Christian Reformed Church

Agenda for Synod 2023

Synod 2022 instructed the Program Committee of synod to designate appropriate matters, such as receiving the condensed financial statements as information, taking note of the unified budget approval, and authorizing pension amounts for housing allowance, to the consent agenda of synod in future years. All other matters in this agenda will be deliberated by the advisory committees and the assembly of Synod 2023.

Called

Agenda for Synod 2023

Christian Reformed Church

June 9-15, 2023
Calvin University
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2023 Christian Reformed Church in North America
1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49508-1407 U.S.A.
Printed in the United States of America

The Christian Reformed Church is active in missions, education, publishing, media, pastoral care, advocacy, diaconal outreach, and youth ministry. To learn about our work in North America and around the world, visit crcna.org.

CONTENTS

Preface....9
Announcements....11
Delegates to Synod....15

Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church in North America
Council of Delegates Report....23
Appendix A: Code of Conduct Review Team Report....54
Appendix B: Church Order Review Task Force Interim Report...72
Appendix C: Curriculum Vitae: Kevin DeRaaf....73
Appendix D: Congregational Ministries Reorganization Document....77
Appendix E: "One Family Conversation" Report....80
Appendix F: Condensed Financial Statements of the Agencies and Institutions....83

Reports of Agencies, Institutions, and Ministries
Introduction....113
Faith Formation
Calvin University....115
Faith Formation....121
Servant Leadership
Chaplaincy and Care....123
Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S. 125
Diversity....128
Pastor Church Resources....130
Pensions and Insurance....132
Global Mission
ReFrame Ministries....137
Resonate Global Mission....144
Mercy and Justice
Committee for Contact with the Government/Centre for Public Dialogue....149
Disability Concerns....152
Indigenous Ministry (Canada)....155
Race Relations....158
Safe Church....161
Social Justice....164
World Renew....166
Gospel Proclamation and Worship
Calvin Theological Seminary....181
Worship....192

Standing Committees
Candidacy Committee....197

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee.....203
Appendix A: World Council of Churches Background References from *Agenda*s and *Acts of Synod* 214
Appendix B: Cost of Membership 216
Historical Committee 217

Denominationally Related Educational Institutions
Dordt University 231
Institute for Christian Studies 234
The King's University.....238
Kuyper College.....240
Redeemer University.....243
Trinity Christian College 245

Task Forces
Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force 251
Study of Bivocationality Task Force.....285

***In Loco* Committee**
Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee Report 317

Overtures
1. *Classis Niagara*
Refrain from Reading Repetitious Notes at the Beginning of Synod.....351
2. *Classis Zeeland*
Make a Statement on Assisted Suicide 354
3. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Refocus Ecclesiological Communication.....356
4. *Classis Zeeland*
Receive Code of Conduct as Helpful but Not Required 359
5. *Classis Columbia*
Commend Code of Conduct as Helpful but Not as a Church Order Revision 361
6. *Classis Minnkota*
Reject the Proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders 365
7. *Classis Lake Superior*
Do Not Accept and/or Use Code of Conduct as a Binding Document.....370
8. *Classis Iakota*
Do Not Implement or Mandate the Code of Conduct.....378
9. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Reject the Proposed Code of Conduct 380
10. *John and Debra Kamer, St. Joseph, Michigan*
Provide Procedures for Discipline of Church Leaders.....382
11. *Classis Quinte*
Revise Church Order Article 61; Encourage Churches to Include Lament in Their Public Prayers.....385

12. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Develop a Strategy to Reverse the Trend of Membership Decline and Require Annual Reporting of Progress 389
13. *Council of Wyoming (Ont.) CRC*
Declare that a Virtual Church Is Not a Church 397
14. *Council of First Hamilton CRC, Hamilton, Ontario*
Adopt Belhar Confession as a Confession of the CRC 401
15. *Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan*
Revise Belgic Confession Articles 18 and 34 403
16. *Classis Ontario Southwest*
Change Decision re Confessional Status of Sins to *Agreement* 404
17. *Benjamin J. Petroelje, Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan*
Clarify and Affirm that the CRC's Doctrine of Marriage Is Confessional Doctrine 406
18. *Members of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan*
Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of Q&A 108 and Declaration on Confessional Status; Provide an Alternative Interpretation 411
19. *Classis Lake Erie*
Reverse Synod 2022's Declaration That Its Interpretation of "Unchastity" Has Confessional Status; Instead Make the Interpretation Nonbinding 414
20. *Officebearers of New Life CRC, Guelph, Ontario*
Confessional-Revision Gravamen 418
21. *Classis Holland*
In Pursuit of Scriptural and Confessional Unity, Alter Synod 2022's Decision on Confessional Status in Three Ways 423
22. *Council of Maranatha CRC, Edmonton, Alberta*
Confessional-Revision Gravamen 430
23. *Classis Toronto*
Remove Confessional Status from Interpretation of "Unchastity" ..433
24. *Classis Rocky Mountain*
Declare that Synod 2022's Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Has Synodical Authority but Not Confessional Status.....437
25. *Council of Monroe Community CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan*
Alter the Action of Synod 2022 regarding Confessional Status of Interpretation of "Unchastity" 440
26. *Members of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan*
Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.....444
27. *Classis Eastern Canada*
Allow Classes of the CRCNA to Declare Article 65, Item 2 of the *Acts of Synod 2022* Inoperative.....448
28. *Council of Bethany CRC, Bloomfield, Ontario*
Reverse Decision re Definition of "Unchastity" 451
29. *Classis Grand Rapids East*
Declare that Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Does Not Have Confessional Status.....453

