

CRCNA Statements on Social, Economic, or Political Matters

Executive summary

In 2023, Classis Southeast U.S. sent an overture to synod titled “Refocus Ecclesiological Communication” (Overture 3). Its basic premise was that over time the denomination had veered away from its emphasis on Scripture and strict theological orthodoxy and had begun to focus instead on orthopraxy and offering concrete advice on how the church should respond to specific social, economic, or political matters. The overture asked synod to declare that the CRCNA “take no position, make no statements, and take no actions promoting or endorsing any social, economic, or political idea or action in any way.”

Synod 2023 debated this overture and landed on a multifaceted response. While delegates and committee members agreed with many of the concerns stated in the overture, they also recognized the ongoing need for the church to be prophetic and to speak into current issues.

In response to the overture, Synod 2023 asked CRCNA staff to report to Synod 2024 about how and when the CRCNA organization comments on social, economic, or political matters. Synod also asked staff to exercise discretion when it chooses to take such actions.

The following report outlines why the CRCNA chooses to speak into such matters, the process used for making those decisions, the components that must be included in such statements, and a list of examples of such statements. The report also outlines concerns staff heard in the overture and how those have been addressed.

What is especially important to note is the difference between being “political” and being “partisan.” While the authors of the overture asked that staff refrain from making *any* statements of a political nature, this report explains that pursuing justice is in fact part of our fivefold calling in the CRCNA. However, the following report also acknowledges that there is no place within the church for staff to be partisan—that is, endorsing a specific political party, ideology, or candidate.

Since Synod 2018, when denominational statements were brought to synod’s attention for being too partisan, all of the processes for issuing such statements were updated with the necessary criteria in mind. The updated processes began being implemented in a robust way in 2020.

Since then, we have seen a reduction in the overall number of staff working in the area of social justice, the quantity of statements being made, and the number of ecumenical letters being signed. In addition, recent restructuring has meant that the former Office of Social Justice has been absorbed into Thrive. As part of this process, former OSJ staff spend less time working on

issue-based public statements and are instead focused on helping churches incorporate justice into their mission as part of faith formation.

While the Centre for Public Dialogue will continue to release issue-based statements and resources for Canadian CRC members, this is always done with the guidance and oversight of the Committee for Contact with the Government.

While not all CRC members will agree with every public position taken by their denomination, we believe there is a role for the church in speaking out about social, economic, and political issues. As part of our calling to pursue justice, the CRCNA has tasked its ministries with interpreting the positions of the denomination, together with the instructions of synod, to advocate for and with people who suffer injustice and to make determinations about how to raise the CRCNA's collective voice in a nonpartisan way.

The updated processes, the checks and balances of collaboration, the thoroughness of background-assessment tools, and the guidance of advisory committees—all help ensure that this responsibility is lived out as well as possible.

I. Background

In 2023, Classis Southeast U.S. sent an overture (see Addendum 1) to synod titled "Refocus Ecclesiological Communication." The premise of this overture was that "over the past decades, we have seen the CRC veer away from focusing on profound theological principles set within the context of the day and toward promoting stances on specific economic, political, and social biases with little or weak scriptural support" (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 356).

The overture asked Synod 2023 to declare that the CRCNA "take no position, make no statements, and take no actions promoting or endorsing any social, economic, or political idea or action in any way, including but not limited to, written comments made in print or on our website, or by providing links from our website" (p. 356). It also recommended the creation of an advisory committee to enforce this declaration and ensure compliance.

The synodical advisory committee's discussion of this overture during Synod 2023 was robust and often agreed with the concerns noted in the overture. However, the committee also received two communications from CRCNA staff (see Addenda 2-3) and recognized that past synods have addressed similar concerns and have always responded in a way that affirmed the need of the church to be prophetic and speak into current issues.

For example, in 2018 in response to an overture titled "Instruct CRC Agencies and Ministries to Stop Political Lobbying on Behalf of the Christian Reformed Denomination," synod said, "we need to continue engaging in the social/political/economic layers of public life," and synod encouraged the

CRCNA to “continue to pray for growth in wisdom as we speak prophetically and pursue mercy and justice” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 524-25).

At the same time, the 2018 advisory committee noted, “In our calling to be prophetic, we acknowledge that there will not be unanimity and single-mindedness on all political issues and that differences of opinions will arise. We are called to gospel-centered relationships that hold unity as a high value. We are called to the preservation and restoration of unity as the body of Christ. We trust that when differences arise, our means of addressing them will give testimony to our unity in Christ” (p. 524).

With this in mind, Synod 2018 instructed “the Council of Delegates to create a U.S. committee to provide guidance and support to the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action [OSJ]” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 527-28).

Although this 2018 directive was implemented, the Synod 2023 advisory committee thought that the created committee had not done enough to oversee and guide the communications of OSJ. They further noted that broader guidance is needed for the entire CRCNA organization on how it ought to communicate on social, economic, or political matters.

In light of the ongoing restructuring in the CRCNA organization, Synod 2023 did not believe the timing was right to create a new, separate, content-management committee. Instead, the advisory committee recommended and Synod 2023 approved the following two recommendations: (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 926):

1. That synod instruct the office of General Secretary to report directly back to Synod 2024 on how the concerns noted in Overture 3 have been addressed—namely, specifying how and when the CRCNA organization comments and/or makes statements on social, economic, or political matters that synod has not previously specifically addressed.
2. That synod urge the CRCNA organization to exercise discretion when responding to social, economic, and/or political matters.

II. Role of the church

In their grounds, the writers of Overture 3 from Classis Southeast U.S. argued that the proper role of the church is to “purely preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and practice church discipline.” They remind the readers of the CRC’s tradition of relying on Scripture and biblical principles to guide our actions rather than observed reality and individual beliefs.

