classis Quinte Response to the Actions of the Council of Delegates

Classis Interim Committee (CIC)

Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, chair; Jennings Creek Christian Reformed Church

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, vice chair; Grace Christian Reformed Church

June 28, 2023

Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church

Andy DeRuyter, chair, and Michael Ten Haken, vice chair

Dear Council of Delegates,

We are writing in response to your letter of May 10, 2023, in which you communicated your decision to “decline the nomination of <redacted> to the Council of Delegates.”

Your letter was shared on the floor of the Classis Quinte meeting of May 30, 2023, and serious concerns were raised about the impropriety of your action.

First, it is the role of Classis to delegate people to the COD, and that should be honoured.

Secondly, it is not the COD but synod who appoints delegates to the COD. <The chair of COD's nominating services committee> email correspondence of February 13, 2023, with our Stated Clerk <redacted>, indicated that this was also his understanding.

Thirdly, while we submitted <redacted> name before Classis had approved <their> nomination, we were not seeking the COD's approval. Rather, we submitted the name at the request of <the chair of COD's nominating services committee>. Again, referencing his email to our Stated Clerk where he wrote, "our preference would be to have the name submitted as soon as possible so that it can make it into the Agenda for synod – who does the actual appointing."

It is our conviction that the COD has procedurally overstepped their authority in declining our proposed nomination. Although <redacted> has informed the CIC that <they have> withdrawn <their> name for our consideration as our COD delegate from Classis Quinte, we protest the COD's rejection of our appointee, and believe a response from the COD to Classis Quinte's concerns is in order.

On behalf of the Classis Interim Committee, Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, pastorbenvs@gmail.com

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, rita.kleingeltink@gmail.com

APPENDIX B

Response from the Council of Delegates to the Letter of June 28, 2023

June 30 2023

Classis Interim Committee (CIC), Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, chair

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, vice chair

Dear Classis Representatives,

Thank you for your letter of June 28, 2023. We wish to address your serious concerns about the propriety of our actions as they relate to Classis Quinte's nomination of <redacted> to the Council of Delegates. We will respond to the various points raised in your letter.

First, the COD Governance Handbook states that each classis of the CRCNA shall, with the assistance of the COD's nominating committee, provide in a manner selected by the classis a nominee through the COD to

synod. The Nominating Committee received your nomination and presented this nominee to the COD per our guidelines.

Secondly, you are correct that synod officially appoints the members of the COD, “relying upon the trust of nominating assemblies in their integrity, judgment, and courage,” as stated in the COD Governance Handbook. It became clear to the COD during executive session that <an issue arose> and therefore, by a clear majority vote, <they were> not recommended to synod as a delegate. In this manner the assemblies offered their integrity, judgment, and courage as required in the handbook.

Thirdly, <redacted, referring to the issue specifically>

As outlined in the grounds presented in our recent letter to Classis Quinte, <an issue> is present in this situation. For the sake of the well-being of the COD, the ministry it governs, and to provide time for <the issue to be resolved> the classis was asked for another nominee to be presented as soon as possible so that you are represented at the COD table. It was made clear in our communication to you that <redacted> would surely be considered as a COD delegate once the <issue> had been resolved.

As leaders of the COD, we want to do everything possible to make sure that a delegate from Classis Quinte can participate well.

Together with you in his service and on behalf of the CRCNA Council of Delegates,

Michael Ten Haken (chair) and Greta Luimes (vice chair)

OVERTURE 2

Grant Permission for Consejo Latino to Report on Its Work and Share Resources at Synod

I. Background

For many years the CRCNA has been involved with different ethnic ministries across the United States and Canada. And among these ministries are the Hispanic ministries. In 2012, Hispanic ministers came together to get to know each other and to look to the future of the CRC’s Hispanic ministries. At that time a catalyst group had been in the works. This group eventually became Consejo Latino in 2017. That year, Jose Rayas had shared some thoughts, including the following:

Another thing I appreciate about the CRC is the vision to be a multi-ethnic/diverse church. And I think this is where there is a great challenge, because for the vision to be a part of the DNA of the church, the CRC will have to discern how the cultural realities of the diverse

ethnic groups can build each other up and edify the denomination as a whole.

Today, this is the reality of Consejo Latino: discerning how the realities of the diverse ethnic groups can build each other up and edify the denomination as a whole. Over the past few decades the Hispanic Ministries have learned much that has ranged from navigating through the denomination to raising leaders from within. Granted, there is still much to be learned, and yet Consejo Latino has made great strides and inroads since 2017. There is more involvement of Hispanic pastors (ordained and commissioned) in denominational matters. The Luke 10 program for the preparation of leaders has been designed and implemented.

The Council of Delegates is only one step in that direction. Other steps may include working with existing ethnic regional ministries to build leadership momentum, rather than trying to provide leadership. The apostle Paul, in a powerful way, talks about the church as one body. We are all different, and yet we have the same Maker. We have different cultural traits, and yet we share one Savior. We minister in different contexts, yet it is one gospel of salvation that rules our lives.

It has been almost seven years since Consejo Latino was formalized as a working group within the CRCNA, with its own leadership group. And in this time Consejo Latino has continued to move forward in fulfilling its vision of growth for the church. However, there comes a time to recognize that the learning of Consejo Latino has matured and should be shared with the larger church for reasons of accountability and feedback. That time is now. Thus it seems appropriate that Consejo Latino have a place to report and inform the church leadership of the possibilities and strides made to strengthen the church.

II. Overture

Classes California South and Arizona overture synod to create room on the floor of synod for the leaders of Consejo Latino to report on their work and to share resources with the CRCNA.

Grounds:

1. Evangelism has global and ethnic implications.
2. The experience and knowledge of Consejo Latino can be shared across the denomination.
3. Consejo Latino was born from the urgency of the call to share the gospel.
4. It is the desire of Consejo Latino to share what it has learned for the growth and progress of the denomination.
5. Church planting is and has been a priority and one of the major foci of Consejo Latino and its relationship with Resonate Global Mission.

6. Missional leadership development is an area of growth within the denomination and is a major focus of Consejo Latino.

Classis California South
Mario Perez, stated clerk

Classis Arizona
Andy DeKorte, stated clerk

OVERTURE 3

Recommend that Ministers' Pension Trustees Increase the Final Average Salary Calculation to 100 Percent of the Average Ministers' Compensation

I. Introduction and background

Classis Niagara submits this overture to recommend that the trustees of the Ministers' Pension Plans increase the final average salary calculation from 75 percent to 100 percent of the average ministers' compensation.

One of the benefits that the CRCNA offers for ordained ministers of the Word serving in the United States and Canada is a defined-benefit pension. The Ministers' Pension Plan (MPP) benefits for participants are calculated by a formula. The current calculation for each participant is based on the multiplication of years of service, a factor of 1.3 percent, and what is reported as the "final average salary."

The "final average salary" (FAS) is country-specific for either Canada or the United States. To determine the FAS, compensation data is collected from all minister participants from each country. The compensation data includes both salary and housing benefit/housing allowance for all active ministers in the plan. That three-year running average compensation is then reduced by 25 percent to arrive at the FAS, which is used to determine pension benefits. (For instance, the FAS effective February 2024 for retiring ministers is \$62,310 for Canada and \$57,998 for the U.S. But these are only 75 percent of the actual three-year average compensation of all ministers in the respective countries.)

In many other defined-pension benefit plans, individual benefits are calculated based on the individual's final average salary of the participant's best three or five years of service. We note that this could result in an inequity of benefits for pastors who may have similar years of service but have served in ministries where compensation may have been vastly different. For that reason we are supportive of the logic of using an average of all ministers' compensation.

What we believe needs to change is that the FAS should reflect 100 percent of ministers' total compensation. We understand that the original MPP was

based on only the salary portion of compensation, exclusive of housing benefit/housing allowance. In both Canada and the United States, clergy may claim their housing benefit/housing allowance as nontaxable. This benefit allows churches and ministries to compensate ministers at a reduced level while the ministers' actual "take home" pay is more in line with the professional services they provide. It is our understanding that the 25 percent reduction of the actual minister average compensation is intended to be reflective of the housing benefit/housing allowance so that pension benefits continue to be calculated on only the salary portion of their compensation.

It is understood that ministers need to plan for retirement based on personal savings plans through such vehicles as RRSPs or 401(k)s, government benefits, and the MPP. In planning for that retirement we believe that the portion of retirement income from the MPP should be calculated based on 100 percent of the three-year average ministers' compensation.

II. Overture

Classis Niagara overtures Synod 2024 to recommend that the trustees of the Canadian and United States ministers' pension plans implement a sustainable plan to increase the final average salary calculation from 75 percent to 100 percent of the three-year average ministers' compensation.

Ground:

Using the full 100 percent of average ministers' compensation in its calculations honors the full contribution of ministers through their years of service.

Classis Niagara
Wendy de Jong, stated clerk

OVERTURE 4

Close the Pension Fund to New Members and Create a New Retirement Fund

I. History

Since 1881 the Christian Reformed Church has covenanted with its ministers to provide a pension plan. This plan has been modified and updated in order to provide secure funding and retirement benefits for pastors:

- In 1883 pensions were funded with two church offerings per year.
- In 1894 funding shifted to the classes through quotas.
- In the 1920s and 1930s expected shortfalls after World War I and the Great Depression forced additional revisions to the plan. During those decades, our churches pledged to mutually assist other churches and classes unable to pay their shares.

- In 1939 the plan changed to provide for spousal and dependent benefits.
- In 1980 synod approved the formation of a Canadian Pension Plan.
- In 2010 synod approved reductions to the pension multiplier and COLA adjustments to keep the plan solvent. Overall, the pension system has served us well.

The denomination has had a long history of adjusting and adapting to the needs of changing circumstances with this plan. We believe that the CRCNA is now in a time that warrants another change to secure the plan and funding and retirement benefits for pastors.

II. Present concerns

Currently retirees and survivors outnumber the plan's contributors. In 2023, 911 active ministers are contributing while 776 ministers and 242 survivors (1,008 total) are receiving benefits. Also, there are 131 withdrawn participants with vested benefits.

The annual reporting to synod further underlines concern for the plan's solvency. Synod 2023 reporting indicated that the **2022** reported market value of the combined Canadian and U.S. plans (\$191,912,000) was able to meet the **2019 reported** actuarial liability obligation (\$182,900,000). This three-year gap is concerning and offers no real assurance the projections end with solvency.

Additionally, for smaller churches, a fixed-pension commitment that is not adjustable within a salary package is burdensome when facing either bivocational or other salary packages. At the same time, as with ministry shares, there are churches not paying their assessments into the pension plan. With 60 percent of the congregations in the CRCNA worshiping at 100 members or less, these concerns will only continue to expand.

Finally, pension plans are designed to bring assurance to participants that in their retirement years there will be adequate income along with other investments and Social Security. Instead of bringing assurance for many pastors, there is growing anxiety about the reduction of benefits that pastors have seen over the past years. For example, a pastor entering ministry around 1995 has seen a reduction in projected benefits from the pension plan of 30-35 percent. This reduction doesn't bring assurance of longevity of the pension plan.

III. Future concerns

There are three challenges facing the Ministers' Pension Plan as it currently functions.

First, the challenge of keeping the pension solvent will only increase as average life expectancy increases. Add to that the challenge of congregations to remain participating (either because of size, closure, or departure from the CRCNA), and a perfect storm is created.

Second, the pension as a defined-benefit plan (DBP) presumes (even requires) that pastors be in full-time ministry for the plan to function. However, Synod 2023 acknowledged the importance of dual-career (bivocational) pastors. Synod made appropriate Church Order changes to support this recognition. However, synod has not yet offered considerations for the future retirements of dual-career (bivocational) pastors and their participation in the pension.

Third, the management of the pension is also in future jeopardy or uncertainty. John Bolt has served our denomination well for many years. He is one of the few people who understand the DBP pensions that the CRC has for its pastors. His knowledge base is so crucial that he had to return from retirement part-time to help with pension matters. While John is truly generous with his time, any person-dependent pension is troublesome.

It should also be noted that participants in the pension also carry the burden that because the CRCNA is an ecclesiastical organization, there is no coverage under the U.S. Pension Guarantee Benefit Corporation should the pension fail.

IV. Analysis

Over the past 25 years most denominations have shifted from DBP pensions to individual retirement account plans by utilizing a 403(b)9 employer-based plan. Rather than a fixed payout calculated according to years of service and a multiplier creating common but limited payout, a 403(b)9 plan requires a percentage of the pastor's compensation based on housing plus salary (usually between 8.5% and 11%) be contributed into a pastor's personal 403(b)9 account. This account is held within an employer-sponsored plan managed by a selected third-party financial management company. The denomination provides oversight to the investment portfolio by creating guidelines for the portfolio manager. The portfolio manager carries third-party insurance against mismanagement of funds.

This type of plan provides multiple benefits for pastors and congregations.

1. The 8.5-11 percent contribution is based on actual compensation (salary plus benefits) of a pastor's earnings regardless of their full-time or part-time position.
2. The contributions become an actual part of the pastor's investment portfolio along with any other retirement investments. As a result, the pastor can plan for his or her retirement based on actual investments rather than being forced to wait until three to four months before her or his retirement to be given the financial numbers for retirement.
3. The management of the portfolio is under an investment company with the guidance of a synodically appointed team.
4. If a pastor takes time off for parental leave or other reasons, his or her contributions continue to gain value within the investment portfolio

rather than losing benefits, as happens with the pension in its current form.

5. Since these investments belong to the pastor, the pastoral participant will also be encouraged to add to their account beyond their compensation contribution.

Moving to individual 403(b)9 accounts within an employer-sponsored portfolio provides the flexibility necessary for the way pastors are employed; provides churches with the certainty that they are supporting their pastor's long-term financial security; and places management of the plan on solid footing moving forward.

V. Overture

Classis Muskegon overtures Synod 2024 as follows:

A. That the current CRCNA Ministers' Pension Plan be closed for all new participants by the end of 2026.

Grounds:

1. As seen in the numbers presented above, there are real challenges to the vitality of the current pension plan. Pastors, who are recipients, and congregations, who support the plan, need to know the health and future vitality of the current pension plan.
2. Since the CRCNA's current pension plan is not fully funded, it is best for the CRCNA to close it, make sure it is fully funded, and move forward with new methods of providing a pension for all pastors of the CRCNA that will not be built on congregational or pastoral participation.

B. That synod form a team of pension experts and vested-plan members to investigate the health of the current CRCNA pension plan and propose a way forward that will provide for its future funding and guard the retirement benefits of those who are enrolled in the plan.

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA Ministers' Pension Plan (U.S. side) is currently underfunded, and it's unclear what it will take to fully fund it.
2. The denomination was in covenant with pastors and congregations when it received the contributions from churches to provide retirement benefits. In the past 10 years cost-of-living freezes and other realities have reduced the value of that pension significantly for pastors who are retired and for those about to retire.

C. That synod appoint a Retirement Plan Task Force to create a new, more flexible retirement plan that supports full-time, part-time, bivocational pastors, and pastors who take leave for a time from ministry. That this team establish a plan that reflects a 403(b)(9) plan as mentioned above and include the establishment of the recommended percentage for pastoral contribution. This team will report back to Synod 2025.

Grounds:

1. With the changes in investing models, personal investment understanding/reporting, and available expertise, pastors, like other individuals, need to and can plan most appropriately for their retirement using individual retirement accounts.
2. Currently it is difficult, if not impossible, for bivocational pastors to participate in the pension plan. With bivocational and part-time pastors' numbers increasing, it is important that they have a retirement plan.
3. Churches will be more motivated and more capable of meeting contribution requirements if that contribution is in direct support of the church's present pastor and tied directly to the compensation package, as is the case with other employers.
4. There are several denominations—RCA, Alliance of Reformed Churches, Evangelical Covenant Church—who already have done this and who can help to resource this team to build an effective plan and contribution percentage in an expedient manner.

D. That synod direct the director of ministry operations to work with the Retirement Plan Task Force to develop a new team to provide oversight of the new retirement plan. The team will provide ongoing supervision for the new retirement plan within the CRCNA structure.

E. That current staff of the CRCNA who are involved in the management of the Ministers' Pension Plan, who act as advisors to the plan, or who are in its supervision be limited in participation on either team to advisor status.

Grounds:

1. Many, if not all, who supervise and are advisors for the current pension plan are not members of the plan and therefore do not have a vested interest in the current plan.
2. Those whose jobs support the pension plan will already be asked to provide reports, etc., beyond their usual job duties.

F. That synod direct the Office of Pensions and Insurance to give a more detailed report to the participants in the Ministers' Pension Plan of the health and actuarial study of the plan performed by Merrill Lynch/Bank of America, the custodians of the Ministers' Pension Plan.

Ground:

A more detailed report of the health and future vitality of the Ministers' Pension Plan will reduce anxiety and help ministers as they prepare for their retirement.

Classis Muskegon
Rev. Drew Sweetman, stated clerk

OVERTURE 5

Allow Transfer of All Nations Church, Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles

Overture

Classis Ko-Am, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles. The All Nations Church council originated this request, and it was approved by both classes.

Grounds:

- a. All Nation Church's new pastor, Rev. Amos Park, has connections in Classis Greater Los Angeles that will facilitate the training of All Nations Church leaders in the regional life of the church.
- b. Pastor Amos Park desires to network with the pastors in Classis Greater Los Angeles and feels he is able to contribute much in the multiethnic setting of Classis Greater Los Angeles. The congregation is at a point where connecting with an English-speaking classis is preferable to connecting with a Korean-speaking one.
- c. All Nations Church ministry would be more inspired to participate at the classis level and be more effectively counseled and held accountable by their colleagues in Classis Greater Los Angeles.

Classis Ko-Am
Edward Yoon, stated clerk

OVERTURE 6

Permit the Transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles

Overture

Classis Greater Los Angeles, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles. The request originated from the All Nations Church council and was approved by both classes.

Grounds:

- a. All Nations Church's new pastor, Rev. Amos Park, has connections in Classis Greater Los Angeles that will facilitate the training of All Nations Church leaders in the regional life of the church.

- b. Pastor Amos Park desires to network with the pastors in Classis Greater Los Angeles and feels he is able to contribute much in the multiethnic setting of Classis Greater Los Angeles. The congregation is at a point where connecting with an English-speaking classis is preferable to connecting with a Korean-speaking one.
- c. All Nations Church's ministry would be more inspired to participate at the classis level and be more effectively counseled and held accountable by their colleagues in Classis Greater Los Angeles.

Classis Greater Los Angeles
Sandi Ornee, stated clerk

OVERTURE 7

Appoint a Task Force on Multisite Churches

I. Background

In 2022, Classis Chicago South approved an overture wherein Plainfield Christian Reformed Church came under the authority of Orland Park CRC as an emerging church. This action was done to facilitate the beginning of a multisite arrangement between the two churches at the end of a multiyear process of discernment and understanding to bring about the union both legally and in a manner that fits with CRCNA Church Order.

The reality that Classis Chicago South observed is that while multisite congregations are increasingly on the rise within the North American Christian scene, the CRC Church Order doesn't specifically envision a multisite congregation, and at present there are only two multisite congregations within the denomination of which we are aware.

As Orland Park CRC and Plainfield CRC have operated within this new framework, some matters have arisen that we believe could benefit from focused denominational attention—for example, matters such as appropriate reporting structures, delegations to classis, allowing both campuses to have a voice in decision making, and so on. Within our own classis our arrangement has caused some confusion that we would like to address to help foster and deepen trust.

There have also been joys of mutual accountability, fellowship across broader bounds, and a broad shared vision that we would love to see as a viable option for other Christian Reformed congregations.

We would also like to see a process developed to allow for churches to move forward without multiyear exploration processes.

Thus we have come to believe that it could be a benefit to our denomination as a whole to appoint a task force to study multisite churches in an effort to

update our Church Order supplements to explain how such an arrangement can function within the context of our Church Order and the Reformed confessions.

II. Overture

Classis Chicago South overtures synod to do the following:

A. Appoint a task force to study multisite churches with a mandate to research multisite churches and provide the following:

- direction, advice, and guidance on what models best fit Reformed theology and polity
- direction, advice, and guidance on what models shouldn't be employed in Reformed churches
- a roadmap for how churches might become a multisite campus or enfold a church as a campus
- recommended changes to Church Order supplements to facilitate such arrangements and provide clarity for how such churches should properly function in relation to each other, the classis, and synod
- provide a legal/structural framework for multisite churches.

B. Appoint to the task force at least one attorney, at least two pastors from multisite congregations, at least one biblical or systematic Reformed theologian, and a Church Order expert.

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA Church Order does not envision such an arrangement at present.
2. Multisite arrangements are being increasingly employed within the North American church scene and may provide missional opportunities for CRCNA congregations.
3. A task force provides the time to ensure that a use of multisite congregations within the CRCNA would be done properly, in good order, and in accordance with Reformed theological principles.
4. A task force can provide direction on how such arrangements can be pursued with respect to the law and articles of incorporation.
5. A road map and changes to the Church Order can prevent confusion at both the congregational and classis levels and give clarity for congregations as they pursue such an arrangement.

IV. Conclusion

We pray that this work may bear fruit in fostering clarity among classes in which this structure is employed, as well as missional zeal throughout our denomination.

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

Reaffirm the Decision of 1996 regarding Racial Reconciliation

I. Background

In the history of the Christian Reformed Church numerous statements about race and racism have been declared since 1957. And as recently as 2022 and 2023, statements have been made by synods about racism and biblical justice. In 1996 a synodical committee presented a report, which synod approved and which the CRC published under the title *God's Diverse and Unified Family* (see crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf). The report was produced in response to instructions from Synod 1992 for a "committee to engage in a comprehensive review and articulation of the biblical and theological principles regarding the development of a racially and ethnically diverse family of God" (*Acts of Synod 1992*, p. 720). This report did not obtain confessional status but has been referred to the churches, and for several years synodical delegates were expected to read the report prior to the convening of synod. What has been clear is that the report is solidly based on the truth of God's Word and is considered a valuable tool for the churches of the denomination.

On the basis of the principles articulated in the report, Synod 1996 declared "that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God's Word and the Reformed confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513). As a declaration of synod, this matter is settled and binding upon the congregations, office-bearers, and members of the CRCNA.

In addition, the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the cherished Reformed confessions, explains the sixth commandment from the Word of God very clearly. We quote the entirety of Lord's Day 40:

Q&A 105

Q. What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge.

I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.

Q&A 106

Q. Does this commandment refer only to murder?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness.

In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder.

Q&A 107

Q. Is it enough then that we do not murder our neighbor in any such way?

- A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

Given that content from the Heidelberg Catechism, it is clear that fighting against racism and fighting for racial justice is more than a social or cultural issue. It is a confessional matter.

During the history of the CRCNA in many locations in the United States and Canada, this confessional declaration has been violated with impunity. We have used thoughts, words, looks, and gestures in very disparaging ways toward people who are different from us. We have frequently stood by silently as others have given expression to what the catechism describes and so have become “party to this in others.” We have become angry with others and vindictive as we have seen neighborhoods change because others different from us have moved in. Some of us upon occasion have expressed outright hatred toward others whom we perceived as those who destroyed our neighborhoods and our job opportunities. We have treated First Nations people with scorn and have severely demeaned their culture. Some have tried to call us to confession, repentance, and changed behavior and attitudes, but this has often been ignored or had temporary effect. The repeated appearance of matters dealing with race and racism in the *Acts of Synod* indicates that we have not concluded efforts to become the reconciled community of racially and ethnically diverse people God desires.

II. Overture

Therefore Classis Chicago South overtures synod to reaffirm the declaration regarding the 1996 report (published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*) “that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God’s Word and the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513). Although it may not ordinarily be wise to reaffirm past synodical decisions, the ongoing gravity of this issue makes it reasonable to do so in this case.

Grounds:

- a. The truth of the statement from Synod 1996 has not changed, and we need to be reminded of the necessity for reconciliation.
- b. The report, published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*, “demonstrates that the Bible declares this reconciled community to be God’s will” (ground from the adoption of this statement in 1996; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

- c. “The confessions declare that the catholicity of the church means that Christ ‘gathers, protects, and preserves’ the church ‘out of the whole human race’ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21)” (ground from the adoption of this statement in 1996; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 9

Encourage Observance of the 1996 Declaration on Racial Reconciliation

I. Background

Synod 1996 declared “that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God’s Word and the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

II. Overture

Classis Chicago South overtures synod to urge all classes in the CRCNA to encourage observance of this declaration by officebearers of their constituent churches and by congregation members, repenting of past sins and diligently pursuing paths of reconciliation and obedience.

Grounds:

- a. Hebrews 12:14 says: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.”
- b. Church Order Article 79-a states, “The members of the church are accountable to one another in their doctrine and life and have the responsibility to encourage and admonish one another in love.”
- c. The requests of Synod 1996 to classes (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 514) were not fully and universally implemented by the classes of the CRCNA.

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, stated clerk

OVERTURE 10

Suspend the Work of the Dignity Team

I. Introduction

Our overture addresses the work of a group of people that until recently we had no idea existed: the Dignity Team. As the description of the Dignity Team reads from its page at crcna.org/dignityteam,

Established in 2022, the Dignity Team exists to respond to less tangible and less clearly defined abuses of power that occur within CRC

circles, but may fall between or outside the scopes of the systems addressed elsewhere in the CRCNA's system to prevent the abuse of power.

Our concern regarding the work of the Dignity Team is already referred to there, but it may be hard to see at first. Looking at the Dignity Team mandate makes our concern a bit more noticeable. The mandate reads,

The approved mandate of the Dignity Team is:

- **to prevent** abuse of power by being available to advise those within CRC arenas on how to promote the value and dignity of all persons;
- **to respond** to abuses of power that occur within CRC circles in nimble, less formal, pastoral ways in coordination with Safe Church Ministry, Pastor Church Resources, and Human Resources in ways that promote reconciliation, healing, and restoration; and
- **to report** trends of abuse and gaps related to response to abuse within the denomination.

Our great concern is that although this team is mandated to respond to “abuses of power that occur within CRC circles,” there is no process identified through which those abuses of power are to be justly and objectively determined. The description of their work itself refers to abuses of power that are “less tangible and less clearly defined.” There is already then acknowledgement that this team is working on the margins, so to speak, where whether there has been abuse of power or not is unclear. This, it seems to us, is all the more reason to require a formal and clearly defined process before the team concludes that genuine abuse of power has occurred. In fact, for this team to use the power that has been conferred upon it, without utilizing an objective and just process to determine if abuse of power has occurred in the situations it addresses, would be in itself, an abuse of power.

Our overture, then, is quite simple and straightforward:

II. Overture

The council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, overtures synod to immediately suspend the work of the Dignity Team until a just process for the determination of abuse can be developed and required as part of the Dignity Team's mandate prior to the Dignity Team becoming involved in cases of alleged abuse, bringing it into alignment with the explanation of the ninth commandment in Q&A 112 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Grounds:

1. Accusations of abuse are incredibly serious and should not be made without great care. Those who face such accusations, even when later found to be innocent, suffer long-term repercussions.

2. The Scriptures are very clear that the pursuit of justice must follow a just process. This includes specific guidelines to verify that accusations are proven true before being accepted as true (Deut. 19:15-21; Prov. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:19-21).
3. Describing someone's actions as abusive, before those actions have been formally determined through a just and careful process to be abusive, is a breach of the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," as the Heidelberg Catechism explains in Q&A 112:

Q. What is the aim of the ninth commandment?

- A. That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.

Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are the very devices the devil uses, and they would call down on me God's intense wrath.

I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name.

4. The mandate of the Dignity Team includes no provision or requirement for a just hearing prior to its determining whether genuine abuse has taken place in situations where abuse has been alleged. (See the explanation of the work of the Dignity Team and its mandate at crcna.org/dignityteam.)

As such, this mandate fails to guard our neighbor's good name. Rather, it creates a likelihood that gossip, slander, and rash condemning will take place instead.

While abuse must be addressed wherever it exists in the church, seeking to do so without a just process to determine the presence of abuse in the first place leads us to committing the very abusive treatment of others that we are seeking to eliminate.

We ask that synod would bring the Dignity Team into alignment with the explanation of the ninth commandment in Q&A 112 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan
Ethan Pawelski, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

Appoint a Committee to Explore the Need for a CRCNA Licensing Board for CRCNA Pastors

I. Background on licensing boards

Licensing boards serve to protect the public from misconduct, maltreatment, and abuse by being accessible to persons harmed so that such persons may file a complaint or grievance against a licensed professional whom they believe has violated them. Medical and mental health professionals answer to their particular licensing boards (social worker licensing board, marriage and family licensing board, medical board, etc.) and attorneys answer to a bar board. Some of the services that a licensing board provides are licensure renewal, reporting of CEU hours for renewal, and forms to file complaints and grievances. Licensing boards meet throughout the year to review complaints and other concerns. When wrongs are determined, licensing boards have the power to implement disciplinary action, such as requiring the licensee to take a class, withdrawing or withholding his/her license, or suspending the license. Disciplinary action is reported to the contracted insurance companies of those charged.

II. Overture

I overture Synod 2024 to appoint a committee to explore and research the need to develop and implement a CRCNA licensing board for pastors of the CRCNA (licensed and commissioned pastors) who face allegations regarding misconduct, maltreatment, any form of abuse including abuse of power, and/or job performance. This would not include a pastor's theological commitments or position.

Additionally, this committee's exploration and research would do the following:

- determine how a licensing board would fit into the current structure of Church Order and/or what changes would need to be made to make it possible, especially regarding the council, classis, and licensing board relationship
- determine how a licensing board would work with
 - a victim presenting allegations of abuse of power, abuse of authority, or misconduct to the licensing board
 - the safe church team (if available), church councils, classis, and Church Order protocols
 - the safe church team and/or council when either or both of them present allegations of abuse to the licensing board
- explore what other churches and denominations are currently doing with regard to using a licensing board structure

- provide explanations about the amount of power the licensing board would or could have in connection with the authority of councils (and sometimes classis) over a pastor (Church Order)
- provide an explanation of what a licensing board could do for councils and classes, such as granting licenses, ensuring completion of required training prior to renewal of license, having authority to discipline (through license suspension, requiring a pastor to take a class, attend a workshop, undergo supervision, etc.)
- determine what jurisdiction the licensing board would have, such as certain classes, regions, or the entire denomination
- determine what kind of background the licensing board members could have (social workers, therapists, psychologists, medical doctors, or other licensed master-level professionals)
- compare and contrast how other professional licensing boards (marriage and family, social workers) execute their duties and responsibilities to understand how a CRCNA licensing board could do theirs
- address other issues or concerns that may arise from their exploration and research

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA denomination, since the opening of Safe Church Ministry in 1994, has pledged to members and victims of the Christian Reformed Church to do all it can as a denomination to provide a safe church environment. This was promised again in the approval of the Abuse Victims Task Force Report of 2010, the Abuse of Power Overture in 2018, the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders in 2023, and other decisions. A licensing board, where pastors answer to a board, would increase safety for all.
2. A licensing board for pastors would increase accountability, which would create a safer church for all.
3. A licensing board (consisting of social workers, therapists, psychologists, medical doctors) assures better outcomes because of a board's greater objectivity and greater expertise when reviewing complaints and situations that involve abuse issues by church leaders.
4. It has been shown that councils lack the ability to know how to do investigations of pastor/church leader wrongdoing, how to question the accused, how to write reports about their investigations, and how to conduct interviews.
5. A licensing board relieves some of the burden of councils and consistories when they are faced with how to handle a pastor's/church leader's misconduct, allegations of abuse, and other difficult situations
6. There has been a consistent lack of objectivity among councils and consistories when investigating abuse of power situations and cases be-

cause of the councils' and consistories' friendship with the pastor/church leader, their need for the pastor/church leader's approval, and their fear of retaliation and rebuttal should a council member stand up against a pastor/ church leader.

Member of Hancock (Minn.) CRC
Judy De Wit

Note: This overture was presented to the council of Hancock (Minn.) CRC but was not adopted. This overture was then presented to Classis Lake Superior at its March 2024 meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 12

Ensure that Advisory Committees Review and Present All Pertinent Information When Synod Receives Overtures or Appeals on Abuse

I. Background

The CRCNA, since 1994 (the opening of Abuse Prevention Office), has vowed that abuse by church leaders of the denomination will be addressed and dealt with. However, this assurance has failed many times. Whether it has been via church process (council, classis, synod) or by presenting, discussing, and approving overtures needed in order to bring change to our church system to ensure a better response to allegations, our church system has not done what it vowed to do.

II. Overture

I overture that when a synod receives overtures or appeals related to abuse, its advisory committee(s) shall review and present all pertinent information to synod so that delegates may make informed decisions.

Ground:

When every overture or appeal is presented on the synod floor, then . . .

- we follow the vows that we as a denomination have made to address abuse, abuse of power, and abuse in our churches, on all levels.
- the (council, classis, synod) appeal process of Church Order is being followed and ensures that victims' voices will be heard at synod; when an advisory committee declines to present an appeal or overture to synod, more victimization occurs.
- we are hearing a possible better way to respond to abuse. Usually overtures mean that a loophole in the appeal process has been found, meaning pastors have manipulated the appeal system to dodge and avoid charges of wrongdoing. Overtures need to be heard because then we are strengthening our response to abuse.

- the protection of pastors is reduced and the voice of the victim is increased. Lying, deceit, gaslighting, and “that didn’t really happen” are typical messages victims hear from church leaders in their situations.
- the victim is validated. Refusing to open and discuss overtures and appeals increases the pain and harm already done to victims. Messages of “we don’t want to hear about it” or “let’s call a technicality on this; then we don’t have to deal with it” or “he’s such a great man, we don’t want to upset him” are reduced when every overture and appeal is put on the floor of synod.

Member of Hancock (Minn.) CRC
Judy De Wit

Note: This overture was presented to the council of Hancock (Minn.) CRC but was not adopted. This overture was then presented to Classis Lake Superior at its March 2024 meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 13

Do Not Adopt Proposed Addition of Church Order Article 23-d and Its Supplement

I. Background

The Study of Bivocationality Task Force has done significant work to consider the meaning and significance of “proper support” for ordained church leaders, both ministers of the Word in bivocational service and commissioned pastors (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314). Their work provides a great service to the denomination and offers an important opportunity for discussion about how we can do ministry faithfully in the changing contexts across North America, as well as how churches can encourage and facilitate the work of pastors by providing sufficient financial resources for the work of ministry as instructed in Scripture (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 2 Thess. 3:7-10). However, the proposals to define “proper support” for commissioned pastors, while well intentioned, could have unintended effects that diminish the distinctions existing between the offices and place undue burdens on churches in nontraditional settings within the CRCNA.

The proposal for “proper support” seems to assume that the offices of commissioned pastor and minister of the Word are, for all intents and purposes, equivalent in terms of the kinds of compensation expected for the value of the work done for church leadership (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Cor. 9:14). But this is not necessarily the case. The offices of the church may be equal in dignity and honor, but not in task or mandate (Church Order Art. 2). The work of commissioned pastors is “applicable to a variety of ministries,” which includes among them youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and

evangelism (Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-a). The variety of ministries covered by the office of commissioned pastor means that, while guidelines for compensation *may* at times be similar to that of a minister of the Word, there may also be substantial differences that require different treatment (for example, differences in education, professional training, responsibility to the local church or wider denomination, etc.). Furthermore, including commissioned pastors in the specific requirements for “proper support” begs the question, What about other, nonordained church staff? Is it only ordained staff who have a right to “proper support”?

Furthermore, with specific reference to the housing provision, the proposal obscures the historical development of this aspect of “proper support” in relation to the work of a minister of the Word. A parsonage was typically allowed to clergy as a benefit due to the more frequent moves expected of a minister of the Word, who served the ministry of the denomination as a whole. This idea stands in contrast to that of a commissioned pastor, whose work is limited to the local ministry to which he or she is commissioned. The housing provisions, in this regard, are particularly problematic at potentially blurring the distinctions between the two offices in the ways these offices serve the overall denomination.

Finally, the specificity of the forms of “proper support” prescribed by synod in the proposed Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-d give the impression that the specific factors named by the task force in its report (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 296-98 and pp. 302-3) can be easily overcome by simply instructing churches to include housing, sabbatical expenses, and so forth as compensation expectation without regard for the size of the church, income level of its members, educational level in the wider community, and similar considerations. While the report rightly challenges churches to consider whether it is fair for a full-time minister of the Word in a larger church to be offered a sabbatical while a bivocational commissioned pastor in an immigrant congregation has no such opportunity, it does not ask whether it is fair—or helpful for our collective witness as a denomination—to demand that all churches provide equal benefits. In particular, the instructions of the Supplement would benefit from additional conversation with leaders of nonmajority culture communities in the CRCNA to determine the effects of these requirements on different constituencies within our denomination.

Clearly, we are not arguing that churches should not provide “proper support” for commissioned pastors (nor ignoring this responsibility for any church staff). In many ways we would echo the sentiments of the Candidacy Committee that whatever differences exist in the requirements between ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors, those differences do not “justify the underpaying of commissioned pastors” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 857). But it would be wise for synod to consider carefully the implications of any Church Order changes in the ways the various offices are perceived throughout the wider CRC.

II. Overture

For this reason, we submit the following overture to Synod 2023:

That synod not adopt the proposed addition of Church Order Article 23-d and its Supplement (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 964-66).

Grounds:

- a. While well intentioned and aimed at developing a parity in terms of the ways churches support ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors, the proposal obscures the very real differences between these offices, particularly in the distinct ways in which these two offices serve the denomination.
- b. The proposal to require housing support in the compensation for commissioned pastors, in particular, overlooks the historical reasons for this aspect of the compensation for a minister of the Word, which might not apply to the more localized ordination of a commissioned pastor.
- c. Further conversation is needed to determine the impact of these requirements on the ministry and financial situations of smaller churches, particularly in immigrant and other nonmajority culture communities within the CRCNA.

Classis Atlantic Northeast
David D. Poolman, stated clerk

OVERTURE 14

Regarding Belgic Confession, Article 36

I. Introduction

Brothers and sisters, our society is in crisis, and we all feel it.

While there is always some degree of crisis in society, fallen as it is, and it goes up and down in waves, the current wave that we are experiencing seems increasingly like a kind of tsunami. There is something in the air, and that something is troubling.

From crime and punishment, racial tension, immigration, transgenderism, and the content of public education to inflation, mounting debt, and deficit spending, it seems as though every aspect of society is involved.

In addition to these and many other challenges, our society faces difficulties with a significant loss of faith in its institutions—including the church, which in times past would be relied upon to provide the steadying influence and direction to help process the challenges in a way that would be constructive and healing and lead to a better and more secure place.

Of the 16 institutions currently tracked by Gallup each year, regarding Americans' confidence in them, 11 notched their lowest score ever recorded in either 2022 or 2023.

The nine central institutions that Gallup has regularly tracked since 1979—the church, the military, the U.S. Supreme Court, banks, public schools, newspapers, Congress, organized labor, and big business—have seen their average confidence score plummet from 48 percent in 1979 to 26 percent last year.

The fall in confidence in the church (organized religion) has been even greater as a percentage, falling from a high of 68 percent in 1975 to just 31 percent in 2023—a drop of 37 points, or 54 percent.

The vast majority of people in our society do not trust these institutions, do not trust that they can help, do not trust that they have answers, do not trust what they say.

We believe that one significant reason the church is not believed to have any answers to these cultural challenges is that the church, and the Reformed churches specifically—which have genuine answers to many of these, as the history of Western civilization testifies—have chosen to remain silent, or worse yet, have begun suggesting answers contrary to the ones God has given us.

It is time for the church to once again begin to declare its answers and to call our society back to the stability and greater fullness of blessing for all people that they provide.

There are two main challenges to the church finding its voice in these matters:

First, there is within the church (and particularly our corner of the church) a great fear of “getting political.” Since all of the challenges of society are debated and often demagogued in the political sphere, it is believed that the church should stay silent on these things.

However, we here in the Christian Reformed Church need to remember that in a very significant way we are *confessionally* political. One of the three forms of unity, the Belgic Confession, specifically addresses itself to civil government, and it does so because civil government has been ordained by God to perform a certain function—a function that is defined within the Word of God. Article 36 of the Belgic Confession (as adopted by Synod 2011) reads as follows:

We believe that because of the depravity of the human race, our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. God wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings.

