

# Defining Membership Task Force

## I. Introduction

Synod 2024 received an overture authored by Rev. Andrew Aukema, pastor of Inglewood CRC in Edmonton, Alberta, requesting advice regarding how the confessions and their interpretations apply to confessing members who are not officebearers (Overture 17, *Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 456-58). In response, synod tasked the Office of General Secretary “to provide theological reflection and advice on the historical, biblical, and theological aspects of membership.” In assigning this task, synod observed a need for clarification in the “difference in the relative commitment to the confessions between a member and an officebearer” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 866-67). Synod later noted that this response to Overture 17 would cover the issues posed by another overture as well: Overture 32 from Classis Alberta North. That overture asked a number of specific questions about the implications of synod’s decisions regarding Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 on the wider life of the church (see *Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 941-42).

Because this task was assigned to be reported “after receiving thoughts from Calvin Theological Seminary,” a small staff group of Zachary King (general secretary), Joel Vande Werken (director of ecclesiastical governance), and Jul Medenblik (president of Calvin Theological Seminary) gathered as a task force to review past synodical guidance on the matter of church membership. Over the course of several months, this task force also met with a number of CRC leaders throughout North America to discuss the ways in which congregations are implementing decisions about church membership in their own contexts. The Office of General Secretary is thankful to all whose wisdom and experience provided helpful input for this conversation. We also recognize the administrative support provided by Ashley Medendorp (coordinator of synodical operations) and help from Thrive staff who reviewed the final report.

## II. Biblical and theological reflection on membership

Membership is a key part and process by which a local church body is identified and commitments are made before God and each other as part of the visible expression of a congregation’s faith. The Heidelberg Catechism expresses our understanding of the church as “a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” and prompts believers to confess personally, “And of this community I am and always will be a living member” (Q&A 54).

In the catechism’s summary of biblical teaching here we find two important points: the community of God’s people is (1) “chosen for eternal life” and (2) “united in true faith.”

To belong to the church begins with being “chosen,” not simply with our “choosing” (see Eph. 1:4-6; John 15:16; Rom. 9:16). The church consists of members gathered by the electing love of God into the fellowship of his people sanctified by Christ’s blood and by the work of the Holy Spirit (see

Belgic Confession, Art. 27; Canons of Dort, Pt. 2, Art. 9). In the Reformed churches this emphasis on election is seen most clearly in our theology of baptism. Because infants as well as adults are members of God's covenant people (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74), our understanding of church membership is grounded in an individual's baptismal identity, which in turn points us to the communion we enjoy at the Lord's table (see *Agenda for Synod 2011*, pp. 578-79).

Along with this, Reformed theology sees the church as a community in which we are "united in true faith" (see 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Tim. 6:12). And while faith itself is also a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9), our understanding is that those who share one faith will have a desire to publicly confess that faith together. This common confession of faith comes to its fullest expression in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, where "we engage together, with thanksgiving . . . as we thus confess our faith and Christian religion" (Belgic Confession, Art. 35). Thus our communion liturgies include a recitation of the church's creed, and the CRC has traditionally given an important place to public profession of faith. Though this profession is no longer tied to admission to the Lord's Supper in all of our churches, our Church Order and church culture continue to see public profession of faith as an indicator of a mature Christian life (see Church Order, Art. 59-b). In fact, only confessing members may participate in the governance of the church or present children for baptism (Church Order, Art. 59-c). The process of membership in Reformed polity is overseen by the elders.

However, membership is not limited to its doctrinal and sacramental aspects. The life of a professing Christian is a life of ongoing discipleship and growth as well as participation in the witness and work of the church. As part of the "communion of saints," each member of the church also considers it a "duty" to use one's gifts, which are imparted by Christ, "readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 55; see 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:3-8). Church members together also proclaim the grace and truth of Christ to the world through their words and actions (Isa. 49:6; Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 3:13-16).

While membership in the body of Christ is fully a gift of God's grace, the CRC has long recognized that our shared witness to Christ in the world as members of that body includes some sort of content that we affirm together. To that content we now turn our attention.