While there is validity in this observation, it must be balanced with the fact that as Christian Reformed people, part of our shared mission statement reminds us to “pursue God’s justice and peace in every area of life.” We reflect this mission when we acknowledge that mercy and justice (in addition

to faith formation, servant leadership, global mission, and gospel proclamation and worship) are part of the fivefold calling that God expects of us individually and corporately as Christian Reformed people.

We express this part of our calling by saying, “Hearing the cries of the oppressed, forsaken, and disadvantaged, we seek to act justly and love mercy as we walk humbly with our God.”

Justice, when it is biblically based and in alignment with Scripture, is a key element of our identity as Reformed people. What’s more, since 1898 the CRCNA has recognized that pursuing God’s justice in the world requires us to provide public witness and engagement on matters of justice, peace, and reconciliation in our society—and that this must be done from a Reformed and biblical foundation.

A review of the *Acts of Synod* for the past 130 years will show this commitment to public engagement around justice and current events (see Addendum 4). From issues about labor, war, immigration, abortion, and Christian education to concerns about nuclear weapons, pornography, world hunger, and more, the synods of the Christian Reformed Church have regularly made declarations and sent communications to governments as a means of expressing our faith and commitment to justice.

In fact, Synod 1973 felt so strongly about these denominational declarations that they mandated a committee to “compile materials for a book to contain pertinent synodical decisions on doctrinal and ethical matters” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 596; see also pp. 44-45, 595-604). As a result, a series of synods’ statements on doctrinal and ethical matters continues to be compiled and shared. These statements are available at crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements.

While it is clear that our church values being a denomination that wrestles with and speaks into current issues, it is also clear that our shared public witness must reflect the values and positions of Scripture and the church. As such, task forces and committees have researched the issues and contexts that congregations have faced, and synods have stated official positions. It is from within these positions that the staff of CRCNA agencies do their work (see Addendum 5).

III. Proper function of denominational agencies

Our past synods and their position statements do not address every nuance or situation that may come up in our societies. While CRCNA agency staff speak only into issues that they have been asked by synod to address, they must use discretion about when and how to execute the directions of synod in today’s context.

In the Classis Southeast U.S. overture, the writers cite the ease of mass communication and the influence this may have had on the CRCNA agencies’

decisions regarding events and positions to promote. They express frustration that some calls to social action seen in denominational publications have appeared to be politically motivated with minimal or weak scriptural engagement.

To respond to this critique and others like it, staff have adopted and adapted several protocols and processes to guide them when they speak into social, economic, or political matters. This report will briefly outline each of them.

It is important to understand that there are different methods by which CRCNA employees have spoken into social, economic, and political matters. Sometimes the former Office of Social Justice or the Centre for Public Dialogue has done so in the form of communications directly with governments, by means of action alerts about specific legislation, or via requests for CRC members to get involved in advocacy.

At other times CRCNA staff have spoken into social, economic, and political matters through published statements online. These have been signed by directors of CRCNA ministries or, in some cases, issued by the executive director/general secretary alone.

In addition, CRCNA staff members may be asked to sign-on to a joint statement or letter that has been prepared by an ecumenical partner as a means of demonstrating ecumenical unity and a shared voice on a particular topic. In each of these situations, CRCNA staff have developed specific protocols to help them discern whether or not to participate.

A. Statements by leadership

Sometimes a significant or pressing event or issue related to public justice may present a need and an opportunity for the church to speak. In such instances, leaders of CRCNA ministries may wish to make a timely public statement on behalf of their agency or on behalf of the CRCNA. This requires wisdom and discretion.

In 2020, following the death of George Floyd and the resulting public outcry, CRCNA leaders put out a statement signed by 19 denominational employees. While this statement was generally well received, some members of the CRC community felt that parts of it did not represent their views. In addition, some of the signatories later commented that while they still approved of the statement in principle, they would have suggested changes if they had had more time to review the statement.

As a result, staff adopted a new process (see Addendum 6). This process outlines the types of situations that might warrant a denominational statement, the process by which a decision about whether to make a statement would be made, what types of content should be included in each statement, and steps for review.

Since the adoption of this process in 2021, three official statements have been made by denominational leadership. All were signed only by the chief ecclesiastical officer (executive director Colin Watson, Sr., or general secretary Zachary King):

- Statement on Atlanta Shooting (crcna.org/news-and-events/news/statement-about-atlanta-shooting)
- Statement on Overturning *Roe v. Wade* (crcna.org/news-and-events/news/statement-overturning-roe-v-wade)
- Statement on Israel/Palestine conflict (crcna.org/news-and-events/news/statement-israel-palestine-conflict)

B. Ecumenical letters or statements

The CRCNA is a member of several ecumenical groups and partnerships. CRCNA agencies such as World Renew are also members of various coalitions. From time to time, these partners may request that CRCNA leaders sign-on to a joint statement or letter.

The decision whether or not to sign such a letter or statement rests with the individual adding their name. The individual will use their knowledge of the partner, expertise on the topic being addressed, and discretion about the content to make a decision.

Generally speaking, they are also guided by these principles:

- a. Has a significant and pressing event or issue related to public justice occurred? (“Significant” will typically refer to something with a national or binational scope and/or be related to a larger movement or trend in society.)
- b. Is this event related to an issue that synod has addressed?
- c. Is our biblical/confessional witness impaired by our not speaking/participating?
- d. Is part of our community impaired by our not speaking?
- e. Is there a role for the church in responding to such events?

This process is in keeping with Synod 1937’s decision that “political, social, and economical questions are ecclesiastical matters only when doctrinal and ethical issues of sufficient moment and magnitude are involved according to the Word of God and our standards” (*Acts of Synod 1937*, p. 11).