30. *Classis Lake Erie*
Reverse the Interpretation That "Unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism Has Confessional Status 456
31. *Nick Loenen, Ladner CRC, Delta, British Columbia*
Do Not Implement the Interpretation of "Unchastity" before 2027 ...457
32. *Classis Alberta North*
Declare that Synod 2022's Definition of "Unchastity" as Having Confessional Status Was a Change to the Confessions 459
33. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Revise Definition of *Homosexuality* 461
34. *Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana*
Alter the Interpretation Given to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and Remove "Homosexual Sex" from the List of Sins That Constitute "Unchastity" 468
35. *Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana*
Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" as Including a List of Specific Behaviors 473
36. *Council of Mill Creek Community Church, Mill Creek, Washington*
Remove "Homosexual Sex" from Definition of "Unchastity" 477
37. *Council of Alger Park CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan*
Reverse the Synod 2022 Decision Defining "Unchastity".....480
38. *Council of Kibbie CRC, South Haven Michigan*
Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.....483
39. *Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana*
Reverse Synod's Endorsement of the Human Sexuality Report.....488
40. *Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, Ontario*
Address Harm Done to LGBTQ+ Persons.....493
41. *Classis Eastern Canada*
Hold Implementation of the "Confessional Status" Decision by Synod 2022 until Synod 2028.....498
42. *Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana*
Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" as Including "Homosexual Sex" 502
43. *Council of Hope Christian Reformed Church, Oak Forest, Illinois*
Amend the Decision of Synod 2022 regarding the Definition of "Unchastity" 505
44. *Members of Woody Nook CRC, Lacombe, Alberta*
Remove Definition of "Unchastity" as Part of the Confessional Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.....508
45. *Council of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta*
Confessional-Revision Gravamen: Revise Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 by Synod 2022 511
46. *Council of First CRC, Denver, Colorado*
Declare that the Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Does Not Have Confessional Status.....513

47. *Council of Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alberta*
Create Local Option to Allow LGBTQ+ Christians to Participate Fully 515
48. *Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana*
Reverse Synod 2022's Decision to Interpret "Unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism as Including "Homosexual Sex"....518
49. *Classis Grandville*
Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B 522
50. *Classis North Cascades*
Establish a Time of Discipleship for Officebearers with a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen.....529
51. *Classis Northcentral Iowa*
Hold Officebearers to Biblical and Confessional Standards.....534
52. *Classis Georgetown*
Require the Council of Neland Avenue CRC to Comply with the Decision of Synod 2022 or Come Under Church Discipline.....537
53. *Classis Georgetown*
Require Confessional-Revision Gravamina on the Occasion of Clear Disagreement with the Confessions 538
54. *Classis Central Plains*
Prohibit Exceptions and Gravamina in All Agencies, Ministries, Boards, Broader Assemblies, and Other Entities of the CRCNA.....540
55. *Classis Illiana*
Do Not Accept Confessional Difficulties That Would Allow What the Church Confesses to Be Sin; Officebearers Who Cannot Agree with Our Beliefs Are to Resign or Be Released.....544
56. *Council of Trinity CRC, Fremont, Michigan*
Call Churches to Repent of Affirming Same-Sex Relationships 547
57. *Classis Minnkota*
Require Council of Delegates to Reverse the Process of Members' Taking Exception to the Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA.....550
58. *Classis Minnkota*
Clarify the Usage of Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina 553
59. *Classis Minnkota*
Instruct Classes to Begin the Process of Special Discipline 557
60. *Classis Greater Los Angeles*
Amend Church Order to Define *Gravamina*.....559
61. *Classis Heartland*
Withhold Denominational Funding from Calvin University until Faculty and Staff Adhere to CRCNA Covenantal Standards.....561
62. *Classis Iakota*
Restrict Delegates Who Have Not Signed the Covenant for Officebearers without Exception or Reservation.....563
63. *Classis Iakota*
Prohibit Officebearers Who Have Submitted Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina from Being Delegated to Higher Governing Bodies.....563

64. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Remind and Instruct Churches and Institutions about Rules for Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen....564
65. *Classis Zeeland*
Redistrict the Churches of and Complete the Work of Classis Grand Rapids East....567
66. *Classis Iakota*
Require All Delegates to Synod 2023 to Sign the Covenant for Officebearers....571
67. *Classis Minnkota*
Amend Rules for Synodical Procedure to Suspend Delegates Whose Classes Have Not Adequately Implemented Discipline....571
68. *Council of Moline CRC, Moline, Michigan*
Shepherd Congregations into Another Denomination....573
69. *Council of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta*
Enable Listening to Facilitate Discernment....575
70. *Classis Huron*
Commit to Love, Charity, and Grace in Disagreement; Equip Congregations to Minister Pastorally with LGBTQ+ People....585
71. *Classis Grand Rapids East*
Prevent and Reduce Harm to LGBTQ+ Persons....586
72. *Classis Southeast U.S.*
Depose Council of Neland Avenue CRC; Instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to Oversee the Process....588
73. *Classis Chatham (Deferred from 2021)*
Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Decisions....590
74. *Classis Zeeland (Deferred from 2020)*
Adopt an Additional Supplement to Church Order Articles 82-84....591
75. *Classis Zeeland*
Evaluate Polity to Clarify Relationship of Assemblies....596
76. *Classis Hackensack (Deferred from 2022)*
Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly....597

Communications

1. Classis Minnkota....599
2. Classis Northcentral Iowa....600
3. Classis Holland....601
4. Council of Fellowship CRC, Toronto, Ontario....611

Unprocessed Overtures or Communications

1. Council of New Hope CRC, Lansing, Illinois....613
2. Councils of High River (Alta.) CRC; Covenant CRC, Calgary, Alberta; Nobleford (Alta.) CRC; and Granum (Alta.) CRC....617

Appeals

1. Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan....621
2. Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan....622

PREFACE

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

The *Agenda for Synod 2023* provides a historical snapshot of what God has continued to do in our ministries and denomination as a whole throughout the past year. The reports of the ministries, agencies, and institutions of the CRCNA, along with responses via overtures and communications, provide an important reminder of God's work among us.