### **III. The content of confessing membership in the CRC**

A discussion about membership should include some background on what it means to be a confessing member in the Christian Reformed Church. While membership in the CRC begins with and is rooted in one's baptism, the promises of God in baptism call each individual to a public profession of faith in those promises. When synod first adopted a liturgical form for profession of faith in 1932, it formulated four questions to be answered publicly by persons committing themselves to membership in the local

church.<sup>1</sup> Those questions asserted the importance of a personal love for Christ, an acceptance of God’s covenantal promises, a confession of the truth of Scripture as summarized in the Reformed confessions, and submission to the government and discipline of the church (*Acts of Synod 1932*, pp. 79-80). While modified somewhat by the addition of a second version of the profession of faith form in the 1970s (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 89, 351-54), these four themes have more or less shaped the CRC’s understanding of confessing membership for much of its history.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, the desire to connect the Lord’s Supper more directly with baptism led to a revision of the forms for profession of faith. As a result of those revisions, many churches no longer explicitly require candidates for confessing membership in the CRC to separately affirm their commitment to the Reformed confessions (see *Acts of Synod 1995*, pp. 715-16; *Acts of Synod 2013*, pp. 339-44; *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 102-5). Rather, for such churches this affirmation is now implied in and seen as part of the candidate’s commitment to accept the church’s spiritual guidance. This does not mean that confessing members are not expected by these newer liturgical forms to affirm the truth of the Reformed confessions; such an expectation remains part of our Church Order (Art. 59-b).<sup>3</sup> However, it is fair to say that the confessions play a less explicit role in confessing membership than they once did, and that the newer forms emphasize participation in the church’s witness.

Synod 1975 noted, “Full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44). However, the CRC now has greater diversity in its understanding of membership than in previous generations. Communicant membership in the CRC no longer necessarily means confessing membership. The increasing ethnic diversity of the denomination means that we no longer necessarily hold the same cultural expectations about the nature of Christian community. At the same time, confessing membership is, in many ways, both more universal and local than a historic Reformed understanding of membership—more universal in that it emphasizes a member’s connection to the faith of the church catholic; and more local in that there is often a more explicit reference to the member’s connection to the local congregation and its ministry. In both cases, these emphases have shifted the focus away from one’s membership in the family of Reformed (or, more specifically, Christian Reformed) churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to that time, consistories prepared candidates for profession of faith by means of a series of generally accepted questions by which the council assessed the candidate’s understanding of the gospel, intention to live in harmony with biblical teaching, and willingness to submit to the discipline and authority of the church (see *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 65-71).

<sup>2</sup> See also the summary of church membership given in *Acts of Synod 1974*, pp. 59-60, 521-22, which emphasized similar themes in response to pastoral questions about the compatibility between lodge and church membership.

<sup>3</sup> This is true, at least, for baptized members who make profession of faith. This expectation is less explicit for “persons coming from other denominations” per Church Order Article 59-f.

There is a recognition and even appreciation of those who come from a non-Reformed background and who also profess the historic ecumenical creeds. Many of the church pastors we interviewed talked about discipleship in terms of building from the various Christian backgrounds of those who are now attending their local churches and introducing them to the Reformed worldview. This approach to membership and discipleship is not necessarily at odds with the questions in the CRC's profession of faith forms nor with the expectations of Church Order Article 59.<sup>4</sup> Many such churches would see the confessions as important tools for discipling new members in a Reformed understanding of Scripture; in fact, this is how the CRC historically approached the baptism of converts (see *Acts of Synod 1953*, p. 85). However, developing a focus on the creeds for new believers may require that we permit consistories a wider latitude for membership acceptance than some past synodical statements have suggested.

The trend of introducing prospective members to the confessions is not new but comes as a result of a long-held desire in the CRC to engage with surrounding cultures and other Christian churches. Already in the 1960s, for example, the CRC was faced with questions about the place of members who could not embrace the confessions' understanding of covenantal baptism for infants (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 63). Questions about baptism have only continued to grow as the CRC has experienced more influence from the broad spectrum of North American evangelicalism as well as from immigrant communities whose baptismal theology has been shaped by a rejection of ritualism (see *Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 659; *Acts of Synod 2000*, p. 710; *Acts of Synod 2011*, pp. 831-32; *Agenda for Synod 2025*, p. 328). Similar questions have arisen about other issues, including the CRC's position on human sexuality (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 866-67, 941-42). Can such individuals offer the "full agreement with the confessions" expected of members by Synod 1975? This question is important not only for the issue of covenant baptism but also for other issues of the present day.

Perhaps one way to address this question is to contrast the level of confessional agreement expected of confessing members with that expected of officebearers. The Covenant for Officebearers requires that those in ordained leadership affirm that the "doctrines [of the Reformed confessions] fully agree with the Word of God" (Supplement, Church Order Art. 5-a; see also subsections A, 1 and A, 5). Confessing members, however, are expected by our liturgical forms to affirm that the confessions of the church "faithfully reflect" the truths of Scripture (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 353). While the difference between these two commitments may seem subtle at first glance, past