For that purpose God has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good.

And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject

to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.

They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them.

They should do it in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.

Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honor and respect, and obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God's Word, praying for them that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency.

[and then the paragraph that is the focus of this overture]

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

This reference to the moral order is a reference to the second table of the law, God's moral law, which establishes the moral order by establishing just conduct between people.

This is, as John Calvin rightly referred to it, the second use of the law—the restraining of evil in society. The second purpose, then, of God's law is that it be applied to society and that society be governed by it. Anything else is lawlessness. This is the role of civil government.

So, while we seek not to blend the two spheres of church and state, we recognize (1) the role of the church in declaring the truths of God that define the role of the state and (2) his moral law, which constructs the moral order in which society can flourish, and which the state has been given the sword to secure.

We are not only “allowed,” then, to “get political”; we are confessionally bound to do it—not so much in the area of specific public policy but, rather, regarding foundational public, or cultural, principles.

The second significant barrier to the church finding its voice on these matters is the question of just what exactly the church should say. But, here again, we are given direction by the confession of faith, specifically included in that final paragraph that warns against the introduction of common ownership of goods, which, as the article reminds us, seeks to “subvert justice “and to corrupt “the moral order that God has established among human beings.” This is the very thing that we have been experiencing, as

our overture seeks to make clear—the confusion, suffering, and injustice that always occur where the common ownership of goods is embraced.

As our overture explains, God’s moral law from beginning to end is founded on the principle of rightful ownership—in its various God ordained forms. Children belong to parents (fifth commandment), the life of each person belongs to that person (sixth commandment), spouses belong to each other (seventh commandment), material goods belong to those to whom God has given them (eighth commandment), one’s good name and reputation belong to that individual (ninth commandment)—and these unique rights are so ironclad that even the desire to dispossess someone from that which rightfully belongs to them is sin (tenth commandment).

These principles of morality—these principles of justice—must be defended where they are attacked and must be reestablished where they have been lost.

It is for the purpose of placing this paragraph back into the body of Article 36 that we present this overture, with the hope that doing so will rekindle in us the importance of these life-giving truths—truths that God has entrusted to us—and that we might begin again to bring his answers to a society that is in desperate need of them, pouring out the blessings of God upon all.

II. Overture

The council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, overtures Synod 2024 to return the final paragraph of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession to the body of the text and adjust its language regarding Anabaptists and anarchists as follows:

And on this matter we oppose all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

Grounds:

1. When this paragraph was moved into a footnote in 1985, it was not because synod had determined the content of the paragraph to be unbiblical but because of the inability to come to agreement on how to deal with the controversial language regarding Anabaptists.
2. The biblical content of this paragraph is desperately needed in our day:
 - a. To exhort us regarding our ongoing need to honor the ordained role of civil government in society.
 - b. To remind those in civil government of what their God-ordained role is.
 - c. To awaken us to the destructive effects on society and justice where the “common ownership of goods” is introduced.

- d. To refresh us as to the biblical nature of true justice, grounded in the second table of the law, and its connection to the love of our neighbors.
 - e. To supply us with fresh eyes through which to biblically understand the growing challenges within our society.
 - f. To restore to us the life-giving message for a hurting world that God's common grace provides in societies that are built on his truth.
3. Relegating this paragraph to a footnote implies that we either do not believe its content to be biblical or that we do not believe its content to be essential. The church has made neither of these determinations.
 4. The difficulty of the language regarding Anabaptists should not create an insurmountable barrier to restoring this paragraph to the body of the text where it belongs.

III. Background

The text of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession has frequently been debated. There are two areas that have been of special focus. While this overture relates only to the second of these two areas, some background on both will be helpful.

The first area of concern related to the way the Belgic Confession originally described the proper role of the state, giving the state a role not simply in matters of the public domain but also in relation to the mission of the church. Specifically, it stated, "The government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to the upholding of the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist. . . ." Synods 1910, 1938, and 1958 all judged this statement to be unbiblical, and in 1958 this section was moved into a footnote and replaced with language judged to be more faithful to the biblical testimony on this question.

The second area of concern was last formally addressed at Synod 1985. That year, synod was being asked to approve a new translation of the Belgic Confession. During this process, the question of the objectionable language of Article 36 regarding the Anabaptists was again deliberated. For many years there had been calls for this language to be changed, but with little success. The need to approve a new translation of the confession forced a debate on this question once again. At that time the paragraph in question read,

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

Synod 1983 had already softened the language, substituting, “And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists . . .” for the earlier translation, “For that reason we detest the Anabaptists. . . .” But, as Synod 1985 revisited this phrasing as part of the approval process for a new translation of the confession, even this revision did not seem sufficient. The language of “denouncing” which carried with it a formal ecclesiastical connotation, seemed inappropriate and perhaps (depending on who you asked) not entirely historically accurate. Regardless, the decision was made to move the entire paragraph into a footnote and out of the body of the text.

Here it must be noted that the reasoning for moving this paragraph into a footnote was different from that for the first area of concern referenced above, relating to the relationship between church and state. Here, it was not because the content of the paragraph was judged to be unbiblical—the record, in fact, including overtures, committee reports, etc. on the Article 36 controversy reveals no debate whatsoever on this point—but rather solely because the language related to the Anabaptists seemed harsh, divisive, inaccurate, or inappropriate.

While this compromise may have been sufficient to bring the disputes at Synod 1985 to an end, it has removed from the body of our confession important content that the church is desperately in need of in the days in which we live. Specifically, it has removed content related to the subversion of justice through the introduction of common ownership of goods, and the way in which this serves to corrupt the moral order that God has established among human beings.

The cause of justice is one that the denomination has long made a focus of its energies, and the place of justice here in our confession is critical to our understanding of true justice and to our united voice in promoting it in society.

The phrase “common ownership of goods” refers to the belief that material goods belong not to individuals but, rather, to everyone, “in common.” No one, therefore, has any exclusive right to the possession of any specific thing. Variations on this concept have been practiced by various groups throughout history (some Anabaptists among them), who lived in small communities of common ownership, or as they have been called in more modern times, “communes.” While the injustice of this practice eventually presents itself to those living in these communities, those who live in them do so by choice and can leave whenever they like. As such, the level of injustice they create is limited. However, it is this very same philosophy, the common ownership of goods, that also lies at the heart of communism (and all other Marxist ideologies), which takes an authoritarian approach to forcibly establishing this principle on entire societies. Where this takes root,

the level of injustice that is created in society is extreme.¹ More recently, rather than being forcibly established in a society by armed revolution, the ideology is planted in culture through its institutions: the media, the schools, the churches, etc. This has come to be referred to as Cultural Marxism.²

While the ideology of communism had, of course, not yet been fully developed or articulated (as we know it today) in the days when the Belgic Confession was written, the author of the confession (Guido de Brès) and those who adopted it at numerous national synods of the late 16th century as well as at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19, were familiar with the concept of the common ownership of goods, and they rightly judged it to be immoral and unjust. Indeed, the extensive explanation of the role of civil government in chapter 20 of Calvin's *Institutes*, Book Four, lays out in painstaking detail that the magistrate is ordained by God to rule according to God's moral law, which includes the responsibility to ensure "that every man's property be kept secure . . . [and] that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other . . ." (IV, 20, 3). To embrace common ownership of goods is to deny to men what is due them according to the moral law of God, and to enforce it through civil government is to use civil government for a purpose directly contrary to the reason for which God ordained government.

The biblical basis for this assessment of the common ownership of goods begins with a reflection on the law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments. While the first table of the law governs our relationship to God, the second table governs our relationships with one another. The six commandments of the second table, then, summarize just and right conduct in the relationships between human beings. In each of these six commandments the principle of exclusive right to the possession of some specific thing ("ownership") is both assumed and enshrined, even though the specific type of "ownership" at issue can vary slightly from commandment to commandment. With regard to these things, then, each commandment articulates a God-given right of some type of exclusive possession or ownership to individual persons that must be respected by all others.

The fifth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of parents in the raising and care of their children. While this commandment also governs all other positions of rightful authority, that of parents over their children is primary (as confirmed by Eph. 6:1-3, et al.).

¹ For a comprehensive scholarly recounting of the injustices done through communism during the 20th century, see "The Black Book of Communism," 1999, Harvard College.

² For a helpful explanation of this, see "Cultural Marxism: Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, Emerging Worldviews 4" and "The Overarching Framework: Emerging Worldviews 5" by Glenn Sunshine at breakpoint.org/cultural-marxism-gramsci-and-the-frankfurt-school-emerging-worldviews-4/.

The sixth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of one's life to the individual who has that life. All human beings have the right to the life God has given them (as confirmed by Gen. 9:5-6, et al.).

The seventh commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of one spouse to the other. Each spouse, then, has the exclusive right to the physical intimacy of the other (as confirmed by 1 Cor. 7:1-5, et al.).

The eighth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of possession of material goods to those who rightfully own them. Those who own them have the exclusive right to both possess them and determine how they are used (as confirmed by Acts 5:3-4, et al.).

The ninth commandment recognizes and enshrines the right of every individual to their own good name and reputation (as confirmed by Lev. 19:13-18, et al.).

The tenth commandment serves to underscore and reinforce the seriousness with which God takes the protection of these exclusive rights by declaring that even the *desire* to have what rightfully belongs to our neighbor is sin (as confirmed by Matt. 5:27-30, et al.).

In summary, this enduring foundation of just and moral relationships between human beings (commandments 5-10), from its beginning to its end, requires—even demands—a recognition of rightful, individual ownership of goods and other gifts of God that must not be infringed upon. Of course, there are times when these rights are forfeited by individuals because of their abuse of them, and we do have the responsibility to use these gifts in ways that glorify God. But the fact that these rights can be abused, or not used for the glory of God, does not nullify them or change this foundation of just conduct among men. To serve the cause of justice, we must seek to protect all these things that rightfully belong to us and our neighbors.

But this is far more than simply a quest for the establishment of true justice in society; it is also a quest for mechanisms through which we can most fundamentally love our neighbors as ourselves. When Christ summarizes the law, he does so by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (relating to the first table of the law). "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (relating to the second table of the law). "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40, ESV). In the eyes of God, then, securing true justice by honoring the rightful ownership of the things that belong to my neighbor, as articulated in the second table of the law, is the most basic foundation of loving my neighbor as myself. Said another way, it is impossible for me to love my neighbor if I am not first and foremost honoring and seeking to protect his exclusive right to the gifts God has given him.

Close examination of many of the challenges our society faces reveals that the moral order has, indeed, been corrupted. The fabric of society is being

torn apart. Moreover, as we go from issue to issue, we can see that this corruption of the moral order is being created by an embrace of the concept of common ownership of goods (in its various forms) and the corresponding denial of the exclusive right of ownership as expressed in the second table. Sometimes this is perpetrated by individuals or society itself because man in his sin turns away from God's law. At other times it is perpetrated by the state, or institutions overseen by the state, as the government increasingly adopts a collectivist or Marxist approach to governance.

An exhaustive list and explanation of these is not possible here, but we include three examples for greater understanding and clarity.

The most obvious and direct example of this is retail theft³ (eighth commandment). Retail theft is increasing dramatically in many areas of the country, due both to a diminished recognition on the part of many members of our society regarding the rightful ownership of the property of others, and by the government, in the growing number of states and municipalities that "have raised the threshold of what constitutes a felony, allowing criminals to steal more before being subject to stronger penalties than a misdemeanor."⁴ In many urban centers the proliferation of retail theft, and the violence that increasingly accompanies it, has led to a number of retail stores closing.⁵ This harms both the store owners and the communities they serve. It should be noted as well that the issue of retail theft is only one small aspect of an overall rise in crime that threatens the lives of citizens in many ways, all of which are in direct opposition to the unique principles of rightful ownership embedded in the sixth commandment.

The deterioration of an embrace of rightful ownership articulated in the second table of the law is also increasingly apparent in the various ways that the authority of parents is either denied or ignored by various government entities, including most notably public schools. This is most clearly manifested in the recent developments regarding school policies where a child's decision to transition from one gender to another is kept secret from their parents.⁶ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, which forced

³ The National Retail Federation (NRF) Retail Security Survey 2023 recounts in great detail the dramatic increase in retail theft and the negative effects it is having. As it states in its introduction, "Retail crime, violence, and theft continue to impact the retail industry at unprecedented levels. The effects of these criminal acts are not isolated to large national brands or large metropolitan cities. Daily media reports show that no business is immune, and these issues touch retailers of all segments, sizes, and locations across the United States."

⁴ As stated in a summary of the NRF report at poynter.org/reporting-editing/2022/why-has-shoplifting-been-out-of-control-since-the-pandemic-began/.

⁵ See the NRF Retail Security Survey 2023.

⁶ See "Gender transitions at school spur debate over when, or if, parents are told," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2022; [washingtonpost.com/education/2022/07/18/gender-transition-school-parent-notification/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/07/18/gender-transition-school-parent-notification/).

many children to attend school remotely, also gave parents a clearer understanding of what their children were being taught. Many parents voiced their opposition to things they were hearing. This touched off a nationwide debate regarding parents' rights, leading to the development of things such as the state of Indiana's "Parents Bill of Right" and serving as the central issue in the 2021 Virginia governor's election, among many others. This issue continues to be the focus of fierce debate across the nation, with many lawsuits currently in process.

A third example of the embrace of common ownership of goods is represented by the current crisis unfolding at the southern border of the United States. Inherent in the biblical teaching regarding rightful ownership is that of boundaries. Each commandment in the second table is defined by boundaries. There are boundaries around a parent's children. They have been entrusted to the parent by God, and others are not to seek to take the place of that parent in their lives. Others are not to breach or deny that boundary. There are boundaries around a person's material goods. They have been entrusted to the person by God, and others have no right to breach that boundary, taking any of those goods for themselves. There is a boundary around every marriage, a boundary that no one is to deny or ignore. What we are saying is that justice is inexorably linked to rightful ownership, and rightful ownership is marked by God-ordained boundaries.

Boundaries are necessary not simply to determine what belongs to whom, but also to allow for proper governance over the items that have been entrusted. Where boundaries are not recognized, there is no ability to govern these gifts of God properly, and they do not achieve their intended end. If the rightful ownership God has given me over my children should be denied me, or if others should seek to take my place, I would have no opportunity to properly steward that which God has given, and my children would likely suffer. Likewise, if the rightful ownership of my material goods should be denied me, or if others should seek to take it from me, I would have no opportunity to steward that which God has given me materially, and it would likely be squandered. Where boundaries are honored, those who have responsibility for that which lies within the boundary can properly govern it. More than that, the recognition of their unique ownership often inspires them to take this stewardship more seriously. However, where boundaries are not honored, there can be no proper governance. While many people react negatively to belief in the necessity of borders and their defense, it is the honoring of this boundary that permits the governing of the area within it to be as God would have it. Without honoring this boundary, no proper governance is possible, and much suffering results.

More and more, this is what we are seeing on the southern border of the United States. The boundary is not being honored, not by the millions who are illegally crossing it each year, nor by the government that is ordained to secure it but is failing to do so. This has led to a significant breakdown in

the governance of the places where this is going on. Rather than human flourishing, we see human trafficking.⁷ Rather than the protection of life, we see the increase of death, some from the dangers of the journey,⁸ many thousands of others from the fentanyl and other drugs that flow freely over the border.⁹

These are only three of many current issues our society faces that are created by the embrace of the idea of the common ownership of goods. In all of these situations, those who suffer the most are those who are the most vulnerable: the poor, the weak, the defenseless. The church cannot remain silent about these things. The church must once again speak with clarity into these issues, and the beginning of finding that clarity is to fully embrace that which is articulated so well in the final paragraph of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. Restoring this paragraph to the body of the text will serve as a powerful statement by the church in this regard.

In order to do this, of course, a fitting solution will need to be found regarding the language in the paragraph regarding the Anabaptists. While a number of options are available, and many have been proposed through the years, we recommend the following three-part solution:

1. Instead of the original “detest” or the current “denounce,” that synod avoid any inappropriate or questionable language by substituting the word “oppose.” This word is clear and accurate to the original intention of the paragraph.
2. That synod strike the words, “the Anabaptists, anarchists, and in general.” The truth being articulated in this paragraph is not dependent on the specific mention of the Anabaptists or anyone else. Indeed, in many respects, the historical record on this point is challenged. There is no reason of content that would keep us from removing these words, thus we are not changing the meaning of the text. The Anabaptists and other anarchists are being referenced as an example of the issue being addressed, but they are not the issue being addressed.

The paragraph would then read, “And on this matter we oppose all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.”

⁷ See the *New York Times*, “Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business”; [nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html).

⁸ See CBS News, “At least 853 migrants died crossing the US-Mexico border in past 12 months – a record high”; [cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/).

⁹ See NBC News, “Fentanyl seizures at US southern border rise dramatically”; [nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/fentanyl-seizures-u-s-southern-border-rise-dramatically-n1272676](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/fentanyl-seizures-u-s-southern-border-rise-dramatically-n1272676).

3. That synod place the original language in a footnote with an explanation of having found the language regarding the Anabaptists to be objectionable and unnecessary to the biblical truth being confessed here.

We respectfully submit this overture for the good of the church, the good of society, and the glory of God.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan
Ethan Pawelski, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 15

Reexamine Ecumenical Relations with the Reformed Church in America

I. Initial statement

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to reexamine the ecumenical relationship of the Christian Reformed Church in North America with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) to reflect recent large-scale changes in the RCA and in Christian solidarity with brothers and sisters in congregations who felt obligated to leave the RCA due to practices that do not align with stated positions.

II. Rationale

A. Historical

The CRCNA and RCA share a common heritage. Though after 1857 focus was often placed on the great differences and animosity between these two theological “cousins,” the more recent past has seen a closer working together. On paper, it seemed as if the reasons for any original split were becoming obsolete and irrelevant. This culminated in the so-called “Pella Accord,” a joint resolution made in Synod 2014 in which the RCA and CRC have agreed to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately” (*Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 504).

More recent years, however, have seen significant changes, particularly in the RCA. While the CRCNA has continued to affirm its historical theology and practice regarding human sexuality, inaction in the RCA to defend its stated positions has led a majority of congregations to disaffiliate from the denomination. While the RCA has officially stated positions that align with

those of the CRC, these churches have cited unaddressed *practices* by congregations and classes which do not align with the *positions* of the RCA General Synod that are shared by the CRC.

With the departure of these churches, some of whom had previous RCA-CRC joint affiliation, the RCA of 2024 is no longer the RCA of 2014. If churches leaving the RCA share the official CRCNA position reflected by our Human Sexuality Report approved by Synod 2022, we ought to have grave concern about the character of the RCA that remains.

Thus it is imperative to begin a dialogue about current RCA practices and whether we really are aligned in doctrine and practice.

B. Biblical and theological

The biblical priority of unity drove the CRCNA and RCA to explore greater partnership; however, what is the focus of Christian unity? The biblical focus on love is grounded in truth (Eph. 4:15). Though our churches share common heritage and geography, if the church represents the kingdom of Christ, unity can only be found in common faith.

Commands toward unity in the New Testament letters are balanced out by calls for the church to remain watchful, and perhaps even to separate. In 1 Corinthians 5 a church celebrates its tolerance of a sexually immoral man, only to be admonished by the apostle Paul, who calls for the man to be put out from the church for the sake of his salvation. Throughout 1 John, the apostle John warns the church of the spirit of the antichrist (2:18-27; 4:1-6), going so far in 2 John as to warn believers not to associate or partner with false teachers (vv. 10-11). When our Lord Jesus speaks to the seven churches through John in the book of Revelation, he praises those who reject certain practices (2:6) while he criticizes those who tolerate them (2:14-15).

The spirit of Matthew 18 calls us, then, to approach the RCA directly to ask about their current doctrine and practice as we evaluate whether we are as aligned as churches in communion ought to be. Though Christ's words here speak specifically to individuals, it seems applicable and wise for denominational relationships among the same theological family.

C. Ecclesiastical

Our Ecumenical Charter states, "Unity is intrinsic to the truth of the gospel and to our confession. . . . The unity of the church is a unity in truth, the truth that is Jesus Christ, as revealed in Holy Scripture." While we reach out to people striving for visible oneness in the church, "passion for the truth of Christ calls us to reject all forms of unity that compromise unequivocal witness to Jesus Christ." The present state of the RCA, and our present form of unity with them, may compromise unequivocal witness to Jesus Christ.

As a fellow Reformed denomination, the RCA affirms the Three Forms of Unity (the Reformed confessions). Our primary concern regards a potential

failure to promote and defend two primary areas of our common confession:

1. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 108 and 109—Though on paper the RCA has made several statements that align with the CRC, in practice there have been reports of the ordination of openly practicing homosexual clergy and of clergy solemnizing same-sex marriages without consequence.
2. Belgic Confession, Article 29—This inaction would thus reflect a lack of the “third mark” of the true church: “It practices church discipline for correcting faults.” While the CRCNA must surely examine itself in this area and repent for a lack of discipline correcting many varied sins, the third mark appears to be increasingly missing from the RCA.

D. Practical

In recent years the entire Dakota Classis of the RCA and many RCA congregations throughout Iowa have disaffiliated themselves from the RCA. In many of our communities, we enjoy solid working relationships with these congregations that share our Reformed convictions. Now, however, our Church Order and ecumenical relationships reflect our having a closer relationship to a distant denomination that we no longer recognize than to these church families.

In our area, as well as in others across the denomination, dialogue has been taking place to discern relationships with the Kingdom Network and the Alliance of Reformed Churches. Recent synods have begun the process of seeking greater unity with these brothers and sisters.

As our brothers and sisters in these churches acted out of a stand for biblical truth on matters of scriptural authority and anthropology, it is our obligation as a church in communion to question the current doctrine and practice of the RCA.

III. Overture

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Instruct the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee [EIRC] to communicate with the RCA General Secretary and Commission on Christian Unity on the following points and to report to Synod 2025 regarding responses received:
 1. A desire for shared commitment to our confessional Reformed heritage, doctrine, and practice.
 2. A concern regarding the nature of churches that have disaffiliated with the RCA as being in alignment with CRCNA positions.

3. A request for clarification on the RCA's ongoing commitment in faith and practice to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 108 and 109, specifically as it relates to the forbidding of unchastity, which encompasses homosexual sex.
 4. A request for clarification on whether RCA clergy have been, or are being, permitted to solemnize same-sex marriages, or to themselves remain in same-sex marriages or romantic partnerships, while remaining ministers in good standing.
 5. A request for response before Synod 2025.
- B. Provisionally declare the following decisions of synod to be inoperative, until further review from Synod 2025 (upon receiving further response from the RCA to the above communication):
1. Article 36, B, 9-10 of Synod 2005, regarding the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America (*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 740):
 9. That synod approve the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church of America . . . subject to the additions or amendments to the Church Order (or supplements thereof) as recommended.
 10. That synod propose . . . changes in Church Order Article 8 and its Supplement. . . .
 2. Article 20 of Synod 2014 regarding the Resolution on the Relationship between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 503-4).

That synod adopt the joint resolution prepared for the CRC synod and the General Synod of the RCA.
- C. Provisionally declare Church Order Article 8-b, along with its Supplement, 8, D, to be inoperative until further review from Synod 2025.
- D. Request that Synod 2025 further review the ecumenical status of the Reformed Church in America as a church in communion.
- E. Prohibit CRCNA classes from delegating RCA-ordained ministers or commissioned pastors to future synod meetings until the above decisions and articles in concern again become operative.
- F. Instruct the General Secretary to work with Thrive on developing a plan for how to potentially shepherd pastors and congregations affected by these decisions (i.e., RCA ministers called to CRCNA churches, union churches) for proposal to Synod 2025, while advising them to continue any current arrangements until further notice.

Grounds:

1. With over half of its member congregations leaving, most of whom are in alignment with the CRCNA, the RCA is no longer the same denomination as the one with whom these bonds were formed.
2. Scripture calls for a unity based upon common faith in Jesus Christ, not upon ethnic heritage, historical relationships, or common geography, and for separation from those tolerant of sin—sexual sin in particular.
3. Faithfulness as a church in communion requires encouragement toward faithful statements and faithful practices related to our common Reformed confession, especially regarding RCA clergy, who are permitted to seek a call in CRCNA congregations.
4. The presence of delegates ordained in the RCA at synod meetings deliberating on the CRC's relationship to the RCA presents an obvious conflict of interest.
5. Since many congregations disaffiliating with the RCA align with the CRC position on human sexuality, we act out of solidarity with them and out of grave concern for the denomination they have left.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 16

Solicit Resources for LGBTQ Ministry from the Churches

I. Background

Synod 2023 reaffirmed the decision of Synod 2022 that “unchastity” includes “homosexual sex.” This effectively precludes the possibility of gay marriage and makes celibacy a requirement for lesbian and gay people (unless they decide to pursue a heterosexual marriage). Synod 2023 also urged congregations to be “places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023). Thus our congregations must find a way to be places of belonging for LGBTQ members and attendees while maintaining the CRC position on homosexuality.

Some congregations have chosen to become places of belonging for LGBTQ people while defying the CRC's position on homosexuality. We have had less opportunity to hear from congregations who have become places of belonging for LGBTQ people while maintaining the CRC's position on homosexuality. Given Synod 2023's reaffirmation of the decisions of Synod 2022, it is time for churches to have this opportunity.

II. Overture

- A. We overture synod to solicit resources and tools for LGBTQ ministry from Christian Reformed churches who are in agreement with the

CRC's position on homosexuality. We ask that an email go out from the Office of General Secretary to the stated clerks of every CRC classis requesting that any church that is *both* faithful to the CRC's position on homosexuality *and* has a thriving and successful ministry to LGBTQ people (or simply has a representational percentage of LGBTQ members who feel a sense of belonging in their congregation) share pertinent information about their ministry (or their strategies for inclusion). The resources shared should be collected in one place, easily accessible to all interested CRC congregations.

Grounds:

- a. CRC congregations are clearly in need of such information and resources.
 - b. Synod 2023 adopted the following recommendation: "That synod direct the Office of General Secretary to develop resources and tools, or endorse existing external resources and tools, that align with our Reformed doctrinal standards (as articulated in previous synodical decisions), to equip congregations for pastoral ministry with and to our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023). No recommendation was made, however, to endorse *internal* resources and tools that have proven successful.
 - c. Developing new resources and tools will take extended time and energy; endorsing external ones, although helpful, comes with no guarantee that they will fit the needs of CRC congregations. It makes sense to seek first resources that are already available and being employed in our churches. This overture does not intend to preclude the Office of General Secretary from taking any other course of action it deems fit in following the synodical recommendation, but merely offers a simple way to collect resources and tools that are in alignment with our standards and have already proven successful in our churches.
 - d. A top-down approach is unlikely to be as effective as a grassroots approach. Even if the precise nature of a particular ministry cannot be replicated from one congregation to another, specific ideas for ministry, when shared, can be adapted by leaders to different ministry contexts.
 - e. Such a strategy (emailing stated clerks to solicit information) would not be taxing for the Office of General Secretary but has the potential to elicit a significant return from those churches who are doing effective ministry with LGBTQ people within the bounds of CRC orthodoxy.
- B. If no such resources become available within a year, we ask that a report be made to that effect to Synod 2025. In such an eventuality, we further

ask that Synod 2025 recommend that the Office of General Secretary explore whether it is feasible to continue to ask CRC congregations to be places of belonging for LGBTQ members in the present context.

Grounds:

- a. Churches should be made aware of the follow-up and outcomes to synodical recommendations.
- b. Fifty years have passed since CRC synods began instructing congregations to welcome and care for LGBTQ members in response to the 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 609-33). If no resources or tools for doing so have arisen naturally or found success within CRC congregations in alignment with the denominational position during this time, it is likely that there are underlying reasons for this. It seems wise to consider and address those reasons before pushing ahead with top-down initiatives, lest we set congregations up to fail.
- c. A time-bound plan with built-in accountability and analysis will help to stop our historic pattern of doing harm to LGBTQ people even while repeated calls are made to be welcoming, and this will show consideration for our LGBTQ members who have already been waiting a long time for the recommendations of the 1973 report to be implemented.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the October 5, 2023, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 17

Articulate What Is Expected of Confessing Members When Agreeing with the Confessions

I. Background

At a profession of faith or infant baptism, the candidate(s) or parents are presented, in one form or another, statements and questions like these:

I ask you before God and Christ's church . . . to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church. . . .

- Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God revealing Christ and his redemption, and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation? . . .

- Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, accept its teaching, and participate in its worship, fellowship, and mission? . . .
- Do you promise to accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love. . .

(Form for the Public Profession of Faith, 2016)

While a literal reading of the vow regarding the confessions of the church would suggest that the person has a personal conviction affirming each of the doctrines contained in the confessions, the vow to *accept* the teaching of the church and its spiritual guidance suggests there is more than one way to understand what it means for a subscriber to commit to the teachings of the church.

Synod 1975 noted that “Full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601). But Synod 2023 also heard through a communication from Classis Holland,

. . . in the CRCNA we have very high standards of confessional agreement for both officebearers and members, with the only real difference being differing degrees of responsibility for the teaching, defense, and promotion of our confessional standards. . . . While we believe that the church’s ordained offices should continue to be held to the high confessional standards spelled out in the Covenant for Officebearers, we suggest that perhaps it is time . . . to make some careful distinctions in our confessional expectations for members. We do not pretend to have charted a way forward here, but we urge synod to consider this.

(*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 604)

Following Synod 2022’s clarification on the interpretation of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and that this interpretation has confessional status (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922), a practical question for councils and pastors is whether one needs to agree with this interpretation to make a public profession of faith, to present their child for baptism, or even to retain membership in their local congregation. While the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has raised this question, it is a question that ought to apply to every article of belief in our confessions.

II. Overture

I request that synod offer the following advice to churches regarding how the confessions and their interpretations apply to nonofficebearer confessing members in light of the vows made at a public profession of faith:

- A. When members vow to “accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love,” they are entrusting themselves to the congregation they are joining and the way in which it is led.

- B. On matters of doctrine that are contained in the creeds and confessions of the church, teaching them as accurately reflecting Christ and his revelation in the Bible is the desire and goal of the church's teaching and instruction.
- C. All who can "accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love" and accept the standards by which the church will teach them are encouraged to make public profession of faith, present their children for baptism, and exercise their right to vote at congregational meetings.

Grounds:

- 1. In distinction from officebearers, confessing members are not asked to renounce every teaching that disagrees with the church's confessions.
- 2. To expect "full agreement with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601) exacerbates the issue experienced in the church that we have little-to-no expectation for further discipleship beyond one's profession of faith.
- 3. This clarifies what members promise when they vow to "accept the spiritual guidance of the church." The spiritual guidance of the church includes the positions and pastoral advice which are "settled and binding" on congregations and their officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).
- 4. There is a difference in what is expected of confessing members compared to what is expected of officebearers when affirming the confessions of the church as accurately reflecting the revelation of Scripture. As Synod 1976 heard in the report regarding Revision of the Form of Subscription, "... since the Form of Subscription is the instrument by which the church regulates the official conduct of the officebearers, it is not the instrument by which the church regulates the actions of the membership of the church in general" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 578).

Pastor of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
Rev. Andrew Aukema

Note: This overture was submitted to the Council of Inglewood CRC but was not adopted. It was then submitted to the March 8-9, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

Appoint a Task Force to Review the Covenant for Officebearers

I. Introduction

Classis Eastern Canada overtures synod to appoint a task force to review the Covenant for Officebearers and the related Article 5 in the Church Order, and to provide Synod 2025 with analysis and recommendations to address the following concerns:

1. Greater clarity about the distinctions and relationship between confessions and interpretations of specific provisions in a confession as requirements for membership and/or serving in any positions of leadership, and greater clarity about implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers at all levels of church assemblies.
2. Greater clarity and respect for the role and authority of the local church to deliberate together and provide guidance in the application of specific provisions in the confessions in specific situations in local contexts.
3. Greater respect for thoughtful and conscientious decision-making when such decisions are made in prayerful, Spirit-led sincerity before God and in dialogue with the church community.

II. Background

Classis Eastern Canada has community churches that include members who identify as, or who have family members or close friends who identify as, LGBTQ+ persons. We recognize we have not always ministered well with these members and, in the past few years, synodical decisions have made it more challenging. We have engaged in learning, prayer-filled dialogue, and reflection on what God is calling us to do as partners in God's mission in our particular context. We have also actively engaged in the discernment processes within the CRCNA, including overtures asking for more time and prevention of harm that were supported and forwarded to synod in both 2022 and 2023. This overture names other elements in a continuing process of prayerful discernment as committed members of both Classes Eastern Canada and the CRCNA.

As part of this journey, especially after the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 regarding human sexuality, we have struggled with what it means to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, the role of gravamina, and living up to our calling to be part of God's mission in our community, as we discern that. We are also alert to and engaged with members of other Christian Reformed churches who are struggling with similar tensions and who anticipate the possible impacts of further decisions at Synod 2024 about enforcement through the Covenant for Officebearers. It is timely to ask for greater

clarity with regard to the Covenant for Officebearers and its role in CRC churches.

This matter is important for other issues as well as this one that will create tensions in our covenantal relationships in the future. Beyond sexuality, the current moment is fostering high levels of confusion and anxiety about the way we make decisions together and work together in a community that takes covenantal relationships seriously, as well as the recognition of differences in interpretations of specific biblical passages and the implications of some of our long-standing doctrines. It also highlights tensions between calls to unity and respect for diversity.

For this reason, we submit a plea to take time for careful consideration and more clear articulation of essential, relevant elements of Reformed polity as they relate to implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers and related articles in the Church Order, both in the current context and for the future health of our churches. Taking time to do this work now will contribute to restored confidence in the quality of our decision-making processes and will help to foster and maintain unity within the denomination.

Grounds:

1. Regarding synodical decisions, interpretation of the confessions, and implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers
 - a. More clarity is needed to consistently apply the wise guidance from Synod 1975 that “no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). Specifically, decisions of synod (pronouncements) are considered “settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Church Order Art. 29). However, “While synodical decisions are ‘settled and binding,’ subscription to synodical decisions is not required” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601). In many ways, the declarations of synod in 2022 and 2023 on human sexuality (specifically related to the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108) blur the lines between the two. This compromises the clear distinction that Synod 1975 described.
 - b. The Church Order states, “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” (Supplement, Article 5, A, 3). The Church Order recognizes a healthy tension between the role of individuals, local churches, and larger assemblies in discernment of the implications of our confessions. Individuals, who may not decide for themselves what doctrines are covered by the confessions, are to seek decisions of the assemblies and acquiesce with

them; those assemblies include councils and classes as well as synods (Art. 26), who themselves are bound together in covenant relationships under God. In the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023, greater clarity is needed to manage this tension well to have a healthy church at all levels.

- c. The Covenant for Officebearers was designed to encourage, not discourage theological discussion (see *Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 623; *Agenda for Synod 2008*, p. 247; *Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 735; *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 67-70, 550-91). The way the Covenant for Officebearers is being used in the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023 is shutting down discussion instead of encouraging it. This is a consequence, intended or not intended, of giving one interpretation of one provision by one synod “*status confessionis*.” Greater clarity is needed to fulfill the purpose of the Covenant for Officebearers to encourage theological discussion of challenging issues.
- d. A covenant relationship, such as that espoused in the Covenant for Officebearers, requires greater attention to how decisions are made and the impacts for all parties in the covenant relationship. Covenant relationships, different from contracts or hierarchical control, include deep respect for the calling of each party before God and ensuring that decisions serve the well-being of the other party. Covenantal commitments made in baptism, for example, are relevant for how a local church council deals with persons who later identify as LGBTQ+. Walking in covenant relationship also has implications for relationships between local churches when one of them, as a result of careful discernment, feels called by God to follow a different Reformed interpretation than the one endorsed by a particular synod. More consideration of the implications of the important Reformed teachings on covenant for the management of tensions in particular areas would likely lead to more nuanced guidance to maintain relationships in spite of differences in interpretation.
- e. Greater clarity on the relationships between synodical decisions and the confessions is relevant for many issues, not just those in the Human Sexuality Report. The lack of clarity contributes to inconsistencies between the way different synodical decisions on interpretations of confessions are implemented in the life of individual churches and a significant erosion of trust in the quality of deliberations and decision-making processes within our denomination. Greater clarity is important for leaders at all levels of the church who are engaged in discussions and decision-making related to confessions. Leaders serve in the context of a growing range of ethical issues that engage church members and various interpretations of many individual provisions within the confessions that are consistent with Reformed approaches to exegesis and hermeneutics.

2. Regarding the role and authority of the local church
 - a. The local church plays a primary role in CRC church polity, especially in areas such as pastoral care, discipling, faith formation, and deciding who serves in ordained offices. Synod has also recognized that the local council is the most appropriate place for decision making in complex pastoral situations (e.g., Synod 1980's decisions in relation to marriage and divorce). The CRC has practiced a healthy tension that balances respect for the authority of the local church and the delegated and limited authority of synods to act in the best interests of all churches. The decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 gave very little consideration to the impacts of their decisions for local churches, and, in doing so, have created difficulties that could be avoided with greater clarity and respect for the traditional role of local churches in Reformed polity.
 - b. The Covenant for Officebearers should "enhance the faithful ministry of the local church" (*Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 623). The way it is being used in the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023 is hindering the work of many local churches, including Kanata Community CRC in Ottawa, Ontario. Greater respect for the authority of local churches could also assist in maintaining unity within the CRCNA.
 - c. An important principle in covenant relationships is the concept of one church or officebearer not lording it over another, as expressed in Church Order Article 85. Requests to sign the Covenant for Officebearers should not be weaponized by one member against other members or by one church against the delegates of another church to one of the higher assemblies; nor should it be used by one church to diminish valuable pastoral work being carried out by another local church. While technically Article 85 may have more limited application, the general principle seems relevant for the current struggle. More careful articulation of it might assist in finding more healthy ways to maintain covenantal unity on core beliefs while respecting some diversity in the implementation of specific provisions in the confessions.
3. Regarding conscientious decisions made in prayerful, Spirit-led sincerity before God and in dialogue with the church
 - a. A valued feature of our Reformed approach to life is developing and exercising robust capacities for individual conscientious decision making, along with discernment in local community. In keeping with the strong focus on conscience and Christian freedom in John Calvin's teachings (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, chap. 19), Reformed branches of Christianity have paid a lot of attention to a core teaching that the church should not bind the consciences of its members any more than what is absolutely essential in Scripture.

- b. Recent decisions by synod raise questions about the level of respect for carefully considered conscientious decisions that people make before God, with prayer for the leading of the Holy Spirit and in community. In our congregation, for example, faithful members in every respect have given well-developed reasons why they cannot in good conscience act in accordance with the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 relating to human sexuality. This includes members who have direct experience with the matters involved, persons who provide counseling services as Christians and professionals, and persons who are called and engaged in public witness about specific related matters (e.g., the just treatment of intersex children in Canada). We do not think it is necessary for such members to make a choice between participation in their church and integrity in work that clearly contributes to God's mission in our community.
- c. The gravamen process was not developed as a mechanism to show respect for conscientious decisions. It is a process for settling theological disputes (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 68-70). Its inadequacy to deal with the matter of conscientious decisions is reflected in the many questions being asked about it, including overtures held over from Synod 2023 for consideration at Synod 2024. Greater respect for conscientious decision-making might lead to consideration of a different mechanism or significant modification of the current processes for gravamina.
- d. Respect for conscientious decision making relates to many areas of Christian life. A review of CRC history reveals an uneven pattern on different issues, but it leans toward greater recognition for individual conscientious decisions. For example, dancing and card playing were prohibited at one time but were later treated as matters for conscientious decision making. In 2006 synod decided to recognize conscientious objections to a particular war, a modification of earlier just-war teaching that did not permit support for persons with conscientious objections to war and military service (see *Acts of Synod 2006*, pp. 670-75). In the area of human sexuality, decisions about marriage and divorce in 1980 showed strong respect for the need to allow conscientious decisions in individual cases, with the local church providing pastoral care and guidance (see *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 484-85). Different conscientious decisions about financial stewardship within a congregation do not lead to removal from office or church membership, even though the Bible has much more to say about the use of wealth than it does about homosexuality.
- e. The contemporary context for Christians and churches requires nurturing the development of a robust capacity for the exercise of moral agency and conscientious living, especially in the Canadian context. Careful consideration and incorporation of guidance on this matter

for the way we make and enforce decisions on ethical issues would serve well for upcoming issues and the future of the church's witness in Canadian society.