Synod 2023 will begin its sessions on Friday, June 9, at 8:15 a.m. in the Calvin Chapel on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Church of the Servant CRC of Grand Rapids will serve as the convening church. Reverend Karen Campbell, pastor of Church of the Servant CRC, will serve as president pro-tem until synod is duly constituted and its officers have been elected. A community-wide Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise will be held Sunday, June 11, 2023, at 5:00 p.m. at Church of the Servant CRC, 3835 Burton Street SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Prior to the convening session, *all* delegates and advisers to synod are encouraged to take time to view the video orientations posted on the synod site—designed as a secure site for delegates and advisers only. The orientation will assist first-time delegates and advisers in understanding the nature of synod and will provide helpful reminders for returning delegates and advisers to synod. In addition, special orientations will be held for advisers to synod, as well as for advisory committee chairs and reporters and their alternates (see the proposed daily schedule in the Announcements section on the following pages for more information).

The congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are requested to remember the synodical assembly in intercessory prayers on the Sundays of June 4 and 11. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will equip the synodical delegates to serve in faith and obedience and will lead the Christian Reformed Church in unity, growth, and renewal.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:1-2: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

May we bring our Lord and Savior joy during Synod 2023 by demonstrating love, compassion, and care for one another. And may we give account for the Spirit's work among us during the joyful and difficult conversations. "The one who calls [us] is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

Zachary J. King
General Secretary of the CRCNA

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I. Welcome

Thank you for serving as a delegate to Synod 2023. Whether you are a returning delegate or you are coming for the first time, we sincerely hope and pray that you will find synod to be a rewarding and blessed experience. We come together as disciples of Jesus Christ, as members of the CRC, and as delegates of the classes that appointed you to serve. Synod is more than just a gathering of church leaders or a governing body. It is a reflection of the church and a time for reflection and celebration of what God is doing in and through the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Most of all, it is a time to discern the Holy Spirit's leading by listening to God through the voices of our brothers and sisters in Christ, in prayer, and through careful application of Scripture. God has richly blessed us, and you have been given a unique privilege to serve him and his kingdom by your engagement at synod.

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

II. Confidentiality of the executive sessions of synod

The Council of Delegates calls the matter of confidentiality to the attention of Synod 2023 and urges that all necessary precautions be taken to prevent violations of confidentiality.

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

III. Social media contact

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

IV. Audio and video recordings of synod

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

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

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

A. Representatives of the media are permitted to make video recordings of synodical proceedings provided they observe the restrictions placed upon them by the synodical news office under the direction of the general secretary of synod.

B. Visitor privileges

   1. Visitors are at liberty to make audio recordings of the public proceedings of synod provided they do so unobtrusively (i.e., in no way inhibiting or disturbing either the proceedings of synod, the synodical delegates, or other persons).

   2. Video recordings are permitted provided the following restrictions are observed:

   a. Video cameras are permitted only at the entrances, not backstage or in the wings.

   b. Auxiliary lighting is not permitted.

   c. Video[recording] is to be done unobtrusively (i.e., in such a way that it in no way inhibits or disturbs either the proceedings of synod, the synodical delegates, or other persons).

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

V. Proposed daily schedule

Although each new assembly is free to alter the schedule, the following general schedule is tentatively in place for Synod 2023:

Thursday check-in

5:30 - 7:00 p.m.	Orientation over supper for advisory committee chairs, reporters, and their alternates
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:00 - 8:30 p.m.	Ministry Fair/Ice Cream Social

Convening Friday

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

Saturday

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

Sunday

Morning worship at area CRC churches

12:15 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.	Lunch
5:00 p.m.	Synodical Service of Prayer and Praise
6:15 - 7:15 p.m.	Supper
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.	Synod workshops

Monday - Wednesday

8:15 - 8:45 a.m.	Opening worship
8:45 - 11:45 a.m.	Plenary session
11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:15 - 5:00 p.m.	Plenary session
5:30 - 6:30 p.m.	Supper
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Plenary session

Thursday

8:15 - 8:45 a.m.	Opening worship
8:45 - 11:45 a.m.	Plenary session
11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:15 - 3:00 p.m.*	Final session

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

DELEGATES TO SYNOD 2023

Alberta North

Minister - Henry P. Kranenburg	Alternate - Richard J. deLange
Elder - Michelle Rooker	Alternate - Art C. van Loo
Deacon - Michael A. Werkman	Alternate - Coni Rozema
Other - Peter Rockhold	Alternate - Ryan T. Pedde

Alberta South/Saskatchewan

Minister - Paul J. Droogers	Alternate - David J. Swinney
Elder - Ryan S. Poelman	Alternate - Judy Heim
Deacon - Joshua Johnson	Alternate -
Other - Adrian R. de Lange	Alternate - Peggy N. Dekens

Arizona

Minister - Ernesto J. Hernandez	Alternate -
Elder - Philip G. Fritschle	Alternate - Jeffrey A. Dykema
Deacon - Jarrad S. McDaniel	Alternate -
Other - Andrew W. Littleton	Alternate - Rodney J. Hugen

Atlantic Northeast

Minister - Matthew D. Burns	Alternate - Michael R. Saville
Elder - Clyde H. Williams	Alternate -
Deacon - Dan L. Wierenga	Alternate -
Other - Willard H. Barham	Alternate - Joel D. Vande Werken

B.C. North-West

Minister - Kevin J. VanderVeen	Alternate - Paul D. DeWeerd
Elder - Daniel E. Schultz	Alternate - Evelyn M. Kersbergen
Deacon - Robin de Haan	Alternate - Elizabeth A. Gysbers
Other - Willem J. Delleman	Alternate - Andrew E. Beunk

B.C. South-East

Minister - Erik M. DeLange	Alternate - Michael J. Vander Laan
Elder - Sonya J. Grypma	Alternate - Lee Hollaar
Deacon - Katelyn Van Hove	Alternate -
Other - Jason D. Crossen	Alternate - Christopher W. deWinter