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the article by Eric Dirksen and Aleah Marsden, "A Positive Theological Vision for the CRC," [thebanner.org/columns/2024/11/a-positive-theological-vision-for-the-crc](http://thebanner.org/columns/2024/11/a-positive-theological-vision-for-the-crc). It could be noted here as well that the membership vows of other denominations in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition focus not on their confessions but on a commitment to the basic teachings of the ecumenical creeds and on submission to the spiritual authority of the church.

synods have insisted that the “doctrinal understanding and competence” required for church office should not be “imposed as a condition of church membership” (*Acts of Synod 1959*, p. 22; see also the plea of Classis Holland, *Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 604). In other words, not every member will have sufficient understanding of, or alignment with, a Reformed view of scriptural teaching in order to serve effectively in ordained leadership. Nor should we expect that of every member. Part of the biblical requirement of being “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) or of “hold[ing] firmly to the trustworthy message” (Titus 1:9; cf. 1 Tim. 3:9) is that officebearers should have a level of agreement with the church’s doctrine that ensures they present a consistent picture of the Christian faith. But this is not required of members who are not called to ordained leadership.

It seems possible, then, that a consistory may admit an individual to confessing membership whose commitment aligns more closely with the ecumenical creeds than with some elements of the Reformed confessions. This is not to dismiss the reality that the unity of the church is aided when church members find themselves in consistent alignment with the teachings of their church, as Van Dellen and Monsma argue in their *Revised Church Order Commentary*.<sup>5</sup> But this also leaves space for pastorally recognizing the realities of an increasingly diverse church environment. As Synod 2024 observed, when people make profession of faith, they are not claiming to fully comprehend all the nuances of the creeds and confessions (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 866). Sanctification and theological understanding are continual processes of growth.

Though this section has largely focused on the CRC’s practice with regard to admission to confessing membership, it is also important to note that we do not see membership simply as a one-time decision. For this reason, consistories have the responsibility of supporting the process of faith nurture and pastoral care among members of the church (see Church Order, Art. 25, 62-65, 71-73). The CRC has consistently placed important emphasis on members’ participation in worship and the sacraments as well as on their investment in the life and work of the local church and in the wider work of God’s kingdom. In considering the significance of membership, discussion of doctrinal standards should not lead churches to neglect the consideration of nurturing members’ growth in Christian community as well.

**IV. Role of the local consistory and current practices in CRC congregations**  
Church Order (Art. 59) assigns the primary responsibility for admission to confessing membership to the discernment of the elders of the local church. Synod 2024’s advisory committee observed that “‘full agreement’ and ‘commitment’ to the creeds and confessions” implies “increasing submission to the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love during the sanctification process,” and the committee further encouraged local leaders “to work out situations under the principle of original authority (Church

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<sup>5</sup> Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Revised Church Order Commentary* (Zondervan, 1967), p. 234.

Order, Art. 27) within their context and in submission to our creeds and confessions” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 866). These statements recognize that the persons who are in the best position to work through membership in a local church are the local church leaders—pastors, elders, and deacons.

Our task force spent several hours meeting with local church leaders in a variety of contexts across the CRCNA to understand better how membership functions in those situations.<sup>6</sup> We asked several questions of each church leader:

1. What is the process of becoming a member of your church?
2. What are the expectations you have for membership in your church?
3. What are the convictions and beliefs that you expect of new members in your church?
4. Are there any liturgical forms that you use to receive new members?
5. Do you have a faith formation process that you use in your church?

These conversations revealed a wide range of practices, from traditional Reformed catechetical formation to less formal avenues of instruction in the basics of Christianity. Some of these are reflected in resources like Thrive’s “faith practices” toolkits (see [crcna.org/FaithFormation/resources](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/resources)), while others reflect circumstances unique to a particular congregation. We offer the following summary of these conversations (in the order of questions asked):

1. Membership procedures vary among congregations and even among the individual members being received. In some churches, most new members have not been familiar at first with the CRC, Reformed doctrine, or even the Christian faith. Scenarios like these may require a longer-than-usual membership process. A “newcomers class” may last a few weeks, but such classes do not always result in an immediate commitment to membership. Even in more traditional CRCs, new members today come from a variety of backgrounds, and catechetical practices are varied. We commend the practice of using new-membership classes and processes by local congregations, particularly as it provides an opportunity to introduce a person to both the local church and the wider church—including, in many cases, an introduction to the teachings of the CRCNA denomination by noting the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions.
2. While a variety of expectations came into view about members’ participation in the life of the church, repeated themes that stood out