CRCNA leaders also report to each other and the general secretary whenever they sign such a letter. They note the partner, the issue being addressed, who signed it on behalf of the CRCNA, and the date—and when possible they also provide a link to the statement.

A summary of this activity for the past ten years is available in Addendum 7. It can be noted that there has been a significant decrease in sign-ons since 2019. While expressing solidarity with our ecumenical partners and

participating in a shared witness on critical issues remains a priority, there appears to be greater sensitivity to the increased polarity of our times.

Other factors may also be involved in this decrease. The political landscape has changed, for example, and the COVID-19 pandemic changed the number of advocacy opportunities available with government officials. In addition, staffing levels at the Office of Social Justice have decreased considerably over the past few years. Today only two former OSJ staff remain on staff.

In 2023 the Office of Social Justice was formally enfolded into Thrive, and its synodical mandate was discontinued. While Thrive continues to be committed to engaging in the social/political/economic layers of public life, its focus is at the congregational level rather than on encouraging people to take action on specific ethical issues. This means that Thrive staff will spend more time working with churches on appreciating the value of incorporating justice as part of faith formation, and less time on specific pieces of legislation. The decrease in participation in ecumenical statements related to justice issues reflects this reality.

Please note that this does not end the work of justice within the CRCNA. It is not a sneaky way of Thrive “getting rid” of OSJ. Instead it is a shift in the focus of the work to the congregational level, where Thrive believes it can make the biggest impact possible. Some statements about social, economic, and political issues may still be made.

C. Office of Social Justice action alerts

According to its mission statement, the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action (OSJ) was created to “lead and equip the CRC in carrying out its transforming mission to ‘pursue God’s justice and peace,’ as stated in its ‘Denominational Mission/Vision Statement’” (*Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 75). Its synodical mandate was to “encourage and assist the CRCNA—its leaders, agencies, institutions, and members—to better ‘live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God’ (Mic. 6:8)” (p. 75).

Throughout OSJ’s history, it carried out this mission by focusing primarily on the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, as well as the social injustices to which synod or the Council of Delegates directed it. This focus and direction included the following:

- raising awareness and educating members and leaders about issues of justice that relate to root causes of poverty, hunger, powerlessness, and about social justice issues that synod identified as priorities.
- identifying, creating, and encouraging the use of methods of worship and modes of living out our faith that express justice as a core personal and corporate value for Reformed Christians.

- raising the voice of the CRCNA in advocacy for and with those who suffer injustice, through action alerts to our members, participation in advocacy coalitions, and public statements when appropriate.

Because this work often touched on legislation or current events that would arise between synods, and because the work involved statements, letters, advocacy alerts, prayer requests, or other public-facing communications, a clear process was in place.

This included a flow chart that outlined whether an issue should be something that OSJ worked on, and an organizational process that outlined what level of communication was needed and who would be involved at each step. Each of those documents carefully considered such things as the broadness of the issue, its relation to synodical decisions, its impact on CRCNA community members, and the risks of both taking action and not taking action on the issue. Today, in Thrive, similar processes are in place.

For every action alert that was made for the attention of CRC members in the U.S. or Canada, a “backgrounder” was created (see Addendum 8). This tool was often made public, or it might simply have guided the development of the action alert. Backgrounders were also made available to OSJ staff so that they could answer questions that might come up.

In addition, the Committee for Guidance and Support of the Office of Social Justice served as an informal feedback group on strategic direction (see *Agenda for Synod 2019*, pp. 45-46; *Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 548, 794).

It should be noted again that, given the organizational realignment of incorporating OSJ into Thrive, we anticipate that former OSJ staff will spend a lot less time working on issue-based public statements and will instead focus their work on helping churches incorporate justice as part of faith formation. Because of these changes, the Committee for Guidance and Support of the Office of Social Justice officially concluded its mandate at the end of fall 2023. Committee members have since asked to be called upon should the need arise.

D. Centre for Public Dialogue

According to its mission statement, the Centre for Public Dialogue (CPD) was created to “promote a positive voice of Christian faith in Canadian public life that seeks justice, hope, and reconciliation in political dialogue and active citizenship” (crcna.org/publicdialogue).

They carry out this mission by doing the following:

- Listening deeply to the people most affected by the policies in question—CPD seeks to dialogue with marginalized communities and to amplify their voices.
- Doing careful research and engaging in conversations with church members and politicians to formulate constructive ideas and advo-

cate for policies that promote the good of all people. CPD encourages and helps churches listen to the voices of marginalized people and advocate for the policies that research has shown worthy of support.

- Depending on the Holy Spirit—this alone gives CPD the confidence and peace to work respectfully, to keep going when progress is slow, and to recognize that they do not need to shout down the positions of others. Confidence in the Spirit allows CPD to work with the patient and persistent hope that justice is coming to Canada.

Because this work often touches on legislation or current events that arise between synods, and because the work involves statements, letters, advocacy alerts, prayer requests, or other public-facing communications, a clear process is in place.

This includes making use of OSJ's flow chart and organizational process. CPD also follows OSJ's protocol of producing backgrounders (Addendum 8) on the action alerts it creates.

The issues that CPD addresses are identified by close collaboration with the Committee for Contact with the Government. This committee was founded in 1968, and its work is "rooted in a vision that the CRC in Canada has a calling to interact with Canadian society and governments 'on the significant and pressing issues of the day'" (crcna.org/publicdialogue/connect). The committee is composed of CRCNA members from across Canada.

IV. Conclusions

In conclusion, here are the steps that have been implemented to address the overture titled "Refocus Ecclesiological Communication" (Addendum 1).

First, a review of CRCNA history and synodical decisions reminds us that the church has a role to play in speaking into political, social, and economic issues of the day. This role is well established in our Reformed tradition and in the history of our denomination. However, this review also notes that such actions must not be of a partisan nature.