California South

Minister - John Harold Caicedo	Alternate - Donald C. Porter
Elder - John H. Jansen	Alternate -
Deacon - Serene Rao	Alternate -
Other - Weichuan C. Wang	Alternate - Rudy Gonzalez

Central California

Minister - Patrick D. Anthony	Alternate - Kyle Brooks
Elder - Titus E. Davis	Alternate - Randall W. Postmus
Deacon - Jayne E. McClurg	Alternate - Andrea V. Kamper
Other - David E. Vander Meulen	Alternate - Bruce A. Persenaire

Central Plains

Minister - Brian L. Ochsner	Alternate - Jianlou Xu
Elder - Ivan R. Mulder	Alternate - Lee S. Talma
Deacon - Caleb C. Gunsaulus	Alternate - Aaron J. Sandbulte
Other - Brad Bierma	Alternate - Aaron J. Gunsaulus

Chicago South

Minister - Neil P. Jasperse	Alternate - Tsung-Lin Bosco Jen
Elder - Derk A. Deckinga Jr.	Alternate - Debra J. Kamp
Deacon - James C. Bolhuis	Alternate - Elizabeth Koning
Other - Daniel J. Roeda	Alternate - Timothy S. Bossenbroek

Columbia

Minister - Joel J. Sheeres	Alternate - Frank Meneses
Elder - Jeffrey A. Cutter	Alternate - Brent M. Osborn
Deacon - Doug Vande Griend	Alternate - Virgil L. Michael
Other - D. Vance Hays	Alternate - Peter B. Armstrong

Eastern Canada

Minister - Daniel A. Meinema	Alternate - Charles G. Lawson
Elder - Sonya Boersma	Alternate - Colin Conrad
Deacon - Kathleen M. Dixon	Alternate - Laura A. Snippe
Other - Sidney Ypma	Alternate - Aaron M. Thompson

Georgetown

Minister - Nate Meldrim	Alternate - Gerald A. Koning
Elder - Herb Kraker	Alternate - Edward A. Steenbergen
Deacon - Dan Winiarski	Alternate - Kathy L. Jelsema
Other - David C. Ten Clay	Alternate - Cory J. Nederveld

Grand Rapids East

Minister - Michael F. Abma	Alternate - Karen Campbell
Elder - Patricia Borgdorff	Alternate - Michael J. Van Denend
Deacon - Kathy L. DeMey	Alternate - Chris Snyder
Other - Elizabeth A. Vander Haagen	Alternate -

Grand Rapids North

Minister - Matthew A. Pearce	Alternate - Nathaniel A. Schmidt
Elder - Bryan R. Dam	Alternate - Keri M. Laporte-Montero
Deacon - Todd A. Ritzema	Alternate - Jaci Kerkstra
Other - Heather Stroobosscher	Alternate - William B. Sneller

Grand Rapids South

Minister - Robert L. Boersma	Alternate - Willem de Vries
Elder - Danny L. Buist	Alternate - Perrin Rynders
Deacon - Richard S. Gerndt	Alternate -
Other - David A. Struyk	Alternate - Edward C. Visser

Grandville

Minister - Brandon L. Haan	Alternate - Joseph VandenAkker
Elder - Steve J. Longstreet	Alternate - Ruth M. Carr
Deacon - James P. Heyboer	Alternate - Brad Diekema
Other - Thomas S. VanderPloeg	Alternate - Cedric W. Parsels

Greater Los Angeles

Minister - Matthew B. Ford	Alternate - Fernando Valencia
Elder - Jim DenOuden	Alternate -
Deacon - Lucinda L. Fleming	Alternate - John M. Doran
Other - Ken Kyunghun Hong	Alternate - Robert D. Golding

Hackensack

Minister - Edward W. Coleman	Alternate - Paul A. Van Dyken
Elder - David J. Apol	Alternate - Karen J. Walker
Deacon - Efren S. Echipare	Alternate - Daryl Thornwall
Other - Gabriel Wang-Herrera	Alternate - Stephen F. Jefferson

Hamilton

Minister - Michael W. Bootsma	Alternate - Kenneth F. Benjamins
Elder - Peter Bulthuis	Alternate - Herb Grootenboer
Deacon - Eric G. Tisch	Alternate -
Other - Cara L. DeHaan	Alternate - Joel Bootsma

Hanmi

Minister - Sung H. Hur	Alternate -
Elder -	Alternate -
Deacon -	Alternate -
Other - Jeong Ha Chun	Alternate -

Heartland

Minister - Jesse L. Walhof	Alternate - Benjamin E. Wiersma
Elder - Michael V. Krommendyk	Alternate - Jeff J. Heerspink
Deacon - Dan Brunst	Alternate -
Other - John C. Klompien	Alternate - Brian R. Dunn

Holland

Minister - Chad M. Steenwyk	Alternate - Stephen M. Hasper
Elder - Jodi L. Gillmore	Alternate - Keith Lubbers
Deacon - Albertena P. Praamsma	Alternate -
Other - Darren C. Kornelis	Alternate - Benjamin J. Petroelje

Hudson

Minister - Mary B. Stegink	Alternate - Timothy J. McHugh
Elder - Roy G. Heerema	Alternate -
Deacon –	Alternate -
Other -	Alternate -

Huron

Minister - Henry W. Meinen	Alternate - Amanda C. Bakale
Elder - Arnold D. Bosman	Alternate - Isaac Bokma
Deacon - Bernard H. De Jonge	Alternate -
Other - Victor S. Laarman	Alternate - Ray Vander Kooij

Iakota

Minister - Kurt A. Monroe	Alternate - Drew Hoekema
Elder - Stan L. Wynia	Alternate - Duane H. Bajema
Deacon - Jevon K. Groenewold	Alternate - David VanderTuin
Other - Matthew A. Haan	Alternate - Wayne C. Klein