Classis Eastern Canada
B. Bernard Bakker, stated clerk

OVERTURE 19

Require that Synod Delegates Re-Sign the Covenant for Officebearers

Throughout the years of its history the CRCNA has always been a confessional denomination that wholeheartedly embraces the Three Forms of Unity and its confessional declarations as fully agreeing with the Word of God.

Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 to require that every delegate of Synod 2024 and all future synods be required to re-sign the Covenant for Officebearers, understanding the following:

- In signing this covenant, all officers are vowing before God that they heartily believe and fully affirm, without reservation, the confessions and anything synod has deemed to have confessional status.
- Those who cannot fully affirm this statement will not be seated as delegates.

Grounds:

1. At this pivotal moment in the history of our denomination that will determine the trajectory of its future, we must ensure that we are fully unified around what we believe for the sake of the mission and gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. This rightly puts full subscription to the confessions onto the hearts and minds of officebearers as they carry out the important work of synod.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Disclose Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina During Roll Call; Seek Classis Nominations for Parliamentarian

Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to implement the following changes to its format:

1. Instruct all delegates to disclose any current confessional-difficulty gravamina during the roll call.

Grounds:

- a. The Church Order Supplement does not ordinarily compel officers to make their gravamina known beyond their own council, but neither does it grant the right of secrecy to those who submit gravamina—especially not to those who allow themselves to be delegated to synod.
 - b. The Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America specifies that delegates be “in full agreement with what the congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America confess.” In that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is an instrument “in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5), a delegate who has filed a gravamen is not in full agreement with what the church confesses.
 - c. Gravamina are considered matters legally before synod (Rules for Synodical Procedure, V, B, 1).
2. Instruct future Program Committees of synod to seek nominations from the classes for a synodical parliamentarian prior to making their appointment.

Ground:

The synodical rules only state that this position “*could be* filled by the faculty advisor for church polity,” not that it *must be* (Rules for Synodical Procedure, III, B, 2, h).

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 21

First Order of Business for Synod 2024

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to “lay directly before synod” Advisory Committee Reports 8D and 8E from Synod 2023 as the first order of business.

Grounds:

1. This arrangement is allowed by the Rules for Synodical Procedure, VI, A, 2, b.
2. These reports and their corresponding overtures have already been reviewed by a synodical advisory committee in 2023.
3. Synod 2023 ended in an unprecedented way, and synod did a great disservice to the delegates by not completing the work they were sent there to do at great personal cost. The officers of Synod 2024 should take this action, even if unprecedented, in order to honor the work of the Committee 8 majority by immediately taking up their recommendations.
4. The outcome of synod's decision on these reports will have significant bearing on both the long- and short-term trajectory of the CRCNA. In order to do their work well, the Synod 2024 advisory committees need to know this direction before convening.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 22

Clarify the Nature and Use of Gravamina, Building on Forwarded Report from Synod 2023

I. Background

In an unusual move, significant portions of the work done by Synod 2023's Advisory Committee 8 were forwarded to Synod 2024.¹ Only one minority report emerged from this committee, which was tasked with addressing many difficult topics. As noted in the introduction to their majority report, the entire advisory committee was even in agreement regarding many of the recommendations in that report.² This overture will build on their work as it pertains to the nature and use of a confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG), which divided Synod 2023's Advisory Committee 8, producing the majority and minority reports.

¹ *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1033-37 (Art. 80).

² *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033 (Art. 80).

There is no need to restate the background summaries articulated in the introduction to Advisory Committee 8's majority report as well as the unaddressed overtures deferred to Synod 2024, especially Overtures 49 and 50.³ The purpose of this overture assumes that background and is intended to build on the recommendations made in the forwarded majority report of Advisory Committee 8. The benefit of having more time to reflect on their work is that it allows us the opportunity to articulate their recommendations with greater clarity, address areas they may have overlooked, and even answer more potential objections. The following overture will reiterate many of the recommendations from Advisory Committee 8's majority report while hopefully clarifying and fortifying their efforts.

This overture seeks to make clear and explicit the timeline to resolve a CDG provided in Advisory Committee 8's majority report. Some believed their timeline to resolve a gravamen was *only* six months, when, in fact, it was much longer. Since the goals are to restore officebearers and reform our doctrine according to the Word of God, there must be enough time to achieve those goals while also maintaining those doctrinal boundaries that locate us within the larger body of Christ.

This overture also seeks to clarify that CDGs are for active officebearers only.

Church members and those training for the office of elder, deacon, or even to become ministers of the Word are not required to sign the Covenant for Officebearers. Prior to ordination a person possesses greater freedom to examine and struggle with doctrine. It is also much less consequential for them to do so.

God's Word also points to this truth in 1 Timothy 3:6, as it instructs that an "overseer" is not to be a "recent convert" but, rather, should possess a mature faith. So it is our officebearers who are called to "heartily believe . . . promote and defend [our] doctrines faithfully . . ." (Covenant for Officebearers; Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).

An officebearer who submits a CDG must continue to promote and defend the doctrines set forth in our standards. Therefore, this overture also seeks better to answer the question "What does it look like to not teach against our doctrines?" Consequently, that language has been adjusted, and a provision about being delegated to classis or synod with a current CDG has been added.

Finally, Advisory Committee 8's majority report was still unclear about what it means for an assembly to examine and judge a gravamen. Therefore, this overture seeks to clarify that definition as well.

³ *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 522-34 (Overtures 49-50).

II. Overture

Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2024 to accept recommendations 2-8 from Advisory Committee 8's forwarded majority report to Synod 2023 (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1034-36) with the following addenda and clarifications to recommendations 2-5 (presented as A-D below):

- A. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the proper use of a CDG and provide a timeline for its process (changes are underlined). (*Note: Additional changes by Classis Zeeland to the recommendations of Advisory Committee 8's majority report [Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 1034-36] and/or to the Church Order Supplement are indicated by ~~striketrough~~ and **bold underline**.*)
1. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1
 1. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a ~~temporary~~ gravamen in which ~~a subscriber~~ **an officebearer, subsequent to their ordination, develops and then** expresses ~~a~~ personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 2
 2. A *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which ~~a subscriber~~ **an officebearer** makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
 3. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1
 1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers **for the first time, or who has signed it in the past**, affirms **and continues to affirm** without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. "Without reservation" means that the CRC does not allow gravamina as exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.
 4. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, by adding a new point 2 [the current point 2 would become point 3]:
 2. Examination and judgment of a confessional-difficulty gravamen includes determining the extent and nature of the gravamen in question and providing an officebearer the information and/or clarification being sought. Additionally, examination and judgment would include discerning whether an officebearer has a sincere difficulty or a settled conviction better served by resignation or by filing a confessional-revision gravamen.
 5. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, by adding a point ~~34~~:
 - ~~34~~. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen* is a personal request for help in resolving ~~a subscriber's~~ **an officebearer's** doubts about a doc-

trine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber'san officebearer's settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriberan officebearer from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

Grounds:

- a. There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing a subscriberan officebearer to take an exception to the standards. Officebearers are expected to hold to the standards without reservation upon becoming officebearers. The purpose of a CDG is to address a personal difficulty that may develop after becoming an officebearer, since one would need to violate the ninth commandment in order to sign the Covenant for Officebearers while harboring a confessional difficulty. One of the purposes of ministerial training is to struggle with doctrines in order to determine to which part of the larger body of Christ one belongs. Part of becoming qualified to hold an ecclesiastical office within the CRC is aligning oneself with the doctrines that locate us within the larger body of Christ. Therefore, it is expected and good for those training for office to struggle with the CRC's doctrines and to have resolved those struggles prior to ordination.
 - b. There is confusion as to what it means to examine and judge a confessional-difficulty gravamen.
 - c. There is already a provision in place to revise the confessions if they are found to be in error. If one believes a doctrine is in error, one may file a confessional-revision gravamen, making the case to the broader body. The purpose of a CDG is to express and then work through a difficulty. It is not to be used as a means of holding an unresolved difficulty in perpetuity.
 - d. Although the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.
- B. That synod approve the following process for a CDG:
1. During the time the officebearer has a CDG, the individual must teach, act, **counsel**, promote, defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately while the gravamen is still unresolved, and the individual must diligently work toward resolving their confessional difficulty. This may require recusing oneself from council and/or consistory discussions, or possibly even taking a leave of absence.

2. An officebearer with an unresolved CDG may not be delegated to classis or synod.
3. Classis credentials shall include the line "Number of active confessional-difficulty gravamen/gravamina in council: "
4. ~~Based on the process laid out in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 1~~ stipulates that a gravamen is first filed with an officebearer's council for examination and judgment. If the council is not able to judge the matter, the council will submit the matter to classis and then to synod if necessary. The council and the classis shall have a minimum of six months each to judge the matter before submitting the gravamen to the next higher assembly. Therefore, a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, *whichever is greater* [added bold italics], to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, *whichever is greater* [added bold/italics], to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. In most cases this process would provide approximately two years before a CDG would arrive at synod. If the CDG appears before synod, synod's decision will be binding and the ~~subscriber~~officebearer will have until the end of that calendar year to either (1) affirm the standards, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office.
5. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of the CDG process.

Grounds:

- a. It is necessary to have a delineated process that guides churches, classes, and synod according to the purposes of gravamina.
- b. This process provides time for an officebearer to resolve their difficulty while maintaining the doctrinal integrity that locates us within the larger body of Christ. The purpose of this process is to restore an officebearer to doctrinal unity or reveal where our standards may be in error. This process may also reveal that an officebearer is doctrinally located elsewhere in the larger body of Christ, or possibly outside of the body of Christ.
- c. This process allows officebearers to work through a doctrinal difficulty that develops after ordination while not violating the third or the ninth commandments by preventing them from committing to the Covenant for Officebearers at higher assemblies.
- d. Asking councils to divulge the number of active confessional-difficulty gravamen/gravamina maintains the pastoral and personal

nature of a gravamen while allowing for transparency and accountability, since the nature of the gravamen and the person filing it need not be disclosed.

- C. Since synod has already ~~made a judgment regarding~~ **examined and judged** the definition of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, that synod instruct those who have submitted a CDG with respect to the definition of “unchastity” to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of ~~2023~~**2024**. This would also include, if applicable, their resigning from their position(s) in broader assemblies, boards, or committees, **including the COD.**

Grounds:

- ~~1. The process explained above has already happened in part during 2022-2023.~~
 12. The decision regarding the definition of “unchastity” has already been examined and judged by Synod 2022 **and Synod 2023**. Therefore, the above ~~amendment and CDG~~ timeline **do not apply** **has already taken place.**
 23. There is no need to file a confessional-revision gravamen unless new grounds are provided, since ~~s~~Synod **2023** has **already reaffirmed the confessional** definition of “unchastity,” as **it is now** settled and binding.
- D. That synod instruct councils to begin special discipline of officebearers who are suspended from office at the end of ~~2023~~**2024** if they refuse to ~~adhere to~~**affirm** the definition of “unchastity” reflected in the standards.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements state the appropriateness and process for the special discipline of officebearers.
2. “Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct” (Church Order Art. 83).
3. ~~Not adhering to~~**affirming** the definition of “unchastity” reflected in the standards is a serious deviation from sound doctrine.

Classis Zeeland
Ronald Meyer, stated clerk

Limited Suspension

I. Background

Synod 1973 adopted a position on homosexuality stating, “Homosexuality— as explicit homosexual practice—must be condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 52).

Synod 2004 reviewed the case of First CRC of Toronto, Ontario, which had communicated its openness to ordaining practicing homosexuals as office-bearers in a letter to the entire classis. Synod 2004 instructed Classis Toronto “to investigate the allegations made in the appeal and the overtures . . . and . . . to urge First CRC to act in accordance with the guidelines of the [1973 and 2002] reports” (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 632). Synod 2005 appointed a committee *in loco* to investigate. The committee reported to Synod 2006 that First CRC, Toronto, had apologized for its earlier decision (*Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 455-62). Synod 2006 adopted a recommendation to “encourage Classis Toronto to continue to provide support to First Toronto CRC in their efforts ‘to tailor its ministry’ according to denominational guidelines for same-gender relationships and to provide accountability as they do so” (*Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 653).

In 2020, Neland Avenue CRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan, ordained a deacon living in a same-sex marriage.¹ Communications to Neland Avenue CRC urged them to reconsider (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 463ff) and communications to Classis Grand Rapids East urged accountability (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 468-74). Neland Avenue responded, “Scripture not only permits us, but calls us to the decision we have made” (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 467). Classis Grand Rapids East took no action.

Synod 2022 voted to “instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage” and appointed a committee *in loco* to meet with Neland Avenue “to oversee its compliance to synod’s rulings” as well as to “meet with Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish them regarding their responsibility to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 926, 941).

The *in loco* committee reported that keeping covenant is “essential” and that Neland Avenue CRC’s actions constituted “a breaking of covenant.” Neland Avenue had no “appreciation of how its decisions and actions might deeply affect the wider CRCNA” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 321-22). Meanwhile,

¹ calvinchimes.org/2020/09/10/local-crc-appoints-deacon-who-is-in-same-sex-marriage; thebanner.org/news/2020/09/woman-in-same-sex-marriage-installed-as-deacon/

the All One Body website announced 11 CRC congregations have official policies in violation with the CRC decisions about “unchastity.”²

Synod 2023 repeated its instruction to Neland Avenue CRC to rescind decisions about ordaining officebearers in violation of our shared denominational covenants. Additionally, synod voted to “instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to guide the Neland Avenue CRC congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1027). Synod 2023 also voted to “instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” through the work of their church visitors (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

The festering conflict over sexuality and unchastity must be resolved. The matter of unchastity is not optional but critical to the life of a believer and the life of believers together in Christ (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87; Eph. 5:3).

Having different standards of what constitutes unchastity among believers in covenant together is untenable at best (Amos 3:3) and sinful at worst (1 Cor. 5). On the one hand, those who reject instruction on sexual immorality do not reject mortals but God (1 Thess. 4:2-8). Likewise, those who do not love a fellow brother or sister do not know God (1 John 4:8), and to hate while professing to love God is to lie (1 John 4:20). When some in the same covenant of believers are considered to be rejecting God and others to be hating fellow believers, there can be no unity. From either side of this controversy, light and darkness cannot have fellowship (2 Cor. 6:14).

The list of denominations that have attempted to hold conflicting views together is long. The Episcopal Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Mennonite Church USA, Church of the Brethren, United Methodist Church, and Reformed Church in America have all attempted to keep everyone together despite differences on unchastity. Each one has faced a major split and tremendous upheaval of budgets, staff cuts, and structural reorganization.

Meanwhile, the LGBTQ community is being greatly harmed. This is the case regardless of where one stands. Whether by being told they are sinning when they ought to celebrate, or by being told to celebrate sin, the ongoing conflicts are being borne on the backs of those who need our care the most.

² PDF found on the home page of allonebody.org (allonebody.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Compilation_Affirming_Church_Model_Statements.pdf) as of 11/29/2023. Those congregations included Eastern Ave. CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alta.; First Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.; First Christian Reformed Church, Toronto, Ont.; Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Loop CRC, Chicago, Ill.; Meadowvale CRC, Mississauga, Ont.; Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Sherman Street CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; The Road Church, Calgary, Alta.; Washington, D.C., Christian Reformed Church.

The harm is inevitable unless we as a denomination can move forward from this conflict, coordinate our efforts, and not have congregations undermining one another.

This being the situation, the CRCNA has two options. We can do loving discipline with those who err and move forward, or we can walk the path of seven other denominations that has proved to be disastrous.

Moreover, if the CRCNA withholds action on flagrant violations of covenant, it will set precedent for other acts of defiance to undermine our shared life together. If synod refuses to discipline when congregations break covenant on sexuality, how will synod respond if a congregation breaks covenant by embracing kinism or white nationalism? When covenant is broken, disciplinary action is required, or our covenant will not have integrity.

II. Overture

Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Instruct all classes to place councils and officebearers that publicly refuse to comply with the CRC views on “unchastity” in word or life on limited suspension.
- B. That synod define limited suspension to include loss of all privileges at broader assemblies, on denominational boards, and on the Council of Delegates. Councils and officebearers that demonstrate repentance shall be welcomed back into full covenant fellowship.
- C. That synod instruct all classes to compile a list of councils and individual officebearers on limited suspension and report to the Office of General Secretary. The list shall be made available to a classis or congregation within the CRCNA upon request, via the Office of General Secretary.

Grounds:

- 1. Councils and individuals who wish to remain in covenant with the CRCNA must follow the expectations of our shared covenant or lose privileges of the covenant.
- 2. The big-tent attempt to include conflicting views has failed in many denominations.
- 3. All CRCNA officebearers have signed the Covenant for Officebearers, which states, “If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views,” and “We promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.”
- 4. Synod has twice practiced admonishment and instruction for those who reject church teachings on “unchastity.”
- 5. Both Scripture and synod have been clear on “unchastity.”

Classis Zeeland
Rev. Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

Clarify Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84**Overture**

Classis Atlantic Northeast overtures Synod 2024 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America to add the following statement to the Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84:

Special Discipline by Broader Assemblies

While councils have the original authority to impose special discipline, broader assemblies may apply special discipline in extraordinary circumstances using the following procedures:

a. Appeals of Decisions Not to Apply Discipline to Individual Officebearers

When a member of a congregation appeals a council's decision to its classis, or a council appeals a classis' decision to synod, the broader assembly must follow the process for appeals according to Article 30.

b. Suspension of an Entire Council by a Broader Assembly

- 1) A broader assembly may suspend an entire council from office, with corresponding administrative leave, only when
 - a) the broader assembly has issued an instruction specific to that council regarding a violation of the Covenant for Officebearers, neglect or abuse of office, or a deviation from sound doctrine and godly conduct,
 - b) the council has neglected for at least one year to comply with the instruction from the assembly, and
 - c) the council is not proceeding through the process of disaffiliation according to Article 38-f.
- 2) Upon voting to suspend the council, the assembly shall revert the congregation to unorganized status and place that congregation under the care of a neighboring council, designated by the broader assembly that imposed the suspension.
- 3) In order that the congregation may be returned to organized status, when possible, in a timely manner, the neighboring council shall
 - a) investigate allegations and apply special discipline as necessary, and
 - b) assist the congregation in electing and calling new council members as necessary.

Grounds:

1. There is significant confusion about the process that classes should use when efforts fail to guide councils into compliance (see “Classes, Churches Taking Differing Actions on Human Sexuality Decisions within CRCNA,” *The Banner*, Dec. 29, 2023).
2. The right of broader assemblies to apply special discipline has long been recognized in CRC polity (Grand Rapids, 1861; Zeeland, 1864; Sioux Center, 1921; Grand Rapids, 1924; Classis Huron, 1980; Classis Lake Erie, 1991 — as cited in Henry De Moor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Faith Alive, 2020), p. 423). Since the procedures followed in those cases may not always have been consistent, a clarifying supplement to the Church Order would be valuable.
3. These procedures ensure that members in good standing of congregations with erring councils are properly cared for and are not effectively excommunicated by a broader assembly ejecting an entire congregation from the denomination for the errors of its officebearers.
4. These procedures ensure that a broader assembly’s suspension of an entire council cannot be used to thwart a congregation’s decision to disaffiliate from the denomination.
5. The contents of this supplement do not amount to substantial alterations to the Church Order and are, likewise, appropriately included in the Supplement for the following reasons:
 - a. Articles 82-84 do not specify which assemblies may or may not apply special discipline, and the history of special discipline applied by broader assemblies in the CRC indicates that such actions are neither novel nor inconsistent with the intent of the Church Order.
 - b. The procedures outlined ensure that special discipline applied by broader assemblies is consistent with other provisions of the Church Order (e.g., Art. 30, 38).

Classis Atlantic Northeast
David D. Poolman, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 25

Call Noncompliant Churches to Either Repent or Disaffiliate

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to call all CRC churches who publicly state they are no longer willing to call practicing same-sex relationships a sin, to choose one of the following options:

1. Publicly repent of their decision and bring themselves back into compliance with the Bible’s and our confessions’ position on human sexuality,

which has been acknowledged throughout all nations and generations of the church catholic for nearly 2,000 years, including the past 50 years of CRCNA synodical decisions. Public repentance will be indicated by the use of the attached form for the Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance.

2. Voluntarily disaffiliate from the Christian Reformed Church in North America by December 31, 2024.
3. If neither of these two things occur, Synod 2025 is to acknowledge that for the fellowship-breaking actions and inactions of these affirming churches, they shall be effectively removed from the fellowship of the Christian Reformed Church.
4. All churches and their governing classes who refuse to exercise church discipline over them will no longer have delegations recognized at synod; nor will they have representation on the Council of Delegates or any other denominational bodies and agencies.

Grounds:

- a. Synod 1926 asserted the right for ecclesiastical assemblies to take decisive disciplinary action even if the Church Order does not stipulate an exact process of action (*Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 329-30). It also made clear that a consistory worthy of discipline had “placed itself outside of the church relationship” (*Acts of Synod 1926*, p. 139).
- b. Classis Hudson in 1992 recognized that one of the churches in its classis had “broken the bonds of fellowship with the denomination and therefore [had] placed themselves outside the fellowship of the CRC” (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 610). Synod itself said that the church that was no longer in fellowship with the denomination would be allowed to participate in synod’s process of appeals if it would “bring itself into conformity with the standards from which it was declared to have deviated” (p. 610).
- c. Synods 2022 and 2023 have given enough time for churches and classes to discern their covenant fidelity to the fullness of God’s Word related to human sexuality and the desire to be affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church.
- d. Paul’s letter to Titus speaks to the need for the officebearers of the church of Jesus Christ to resist false teachers. In Titus 1:9 Paul states that an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” And then, more directly, in Titus 3:10: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.”
- e. This meets the burden of synod’s instruction to “err on the side of caution, permitting full opportunity for other pastoral efforts to take effect” (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771).

- f. Our Lord and Savior commands his church to permit what his Word permits and to forbid what it forbids (John 20:23; Matt. 16:19; 18:17-18, 20).
- g. Discipline with the end goal of restoration has been sought (Matt. 18:22; 1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 12:11).

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

ADDENDUM A

Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance for use by a council of the CRCNA

We, the council of _____ Christian Reformed Church:

- acknowledge before God and his people that we have sinned against God and his church by persistently going beyond the teaching of our Lord, by breaking the unity of the church, by refusing to submit to its instruction and discipline, and by refusing to bend our necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ.
- acknowledge before God and his people that we are truly sorry for our sin and believe that the Lord has forgiven us.
- reaffirm our union with Christ and desire to be readmitted to the covenant family of God.
- reaffirm, without reservation, that all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church are doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
- promise to do all we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority.
- promise to be formed and governed by the forms of unity of the CRCNA, heartily believing, promoting, and defending their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.
- promise to join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere.

Signed: _____
[clerk of council]

Date: _____

ADDENDUM B

Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance for use by a classis of the CRCNA

We, Classis _____ of the Christian Reformed Church North America:

- acknowledge before God and his people that we have sinned against God and his church by persistently abusing our God-given authority, by refusing to fulfill our responsibility to lovingly discipline the councils and officebearers entrusted to our care, and by breaking the unity of the church by refusing to heed its admonitions and warnings.
- acknowledge before God and his people that we are truly sorry for our sin and believe that the Lord has forgiven us.
- reaffirm our union with Christ and desire to be readmitted to the covenant family of God.
- reaffirm without reservation that all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church are doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
- promise to do all we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority.
- promise to be formed and governed by the forms of unity of the CRCNA, heartily believing, promoting, and defending their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.
- promise to faithfully use our God-given authority as Scripture demands in the admonition and discipline of the officebearers and councils entrusted to our care.
- promise to join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere.

Signed: _____
[stated clerk of classis]

Date: _____

OVERTURE 26

Require a Letter of Repentance from Consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC

Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2024 to require a letter of repentance from the consistory of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, for defying the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023.

I. Background

Synod 2022 affirmed that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh command-

ment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). In so doing, Synod declared this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession,” meaning “this interpretation has confessional status” (p. 922). When challenged on this point, Synod 2023 restated that this interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has confessional status (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021).

Nevertheless, since Synod 2023 convened, Eastern Avenue CRC has treated a homosexual union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage in the church of Jesus Christ. On November 19, 2023, two women in a same-sex relationship presented their daughter for baptism during an Eastern Avenue CRC worship service. The sacrament of baptism was administered to this child without any qualms about the parents’ homosexual union. In fact, following the baptism, the pastor who administered the baptism invited the congregation to “extend a hand in a posture of blessing as we pray over this family.”¹ On November 19 it became clear that Eastern Avenue CRC will treat a same-sex union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage in the Christian church, even though synod has definitively stated that homosexual sex is a violation of the seventh commandment.

II. Overture

In order to avoid confusion about where the denomination stands on this issue, and in order to remain faithful to the Word of God and our confessional standards, Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Require a letter of repentance from the consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC to the churches of the CRCNA, within which the Eastern Avenue consistory repents for treating a homosexual union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage during the November 19 worship service. Synod should set a specific date by which the consistory must submit this letter. This letter should come from the consistory since it is the consistory’s responsibility to regulate worship services (Church Order Art. 52-a).
- B. Communicate to the consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC that if they do not comply with this aforementioned instruction, synod, with the full cooperation of Classis Grand Rapids East, will set in motion an appropriate process of discipline for consistory members who remain unwilling to comply with the rulings of Synods 2022 and 2023.

Grounds:

1. It is vital to maintain confessional unity in the CRCNA.
2. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to affirm that they will be “formed and governed” by the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort.

¹ [youtube.com/watch?v=e3__DKA2QgM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3__DKA2QgM); see 19:07 minute mark; accessed 12/12/2023.

3. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to “promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.”
4. When sin emerges, the Bible prescribes a process of candid rebuke and repentance, followed by sincere forgiveness (Luke 17:3).
5. “Church discipline for correcting faults” is one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

Classis Georgetown
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

OVERTURE 27

Maintain the Distinctive Authority of the Local Church in Matters of Discipleship, Discipline, and Pastoral Care

I. Background

A. Synod 2024 and real-life situations

How the church decides this overture and the issues around it has important, real-life consequences. These decisions take on flesh and blood in cases such as the following:

Grant is a 57-year-old African-American physician, widely respected in the community. He has been elected as an elder in his local multiethnic Christian Reformed church. To the surprise of the council, Grant has submitted a gravamen to his council stating that he privately struggles with the concept of infant baptism. (He grew up in a denomination that emphasized believer baptism.) Grant's current Christian Reformed congregation highly values his presence at the church and his willingness to serve as an elder. Grant is willing to remain completely silent about the infant baptism issue, except as his council asks him about it. How quickly, if ever, should synod require the local church council to expel Grant from office?

Megan is a 35-year-old history teacher in the local Christian high school. She is engaging and popular at church, particularly with the teens ministry. Both in church and at school, teens seek her out for counsel. She was recently elected as a deacon. She has submitted a gravamen acknowledging that she has private doubts about Belgic Confession Article 37's description of events surrounding Christ's return to earth. She grew up in a different denomination that taught a somewhat different understanding of eschatology. She is willing to remain completely silent about those doubts, except as her council might ask her about the topic. How quickly, if ever, should synod require the local church council to expel Megan from office as a deacon over this issue?

Alvin is a highly regarded university professor, renowned in his field for sterling academic writings about the reasonableness of Christian faith. He has

been elected elder in his university-town church. Alvin has submitted a gravamen to his council, stating that he privately struggles with some teachings in the Canons of Dort about reprobation. He questions whether the Bible teaches as clearly or as emphatically as the Canons of Dort imply that, before time, God chose particular named individuals from whom he would knowingly and willfully withhold the gift of salvation, instead condemning them to eternal punishment. Alvin is willing to remain completely silent about his private doubts, except as his council might ask him about the topic. Should synod force the local council to push Alvin out of office over this issue?

B. Church Order background

Through this overture we are asking synod to maintain the authority of the local council when it comes to deciding cases like these. Giving councils the authority to judge the length of time for examination and judgment of a confessional-difficulty gravamen fits with the Church Order. When talking about CDGs, Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 2 states that “this type of gravamen is a personal request.” While not explicitly stated, the language suggests that such a request is to be made in personal relationship with fellow officebearers. This sense of personal, pastoral connection aligns with the Church Order elsewhere when it states that elders and deacons complete their tasks within the context of a congregation. Church Order Article 25-b says, “The elders, with the minister(s), shall oversee the doctrine and life of the members of the congregation and fellow officebearers, shall provide counsel and discipline along with pastoral care in the congregation. . . .” Notice that the tasks of counsel, discipline, and pastoral care are designated for officebearers in the local context. These are also the tasks that need to be exercised when dealing with a confessional-difficulty gravamen. This is not to say that classis and synod do not provide care or discipline, but a lack of reference to these tasks being completed by broader assemblies does underscore that these tasks are best completed in personal relationship. Reformed ecclesiology has always leaned into these tasks being completed at the local level and involving the broader assembly in these tasks when there has been a failure to complete them. The Church Order recognizes this local/broader distinction in the very division of types of gravamina. A confessional-revision gravamen requests changes to the confessions that require the involvement of higher assemblies because confessional change affects the entire church. A CDG is concerned with “a personal request” and is therefore to be “dealt with pastorally and personally” at the local level. We could add, for clarity’s sake, that pastoral and personal matters, by their very nature, do not concern churches in common, making the involvement of major assemblies unnecessary (Art. 28-b).

C. Historical background

Since its founding, the Christian Reformed Church has required its officebearers to subscribe to the creeds and confessions of the denomination. First, through the Form of Subscription, and now through the Covenant for Officebearers, elders, deacons, ministers, and professors have demonstrated their agreement with these confessions of faith by signing. The purpose of this process has always been to preserve the faith and to guard orthodoxy.

In 1976, in response to some questions from within the denomination, a study committee (Report 38) gave this summary of the Form of Subscription's purpose: "The focus of the form lies clearly on the church's regulation of the ministry of the Word and the government of the church in accord with the confessions. The form is the instrument by which the church seeks to assure itself that those called by the church to function officially do so in accord with the faith of the church. As such an instrument it has been well conceived; it is 'water-tight,' assuming that both those who subscribe and the church requiring subscription take it seriously" (*Agenda for Synod 1976*, p. 571).

Even as Report 38 made this observation, it did so recognizing that officebearers do sometimes have personal difficulties with some parts of the confessions and that sometimes those difficulties turn into settled differences. The committee wrestled with the question about how to handle those differences, and, at Synod 1976, the synodical advisory committee assigned to process the report used the report's findings to create our current categories of gravamina. A confessional-revision gravamen (CRG) was defined as a request for confessional change. A confessional-difficulty gravamen was defined as an expression of personal difficulty and a request for a conversation with the church about that difficulty. Both of these gravamina included a process of "examination and judgment." In the case of the confessional-revision gravamen, the examination and judgment focused on whether or not a confession needed to be changed. In the case of the confessional-difficulty gravamen, the examination and judgment focused on whether or not the person's personal views were in line with the confessions. What is not stated in either the advisory committee report, or in Report 38 itself, is whether or not a confessional-difficulty gravamen could be ongoing. If a council reviewed an officebearer's confessional-difficulty gravamen and judged that the officebearer's opinions were out of line with the confessions, could that officebearer continue to serve for an extended period of time even when their difficulty remained, so long as the difficulty was not too extreme and the officebearer kept the difficulty private?

That history has precipitated the question facing Synod 2024: What role do the broader assemblies have in relation to the authority of the local church in pastoral matters? That deeper question finds its application in the more specific question, Can a local church council allow a confessional-difficulty

gravamen to continue for an extended period based on pastoral considerations and local judgment, or must it be resolved within the bounds of a synodically prescribed time period?

D. Are ongoing CDGs a threat to orthodoxy?

A person might well ask, If we allow difficulties to continue, will that weaken our church? Will our commitment to being a confessional, orthodox denomination be essentially compromised? Not if the difficulties are handled in the right way. If the officebearer submits to the judgment of the church, promises not to contradict the confessions in their speaking and teaching and preaching, and promises to enthusiastically support the confessions and work of the church in every other respect, there is no danger to the church's confessional integrity. This is not just a guess; there is good evidence to support this assertion.

The Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are both orthodox, Reformed, confessional churches who have maintained their confessional identity for generations. Both the PCA and the OPC require subscription to the Westminster Catechism as part of holding office. But both the PCA and the OPC also allow for officebearers to register exceptions as part of their subscription. That process is outlined in chapter 21, section 4, of the PCA's Book of Church Order:

While our Constitution does not require the candidate's affirmation of every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, it is the right and responsibility of the Presbytery to determine if the candidate is out of accord with any of the fundamentals of these doctrinal standards and, as a consequence, may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.

Potential officebearers submit their exceptions (difficulties), and once these exceptions are submitted, individual presbyteries judge whether these exceptions are acceptable, or whether they are of such a magnitude that the officebearer should not serve. In effect, they examine and judge, and if the difficulty isn't too strong, they allow the exception to be ongoing. They've done this for years. Common exceptions granted by presbyteries include disagreement with the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the Sabbath, and with the Westminster Confession's teaching on magistrates. Given the experience of these two denominations, there's no reason why gravamina couldn't be ongoing within the Christian Reformed Church without endangering our confessional orthodoxy.

E. Doubt of the mind versus commitment of the will

As previously discussed, the Church Order Supplement says that those who sign on as officebearers must "heartily believe" the creeds and confessions of the church. That's appropriate. We should all aspire to hearty belief.

But what sort of standard is hearty belief? If, in asking for hearty belief, we require that every officebearer have 100 percent mental agreement and 100 percent mental certainty for every doctrine in the confessions, without any shade of doubt, we are asking too much. Asking for 100 percent commitment to the confessions in our actions and our words and our wills is reasonable, but on this side of the new creation all human beings wrestle with private mental doubts and reservations. Doubt and uncertainty are unpleasant. In the new creation, when we see Christ face to face, we will cease to see darkly through the glass, we will know even as we are fully known, and our mental doubts will mercifully vanish. But in this world, where we still squint through the dark glass, doubt is part of the not-yetness of our existence. Even John Calvin has admitted as much. Calvin says that we are partly unbelievers until we die. Commenting on Mark 9:24, the passage where the father of the young man whom Jesus heals says, “I believe, help my unbelief!” Calvin says this:

[The man] declares that he believes, and yet acknowledges himself to have unbelief. These two statements may appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself. As our faith is never perfect, it follows that we are partly unbelievers; but God forgives us, and exercises such forbearance towards us, as to reckon us believers on account of a small portion of faith. It is our duty, in the meantime, carefully to shake off the remains of infidelity which adhere to us, to strive against them, and to pray to God to correct them, and, as often as we are engaged in this conflict, to fly to him for aid. If we duly inquire what portion has been bestowed on each, it will evidently appear that there are very few who are eminent in faith, few who have a moderate portion, and very many who have but a small measure.

For Calvin, when it comes to the certainty of our mind, hearty belief is “but a small measure.” It is reasonable for the church to expect an officebearer’s outward statements and pronouncements to 100 percent align with the confessions. It’s reasonable to expect a 100 percent commitment of the will. It’s not reasonable to expect every officebearer to have 100 percent mental certainty about 100 percent of the things. That’s why, when we make our vows, we say, “I do, God helping me.”

F. Helping the church

In describing the confessional-difficulty gravamen, the Church Order Supplement says that they should be dealt with “personally and pastorally.” If local churches want to act personally and pastorally, they will need to maintain the pastoral authority proper to the local council. People’s lives are complex; all our beliefs are shaped by and intertwined with our relationships and life events. Pastoring one person may need a different approach and a different timeline from pastoring another person, even when

those two people express exactly the same difficulty. Furthermore, not all confessional difficulties are the same. An officebearer who has difficulty believing that Jesus rose from the dead has a very different kind of difficulty from an officebearer who has difficulties with the way the catechism handles the use of images in Lord's Day 35. Even the spirit of difficulties can vary widely from person to person. One officebearer may hold a difficulty in a spirit of proud defiance; another officebearer might hold the very same difficulty with tears and anguish. Local congregations are best positioned to judge these personal and pastoral situations. A synodically prescribed time period diminishes both the council's pastoral authority and its pastoral effectiveness. Finally, allowing local congregations to maintain primary authority in determining how long a confessional-difficulty gravamen can continue would allow many churches to stay united in ministry. Many congregations in our denomination have a wide variety of members with a broad range of opinions on all sorts of issues. Though those differences have long been known, only recently have they threatened the unity of these bodies. Lately, it's become harder and harder to live in a community of difference. In the political realm, people are moving to areas where everyone is politically like-minded. In the world of the church, there has been a similar migration. For churches who are trying to hold together a family of difference, we need to keep the pastoral freedom that allows us to live with our differences while still protecting orthodoxy. If synod takes this authority away, many churches will fracture. Because each church is a different kind of family facing different challenges, we urge synod to allow local churches to maintain pastoral authority when handling confessional-difficulty gravamina. If an individual church wants to make a CDG time-bound, if they feel that a CDG should last only six months, they should feel free to apply that limit. If another church needs to allow CDGs to continue longer than that in order to protect the critical good of congregational stability and long-term ministry, that decision should be considered part of their proper pastoral authority.

II. Overture

- A. Classis Grand Rapids South overtures Synod 2024 to maintain the distinctive authority of the local church with respect to matters of discipleship, discipline, and pastoral care and to clarify the process by acknowledging the local council's authority to judge the appropriate time length of confessional-difficulty gravamina.
- B. Decisions about the length of an individual confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) would be part of a council's "examination and judgment" proper to any CDG (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). In cases where a council is unable to make that judgment, the classis may/would decide. In cases where the classis is unable to make that judgment, synod may/would decide.

- C. We acknowledge that accepting the above overture may require that the following language be added to section B of Church Order Supplement, Article 5: “During the time an officebearer has a confessional-difficulty gravamen, the officebearer must teach, defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately.”

Grounds:

- a. The majority report of Advisory Committee 8, Synod 2023

Synod 2023 was scheduled to deal with this issue, but due to time constraints, the matter was pushed forward to Synod 2024. Nevertheless, Synod 2023 did receive advice about how to handle CDGs from the advisory committee assigned to the issue. The majority report of Advisory Committee 8 advised synod to allow a confessional-difficulty gravamen to continue for no more than six months. In effect, they asked synod to regulate the pastoral decisions of the local church. In their report they grounded this opinion on two statements. First, they suggested that “the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision whereby some terminal action takes place,” because, as the Supplement to Church Order Article 5 says, “No one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033).

While it is true that no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what the confessions say, that's not what a gravamen does. In a gravamen (especially a confessional-difficulty gravamen) a person is not deciding what the confessions say; they are admitting that they have a difference with the confessions. They are not determining what those standards say; they are acknowledging difficulty with the standards. The question to be examined and judged is whether their difficulty is in fact at odds with the confessions, and, if it is, whether or not that difference is disqualifying. In effect, when someone asks for a CDG to continue, they are saying, “I suspect that my opinions disagree with the confessions on this point. I submit to the council's judgment as to whether or not I'm in disagreement. But, regardless, in humility, despite this difference, I hope council will allow me to keep serving the church with my brothers and sisters.” That is not the same as deciding for oneself what the confessions say. The request doesn't contest the confession; it asks for pastoral permission.

For the second ground, the majority report quoted from the Covenant for Officebearers, noting that the person signing the covenant must “affirm that the doctrines in the standards ‘fully agree with the Word of God’” and that the subscriber promises “‘to be formed and governed by them’ and to ‘heartily believe and . . . promote and defend their

doctrines . . .” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033). The majority report says that because the officebearer must “heartily believe” and defend these doctrines, any objection must be resolved within six months. But why should that be true? We know that the Church Order allows officebearers to express exceptions to their hearty belief in the form of a gravamen. Why couldn’t a council examine and judge an individual officebearer’s difference and decide that in their unique case, with their particular difficulty, they could continue to serve, so long as they promised never to teach or preach or promote anything other than the church’s teaching?