Second, in response to criticism and in order to ensure proper protocols, processes have been adopted and adapted to help staff determine if, when, and how to speak into such issues. These processes refer back to synodical statements on the issues and rely on advice from guiding committees, ecumenical partners, and a review of synodical decisions and Scripture.

The processes were updated following Synod 2018 and began to be implemented in 2020 and 2021. Since then, we have seen a reduction in the overall quantity of statements being made and the number of ecumenical letters being signed. Over time, as these processes continue to be refined and lived into, we expect to see continued high levels of discernment.

Third, this work is collaborative in nature, seeking to speak into political, social, and economic issues that are important to CRCNA ministries and

the people in our churches. When political, social, and economic questions are of sufficient moment and magnitude and are related to topics that previous synods have asked the church to speak into, CRCNA staff wish to provide a prophetic voice on behalf of the church. This is done across ministries and often in partnership with ecumenical partners. This collaboration adds another layer of discernment to the process.

Finally, staff listen carefully to feedback received regarding any statements made in order to inform decisions moving forward. Every effort is made to understand the areas of concern expressed by churches and individuals, to provide them with the detailed explanations included in backgrounders, and to engage with them in meaningful dialogue. Lessons are often learned on both sides.

In the end, it is also important to remember that a letter to government officials or a statement made by the denomination does not claim to speak for all members of the CRCNA. When the CRCNA articulates a view on a social or political matter (or when it is silent on those matters), it does so as an institution, not as a collection of individuals who all agree on everything. These views are voiced after a position has been formed, based on thorough study, discussion, and/or decision by synod.

Not all members will agree with every public position—statement or silence—taken by its church. That is OK. The CRCNA's ministries have not been tasked with representing the *majority* of members' views on issues. Instead, they have been tasked with interpreting the positions of the denomination, together with the instructions of synod, to advocate for and with those who suffer injustice and to make determinations about how to raise the CRCNA's collective voice in a nonpartisan way.

The processes in place, the checks and balances of collaboration, the thoroughness of backgrounders, and the guidance of advisory committees—all help to ensure that this responsibility is lived out as well as possible.

ADDENDUM 1

Overture 3: Refocus Ecclesiological Communication

(Agenda for Synod 2023, pp. 356-58)

I. Introduction

Over the past decades, we have seen the CRC veer away from focusing on profound theological principles set within the context of the day and toward promoting stances on specific economic, political, and social biases with little or weak scriptural support. This move has taken our focus off of the core tenets of what it means to be the true church and has left the impression with many that our denominational focus is to promote specific

solutions to modern issues in lieu of biblical principles by which solutions are formulated.

Furthermore, this shift in focus has allowed a few within the denomination to promote unvetted ideas that represent themselves as the views of the entire CRCNA. The motivation behind this overture is not to censor our ministries from communicating but to, in fact, empower the CRCNA to do the opposite: to articulate issues with robust Reformed theological reflection using the voices of our neo-Calvinist past with the brilliant minds of today's theologians. We desire to restore our rich theological and historical prowess to equip not merely the CRCNA but the church worldwide.

II. Overture

Classis Southeast U.S. overtures synod to do the following:

- A. Declare that the CRCNA will take no position, make no statements, and take no actions promoting or endorsing any social, economic, or political idea or action in any way, including but not limited to, written comments made in print or on our website, or by providing links from our website.
- B. Appoint a Denominational Content Management Committee (DCMC) to act as a committee *in loco* to initially enforce this declaration and ensure compliance.
- C. Instruct the general secretary to remove all content immediately that the committee deems violates this declaration, and further instruct the general secretary to ensure that all policies and job descriptions with the denominational offices comply with this declaration.

Further, we offer the following names as recommended members for the DCMC:

- Rev. Gerrit Besteman, Bradenton (Fla.) CRC
- Rev. David Vander Meulen, Escalon (Calif.) CRC
- Rev. Andrew Zomerman, Dresden (Ont.) CRC
- Rev. Jim Hollendoner, Munster (Ind.) CRC
- Rev. Jesse Walhof, Living Water Community CRC, Orange City, Iowa

Grounds:

1. Promote the proper role of the church
 - The role of the church is to purely preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and practice church discipline. Preaching can involve proclaiming biblical principles obtained from Scripture but should not include promoting specific political, social, or economic positions that stem from expertise, understanding, and biases outside of Scripture.
 - The church as an institution and organization ought to remain within its "sphere" and speak only to biblical principles, and in so doing it

will equip its members to be transformative agents as they serve within the other spheres to which they have been called. Abraham Kuyper discusses the dangers of a time when "the entire social life was to be covered by the wings of the Church . . . [and] . . . as a result the world corrupted the Church." Kuyper goes on to state that under Calvinism, "the Church receded in order to be neither more or less than the congregation of believers . . . [and] . . . thus domestic life regained its independence . . . set free from every ecclesiastical bond" albeit still under the dominion of God (*Stone Foundation Lectures*, p. 79).