Illiana

Minister - William R. Sytsma	Alternate - Joshua Christoffels
Elder - Joshua D. Dykstra	Alternate - Dan J. Aardsma
Deacon - Timothy C. Turner	Alternate - Gary L. Siegersma
Other - Blake I. Campbell	Alternate - Jeffrey R. Hale

Kalamazoo

Minister - Derek M. Zeyl	Alternate - Maria L. Bowater
Elder - Craig H. Lubben	Alternate - Jack G. Kuipers
Deacon -	Alternate -
Other - Michael D. Koetje	Alternate -

Ko-Am

Minister - Edward W. Yoon	Alternate - Alternate -
Elder -	Alternate -
Deacon - Jenny Yoon	Alternate -
Other - Kyung Ho Park	

Lake Erie

Minister - Matthew T. Ackerman	Alternate -
Elder - Marilyn F. McLaughlin	Alternate -
Deacon - Mary B. Smith	Alternate -
Other - Nathan J. Groenewold	Alternate -

Lake Superior

Minister - Aaron Greydanus	Alternate - David S. Huizenga
Elder - Gaye A. Hanson	Alternate - Rob R. Braun
Deacon –	Alternate -
Other - Steven A. Zwart	Alternate - David M. Dick

Minnkota

Minister - Scott M. Muilenburg	Alternate - C. James den Dulk
Elder - Donley G. Walhof	Alternate - Larry M. Van Otterloo
Deacon - Nick E. Sjaarda	Alternate - Mitchel W. Slagter
Other - Chad E. Werkhoven	Alternate - John A. Bothof

Muskegon

Minister - Drew K. Sweetman	Alternate - Arthur J. Van Wolde
Elder - Pat J. Cavanaugh	Alternate - Ronald L. Folkema
Deacon - Heidi J. Sytsema	Alternate -
Other - Timothy D. Blackmon	Alternate - Richard A. Britton III

Niagara

Minister - M. Jeff Klingenberg	Alternate - Robert J. Loerts
Elder - Eleanor Sarkany	Alternate -
Deacon - Henrietta Hunse	Alternate -
Other - Steven J. deBoer	Alternate - William F. Hoogland

North Cascades

Minister - Bryan A. Dick	Alternate - Ben E. deRegt
Elder - Don Korthuis	Alternate - Mark L. Wagenaar
Deacon - Drake D. Likkel	Alternate - Rob H. Hilverda
Other - Michael T. Jager	Alternate -

Northcentral Iowa

Minister - Randall C. Raak	Alternate - Russell W. Boersma
Elder - Duane C. Vanderploeg	Alternate -
Deacon -	Alternate -
Other - Herbert W. Schreur	Alternate - Jason T. Semans

Northern Illinois

Minister - Kyle E. Haack	Alternate - Daniel L. Jongsma
Elder - Craig E. Buma	Alternate -
Deacon - Timothy J. Wurpts	Alternate -
Other - John L. Hoekwater	Alternate - Daniel L. Jongsma

Northern Michigan

Minister - Todd F. Kuperus	Alternate - Steven J. Datema
Elder - Kenneth E. English	Alternate - Dennis J. Miller
Deacon -	Alternate -
Other - John P. Kostelyk	Alternate - Dennis J. Miller

Ontario Southwest

Minister - Rafik Kamel	Alternate -
Elder - Daniel F. Meyers	Alternate - Boreas B. Meiboom
Deacon - John Klein-Geltink	Alternate -
Other - Derek Ellens	Alternate - Ralph S. Wigboldus

Pacific Northwest

Minister - Joshua S. Lee	Alternate - Douglas E. Fakkema
Elder - Darrel R. Lagerwey	Alternate -
Deacon - In O. Yang	Alternate -
Other - John C. Knoester	Alternate - Vincent C. Stout

Quinte

Minister - Ryan W. Braam	Alternate - Bruce G. Adema
Elder - Bill Wybenga	Alternate -
Deacon - Nellie Westerman	Alternate -
Other - Rita S. Klein-Geltink	Alternate - Joshua C. Tuininga

Red Mesa

Minister - Stanley W. Jim	Alternate - Caleb N. Dickson
Elder - Francis B. Nelson	Alternate - Darleen Litson
Deacon - Julia A. Alonzo	Alternate -
Other - Evelyn H. Bennally	Alternate - Sean Kass

Rocky Mountain

Minister - Mark A. Quist	Alternate - Greg R. Dyk
Elder - Mary L. Gallegos	Alternate -
Deacon -	Alternate -
Other - Christian Sebastia	Alternate - William H. Jensen

Southeast U.S.

Minister - Scott A. Vander Ploeg	Alternate -
Elder - James Dykstra	Alternate - John S. Maatman
Deacon - Jeffrey Huntley	Alternate - Irma Rodriguez
Other - Christopher N. Cassis	Alternate -

Thornapple Valley

Minister - David J. Bosscher	Alternate -
Elder - Ren Tubergen	Alternate - Daniel G. Bos
Deacon - Carroll L. Burgess	Alternate -
Other - Paul R. DeVries	Alternate -

Toronto

Minister - Richard A. Bodini	Alternate - David A. Salverda
Elder - Sandra V. Williams	Alternate - Jake Veenstra
Deacon - Julius J. Williams	Alternate -
Other - Maarthen Reinders	Alternate -

Wisconsin

Minister - Jason S. Ruis	Alternate - Josh Van Engen
Elder - Floyd Leo	Alternate - Benjamin Verhulst
Deacon - Deborah Fennema	Alternate - Roshelle Doornbos
Other - Young-Kwang Kim	Alternate - Christopher J. Ganski

Yellowstone

Minister - Timothy A. Kuperus	Alternate - Steve Bussis
Elder - David K. Hoekema	Alternate - Clifton G. Sanders
Deacon - Elsa C. Vander Neut	Alternate -
Other - Clair Vander Neut	Alternate - Clifton G. Sanders

Zeeland

Minister - Aaron J. Vriesman	Alternate - Stephen F. Terpstra
Elder - Chuck DeVries	Alternate - Robert W. Brower
Deacon - Travis Datema	Alternate -
Other - Lloyd H. Hemstreet	Alternate - Tyler J. Wagenmaker

COUNCIL OF DELEGATES

The Council of Delegates (COD) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) began its service of interim governance on behalf of the CRC's annual synods after being appointed by Synod 2017. COD delegates represent the CRC's forty-nine classes. There are also currently six at-large members. The ministry matters addressed by the COD include governance matters regarding ReFrame Ministries and Resonate Global Mission, along with matters concerning the congregational ministries of the CRCNA.