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<sup>6</sup> The authors of this report express their thanks to Tabitha Manuelito (Tohatchi, N.Mex.); Joseph Hun-Suk Bae (Ann Arbor, Mich.); Ron DeVries (Edmonton, Alta.); Rick Zomer (Grand Rapids, Mich.); Harold Caicedo (Fontana, Calif.); Victor Ko (Edmonton, Alta.); Brian Na (Queens, N.Y.); Jim Kirk (Madison, Wis.); Ryan Pedde (Fort Saskatchewan, Alta.); Stephanie Van Rooyen (Chatham, Ont.); John Lee (Sioux Center, Iowa); John Medendorp (New Era, Mich.); and Chad Steenwyk (Holland, Mich.) for their participation in these conversations.

were attendance at public worship, having a lifestyle that reflects a Christian profession of faith, promoting the welfare and harmony of the local church, financial support of the church as God provides, prayer with and for others, and seeking to grow in one's understanding of Scripture. In some cases these expectations are spelled out in a membership covenant; in other situations they are simply communicated verbally as part of a membership class. The question about membership expectations also sparked reflection on the need to care for disengaged members, an issue that will be addressed in more detail below.

3. The doctrinal convictions and beliefs expected of members were also expressed in various ways. In a number of congregations, a specific statement of faith has been developed, reflecting apostolic Christian convictions. It should be noted that such statements, while they may align in many ways with a "commitment to the Reformed confessions" (Church Order, Art. 59-b), may also leave room for disagreement with Reformed doctrine (often evident in the omission of specifically Reformed doctrines). A number of churches in the CRC have used Alpha and similar evangelistic programs, which have been helpful to proclaim the basics of faith but are not necessarily fully Reformed in their teaching or approach. Other churches use teaching materials based on the Reformed confessions themselves to convey the foundations of faith. In some cases, churches noted that a journey toward a specifically Reformed understanding of Scripture involved a discipleship journey that could take a number of years. The variations in practice may be of interest for continued reflection for the CRCNA.
4. The use of liturgical forms in the congregations we surveyed largely reflected the practices of churches regarding the convictions expected of their members (discussed in point 3 above). Congregations that expect a member largely to align with, or be on a journey toward alignment with, the Reformed confessions often make use of CRC liturgical forms. It should be noted that the CRC has translated many of its liturgical forms into Spanish and Korean, but it may be time to complete the work so that all forms are translated, along with translations into other languages (see [crcna.org/resources/church-resources/liturgical-forms](http://crcna.org/resources/church-resources/liturgical-forms)). Many congregations offer an informal welcome to new members consistent with their presentation of their church community as a family, expressed in terms of broadly accepted standards of doctrinal agreement. A more complete approach to translation of these forms could foster a greater unity of understanding for membership across the denomination, particularly in churches where the English language is not used in worship.

5. Regarding faith formation, one approach that a number of churches noted as helpful was to see membership as a lifelong journey of discipleship, a theme which the CRC has increasingly embraced in the past couple of decades (see *Agenda for Synod 2005*, pp. 499-500; *Agenda for Synod 2011*, pp. 556-57). In this understanding, membership is not a “yes/no” matter in which one either agrees with everything or does not. A basic grasp of the gospel is seen as the fundamental element of membership, with the expectation that members will continue to strive toward holiness and spiritual growth. It is noted that this idea of “belonging before believing (or at least before fully understanding)” represents something of a shift from the traditional CRC approach to membership, which tended to call for an “all-in” approach to the life of the church. But it might also reflect a more realistic approach to the way that many people in the wider society relate to the gospel today. Because the Christian faith no longer saturates Western culture in the way it did even a few generations ago, the journey from conversion to maturity in faith may be longer than the CRC has historically envisioned.

From the above reflections, we can see several key themes developing. First, CRC congregations take a wide variety of approaches with regard to membership formation. This is to be expected. Ministry is inherently local, and at various points in the past synod has emphasized the importance of local discernment (see *Acts of Synod 1952*, pp. 199-200; *Acts of Synod 1974*, pp. 545-56). Second, the CRC’s liturgical forms, where used, play an important role in naming some of the key elements of church membership in both the doctrinal basis of members as well as their relationship to the guidance of the local church’s leadership. Third, there is a growing trend in churches toward “belonging” before “joining as a member.” This may mean that membership is viewed increasingly in terms of a journey of sanctification. It may also require that churches distinguish more clearly between the expectations of members and the expectations of officebearers.

During its conversations with church leaders, the task force was encouraged to comment on the reality of inactive members. Though this is not a new challenge to the church, it has become all the more acute in an increasingly mobile culture in which members move or shift their faith commitments. It is also increasingly difficult to enforce membership commitments where the wider culture encourages “authenticity” and sees institutional authority as “judgmental.” For these reasons, church leaders must approach conversations with inactive members in a pastoral spirit and with a clear vision for the long-term task of calling people into faithful fellowship with Jesus as a part of his church. But pastoral sensitivity does not mean that local leaders may ignore the responsibility to pursue members who do not participate in the life of the local church. Our theological vision for membership as a community of believers actively sharing in the witness of the local church means that we have a covenant obligation to do so. (The

nature of the institutional church as a legal corporation may also provide reasons for councils to attend to this responsibility.) Past synods have provided advice in this regard; because a full treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this group's work, we have summarized additional information on inactive membership in an appendix to this report.