- It needs to be presupposed that all truth stems from God's revealed Word. Scripture is not subject to our observed reality or individual spiritual beliefs (which are fallen). The trend we are observing is that current political, social, and economic reflections are prioritized above the guidance of Scripture to speak into the issue.
 - Thus, if the CRC collectively, as a church, desires to speak to an issue of our day, we need to first approach Scripture and exegete, or draw out, the biblical principles that speak to that issue and seek to apply those principles to the current context as best as we can. Synod has used study committees to construct biblical theologies of various issues in the past, and this process is still available.
2. Promote the proper function of the denominational agencies
- The mission of denominational agencies is to resource the local congregation and is not intended to represent the plethora of opinions and political ideologies of CRCNA officebearers or members.
 - The CRCNA has spent significant time and effort over the years formulating and communicating official position statements—from gambling to abortion. More recently, however, the ease of mass communication has influenced what our CRCNA agencies decide to promote with little or no oversight or approval from the denomination as a whole.
 - Some of the calls to social action that are seen in our publications often seem to be politically motivated with minimal or weak scriptural engagement—or worse, exhibit sophistry that impugns basic Christian doctrine.
3. Promote proper practices and good results
- Bad theology hurts people. Good orthopraxy only stems from good orthodoxy; however, it seems many of the statements made in our publications stem from "orthodoxy following orthopraxy" where a preferred policy becomes the basis for eisegeting Scripture.
 - The proper use of language is important. The church struggled for centuries on the language it uses to speak about God, demonstrating the importance of precise language. We need to understand that the

specific words we use communicate our purpose and understanding. So, for example, when we understand that using the term "social justice" aligns the CRC with one political and social movement, it is incumbent upon us to choose language such as "biblical justice" to instead align the CRC with Scripture.

- Adopting this overture will still allow our publications to publish opinion letters from individual readers, but the publications themselves would not be able to editorialize, since this is done in the name of the denomination. Rather, they could report on current issues with impartiality, except as has been approved by synod.
- Any individual CRC member, whether an employee or not, can freely express their opinions about how biblical principles should be applied; however, the avenues to express those opinions should be communicated through other means like parachurch organizations rather than church as institute.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

ADDENDUM 2

Communication (from Thrive) Concerning Overture 3: Refocus Ecclesiological Communication

(Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 773-75)

I. Introduction

The current Council of Delegates Governance Handbook, Appendix T provides an opportunity for the leadership of CRCNA agencies and institutions to make comments on overtures to synod that would affect their work and mandate. Congregational Ministries offers this reflection to synod to assist in its deliberations. In summary, we would like to point out the following considerations and concerns related to this overture:

II. Considerations and concerns

A. This overture echoes the concerns and issues brought up at Synod 2018 in Overtures 12-14 and Communication 2. Synod 2018 responded by acknowledging the importance of having a public voice for justice and mercy issues and stating, "We need to continue engaging in the social/political/economic layers of public life." Synod also encouraged us "to continue to pray for growth in wisdom as we speak prophetically and pursue mercy and justice" (see *Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 524-25). It is important to note that Overture 3 to Synod 2023 does not present any new evidence or grounds that would justify revising or rescinding past synodical work and endorsement on this matter. As such, it falls short of the standard for reconsideration or revision as outlined in Church Order Article 31.

B. The CRC has repeatedly affirmed that the gospel must be proclaimed in both word and deed, and that an essential part of both proclaiming and living out the good news in this world is to raise our voice to our public officials and faithfully engage in the public sphere (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 63; *Acts of Synod 2006*, pp. 676-77). This belief and position has been reaffirmed on multiple occasions in the history of the CRC—most recently in 2018 (see *Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 524-28).

C. *Our World Belongs to God*, paragraph 53, expresses that a component of our mission is to “call on all governments to do public justice.”

D. If adopted, the recommendations proposed in Overture 3 would contradict the rich legacy of advocacy and public justice that synod itself has participated in and urged, dating back to the 1800s, and would undermine one of the five calling areas (Mercy and Justice) that synod has approved as integral to the CRC’s mission.

E. The following nonexhaustive list of examples highlights occasions in which previous synods emphasized denominational public advocacy and reaffirmation of this role. These examples serve to underscore the CRC’s historical and ongoing commitment to biblical justice and advocacy, and the vital importance of maintaining this tradition in service of the holistic witness of the gospel:

Acts of Synod 1889 (English translation), pp. 40-41

Acts of Synod 1937, p. 11

Acts of Synod 1941, pp. 131-32

Acts of Synod 1942, p. 139

Acts of Synod 1965, p. 41

Acts of Synod 1966, p. 143

Acts of Synod 1972, p. 64

Acts of Synod 1975, pp. 68-70

Acts of Synod 1978, p. 63

Acts of Synod 1982, pp. 105-6

Acts of Synod 1996, p. 40

Acts of Synod 2000, p. 621

Acts of Synod 2003, p. 687

Acts of Synod 2005, p. 778

Acts of Synod 2006, pp. 676-77

Acts of Synod 2007, p. 581

Acts of Synod 2010, pp. 878-85

Acts of Synod 2011, p. 820

Acts of Synod 2012, p. 756

Acts of Synod 2014, p. 560

Acts of Synod 2017, p. 633

Acts of Synod 2018, pp. 524-25

III. Conclusion

In summary, it is our opinion that the action requested by this overture goes against many decades of synodical decisions on the importance of the church's prophetic voice in our society.

On behalf of Congregational Ministries (Thrive),

Lesli van Milligen, director (Canada)

Chris Schoon, director (U.S.)

ADDENDUM 3

Justice and Reconciliation Team (Canada) Response concerning Overture 3: Refocus Ecclesiological Communication

(Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 775-77)

I. Introduction

The staff of the Canadian ministries of the CRCNA who are tasked with mandates related to justice and reconciliation appreciate the opportunity to speak to the contents of Overture 3.

This overture addresses matters similar to those raised in Overtures 12-14 and Communication 2 at Synod 2018 regarding ecclesiology and justice. At that time, synod reiterated that advocacy work is part of holistic justice and gospel work. It adopted recommendations (see Articles 66 and 70, *Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 524-28) that provide a significant framework for the context and oversight of CRC public communications and engagement on matters of public justice.

It might also be of interest to Synod 2023 delegates that synod itself has instructed the majority of justice activity in the CRCNA as a result of the work of study committees. Synod 2018 provided instruction that ministries must continue to center their justice activity on sound biblical principles and theological discernment (see recommendations 7-8, *Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 528). Justice and reconciliation ministries are deliberate about honoring this instruction.