The COD presents the following report as a summary of its work in the interim between the synods of 2022 and 2023.

I. Introduction

A. *Governing on behalf of synod*

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

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

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

[1] Bradshaw, P., R. Hayday, R. Armstrong, "Non-profit Governance Models: Problems and Prospects," paper originally presented at ARNOVA Conference, Seattle, Washington, 1998.

> The COD functions with a constituent-representative model of policy governance. Policy governance suggests a board's role is to see that the organization achieves what it should, avoiding the unacceptable (via the concept of limitations), all on behalf of its constituents. [Read more about the constituent-representative model in the COD Governance Handbook at crcna.org; search "COD Governance Handbook."]
>
> In other words, ecclesiastical authority begins with congregations and is delegated to classis and then to synod. Church Order Article 27-a is balanced by Article 27-b: "The classis has the same authority over the council as the synod has over the classis"—emphasizing the authority of the broader assemblies, which are made up of officebearers who represent Christ's authority in those assemblies as they make decisions for the broader church. The role of officebearers in each of these assemblies is significant in Church Order Article 1-a: "The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that officebearers are 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Eph. 4:12), and to do so 'in a fitting and orderly way' (1 Cor. 14:40), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities."
>
> As an ecclesiastical governance entity serving in the interim of synod, the COD provides governance by means of the authority delegated to it by synod and with its synodically elected membership representing classes or serving in at-large capacities.
>
> (COD Governance Handbook, section 1.1: Governance)

The mandate and functions of the Council of Delegates as adopted by synod are outlined in the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook. (Note that the COD Governance Handbook is undergoing a rewrite to reflect the structural changes adopted by Synod 2022. This revised handbook will be presented in the COD Supplement report to synod, but will not go into effect until adopted by synod.)

COD members also serve as the directors of the CRCNA Canada Ministry Board, the CRCNA U.S. Ministry Board, the ReFrame Canada Ministry Board, and the ReFrame U.S. Ministry Board. (Please note that, in order to promote ministry-centered language and culture, the term "Ministry Board" replaces the term "Corporation," used previously in COD reports.) These legal entities in Canada and the United States interact via joint ministry agreements to provide organizational governance to ReFrame and CRCNA ministries that are shared across the national borders. (In fall 2019 the directors of the CRCNA and BTGMI Canada Ministry Boards alerted the COD to organizational implications of charitable laws in Canada, which necessitated immediate interim action by the COD to comply with the Canada Revenue Agency [CRA]. In 2022 synod adopted these new structures.)

The Council of Delegates met three times since May 2022—in regular meetings in October 2022 and February 2023 as well as in a special meeting in November 2022. A regular meeting is scheduled for May 2023, an account of which will come via the COD Supplement report.

The COD's agenda items are first reviewed by one of five committees: Congregational Ministries; Global Missions Ministries; Mercy and Justice Ministries; Ministry Plan, Communication, and Synodical Services; and Support Services. These committees hear and study reports regarding the mission, vision, and values of our various ministries; the ways our ministries are integrated into and evaluated according to a strategic ministry plan; and the ways in which the COD responds both to synod and constituents. Committees present their recommendations to the full COD for information and any required action. In addition, the COD is responsible for overseeing the work of the general secretary of the CRCNA.

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

The COD, as synod's agent, is grateful for the opportunity to serve the entire church.

B. Tasks carried out on behalf of synod

A significant part of the COD's work over the past year reflects the *continued* response to synodical instructions to the COD or to the general secretary in conjunction with the COD. An outline of the various instructions, organized by ministry-priority area, is provided in the following.

1. Faith formation

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

2. Global mission

Status of Resonate Global Mission (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 930-31): "That synod take note that the COD will review the status of Resonate Global Mission with a view to possible modification by a future synod in order to make its status equivalent to that of World Renew and ReFrame Ministries, and that the purpose of such a review is to ensure internal ministry presence on the Ministries Leadership Council and to foster ministry integration (COD Supplement 2021, section I, G and Appendix A)." (See section II, B, 8.)

3. Gospel proclamation and worship

Ask questions of all candidates regarding race and justice (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 944): "That synod instruct the COD to encourage classes to ask questions of all candidates for ministry regarding their commitment to preach a biblical and Reformed perspective on race and justice. (See section II, A, 13.)

4. Mercy and justice

Diversity Report (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 829): "The [general secretary] will continue to request an annual diversity report from each agency and ministry and will include a summary of these reports in the report to the [COD] each February." (See sections II, A, 3 & 4)

Addressing abuse of power (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 794-99)—**Monitoring by the COD**: "That synod mandate the Council of Delegates to ensure implementation by . . . monitoring progress at each meeting of the COD . . . making necessary adjustments in specific plans . . . and reporting to synod. . . ." (See section II, A, 10, c.)

Implementation of Code of Conduct (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633): "That the COD, on behalf of synod, adopt the proposed Code of Conduct report . . . and instruct the COD to devise a plan for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches per the instruction of Synod 2019." (See section II, A, 10, b.)

Safe Church reporting (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 935): "That synod ask the Council of Delegates to instruct Safe Church Ministry to carry on their task of gathering data and reporting the current number of churches and classes with Safe Church teams and coordinators." (See the Safe Church report, section III.)