The statements in both the Covenant for Officebearers and the Church Order Supplement are designed to protect our identity as a confessional church. Despite the claims of the majority report, what these documents don’t tell us is how long a person with a confessional difficulty should be allowed to serve. They don’t tell us, for example, whether or not an officebearer who humbly promises to submit to the judgment of the council by keeping their confessional differences to themselves could continue serve for an extended period of time.

b. Precedent for ongoing confessional-difficulty gravamina

In further support for limiting CDGs to six months, the majority report says this: “What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church’s creeds and confessions.” That’s true, of course, but that’s also an argument from silence. It’s also true that what no synod, including 1976, has ever said is that a gravamen was *not* a way to take ongoing exception to the church’s creeds and confessions. No judgment has ever been made either way.

In fact, when you dig a little deeper, you find that, in practice if not in pronouncement, synod has allowed difficulties and differences to be ongoing. Harry Boer, whose case precipitated the 1976 report, and whose gravamen about reprobation and the Canons of Dort was arguably the best-known gravamen in the history of the Christian Reformed Church, was never forced to resign. He was never stripped of his ministerial credentials. This despite the fact that he never changed his opinion about reprobation and the Canons of Dort. In effect, his personal difficulty was allowed to continue even after the church examined and judged and found against his complaint.

When you read the 1976 report, there are a number of places that suggest that Dr. Boer was not the only one whose difficulties were allowed to continue even when judged to be out of line with the confessions. After discussing the difficulties of a Dr. Boersma, difficulties which came before synod between 1952 and 1961, the report makes reference to how lessons from the Boersma case were later applied in dealing with other

minor difficulties and uncertainties held by other candidates for the ministry: “the church’s assemblies have consistently been applying them [the lessons] in *accepting without prejudice* candidates for the ministry who have voiced difficulty with matters in the creeds, such as those raised by Dr. Boersma” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 563; emphasis added).

So while there has never been an official judgment on whether or not CDGs are time-bound, there is evidence that the practice of allowing officebearers to continue serving even when they have differences is well-established, so long as those officebearers don’t preach and teach against the church’s confessional judgments.

Classis Grand Rapids South
Paul Sausser, stated clerk

OVERTURE 28

Declare as Heresy the Belief that Scripture Sanctions Homosexual Marriage

I. Background

Synod 2022 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America affirmed that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). Synod further clarified that this interpretation also has “confessional status.” However, while synod affirmed the confessional framework of our human sexuality, synod did not, at this time, define whether opposition to this confessional understanding is heretical.

Synod 2022 also adopted a study report first presented in the 2020 agenda that offered parameters for deciding when to use the term *heresy* (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 843-44). In this study report, the authors offer nine “tests” for when a doctrine in question might be heretical (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 168-69):

1. Heresy typically involves serious distortion or rejection of basic or core Christian doctrines, including core Christian teachings about God, creation, humanity, or God’s dealings with creatures.
2. Heresy typically contradicts doctrines that have been defined by an official church body (such as a creed or confession).
3. Heresy typically is embedded in an affirmation of Christianity, claiming to be Christian while at the same time distorting or twisting central teachings of Christianity.
4. Heresy typically involves not just an individual, but a group or a faction that threatens the unity of the church and the Christian

faith. Even if heretical teachings are initiated by an individual, those teachings typically do not reach the status of heresy until sufficient numbers of people are swayed by them.

5. Heresy typically leads its adherents away from genuine faith in the triune God. In contrast, other differences (even what we would regard as errors, such as not baptizing infants or holding a non-Reformed view of the roles of God and humanity in salvation) typically do not lead people away from faith in God.
6. Heresy typically causes inquirers and other believers to be confused about Christian teaching and thus led astray in their belief or discouraged from believing. In this way, heresy presents a special danger to the church that goes beyond its effect on its adherents.
7. Heresy typically ends up bringing disrepute on the truth of the gospel. Because it confuses people about what the gospel really is, heresy can lead those outside the Christian faith to mistakenly believe that heretical teaching is actually genuine Christianity.
8. Heresy typically involves a stubborn refusal to be corrected by patient and gracious engagement with the church. Even when the church thoughtfully shows biblical and theological problems with heresy, proponents of heresy refuse to change their views.
9. Heresy typically involves a moral failing as well as a theological or doctrinal one. Heresy misleads others about Christianity and threatens to introduce division into the body of Christ. In this way, heresy is a moral as well as a theological problem.

We believe that the belief by some members, officebearers, and churches in the CRCNA that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships; or that God permits or even desires homosexual marriage or relationships; or that homosexual marriage or relationships do not violate the eternal, moral law of God rightly ought to be called a heresy because such action is supported by the nine tests adopted by Synod 2022:

1. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture is a serious distortion of the historic and basic Christian doctrine and teaching that all sexual activity outside of the marriage of one man and one woman is unchaste and a violation of the seventh commandment.
2. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture contradicts the official interpretation of the CRCNA on what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in Q&A 108 regarding the doctrines of adultery and unchastity, as affirmed by Synods 2022 and 2023. Because this belief contradicts a confessional standard, it is properly a heresy instead of simply being a differing interpretation of Scripture.
3. Those within the CRCNA who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture claim to be true Christians while at the same

time they distort a central teaching of the Christian faith regarding God-honoring human sexual practice.

4. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture is held not just by a few individuals but by a group of CRCNA members, officebearers, and churches, indicating that many appear to have been swayed by these false teachings.
5. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture leads people away from genuine faith in the triune God because it rejects his eternal, moral law and the true, plain reading of God's Word.
6. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture causes confusion for both believers and unbelievers alike because both sides claim to represent truth. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that some people have declined to pursue faith in Christ in the CRCNA context because of our confusion regarding the issue of human sexuality.
7. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture has brought disrepute upon the gospel insofar as some outside the faith do mistakenly believe this belief to be the genuine teaching of Christianity.
8. Those who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture have exhibited a stubborn refusal to be corrected and have refused to change their views despite the CRCNA pointing out the error of this belief at the last two synods of the CRCNA.¹
9. Those who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture have misled others about Christianity and have introduced division into our denomination and therefore have also committed a moral failing alongside a theological failing. Their work to divide the CRCNA over this heresy instead of seeking unity over the orthodox teaching of the Christian faith regarding human sexuality has damaged the witness and fellowship of the CRCNA.

Further, the authors of the 2020 study report on heresy write, "So when should the church say, 'Those who hold this view should be regarded as heretics'? When many or all of the characteristics identified in the previous section are present, then it seems reasonable for the church to consider declaring that people or movements are engaging in heresy" (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 169).

¹ thebanner.org/news/2023/12/classes-churches-taking-differing-actions-on-human-sexuality-decisions-within-crcna; allonebody.org/ (see the list of churches and the mission and values statement); hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/ (see the various CRCNA churches and individuals who have published statements that align with the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships).

Therefore, having seen how the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage reasonably meets the criteria to be called heresy, as demonstrated by the nine tests, the council of Immanuel CRC urges the CRCNA to make proper use of the adopted tests to declare such beliefs heretical. We urge our brothers and sisters to go beyond merely adopting a confessional view of human sexuality to also rooting out all heretical views that oppose our confessions and Scripture itself and that would lead our brothers and sisters astray.

Let us stand fast in this moment against those who would question God's clear teaching on human sexuality. Let us not be deceived by "fine-sounding arguments" (Col. 2:4) that argue for a difference of opinion or a local option on human sexuality. Instead, let us guard those whom God has entrusted to our care—as did Paul, John, and Peter in their epistles—and clearly and without reservation point out the heresy that denies God's creational design for and moral law governing God-honoring human sexuality.

II. Overture

The council of Immanuel Christian Reformed Church of Burbank, Illinois, overtures synod to declare as heresy the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships; or that God permits or desires homosexual marriage or relationships; or that homosexual marriage or relationships do not violate the eternal, moral law of God.

Grounds:

- a. The CRCNA has adopted a series of tests that guide when a doctrine is to be labeled heresy.
- b. The nine characteristics of heresy each appear to be present in the belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture or permissible to God or otherwise does not violate his moral law.
- c. Our scriptural, apostolic, and confessional heritage gives us warrant for labeling as heresy certain beliefs.
- d. Our call as shepherds necessitates that we protect our sheep by clearly labeling and defending against heresy when it enters our midst.
- e. The CRCNA has a vested interest in promoting unity in our church by opposing divisive beliefs.

Council of Immanuel CRC, Burbank, Illinois
Jeremy Oosterhouse, stated clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 2, 2024, meeting of Classis Chicago South but was not adopted.

Declare that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Addresses a Salvation Issue

I. Background

Leading up to and following Synods 2022 and 2023, a common argument has been made for maintaining “unity” with, and withholding discipline from, members who disagree with both synods’ affirmations that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). That common argument is this: Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 does not address a “salvation issue” and should therefore be treated as some form of *adiaphora* (a matter judged to be not essential to the faith: a “questionable” or “disputable” issue about which Christians can disagree).

The argument that Q&A 108 does not address a “salvation issue” (and that sexual ethics, broadly speaking, are not a “salvation issue”) is made numerous times in the agendas for both Synods 2022 and 2023 and is used as the foundation of arguments for maintaining “unity” and refusing to discipline those who disagree with the position of the CRCNA. In the report of the Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee, for example, Neland Avenue CRC’s response to the decisions of Synod 2022 states: “But we do agree on paying attention to the call of the Holy Spirit and the fact that this issue is not a salvation matter that should shatter churches or denominations” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 328). In the same report, an elder from Neland Avenue offered the same line of argumentation for remaining a member and officebearer of that church: “I’m still at Neland because I don’t think this issue, though very important, is a salvation issue” (p. 330). The same line of argumentation was employed already in 2022 by classis Chicago South, who attacked the Human Sexuality Report, saying that it “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 . . .” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 657).¹

The CRCNA’s own confessions, however, rule out the possibility of such arguments. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism itself explicitly states that unchastity is certainly a salvation issue. Q&A 87 says:

Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and unrepentant ways?

¹ Other examples from the agendas of both synods could be cited. This line of argumentation is also frequently found in the publications and public statements of individuals and organizations advocating for the classification of human sexuality as *adiaphora* and for “space for disagreement” within the CRCNA on the issue of human sexuality.

- A. By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like will inherit the kingdom of God.

In order to argue that unchastity and sexual ethics (along with idolatry, adultery, theft, covetousness, drunkenness, slander, robbery, or the like) are not “salvation issues,” we would be required to revise or remove Q&A 87 from the catechism. If we did not revise or remove Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87, the argument that sexual ethics is not a salvation issue would always be confessionally incoherent (and as we believe our confessions to be a faithful summary of Scripture’s teaching, also biblically incoherent).

II. Overture

Classis Iakota therefore overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Declare that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, along with all cases of unrepentant sin, addresses a salvation issue.

Ground:

The Scriptures and confessional standards (particularly Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87) make clear that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 does address a salvation issue and that unchastity and sexual ethics are salvation issues.

- B. Declare that it is a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church in any way to deny that either Heidelberg Q&A 87 or Q&A 108 addresses salvation issues or to deny that sexual ethics and unchastity are salvation issues.

Grounds:

1. Officebearers in the CRCNA are denying that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 (and implicitly Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87) and sexual ethics are salvation issues.
2. It is a serious deviation from the teachings of the CRCNA to reclassify that which is a matter of salvation as a disputable or questionable issue or some other classification; such serious deviations from the clear teachings of Scripture and our confessions endanger the eternal salvation of the sheep and the unity of the flock entrusted to the officebearers’ care.
3. This action is in keeping with the established guidance of Synod 2022 (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 897-98).

- C. Declare that any officebearer who denies that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87 or Q&A 108 addresses a salvation issue and/or denies that unchastity and sexual ethics are salvation issues is worthy of special discipline in accordance with Church Order Article 83.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Article 83 states, "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct."
2. Tolerating such denials of these salvation issues puts the CRCNA in danger of transgressing its own boundaries for what a true church is, which includes the proper exercise of church discipline (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).
3. Officebearers in the CRCNA who deny that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87 and Q&A 108 and sexual ethics address salvation issues, instead of faithfully fulfilling the responsibility of their office to confront brothers and sisters regarding their sin, are leaving them in their sin, thus denying them the opportunity for repentance and subsequent reconciliation with God and their neighbors.

D. Instruct all classes, councils, and officebearers in the CRCNA that it is our duty to uphold the clear teaching of the Scriptures and confessions on the nature of Heidelberg Q&A 87 and Q&A 108 and sexual ethics.

Grounds:

1. As Christians, we are called to be people of the truth, with integrity and honor, and failure to promote and defend the faith is to break the Covenant for Officebearers.
2. The church must make every effort to correct such a grievous error, that we might not continue to sin in the eyes of God.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 30

Guide Classes into Compliance or Discipline

I. Background

Our classis has spent several years discussing matters of human sexuality. Our synods have also spent much time in studying and deliberating this particular topic. Synod 2022 recognized that "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism included all of the grievous sins discussed in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). Then at Synod 2023 it was adopted that classes should "guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

II. Overture

The council of Edson-Peers CRC of Edson, Alberta, overtures Synod 2024 to guide into compliance or discipline classes that are not guiding the officebearers of their constituent churches into compliance with the “guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029).

Grounds:

1. Our classis has not articulated either plan, timeline, or the will to guide erring councils or officebearers into compliance. Indeed, the Healthy Church Task Force of our classis has voiced that church visitors assess and do what they think is appropriate and that their present posture is only to “walk alongside.”
2. Synod itself has not given any guidance on how to do this; synod has only adopted a recommendation that classes should do this.
3. Our gospel and true discipleship requires repentance and obedience in all areas of our lives, including the area of human sexuality. The apostle Paul, when he gave his farewell to the elders in Ephesus, declared that he was “innocent of the blood of all men” because during his time there he made known “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:26-27, NIV [1984]). It is safe to say that his teaching included the area of sexuality, as most of his letters address sexual conduct at some point. Our sexual conduct is an important part of our living in covenant with our holy God (Ex. 20:14; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108). We, therefore, cannot afford to ignore what God’s Word so clearly teaches and does not shy away from teaching (1 Cor. 6:9-11, NIV [1984]):

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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 our God.

In sum, if we are not calling people to repentance in all of these areas, we are failing to proclaim the gospel, failing to make true disciples, and robbing people of the joy of living according to God’s design and in true covenant with him. Synod needs to act so that the gospel in our denomination is not compromised.

4. It is simply time to move forward. Synod has recognized the clear teaching of Scripture, and it is time that our classes and councils do the same. Regarding our Covenant for Officebearers, the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 3 states:

... no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.

This matter has been thoroughly considered so that no one is wondering about the content of our teachings. Now is the time for classes and officebearers to acquiesce.

5. The true church only exists where discipline also exists (Belgic Confession Art. 29). There is never perfect discipline, and we should never be eager in the area of discipline. That said, it is clear that some classes are demonstrating that they do not have the will or desire to discipline or guide into compliance erring officebearers. This is evidenced by the overtures seeking to overturn the HSR or the definition of "unchastity" in our confessions.

Council of Edson-Peers CRC, Edson, Alberta
Ryan Hoogerbrugge, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 8-9, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 31

Ensure Accountability regarding Synodical Decisions and Instructions

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to ensure accountability regarding synodical decisions and instructions by means of the following:

1. Instructing classes that have constituent churches which publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships to provide a written update of the efforts made to guide their officebearers into compliance, and provide time during the opening session of synod for these reports to be discussed by delegates.

Grounds:

- a. Synod 2023 instructed classes to do this (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1029).
- b. Being informed of how the classes are approaching this task will greatly enhance the trust that has been eroded and will enable synod to fulfill the obligations given to it by Church Order Article 27-b.
2. Instructing Classis Grand Rapids East to provide a written update to Synod 2024 outlining the steps they've taken to discipline Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church. Time should be provided during the opening session of synod for these reports to be discussed by delegates.

Grounds:

- a. In Overture 78 to Synod 2023, Classis Grand Rapids East indicated that at its January 19, 2023, meeting it “Agreed to provide a season of mutual forbearance in the classis while the appeal by Neland Avenue CRC of its discipline by Synod 2022 is pending before Synod 2023” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 886).
- b. Neland Avenue’s appeal was not sustained by Synod 2023. Synod’s decision not to discipline Neland Avenue CRC does not relieve Classis Grand Rapids East of its responsibility to discipline Neland for sins and offenses outlined in the *In Loco* Committee Report. These sins have harmed the entire denomination, therefore Classis Grand Rapids East must report on the progress of its discipline to the entire denomination.
- c. Church Order Article 27-b assigns the classis authority over the councils of its constituent churches: therefore synod, which has authority over the classes, must monitor the efforts of classes to discipline when their churches promote blatant heterodoxy and must hold the classes accountable for exercising discipline. This report is necessary for synod to meet this obligation.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 32

Clarify Decisions Concerning “Unchastity” in Q&A 108 and How This Definition Functions in the Life of the CRC

I. Background

Synod 2022 declared the following (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922):

that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

Synod 2023 upheld this decision and in so doing declared that this upholding of the decision of Synod 2022 was the answer to many overtures submitted to Synod 2023.

Classis Alberta North identified in Overture 32 to Synod 2023 a concern about how churches were to understand the implications of the 2022 decision. We noted that the 2022 decision, while clear in identifying a definition of “unchastity” and the status of that definition in the confessions, had at

the same time led to confusion, disagreement, and uncertainty about the scope of that decision. This was also evidenced on the floor of Synod 2023 when the reporter of the majority report of Advisory Committee 7 was unable to answer a question about whether a member of the CRC who was uncertain about the definition was able to remain a member; at the same time the chair of the committee thought the answer was clear.

Classis Alberta North has identified further questions and concerns that were brought to Synod 2023 and have been raised since then, which include the following:

1. May members who are *uncertain* about this interpretation . . .
 - make public profession of faith?
 - remain members within the CRC?
 - present their children for baptism?
 - serve as officebearers in the CRC while signing the Covenant for Officebearers, pledging to live within the bounds of that covenant?
2. May members who *disagree* with this interpretation . . .
 - make public profession of faith?
 - remain members within the CRC?
 - present their children for baptism?
 - serve as officebearers in the CRC while signing the Covenant for Officebearers, pledging to live within the bounds of that covenant?
3. May those who desire to candidate for minister of the Word and who are willing to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, but are unsure where they stand regarding this specific interpretation, pursue candidacy?
4. Synod 2024 will need to consider overtures and recommendations regarding the place and function of gravamina. Will decisions about gravamina apply equally to . . .
 - uncertainty about infant baptism?
 - uncertainty about the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacraments?
 - uncertainty about the declarations regarding election and predestination in the Canons of Dort?
5. Is it conceivable for someone who is uncertain or even disagreeing with an aspect of this interpretation to yet submit to the authority of the church and its teachings, be willing to live and work within the bounds of the confessions, and thus still be a member in good standing?
6. Is it conceivable to give a verbal affirmation to the confessions if in one's heart or mind one is uncertain, and still be a member in good standing?
7. Does lack of understanding or awareness of the confessions of the church and its interpretations disqualify someone from membership or serving as an officebearer? How much does one need to understand the details of a confession in order to be understood to be compliant with it?

8. How will the implications of (and answers to) the above be monitored and enforced, and who will do that? Will compliance be pursued and ensured equally for all the matters identified as “unchaste” (including premarital sex and pornography) and other areas of the confessions? How would this be achieved?
9. If, for example, I, as a parent, have pastorally wrestled with the matter of same-sex committed marriage for 20 years because I have a child who is gay, may I now no longer wrestle with understanding, even if I live in compliance?
10. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR), which Synod 2022 approved, noted: “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” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 457). While we recognize that synod has yet to deal with overtures regarding gravamina, the committee recommendations at Synod 2023 were moving in a specific direction that would appear not to include the above. Given the history of pastoral accommodation and what the HSR says as per the above, how may councils understand this “room for disagreement”?
11. The shift from Synod 1973 (pastoral advice) to Synod 2022 (confessional status) is significant with all of the subsequent concerns, questions, unrest, and confusion noted above—and raises the question churches are wrestling with: What is the rationale for this significant change in function for an understanding of Scripture (1973) that has not changed?

We are concerned that synod, in its desire to come to conclusions and decisions about matters of human sexuality, has inadvertently shut the door to discussing and clarifying the implications of these decisions. When synod declares that a particular position is the answer to a whole group of overtures that contain significant nuances and serious concerns, many of those concerns and nuances go unaddressed. As a result, synod can be seen to be veering away from its historic tendency to respond pastorally and carefully in helping churches to understand and dialogue together. Without the clarity of what these decisions mean and what their implications are, it becomes too easy to simply react or draw lines or choose/vote for a side. Churches will interpret and act in a variety of ways that are inconsistent with each other, as we are presently already observing.

We are also concerned that in an effort to clarify and close the door on some decisions, synod has closed the door on our historic commitment to deliberate and wrestle together. Recognizing that God’s people from the time of Jacob have had the name *Israel*, which means “to contend with God,” and given our historic desire to wrestle with God and his Word, we need to work through these implications together so that even if we don’t all agree,

we will at least be on the same page of understanding what we agree or don't agree with.

Classis Alberta North believes that we need to ensure that in our engagement together within the denomination there is clarity about these decisions and their implications. This is important in order to avoid actions based on misunderstanding, and to avoid fostering simple votes of agreement or disagreement with a decision without proper awareness of what those decisions mean.

II. Overture

Classis Alberta North overtures Synod 2024 to review and clarify the implications of its decisions concerning the definition of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and to clarify how this definition as an interpretation of the confession functions in the life of the churches, the agencies, and the institutions of the CRC.

Grounds:

1. The confusion, lack of direction, and conflict within our churches, agencies, and institutions in seeking to work out the implications of the Synod 2022 declaration demonstrate the need for clarification.
2. In a climate of conflict, it has become easier to simply vote on decisions and draw lines rather than to dialogue about the implications. While unity may not be achievable, it is better to have been clear about what the reasons for disunity are than to just draw more lines that vary from church to church.

Classis Alberta North
Gary Duthler, stated clerk

OVERTURE 33

Rescind Compliance-Requirement Decision of Synod 2023

I. Introduction

Synod 2023 adopted the following recommendation: “That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30). While some decisions of synod may not have grounds, a decision of this weight and with this impact should have solid reasons or grounds for action. The following three grounds that Synod 2023 used to support the recommendation it adopted are faulty, calling into question the decision itself.

Ground a:

“Church Order Article 3 states that officebearers must meet the biblical requirements, and Synod 2022 has clarified those requirements.”

After citing the Church Order, this ground equates the statement of Synod 2022 with the biblical requirements noted by the Church Order. Nowhere in the Bible is it declared that agreement with a decision of a CRC synod is a requirement for office. The conclusion the ground makes is an overreach and cannot be used as a ground.

Ground b:

“Regarding our confessions, the Covenant for Officebearers states that ‘we heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them’ (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).”

Synod 2022 defeated a recommendation to place a footnote *in* the confession (Heidelberg Catechism) with synod’s interpretation of the word “unchastity,” thus clearly deciding not to make that interpretation part of the confession. In addition, the complete failure of previous synods to make such a declaration with any other confessional explanations makes this an unprecedented and absurd ground. Therefore, the ground should not apply.

Ground c:

“Church Order Article 27-b assigns the classis authority over the councils of its constituent churches; therefore synod, which has authority over the classes, must instruct classes to discipline when their churches promote blatant heterodoxy, and hold the classes accountable for exercising discipline.”

This ground jumps to the conclusion that synod “*must* instruct classes to discipline.” The Church Order article does not require instruction to classes regarding discipline. Section IV of the Church Order, which deals with “The Admonition and Discipline of the Church,” does not mention the imposition of synod in the exercise of discipline; nor does it allow synod’s instructions to engage in discipline. The ground misstates the impact of the Church Order and therefore is not applicable to the recommendation.

II. Overture

Therefore Classis Chicago South overtures synod to rescind the following decision of Synod 2023: “That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

Grounds:

- a. The grounds for the 2023 decision are flawed, making the decision itself faulty and groundless. If there are no grounds for such a weighty decision, the decision should not have been made and should be rescinded.
- b. The Church Order gives responsibility for discipline to the consistory, not to synod (*Church Order* Articles 78-84).

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 34

Revise Decision of Synod 2023 and Carry Out Biblical Requirements

I. Introduction

When given the opportunity to call for accountability, repentance, and possible church discipline for Neland Avenue CRC and for Classis Grand Rapids East, Synod 2023 declined to do so (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28). By this inaction, the delegates to synod made a great mistake. Synod 2024 must declare this decision to be in conflict with the Word of God. Further, only after declaring that Synod 2023 acted in conflict with the Word of God, Synod 2024 is then obligated to carry out the biblical requirements Synod 2023 declined to pursue.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. That Synod 2024 declare that Synod 2023 acted in conflict with the Word of God (*Church Order* Art. 29) by not calling Neland Avenue CRC to repentance for their decision to allow someone in a same-sex relationship to be a member in good standing at Neland and further, to serve as a deacon (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28).

Grounds:

1. Sin that is public in nature calls for repentance that is public as well (Gal. 2:11-14). The sin, public defiance, and dishonor to the name of the risen Lord Jesus that Neland Avenue CRC has demonstrated over the last several years warrants a call to repentance that is just as public as their sin has been.
2. Synod 2023, comprised of officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, is called to a high standard in their beliefs and behavior (James 3:1). Having signed the Covenant for Officebearers, these delegates acknowledged “the authority of God’s Word” and promised

to “submit to it in all matters of life and faith” (Covenant for Office-bearers). Synod 2023 failed to submit to God’s Word by not calling Neland Avenue CRC to repentance.

3. Synod 2023 was required to call for what Christ the King calls for, namely, that Neland Avenue CRC repent and turn from wickedness (James 5:19-20; Acts 3:26; Acts 14:15). Because Synod 2023 failed to call for repentance, Synod 2024 must do so instead.
 4. Synod 2023 stood in conflict with the Word of God (Church Order Art. 29) when they set aside the demands of the head of the church, the Lord Jesus. Christians have no authority to set aside the demands of Christ (Matt. 28:20). It is unacceptable for citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20) to tolerate what Christ the King forbids (Rev. 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:1-8).
 5. Neland Avenue CRC has disobeyed the Word of God by setting aside what the Lord commands regarding human sexuality. So too Synod 2023 set aside what the Lord commands regarding church discipline (1 Cor. 5:2; Rev. 2:20). As such, Synod 2023 stands in conflict with the Word of God for their decision to not call for repentance by way of a new *In Loco* Committee (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28).
 6. Synod 2024 has the authority to revise the decision of Synod 2023 in this matter. This overture has been processed as far as possible already at the levels of the council and the classis. It is therefore within the authority of Synod 2024 to act (Church Order Art. 31 and its Supplement).
- B. That Synod 2024 carry out the biblical requirements that Synod 2023, in conflict with the Word of God, declined to pursue. Therefore, Synod 2024 must do all the following:
1. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call upon Neland Avenue CRC to publicly repent for their open, persistent rebellion against Christ the King. This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024.
 2. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call upon Classis Grand Rapids East to publicly repent for allowing the unbiblical positions and practices of Neland Avenue CRC to be tolerated. This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024.

3. That Synod 2024 require Classis Grand Rapids East, at their Fall 2024 classis meeting, if there is no public repentance from Neland Avenue CRC, to depose the council of Neland Avenue CRC for their serious deviation from sound doctrine, in accordance with Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84.
4. That Synod 2024 require Synod 2025, if there is no public repentance from Classis Grand Rapids East, to depose all the church councils of Grand Rapids East for their serious deviation from sound doctrine in accordance with Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84.
5. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call for public repentance from all the churches of the CRC that have publicly made declarations on human sexuality that are contrary to the Word of God and our confessions. This list of churches shall include, but is not limited to, the list of churches posted on the website of the organization “All One Body” as those “Welcoming and Affirming CRC Churches.” This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024. If there is no public repentance, the classes in which these particular churches are located must begin the process of special discipline in accordance with Church Order Articles 82-84 and the Supplement.
6. That Synod 2024 instruct Synod 2025 to hold a joyous celebration of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration if Neland Avenue CRC, Classis Grand Rapids East, and the other affirming CRC churches repent and turn from their wickedness. “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. [The] reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B**I. Background**

At every level of the Christian Reformed Church's ecclesiastical life (council, classis, and synod), officebearers are required to indicate their confessional covenant with one another around our forms of unity by either signing the Covenant for Officebearers or, in the case of synod, standing together to signify their confessional covenant with their fellow delegates. As signatories, officebearers "promise to be formed and governed by" the creeds and confession, and they profess, "We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them." As Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1 says, "The person signing 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."

It is important to assure that councils and classes within the Christian Reformed Church in North America are not using the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a means of allowing those who cannot affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" either to begin their service as officebearers or to continue in service as officebearers without any desire or effort to resolve the "difficulty" at the council level or to submit the matter to classis or synod for examination or judgment. Such use would render the integrity of our covenant as officebearers uncertain, particularly at the classical and synodical levels where, due to the confidential and pastoral nature of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process, delegates cannot know the nature or weight of any confessional difficulties that their fellow officebearers from other councils might have submitted. In short, delegates to classis and synod do not know (and cannot know) if their fellow delegates have "difficulties" with the confessions, what the nature and type of those difficulties might be, and if the delegates to the ecclesiastical body are in confessional covenant or not. This is clearly problematic and unsustainable.

To restore the integrity of the confessional covenant of classes and synod and to maintain the pastoral sensitivity of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process, those who have submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen should not be delegated to those ecclesiastical bodies that do not and cannot know the nature of their difficulties (i.e., classis and synod) until their difficulties are resolved with appropriate pastoral care and confidentiality and until they can affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God." To further preserve the integrity of the confessional covenant of the council and the mutual accountability of councils, classis, and synod, a reasonable timeline should be observed for providing help to officebearers

with difficulties and for classical and synodical examination and judgment of those difficulties.

II. Overture

Classis Iakota overtures synod to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B to read as follows (new material is underlined):

1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for examination and judgment. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b. These procedures shall follow the following timetable.
 - a. A council shall have six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the gravamen is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the gravamen appears before synod, synod’s decision is binding, and the subscriber will have until the end of that calendar year to either (1) affirm the standards without reservation, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office.
 - b. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of this process.
2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.
3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber’s doubts about a doctrine contained in the confessions that arise after the officer has, in good faith, subscribed themselves to the Covenant for Officebearers. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber’s settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.
4. To honor the confidential and pastoral nature of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process and to maintain the integrity of the

church's confessional covenant, the local council of an officebearer who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen may not delegate that officebearer to a broader ecclesiastical assembly (classis or synod) until the difficulty has been resolved and the officebearer can affirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. If the officebearer who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen is nominated as a delegate to a broader assembly by an officebearer outside of his or her own council, he or she must decline the nomination.

Grounds:

1. Confessional-difficulty gravamina were never intended as a permanent exception to our confessions. Therefore we cannot let their illegitimate use as a permanent exception to the confessions compromise the integrity of our confessional covenant.
2. Due to the confidential nature of confessional-difficulty gravamina, delegates to broader assemblies (classis, synod) have no confidence that their fellow delegates hold to the same beliefs and are deliberating from the same biblical and confessional foundation.
3. Adding a timetable to the guidelines and regulations will ensure that commitment to God's Word, commitment to the testimony of the creeds and confessions, and mutual trust among all officebearers of the CRCNA will be restored in a reasonable and prompt manner.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 36

Preserve the Gravamen Process

We, Classis Red Mesa of the Christian Reformed Church, overture Synod 2024 not to accede to the deferred overtures from Synod 2023 that ask for changes in the gravamen process. Our desire is for the gravamen process to be preserved as is written in the Church Order in the Supplement to Article 5:

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. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its

supplements. If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(Acts of Synod 2012, pp. 761-62)

As noted in the Church Order Supplement above, provision is made for officebearers to give expression to their conscientious objection to a variety of possible areas of difficulty with the confessions of the CRCNA. Submitting what is called a "gravamen" allows officebearers to express their difficulty or doubt while still signing the Covenant for Officebearers with integrity and remaining members in good standing in their churches. However, there is now a strong push to functionally eliminate this provision—a matter to be taken up at Synod 2024.

If adopted, the restrictions to the gravamen process proposed at Synod 2023 (but deferred to Synod 2024) would leave many local churches with very few people eligible to serve as officebearers and thereby seriously impede their ability to function. These sweeping changes would affect all potential officebearers who have difficulties or doubts about any of a number of doctrines, resulting in barring them from service as elder, deacon, minister of the Word, or commissioned pastor. It would leave local churches bewildered and confused to have saints and lifelong leaders suddenly disqualified from church leadership because of a decision made by those wholly unknown to their congregation or its leaders. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.

We treasure our denomination's colorful history of discussion, discernment, and disagreement about nonsalvific issues, always knowing that as we disagree in a variety of forums that we can stand in alignment and agreement in worship before our Creator. We grieve the potential loss of our ability to dialog and hold opposing opinions. We also see this as the creation of a systemic bias where none had previously existed. We declare that the only way we can remain part of the Christian Reformed Church with integrity, if Synod 2024 intends to significantly change or remove the gravamen process, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Red Mesa
John Greydanus, stated clerk

Maintain Local Council Authority over Timelines for the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen Process

I. Background

Church Order Supplement, Article 5 lays out both the Covenant for Officebearers and the “Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina,” stating (in the Covenant) that if officebearers have difficulty with a teaching in the confessional documents, they “promise to present or receive [such] confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship . . . [as the church together seeks] a fuller understanding of the gospel.” Officebearers also commit to “submit to the church’s judgment and authority” as the church council receives any difficulties via gravamina. Neither the Church Order nor synod has provided a timeline for the use of such gravamina, entrusting this to the discernment and authority of local councils and entrusting that officebearers will submit to their councils in whatever said councils decide.

However, overtures submitted to Synod 2023 requested, among other things, that synod amend the Church Order and place timelines on this process, removing authority from local councils and compelling officebearers either to resolve their confessional difficulties, escalate their gravamen to a confessional-*revision* gravamen before synod, or be removed from their office.¹

We respect the desire of the writers of these overtures to “be of one mind” (Phil. 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8), and we understand their concerns that confessional-difficulty gravamina could threaten this unity. We also believe, with them, that officebearers should be held to a high standard. Further, we wish to maintain the option for them to choose such a time-bound process in their own churches *should their own local councils decide*. However, we do not believe such a time-bound process should be imposed by synod.

II. Overture

Classis B.C. North-West overtures Synod 2024 to maintain local council authority over timelines for the confessional-difficulty gravamen process.

Grounds:

1. The current gravamen process has served the church well since its inception, as it gives space for individuals to be open and honest about their positions and concerns while still allowing councils the authority to discern whether said positions and concerns have an impact on those individuals’ ability to serve in office.
2. Maintaining local council authority over timelines avoids synodical overreach. Gravamina are received at the local level, and decisions

¹ See, for example, Overture 50: Establish a Time of Discipleship for Officebearers with a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 529-34).

- around what to do with them should remain at the local level. Any escalation to classis or synod should be the decision of the local council, as is already laid out in the existing guidelines for gravamina.
3. While there are valid concerns about the potential abuse of gravamina, there are other ways (see point 4) to safeguard against this abuse rather than using synod-imposed timelines.
 4. Since the local council receives gravamina from officebearers with whom they are already in relationship, the local council is best equipped to discern how to support and engage these individuals in their journey of faith and growth, and on what timeline.
 5. The current gravamen process “[upholds] the confessions, the Church Order, and the Covenant for Officebearers”² while still maintaining space for respectful dialogue and discernment that allows for unity in mission and purpose, in the service of Christ and the church.

Classis B.C. North-West
Kathy N. Smith, stated clerk

OVERTURE 38

Do Not Implement Any New Acts of Discipline or Mandatory Timelines for Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

Overture

In response to Article 80 in the *Acts of Synod 2023* (pp. 1032-39), we call on Synod 2024 not to implement any new acts of discipline or mandatory timelines for officebearers who have offered a confessional-difficulty gravamen with regard to the confessional status of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR).

Grounds:

1. The Christian Reformed Church in North America is made up of a diverse community of churches and individuals seeking to understand God's teachings and God's will for our lives. Diversity enriches our faith and witness.
2. Decisions about the confessional status of the HSR have brought to light differences in perspective among individuals, congregations, and classes. Within some churches there are sizable communities of people, including current officebearers, holding differing views on this topic. It is important to seek to agree on foundational elements of our faith. And it is also important to seek to live in fellowship together within individual churches and as a broader denominational church.

² Smith, Dr. Kathy; “Gravamen: What It Is and How to Use It,” Jan. 18, 2023; crcna.org/news-and-events/news/gravamen-what-it-and-how-use-it.

3. Scripture encourages us to continue to grow and learn (2 Pet. 3:18; Phil. 1:9; Prov. 1:5). Similarly, our Reformational heritage encourages us to continually be Reformed by the Spirit of God through the Word. It is important to create space that allows for humble wondering and doctrinal wrestling within the accountability structures of council, classis, and synod. “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” (1 Cor. 13:12).
4. Applying a disciplinary approach with rigid timelines with respect to the HSR raises a serious risk of causing harm, of rushing action nonpastorally, and of causing damage to the body that may not be in alignment with God’s desire for how we proceed as a community. Poorly contemplated and rushed discipline is likely to hurt people, fracture communities, and impact the church’s ministry and witness in our communities and our families.
5. Romans 14:19 states, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” For our denomination, and for individual churches, it is our hope that this may be a season of pursuing harmony and walking in humility as we seek a path that leads to peace and mutual edification.

Classis Huron
Fred Vander Sterre, stated clerk

OVERTURE 39

Clarify the Use of a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Introduction

The confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) was created within Christian Reformed Church polity to allow officebearers the opportunity to faithfully question and wrestle with doctrines and theological matters contained within our Reformed confessions. We recognize that a CDG must be used in any instance where an officebearer has developed reservations after signing the Covenant for Officebearers. Additionally, we acknowledge the importance of the CDG in the ongoing discipleship of faithful Christ-followers under the guidance, accountability, and confidentiality of the local council.

As our churches, classes, and denomination seek to disciple its membership into alignment with the confessions, the CDG remains a vital tool which allows those new to Reformed theology, or wrestling with Reformed theology, to serve faithfully within their congregation. Their faithful service in Christ’s church is held in tandem with their engaging in continued discipleship toward alignment with the confessions of the CRC.

II. Overture

Therefore the council of Princeton CRC overtures Synod 2024 to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section B by adding the following:

- A. "3. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the officebearer is expected to submit to the church's confessions and judgments and must not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against any doctrine for which they are filing a gravamen."
- B. "4. All gravamina will be revisited in closed session (ordinarily yearly), so that the officebearer may inform council about their progress in working toward full alignment with the confessions."
- C. "5. In all active instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the officebearer shall not be delegated to the higher assemblies."

Grounds:

- 1. This recommendation upholds the authority of the local council (Art. 27-a) to provide oversight and accountability over the life and doctrine of its officebearers.
- 2. This recommendation strengthens its commitment to the confessions through (1) requiring those filing a gravamen to set aside their difficulty for the larger body and (2) requiring that no officebearer with an active confessional-difficulty gravamen will be delegated to classis or synod.
- 3. This recommendation recognizes that the CDG is a discipleship tool that aids congregations who draw membership from a variety of theological traditions and backgrounds. This recommendation therefore allows for continued long-term discipleship while officebearers serve as their gifts allow.

Council of Princeton CRC, Kentwood, Michigan
Casey Jen, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the January 16, 2024, meeting of Classis Thornapple Valley but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 40

Leave Gravamen Process as It Stands

I. Background

Almost five decades ago, and in response to specific circumstances that warranted it, the CRC developed a process by which officebearers could express personal difficulty with our creeds and confessions or request a revision to them.¹ Officebearers could submit a gravamen (pl. gravamina) that stated their difficulty (confessional-difficulty gravamen) or requested a

¹ crcna.org/news-and-events/news/summary-history-behind-guidelines-gravamina

revision (confessional-revision gravamen), and they could expect a response from their council or from a broader assembly, depending on the nature of the gravamen.