In sum, then, our treatment of the consistory's role in membership reflects the fact that belonging to the church is not just a matter of assent to certain theological convictions. It also includes a process of growing participation in the shared life of the church, living under its authority, joining in its work, and publicly confirming our commitment to its witness with our words and actions. Our liturgical forms and membership statements reflect these values,<sup>7</sup> but in our current setting there is value for local churches to provide additional statements to guide the process of discipling members toward deeper participation in the life of the Christian church and toward the importance of "milestones" along that journey rather than toward a single moment of "yes/no" commitment.

## **V. Practical implications for membership issues**

In considering the meaning of membership, this task force also took into consideration the material of Overture 32 from Classis Alberta North, requesting clarity on the implications of our confessional expectations for members in the church. In particular, this overture asked whether members who are uncertain about or who may disagree with elements of our confessions may make profession of faith, remain members, present children for baptism, or serve as officebearers (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 498-501).

The overture asks many good and practical questions worth careful consideration by the churches. Some of the questions have already been addressed by synod's work on gravamina in recent years, which have clarified that members who have settled convictions contrary to the Reformed confessions may not serve as officebearers (Supplement, Church Order, Art. 5-a).<sup>8</sup> Other issues, such as baptism, have also been specifically addressed by synod, which has reaffirmed the authority of local consistories provided

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Form for Profession of Faith (1976): "Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere?" Or, in the 2013 version: "Do you promise to exhibit the joy of new life in Christ; to share fully in the life of the church; to be faithful in worship and service; and to offer your prayers and gifts?" This emphasis is also implied in the admonitions to participation in Christian community in our liturgical forms for baptism and the Lord's Supper.

<sup>8</sup> With regard to objections about the real presence in the sacrament (and other concerns about the wording of matters in the Belgic Confession) see *Acts of Synod 1952*, pp. 520-21; *Acts of Synod 1954*, pp. 253-55; *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 205-12. On election and predestination in the Canons of Dort, see *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 73-76, 486-559. Synod has not been presented with a gravamen related to infant baptism. However, it is important to recognize that gravamina decisions do not primarily address *membership* issues but rather those surrounding *ordained leadership*.

that other synodical instruction is kept in mind (see *Acts of Synod 2025*, p. 697). However, in other situations synod has not spoken definitively with regard to the implications for members of the church. This reflects the reality that local congregations retain significant authority to determine how to apply synodical decisions with regard to membership issues.

In some ways the Classis Alberta North overture asks whether the CRC approaches membership from a confessional lens. The answer we found is that it does, but the expression of that approach depends on the context of ministry and the local church leaders who are responsible for how the confessions are introduced, taught, and developed as a matter of spiritual discipleship in the local church.

On the one hand, church leaders owe it to their members to develop ministry that allows for ever-greater engagement with the truths of Scripture summarized in the Reformed confessions. For example, many church pastors regularly preach through the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer by use of the confessions (see Church Order, Art. 54). The purpose in membership is to recognize Christ's call on an individual's life and that the individual is called into a growing relationship with the triune God. That is ultimately a journey of ever-deepening relationship, and CRC polity recognizes the primacy of local authority in nurturing the relationships that direct people toward Jesus. The consistory is the body charged with determining when and how to answer questions of admission, continuation, and even exclusion of members (see Church Order, Art. 59-b, -e, -f; 80-81). Our liturgical forms commit members to "accept the spiritual guidance of the church" (Profession of Faith forms—2013, 2016) as they make their profession in a local congregation. The local leadership is in the best position to nurture this life of faith through pastoral care, faith nurture, and (if necessary) exclusion or formal discipline (see Church Order, Art. 63-65; Supplement, Art. 67; Art. 81).

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that membership in Christ's church brings responsibilities and not just privileges. Our Church Order recognizes that confessing members should offer their "full participation in the work, life, and mutual discipline of the local congregation and the universal body of Christ" (Church Order, Art. 59-c; see also Supplement, Art. 67; Art. 74-c; Art. 79). Thus, while individual members are not asked to provide assurance of "full agreement" with confessional statements, the nature of church life does expect that members will work for the common good of the local church as well as its wider expression in the classis, denomination, and universal church. Local leaders should remind members of their obligations to support the wider church through their time, treasure, and talents and should model what it means to be stewards of these gifts in the way that they lead.