5. Servant leadership

Church planting in both the RCA and CRC denominations (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 840): "That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to review the implications of the church planting activities in Classis Arizona and recommend any needed Church Order changes to help church plants find expression in both denominations (RCA/CRC)." (See section II, A, 12, b.)

Classis Renewal Advisory Team (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 856): "That synod receive the Classis Ministry Plans report as a fulfillment of the request from Synod 2018 and instruct the COD to request that the Classis Renewal Advisory Team report to Synod 2023 regarding (1) new resources being developed for creating or refining a classis ministry plan and (2) an update on which classes have a ministry plan, since many are currently in process (2020, II, A, 13; Appendix D)." (See section II, B, 11.)

6. Other areas

Evaluation and prioritization (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 455): "That synod instruct the Council of Delegates and the [general secretary] to continue the

important work of evaluation and prioritization by working together to implement a robust evaluation strategy whereby in a five-year cycle all agencies and ministries will be continually evaluated through the framework of the five ministry priorities." (See section II, B, 5.)

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

Fill vacancy on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 842): "That synod, by way of exception, ask the Council of Delegates to appoint a new member at the October meeting to fill the vacancy on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee." (See section II, A, 6.)

Review of Ministry Shares Reimagined (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 846-47): "That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to examine congregational responses to Ministry Shares Reimagined, with particular attention to questions such as the following:

- Why are ministry share contributions declining, especially in the U.S.?
- How are churches contributing in alternate ways?
- What other ministry priorities are congregations funding?
- What should we be doing going forward?" (See section II, C, 3.)

Church Order Review Task Force (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849): "That synod direct the COD to form a task force to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their supplements in conversation with Pastor Church Resources and relevant voices, and to bring an interim report to Synod 2023 through the COD and a final report to Synod 2024." (See section II, A, 12, c.)

Legal entity to house the Office of General Secretary (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 929): "That synod take the following actions with respect to the formation of a separate legal entity to house the ecclesiastical office (to be known as the Office of General Secretary) of the CRCNA:

1) Endorse the formation of this separate legal entity, note the work that has been done on the certificate of incorporation and bylaws of what has tentatively been called the "Worldwide Christian Reformed Church," and receive the accompanying "Christian Reformed Church Ecclesial and Ministry Organizational Views" document as background regarding the new corporation.

2) Instruct the Council of Delegates executive committee to review the proposed articles of incorporation and bylaws for this new ecclesiastical corporation and make the necessary changes to bring the articles of incorporation and bylaws into harmony with each other as well as

with the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook, and to consider a new name for the ecclesiastical corporation, before presenting these documents for final approval by the Council of Delegates." (See section II, A, 8, a.)

Chief administrative officer (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 930): "That synod grant the COD authority to act on the appointment of a chief administrative officer should a nominee be identified and presented to the COD prior to Synod 2023 (COD Supplement 2022, section I, C, 3)." (See section II, A, 8, b.)

Appoint senior level staff within the Office of General Secretary (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 930): "That synod, upon adoption of the new structure as proposed in the Structure and Leadership Task Force report and adoption of a new ecclesiastical corporation, grant the COD authority to appoint all senior level staff within the Office of General Secretary (including the chief administrative officer, but excluding the General Secretary) going forward (COD Supplement 2022, section I, C, 6)." (See section II, A, 8, b.)

C. COD membership

The members of the Council of Delegates from the classes include Matthew T. Ackerman (Lake Erie), Jesus Bayona (Southeast U.S.), Rachel Bouwkamp (Grandville), Wayne Brower (Holland), Steve Bussis (Yellowstone), Thomas Byma (Greater Los Angeles), J. Harold Caicedo (California South), Paula Coldagelli (Wisconsin), Wendy de Jong (Niagara), Andy de Ruyter (B.C. North-West), Kyle J. Dieleman (Chicago South), Jeanne Engelhard (Grand Rapids East), Sherry Fakkema (Pacific Northwest), Jill Feikema (Illiana), Roy G. Heerema (Hudson), Sheila E. Holmes (Hackensack), Paul K. Im (Hanmi), Michael Irshad (Toronto), Casey Jen (Thornapple Valley), Jeanne Kallemeyn (Georgetown), Debbie Karambowich (Alberta South/Saskatchewan), Jonathan J. Kim (Ko-Am), Michael D. Koetje (Kalamazoo), William T. Koopmans (Hamilton), Jose Antonio (Tony) Lara (Arizona), John R. Lee (Iakota), Jessica Maddox (Grand Rapids South), Daudi Mutisya Mbuta (Grand Rapids North), Peter Meerveld (Huron), Daniel A. Meinema (Eastern Canada), Amy Nydam (Alberta North), Herbert W. Schreur (Northcentral Iowa), Anthony T. Selvaggio (Atlantic Northeast), Arnie J. Stolte (Northern Illinois), Drew Sweetman (Muskegon), Michael L. Ten Haken (Lake Superior), Rob J. Toornstra (Columbia), Nathaniel E. Van Denend (Ontario Southwest), Arie Vander Zouwen (North Cascades), Mark VanDyke (Central California), Tyler J. Wagenmaker (Zeeland), Frederick Wind (Quinte), and Thomas R. Wolthuis (Central Plains).

The following persons are serving as *interim* delegates until Synod 2023 can act on their appointments (presented in section I, D below): Tabitha D. Manuelito (Red Mesa), Loren Veldhuizen (Heartland), and Jim Winkel (Northern Michigan).

The delegate positions for Classes B.C. South-East, Minnkota, and Rocky Mountain are currently vacant due to the resignations of Bev Bandstra

(B.C. South-East), effective prior to the February meeting of the COD, and of Roger W. Sparks (Minnkota) and Kelly L. Vander Woude (Rocky Mountain), both effective prior to the May COD meeting. The COD anticipates presenting nominations to fill the recent vacancies by way of the COD Supplement report to synod. Kelli Berkner (Canada at-large) also resigned, effective prior to the May COD meeting. The CRCNA Canada Ministry Board is determining whether or not that at-large position is still required. Frederick Wind (Quinte) has indicated his desire to conclude service at the end of his second year in June. A nominee for the Classis Quinte position is expected by way of the COD Supplement report to synod.