Please also note that the Ministries Leadership Council adopted a detailed protocol in 2020 regarding how it would discern, review, and approve future public statements concerning justice and reconciliation (see crcna.org/joint-crcna-leadership-statements). This protocol includes when a public statement should be considered, who can request that a public statement be made, where the request for such a statement should be sent, who will be involved in deliberation, who will be asked to sign on to such statements, and how much time signatories will receive before the statement is

made public. The protocols also include standards for content and where the statements should be posted.

Overture 3 does not provide any new grounds or evidence for rescinding past synodical work or for opening up discussion on this matter now. Further, Overture 3 adds a layer of complexity that could be interpreted to circumvent Synod 2018's reflections on questions of justice and ecclesiology. In addition, the recommendations of the overture to "make no statements" or take "no actions" and, further, to remove reference to justice statements and actions of the CRCNA puts at risk the public witness of the church on core matters of public justice such as civil rights, apartheid, sanctity of life, peacebuilding, and reconciliation.

II. For the specific attention of the Canada Ministries Board of the CRCNA:

In Canada the CRCNA has a long and storied history of public-witness engagement on matters of justice, peace, and reconciliation from a Reformed and biblical foundation. Overture 3 does not engage this context in any meaningful way and suggests that social justice action is biased, based on weak scriptural support and "unvetted."

Since 1968, at the establishment of the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada, matters of public justice have been a frequent subject of ecclesial discernment and institutional and congregational action in Canada. This has persisted in subsequent governance structures, and most recently Synod 2022 affirmed justice and reconciliation as a core element of ministry in Canada (via approval of the Structure and Leadership Task Force report and *establishing the Canadian office; Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 926-31).

The proposed directive to remove content and statements on justice (section II, C of Overture 3) could, for example, lead to the removal of CRC Canada statements related to the New Covenant with Aboriginal Peoples (1987, 2007) which has been foundational to much of our public and congregational work on truth and reconciliation and *Hearts Exchanged*.

It also bears mentioning that much of the work of justice and reconciliation work in Canada is done in responsive dialogue with partners and affected communities. These colabourers in Christ's call to justice are often a prophetic voice to the church and give shape to the public-witness activities of justice and reconciliation ministries. Ceasing public statements and removing content related to them will mute these important voices in our midst and threaten the integrity of the CRC's holistic gospel public witness in Canada. Passage of this overture in its current form would hinder the integrity of contextualized justice and reconciliation ministry in Canada.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Hogeterp,
Justice and Reconciliation Team (Canada)

ADDENDUM 4

Examples of Denominational Advocacy from History

- **1898**—Synod adopts two overtures to approach the United States government to request a National Day of Prayer (*Acts of Synod 1898* [English text], pp. 40-41).
- **1918**—Synod sends a telegram to the president of the United States pledging support in the war effort (*Acts of Synod 1918* [English text], p. 7).
- **1937**—Synod declares that “political, social, and economic questions are ecclesiastical matters only when doctrinal and ethical issues of sufficient moment and magnitude are involved according to the Word of God and our standards” (*Acts of Synod 1937*, p. 11).
- **1941 and 1942**—Synod sends communications to the president of the United States to avoid compulsory labor, or a seven-day work week, in the defense program (*Acts of Synod 1941*, pp. 131-32; *Acts of Synod 1942*, p. 139).
- **1943**—Synod sends a letter urging the president of the United States to take more effective measures toward the prevention of the use of profanity and cursing on the part of the military officers (*Acts of Synod 1943*, pp. 24-25).
- **1960**—Stated clerk R.J. Danhof asks Rep. Gerald R. Ford to introduce a bill to address the expiration of legislation that had allowed Indonesians to immigrate to the U.S.; Ford does so and provides a copy of his proposal to the CRCNA; the bill passes (*Acts of Synod 1960*, pp. 278-80).
- **1965**—Synod expresses opposition to U.S. SB 1211, proposing national election days be on Sundays, by drafting a resolution and sending it to every U.S. senator (*Acts of Synod 1965*, p. 41).
- **1966**—Canadian classes establish the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada (CCRCC) as the result of the work of a synodical study committee. The first item listed on its mandate was “official contact with the Canadian government” (*Acts of Synod 1966*, p. 143; *Acts of Council 1968*, CCRCC, p. 4).
- **1972**—Synod calls believers to a ringing testimony against the evils of abortion as practiced in our society and encourages the promotion of action and legislation that reflects the teaching of Scripture (*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 64).
- **1975**—Synod sends a statement to the president of the U.S. about injustice in financing Christian education (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 68-70).
- **1976**—Synod endorses the Human Life Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, as worded by the legal committee of the National Right to Life Organization (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 63).