This process was used to good effect and without much fanfare until 2022. At that time, synod, by majority vote, declared a particular interpretation of the word “unchastity” in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and then declared that that interpretation had “confessional status.” Suddenly the many officebearers who disagreed with synod’s interpretation found themselves with a confessional difficulty that they had not previously had, newly created as it was by Synod 2022. Many of these officebearers, in compliance with the process laid out in the Church Order, submitted a gravamen to express that difficulty.

Synod 2023 formed a committee (Advisory Committee 8) to process the overtures it received related to the gravamen process. The committee produced a majority report and a minority report. The majority report (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1032-37; see also Communication 2, *Agenda for Synod 2024*) called for sweeping changes to the gravamen process, proposing a six-month time limit on working out one’s difficulty,² with three options at the end of it: affirm the interpretation they had difficulty with, file a confessional-revision gravamen,³ or resign from office. Before Synod 2023 could act on the recommendations of either report, the clock ran out and the work was put on hold. It will be taken up again at Synod 2024, with the majority and minority reports received as communications.

II. Overture

We overture synod to leave the gravamen process as it stands currently in the Church Order, and not to adopt the changes recommended by the majority report of Advisory Committee 8 at Synod 2023.

Grounds:

1. The gravamen process was formed out of the institutional wisdom of the past and has worked well for many decades. If changes are to be made, that should only be after serious consideration and not in reaction to, or in the midst of, a conflicted and controversial situation such as we are now in.
2. While the majority report is not coming before Synod 2024 as a report to be voted on, it is (against parliamentary advice and against precedent) coming as a “communication.” Thus, although the majority report ought not to have standing at Synod 2024, the reality is that it is likely to have a strong influence on proceedings. Thus we are compelled at this

² Depending on what one’s council and/or classis did with the gravamen, and the timing of meetings, this timeline could stretch out a little longer.

³ As Synod 2023 summarily dismissed all confessional-revision gravamina without engaging meaningfully with them, it is hard to see this as anything but an option given in bad faith.

critical moment to overture Synod 2024 not to adopt its recommendations.

3. It is transparent that the recommendations of the majority report target both in intent and effect those officebearers who have reservations about Synod 2022's definition of unchastity.⁴ Changes to the Church Order should not be made in this spirit.
4. The gravamen process was put into place to promote unity in the church and to encourage honesty and integrity on the part of those experiencing doubts and difficulties.⁵ The changes recommended by the majority report are likely to discourage open and honest communication and to lead to disunity that is hidden underground.
5. The compressed timeline recommended by the majority report is problematic on several fronts:
 - a. The Reformed tradition has always promoted thoughtful consideration of theological issues, which takes time, and to put a deadline on such Spirit-led, thoughtful discernment is foreign to our tradition.
 - b. It is destabilizing for local churches to have officebearers leave office in the middle of a term, for reasons imposed from the outside that have little or nothing to do with the life of the local church.
 - c. It puts pressure on officebearers to fall into line quickly, creating the temptation to be less than honest about their doubts and difficulties.
 - d. The majority report seems wholly insensitive to the choice their recommended timeline is imposing on hundreds of ministers: to lose a career within six months that they have perhaps spent decades building (see 6, a below), or to jeopardize their integrity so that they might continue to provide for their families (see 5, c above).
6. The majority report violates the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers in at least two ways:
 - a. A rigid timeline and harsh consequences are not in keeping with the Covenant for Officebearers, which states, "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."

⁴ As evidenced by the fact that gravamina garnered no negative attention until they were used in response to Synod 2022's interpretation of Q&A 108. Additionally, the majority report names their targets explicitly and notes that in their case, the clock is already ticking: "Since synod has already made a judgment regarding the definition of 'unchastity' in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, that synod instruct those who have submitted a CDG with respect to the definition of 'unchastity' to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of 2023" (Recommendation 4, *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1035).

⁵ crcna.org/news-and-events/news/gravamen-what-it-and-how-use-it

- b. The Covenant for Officebearers calls those who disagree with a synodical decision regarding a creed or confession (or its interpretation) to “promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.” The majority report insists that those who disagree “affirm without reservation” (Recommendation 2, b; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1034) what synod decides about a creed or confession (or its interpretation). There is a vast difference between submitting to a decision one does not personally agree with and affirming that decision without reservation. Instead of promoting *unity*, as the Covenant for Officebearers does, the majority report insists on *uniformity*. Instead of requiring submission on the part of those who disagree, as the Covenant for Officebearers does, the majority report calls for their exclusion.
7. The majority report violates Scripture when it claims that what “truly unifies” the CRC is the “standards” (Recommendation 8, Ground a; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1036). Scripture is clear that it is Jesus Christ who unifies the church (see Eph. 2:14-22; John 17:20-23; Col. 1:15-20).
8. The majority report does not recognize the fact that some doubts and difficulties never go away this side of heaven. Having them does not automatically disqualify someone from serving in office. This is why the Church Order calls for handling gravamina at the local church level; the council is in the best position to know how or whether the doubt or difficulty will affect the person’s ability to serve in their context.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Clasis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 41

Refrain from Making the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen Time-Bound

I. Background

The Synod 2023 Advisory Committee 8 majority report argues that “the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033; see also Communication 2). The report goes on to recommend that synod add the word “temporary” to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1 (p. 1034):

A confessional-difficulty gravamen: a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions.

The report then asks synod to mandate that “a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought [by the gravamen]” (p. 1035).

II. Overture

Classis Grand Rapids South overtures Synod 2024 to refrain from making the confessional-difficulty gravamen time-bound.

Grounds:

1. The process proposed by Synod 2023’s Advisory Committee 8 regarding the confessional-difficulty gravamen fails to recognize that a gravamen may express different levels of difficulty with one of the doctrines of the church. Difficulty may range from “I struggle with how to hold to this doctrine in the light of these Scriptures” to “I don’t believe this doctrine anymore.”
2. The process outlined fails to recognize that gravamina may express difficulty with different doctrinal concerns. An officebearer who is not convinced that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews (Belgic Confession, Art. 4) is expressing a concern different from an officebearer who denies the deity of Christ. The proposed timeline would not allow a council to determine if the matter should be resolved in six months or three years or longer, even though the gravamina in question would be very different.
3. The setting of an arbitrary time limit on a gravamen fails to recognize that grappling with complex theological matters requires wisdom, integrity, support, and time. We believe that any time limit would make it very difficult for a council to deal with a gravamen in a pastoral and personal way. Without a practicable gravamen process, officebearers might simply avoid the risk of sharing their concerns.

III. Conclusion

We believe that the gravamen process as it is currently outlined in the Church Order has served the church well over the years. When undertaken with integrity, humility, and respect, the process allows the church to be a place of truth and grace. It is with this in mind that we humbly request that Synod 2024 not add an arbitrary timeline to this process. We ask that you preserve the flexibility that the local council currently maintains in the process.

Classis Grand Rapids South
Paul Sausser, stated clerk

Create a Category of “Confessional-Exception Gravamen”; Clarify Its Regulations and Process in Church Order Supplement, Article 5

I. Background

Synod 2023 closed with decisions related to the use of “confessional-difficulty gravamina” deferred to Synod 2024. As a part of this, the officers of synod also deferred all Synod 2023 overtures on this topic to Synod 2024, and they forwarded Advisory Committee Reports 8D and 8E (majority and minority) to Synod 2024 as well (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1039).

The clarity of Synod 2022 and Synod 2023’s decisions on human sexuality has precipitated a larger conversation in the CRCNA about what it means to be a confessional denomination. In particular, we are asking ourselves—in churches, classes, and in-person and online discussions—what we might reasonably expect of churches, officebearers, and members as it relates to fidelity to the confessions, along with what sort of latitude exists as we wrestle with the meaning of Scripture and the confessions for life and ministry in the present. We regard this conversation as good and necessary, and we have spoken into it elsewhere (see Communication 3, *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 601-11).¹ Here we wish to speak more specifically, via an overture, about our preferred path forward for how the CRCNA will use confessional gravamina as part of this overall picture. We do this self-consciously in dialogue with the respective positions of the majority and minority reports of Advisory Committee 8 and as part of the “confessional conversation” that the CRCNA is now having.

In this overture, which proposes a new category of gravamen called a “confessional-exception gravamen,” we seek to hold in tension a delicate balance—on the one side, recognizing the legitimate role that a confessional tradition has in guiding our reading of Scripture and guarding the unity of life and doctrine in its churches, while, on the other side, not *overvaluing* that confessional tradition in a way that places it functionally on par with Scripture. In order to hold this tension, we believe that, with good guidelines and a good process in place, confessional exceptions should be allowed in certain circumstances, under proper authority and oversight. If we do not allow for this, it seems to imply a belief that our confessions *cannot* be mistaken vis-à-vis Scripture—a claim none of us should wish to make.

¹ While we certainly wish to avoid a confessional *minimalism*, we wish also to avoid a confessional *absolutism*—or a tendency to appeal to our confessions before we appeal to Scripture, or to the clarity of our confessions’ doctrinal synthesis at the expense of Scripture’s ambiguity on some questions. As we said in our Communication 3, “Confessional commitment ought *never* be a means of avoiding the gaze of God’s Word” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 604).

By way of background, and to recognize the challenges of and to head off potential concerns with this new category of gravamen, we observe the following:

1. There is precedent for “confessional exceptions” in the polity of other Reformed denominations. Both the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) allow for such exceptions in a careful and circumscribed way.² In the PCA, such exceptions are allowed only when an officebearer’s disagreement is considered “neither hostile to the system [of doctrine] nor strikes at the vitals of religion” (Book of Order, Art. 21-g). Similarly, in the EPC exceptions are allowed “that do not infringe upon the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession of Faith,”³ while no exceptions may be taken to “The Essentials of Our Faith,” a document clarifying core EPC beliefs (Book of Order, Art. 12-4). In other words, confessional exceptions are closely circumscribed, but they are allowed.
2. Yet we recognize that the above examples raise challenging questions: what sorts of exceptions would infringe too closely on our own system of doctrine, and what would not? What constitutes the “vitals of religion” in our confessions, and what does not? And who would decide? We admit that we can’t simply write policy to answer any and every possible question. In the overture below we can suggest guidelines, propose right lines of authority, and recommend obvious boundaries, but none of this can serve as a replacement for officebearers, councils, classes, and synods who act with character and integrity, and who choose to trust each other and to act in trustworthy ways. We cannot legislate our way to a wise use of Scripture, the confessions, and our Church Order.
3. We do not envision the creation of this category as opening a Pandora’s box. In fact, we expect that, if used appropriately, such confessional exceptions will be sought and approved in relatively rare circumstances.
 - a. Partly, this is a “what” question. Can officebearers take exception to core creedal doctrines? In our proposal, no. Can they disagree with a doctrine that is pervasive across the confessions, and thus closer to the heart of the system—say, the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement? In our proposal, almost certainly not. But might they quibble and take exception to the particularly strong language of the Heidelberg Catechism’s doctrine of divine providence in Q&A 27—a question on which Scripture itself is somewhat more ambiguous than the catechism? In our proposal, probably yes. As we would

² Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order*, Art. 21-f, -g; Evangelical Presbyterian Church, *Book of Order*, Art. 12-4.

³ See the “Explanatory Statement to ‘The Essentials of Our Faith’”; accessed at epc.org/about/beliefs/ on Nov. 30, 2023.

suggest it, the clearer and more pervasive a teaching is across Scripture and the more deeply connected it is to the gospel, the less likely it would be that an exception should be approved.

- b. But this is also a “who” and “why” question. Who is this officebearer who brings this exception, and why are they seeking it? Is it purely a matter of private disagreement, and born from a desire to take one’s vows seriously—in order to sign the Covenant for Officebearers in good conscience? Or is it an attempt to be *immune* from those commitments—to not submit to the judgment and authority of the church, to not accept its teaching, to not have to defend or promote its teaching, and to be free to do otherwise? In the latter case, approving an exception would be inappropriate, since even the officebearer serving with an exception is expected to be able to teach and defend the church’s position rather than their own private views.
 - c. In other words, an exception should only be granted by an assembly on an *issue* that it deems acceptable and to a *person* that it deems trustworthy. For all these “what,” “who,” and “why” reasons, then, we would expect that assemblies would be judicious and cautious in granting confessional exceptions—and generous where appropriate.
4. Having said all of that, we recognize that different assemblies will make different decisions and will have different levels of tolerance for “confessional-exception gravamina.” To our minds, this is an appropriate expression of diversity within a robust confessional system. Yes, it creates space for some types of thoughtful divergence that keeps the system honest, but it mitigates the excesses of such via the vows we take and make to one another in the Covenant for Officebearers—which, again, apply to all officebearers regardless of exceptions granted. In other words, it is a way of creating and allowing for some level of freedom and diversity while doing so within appropriate constraints and boundaries.
 5. And at this point, we are back to the question of trust. Will we trust each other and act in trustworthy ways, or will we not? Will we be people and assemblies of character, or will we not? Will we take our vows seriously, or will we not? No creation of a new category of gravamen and no change to the Church Order can serve as a substitute for the formation of the sort of Christian character and integrity that alone can make our covenantal commitments to one another work. In light of that, the overture below will *not* work—and it may even create *more* conflict—unless we learn to love, trust, and submit to one another (and our assemblies) out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).

None of the above places an individual’s views above those of the church’s confessions as it relates to a right reading of Scripture; nor does it inherently

water down confessional commitment. On the contrary, it makes confessional subscription more realistic and honest, and it has the potential to spur conversations that would renew the best aspects of Reformed confessionalism rather than settle for the diluted form we currently exhibit.

With the above as background, then, we offer the following overture.

II. Overture

The council of Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan, overtures Synod 2024 to revise the section titled “Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina” in Church Order Supplement, Article 5 to create a category of gravamen called a “confessional-exception gravamen” and to clarify the regulations for how such gravamina could be used, as well as the process to be followed in granting them. Specifically, we recommend the following revisions to Church Order Supplement, Article 5 in order to create this category and clarify its use (recommended changes are indicated by ~~striketrough~~ and underline):

Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina

Synod declares that gravamina fall into ~~at least three~~ basic types:

1. *A confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with a point of doctrine/teaching contained in the confessions but does not take settled exception to nor call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. *A confessional-exception gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber takes settled exception to a point of doctrine/teaching contained in the confessions but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 3. *A confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
- A. Guidelines as to the meaning . . . *[stays the same]*
1. The person signing 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.
 2. *[Stays the same]*
 3. *[Stays the same]*
- B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:
1. *[Stays the same]*
 2. *[Stays the same]*
 3. If an officebearer’s confessional-difficulty gravamen (i.e., his or her “request for information” and the conversation that ensues)

results in either the resolution of the difficulty or agnosticism on the point of difficulty, the process may end at this stage. Only in the case of sustained and settled disagreement with a teaching in the confessions should an officebearer move to the next stage and submit a confessional-exception gravamen.

[The following new section C would be inserted; the next section would remain the same and become section D.]

C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-exception gravamen:

1. Candidates for ministry in the office of minister of the Word (including missionaries, professors, and others not serving congregations as pastors) or commissioned pastor shall provide a written statement of any exceptions to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort prior to a classical examination, and the classis shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.
2. Should a minister of the Word (including a missionary, a professor, and any other not serving a congregation as pastor) or commissioned pastor develop an exception to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort following ordination, he or she shall report those exceptions to his or her council and provide a written statement of those exceptions to the classis, and the classis shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.
3. Nominated and/or elected elders and deacons shall provide a written statement of any exceptions to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort prior to their ordination, and the council shall act to allow or disallow those exceptions. Should an elder or deacon develop an exception to the confessions following ordination, he or she shall report those exceptions to his or her council via a written statement, and the council shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions.
4. In the case of an elder or deacon, should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. In the case of a minister, elder, or deacon, if a classis judges, after examination, that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit the matter to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
5. In the event that a confessional-exception gravamen (whether of a minister, elder, or deacon) is accepted by a council and/or classis, that decision shall be filed with both the officebearer's clerk of

council and the clerk of classis,⁴ and shall be publicly available to council members and classis delegates as they make decisions about delegating officebearers to higher assemblies. A confessional-exception gravamen, in other words, unlike a confessional-difficulty gravamen, is not a private matter but a matter of public record at the level of congregation and classis. The information filed should take the following form: (a) officebearer's name and church; (b) office; (c) type of gravamen (i.e., exception); (d) point of exception.

6. An officebearer who serves with an approved exception is not, by virtue of having that exception, prohibited from being delegated to higher assemblies, nor from being nominated for classical or denominational positions. However, the council and/or classis may consider an officebearer's exception when choosing whether or not to delegate him or her to a higher assembly, or when nominating him or her for a classical or denominational position.
7. In the event that a confessional-exception gravamen (whether of a minister, elder, or deacon) is not accepted by a council and/or classis, the officebearer may seek, together with the council/classis, to pursue a process that resolves the exception so that it no longer exists, or the officebearer may choose not to serve or to resign from office.
8. While an approved exception allows for private disagreement and the preservation of conscience with respect to some point(s) of doctrine in the confessions, it does not allow an officebearer to "preach, teach, write, serve, or live" contrary to that point of doctrine while serving in office. All of the expectations of the Covenant for Officebearers remain for ministers, elders, and deacons serving with an exception.
9. No exceptions for any officebearer are to be approved that infringe upon or undermine essential points of doctrine as they are contained in the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed). Assemblies shall also recognize that not all doctrine contained in the confessions is of equal import; nor is Scripture equally clear with respect to every point of doctrine in the confessions. Assemblies, therefore, shall use great caution in approving any exceptions to the confessions in areas in which Scripture is deemed clear, as well as in areas that may be

⁴ In the case of a minister, it shall also be placed on the ministerial credentials. When a church and/or classis delegates any officebearer serving with an exception to a higher assembly, that officebearer's exception shall also be placed on the church's/classis's credentials to the higher assembly.

seen to infringe upon or undermine key tenets of a Reformed system of doctrine.

10. If, at any time, an officebearer's exception is resolved such that he or she no longer takes settled exception to a point of doctrine/teaching in the confessions, the officebearer shall report this to the assembly that approved the exception, and, upon examination, the assembly shall act to resolve or not resolve the exception. If the exception is resolved, it shall no longer be filed with the officebearer's clerk of council and clerk of classis.

DE. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:

[The rest of this section would be unchanged.]

Grounds:

1. The language "without reservation" is unnecessarily stringent an expectation and impossible to apply in practice.
2. The current language of Church Order Supplement, Article 5 on a confessional-difficulty gravamen makes clear that such a gravamen is largely a "personal request for information and/or clarification" which the officebearer hopes to resolve in consult with the "examination and judgment" of his or her council (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 1-2). Attempts to use a confessional-difficulty gravamen outside this purpose (e.g., as a settled exception) run afoul of a plain-sense reading of Church Order, and such attempts understandably raise questions about the motivations attached to such use.
3. Yet there is, in practice if not in theory, well-established precedent for using confessional-difficulty gravamina in just this way, as a sort of limited exception, whether the formal process is followed or not.⁵ For the sake of clarity, then, and so as not to further deepen the disconnect between theory and practice, we should allow confessional-difficulty gravamina to function simply as Church Order defines them and create a new category ("confessional-exception gravamen") which accords with our historic practice and builds guidelines and processes around it so as to safeguard it from abuse.
4. Church Order articulates a balance between local and supralocal authority and accountability (Art. 27). Differences in the ordination of ministers versus elders/deacons (transferability, length of time, where discernment and examination occur, etc.) suggest that a minister's exception is best adjudicated at the classical level, while an elder/deacon's exception is best dealt with at the local level (see proposed section

⁵ This accords with how Calvin University handles confessional-difficulty gravamina (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1036), but it is also, more informally, how churches have dealt with situations involving an officebearer who has a difficulty with, e.g., infant baptism.

- C, 1-3). Further, given the settled (long-term) nature of these exceptions, it is wise for such exceptions to be a matter of the “public” (i.e., council and classical) record, rather than a private matter between officebearer and council, so that assemblies can make informed decisions about delegating and nominating officebearers (proposed section C, 5). This increases transparency and trust.
5. Given that the vows made in the Covenant for Officebearers still apply to any officebearer serving with a “confessional-exception gravamen,” there is no reason for this type of gravamen to involve a time-bound process that must end in resolution of the exception,⁶ nor should it automatically disqualify an officebearer from being delegated to a higher assembly or serving in a classical/denominational position (proposed section C, 6). This does not threaten confessional identity or the faithfulness of our assemblies. It simply allows for certain types of exception to be taken when an assembly judges that space may be given to private conscience—while placing significant expectations on the officebearer who requests such an exception as well as acknowledging certain nonnegotiable matters on which an assembly must *not* grant an exception (proposed section C, 9).
 6. All of this is not at all dissimilar to how the Presbyterian Church in America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church handle matters of confessional commitment in their Books of Order,⁷ applied to the particulars of our own polity. Such provisions seem to work well in these contexts and have not watered down confessional commitment.
 7. The above policy—keeping confessional-difficulty gravamina narrowly construed and private while creating a category of “confessional-exception gravamina” carefully circumscribed and public—has a greater chance of enhancing transparency and trust among churches and officebearers than do either of the alternatives in Advisory Committee Report 8E: on the one hand, the functional eradication of confessional-difficulty gravamina in the way that they have been historically used (majority report), and, on the other, the ongoing confusing, inconsistent, and somewhat suspicious use of confessional-difficulty gravamina in ways that are at odds with Church Order (minority report).

Council of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan
Paul Katerberg, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

⁶ In this respect, we oppose the majority report when it proposes a time-bound process for the resolution of (in its case) a confessional-difficulty gravamen (*Acts of Synod 2023*, Art. 80, C, 3, pp. 1034-35).

⁷ See footnote 2 above.

Amend the Church Order Supplement to Reflect Grace and Truth in the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen Process

I. Background

As the body of Christ, we have a fundamental commitment to reflecting Christ's fullness of grace and truth (John 1:14) in all our endeavors, including the confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG). The Covenant for Officebearers echoes this sentiment, calling officebearers "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" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). Our covenant emphasizes a pastoral approach in handling CDGs (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

Synod 2022's decision to recognize the Human Sexuality Report's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as confessional highlighted the need for a pastoral approach in the CDG process. Synod 2023 was tasked to address this need, and it received majority and minority reports (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1032-39), which it sent to Synod 2024. The Council of Brookfield (Wis.) CRC hopes that Synod 2024 continues the work begun in 2023 and that this overture will contribute to the ongoing discourse.

Some of the proposed recommendations impose a stringent timeline for the CDG process, potentially limiting the process to two years. At the close of the process, officebearers with confessional difficulties would choose to either "(1) affirm the standards, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1035). A strict time limit puts unnecessary pressure on officebearers to rush a decision or end their service to their churches. This kind of strict limit deviates from the personalized and amenable approach that marks pastoral care.

There is also consideration of a mandate that officebearers with confessional difficulties "teach, act, promote, [and] defend" even the parts of the confessions with which they are wrestling (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1034). This is a heavy burden to place on our brothers and sisters who are already dealing with the weight of a confessional difficulty. Followers of Christ are called to give compassion and understanding even to our enemies, how much more to fellow children of our Father? As church leaders, no less than others, we need appropriate forums for expressing our doubts, our failings, and our difficulties. Following Christ's call, we can be examples to the flock of how to be gracious when experiencing and responding to conflicts (1 Tim. 4:11-16). Those going through the CDG process should not teach contrary to our confessions or disparage them but should not be compelled to feign agreement while they struggle internally. Our churches can endure this tension and must be willing to have real dialogue around areas of disagreement.

In conclusion, imposing strict timelines and unnecessary burdens will move us away from Christ's call: grace and truth. These changes threaten the nurturing

spaces that are vital for providing pastoral care to those wrestling with confessional difficulties. They run contrary to the spirit of our Covenant for Officebearers and of our faith, which demand no less than all humility, gentleness, patience, and love as we bear with one another (Col. 3:13).

This overture is presented with the hope of guiding Synod 2024 toward a path that wholeheartedly embraces the embodiment of grace and truth as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. It aims to encourage our church bodies to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual love, fellowship, and nurturing spaces for all, particularly for those grappling with confessional difficulties.

II. Overture

Brookfield (Wis.) Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2024 to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B as follows (with deletions indicated by ~~strike through~~ and additions indicated by underline).

B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:

1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for counsel, examination, and judgment. *[Note: The rest of subpoint 1 becomes subpoint 5 below.]* Upon receiving a confessional-difficulty gravamen, the assembly addressed shall begin a process of discipleship and discernment, in conjunction with two deputies from the immediately larger assembly. Together, they are responsible for providing time, encouragement, and counsel toward the officebearer’s full alignment with the confessions. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the officebearer and the assembly are presenting, receiving, and resolving confessional difficulties in a spirit of love, humility, and fellowship as together they seek a fuller understanding of the gospel.
2. As part of this process, the officebearer, the assembly addressed, and the deputies shall set a reasonable timeline for the resolution of the confessional difficulty. The timeline may be modified if all three parties agree that such a modification would be profitable and lead to the resolution of the confessional difficulty. The deputies shall report to the immediately larger assembly on the nature and timelines of ongoing processes. These reports shall be given annually and at any such time as the deputies believe that the process will not result in aligning the officebearer with the confessions in life and faith.
32. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information

and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not an exception to the confessions themselves or anything that holds confessional status. Therefore, an assembly may not merely acknowledge an officebearer's reservation regarding a confession—it must work toward resolving it. Likewise, this process may not be used as a means to coerce conformity or resignation—the assembly must provide due pastoral care. This care includes, but is not limited to, offering instruction and clarification regarding the confession in question.

4. While her or his confessional-difficulty gravamen process is ongoing, an officebearer must (1) submit their life and actions to the standards set by the church's confessions and judgments, (2) refrain from teaching contrary to or disparaging these confessions and judgments when they instruct, disciple, care for, and counsel others, (3) work actively in good faith toward full alignment with the confessions even after the term of their service is over, and (4) continue to serve the church faithfully, which may include participating in larger assemblies, provided they abstain from decisions and advocacy directly related to their area of confessional difficulty.
5. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge/resolve the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide/resolve the matter, it may submit ~~it~~the matter to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
6. All assemblies are encouraged to initiate a periodic review of the confessions. This review is designed to encourage the officebearers' continuous spiritual growth and to energize life-long discipleship. As part of this review, the assemblies should engage those who have completed the above process, inquiring about their alignment with their previous area of difficulty. This review and inquiry shall be pastoral—a chance to edify and better understand each other. As part of this inquiry, the assemblies shall consider how they can disciple, correct, instruct, and admonish in a way that increasingly glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grounds:

1. This amendment clarifies the confessional-difficulty gravamen process to prevent potential misuse and to ensure it serves its intended purpose effectively.

2. This amendment ensures a more pastoral approach to resolving confessional difficulties, allowing sufficient time for thoughtful discernment and fostering a nurturing space that prioritizes pastoral care and mutual understanding.
3. This provision fosters accountability by involving deputies from a larger assembly, ensuring that the resolution process adheres to the church's confessional standards while embracing a spirit of love and fellowship, in line with the church's forms of unity.
4. The amendment acknowledges that experiencing confessional difficulties may be part of one's lifelong discipleship and spiritual growth that requires nurturing spaces for honest wrestling.
5. This amendment enables officebearers to maintain their active role in the church community while honoring the church's current understanding of its confessions.

Council of Brookfield (Wis.) CRC
Craig Du Mez, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 17, 2024, meeting of Classis Wisconsin but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 44

Do Not Allow Calvin University Faculty to Take Exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty Members

I. Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 not to allow faculty of Calvin University to take exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty Members in the particular area of our confessional definition of “unchastity.”

Ground:

Calvin's own documents, in consultation with past synods, gives synod the right to speak into the confessional implications of the university:

1. The Covenant for Faculty Members uses the same language as that of the Covenant for Officebearers in the following key paragraphs:

We also affirm three confessions—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. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and

defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

(Faculty Handbook, 3.5.1.1, p. 42)

To “heartily believe,” “promote,” and “defend” the doctrines and at the same time be given the space not to believe them is disingenuous and is a violation of the ninth commandment.

2. The Faculty Handbook aligns faculty with our Church Order regulations:

For the work of the university, the meaning of affirming the confessions shall be determined according to the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church (e.g., Church Order, Article 5, and its Supplement), which currently reads:

The person signing the Covenant for Faculty Members affirms without reservation the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being taught in the Word of God.

(3.5.1.1, p. 43)

This language of affirming “without reservation” does not allow for differing opinions in this matter. If Synod 2024 were to make the gravamina regulations clearer and tighter, Calvin’s adherence to our Church Order should follow.

3. The Faculty Handbook says, “When the synod of the Christian Reformed Church has issued a formal interpretation of the confessions, that interpretation shall be binding for Calvin University,” and, “Any judgment of the Board of Trustees is in turn subject to the judgment of the synod of the Christian Reformed Church” (3.5.1.1, p. 44).
4. Calvin University’s paper on Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom says, “While CRC synodical decisions are ‘settled and binding’ with respect to pertinent aspects of institutional policy, they do not automatically limit academic freedom unless they are offered as ‘interpretations of the confessions’” (p. 7). Since synod has interpreted a confession and recognized it as having confessional status, especially with regard to a sin issue, this should mean that no exceptions are allowed in this particular area.
5. Calvin University’s paper on Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom says that “authority to make binding judgments about the meaning and implications of the confessions is assigned to synod” (p. 41).
 - a. The longstanding exceptions policy for faculty was often over issues such as disagreeing with the language of detesting the Anabaptists in our confessions, infant baptism, or teachings on reprobation. We should not allow exceptions for matters of sin that would endanger someone’s salvation (1 Cor. 6:9-10), whether that is a private or publicly held belief.

- b. Other institutions such as Dordt University and Reformed Theological Seminary do not allow exceptions to the confessions for their faculty, and both institutions are thriving.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 45

Appoint a Task Force to Shape a Gentle Pathway for Those Departing the CRCNA

I. Background

In our current tumult, many of those connected to the CRCNA are discerning that it is time to leave: members, officebearers, and whole congregations. This overture is born out of lament that our unity in Christ is breaking, and out of a desire to love well those who have discerned it is time to leave. Not only are many discerning it is time to leave; they are being forced out of the CRCNA. Written and verbal communication in many circumstances is summarized as “If you don’t like it, leave.” This overture, inspired by some ideas from Rev. Cedric Parcels, asks that Synod 2024 appoint a task force to provide support especially for the pastors and the congregations who depart the CRCNA.

II. Overture

The council of River Park Church of Calgary, Alberta, overtures synod to appoint a Gentle Pathway Task Force for the purpose of providing support for those departing the CRCNA, with the focus primarily on supporting congregations and pastors who have discerned a need to leave the CRCNA. This task force would consider how, if at all possible, to do such things as the following:

- equipping the CRCNA to pray for one another with both conviction and kindness
- allowing ministers departing the CRCNA to remain in the CRCNA Pension Plan
- supporting CRCNA staff if they discern a need to leave their employment without having a new position to enter
- inviting CRCNA ministries, agencies, and institutions to engage in discernment with their own stakeholder groups regarding how best to reshape their formal relationship with the CRCNA so as best to flourish in their mission
- providing support with the help of Thrive (Pastor and Church Support) for congregations and ministers in their discernment about departure from the CRCNA

- establishing ways for congregations and ministers departing the CRCNA to collaborate as they determine if they could remain connected after departing
- providing support for any collective group of congregations working to establish a new, independent denominational structure
- considering how, if possible, to support the CRCNA community experiencing a sense of loss by way of professional counseling opportunities
- discerning if other tasks are helpful or doable as they may come up in the discernment of the task force or in feedback from congregations or individuals
- by doing all of these things in order to shape a Gentle Pathway toward separation, hopefully minimizing any discerned need for litigation for property or funds in the body of Christ

Grounds:

1. We are seeing multiple signs that congregations and ministers are discerning the need to leave the CRCNA. We desire not to coerce unity, and we desire to love those who are departing the CRCNA, whatever their reasons.
2. The tasks named above, and others to be discerned by the task force, are complex enough to require a focused team to work through the challenges.
3. A task force with diverse denominational connections and support from the Office of General Secretary is best equipped to shape this gentle pathway for those discerning the need to leave.

Council of River Park Church, Calgary, Alberta
Joanne Spronk, clerk

Note: This overture was adopted by the council of River Park Church on January 29, 2024. This overture was presented to Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan on March 8, 2024, but was not adopted.

APPENDIX

A. Who is finding the CRCNA to be a challenging denomination?

Here follow the examples of two congregations:

1. **First CRC of Byron Center, Michigan:** First Byron CRC is a vibrant congregation with a membership of 1,398 persons. In December 2023, the elders of First Byron CRC sent a letter to their congregation informing the congregation that they have established a “Denominational Discernment Committee.” For rationale, the elders wrote, “First Byron CRC and the CRC denomination have been misaligned on critical issues for many years.” They speak about fundamental disagreements around women in

office, social justice, and the sinfulness of homosexual desire, among other topics.

The elders of First Byron CRC lament that the PCA and OPC have ended their fraternal relations with the CRCNA. In addition, they name that the CRCNA's membership in NAPARC (the largest gathering of conservative Reformed denominations in the United States) was terminated in 2001 as a result of the CRCNA opening the offices of elder and minister to women.

2. **Emmanuel CRC of Calgary, Alberta:** Emmanuel CRC is also a vibrant congregation with a membership of 527 persons. In April 2023, the council of Emmanuel CRC sent a letter to their congregation providing an update on their local process with respect to the topic decisions of synod "related to homosexuality as addressed in the Human Sexuality Report and 'confessional status' of Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism." The council focuses on discerning a local path forward for Emmanuel CRC, a congregation that has diverse views on the topic of same-sex marriage.

Equipped with feedback from listening circles and book groups, from surveys and congregational meetings, the council of Emmanuel CRC gathered to discern a pathway forward that seemed best to them and the Spirit as they guided the congregation. They prioritized the unity of their local congregation, respecting the leadership of those who hold office. In the end, the motions adopted by the council of Emmanuel CRC put them in direct tension with the challenging decisions of Synod 2022.

B. Are others finding the CRCNA to be a challenging denomination?¹

A brief readthrough of various CRC-related social media spaces provides a glimpse of the many others who are currently struggling with whether or not they want to stay connected to the CRCNA. Those who are wrestling with this question cover the whole range of theological perspectives on a whole range of theological and ethical topics (same-sex marriage, women in office, critical race theory, political alignment, gun ownership, binationality, and more). For those interested in listening in to a wider CRCNA conversation, here is a sampling of the social media and web-based locations where members of the CRCNA talk (not always civilly) across lines of difference:

- CRC Voices Group (groups.io/g/crc-voices)
- Toward CRC Canada (on Facebook)

¹ Throughout this section, we do not provide further links or quotes to "prove" our statements that many are struggling with remaining in the CRCNA. To do so feels like "airing dirty laundry" in public. And we trust this is fairly common knowledge. For this section, a curious person is invited to simply read through the various social media spaces listed. If that is not sufficient to verify our current reality, we would suggest putting a question out to the CRC Voices Group and on the Toward CRC Canada Facebook page, as these two places have a responsive audience.

- The Network (network.crcna.org/; in many cases, the comment section reveals tension)
- The Banner Magazine (on Facebook; in many cases, the comment section reveals tension)
- The Christian Courier (christiancourier.com/)

C. Do we know who will leave?

Many of our CRCNA churches have lost members. It is hard to know who will leave and how to love and support members who discern the need to leave the CRCNA. Some who are leaving are lifelong CRCNA individuals and families. The experience for some is traumatic. Some have been—or maybe currently are—officebearers. Their departure may be challenging for the local congregation. Some are ministers, entering into ministry expecting to serve in the CRCNA for their entire life, but discerning an inability to stay. And, as noted above, some who are leaving are entire congregations—both on the conservative end and the progressive end. Even some moderate churches wonder if they simply need to depart what feels like a tumultuous denomination, unable in the current moment to collaborate around a common mission.

D. Shaping a more gentle path for those who discern they must leave

On the other hand, there are many in the CRCNA who wish we could remain united despite the many differences. A phrase often used has been “unity without the need for uniformity.” Indeed, the original author of this overture wishes we would all slow the process down and take time to listen more carefully to one another, asking the Spirit to help us discern a way to live into our God-given unity in Jesus.

But a coerced unity is not a healthy unity.

And the evidence suggests that some—perhaps many—are discerning a need to leave the CRCNA. Why is this happening now? We may each list very different reasons for this situation. We may place blame on different communities for our current turmoil. Listening in to our social media spaces, it might even be the case that we consider others within the CRCNA as enemies, battling over the CRCNA.

But Jesus calls us to love even our enemies. How much more should we love those in our own covenant community?

When we put these two pieces together—a desire not to coerce unity and a desire to love those who are leaving—it is the wisdom of this overture that synod should form a task force to give shape to a gentle path for those who discern they must depart from the CRCNA.

E. Potential aspects of a gentle path for those discerning to leave

In February 2020, Rev. Aaron Vriesman published an article in *The Banner* titled “LGBTQ-Incompatible Means Gracious Separation Is the Church’s

Best Option.”² In social media conversation that followed on what was at the time a public Facebook page, Rev. Paul Verhoef asked the online community, “What do you imagine that separation to look like?” While there were many clarifying responses, we would like to focus on the response of Rev. Cedric Parsels.³ In his response, Rev. Parsels named seven things:

1. “not to act out of hostility or animosity”
2. “agreeing that we will no longer fight for the levers of power in the denomination”
3. “agreeing that we will not enter into litigation for church property and funds”
4. “praying for one another”
5. “safeguarding ministers’ pensions”
6. “helping each other to organize independent denominational structures”
7. “making professional counseling resources available to those who need help processing or adjusting this loss”

This overture considers this response of Rev. Parsels to be a good start to naming some of the ways to shape a gentle path for those who are discerning it is time to leave the CRCNA.

While it would be the work of the task force to shape this path with more detail, it may be helpful even in this overture to consider further some of the suggestions above.

F. How to pray for one another in a helpful way

Some participants in Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 expressed afterward that worshipping together was quite a complicated spiritual, emotional, and social dynamic. How can I sing songs of praise together with others when I just listened to thirty minutes of people arguing that our church should be under discipline? How can I pray about unity when someone just stood at the microphone and professed to believing something that I consider fully unbiblical?

Another example of the complication of praying together and for one another can be seen in the prayer initiative leading up to Synod 2022. Classes were invited to join Colin Watson in prayer together, but not everyone felt able to pray with one another. When Classis Minnkota and Classis Grand Rapids East were put in the same prayer group, Classis “Minnkota declined to be part of a small prayer group that also included members of Classis Grand Rapids East.”⁴

² thebanner.org/columns/2020/02/lgbtq-incompatible-means-gracious-separation-is-the-church-s-best-option

³ Response of Rev. Cedric Parsels to an article posted by Carla Morris on Mar. 2, 2020.

⁴ thebanner.org/news/2022/02/prayer-meeting-challenge-ahead-of-synod-2022

Given this situation, it is not a simple question to ask, “How can we equip one another to pray in ways that are both integrous to our own convictions and kind to one another?” And yet, throughout the New Testament, we are commanded to pray continually—including (but not limited to) praying for one another (James 5:16), praying for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44), and praying for those who are committing sin (1 John 5:16).

It would be helpful for a task force to equip us to pray well, both with conviction and kindness.

G. Safeguarding ministers’ pensions—and providing for gentle pathways for CRCNA staff

As mentioned above, most ministers in the CRCNA imagined themselves serving in this denomination until their retirement.

But what if their congregation has discerned a need to leave the CRCNA? What does that minister do? That minister may so love their congregation—and vice versa—that the two desire to remain together. But if the congregation desires to shift to a new denomination not in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRCNA, the minister is forced to choose between leaving the congregation or leaving the CRCNA pension plan. This makes their decision more difficult.

Or what if a minister in their final years of ministry discerns they must leave the CRCNA in this current moment? Maybe they simply want to join a denomination that aligns more closely with their theological convictions (i.e., women in office or gay marriage). But if they leave, they lose the CRCNA pension plan’s support for a post-retirement final move—and they had plans to move to the city where their grandkids live. This makes their decision more difficult.