The matter of responsibilities also raises questions about the life of a believer in the context of a community of faith. In fact, the "privileges of mem-

bership” (such as the right to vote in congregational meetings, present children for baptism, or serve in church office) often depend in some way upon one’s fulfillment of “responsibilities” (as our discipline process makes clear; see Supplement, Church Order, Art. 78-81, b). Applying this to Classis Alberta North’s questions, we observe that local councils have the authority to determine whether a member is in good standing. But they do so in ways that are mindful of the wisdom of the wider church regarding when and how to draw boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

A survey of CRC history provides numerous examples of advice given by major assemblies on how to apply our confessional convictions to the “life and doctrine” of church members.<sup>10</sup> But it is ultimately the local leadership that must determine how to apply this collected wisdom. The recognition that such decisions may be appealed if they are inconsistent with Scripture or with the Church Order (Church Order, Art. 30) should invite careful and collective discernment in sensitive cases, whether through conversations with church visitors (Church Order, Art. 42-b) or requests for advice from the classis as a whole (Church Order, Art. 41). But this expectation of collective discernment need not make a local council fearful of using its authority to disciple those members and prospective members whom God has entrusted to its care. In fact, recent synods have reaffirmed this very truth (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 866-67).

Synod 2024’s advisory committee had begun to work on a response to Overture 32 but withdrew its recommendations when it became clear that there was significant overlap between that overture and Overture 17. However, their initial response, addressing particular questions about human sexuality, is instructive for this task force’s work. The advisory committee suggested that a positive response to the profession of faith questions implied that an individual did indeed submit themselves to the authority of the local consistory’s oversight of their doctrine and life. It also observed that past synods have provided extensive reflection on the ways in which churches could faithfully engage LGBTQ+ members, their families, and their friends in ways consistent with our understanding of Scripture’s demands concerning “unchastity.”<sup>11</sup> As a report to Synod 2025 noted, “a confessional commitment that views all same-sex sexual activity as sinful does

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<sup>9</sup> Decisions about the relationship between lodge and church membership are instructive here. For example, Synod 1982 reaffirmed the right of synod to establish regulations for church membership by decisions considered “settled and binding” in ways that do limit a consistory’s authority to admit confessing members (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 44-45, 628). However, it should be noted that this authority is limited only where synod has specifically spoken, not where synod has left questions open.

<sup>10</sup> Some examples relate to the proper celebration of the Lord’s Day, views of the Spirit’s work in an individual’s life, divorce and remarriage, and lodge membership, in addition to same-sex marriage. See relevant sections of the CRC’s “Position Statements” at [crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements](http://crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 609-33; *Acts of Synod 2002*, pp. 313-51; *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 361- 443, 917-18; *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 313-487.

not lock the church or individual members into a particular course of pastoral care beyond those on which synod has specifically spoken.<sup>[12]</sup> . . . The principle of the original authority of the local assemblies (Church Order, Art. 27-a) dictates that local leaders do have significant authority to disciple members in ways that make sense in a particular situation, and should be able to do so with the trust of fellow officebearers and members of the CRC” (*Agenda for Synod 2025*, pp. 328-29).

Thus the answer to Classis Alberta North’s broader questions—regarding what latitude members who are uncertain about or who disagree with confessional interpretations have to participate in the life of the church—is fundamentally pastoral. If a member’s disagreement with the confessions is significant enough that it disrupts the peace of the church, it certainly seems challenging to allow such a person to remain a member in good standing. If, however, a member is willing to “accept the spiritual guidance of the church” (Profession of Faith forms—2013, 2016) and can say with integrity that the confessions “faithfully reflect [the Bible’s] revelation [of Christ and his redemption]” (Profession of Faith form—1976), then our polity has traditionally recognized the possibility for ongoing pastoral engagement and discipleship as the consistory determines appropriate. In other words, there is space for a wide variety of avenues of service for individuals at various points of their membership journey in the local church—as greeters, musicians, nursery attendants, coffee servers, and office volunteers, to name a few. Councils and consistories would be wise to ponder these issues and to recognize the importance of potentially involving individuals in appropriate ways in the life of the church even prior to formal membership. This is consistent not only with our Church Order but also with Jesus’ own approach to people who had not yet committed to him (see Matt. 9:9-13; Luke 19:1-10).