- **1978**—Synod endorses the conclusion of a study committee stating that “the matter of social justice is important for the Christian Reformed Church, involving the relationship of action by the church as an organization and action by believers as individuals and as groups” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 63).
- **1982**—Synod sends guidelines and a letter to the president of the U.S., the prime minister of Canada, and the secretary general of the U.S. expressing concerns about the use of nuclear weapons (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 105-6).
- **1984**—The Canadian Committee for Contact with the Government (CCG) advocates with the Canadian government for pornography legislation, identifying it as “idolatry” and asking for ethical codes in media (*Pornography: Pollution of Our Culture*, CCG Pamphlet, panel 3).
- **1988**—The shared board of Christian Reformed World Missions and the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee asks synod to petition the U.S. and Canadian governments regarding U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. Synod rejects the request but does send a letter to the prime minister and parliament of Canada about impending abortion legislation (*Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 528, 547).
- **1993**—CCG makes recommendations to the Canadian government’s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, advocating for dialogue, mutuality, and empathy (*Acts of Council*, 1993, p. 38).
- **1996**—Peter Vander Meulen is appointed by the Board of Trustees as coordinator of social justice and world hunger issues (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 40).
- **2005**—Synod urges the CRCNA and its key agencies to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic with an energetic advocacy program—speaking to institutions, governments, and individuals to ensure that resources are made available to the world’s poor and powerless victims (*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 726).
- **2010**—Synod adopts an overture to instruct OSJ to boldly advocate for the church’s position against abortion (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 883). This same synod urges the OSJ and CCG to engage in policy development and advocacy strategies that lead to immigration reform and the enactment of fair, just, and equitable laws regarding persons without status in Canada and the United States (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 878).
- **2011**—Synod approves a revised mandate for the OSJ “to encourage and assist the CRCNA—its leaders, agencies, institutions, and members—to better ‘live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God’ (Mic. 6:8). [OSJ] focuses primarily on the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, as well as those social injustices to which synod or the [COD] has directed it . . . raising the voice of the CRCNA in advocacy for and with those who suffer injustice, through action

alerts to our members, participation in advocacy coalitions, and public statements when appropriate” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 75).

- **2012**—Synod calls on appropriate denominational agencies to advocate with governments to take the necessary actions in an effective global framework to assist populations that are bearing the brunt of the negative effects of climate change while being the least able to cope (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 805).
- **2016**—Synod asks the OSJ to urge every congregation to participate in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church and to ensure the collection and distribution of up-to-date information about religious persecution and liberty (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 862-63).

ADDENDUM 5

Examples of Synodical Mandates for Advocacy

The following list is not comprehensive but includes a sampling of the instructions provided by synods over time to CRCNA staff in terms of advocating on specific issues of relevance to the church.

- Abortion—Synod 2010 adopted an overture to instruct the Office of Social Justice and Hunger Action (OSJ) to boldly **advocate** for the church’s position against abortion. This has been interpreted to include **political advocacy** (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 883).
- Creation care—Synod 2012 called on appropriate denominational agencies to **advocate with governments** to take the necessary actions in an effective global framework to assist populations that are bearing the brunt of the negative effects of climate change while being the least able to cope (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 805).
- HIV/AIDS—Synod 2005 urged the CRCNA and its key agencies to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic with an energetic advocacy program—**speaking to institutions, governments**, and individuals to ensure that resources are made available to the world’s poor and powerless victims (*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 726).
- Immigrants and refugees—Synod 2010 urged the OSJ and CCG to **engage in policy development and advocacy strategies** that will lead to immigration reform and the enactment of fair, just, and equitable laws regarding those without status in Canada and the United States (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 878).
- Poverty and hunger—Synod 2011 approved a revised mandate for the OSJ “to encourage and assist the CRCNA—its leaders, agencies, institutions, and members—to better ‘live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God’ (Mic. 6:8). [OSJ] focuses primarily on the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, as well as

those social injustices to which synod or the [COD] has directed it . . . *raising the voice of the CRCNA in advocacy for and with those who suffer injustice*, through action alerts to our members, participation in advocacy coalitions, and public statements when appropriate” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 75).

- Religious persecution— While there is no advocacy mandate on this issue, Synod 2016 asked the OSJ to urge every congregation to participate in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church and to ensure the collection and distribution of up-to-date information about religious persecution and liberty (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 862-63).

ADDENDUM 6

Communication for Joint CRCNA Leadership Statements

I. Process Standards

1. We should consider drafting a statement when all of the following criteria are met:
 - a. A significant and pressing event or issue related to public justice occurs (“significant” will typically refer to something with a national or binational scope and/or be related to a larger movement or trend in society),
 - b. AND this event is related to an issue that synod has addressed,
 - c. AND our biblical/confessional witness could be impaired by our not speaking,
 - d. AND a part of our community could be impaired by our not speaking,
 - e. AND there is a role for the church in responding to such events.

This is in keeping with Synod 1937’s decision that “political, social, and economical questions are ecclesiastical matters only when doctrinal and ethical issues of sufficient moment and magnitude are involved according to the Word of God and our standards” (*Acts of Synod 1937*, p. 11).
2. A request for such a statement could arise from
 - a. brothers and sisters in faith impacted by the event,
 - b. any of our ministries whose mandates relate to the event/issue at hand,
 - c. any of our churches, classes, ecumenical partners,
 - d. ecumenical partnerships and other groups of which the CRCNA or its ministries are a part.

3. Each CRCNA office and ministry should discern and curate carefully the public voice of the church as they consider making these requests.
 - a. There is a polarity between needing to be seen as a part of the broader ecumenical world speaking on issues, and needing to be judicial about what we ask our Christian Reformed churches to take action on. (For example, constituents experience “message fatigue” when we send statements too frequently. This can lead to their not paying attention to any of our statements.)
 - b. There are costs in speaking about an issue, and there are costs in not speaking.
 - c. There are multiple ways to speak into an issue beyond a full CRCNA leadership statement (e.g., advocacy alert, news stories, agency statement, etc.).
4. When such a situation and such a request arises, and after discernment by the appropriate persons or agencies has been done, a request for a CRCNA leadership statement should be sent to
 - a. the executive director of the CRCNA,
 - b. the transitional executive director-Canada (if the issue is related to Canada or is binational in scope),
 - c. the director of U.S. ministries and administration (if the issue is related to the U.S. or is binational in scope),
 - d. the director of communications and marketing.
5. This leadership group will convene a discernment meeting, which will include a representative from the group asking about this statement. The leadership group will also be intentional about ensuring a diversity of voices at the table. If the potential statement relates to an issue that impacts certain groups of people more than others (e.g., disability legislation), the leadership group will ensure that there is representation from that group in the discussion. After this discernment has been done, the leadership group will make a decision.
6. This same decision-making group should also decide, in consultation with those requesting a statement and the appropriate persons or agencies, which level of signatories should be required if a statement is warranted. They should also decide if two statements (one U.S., one Canadian) might be needed. The potential signatories could include
 - a. the general secretary alone;
 - b. U.S. senior leadership (director of U.S. ministries and administration, World Renew codirector, Resonate director, ReFrame director, Thrive codirector);
 - c. U.S. senior leadership (see above) plus Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary presidents;

- d. Canadian senior leadership (the executive director-Canada, director of the Centre for Public Dialogue, World Renew codirector, Resonate director, director of Diaconal Ministries Canada, Thrive codirector);
- e. binational senior leadership and general secretary.