Could a task force find a way for ministers who depart the CRCNA to opt into remaining with the CRCNA pension plan? That would be a gentle and kind gift in these current times.

But we would also ask that the task force consider how to support CRCNA staff (ministry staff, agency staff, institutional staff) who may be discerning it is time to leave their employment with the CRCNA. Is it possible to provide loving support for CRCNA staff who are discerning it is time to leave their employment? Some may find other positions and simply shift from one to the other. But what about those who simply need to leave in this complex time—could we provide a few months of financial support?

H. No longer fighting for the levers of power in the denomination⁵

If one pays attention to the conversations over the past years about the CRCNA, the word “power” comes up often. Indeed, we have worked to

⁵ Again, in this section, we do not provide further links or quotes to “prove” our statements that there are many accusations of abuse of power currently being leveled. And we trust this is fairly common knowledge. If the reader has need to verify this claim, we

shape a new policy around abuse of power. And accusations of “abuse of power” are on the rise. Some believe that denominational staff or leadership have misused their power. Others believe the synod and synodical delegates have misused their power. As one gets down to more local conversations at a classical level or local church level, the concerns about use of power only multiply. On the above-mentioned social media spaces—and particularly in the “like-minded” spaces—accusations of misuse or abuse of power are incredibly common.

So what are the “levers of power” in the denomination?

Are we talking about positional leadership and the related power found in CRCNA staff positions or Council of Delegate members? Are we talking about the power of synod to enforce discipline at a local level or make “unprecedented”⁶ decisions? Are we talking about the relationship of Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University to the denomination? How about who gets to be delegated to synod? If there are CRCNA ministries, agencies, or institutions who desire a greater independence from the CRCNA, is the synod-appointed board seen as a “lever of power”?

We would trust—and pray—that a task force composed of a wide variety of well-connected CRCNA members would be able to identify the vast concerns around the “levers of power,” and, with the Spirit’s guidance, determine how to diminish the battle of these levers.

At a minimum, we imagine ministries, agencies, and institutions need to be given freedom for discernment. This discernment should not simply be the work of the COD or a particular board of governors but should include a wider list of stakeholders, especially those who do the work of the ministry, agency, or institution.

I. Not entering into litigation for church property or church funds

It may be complicated to ask congregations or the denomination to not enter into litigation. If there is real and destructive “abuse of power” in the local congregation, litigation may be the only way for those without power to be heard.

But, related to the above, there are “levers of power” that a task force could minimize.

would again suggest putting a question out to the CRC Voices Group and on the Toward CRC Canada Facebook page, as these two places have a responsive audience. In addition, writing current and former members of the classical ministry committee in Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan would help to provide ample evidence.

⁶ “Unprecedented” is used here because this is the word used by Rev. Paul De Vries when he chaired Synod 2023. At one point, he simply conceded to a delegate asking a question from the floor, saying something like “We have already acknowledged that the decisions of Synod 2022 were unprecedented.” The curious reader is welcome to watch the last few days of Synod 2023 to find the exact quote.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when churches discerned it was time to leave the CRCNA because of decisions around women in church office, the CRCNA discovered the complications of some of our historical precedents and local church bylaws. We discovered that some church bylaws give full power to those who are staying connected to the CRCNA. If 90 percent of a local congregation wants to leave the CRCNA, should the 10 percent who desire to remain in the CRCNA get everything? Some bylaws—and some Church Order precedents—gave this impression. And thus . . . litigation happened in what felt like unfair situations.

A task force could be helpful here as well. Could the task force make recommendations that would allow for a more gentle pathway to separation?

Here is an example. What if a church is not all on the same page, and 90 percent want to leave but 10 percent want to remain. And what if that local church has a bylaw saying that the classis gets to decide which group gets all the assets (or, alternatively, that whichever group aligns with decisions of the CRCNA gets to keep all the assets). In this case, a motion adopted by synod could simply state that the group with the largest percentage has priority in receiving the church assets, but should also provide reasonable support to the smaller group if they decide to set up a new congregation.

These are very complicated matters. If we do not consider them carefully, we may end up with multiple appeals to synod and massive amounts of litigation, harming the church's witness to the world. A task force is the right tool to consider ways to provide a more gentle, wise, and kind pathway for those who have discerned they need to separate from the CRCNA.

J. Support for organizing independent denominational structures

As Rev. Parsels noted, departing churches may wish to collaborate. Could those remaining in the CRCNA provide support for new independent denominational structures that might take shape? We also imagine that there may be a benefit for departing ministers to collaborate. Some may want to “depart together” into a new denomination.

In both of these cases, the task force, perhaps with support from Thrive (Pastor and Church Support), may be able to equip congregations and pastors for this discernment—but also help those congregations or churches stay in contact with those in a similar situation.

- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to shift to the PCA.
- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to shift to the RCA.
- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to collaborate nationally.

The task force may be able to support healthy communication between congregations ready to depart—so that they do not need to navigate such challenging decisions alone.

K. Professional counseling resources for working through a sense of loss

Churches, pastors, officebearers, and members may all be considering leaving the CRCNA. Some of these have been CRC their whole lives. Others perhaps found the CRC, joined, and discovered that this particular theological community felt more like “home” than ever before. Departing a community that they love is painful.

What about providing professional counseling for those who are experiencing a strong sense of loss? Could group counseling be made available? Could Thrive (Pastor and Church Support) help shape services of lament? While there are surely questions of cost and scope, finding a way to mourn with those who mourn is an act of Christian love. We wonder if the task force might be able to consider these things.

COMMUNICATIONS

COMMUNICATION 1

Advisory Committee 8D Report (*forwarded from Synod 2023*)

Response to Overture 68: Shepherd Congregations into Another Denomination

A. Materials

Overture 68; *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 573-74

B. Observations

This overture asks to create two committees to help congregations who desire to disaffiliate to do so in a supported way. This overture does not recognize some of the materials that already exist, nor the core responsibility that a classis has for ensuring that this support is available.

C. Recommendations

1. That synod remind classes of the support that the Office of General Secretary offers for churches that are seeking to disaffiliate from the CRC.
2. That classis leaders familiarize themselves with their responsibility to offer support through a church's disaffiliation process.
3. That the Office of General Secretary pay particular attention to the needs of disaffiliating churches and of classes who are supporting them to ensure that the proper support is available.
4. That synod consider this to be its response to Overture 68.

Jason Ruis, chair
Todd Kuperus, reporter

COMMUNICATION 2

Advisory Committee 8E Report (majority) (*forwarded from Synod 2023*)

Response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 57-58, 60-64, 66-69, 73-76 (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1032-37)

A. Materials

Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 73, 74, 75, and 76; *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 522-46, 550-56, 559-66, 571-84, 590-98

B. Introduction

The concept of the confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) was created within the CRC to allow officebearers to honestly question doctrinal matters contained in our confessions, giving them space to wrestle with the biblical accuracy of these doctrines while also ensuring that there would be a season of pastoral care provided for the officebearer in his/her struggle and search for clarification.

A CDG occurs when “a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, 1). This kind of gravamen is submitted by a subscriber to a church council for “examination and judgment.” A CDG is defined as “a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). Therefore, “examination and judgment” of a CDG occurs when the subscriber receives the information and/or clarification being sought—either from the church council, the classis, or concluding with synod.

Since (1) “no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3) and (2) the person signing the Covenant for Officebearers must affirm “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, Art. 5, A, 1), the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision whereby some terminal action takes place. This is true because signing the Covenant for Officebearers requires all subscribers to affirm that the doctrines in the standards “fully agree with the Word of God,” to promise “to be formed and governed by them,” and to “heartily believe and . . . promote and defend their doctrines . . .” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).

This reflects the nature of a CDG as seen in the historical development of this type of gravamen in the Harry Boer case from Synod 1976. Synod 1976 understood the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a personal request for help in resolving one’s doubts. And the way a council, classis, or synod was to do that was by providing the officebearer with the “information and/or clarification” of the confessions (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church’s creeds and confessions.

The CRC does not allow gravamina as exceptions to the standards. While the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.

Note: We wish for synod to recognize that Advisory Committee 8 had agreement on Recommendations 1, 3-a, 3-c, and 6-12.

C. Recommendations

1. That synod allow all officebearers delegated to Synod 2023 to remain seated as delegates.

Ground: Prior to Synod 2023 there was confusion surrounding the nature and use of a CDG. Now that it has been clarified, each officebearer can serve until at least the end of 2023.

2. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the proper use of a CDG and provide a timeline for its process (changes are underlined).

a. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1

1. *A confessional-difficulty gravamen:* a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and

b. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1

1. The person signing 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. “Without reservation” means that the CRC does not allow gravamina as exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.

c. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, by adding a point 3:

3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber’s doubts about a doctrine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber’s settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

Grounds:

- 1) There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing a subscriber to take an exception to the standards.
- 2) There is already a provision in place to revise the confessions if they are found to be in error.
- 3) Although the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.

3. That synod approve the following process for a CDG:

- a. During the time the officebearer has a CDG, the individual must teach, act, promote, defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately while the gravamen is still unresolved, and the individual must diligently work toward resolving their confessional difficulty.
- b. Based on the process laid out in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 1, a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG appears before synod, synod's decision will be binding and the subscriber will have until the end of that calendar year to either (1) affirm the standards, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office.
- c. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of the CDG process.

Ground: It is necessary to have a delineated process that guides churches, classes, and synod according to the purposes of gravamina.

4. Since synod has already made a judgment regarding the definition of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, that synod instruct those who have submitted a CDG with respect to the definition of "unchastity" to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of 2023. This would also include, if applicable, their resigning from their position(s) in broader assemblies, boards, or committees.

Grounds:

- a. The process explained above has already happened in part during 2022-2023.
- b. The decision regarding the definition of "unchastity" has already been examined and judged by Synod 2022. Therefore, the above amendment and timeline do not apply.
- c. There is no need to file a confessional-revision gravamen unless new grounds are provided, since synod has affirmed the definition of "unchastity" as settled and binding.

5. That synod instruct councils to begin special discipline of officebearers who are suspended from office at the end of 2023 if they refuse to adhere to the definition of "unchastity" reflected in the standards.

Grounds:

- a. Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements state the appropriateness and process for the special discipline of officebearers.
 - b. "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct" (Church Order Art. 83).
 - c. Not adhering to the definition of "unchastity" reflected in the standards is a serious deviation from sound doctrine.
6. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to send a special communication to the churches detailing the proper use and timelines for a CDG, including the process for those who submitted a CDG regarding the definition of "unchastity."

Grounds:

- a. Not all churches pay close attention to the *Acts of Synod*.
 - b. This is an important decision with time-bound implications for members who submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen based on the definition given in the denominational FAQ document.
7. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to amend the "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report" to accurately reflect the use of a gravamen.

Ground: A retraction is in order when something is mistakenly printed.

8. That synod instruct classes to help churches implement discipleship for their congregations in the teachings of the standards.

Grounds:

- a. This allows the CRC to grow in unity around what truly unifies it—namely, the standards that locate the CRC within the larger body of Christ.
 - b. This allows churches to build up future officebearers who can wholeheartedly agree to the standards.
9. That synod allow Calvin University to continue their current course of action with respect to their faculty taking exceptions to their Covenant for Faculty, while encouraging Calvin University to diligently oversee alignment with our confessional standards.

Grounds:

- a. While Calvin University is an educational institution of the CRCNA, their faculty do not work directly under the Covenant for Officebearers.
- b. There is a one-hundred-year history of allowing exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty. And the Faculty Handbook has specific processes already laid out.

- c. There are considerations of academic freedom and tenure that do not apply in a church setting. “The Faculty member shall be judged only by the confessional standards of CU, and by the professional standards appropriate to his or her role and discipline” (Calvin University Faculty Handbook, 3.5.4).
 - d. “When the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church has issued a formal interpretation of the confessions, that interpretation shall be binding for Calvin University” (CU Faculty Handbook, 3.5.1.1).
10. That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to review its practices regarding the Statement of Exception in light of decisions made by Synod 2023 to the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, and revise their practices and handbook regarding guidelines for exceptions (Appendix Q of the COD Governance Handbook) as necessary to fully align with the spirit of the use of gravamina.

Grounds:

- a. Since the COD is an interim committee of synod, synod needs to provide clarity to the executive committee of the COD in evaluating exceptions to the creeds, confessions, and contemporary testimonies.
 - b. The COD should reflect as closely as possible the same standard for subscription as the churches.
11. That synod encourage Calvin Theological Seminary to clarify its position on synod’s decision regarding the confessional status on same-sex marriage by December 2023.

Ground: This will help build trust among the churches and institutions.

12. That synod defer to Synod 2024 the creation of any task force, study committee, or ad hoc committee as proposed by Overtures 68, 75, and 76.

Grounds:

- a. Our desire is that no churches leave the denomination but be reconciled back into covenant with the churches of the CRCNA. Our desire is for reconciliation, not disaffiliation.
- b. In light of recommendations being made to Synod 2023 by Advisory Committee 8, it is important to wait to see if these proposed changes and mechanisms are effective, thus changing the need or direction for any task force or committee.
- c. Synod already has authority to intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b). According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure (section V, B, 12), “All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable.”
- d. Synod may (or may not) need to revisit the need in a year, but it seems wise to wait at least a year.

13. That synod consider this to be its response to Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 73, 74, 75, and 76.

Patrick Anthony
Will Barham
Tim Blackmon
Dave Bosscher
Wayne Coleman
Jeff Cutter
Robin De Haan
Dave Hoekema

John Jansen
Rafik Kamel
Todd Kuperus, reporter
Esther Nam
Matthew Pearce
Jason Ruis, chair
Edward Yoon

COMMUNICATION 3

Advisory Committee 8E Report (minority) **(forwarded from Synod 2023)**

Response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 58, 60, 62-64, 66-67 (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1038-39)

A. Materials

Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 62, 63, 64, 66, and 67; *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 522-46, 553-56, 559-60, 563-66, 571-73

B. Recommendations

1. That synod add the following points 3 and 4 to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B:

- a. "3. The officebearer is expected to submit to the church's confessions and judgments and must not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against the doctrine for which they are filing a gravamen."
- b. "4. The gravamen will be revisited yearly by the council (from date of filing) so that the officebearer may both (1) continue to serve in faithful ways—including but not limited to delegation to larger assemblies—and (2) work actively toward full realignment with the confessions."

Grounds:

- 1) We are, and wish to remain, a confessional denomination. This recommendation fosters a strengthened commitment to the confessions, because it requires that subscribers filing a gravamen set aside their difficulty for the sake of the larger body.
- 2) Since its establishment, the gravamen process has served our denomination well, but, as of late, some confusion around this process may have led to a misuse of this process. This recommendation provides clarification while assuming good intent from the subscriber.

- 3) Church Order articulates a balance between local authority and communal accountability (Art. 27). This recommendation upholds the “original” authority of the local council (Art. 27-a) to provide oversight of the life and doctrine of officebearers.
- 4) Scripture encourages us to continue to grow and learn (2 Pet. 3:18; Phil. 1:9; Prov. 1:5). Similarly, our Reformation heritage encourages us to continually be reformed by the Spirit of God through the Word. This recommendation thus appropriately allows for humble wondering and doctrinal wrestling within the accountability structures of council, classis, and synod. “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” (1 Cor. 13:12).
- 5) Jesus declares, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). This recommendation clarifies our accountability to one another without placing an undue burden on officebearers. This “easy yoke” facilitates our efforts to welcome and use the leadership gifts of those who join our churches from other faith traditions and through evangelism.
- 6) As Classis Holland notes in Communication 3,

The Covenant for Officebearers asks two things of someone with a confessional difficulty: (1) to present it “in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel,” and (2) to “promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.” Notice what it does *not* ask—namely, to *agree* with the church’s judgment, but rather to *submit* to it. As we read it, this should allow someone with a private disagreement to serve, so long as (1) they will not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against the church’s teaching, and (2) if called upon in private or public, they will teach the church’s doctrine and not their own private belief. If churches will *not* allow this—that is, if they refuse *a priori* to grant a confessional-difficulty graven in this area of doctrine and teaching, *even if the officebearer submits to the church’s judgment and authority, as expected in the Covenant for Officebearers*—then this seems to us abusive in its own right, and an abject failure to humbly and patiently “bear with one another in love” (Eph. 4:3) and to “pursue what makes for peace” (Rom. 14:19). If a provision exists in the Church Order for a confessional difficulty, then that provision should be available regardless of the difficulty, at the judgment and discretion of the local church in consultation with the officebearer. (Agenda for Synod 2023, p. 605)

2. That synod consider this to be its response to Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 62, 63, 64, 66, and 67.

Robert Boersma, reporter
Craig Buma
Cara DeHaan, chair
Philip Fritschle

Jodi Gillmore
Sonya Grypma
Henrietta Hunse
Bill Wybenga

COMMUNICATION 4

Classis Rocky Mountain

This letter addresses the confessional-difficulty gravamen amendments and additions recommended by the Synod 2023 Advisory Committee 8E majority report, a similar version of which will likely be voted upon for inclusion in the Church Order in 2024. We respectfully request that synod consider the repercussions and ramifications of the additions and amendments to the gravamen process—a process outlined in the Church Order Supplement, Article 5 that has been in force and workable since 1976. Our concerns are elaborated below.

I. Background

Although the first recorded gravamen was submitted to Synod 1947, it was not until 1976 that the gravamina (plural of *gravamen*) process was defined and included in the Church Order in connection with a new Form of Subscription. A study committee approved by Synod 1974 recognized that not all gravamina were requests for the revision of the confessions and that some personal difficulties should not be open for discussion in the church. The committee recommended identifying two types of gravamina—confessional-revision gravamina and confessional-difficulty gravamina—and that the confessional-difficulty gravamen is to be dealt with “personally and pastorally.”

A confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) occurs when “a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confessions but does not call for a revision” (Church Order Supplement, Article 5, pt. 1). Gravamina are used by those who sign the Covenant for Officebearers as a way of affirming “three confessions—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.” Signers of the Covenant for Officebearers also pledge to be “formed and governed” by the confessions and to “promote and defend their doctrines faithfully,” conforming their “preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living” in accordance with them. Officebearers promise to receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of

love and fellowship with their brothers and sisters as together they seek a fuller understanding of the gospel.

It is important to note that the gravamen process is intended to promote confessional subscription and integrity of belief—as well as unity in the church. When a confessional-difficulty gravamen is submitted as outlined in the Church Order, the submitter continues to uphold their belief in the confessions. The officebearer may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately or teach in opposition to them while the gravamen remains unresolved. This is a matter of integrity and honesty, and without the gravamen process, officebearers might avoid the risk of sharing their concerns. A gravamen is an opportunity for officebearers to make known their conscientious difficulties so that matters can be confidentially and pastorally judged, clarified, and adjudicated by their council.

The 2023 Synod Advisory Committee 8E (Church Order II), in its majority report, recommended that synod add the word “temporary” to the *confessional-difficulty gravamen* definition and to describe a CDG as a request for help in resolving a difficulty within a six-month period, or by the next classis meeting, whichever time period is greater. The recommendation is that if the matter is not resolved by that deadline, it must be forwarded to classis, at which point another six-month timeline is imposed on the process. The next step, if still unresolved, is to forward the gravamen to synod. If the CDG is ultimately forwarded to synod, the subscriber will have until the end of that calendar year to affirm the standards, file a confessional-revision gravamen, or resign from office. The recommendation also noted that “ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of the CDG process” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1035).

II. Concern

We affirm that the gravamen process was intended to be temporary and that the goal is to reach resolution, but grappling with complex theological matters requires wisdom, integrity, support, and perhaps time; the pace may vary for any number of reasons such as personal background, history with the issue, magnitude of the issue, and available training and resources. Six months to resolve a CDG and affirm all standards while engaged with the local council is an arbitrary deadline that appears to apply to all confessional difficulties, no matter the nature of the difficulty or the involvement of the subscriber’s concern. Our concern is that this brief, arbitrary deadline has the potential to unhelpfully constrain or undermine the “pastoral and personal process” that Church Order has entrusted first to the local council, the entity best equipped to manage it pastorally and personally.

The gravamen process is intended to promote honesty. It would be easier for an officebearer to simply be quiet. Instead, by raising concerns via the gravamen process, the officebearer opens the door for conversation and dis-

cussion. This process also helps to avoid future conflict and sets expectations and a clear process, which provide some ground for unity. The level of disagreement presented in the gravamen may determine the nature of adjudication by the church council. For example, the courses of action for a leader struggling with infant baptism in contrast with a leader who doubts that Jesus Christ was fully man and fully God may differ significantly. The gravamen process allows a degree of judgment, discernment, and responsibility by local church councils. It is the local church council that is aware of the character of the gravamen author and their fidelity to the CRC confessions and agreement not to teach or support a different view. Both the officebearer and the local council commit to a process governed by integrity, sensitivity, and grace. Imposing a six-month deadline to govern the process is a move that, in our judgment, seems oblivious or indifferent to the complexities that may influence its integrity.

Furthermore, there are likely to be unintended consequences for churches like some of ours, where most congregants come from non-CRC backgrounds and the pool of eligible officebearers with a high degree of familiarity and comfort with the full scope of all the confessions may be smaller than at other CRC churches. A deadline like the one proposed creates a situation in which otherwise highly qualified officebearers who are engaged in a thoughtful and deliberate process confidentially with their church council under a gravamen may feel they must either compromise their integrity to remain in service or be squeezed from a leadership role before the confessional difficulties are resolved, simply because the calendar hits the six-month mark. Yet Church Order affirms that submission to the confessions can occur without full agreement during the period in which a confessional difficulty is experienced. There can be openness and honesty within the confidentiality of council while remaining faithful to the confessions within the congregation. The Church Order specifies a process in which the matter is submitted to classis and ultimately to synod if the council determines it is unable to judge a gravamen. However, the process no longer remains confidential at that point, which threatens its “personal and pastoral” aspiration. Our fundamental concern is that the integrity of the process at the local council level may be undermined by the imposition of a six-month timeline.

The current gravamen procedure must be undertaken with honesty, openness, clarity, confidentiality, and respect by both the submitter and the church council, and this process has served the church appropriately for over forty-five years. At this time of polarizing disagreement and struggle, we strongly desire that the conflict not be heightened by adding to and effectively changing the gravamen process.

Classis Rocky Mountain
Kelly Vander Woude, stated clerk

Classis Holland

Note: The Office of General Secretary believes that this overture fails to present sufficient and new grounds for reconsideration of a synodical decision. This is therefore being included in the *Agenda for Synod 2024* as a communication, allowing for transparency and for the officers of synod, or a motion from the floor, to decide otherwise.

I. Background

On November 7, 2022, the Council of Church of the Savior of South Bend, Indiana, considered and approved a confessional-revision gravamen (CRG) submitted by one of its officebearers. This CRG requested a change, for weighty biblical and theological reasons, to Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as including "homosexual sex" (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). According to Church Order Article 5 and its Supplement, if accepted by a council, a CRG becomes an overture to classis, "open for discussion in the whole church."

Accordingly, the council of Church of the Savior submitted its CRG as an overture to Classis Holland at its regular meeting on February 3, 2023. Church of the Savior did so with the full expectation that Classis Holland would consider it in the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers, which states, "We also promise to . . . 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." Instead, and contrary to both the Church Order and the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers, Classis Holland decided by majority vote not to discuss it at all.¹

Church of the Savior then appealed to Synod 2023, where, according to Church Order Article 5, "all the signers of the Covenant for Officebearers shall be free to discuss [the CRG] together with the whole church until adjudicated by synod." No such discussion occurred. Responding to the CRG overture (Overture 34, *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 468-72), Synod 2023 did not accede to it, on the ground that "the Human Sexuality Report addresses this" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1008). So, in essence, what happened was this: Church of the Savior objected to a recommendation of the Human Sexuality Report adopted by Synod 2022. Synod 2023 responded by saying, "The Human Sexuality Report addresses this."

In addition to failing to receive Church of the Savior's CRG "in a spirit of love and fellowship" or according to the process laid out in the Church Order, Synod 2023 failed to give a response to it that made rational sense. Church of the Savior's CRG was not the only gravamen treated this way;

¹ Classis Holland sent a communication to Synod 2023 acknowledging that it did not handle the CRG properly (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 896).

none of the CRGs submitted to Synod 2023 were given anything like proper consideration or thoughtful responses.

II. Overture

Classis Holland overtures Synod 2024 to consider the confessional-revision gravamina submitted to Synod 2023, including Church of the Savior's, in the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers and according to the process laid out in the Church Order. While there are various ways this might be accomplished, at minimum the CRGs need to be given adequate time for discussion on the floor of synod, as well as to be considered carefully and answered thoughtfully by a committee of qualified delegates or by a separate study committee of qualified members.

Grounds:

1. Synod is bound to abide by the Church Order.
2. Classis Holland and Synod 2023's responsibility to receive Church of the Savior's confessional difficulty "in a spirit of love and fellowship" remains unfulfilled.
3. Church of the Savior's and others' CRGs raised weighty concerns about Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 that should be responsibly addressed by the church.

Classis Holland
Calvin Hoogstra, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 6

Classis Minnkota

1. Classis Minnkota wholeheartedly endorses Recommendations 2-8 and 10-12 from the 2023 Advisory Committee 8's majority response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 57-58, 60-64, 66-69, 73-76 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1032-37).
2. Classis Minnkota does not endorse Recommendation 1 from the 2023 Advisory Committee 8's majority response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 57-58, 60-64, 66-69, 73-76 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1034).

Grounds:

- a. The Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America specifies that delegates be "in full agreement with what the congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America confess." In that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is an instrument "in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5), a delegate who has filed a gravamen is not in full agreement with what the church confesses.

- b. Those who cannot fully affirm this statement in the Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America should not be seated as delegates.
3. Classis Minnkota does not endorse Recommendation 9 from the 2023 Advisory Committee 8's majority response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 57-58, 60-64, 66-69, 73-76 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1036-37).

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 7

Members of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan

Note: The Office of General Secretary believes that this overture fails to present sufficient and new grounds for a revision of a synodical decision. This is therefore being included in the *Agenda for Synod 2024* as a communication, allowing for transparency and for the officers of synod, or a motion from the floor, to decide otherwise.

I. Overture

We, the undersigned members of Fourteenth Street CRC of Holland, Michigan, overture Synod 2024 to take the following remedial measures related to Synod 2023's affirmation of Synod 2022's conclusion that its interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has confessional status:

- A. Reverse *Acts of Synod 2023*, Article 69, Items C, 2 and 3, thereby acceding to Overtures 16, 18, 23, 24, and 77 that were before Synod 2023, and declare the following:
 1. That synodical interpretations of the Reformed confessions, including Synod 2022's interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, do not have confessional status and cannot have confessional status pursuant to the settled and binding decision of *Acts of Synod 1975*, Article 46.
 2. That officebearers are not required to subscribe to *Acts of Synod 2022*, Article 65, Item 2 or to any other synodical decision.
- B. Declare that *Acts of Synod 2022*, Article 65, Item 2 contradicts the CRCNA's official position that subordinates synodical decisions to the confessions and is therefore inoperative. Alternatively, declare the last sentence thereof inoperative and repudiate Synod 2022's conclusion that its interpretation has confessional status.

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022 departed from Synod 1975 while claiming to follow its decision.
 - a. In 1975, synod decided to deny confessional status to synod's interpretations of the confessions. Synod 1975 said, "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions. . . . an interpretation of the confessional writings . . . given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group. . . . However this use does not elevate them to the status of the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598.)
 - b. Synod 1975 also stated that subscription to synodical decisions is not required of officebearers, who are expected to abide by synod's decisions even if they disagree with them (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-2).
 - c. In 2022, synod cited Synod 1975 as precedent for its decision as follows:

That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the Seventh Commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status. (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922)
 - d. Synod 2022 misrepresented the 1975 decision when it claimed the 1975 decision supported its confessional status conclusion. Synod 1975 ruled out any possibility of Synod 2022's interpretation having confessional status. Despite receiving overtures informing it of this, Synod 2022 willingly chose a path of noncompliance and did not use the proper means to enact change in the CRCNA. If Synod 2022 believed Synod 1975 was wrong to declare a subordinate status for synodical interpretations of the confessions, it should have overturned the precedent established by Synod 1975 instead of pretending to follow it.¹
 - e. To be clear, Synod 2022 did not declare confessional status for its interpretation, rather, it concluded that confessional status was the logical result of Synod 1975's decision. Synod 2022's decision is set forth as an argument with two premises and a conclusion.

¹ Synod 2022's decision cannot be recast as a reversal of the 1975 precedent without violating Church Order Supplement, Article 47, since such a substantial alteration can only be adopted after churches have had an opportunity to give input on the proposed change to the following synod. To date, no recommendation to reverse *Acts of Synod 1975*, Article 46, has been made.

- 1) Premise 1: Synod's affirmation of the proposed definition of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 is synod's interpretation of a confession.
 - 2) Premise 2: *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603, states, "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function."²
 - 3) Conclusion: Therefore, synod's interpretation of Q&A 108 has confessional status.
- f. Synod 2022, Article 65, Item 2 also contravened Scripture by provoking dissension that could have been avoided by compliance with synodical precedent; the discord created by Synod 2022's unprecedented decision is self-evident.³
2. Synod 2023 failed to address the error of Synod 2022.
- a. Synod 2023 was informed by multiple overtures⁴ that Synod 2022's claim of confessional status for its interpretation contradicted the 1975 decision that it claimed to follow. Synod 2023 declined to accede to these overtures and summarily affirmed Synod 2022's erroneous decision (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1021-22). Synod 2023 never addressed the contradiction between what the 1975 decision says and what Synod 2022 claimed. Neither Synod 2023's decision nor the majority report even mentioned the 1975 decision, which was at the crux of these overtures.
 - b. The first ground for Synod 2023's decision says:

Synod 2022 gave due process, according to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, to the matter of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality and its conclusions without any decisions ruling the declaration "confessional status" out of order, leaving such a declaration in place. (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021)

That run-on sentence says, in effect, that because Synod 2022 had not decided its confessional status decision to be wrong, it must have

² Synod 2022 quoted this sentence from Synod 1975 as its first ground in support of Article 65.

³ The HSR quotes Galatians 5:19-21 as support for its conclusion that its definition of "unchastity" has confessional status because Paul includes "sexual immorality" as a sin that threatens a person's salvation. Paul also lists dissensions, factions, and discord as acts of the flesh that jeopardize our inheritance to the kingdom of God. Synod promotes factions and fractures unity when it frames an issue as a choice between two polarized options and excludes other available options; Synod 2022 compounded the polarization by presenting this issue in terms of the ultimate dichotomy between salvation and the unspoken alternative (*Agenda of Synod 2022*, pp. 459-60).

⁴ See Overture 18, para. 1 and 3, c (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 411-12); Overture 20, para. IV, B (p. 420); Overture 21, para. II, C, 2 and 6 (pp. 428-29); Overture 23, para. A (p. 433); Overture 24, para. A (pp. 437-38); and Overture 77 (pp. 879-88).

been right. Such a rationale nullifies the overture process in violation of Church Order and is not a reason to ignore Synod 2022's obvious misinterpretation of the 1975 decision. Synod 2023's statement that Synod 2022 left "such a declaration in place" is simply wrong because there was no such declaration of confessional status by Synod 1975 or by any other synod to leave in place. Synod 2023 made no comment on whether it even noticed the dichotomy between the decisions of Synod 2022 and Synod 1975. Such unresponsiveness is not "due process."

- c. Synod 2023's second ground, quoted below, cites synod's 1976 decision adopting the "Guidelines and Regulations for Gravamina" found in Church Order Supplement, Article 5:

In accordance with the *Acts of Synod 1976*, synods have the ability to interpret what the confessions teach. *Note*: "No one is free to decide for himself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 69; Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3).

(*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021)

- 1) None of the overtures addressed by Synod 2023's decision took issue with synod's ability to interpret the confessions⁵ or with the gravamen process adopted by Synod 1976. Instead, they claimed that Synod 2022's confessional status conclusion violated Synod 1975's decision. Since Synod 2023 did not deny that claim, should we assume that it found it to be true? It certainly seems that Synod 2023 recognized Synod 2022's error, since it did not defend or even comment on Synod 2022's alleged violation. Instead, Synod 2023 cited Synod 1976's decision as if to assert that Synod 2022 arrived at the right conclusion albeit for the wrong reason. However, it did not explain how it thought Synod 1976's decision supported Synod 2022's conclusion. Synod 2023 did not say this paragraph from Synod 1976 is a basis for confessional status or a reversal of Synod 1975's decision. Any argument that interprets the 1976 decision as an alternate basis for Synod 2022's confessional status conclusion ignores the harmony between the 1975 and 1976 decisions. There were no overtures to Synods 1975, 1976, or 1977 arguing that synodical interpretations of the confessions should be given confessional status. The denomination appears to have been unified behind the 1975 decision, which it

⁵ To the contrary, Overture 24 says, "Interpretation comes with the authority of the synod" (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 437).

continues to publish as its official position. If there is any question about what Synod 1976 meant by its carefully chosen words, we should look to the *Acts of Synod 1976*.

- 2) Synod 1976 said this about the paragraph from the gravamina guidelines quoted by Synod 2023: “Paragraph three of the form is not primarily intended as an instrument to accomplish creedal revision, but as an instrument for adjudicating personal difficulties with the confessions and for keeping the individual subscriber in right relationship with the church” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 565). “In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 69).
- 3) Because Synod 1976 eliminated the right to submit gravamina directly to synod, the “assembly” to which officebearers must address their gravamina is their council. Since the officebearer has no right to appeal but must acquiesce in the council’s decision, a gravamen only goes to classis if council decides it is unable to judge it, and it only goes to synod if classis decides it is unable to judge it. This procedure almost guarantees that the decision being acquiesced in will not be synod’s. “Acquiescence” is a begrudging submission that occurs when we allow others to have their way despite believing they are wrong. Nowhere does Church Order say the officebearer must subscribe to the assemblies’ decision. “Subscription” goes beyond submission and denotes wholehearted agreement signified by the signing of one’s name. One can acquiesce without subscribing. Further, the acquiescence required by the gravamen guidelines is not acquiescence to the confessions but to the decision on the gravamen as to what doctrines are confessed. This is an important, albeit subtle, distinction. The gravamen process exists for officebearers who come to believe “that a *teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God’s Word*” (emphasis added); the process is not available to officebearers who disagree with synod’s interpretations of the confessions. Disagreement with synod’s interpretations is not the same as disagreement with the confessions.

This does not mean officebearers are free to individually decide what is and is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. When individuals serve as officebearers, they “sign as members of a community engaged . . . in a common work and dedicated to a common cause” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 567). That is why the Covenant

for Officebearers is expressed in the plural rather than the singular: “We believe,” “we confess,” etc. Regardless of personal disagreement with the assembly’s decision on a gravamen, the individual must acquiesce and join the chorus of officebearers or leave office. This process ensures that the assemblies of the church speak and teach in a unified voice (pp. 570-71).

- 4) Synod 1976 limited the gravamen process to difficulties with and requests to revise the *confessions*. It rejected the recommendation to allow gravamina addressing “ecclesiastical pronouncements relating to the Confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 67-68). If Synod 1976 believed that such pronouncements had confessional status, the broader definition would have been necessary. Because Synod 1975 rejected confessional status for such pronouncements just a year earlier, Synod 1976 would have expressly stated it was reversing the 1975 decision if that was its intent. Further, if Synod 2022 thought the 1975 decision had been reversed, it would not have cited it as the precedent for its decision. Likewise, if the denomination thought Synod 1976 had reversed Synod 1975, it would not post the 1975 decision on its website as its official position (crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements).

Synod 2022’s confessional status decision has caused confusion over whether officebearers must now subscribe to synodical interpretations and whether the gravamen process adopted by Synod 1976 now applies to synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters. However, the gravamen process does not impart confessional status on synod’s interpretations of the confessions. The only avenue to confessional status under the gravamen guidelines adopted by Synod 1976 is via a confessional-revision gravamen.

- d. Synod 2023’s next ground for excusing Synod 2022’s noncompliance with precedent is as follows:

The theological and biblical components of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, received for information by Synod 2019, were before the churches for three years, giving the churches significant “opportunity to consider the advisability of the proposed changes” (Church Order Art. 47) prior to Synod 2022. (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021)

This is untrue because the HSR’s recommendation on confessional status was not in the committee’s 2019 report. Also, the HSR did not cite the 1975 decision as the basis for its confessional status recommendation; it was Synod 2022’s own idea to cite Synod 1975 as the

precedent for its confessional status conclusion. There was no advance notice that Synod 2022 was going to misconstrue Synod 1975's decision as the basis for its decision. Regardless, Church Order does not excuse misrepresentations and violations of precedent on the basis of notice given.

- e. Synod 2023's last ground is also procedural: "This overture does not contain 'sufficient and new grounds' (Church Order Art. 31) to reverse Synod 2022's decisions" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021).

In effect, Synod 2023 is saying that because Synod 2022 received overtures warning it that Synod 1975's binding decision prohibited any declaration of confessional status for its interpretation of Q&A 108, Synod 2022's decision to ignore those overtures has made its misinterpretation of the 1975 decision immune to challenge, and, because its decision has confessional status, we must all now pretend that when Synod 1975 said synod's use of synodical pronouncements to interpret the confessions "*does not* elevate them to the status of the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598; emphasis added), what it really meant all along was that such use *does* elevate them to the status of the confessions.

Synod's efforts to guide churches into compliance with its recent decisions is recognition that compliance is very important. Given the importance synod puts on compliance by others with its decisions, synod must recognize its own noncompliance as a sufficient basis for reconsideration. Synod 2023's rejection of overtures for presenting the same grounds that Synod 2022 refused to address is a violation of Church Order, which should never be used to perpetuate noncompliance. Until synod resolves the dichotomy between its 1975 and 2022 decisions, the request that it do so remains both new and sufficient.

- f. Although the majority report lauded its "reflective humility in the pursuit of clarity" in the matters before it, in the end it clarified nothing and was silent on the error it was asked to address (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1013). It called Synod 2022's decision unprecedented, contradicting Synod 2022's own claim that it followed the 1975 precedent. It claimed to "detest any misuse of the Scripture and confessions," yet affirmed Synod 2022's violation of Synod 1975's precedent to justify a decision for which there is no authority (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1014). Synod 2023's claim that Synod 2022's "confessional status" decision was forced by "a crisis of necessity years in the making" does not justify its affirmation of Synod 2022's clear error. The majority report blamed this crisis on synod's failure to implement the care prescribed by Synod 1973 for those who are same-sex attracted (p. 1014). Are we to believe our denomination never faced a crisis that tempted synod to usurp confessional authority? It is argued that

Synod 2022's decision was necessary because some churches felt free to disregard synodical decisions as "pastoral advice," claiming they were not "settled and binding" unless they had "confessional status." Such arguments forget that Church Order Article 29 says all decisions of the assemblies are "settled and binding." If synod's decisions are only binding when coupled with declarations of "confessional status," churches would be free to disregard any decision that has not been coupled with such a declaration.

- g. The following facts are not in dispute:
 - Synod 1975 held that subscription to synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters cannot be required because such decisions lack confessional status.
 - No subsequent synod has been asked to reverse Synod 1975's decision, which remains our denomination's official position.
- h. If our denomination were to reverse its official position adopted in 1975 and impart confessional status on synodical interpretations of the confessions, we would expect it to do so just as clearly as it announced 48 years ago that such interpretations do not have confessional status. Those who believe synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters should have confessional status should submit an overture asking synod to reverse its 1975 decision and adopt an unequivocal decision to that effect.

II. The Unanswered Questions

The following questions, which Synods 2022 and 2023 evaded, deserve a thoughtful response from Synod 2024 so that its position on these issues becomes unmistakable.

1. Does the 1975 synodical decision cited by the *Acts of Synod 2022*, Article 65, support the conclusion that synodical interpretations of the confessions have the same status as the confessions?