## **VI. Conclusion**

As we conclude these reflections, it is important once again to acknowledge the mandate given to this group “to provide theological reflection and advice on the historical, biblical, and theological aspects of membership” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 866-67). The first aspect of this mandate has been easier to fulfill. The CRC has historically given significant emphasis to the content of church membership. While some of the specifics of this content have varied over time, in general it can be said that membership in the CRC has been grounded in the baptismal call that brings an individual into the covenant community of God’s people. This baptismal call points toward obedient participation in the Lord’s Supper and a public profession of faith under the direction of the elders of a local church. This profession of faith involves some kind of affirmation of the Reformed confessions as “faithful reflections” of the gospel message, or at least as the framework that provides the

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<sup>12</sup> Matters that do bind churches and officebearers can be found, for example, in the list presented in the *Acts of Synod 2024*. p. 891.

“spiritual guidance” of the church to which one belongs. While sharing with the worldwide evangelical church a desire for a personal embrace of the Christian faith, the Reformed understanding strongly emphasizes the Spirit’s work of initiating our walk with Christ and the importance of a shared testimony with the church by means of its sacramental witness.

Applying these theological reflections to the present context requires wisdom. For one thing, we need to recognize the value of our theological perspective and the importance of continuing it. We all benefit from the common vocabulary around membership commitments provided by our liturgical forms and synodical statements, and we would do well to foster a robust and consistent use of this vocabulary throughout our churches. Yet we also recognize that our wider culture no longer reinforces the value of membership commitments, and we cannot assume that everyone around us knows the meaning of the statements we make in those forms (or even that people acknowledge the value of a formal commitment to the church). In such a context, we recognize the value of framing membership as a “journey” in which formal admission to membership is only one milestone in a walk with Christ that includes (among other things) continual repentance from sin, joyful embrace of godly living, public commitment to Christ, participation in the Lord’s Supper, and a desire to share in the work of the church.

We believe that our theological convictions and historic practice provide sufficient latitude to allow churches to minister in a changing context. Specifically, the task of applying the Reformed theological and practical understandings that we share falls to local consistories. It is they who determine when to administer baptism and how to oversee the Lord’s Supper; it is they who decide when to admit individuals to membership, how to faithfully disciple those who continue in the journey of following Jesus, and how to disciple erring members. Though the entire church is called to “go and make disciples . . . baptizing . . . and teaching them” faithful obedience to the way of Christ (Matt. 28:19-20), this task is an inherently local and relational one. Within our shared commitments to the public obligations involved in the church’s witness—and specifically the CRC’s witness—is the reality that we “follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17; Heb. 13:7) in covenant with one another as fellow pilgrims on the journey to full life forever with the Savior. This journey brings us into fellowship with the people of God, who in every time and place embrace the amazing and gracious call to salvation in Christ so that we may become together “one body” in which “each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:5).

## **VII. Recommendations**

A. That synod commend to the churches the reflections and advice on the historical, biblical, and theological aspects of membership identified in this report, noting again the distinction in confessional commitment required of officebearers in comparison to that of confessing members.

B. That synod again remind consistories of the privilege and responsibility of discerning how to invite believers to membership and disciple them faithfully (including, if necessary, discipline of erring members), in keeping with the principles previously established by our denomination, and to urge continued reflection about the balance between confessing membership rooted in the ecumenical creeds and an approach rooted in the Reformed confessions.

*Grounds:*

1. The local consistory is the body charged with evaluating membership decisions within the framework established by Scripture and our denominational standards (see Church Order, Art. 59, 78-81; Supplement, Church Order, Art. 67).
2. Our profession of faith practices assume that there is no “disjunction” between a Christian confession and a Reformed confession: “A Christian confession is by implication a Reformed confession and vice versa” (*Acts of Synod 1959*, pp. 21-22, 373).
3. A number of denominations in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition base confessing membership in an embrace of the ecumenical creeds, embracing the Reformation-era confessions as the framework for the “spiritual guidance of the church” to which members also assent.

C. That synod encourage churches to use our approved liturgical forms, or adaptations of them that conform to synodical guidelines (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 493-94), in the administration of the sacraments or in celebrating public profession of faith; and instruct the Office of General Secretary to make progress toward providing translations of all of these forms in the languages used in the churches.

*Grounds:*

1. The use of these liturgical forms will foster a greater shared understanding of membership across the denomination.
2. “The consistory shall see to it that the principles and elements of worship approved by synod are observed, including the use of liturgical forms . . . . If liturgical forms are adapted or additional psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are used in worship, these elements should conform to synodical guidelines” (Church Order, Art. 52-b).
3. Translating our liturgy into the languages used in worship across the church will provide ways to communicate expectations about membership in communities where English is not widely spoken.