In addition to these groups above, certain events may suggest the need for additional relevant signatories. For example, a situation involving abuse might warrant adding the safe church ministry consultant. This decision can be made on a case-by-case basis.

7. If a decision is made not to issue a CRCNA leadership statement, it does not preclude a specific ministry from issuing their own statement. A summary of all requests for statements will be reported to the Ministries Leadership Committee (MLC) each month so that all directors are aware of which requests have been considered.
8. The decision-making group will email the potential signatories as soon as possible to let them know that a decision has been made to work on a statement.
 - a. This will give them time to consider whether or not to add their name. This may include the need for signatories to consult with their boards (e.g., Calvin University Trustee Executive Committee), depending on the issue.
 - b. The potential signatories will be told who the primary authors of the draft statement will be, and the signatories will be encouraged to provide input and ideas while the statement is being drafted.
 - c. The author group will also give the potential signatories a timeline for when the draft will be ready, when edits will be needed, and when the statement will be published.
 - d. If signatories are traveling or are away on vacation, they should designate someone on their staff to make a decision on their behalf.
9. The decision-making group will appoint an author group to write the first draft of the statement. This will include the following:
 - a. The appropriate agency(ies) with this issue in their mandate will be given primary responsibility for writing the first draft.
 - b. The director of communications and marketing will be consulted and included throughout the process of this initial draft.
 - c. The primary authors will also incorporate input from potential signatories and the decision-making group.
10. Once an initial draft of the statement is ready . . .
 - a. All potential signatories will be given the draft statement and will have a reasonable response time under the circumstances to provide input. (Usually, feedback should be gathered and incorporated within 24 hours of the initial draft).

- b. Edits should be related to substance more than word choice. No one should expect every word to reflect their individual position. There needs to be trust and grace in each other.
 - c. In some instances, a quick videoconference meeting may be needed to make final decisions. This can be requested by any of the signatories.
 - d. If there is disagreement (for example, about whether or not to include a specific resource or link), the final decision will be made by the general secretary or the country-specific director after consultation with the signatories and the impacted ministries.
 - e. Potential signatories will then be given the chance to decide whether or not to add their names.
11. The final statement will be posted to crcna.org. In addition . . .
- a. An email will be sent to all Council of Delegates and MLC members so that they are aware that this statement has gone out.
 - b. An email will be sent to stated clerks of classes with a note that this statement is for their information.
 - c. The statement will be linked to in *CRC News* and “For Pastors.”

II. Content Standards

1. Statements should begin by identifying the signatories. For example, “We, the U.S. leaders of the CRCNA” or “We, the leaders of the CRCNA.” This makes clear that the leadership is speaking for themselves and not on behalf of the whole denomination in the way of a synodical statement.
2. The statement should clearly state the problem/event that sparked the need for the statement.
3. The statement should emphasize the biblical/confessional reason for issuing the statement.
4. It should also emphasize our denominational positions by linking to relevant synodical statements.
5. The statement should end with a specific call to action.
6. Statements that are directed to both government and church constituency should ordinarily include (perhaps in an addendum) suggestions and tools for action (e.g., prayer, advocacy).
7. Statements should not be partisan or explicitly support or oppose specific politicians or parties (but may encourage action on specific legislation).

ADDENDUM 7

Sign-on Letters by Year

<i>Year</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Number of Sign-ons</i>
2013	OSJ	20
2013	World Renew	1
2013	Executive director	11
2013	Disability Concerns	1
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		31
2014	OSJ	14
2014	World Renew	6
2014	Executive Director	8
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		24
2015	OSJ	25
2015	World Renew	1
2015	Executive director	13
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		38
2016	OSJ	65
2016	World Renew	6
2016	Executive director	9
Total		80
2017	OSJ	58
2017	World Renew	3
2017	Executive director	13
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		71
2018	OSJ	61
2018	World Renew	4
2018	Executive director	9
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		69
2019	OSJ	94
2019	Executive director	10
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		103
2020	OSJ	83
2020	Safe Church	1
2020	Executive director	3
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		85
2021	OSJ	51
2021	Executive director	5
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		54
2022	OSJ	29
2022	Executive director	2
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		30

2023*	Thrive	6
2023	Centre for Public Dialogue	1
Total (excluding multiple sign-ons)		6

*Amounts for 2023 were incomplete as of the time of compiling.

ADDENDUM 8

Office of Social Justice Backgrounder

For every action alert that OSJ created, a backgrounder would be produced. These documents would outline the following:

1. The background behind the issue—What is happening? Why is it a big deal?
2. Connection between this issue and our biblical call as Christians—How does this tie to Scripture?
3. Connection between this issue and the CRCNA—What has synod already said about this issue?
4. Connection between this issue and the mandate of the Office of Social Justice—How does speaking about this issue tie back to what we've been instructed to do?

These backgrounders may be posted online or may be made available to staff to answer questions that may arise once the action alert is distributed.