We answer "No." Synod 1975's decision applies to all synodical pronouncements without exception, including synod's interpretations of the confessions. Synod 1975 cited Synod 1881's interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism as an example of a synodical pronouncement that does *not* have confessional status:

It is obvious that these particular synodical pronouncements of a doctrinal and ethical nature serve a unique function. *However, this use does not elevate them to the status of the confessions.*

(*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598; emphasis added)

2. Must officebearers subscribe to and members agree with *Acts of Synod 2022*, Article 65, item 2, or any other synodical decision?

We answer "No." Again, Synod 1975 answers the question Synod 2023 evaded:

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 Form of Subscription. While synodical decisions are “settled and binding,” subscription to synodical decisions is not required. . . . Officebearers are expected to “abide by” certain specified deliverances of synod as well as to synodical decisions in general.

(*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-2; underlining added for emphasis)

III. Recommendations

A. Synod 2024 can and should answer “yes” or “no” to the questions above, and it should explain its answers to provide us with a clear understanding of what officebearers must subscribe to. If Synod 2024 believes the decisions of Synods 1975, 2022, and 2023 were all correct, it should fully explain how it reconciles the latter two decisions with the former.

B. The CRCNA recognizes only three documents with confessional status: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 761-62; Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). When synod interprets one of these confessions, its interpretation remains subordinate to the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).

C. We do not dispute synod’s authority to interpret the confessions; however, our confidence in synod’s competence to provide faithful and coherent interpretations has been eroded by Synod 2022’s inexplicable “interpretation” of the 1975 synodical report that it cited to justify its self-serving assumption of confessional authority.⁶ It should concern us that Synod 2023 has defended Synod 2022’s method of interpretation, which permits synod to deny at will what prior synods have clearly decided.

D. This overture asks Synod 2024 to reverse *Acts of Synod 2023*, Article 69, Items C, 2 and 3 because it violates the CRCNA’s official position subordinating synodical decisions to the confessions and prohibiting subscription to synodical pronouncements.

⁶ The rationalization that Synod 2022 engaged in to adopt Article 65 Item 2 evokes a type of “intellectualism” that Herman Bavinck identified as one of the three pathologies of Christian life, which “places all the emphasis on the Word, doctrine, and knowledge, which can lead to ‘orthodoxism,’ rationalism, and various forms of gnosticism” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Volume One*, p. 415). Bavinck noted that intellectualism, in the fuller life of the church, becomes manifest in confessionalism, “which has a confession but no life” (*Ibid.*). He warns that intellectualism “can operate in two directions: people may want to keep the church’s teachings pure, or they may wish to change and improve them. . . . Among those who wish to preserve the church’s teachings, this intellectualism manifests itself as orthodoxism,” which “considers being orthodox the ultimate and decisive criterion of truth and godliness” and “which regards the teachings of the church as immutable . . . and therefore regards them as no longer subject to any scriptural test” (*Ibid.*, pp. 422-23). Bavinck refers to orthodoxism as “one of the most common and dangerous spiritual sicknesses in Protestantism” (*Ibid.*, p. 423).

E. Synod 2023's noncompliance with synodical precedent has negative consequences on the CRCNA. It sends a message that noncompliance is acceptable; it threatens our unity; and it erodes our faith in leadership that, when made aware of an error, refuses to acknowledge and correct that error.

F. Synod 2022 misrepresented Synod 1975's decision as a justification for its "confessional status" conclusion, and Synod 2023 affirmed that misrepresentation. This has damaged synod's credibility and compromised our denomination's witness to the world. If our denomination cannot be honest with itself, why should anyone outside our denomination believe us when we announce that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead?

G. The question that Synod 2024 now needs to answer is whether it will perpetuate or correct the errors and misrepresentations of the past two synods.

H. If there is any doubt that the 1975 synodical decision stands for the exact opposite of what Synods 2022 and 2023 claim, the 10-page report should be read in its entirety and can be found at crcna.org/sites/default/files/1975_synodical_decisions.pdf.

Members of Fourteenth Street CRC of Holland, Michigan

Doug Rooks	Meredith VanderHill
Maria Rooks	Micah VanderHill
Jack Berghoef	Greg Hofman
Nancy Berghoef	Jude Hofman
Barry Bandstra	Robert Keeley
Debra Bandstra	Laura Keeley
David Genzink	Mary Jellema
Deborah Genzink	Suzette Staal
Barbara Steen	Gary Vander Veen
Roger Brummel	

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 8

Classis Grand Rapids East

Warm greetings from Classis Grand Rapids East.

Classis Grand Rapids East ("Classis GRE") sends this communication to Synod 2024 to provide information about the new Alignment Committee appointed by our classis. The mandate of the committee is as follows:

To listen to the churches of classis; describe where each church is at on sexuality issues, with its rationale; and discuss with each church ways to follow synodical guidelines, given their position and their desire to minister faithfully with all.

Some of the initial work of the committee will address the following:

- Matthew Tuininga filed an appeal against the council of Grace CRC (Minutes of 9-21-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Section 3.0, p. 2). Grace CRC approved a statement of full participation for those in same-sex relationships that Dr. Tuininga believed was in violation of recent decisions of synod about human sexuality (Minutes of 9-21-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Appendix, p. 1). Dr. Tuininga also appealed Grace's decision to not require and process gravamina from its officebearers (*Ibid.*). Classis GRE sustained Dr. Tuininga's appeal (Minutes of 9-21-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Section 3.1, p. 2; Appendix, p. 2).
- Synod instructed Classis Grand Rapids East to guide the Neland Avenue CRC congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex sexual relationships (*Acts of Synod 2023*, Art. 75, p. 1027).
- Synod instructed all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships (*Acts of Synod 2023*, Art. 78, pp. 1029–30).
- Synod 2023 also reminded “church visitors throughout the CRCNA of their authority and responsibility to, in a spirit of love and grace, guide officebearers into alignment with the biblical guidelines, including but not limited to all areas of human sexuality” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, Art. 78, p. 1030). The Alignment Committee and the Classis GRE church visitors have agreed to work in cooperation on matters related to human sexuality.
- Synod 2023 acknowledged and lamented the ongoing shortcomings of our denomination and its congregations in their pastoral posture and care to those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1008-9, 1010). The Alignment Committee will encourage and advise its congregations how to grow in their pastoral care to LGBTQ+ people and the use of their gifts in the offices and structures of the church (See *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1010).

Classis GRE sends this communication out of its love and commitment to the denomination and to provide an overview of its ongoing work in response to synod's recent decisions about human sexuality. We recognize the pain felt throughout the denomination as churches respond to these decisions and each other. We hope this communication is received in the spirit intended of accountability and faithfulness. To place this communication in the context of our ongoing work in classis, we provide this overview:

- At its January 2023 meeting, Classis GRE addressed the report of the *in loco* committee and discussed an overture that classis adopted as a response to the *in loco* committee report (Minutes of 1-19-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, 123.2, 2.3, Decision to Adopt a Response to Neland Avenue CRC, p. 2.; Minutes of 1-19-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Appendix, Overture Asking Classis Grand Rapids East to Adopt a Response to Neland Avenue CRC, pp. 7-11).
- Classis GRE adopted three of the four recommendations from the *in loco* committee: to acknowledge the admonishment of synod, to provide pastoral care to those most affected, and to provide a report to Synod 2023 (the 2023 overture approved by classis and sent to the *in loco* committee served as this report) (*Ibid.*).
- In response to the fourth recommendation from the *in loco* committee: to appoint an oversight committee to engage with Neland Avenue CRC, Classis GRE proposed an alternative. It agreed to wait until Synod 2023 addressed Neland Avenue's appeal, after which classis would engage further with Neland Avenue (*Ibid.*). This would give Neland due process under the Church Order and also provide accountability (*Ibid.*).
- Classis GRE planned to use a pastoral approach with Neland Avenue rather than appoint an oversight committee that inevitably creates an adversarial posture (*Ibid.*). To support this work, Classis GRE suggested that it would use the denominational resources of Thrive to discern together with the congregations in our classis how to respond to the decisions of synod about human sexuality and Neland Avenue CRC (*Ibid.*).

Classis GRE is honoring its commitments to this denomination, including those made in its 2023 overture:

- Classis GRE approved the formation of an Alignment Committee and sustained the Tuininga appeal in September 2023 (Minutes of 9-21-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Sections 3.0 and 3.1, p. 2).
- Classis GRE held a first listening session with the assistance of Thrive with the congregations of Classis GRE on Oct. 26, 2023 (Minutes of 10-26-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Section 2, pp. 1-2).
- Classis shared the feedback from this listening session and received further input from congregations on November 30, 2023 (Minutes of 11-30-23 Meeting of Classis GRE, Sections 2 and 3, pp. 1-2).
- Classis approved the mandate and membership of the Alignment Committee in January 2024 (Minutes of the 1-18-24 Meeting of Classis GRE, Section 6, p. 4).
- The Classis GRE Alignment Committee held its first meetings on January 23, February 6, and February 20, 2024.
- The Alignment Committee soon will start to schedule in-person meetings with the councils of classis, beginning with Neland Avenue

and Grace CRCs, as part of its cooperative arrangement with the church visitors.

- The Alignment Committee will be guided by advice published by this denomination in 2023 for what “guiding into alignment” looks like (Synod 2023 FAQ Document | Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org), Q&A 9). It is work that is patient, private, and pastoral (*Ibid.*). These guidelines recognize that doing this work well will take time. The decisions of Synod 2024 may also factor into our discussions in important ways. We recognize that there is an appropriate urgency to our mandate, but also agree with the denominational guidelines that we need to proceed with patience.

Questions about this committee may be sent to gre.alignment@gmail.com. The Alignment Committee invites conversation with other classes who are engaged in similar work and would like to support each other by sharing their best practices and challenges. Classis GRE asks for the prayers and support of the denomination as it moves ahead with this important work.

Classis Grand Rapids East
Robert Arbogast, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 9

Council of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan

Note: The Office of General Secretary believes that this overture fails to present sufficient and new grounds for a revision of a synodical decision. This is therefore being included in the *Agenda for Synod 2024* as a communication, allowing for transparency and for the officers of synod, or a motion from the floor, to decide otherwise.

I. Background

Synod 2022 chose to interpret the term “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 with reference to a representative list of sexual sins and then declared that interpretation to have “confessional status” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). After a further year of dialogue and debate on these matters (via overtures, gravamina, communications, and an appeal), Synod 2023 affirmed the decision of Synod 2022, leaving it essentially unchanged (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021-22). Having read the Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 decisions and grounds, we wish to try one more time to persuade Synod 2024 to alter those decisions while keeping with their basic intent, because the specific language used in those decisions is in conflict with Report 47 of the *Acts of Synod 1975* (pp. 595-604), which clarifies how synodical decisions relate to the confessions.

By way of background, we wish to acknowledge a few things that make these decisions (and potentially altering them) difficult and complicated. First, with reference to Synod 2023's affirmation of Synod 2022's decision, we recognize that there is some tension between the *Acts of Synod 1975* Report 47, which suggests that *no* synodical decision rises to the "status of the confessions," and the *Acts of Synod 1976* decision (Art. 64, C, 3, a, 3; now Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3), which gives synod the right, in the case of a question or dispute, to clarify what is (or is not) confessional doctrine to which officebearers subscribe via the Covenant for Officebearers.¹ We suggest that this tension between the *Acts of Synod 1975* and the *Acts of Synod 1976* has created competing narratives about whether synod's declaration rightly has "confessional status." Did Synod 2022 simply "interpret the confession" — an interpretation which *cannot* have confessional status (à la 1975)? Or was Synod 2022's "interpretation of the confession" simply its way of clarifying a "doctrine confessed in the standards" (à la 1976; Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3), which *is* thereby confessional. We admit the tension here, and believe that Synods 2022 and 2023 have largely acted in keeping with the *spirit* of the 1976 decision (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3). But by using (and affirming) the *language* of the 1975 decision, Synods 2022 and 2023 have actually violated a plain reading of that report.

This leads to our second opening reflection. The conflict of Synod 2022's specific language with the 1975 report was raised to Synod 2023 in several overtures. We trust the advisory committee that dealt with these overtures when they say that they "wrestled with the conclusive, unprecedented language of Synod 2022" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1013-14). But perhaps this unprecedented language should have been a sign to the committee that there was a problem here that needed fixing rather than simply unprecedented language that needed affirming. When synod is shown an error in its own

¹ Some have wanted to pick up on the language of "acquiescence" in Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3 to suggest that the officebearer only has to "acquiesce" (i.e., abide) to a doctrine deemed confessional rather than "subscribe" (i.e., agree) to it. This is true of synodical decisions generally but not of confessional doctrine (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-2). Critically, what is being addressed in Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3 (from *Acts of Synod 1976*) is clarification of *confessional doctrine* by an assembly, not a synodical pronouncement as such (*Acts of Synod 1975*). In this context, then, what the officebearer "acquiesces" to is a decision of the assemblies, in the event such a question arises, about *whether or not something is confessional doctrine*. It then follows that if a council/classis/synod clarifies that something *is* confessional doctrine (per their role as prescribed in Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3), that doctrine is then *subscribed* to via one's signature on the Covenant for Officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601). That is, after all, the very context of Supplement, Art. 5, A, which outlines "Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers." If one cannot subscribe to the confessional doctrine thus clarified by the assembly, the confessional gravamen process comes into play.

formulation and does not act to correct it,² or even to provide substantial argument in support of its prior action,³ this undermines and erodes trust in synod's authority. This overture hopes to restore trust and build confidence in synodical decisions and authority. When we seek to do the right things, we should not neglect to do them in the right way.

We believe that the wisest way to do this is to reclassify Synod 2022's interpretation of unchastity as an "interpretation of the confession" which is "settled and binding" as an "interpretation of the confession" in accordance with a plain reading of Report 47 from *Acts of Synod 1975*, and then spell out what this means for our churches, officebearers, and members, as our overture does below.⁴ This would maintain the clear direction set by Synods 2022 and 2023 as well as set clear expectations for our churches that must be acquiesced to. It also holds real promise to call all of us to more than acquiescence but, rather, to deeper and costlier discipleship together and to submission to one another (and our assemblies) out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).

Finally, even though we are asking for the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 to be altered, we wish to make the following abundantly clear:

1. We agree with and are grateful for the basic intention and clarity of Synods 2022 and 2023 pertaining to the CRCNA's biblical and confessional position on matters of human sexuality.
2. When confusion or disagreement arises as to what the Bible and our confessions teach on a theological or ethical matter, synod has the right and responsibility to interpret these matters for us. Moreover, we believe that Synod 2022 was wise to do so in this situation, and we have no

² While synod may technically have the authority to ignore the 1975 precedent and conclude differently on its own (Rules for Synodical Procedure 2022, p. 23), that does not mean it is *wise* for synod to do so if there are other ways to get at the same decision that are in keeping with Church Order and synodical precedent (i.e., Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3; *Acts of Synod 1976*).

³ The grounds of Synod 2023's affirmation of Synod 2022's decision in response to the overtures submitted to it are disappointingly thin (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021).

⁴ While this is our preferred route, we acknowledge that according to Church Order synod has another option before it as well. Synod 2024 could reclassify Synod 2022's interpretation as suggested above, but also clarify that some *doctrine* is at play in Q&A 108 (e.g., marriage) that is, in fact, confessional doctrine to which officebearers subscribe via the Covenant for Officebearers, and do this with explicit appeal to the language of *Church Order Supplement*, Art. 5, A, 3 as the grounds. This path would result in an interpretation of unchastity that is "settled and binding" (Synods 2022/23) as well as a confessional doctrine (e.g., marriage) to which officebearers subscribe (Synod 2024). While we do not think this option is wise or necessary in our present moment, we recognize that Synod 2024 may feel differently, which is why we mention this as a possibility. Again, our purpose in this overture is to help set synod's decisions on stronger footing so as to restore and build trust in synod's authority.

quarrel with its interpretation of “unchastity” as such. On the contrary, we agree with it.

3. This overture is *not* an attempt to create a “local option” for divergent belief and practice in the CRCNA but, rather, simply an attempt to bring the decisions of Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 in line with the 1975 synodical report referenced above (see further below). On the contrary, as the grounds of the overture below make clear, churches and officebearers *must* acquiesce to this decision. If they do not—if they were to preach, teach, or act in defiance of synod’s decision—they would open themselves up to the process of church discipline (Church Order Art. 78-84).

With the above background and clarification, then, we offer the following overture.

II. Overture

The council of Fourteenth Street CRC of Holland, Michigan, overtures Synod 2024 to alter the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 that the “interpretation of the confession” regarding “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021) has “confessional status” pursuant to the *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603, in the following two ways (A and B):

- A. Declare our agreement with Synod 2022 that the interpretation of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 is an “interpretation of [a] confession” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). However, revise Synod 2022’s declaration that this interpretation has “confessional status” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) and declare instead that Synod 2022’s interpretation of “unchastity” shall be considered “settled and binding” (Church Order, Art. 29) in its use and function as an “interpretation of [a] confession” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603), noting the following:
 - This is the most significant category of pronouncement on doctrinal and ethical matters available to synod (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 597).
 - “All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603).
 - As such, “those who err” would be subject to discipline with the understanding that “the purpose of admonition and discipline is to restore [the erring member] to faithful obedience to God and full fellowship with the congregation, to maintain the holiness of the church, and thus to uphold God’s honor” (Church Order Art. 78).
 - We affirm that “the members of the church are accountable to one another in their doctrine and life and have the responsibility to encourage and admonish one another in love” (Church Order Art. 79-a).

Ground:

Synod rightly has the authority to pronounce on doctrinal and ethical matters that concern the whole church (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 597). Regarding the authority of these decisions, the following statements all

pertain to Synod 2022's decision and serve as the grounds for our recommended alteration:

1. Synodical decisions "shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Church Order Art. 29).
2. At the same time, "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). That is to say, no synodical pronouncement *itself* (even an "interpretation of the confession") can ever be "elevate[d] . . . to the status of the confessions" (p. 598).
3. Instead, "clothed with synodical authority, [such pronouncements] serve that precise use and function for which they were specifically designed by synod" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). At Synod 2022 this pronouncement took the form of an "interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). As such, "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). It follows, then, that Synod 2022's "interpretation of the confession" does not itself have "confessional status" but is, rather, "settled and binding" (Church Order Art. 29) in its "use and function" as an "interpretation of the confession."
4. Regarding the "settled and binding" authority of a synodical "interpretation of the confession," Report 47 of the *Acts of Synod 1975* states, "Such an interpretation given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group. . . . *One cannot place one's personal interpretation of the Confessions or a part thereof above the official interpretation of synod. That would make void the significance and power of the Forms of Unity*" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598; quoting *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 191-92; emphasis ours). All teaching, preaching, discipleship, and discipline within CRCNA churches should therefore conform itself to the "settled and binding" character of this interpretation.
5. Two things follow from the above and should be recognized by all members and officebearers in the CRCNA:
 - a. On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that the "measure of agreement expected" is different for a synodical decision than it is for a confessional doctrine. As the 1975 report says, "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 Form of Subscription. While *synodical decisions* are 'settled and binding,' subscription to synodical decisions is not required. Registering a negative vote with regard to a

synodical decision is permissible, although this is not tolerated with respect to the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-2). As this makes clear, disagreement with a synodical decision is possible/allowable, even as that decision remains “settled and binding” on the church.

- b. With that said, it should also be acknowledged that in making the decisions it did, Synod 2022 was attempting to call local churches, officebearers, and members *away* from such disagreement and back toward unity on this doctrinal/moral subject. In this way, Synod 2022 attempted to use the confessions as what we say they are—“Forms of *Unity*.” As the 1975 report says, “The well-being of the church is fostered when there is substantial unity with respect to the decisions of synod” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 602).
6. In sum, by declaring its *interpretation* to have “confessional status,” Synod 2022 blurred lines that are clear in the 1975 report, setting a poor and confusing precedent for future synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters. Altering Synod 2022’s decision in the way described above brings it in line with the position of the 1975 report on the relationship between synodical decisions and the confessions. At the same time, it honors synod’s intent to clarify the meaning of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 in the strongest way possible, so as not to allow divergent practice at the local church level by appeal to the suggestion that previous synodical deliverances were “pastoral advice” that can be set aside.⁵ As such, the purpose of this overture is to alter Synod 2022’s decision so as to bring it in line with the conclusions of the 1975 report while affirming the “settled and binding” authority and significance of its interpretation of “unchastity” in Q&A 108.
- B. Adopt the following definition of *chastity* in order to guide the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108: “Chastity is the pursuit of that purity of heart which Jesus calls blessed (Matt. 5:8). Whether in married or single life, chastity is the preservation of sexual union for the one-flesh union of one man and one woman in marriage, within which such sexual union serves both natural and symbolic ends: the joining of male and female in one flesh (Gen. 2:24); the bearing of children (Gen. 1:28); and the nuptial union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32). Chastity is thus a gift which preserves the holy state of marriage and signals our ultimate betrothal to Christ, and unchastity is any transgression that undermines this state and this betrothal.”

⁵As the 1975 report says, “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).

Ground:

Synod 2023 did not accede to this recommendation when it was made to it in Overture 21 to that synod (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 426-27; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1006), offering the following grounds: (a) “It is not necessary to define *chastity* as it is not a word we find in the Heidelberg Catechism”; (b) “The Human Sexuality Report adequately describes chastity (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 442).” We wish to continue this dialogue with Synod 2024, offering the following reasons for why the above definition of *chastity* would serve the CRCNA well by providing further guidance to churches to recognize and pursue chaste living within and outside of marriage.

1. Strictly speaking, the word *chastity* may not appear in Q&A 108, but the word “*unchastity*” does (the negative form), as does the word “*chaste*” (the adjectival form). In the nature of the case, one cannot know what unchastity is nor what chaste living entails unless one knows what *chastity* means. The negative vision of what we are to avoid (unchastity) implies a positive vision of what we are to pursue (chastity). Or as the catechism itself says, “We should . . . live decent and *chaste* lives” (Q&A 108). Synod 2022 interpreted the negative term (“unchastity”) with reference to helpful representative examples. But what does it mean to live “chaste lives” (the positive vision)? Synod 2022 recognized the need to call the CRCNA to “radical obedience” in this area of our lives (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922 [cf. p. 906]), which surely means more than simply avoiding unchastity. It means pursuing chastity. Adopting the above definition complements Synod 2022’s interpretation of “unchastity” by holding out a positive vision for all of our people about what it means to “live decent and *chaste* lives” (Q&A 108).
2. It is true that the Human Sexuality Report describes the virtue of chastity (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 442-43), but nowhere on those pages does it seek to define it.⁶ The HSR says good things on those pages, but it does not collect those things into a tangible positive vision. One does not walk away from those pages thinking, “Now I know what the pursuit of chastity will entail.” Nor does the HSR on those pages connect chastity positively to the spousal relationship of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-33), nor to Christ’s own words about purity of heart in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:8), as our definition does. Moreover, the HSR is a long document, not easily digested. We would be wise to draw out and distill some of its cardinal points for the sake of catechesis. Synod 2022 did this relative to “unchastity,”

⁶ The closest it comes is the following: “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” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 442). But that is rather thin as a definition.

and in doing so helped us name and avoid sin. We suggest that, in many ways, the deeper and more radical call would be to pursue *virtue*. Synod 2024 could help us do this by adopting a simple and accessible, yet thoroughgoing and challenging, definition of *chastity*.

Council of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan
Paul Katerberg, clerk of council

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 10

Member of Ivanrest CRC, Grandville, Michigan

I. Introduction

The CRCNA has long said that it wants to hear from young and LGBTQ+ voices. Mine is one of those. I'm a 23-year-old in the church. I also identify as LGBTQ+. I believe in the transformative and healing power of the gospel and the infallibility of Scripture. I believe that we are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, alone. I believe in the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of God—that God is sovereign over all things. But I am also concerned about how the CRCNA has made its recent decisions on human sexuality and their impact on many of my family members in Christ—including some of whom are also LGBTQ+.

I was reading Ephesians 5 recently and came across Paul's encouragement to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 18-20).

Upon reading this, I was inspired to try my hand at writing a psalm of sorts of my own. And that's what this communication is. It's my attempt to express in psalm-form some of what I've been feeling and thinking.

It should be noted that although the message contained in this communication is primarily for the affirming/more affirming-leaning churches in the CRCNA, my hope is that this communication might, Lord willing, encourage rich and meaningful conversation between and within *all* the various churches in the CRCNA, and encourage my siblings in Christ in all these various churches to do some deep reflection. My hope is also that such conversation and reflection will foster greater compassion, patience, humility, and peace in all of us.

II. Words of Clarification

For those who are not used to reading poetry, the main gist of this

communication is to gently encourage affirming/more affirming-leaning churches to consider graciously leaving the CRC of their own accord. Rather than stick it out for a protracted fight (which, I worry, will, in the end, hurt them and their faith more than help it), I would like to see them leave the CRC for denominations or churches that can care for them better (and see them receive the proper support and assistance they'll need from the CRC's broader assemblies, should/when they choose to do this). I don't mean to offend but simply to inform/remind people of the option if they haven't fully considered it before.

III. Communication

There is joy in knowing God's kingdom of heaven will come
Regardless of what happens to this denomination.
No power on earth or in hell can stop the full restoration
That the Lord has promised will come to pass on all creation.

And that is why I find myself unafraid
Of the decisions that were made and the ways things have changed.
That is why in the midst all the hurt and pain,
I have continued to put all my faith in the Lamb who was slain.

Also, I suppose my faith remains strong and intact
Because I've somehow always been acutely aware that

The CRC is just one of the many parts of the body,
Thus, it should never be revered as if it were the whole body itself.
Plus, while I've always appreciated that it has been given a special responsibility,
I've always recognized this was also true for churches everywhere else.

Furthermore, the CRC, like the rest of the church, isn't and has never been perfect.
I know full well that any good fruit it bears is because of the Spirit.
In fact, the best the church can do is strive towards purity.
It is only God alone that can make its holiness complete.

Consequently, I, a queer youth in the CRC, would like to communicate the following
To the churches that have been most affected by Synods 2022 and 2023¹:

*The children of God are everywhere—they are in churches that are independent,
And they worship and serve him in other denominations too.
So, if the Christian Reformed Church is no longer a good fit,
Do not fret, but rather, take comfort in knowing there's still a place for you*

¹ This includes churches who are open and affirming or are in the process of becoming so, as well as churches who are struggling with the "confessional status" designation that was given to Synod 2022's interpretation of the word "unchastity" which was upheld by Synod 2023, because they have always held space for diverse views on same-sex marriage in their communities.

*In the body of Christ. As a matter of fact, it could be
That you were never meant to stay indefinitely
In this one particular part of the body that is the CRC.
Or maybe you were always meant to serve in another part of the body.*

*Now, I'm not saying this out of ignorance to your plight,
Nor am I saying this because I think the other group² is completely in the right.
I'm saying this because they are equally precious in God's sight,
And I can tell they're genuinely striving to live as children of light.*

*Like you, they're doing the best they know how to be the salt of the earth,
And invite others to experience the beauty of spiritual rebirth.*

*And it's clear to me that the Spirit is working in their communities,
Just like it's evident to me that the Spirit's been at work in yours.
Thus, I would encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities
That you'll find if you just allow yourself to go beyond the CRC's doors.*

*In fact, for a while, I've been thinking that maybe God allowed
These past two years of synodical decisions to turn out like this
Because he has decided to select you from the rest of the crowd
To start something or somewhere new that'll make greater use of your gifts.*

*And as for the churches who are alright with the decisions of Synod '22 and '23
I've been thinking maybe God decided to appoint them as the primary stewards of the CRC.
And if this is the case, I feel there is no need to constantly worry,
For I trust that God will help them care for those who remain appropriately.*

*Of course . . . I'm fully aware that many of you have been in the CRC since you were young³,
So parting from it, would feel strange, and disorienting for you — maybe even wrong.
And for some of you, it's more complicated. Serving in the CRC has been a long-
standing family tradition and so your attachment to it is especially strong.*

*So I do understand that what I am suggesting would be incredibly hard for you to do.
But at the same time, the Spirit has been continuously prompting me to be honest with you.*

*And so that's what I'm doing here despite the anxiety it is causing me,
Hoping and praying that this message will be received charitably.
Truth be told, there's two other reasons why I think it might be
Better for you to separate from this denominational entity.*

² By "other group" I mean the group of churches who were in favor of the "confessional status" designation that was given to Synod 2022's interpretation of the word "unchastity" which was upheld by Synod 2023, and whose communities are experiencing little to no negative effects from this particular decision.

³ My own family has been part of the CRC ever since I was baby. Like a lot of you—I have grown up in the Christian Reformed Church.

*First, it seems that some of you have developed an unhealthy bond with the CRC
To the point where it's like your love for this denomination is actually keeping you from
Investing time in strengthening your relationship with all the persons of the Trinity
And helping those in your communities develop their gifts for the glory of God's kingdom.*

*I think that having a little bit more of a distant relationship with this church might help
You avoid further conflating your love for the church with your love for Christ.
I'm concerned that remaining will only be to the detriment of your health
And that what is normally a virtue will become your greatest vice.*

*Second, I know that a lot of you want to stay and keep fighting because you're wary
Of how the other churches are going to minister to people who are LGBT.
But I can already see that staying here has been sapping you of energy
And has been hindering you from helping LGBTQ people more effectively.*

*Because, you see, since every LGBTQ person is unique and different,
What type of church community will best aid their spiritual development
Depends on their individual life experiences and circumstances—both past and present.
Hence, the approach to care the other group desires every church to implement*

*May suit some LGBTQ people well but for many others it falls short
Of providing them what they need in terms of spiritual mentorship and support⁴.*

*So, there's a need for churches like you that wish to operate under a different model.
Unfortunately, doing so while remaining part of the CRC isn't really feasible.
Thus, to help the body of Christ better reach out to a wider range of LGBTQ people
Please consider changing the church affiliation in which you share the gospel.*

*One last thing. I notice that many people associate the word "separation" with "isolation."
However, when one separates from someone that doesn't necessarily equate
To one completely cutting ties with them—and no longer having any kind of connection.
Just like a child who leaves their parents to live on their own, their love for them is still great.*

⁴ Case in point: I have friends who are LGBTQ+ and currently only feel safe attending an affirming church largely due to the trauma they have experienced within more conservative religious spaces. At the same time, I also know a few LGBTQ+ people that wouldn't have any difficulties becoming confessing members of the CRC as it pertains to the "confessional status" designation that was given to Synod 2022's interpretation of the word "unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism, because they have come to hold the traditional view of marriage of their own accord.

And then there's LGBTQ+ youth in the CRC (like myself) who have yet to form their own views on sexuality and marriage, or have already formed particular views on these things but also have been deeply committed to showing a healthy respect and appreciation for views different from their own, and open to learning more about these differing views—and so feel conflicted about the "confessional status" designation that was given to Synod 2022's interpretation of the word "unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism.

*They just don't live under the same roof anymore, and may see them less.
But if they truly care for their parents, they'll find ways to maintain a good relationship
With them as they become more independent and adjust to life away from the nest.
Similarly, I can imagine you part of a different denomination but still having fellowship*

*With churches in the CRC, where the nature of your relationship wouldn't be the same
But your relationship would be one of mutual respect and goodwill and void of undue strain.
Though you would be of different church affiliations, you'd be united in the holy name
Of Christ, our dearest Lord and Savior, who will forever reign.*

*Furthermore, it's worth noting that to have a close relationship with this denomination
A church does not need to be part of it—it can be of a different church affiliation.
This is because the CRC has a history of building and supporting ecumenical relations⁵
Not only with churches in the U.S and Canada, but with churches in other nations.*

*With all this said, I do hope that you take time to consider what I've expressed.
Again, I know that if you do choose to follow through with this request
It will be a challenging transition, and cause much heartache and distress.
And yet . . . I can't shake off the feeling that in the end, it'll be for the best.*

Member of Ivanrest CRC, Grandville, Michigan
Lain Martinez Vasquez

Note: This communication was presented to the council of Ivanrest CRC at its December 2023 meeting but was not adopted. This communication was then presented to Classis Grandville at its January meeting, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 11

Member of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta

I. Introduction

My name is Aaliyah Verhoef, and I am a 17-year-old, grade 12 student. I attend River Park CRC, the church that I have attended since my birth and where I am a baptized member. As a youth, I am writing this both on behalf of myself and on behalf of a handful of the youth who will be the future of our beloved church.

II. Thoughts on the HSR

Conversations surrounding the Human Sexuality Report and synod have been common in my church and even in my own house. Both of these

⁵ crcna.org/eirc/ecumenical-relations/relationships; crcna.org/eirc/ecumenical-relations/ecumenical-charter

spaces have been good at inviting everyone's opinions, but I feel that, as a whole, the opinions and thoughts of youth are not paid attention to.

Youth have valuable ideas and opinions that deserve to be heard. We are greatly affected by the church's decisions, and yet we are not given the voice or the power to influence them. I understand that many young people are thought of as being uninformed or as only speaking our parents' views. However, as the next generation and the ones that will be stewarding the future of the church very soon, I believe that this is a huge oversight.

I, personally, have many opinions on the issues that the church is currently facing. In the past few years I believe that synod has made decisions that have negatively impacted the church and will continue to do so. However, although I disagree with the stance that the CRC has taken on many aspects of sexuality (especially their stance on the "unchastity" of homosexuality), my main issue with the whole situation is the way it is being handled.

This conversation has become less of a discussion and more of an argument. We are failing to listen respectfully to others with an open mind and heart.

In this way, the church is setting a bad example.

III. Unity without uniformity

In John 17:22-23, Jesus says: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." The way I read this, Jesus is calling us to be united. Through our unity, the world will know that God has sent us to spread his Word and his love.

Right now, Christians are so divided on so many issues that the rest of the world is barely able to recognize us as the family that we are meant to be. As 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." We are meant to be the body of Christ, and a body cannot function without all of its parts.

The question I pose is this: How do we achieve unity without uniformity? This is what I believe we must do.

River Park Church's vision is "Reaching Out, Drawing In, Creating Mosaic Community." A mosaic is a picture or pattern produced by arranging together small, unique pieces of all different shapes and colors. Similarly, every person is different and beautiful, but it is only together that we can find the true beauty and see the whole picture. There is beauty in difference. There is value in variety. Without unique perspectives and people, a glorious mosaic cannot be created.

It is my belief, one that I share with many people in my community, that it is more important to be united and find ways to respect and care for each other despite disagreement than to hold the same stance on certain issues.

Matthew 22:37-39 shows Jesus' response when asked which is the most important commandment: "Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself.'""

Each of us is trying to love God in the best way we know how. We all read the Bible and try to understand and respect what God is telling us to do. Even if we land in different places, we are only trying to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds.

When we can recognize this about each other, we will be better able to love our neighbor as ourselves. We must respect each other just as we want to be respected. We must listen to each other's opinions just as we want our opinions to be heard.

This is what it means to live in unity without uniformity. That, despite our differences and disagreements, we can find ways to live in community with each other and love one another as God loves us. This is what I hope we, as the future of the church, will be able to accomplish.

What I have written above is completely by me. However, this communication isn't only about sharing my opinion. It is intended to be a catalyst so that synod might listen to more of the youth and young adults in the CRCNA.

IV. Thoughts of other youth

In trying to hear the opinions of other youth, I created a form with 12 questions, eight of which were meant to gather general information about the respondent. The other four questions are included below, with the responses from a handful of youth from multiple churches (whose names have been changed to protect identity). These responses represent a tiny fraction of the people and opinions in our vast and varied community. I feel that it is important that more of these young voices are heard in our church when we are facing such important decisions.

When you think of the CRC's position (or even that of the church in general) and its response to human sexuality (including homosexual sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation) how do you feel about it?

"I disagree with the stance they have taken, and think that it will do more harm than good and push people out of the CRC and potentially the church as a whole."

—Mary, age 16

"I respect how everyone has their own opinions when it comes to the human sexuality report. I feel strongly that, more and more, the politics within the church have started to take away from the main purpose of worshiping the Lord. I feel that everyone, no matter how they identify, should be able to worship freely. When I think of the CRC in the state it

is in currently, it makes me sad to think that we are dividing different groups of Christian people based on what they believe is right, and not sticking with the main idea and purpose of church, which is worshipping the Lord.”

—Alyssa, age 17

“I feel my church personally has addressed it in the best possible way for the people of the church. We have decided to become mostly accepting, yet are trying to meet at the consensus of the majority.”

—Annika, age 17

“I feel disappointed as I feel that this decision has caused a lot of unnecessary division within the church. Church should be a place where everyone feels welcome, and I believe that, as followers of Christ, our most important calling is to love others above anything else. Excluding certain people from the church community is the opposite of loving our neighbors. The church has experienced a long history of corruption, caused by the forceful implementation of Christianity, the silencing of certain questions or issues, and the shaming upon sinners. We should learn from the mistakes of the past and create a welcoming environment for ALL people, because the more people we turn away, the greater stain we put on the church. It proves as a bad example for nonbelievers who are already weary of Christianity when they hear that we shame certain demographics. Why would anyone want to join a community that targets certain “sinners” and treats their sin as worse than the sins of every other heterosexual member of the church? The big issue with this report is that it claims that homosexuality is a sin; but if this sin is being so harshly punished, then what about everyone else’s sins? There is no formula or scale for the way that we should deal with sin. This is because God is the only true judge of sin, as we are ALL sinners. I believe that this is the beauty of a church: a community of equally sinful individuals figuring out how to pursue relationships with Christ together.”

—Katherine, age 16

“I feel that the stance the CRC has taken is unfair and does not glorify God. I feel it is not being seen through the eyes of the Lord as it is not including certain people just because of the way they live their lives. God did not teach us to judge others but to love our neighbor as our self and to be accepting people with love in our hearts. In my opinion, it is a misrepresentation of what it means to be a Christian. I feel it was a poor decision and it was not given enough time to be discussed.”

—Sam, age 17

“I have mixed emotions on this topic. Some things I am agreeing with, and some things I have not made a complete decision on. I have not explored gender identity and sexual orientation as much as I have with

human sexuality. I am on more of the agreeing side that same-sex marriage is okay. I'm still figuring this out, but I'm not in the middle and I'm not disagreeing; I am not 100 percent affirming but more like 75 percent affirming for the stage I'm at right now."

—Chad, age 15

"I think that the church should not discriminate against someone based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. Just because you don't agree with someone else's position on something doesn't mean that you are given the right to tell them what they can and cannot do. Especially if they want to be a part of the CRC community but are not being welcomed."

—Sophie, age 14

How have you experienced conversations about this topic? Have these been difficult conversations?

"I have had many conversations with my family members and my peers about the idea of the human sexuality report, and I have learned from those conversations that every person has a different side to the story and that it is important to listen to all different views of the topic. Some of these conversations have been difficult but feel very necessary."

—Alyssa

"Yes. This has been a big conversation because some of my closest friends hold different opinions on this topic than I do, and we each try to have the other understand our side of this conversation. I think these conversations have been long and hard as we try to make others understand why this is an important topic for our futures."

—Sophie

"The conversations I have been a part of are filled mostly with hurt. They are difficult in that I see how this report has hurt those around me, and in how it is pushing people away from God. However, I have not been a part of difficult conversations in the sense of hearing the other side of the argument firsthand."

—Mary

"I have found the conversation on the topic to feel productive and to give me a deeper understanding of what those around me feel. I have not had any significantly difficult conversations on the topic, but I do feel the conversations are only made difficult by those who are uncomfortable about the topic."

—Sam

"I have been part of these conversations, especially with friends. Some of my friends have different beliefs than I do and are strongly opinionated on those beliefs. Sometimes I feel uncomfortable because they have said things that I find offensive toward my beliefs and just casually joke

about it. These conversations have been difficult because of the opposite opinions and the way they can get heated instead of staying respectful.”

—Chad

“Yes, these conversations are difficult because they do bring up a lot of pain for certain friends and individuals in the community, and these decisions mean a lot to many people as well.”

—Katherine

“Definitely challenging topics to discuss due to the spectrum of individuals and how close it is to their hearts. We are all trying to make sense of it all, and many are stuck in the middle. So, yes, it is a difficult yet needed talk.”

—Annika

In conversations about the topic mentioned above (sexuality in the church), has your opinion been invited or heard?