D. That synod, while recognizing the validity of CRC professing membership rooted in alignment with the ecumenical creeds, encourage churches to develop and use membership and profession of faith classes that foster a commitment to the Reformed confessions, and to reflect on the ways in

which this goal might require adaptation of programs developed in other theological traditions when our churches make use of these programs.

*Grounds:*

1. Membership or profession of faith classes provide a means for churches to establish a baseline of expectations for persons committing to the life of a local CRC congregation.
2. “Commitment to the creeds and confessions of the Christian Reformed Church” is a basic expectation of professing membership (Church Order, Art. 59-b; see also Profession of Faith forms—1976, 2013, 2016).
3. A number of churches are using resources developed outside the Reformed theological tradition to invite people to membership in their congregations. While these resources have been beneficial to many churches, many of them also contain theological convictions about the nature of salvation or the role of the church and sacraments that undermine important insights of the Reformed understanding of Scripture. Discernment is important both to identify teachings that connect us to the wider Christian tradition and to recognize teachings that may tend to undermine our understanding of Scripture.

E. That synod declare the mandate of this working group complete, noting the responses to Overtures 17 and 32 (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 866-67, 941-42), with thanks for the reflections provided by those who participated in its discussions.

Defining Membership Task Force  
Office of General Secretary

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## APPENDIX A

### **Addressing the Reality of Inactive Members**

Many established congregations are wrestling with membership lists including the names of baptized and professing members who have not been a meaningful part of their local body for a number of years. Some characteristics that may identify “inactive members” are that they do not attend worship, make use of the means of grace, contribute financially, or participate in the life of the church; these do not include mitigating circumstances such as military service or a move to a nursing home (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 215; see *Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 410).

It is helpful to note that synod has, in the past, developed guidelines to assist consistories in addressing these realities (see Supplement, Church Order, Art. 67; *Acts of Synod 1974*, pp. 81-82; *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 25, 593-99). In the case of members worshipping elsewhere, a consistory may approach

the matter positively: there is spiritual value in recognizing one's affiliation with another congregation, even when that may mean acknowledging the painful reality that a former member is no longer a part of one's own congregational fellowship. In cases regarding members who have moved away, it is worth noting that Church Order Article 67 allows for members to retain membership in their former congregation but assumes some measure of active engagement with church life there. If that active engagement is not possible, consistories have freedom to determine whether and when to lapse membership. Releasing the memberships of those who are a part of other Christian fellowships allows consistories the space to determine how best to engage those who still live nearby but are not worshiping elsewhere. In such cases it may be necessary at some point for all to recognize that an individual no longer desires a meaningful relationship with the congregation. Whether this is done through a member's resignation from the church or through a disciplinary process is a matter of pastoral wisdom.

Church leaders may also find it helpful to note the advice of past synods to congregations ministering to their "dispersed" members. At one time, consistories were requested to share with the denomination the names of members who had moved from their home church (*Acts of Synod 1902*, pp. 15-16) in the hope of fostering a shared pastoral presence to such individuals. This request would later inform the work of the CRC's home-mission efforts, which saw one of its goals as bringing the gospel "to the dispersed [members] of the faith" ("Home Mission Order" preamble in *Agenda for Synod 1936*, p. 267). In fact, for many years synod received a report each year on "dispersed and non-resident members," and the topic of reporting on dispersed members was one of the questions posed to councils for discussion on classical credentials per Church Order Article 41 (*Acts of Synod 1947*, pp. 38-40). Due to increased mobility and willingness to embrace the ecumenical nature of the church, the matter of "dispersed members" has received less attention over the years (the home-mission reports on dispersed members were dropped around 1970, and the Art. 41 question was dropped in 2006). This is not a bad thing. But we would note that drawing upon other CRC congregations (or congregations of denominations in communion with the CRC) to pastorally support members who have moved to another area could be a helpful practice and would encourage consistories to see this as one avenue for addressing members who move away from their home church rather than leaving the burden of a search for a new church home solely to the members themselves.

Of course, addressing concerns about inactive membership has pastoral and practical complexities that can hardly be addressed in a paragraph or two. Nonetheless, it is important for consistories to take such procedures seriously as a reminder to the congregations—and perhaps even to themselves—about the importance of a continuing and active engagement with Christ and his church. This is an issue with practical significance as well,

since our polity accords professing members certain privileges. In particular, some churches have discovered to their alarm that, in distinction from some other denominations, the CRC does not have a mechanism for removing from a member the privilege of voting at a congregational meeting unless the member is under discipline. This situation has occasionally resulted in unnecessary conflict when a congregation faces a vote on a divisive issue and inactive members become part of the process. For pastoral, theological, and practical reasons, then, churches are reminded to give regular attention to their list of inactive members and to seek to restore them to the church or commit them to the care of other Christian churches.