“Yes, the people who I have engaged in conversation on this topic have invited me in and listened to my point of view.”

—Mary

“I have mostly discussed with my family on this topic, and they have been accepting and happy to listen to me when I share my opinion.”

—Sam

“Honestly, it depends on who it is with. Some have chosen to not respect my opinion and tell me that my opinion is not important because it does not align with theirs. I feel very hurt in these communities. With others, on the other hand, my opinions are heard and brought into big conversation, and I feel respected in these spaces.”

—Sophie

“Yes, definitely. Many people have had the opportunity to share and be heard within my particular church. I think my church has done the best to hear from both sides in order to decide the next steps and stage of the church.”

—Annika

“I feel in some cases my opinion has been invited, and I have felt safe to share how I feel without the fear of being judged, but I have also been in conversations where I have felt ashamed for having a different perspective on the topic and have not felt safe to share how I felt.”

—Alyssa

“In conversations my opinion has been heard, but not very much. When this topic is being talked about within my school community I try to stay silent about it because I know in the end it will just become heated and will not be a healthy environment. My opinion is so unheard in other outside-of-school conversations, but I try not to step in too much.”

—Chad

"No, as someone who is under 18, my opinion has not been asked for."
—Katherine

Anything else you would like to share?

"God 'will repay each person according to what they have done.' To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism' (Rom. 2:6-11). I think of this verse in relation to this discussion within the church. It reminds me not to judge others because I am equally as imperfect and shall be judged along with everyone else in the eyes of the Lord."

—Sam

"My family has put many hours of work and thought into this topic, and it has turned me from not caring as much to caring a lot—and I think it is very important for everyone to understand that this is more than just a small little topic to me, my family, and my community. It is a big topic that can and will affect the rest of our lives. I believe that this is going to the young and newer generations to talk, listen, and discuss. As we talk about this, many of us truly and honestly do care about this, and it is left to us to think about the effect this can hold on our future."

—Sophie

"Worshiping God has nothing to do with our individual beliefs about sexuality. Communities can remain diverse. I just feel like if we want to grow the earthly community of Jesus' followers, it will not happen through shame, judgment, and exclusion. This will only turn people away from the idea of Christianity."

—Katherine

Member of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta
Aaliyah Verhoef

Note: This communication was discussed by the council of River Park Church over multiple days in January, and on January 28, 2024, the council did not adopt this communication as its own but supported me in sending it on to classis by appending the following note:

The following communication has been thoughtfully prepared by a high school student from River Park Church. As council, we wholeheartedly support the sharing of multiple perspectives and as such support submitting this to classis. Not all members of our council are

in full agreement with all the opinions and views presented. However, we do believe in listening to each other without judgment and in coexisting in a community that can respectfully disagree on some topics. As they are the future of the church, it is important that youth and young adults have an opportunity to be heard, and as such we endorse bringing this forward.

Note: This communication was processed at the March 8, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan but was not adopted as its own.

COMMUNICATION 12

Council of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta

As the Council of River Park Church of Calgary, Alberta, we believe that River Park Church is a congregation of people loved by God the Father as we follow Jesus our Lord with the support of the Holy Spirit, participating as one body composed of many parts in the life and work of the kingdom.

I. Who we are

Originally established as First CRC of Calgary, Alberta, in 1952, we have been through many shifts and changes. One thing is consistent: we are a community that loves to follow Jesus together.

We are a multiethnic congregation. Current Christian literature defines a multiethnic congregation as one in which no single racial or ethnic group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership. Even by this definition, there are very few multiethnic congregations in North America. We are one—to God be the glory.

We are creating a mosaic community. This is our vision. It includes more than just multiethnic membership. Being called to create a mosaic community means we are working to become more fully multicultural (yes, this is different from being multiethnic). In addition to being multiethnic or multicultural, we are also a community of diverse genders, ages, and socioeconomic situations. We gather with both married and single people, widows and widowers. We already have diversity in our leadership, in our approaches to mission and discipleship, in aspects of our theological convictions.

Amid all of this diversity, we are one family in Christ. Through pursuing our vision at River Park Church—“reaching out, drawing in, creating mosaic community”—God has brought together a wonderfully diverse worshipping community. Some have been CRC their whole lives. Some have recently joined the CRC because they have found River Park Church to be their home. But when we come together, we come as one Christian family.

II. Our responses to recent synodical decisions about the HSR

We have tried our best to communicate with synod as decisions are being made. We sent an overture that was on the agenda for Synod 2022, asking that synod not accede to the Human Sexuality Report's recommendation about "confessional status." Our sense was that adopting "confessional status" would harmfully divide the CRCNA. Synod 2022 decided to adopt "confessional status." In response, we sent an overture to Synod 2023, asking that synod listen carefully to our whole CRCNA community to hear more carefully the impact of this "confessional status" decision. Instead of listening, Synod 2023 adopted a motion to "guide into compliance" those who disagree. We believe this decision to also be unwise and divisive. In addition, the committee responding to this overture did not address our questions about the confessional-revision gravamen.

III. Expressing our concerns with the trajectory of the CRCNA

In the above ways, we have tried to be faithful in communicating with our covenant community in the CRCNA.

We are communicating once more.

We are concerned about going further down this path of "guiding into compliance" the local church with the heavy hand of classical discipline. There has been no healthy listening; to then bring discipline is harmful.

We do not consider it to be wise or helpful to add additional restrictions to the gravamen process. We have faithful officebearers who have filed gravamina. They are respected by our congregation and leading well.

We are deeply concerned that synod continues to make decisions that negatively impact our local congregation.

Council of River Park Church, Calgary, Alberta
Joanne Spronk, clerk

Note: This communication was presented to the meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan on March 8, 2024, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 13

Classis Minnkota

Classis Minnkota informs the delegates of Synod 2024 that it has sent the following communication to the Program Committee of Synod 2024:

1. In keeping with the instructions given in the Supplement to Church Order Article 45, delegates from Classis Minnkota who believe the seating of women delegates is in violation of the Word of God wish to have their protest recorded in the minutes of synod. This protest will be noted on our synodical credentials to be read out loud as synod convenes.

2. Classis Minnkota is deeply convinced that the seating of delegates who have filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen is contrary to God's Word.
 - a. To stand in full agreement with the Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America while at the same time having secretly communicated "difficulties" with the confessions is a violation of the ninth commandment.
 - b. In keeping with the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section VIII, F, Classis Minnkota delegates will register their protests immediately from the floor if the initial procedures delineated in section II, A, 1 are completed without addressing this issue.
 - c. This intent to register a protest is noted on our synodical credentials to be read out loud as synod convenes. Should appropriate steps be taken to mitigate this great concern, the Classis Minnkota delegates will not protest.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 14

Classis Minnkota

Classis Minnkota sends delegates to synod each year that protest the ordination and seating of women at synod. In the interests of transparency and clarity, classis wishes to explain the rationale for our protests by sending this communication.

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 NAPARC 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

COMMUNICATION 15

Members of LaGrave Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

I. Background

In the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023, many CRC congregants are struggling with the serious impasse that now exists between their beliefs and those of the denomination.

For some, the heart of the impasse is differing understandings of marriage and human sexuality that arise from different interpretations of Scripture, highlighted particularly by Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage. We also have read Scripture, have sought the Spirit's direction, and have come to a different conclusion.

For others, the heart of the impasse is Synod 2022's decision to give "confessional status," a new category of synodical decision, to its declaration regarding same-sex sexual activity, thereby making this declaration on the same level as all doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions of the Christian Reformed Church and requiring all CRC members to agree with this teaching and all officebearers to explicitly bind themselves to this teaching when they sign the Covenant for Officebearers.

For others, it is not just the confessional status of the declaration but the synodical push to police the denomination for any violations of confessional orthodoxy and purge the church of any dissenting voices that has them concerned about what is happening to their denomination. Instead of seeking ways to give room for honest differences of biblical interpretation, synod has instructed its classes to find any and all officebearers and churches with convictions that differ from synod's confessional declaration and "guide [them] into compliance." Instead of allowing the confessional-difficulty gravamen provisions of our Church Order to give officebearers some gracious room to express their conscientious objection to this new confessional position and thereby still sign the Covenant for Officebearers with integrity and remain members in good standing, there is now a strong push to restrict the use of the gravamen provisions of our Church Order.

More and more, some of our members fear that synod as a deliberative assembly is broken. Overtures to synod that raise significant biblical and theological matters that the church must engage with are summarily ignored, including confessional-revision gravamina that synod is required to adjudicate. Synod bundles together scores of such overtures and declares a sweeping decision by synod to be its “answer” to all of them but doesn’t necessarily answer the overtures at all. This breakdown in synodical deliberation, combined with the overwhelming margin of support for this new direction in the church, leaves more and more of our members feeling voiceless and helpless and lacking confidence in synod as a way to discern the work of the Spirit in our midst.

II. Members in Protest

Given Synod 2023’s unequivocal reaffirmation of Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, there are now fewer options to address synod with these concerns. Yet members who share these concerns feel deeply that they must speak into the current crisis in the CRC. To that end, members are invited to sign the Resolution below and thereby identify themselves in a communication to Synod 2024 as a “Member in Protest” in LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church.

“Protest” is fitting ecclesiastical language in the Christian Reformed Church. We are “Protestants” after all. And protest is a term and category used in our Church Order, Supplement to Church Order, and Rules for Synodical Procedure. A protest is one type of communication to synod. And when Rev. David Struyk could not in good conscience continue as a delegate at Synod 2023, he was not noisy or unruly about it. He simply announced, “I leave in protest.”

We, the undersigned members of LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, pray that the broader church and Synod 2024 will receive this protest at recent developments in the CRC as a cry of the heart from members who love the LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church.

III. Resolution

We, the undersigned members of LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, declare ourselves to be “members in protest” in the Christian Reformed Church. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022’s use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological

- reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance."
2. We qualify our status as members of LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, given that the "confessional status" attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: "Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration."
 3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objection to Synod 2022's confessional declaration and sign the Covenant for Officebearers will seriously impede the ability of many to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration.
 4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration as expressed above are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.

Members of LaGrave Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Ken Afman	Kerrie Doezeema	Barb Leegwater
Mary Afman	Albert Doorn	Isabella Lindh
Jo Arnoys	*Ann Mary Dykstra	Polly Lindh
Bradd Beidler	*Chuck Dykstra	Roland Lindh
Rog Bratt	*Barb Engbers	Barbara Noordeloos
Sue Bratt	*Bruce Engbers	Bob Noordeloos
Bill Boer	Sharon Etheridge	Jon Pastoor
Laurie Boer	Irene Fridsma	Sue Pastoor
Mary Boyk	Ken Fridsma	Marcia Pater
Ryan Boyk	Bryan Ganzevoort	Don Plantinga
Ben Buter	Leila Ganzevoort	Evonne Plantinga
Dave Buter	Elise Greidanus	Liesl Pruis
Kristen Buter	Nelson Greidanus	Rory Pruis
Glenda Buteyn	*Jan Heerspink	Jim Reiffer
Katie Carson	*Donna Klein	Marilou Reiffer
Deb DeHaan	*John Klein	Jason Reiffer
Steve DeHaan	Jerry Kruyf	Melissa Reiffer
Frank Doezeema	Susan Kruyf	Liz Rozeboom

Ger Rozeboom	Tom Waalkes	Kay Hoitenga
Ted Rozeboom	Arvin Wierda	Austin Kanis
Gloria Rozeboom	Joyce Wierda	Bob Otte
Lonnie Rynders	Harold Wiersma	Judy Otte
*Dave Setsma	Madelyn Wiersma	Alex Pastoor
*Lynn Setsma	Rick Workman	Emma Pastoor
*Grace Shearer	Paul Wright	Dongo Pewee
Marge Snoeyink	Verla Zuiderveen	Lisa Pewee
Ginge Steele	Mary Jo DeJong	Gordon Ryskamp
William Stroo	Robert DeJong	Joyce Ryskamp
Dick VanDeelen	Elaine DeStigter	Judi Scholten
Jan VanDeelen	Connie DeVries	Scott Scholten
Dave VanderArk	Claire Doorn	Karen Schuitema
Lorrie VanderArk	Micah Doorn	Mike Schuitema
Connie Kuiper VanDyke	Aaron Eding	Kristen VandenBosch
Karl VanDyke	Jana Eding	Joe Vriend
David VerSluis	Tom Glover	Millie Vriend
Janis VerSluis	Jacob Hartman-Tanis	

*Members of steering committee

Note: The above communication was presented to the council of LaGrave Avenue CRC on January 8, 2024, but was not adopted; it was also presented to Classis Grand Rapids South on March 7, 2024, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 16

Members of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

We, as members in good standing of Inglewood Christian Reformed Church, Edmonton, Alberta, hereby register our protest of certain actions of Synods 2022 and 2023, as hereafter described. By this protest . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as "Synod 2022's confessional declaration"). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance."
2. We qualify our status as members of a Christian Reformed Church, given that the "confessional status" attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament

that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our names:
 “Yes, we are members of a Christian Reformed Church, but we must clarify that we do not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”

3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as members to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
5. We declare that the only way we can remain Christian Reformed Church members with integrity, given Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, is “under protest.” Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon our local church, our classis and our denomination.

Members of Inglewood Christian Reformed Church, Edmonton Alberta

Ellen Paquette	John Hiemstra	Rose Nydam
Jim Joosse	Shirley Hiemstra	Devin Boonstra
Trica Boonstra	Amy Nydam	Elly Klumpenhower
Diana Nelson	Sharon DeMoor	Sheryl Plantinga
Jessica DeMoor	Gary VanderVinne	Jenny Van Belle
Jenna Hoff	Thea Fennema	Dave Nydam
Jack Vandendorp	Karin Van Weelden	Ray Fennema
Gerda Kits	Ron Horjus	Henry Woudstra
John Rhebergen	Peggy Horjus	Alice Joosse
Rita Rhebergen	Sim VanderVinne	Coni Rozema
Rebecca Rozema	Sandra VanderVinne	Janet Paquette
Anita Vandenberg	Judy VanderVinne	Connor Fennema
Jennifer Fennema	Margery Stolte	
Leendert Mos	Henry Bosch	

Note: This communication was submitted to the March 8, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

Council of First CRC, Vancouver, British Columbia

I. Background

Since December 2020, the congregation of First CRC of Vancouver, British Columbia, has been participating in prayer and discernment related to engaging with the CRCNA's Human Sexuality Report (HSR) using the restorative practices from Pastor Church Resources (now part of Thrive). We began with listening circles (designed with the denomination's *Challenging Conversations Toolkit*), which resulted in a communal decision to send an overture asking that synod not accede to Recommendation D of the HSR regarding confessional status—an overture that was adopted by Classis B.C. North-West and sent to Synod 2022. Following Synod 2022, we held further conversations and listening circles, and we have been engaging since that time in the specific Next Steps process as laid out by Pastor Church Resources, resulting in a communal conversation that we held in mid-October to talk about specific actions we might consider while moving forward.

A number of clear themes emerged from our “Moving Forward” conversation, and we wanted to share three of them with you:

1. We lament. Our vision at First CRC is to follow Jesus, grow together, and extend hospitality—and together we seek to live into our core values of being sustained by worship, formed in Christ, made for relationship, and being here for good. As we see the impact of the difficult discussions and decisions regarding the Human Sexuality Report, we acknowledge the challenge to live out our vision and values, and we lament the pain that has been caused in our congregation, in our denomination, and in the LGBTQ community.
2. Specifically, these are the laments in our congregation:
 - the impact that this has had on First CRC, including on those who have left, those uncertain about their belonging in our congregation, and those who are now weary and wary about how we can carry on
 - that, at times, thoughtful dialogue has been replaced with polarization, when Christ's prayer for his followers under pressure is that we would remain unified to God's glory (John 15-17)
 - the ways one aspect of human sexuality has seemingly eclipsed other areas of Christian discipleship
 - the ways our congregants, including members of the LGBTQ community and other individuals, have been talked about and treated in the denomination-wide discussions
 - the process of Synods 2022 and 2023, looking for a quick majority without listening to the significant minority reports or pausing after pleading from the delegates

- the discord and disconnection we experience as a congregation in the Christian Reformed Church, wondering where we, personally and congregationally, belong
- the witness of the church being negatively impacted when we have failed to love God with all of who we are, and to love each other as ourselves

We acknowledge with humility that we “see through a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). But as we seek unity and pursue God-honoring lives, we want to acknowledge the pain we see both historic and present, and to articulate our hope for the postures we wish to take as we live together as a community in Christ moving forward.

Still we call this to mind: because of the Lord’s love and his faithfulness, he will see us through this by leading us, bringing us peace, helping us to trust each other, and filling us with hope (Lam. 3:21-24).

3. Noting synod’s decisions related to confessional status, the nature of the discussion on gravamen, and the seeming dissipation of synod as a deliberative body, we are left discouraged. We register our protest that synod left no room for disagreement and raised the matter to confessional status. We acknowledge disagreement in our council and congregation concerning these matters noted above, and concerning postures synod has taken in its decision making. This does not mean we disagree with the entirety of the HSR—in fact, we appreciate much of it.
4. We love the Christian Reformed Church, and we desire to stay together with our classis and navigate questions regarding the HSR locally rather than being forced to follow synodical decisions that ask us to discipline or further harm congregations that we love.

To that end, we submit the Communication of Protest below, a formal complaint which we have adapted, which a number of CRC congregations are considering adopting, and which was shared by a group within the CRC called Better Together. As Better Together notes, “While some may question the use of this term, the category of “Protest” is fitting ecclesiastical language used within the Christian Reformed Church. “Protest” is a term and category used in our Church Order and its Supplements, and it can be found within the Rules for Synodical Procedure. Additionally, a protest is an appropriate form of communication to synod.”

II. Communication of Protest

We, First Christian Reformed Church of Vancouver, submit the following Communication of Protest. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022’s use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal

- marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”
 3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their respectful objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
 4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
 5. Synod 2022’s confessional declaration has been a hardship for us. However, we seek to remain like-minded in Christ (Phil. 2:5-11), desiring to continue to participate in the denomination because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon it.

Finally, the Council of First Christian Reformed Church of Vancouver forwards this communication to Synod 2024.

Council of First CRC, Vancouver, British Columbia
David Bacon, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted to the February 6, 2024, meeting of Classis B.C. North-West but was not adopted.

Council of Church of the Savior, South Bend, Indiana

We, the council of Church of the Savior of South Bend, Indiana, declare ourselves to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022’s use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”
3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Office Bearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, is “under protest.” Though under protest regarding Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon our denomination.

The Council of Church of the Savior CRC adopts this protest as its own and forwards it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Church of the Savior, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 19

Council of Ann Arbor (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church

We, Ann Arbor (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church, declare ourselves to be a "church in protest" within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as "Synod 2022's confessional declaration"). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance."
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the "confessional status" attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: "Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration."
3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church's members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at

all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.

5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Council of Ann Arbor (Mich.) CRC
Larry Gruppen, president of council

Note: This communication was submitted to Classis Lake Erie at their meeting on Saturday, March 2, 2024, but was not adopted. Therefore the Council of Ann Arbor CRC submits this letter of protest to be included in the *Agenda for Synod 2024*.

COMMUNICATION 20

Council of Waterloo (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church

We, Waterloo Christian Reformed Church, declare ourselves to be a "church in protest" within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as "Synod 2022's confessional declaration"). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance."
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the "confessional status" attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: "Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration."

3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church's members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.
5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Finally, we forward this protest as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Waterloo (Ont.) CRC
Roelof Eikelboom, chair of council
Pamela Joosse, clerk of council

Note: This communication was presented to Classis Huron on February 21, 2024, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 21

Members of Ebenezer CRC, Leduc, Alberta

I. Background

Our congregation was not given the opportunity to use denominational materials (such as the *Healthy Conversations Toolkit*) to engage in healthy, church-wide discussions. Many of us felt voiceless as we watched Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 and are concerned about the Advisory Committee 8 majority report, forwarded to Synod 2024, and its implications.

II. Communication of protest

We recognize that a communication of protest or complaint is less weighty than an overture; however, we also realize that it allows many members of

our congregation to allow their names to stand alongside one another regardless of their own specific and limited concerns regarding confessional status and in recognition that the restrictions on confessional-difficulty gravamina have far-reaching implications on the health of our congregation and the denomination. It is our prayer that this act of solidarity will give “voice” to more individuals in congregations before synod.

We, members of Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church of Leduc, Alberta, and of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, declare ourselves to be a “community in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We are concerned that churches have not been equipped or supported in the practical impact the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 are having on their well-being.
2. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including but not limited to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level.
3. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including but not limited to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
4. We protest synod’s recent use of “confessional status,” as it sets a concerning precedent requiring all CRC members to agree with specific teachings and all officebearers to explicitly bind themselves to such teachings (in particular, when they sign the Covenant for Officebearers). Such use of “confessional status” also impacts CRCNA agency employees and board members. Synod’s actions seem to lead to a lack of discussion rather than healthy engagement and appreciation for diverse voices within the body of Christ.
5. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are not settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
6. We protest that overtures to synod that raise significant biblical and theological matters with which the church must engage have been summarily ignored (including confessional-revision gravamina that synod is required to adjudicate). Instead, synod has bundled together scores of

such overtures and summarily declared sweeping decisions to be its answer to all of them, disregarding the fact that the answers provided often fail to engage the actual concerns within the overtures themselves adequately. This breakdown in synodical deliberation, combined with the seemingly overwhelming support for this new direction in the church, leaves more and more churches feeling voiceless and helpless and raises questions about synod's capacity to be a deliberative body.

Finally, this community of members of Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church in Leduc, Alberta, as members also of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, adopts this protest as its own and forwards it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Members of Ebenezer CRC, Leduc, Alberta

Frank de Boer	Abe Horneman	Josh Van de Kraats
Donna Debbink	Tena Horneman	Nicole Van de Kraats
George Debbink	Leanne Klooster	Owen Van de Kraats
Jenna Debbink	Heather Leddy	Terry Van de Kraats
Mike Debbink	Emily Meetsma	Ed van't Hoff
Albert DeBoer	Bryan Meetsma	Monica van't Hoff
Marianne DeBoer	Tamara Perry	Bea Vlieg
Grace Deunk	Dennis Prins	Pete Vlieg
Joe Deunk	Ruby Prins	
KerryAnne Hoogland	Alice Van de Kraats	

Note: This communication was presented to the meeting of Classis Alberta North on March 9, 2024, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 22

Council of Community CRC, Wyoming, Michigan

Background

Community CRC of Wyoming, Michigan, includes some members who agree and some who disagree with Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage. Both sides of the argument are using biblical grounds, and some on both sides are settled in their view. We as a body, in the interest of unity in the greater gospel of Christ and our mission in our own community, want to maintain room for both opinions and have the freedom to continue to openly wrestle with this issue without condemnation of one side or the other.

Declaration

Therefore we, Community CRC, declare ourselves to be a "church in protest" within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. It seems to us that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations.
2. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's elevation of the statement "all same-sex sexual activity is sinful" to confessional status because this requires all members of the CRC to agree on that point. We consider members of our church who either agree or disagree with that declaration for biblical reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance." That would imply that those with disagreements on any point of our confessions or confessional interpretations thereof must be guided into compliance.
3. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church in protest, given that the "confessional status" attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: "Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that some in our church do not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration."
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of some of our church's members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a disagreement between some members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.
5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Finally, the council of Community CRC adopts this protest as its own and now forwards it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Community CRC, Wyoming, Michigan
Char Kubiak, clerk of council

Note: This communication was presented to classis Grand Rapids South at its March 7, 2024, meeting but was not adopted.

Council of Fellowship Church, Edmonton, Alberta

Fellowship Church of Edmonton, Alberta, declares itself to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022’s use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that the vast majority in our church does not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”
3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must always be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, is “under protest.” Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon our denomination.

Finally, the council of Fellowship Church, Edmonton, adopts this protest as its own and forwards it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Fellowship Church, Edmonton, Alberta
John E. Hull, chair

Note: This communication was presented to Classis Alberta North at its March 7, 2024, meeting but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 24

Council of Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta

We, Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, declare ourselves to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022’s use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”
3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at

all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.

5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Council of Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
Francine Drisner, authorized signatory for council

Note: This communication was presented to the meeting of Classis Alberta North on March 9, 2024, but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 25

Council of Bethany CRC, Muskegon, Michigan

We, Bethany Christian Reformed Church of Muskegon, Michigan, love the CRC and wish to remain in faithful fellowship as we have done for over 100 years. However, we object to Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all officebearers to agree with Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage.

Therefore . . .

1. We protest that the decisions of synod on same-sex-marriage have placed us in an agree-or-leave position.
2. We protest that agree-or-leave is an unfair and tragic thing to force onto people who are fellow followers of Christ, many of whom have been longtime members and loyal supporters of the CRC.
3. We protest that church officebearers must be limited only to people who heartily and unreservedly agree with the confessional interpretation of Synod 2022.
4. We protest that officebearers in our church who disagree with synod's decision for sound biblical and theological reasons, or even allow for the possibility of a different interpretation, are now to be considered out of compliance and must be guided into compliance or resign their position.
5. We would support expanding the definition of "confessional status" allowing for godly people on both sides to remain in fellowship while

continuing to search the Scriptures and engage with Jesus-followers who are same-sex attracted.

6. We would support actions by synod to again revisit the issue of same-sex sexual activity and to include all viewpoints on the issue during their discussion.
7. We believe that any restriction upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina (under consideration by Synod 2024) preventing officebearers from declaring conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, are neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary.

We submit this letter of protest as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Bethany CRC, Muskegon, Michigan
Chris Ufnal, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted to classis but was not adopted.

COMMUNICATION 26

Classis Grand Rapids East

At its February 29, 2024, meeting, Classis Grand Rapids East adopted the six communications below from Boston Square CRC, Fuller Avenue CRC, Grace CRC, Neland Avenue CRC, Woodlawn CRC, and Eastern Avenue CRC. While not all of the congregations of classis are in protest, classis as a whole considers it important that synod hear these cries of the heart from several of our congregations.

I. Protest Communication — Boston Square CRC

We, Boston Square Christian Reformed Church, affirm that . . .

1. Our core identity is as God's imagebearers and God's adopted children. Assurance of this core identity pervades all of Scripture, the teachings of the church universal, and our Reformed creeds and confessions.
2. God calls the church to be a community of believers who love and accept one another despite our differences. Faithful Christians may disagree on the application of Scripture and the confessions to specific cultural issues and norms without jeopardizing either their standing within the kingdom of God or their welcome within the church.
3. Sexuality is a good part of our created being, yet faithful Christians may disagree how best to apply the message of Scripture to grateful living within our created sexuality. Within our own congregation, members disagree on these issues, but we are determined to live together in faithful community as part of the family of God.

4. Many members of our congregation have been harmed by the deliberations and decisions of Synod 2022 and Synod 2023, especially by the condemnation, judgment, and self-righteous legalism expressed or suggested by members of our denomination. These messages have been harmful to God's people—to individuals, churches, the CRCNA, and the church universal.

Therefore, we, Boston Square Christian Reformed Church, reluctantly declare ourselves to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We reject Synod 2022's use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, even within faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022's confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We reject Synod 2023's declaration that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We openly acknowledge that the carefully considered disagreements of many of our church's members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration are settled. We do not want to deny, minimize, or hide the fundamental disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter. Not all members of our congregation (or indeed even our council) think that the traditionalist position affirmed by Synod 2022 is wrong, but we are in agreement in lamenting how the “confessional status” declaration unnecessarily pits believer against believer.
3. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes the uniform agreement of all CRC members. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity is under protest. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.
4. We deny that this is a defining issue for faithful discipleship, and by God's grace we will not allow it to divide us.

Council of Boston Square CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

II. Communication to Synod 2024—Fuller Avenue CRC

We, the Council of Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church, declare ourselves to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's

- confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022’s confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022’s confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.”
 3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church’s ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022’s confessional declaration.
 4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church’s members with Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in good standing in our church and the CRC’s official teaching on this matter.
 5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022’s confessional declaration, is “under protest.” Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God’s blessing upon our denomination.

Finally, the council of Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church adopts this communication of protest as its own and forwards it as a communication to Classis Grand Rapids East, requesting that Classis Grand Rapids East adopt it and forward it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Fuller Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

III. Letter of Protest from Grace CRC Council

As a result of decisions by the Synods of 2022 and 2023 and the decisions ahead for Synod 2024, we, the leadership of Grace Church, protest actions

already taken by synod regarding human sexuality and those actions recommended for consideration by Synod 2024. We write with enormous concern about the moralistic spirit we perceive in the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the direction that is taking the denomination.

Grace Church openly disagrees with the assertion that same-sex relationships, including marriage, are not chaste and with the elevation of synod's definition of unchastity to the level of confessional status. We also oppose changing the gravamen process.

Our church has collaboratively participated in a years-long process of discernment, engagement with Scripture and theological texts, listening to members of our church community, and prayer. The result of that process is our full participation policy that encourages all who love Jesus, including those in same-sex relationships, to use their gifts of leadership within our church.

We will not attempt to relitigate arguments but instead will highlight the implications and ramifications we discern are ahead for the CRCNA.

We believe that the harm inflicted by synod's decisions is real. In the name of faithfulness to one interpretation of Scripture and one view of purity of doctrine and life, the CRC is causing trauma and deep sorrow in our queer siblings, and harm to our congregations, both those that hold to the views expressed in the HSR and our publicly affirming congregations. Many congregations are focused on disaffiliation, either by pushing others out or figuring out how to leave, and are not devoting pastoral care to those experiencing the greatest degree of harm. Distracted from ministry, especially from spreading the great good news, people are looking for new church families, forced to leave those with whom they have shared lives of faith, sometimes for a lifetime. People who have participated enthusiastically in the life of the CRC are trying to figure out if it is possible to preserve favorite ministries such as World Renew and Calvin University from outside of the denomination that created them. Pastors in anguish are struggling to know how to follow their faithful and conscientious convictions without jeopardizing their ordination or losing their congregations.

We believe further chaos will occur if Synod 2024 changes our gravamen process. Starting with the Wittenberg door, our tradition has always made room for the expression and exploration of nonmajority positions. Recent examples include wide discussion of human origins stimulated by the scholarship of Dr. Donald Wilson of Calvin University and of the beginnings of the universe by Prof. Howard Van Til. President Spoelhof, the Calvin Board of Trustees, and synod supported the freedom of these scholars even when not always agreeing with their positions. At Calvin Seminary, Professors Harry Boer and Harold Dekker both wondered aloud about the universality of God's grace. Neither were defrocked, dismissed from their positions, or subjected to church discipline. *Status confessionis* was not used

to silence or exclude them. Open dialogue and commitment to allowing respectful room for differences are necessary to continually reforming our beliefs and practice, particularly when those positions are in conflict. Such open conversation and forbearance in the face of disagreement has allowed the CRCNA to modulate its position on divorce, remarriage, and racism, as examples.

Synod 2024 will consider restrictions on the gravamen process. Approving these proposed restrictions would upend our tradition and create a significant barrier to our ability to function at the congregational level and as a denomination. Current and potential office-holders who have questions about any doctrines (e.g., infant vs. adult baptism, election, predestination, depravity, and atonement) may be unwilling to serve if they will be subject to the constant threat of church discipline. The intellectual integrity and personal moral agency of church leaders will be compromised.

A significant reality is that many have lost confidence in synod as a deliberative body. Synodical processes have allowed for overtures that raise significant matters to be summarily dismissed without dialogue in advisory committees or the whole body of delegates. The synodical committee that produced the HSR ignored queer voices and scientific data and was biased in its membership. These breakdowns hampered synodical decision making and have left many individuals and entire congregations feeling voiceless and marginalized.

Here is a quick summary of our concerns:

- We disagree with assigning confessional status to a singular interpretation of “unchastity.”
- Restrictions on the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina will impede the ability of church councils to function.
- Disagreements within the denomination’s churches are not settled by declaring synodical actions to be “binding.” Minimizing conscientious disagreement among leaders and other members who are in good standing can be a barrier to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to God’s continuing revelation of what God’s love looks like.

Our council at Grace CRC has chosen obedience to our understanding of God’s revelation to our church community rather than to the denominational stance recently taken. The only way we can remain in the CRCNA is “under protest.” This letter is our cry of the heart to the denomination we have loved.

Council of Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

IV. Communication from Neland Avenue CRC, February 2024

The mission of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church is “Believing that the grace of God, the sacrificial love of Jesus, and the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit are at work in the world and also in us, Neland Church

seeks to be a community of hope where all will experience and extend the deep welcome of Christ.”

Since 1915, Neland Avenue CRC has served as Christ’s witness within the Christian Reformed Church. For most of those years, the church has been standing at the corner of Neland Avenue and Watkins Street in the heart of Grand Rapids. Through many changes in church and neighborhood Neland has endured, and the Neland faith family remains committed to living out the Scriptures, the confessions, and its mission.

Nearly ten years ago, the Neland faith family embarked on a careful review of its mission. We have long been committed to serving with our neighbors and neighborhood; however, members of the congregation who identify as LGBTQ+ wondered if they were fully included in Neland’s mission.

Years of prayer, scriptural discernment, educational programs, and meaningful conversations led to the understanding that, yes, Neland’s mission called for the full participation of our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ, including those in same-sex marriages, alongside members who hold traditional views of gender and marriage (see appendix below). The kingdom of God is deep and wide and, as Jesus preached and embodied, open to all—especially to those typically overlooked by church leadership.

As we’ve stood with the marginalized, however, we as a church have felt increasingly marginalized. The decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 have left us wondering: Is there still a place for us in the CRC? Many of our members wish for our congregation to stay in the CRC because of the theological roots we share, the strong ministries of the CRC, and deep personal ties; many others feel we can no longer stay. The actions and tone of recent synods have brought harm to our LGBTQ+ members and division to the denomination.

So, as we’ve wondered if there is still a place for Neland in the CRC, we find that a deeper question has emerged: What is God calling us to hold on to—to stay faithful to? As we see it, there’s not just one thing but two that we’ve been holding on to; two Great Commission priorities that we cannot let go:

First, **mission**: Since 2016 we have stood for full participation of all members in the body of Christ—including our LGBTQ+ siblings who have been marginalized for so long. We need them. We need the fruit of the Spirit they clearly bear. And we believe they are called to belong and bless others with all their gifts, as much as any part of our body. We find our identity not just in looking back but looking forward to our forever family in the kingdom of God. Only with that consideration can we understand marriage and sexuality, which are a shadow of things to come.

Second, **unity**: While many claim it’s impossible for Christians of different perspectives to hold together in these polarized times, we read in the Bible that “all things are possible with God,” in Christ. We refuse to let

go of that promise. We do not believe our unity stems from uniformity to a specific interpretation of a confession or an ethical norm. Our unity is in the family of God, formed and held fast in Christ alone. We abide in Christ's covenant of grace, not in any we make on our own.

While our members think differently about questions of human sexuality, our Neland faith family has walked this journey together, understanding that our mission to serve others in Christ's name is more important than total agreement on complex social issues. We continue to be blessed by members who hold a variety of views on marriage and sexuality, even as we are being blessed with many new members—people drawn to mission and unity, not Church Order debates and disciplinary actions.

We believe that to be faithful to Christ and to the Scriptures is to hold to both mission and unity. And we believe it is possible to live faithfully in a community where some matters remain unclear or uncertain. God has given the CRC many churches and numerous classes that serve as testimonies that this unity in diversity is possible.

Thus we pray that Synod 2024 will give us room to do the following:

- **Live out our mission**, by continuing to allow officebearers to conscientiously object to the Synod 2022 decision on same-sex marriage through an unrestricted gravamina process, and by respecting the authority of the local church to elect its officebearers in accordance with the Scriptures.
- **Live in Christ-centered unity**, by continuing to allow our church and classis to fully participate in synod and in the work of the denomination, and by refraining from punitive or probationary disciplines of our leaders, our church, or our classis.

If synod should act to prohibit or inhibit this work—which we believe God's Word and Spirit are clearly calling us to do—it would sadly be closing the door on our participation in this denomination.

We hope you will receive this communication as an opportunity and as a plea from the heart: to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”; we share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-6). Impossible as it may sound in these divisive times, we know that “all things hold together” in Christ (Col. 1:17).

Council of Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Appendix

1. To further understand Neland Avenue CRC's journey, please refer to the following:
 - Neland Avenue CRC's communication to synod on electing its deacon, via Classis Grand Rapids East (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-*

- 2021, pp. 594-616; crcna.org/sites/default/files/2021_agenda_supplement_shaded.pdf#page=95)
- Classis Grand Rapids East's 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 (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 663-80; crcna.org/sites/default/files/2022_agenda.pdf)
 - Neland Avenue CRC's appeal of synod's instruction to rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 622-27; crcna.org/sites/default/files/2023_agenda.pdf)
2. For a thoughtful study that helped open our minds through careful biblical study and a review of the discoveries of science to the Spirit's work, please read Classis Grand Rapids East's communication to Synod 2016 (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 663-68) and its Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage (2016, rev. 2017; classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf).
 3. Finally, a biblical analysis presented by Neland Avenue CRC member Rev. Duane Kelderman: youtube.com/watch?v=VAw5mMCCmL4.

V. Communication to Synod—Woodlawn CRC

The Congregation of Woodlawn Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, is wrestling with the impact of recent synodical decisions and anticipating the impact of potential synodical decisions. In keeping with synodical procedures, we present this communication out of love and concern for the church. By this communication . . .

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal commitment (hereafter referred to as "Synod 2022's confessional declaration"). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be "guided into compliance."
2. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of our church to function, especially at the council level. If our church leadership were to be limited only to those who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration, then we would restrict from church leadership many present members.

3. We declare that the only way we can fully function as a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is by expressing our objection to this past decision, and by communicating our deep concern for a potential restriction of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process. Though we are expressing our objection and concern, we nevertheless continue to support the CRCNA because we have a deep love for our denomination and seek God's blessing upon her.

Finally, the council of Woodlawn CRC humbly adopts this communication as its own and forwards it to classis, requesting that classis adopt it and forward it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Council of Woodlawn CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

VI. Communication to Synod—Eastern Avenue CRC

We, the undersigned congregation of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, wish to declare to Classis Grand Rapids East and to Synod 2024 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America that we are a church in protest in the Christian Reformed Church. By this declaration . . .

1. We reaffirm our desire to remain faithful to the teachings of Scripture, the historic creeds of the Christian faith, the three confessions of the Christian Reformed Church (as interpreted prior to the 2022 Synod of the CRCNA), and the leading of the Holy Spirit.
2. We acknowledge that across different historical eras and varying cultural contexts the church has needed to apply the teachings of Scripture to contemporary thought and practice in its endeavor to be a faithful witness to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
3. We recognize that in these endeavors siblings in Christ who have sought to be faithful have, at times, come to differing interpretations of what is required to conform to the teachings of Scripture.
4. We welcome as full and faithful members of our congregation all who claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, seek to live their lives in conformity to his teachings, and desire to serve him.
5. We express our desire to remain unified in Christ with other members of the Christian Reformed Church in the essentials of the faith and lament the recent movement toward requiring certain uniformity in thought and practice as markers of inclusion within Christ's church.
6. We protest Synod 2022's use of "confessional status" to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as "Synod 2022's confessional declaration"). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for weighty biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing.

We disagree with Synod's 2023 decision that they must be "guided into compliance."

7. We necessarily must qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the confessional status attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes universal agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a hypothetical asterisk by our church name: "Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that our congregation does not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration."
8. We note that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina by which officebearers can declare their conscientious objections to interpretations of the confessions—whether it be on infant baptism, women's ordination (should some future synod bar that as a confessional matter), or Synod 2022's confessional declaration—and still sign the Covenant of Officebearers will seriously impede the ability of our church and others to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.
9. We desire to be transparent with synod that our congregation's disagreement with Synod 2022's confessional declaration is a settled matter. While all members of the church must always be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members of good standing in our church and the CRC's decision to make a particular interpretation a confessional matter.
10. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed congregation with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is under protest. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we treasure our relationship with the CRCNA, honor the positive Reformed witness it has made in many areas of human life, and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Council of Eastern Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Classis Grand Rapids East
Robert Arbogast, stated clerk