Six at-large members currently serve the COD. They include Henry Eygenraam, Greta Luimes, Melissa Van Dyk, Roberta Vriesema, and Ralph S. Wigboldus in Canada, and Elsa Fennema in the U.S.

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

In addition, guest representatives from three denominational boards attend the meetings of the COD and serve on a COD committee: Robert Drenten, Charles Veenstra, and Brian Verheul from the Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees; Richard P. Mast from the Calvin University Board of Trustees; and Chuck Adams and Andrew Geisterfer from the World Renew Board of Delegates. These nonvoting COD guests are given privilege of the floor during committee and plenary meetings.

The following serve as officers of the COD and of the respective ministry boards for the 2022-2023 term:

1. COD officers: Andy de Ruyter, chair; Michael L. Ten Haken, vice chair; John R. Lee, secretary; Greta Luimes, treasurer.
2. Ministry board officers
    a. CRCNA Canada Ministry Board: Andy de Ruyter, president; A. Henry Eygenraam, vice president; Greta Luimes, treasurer. Bev Bandstra served as secretary until her resignation in February.
    b. CRCNA U.S. Ministry Board: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Sheila E. Holmes, vice president; John R. Lee, secretary; Daudi Mutisya Mbuta, treasurer.
    c. ReFrame Ministries Canada Ministry Board: Andy de Ruyter, president; A. Henry Eygenraam, vice president; Greta Luimes, treasurer. Bev Bandstra served as secretary until her resignation in February.
    d. ReFrame Ministries U.S. Ministry Board: Michael L. Ten Haken, president; Sheila E. Holmes, vice president; John R. Lee, secretary; Daudi Mutisya Mbuta, treasurer.

3. Executive Committee: Andy de Ruyter, chair; Jill Feikema; Sheila E. Holmes; John R. Lee; Greta Luimes; Michael L. Ten Haken; and Melissa Van Dyk. Zachary J. King serves ex officio. Bev Bandstra served until her resignation in February.

D. COD nominations

Prior to the fall meeting of the Council of Delegates, the COD received the resignations of Lora Copley (Red Mesa), Bruce De Kam (Northern Michigan), and Mark Vandezande (Heartland). The COD appointed the following persons as interim delegates in October 2022 and February 2023 and recommends these interim members to synod for appointment to the specific terms as indicated:

Classis Heartland

(First term will conclude June 30, 2025, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

Loren Veldhuizen is a member of Calvary CRC in Orange City, Iowa. In his retirement he volunteers as a regional representative for Calvin Theological Seminary and Barnabas Foundation. He has previously served as an elder and deacon in his church, as a synodical delegate (three times, including as clerk of synod), and has served on the Judicial Code Committee and the Board of Trustees for the CRCNA. He also served on the board of trustees of Calvin Theological Seminary and on the Barnabas Foundation board (serving as president from 2015-2018). Currently he serves on the synodical Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force, reporting to Synod 2023.

Classis Northern Michigan

(First term will conclude June 30, 2025, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

Jim Winkel is a member of Vogel Center CRC in McBain, Michigan. He is employed as an emergency medical technician and is retired from dairy farming. He has served as a deacon and elder, and has served as chair of the Vogel Center CRC council, its vision team, and its pastor-search committee.

Classis Red Mesa

(First term will conclude June 30, 2023, and the nominee will be eligible for reappointment to a second term.)

Tabitha D. Manuelito, a member of First Navajo CRC in Tohatchi, New Mexico, is a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act specialist. She has experience serving as treasurer of her local council and is currently a member of the Rehoboth Christian School board, for which she also serves on the personnel committee.

The COD Nominating Services Committee works from an adopted rotation of concluding terms for the current COD membership—ideally eight or nine members conclude their term of service with the board each year to provide continuity.

Concluding service to the Council of Delegates in June 2023 are the following members:

Classis	*Member*
Arizona	Tony Lara
B.C. North-West	Andy de Ruyter
California South	Harold Caicedo
Grand Rapids North	Daudi Mbuta
Hackensack	Sheila Holmes
Northern Illinois	Arnie Stolte
U.S. at-large	Elsa Fennema

Wendy de Jong (Niagara) and Jeanne Engelhard (Grand Rapids East) are completing a first term on the COD and have decided not to serve a second term on the COD.

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

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

Classis B.C. North-West

Hyung-Jun Kim serves as the associate pastor at New Westminster CRC in Burnaby, British Columbia. A graduate of the University of Toronto, Regent College, and Calvin Theological Seminary, he served as an ethnic adviser to Synod 2022. In this work for the local church he has been actively engaged with international students, provided leadership to the worship team, and has served seven years on the council.

Classis California South

H. John Jansen, a member of CrossPoint CRC in Chino, California, has a degree in electrical engineering and is employed as a district application engineer for Eaton Corporation. He previously served as an elder and as president of the board of trustees of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in New York; and he served three terms as an elder at Community CRC in Cold Springs, New York, including attendance at classis meetings and service as a church visitor. He also served on the Ontario (Calif.) Christian School Board. He helped start and continues to serve on the Providence Christian College board of trustees, including three years as board president. He currently is a member of the board's nominating committee, president search committee, and finance committee. He has served as clerk and president of CrossPoint CRC's council and on the search committee for a new pastor.

Classis Grand Rapids North

Ronald L. Karelse, a member of Riverside CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a retired owner and manager of a funeral service organization in Grand Rapids (for over 50 years). He was a delegate to Synod 2022, serving on the Church Order Advisory Committee. Previously he served as president

of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association, on various committees of the National Funeral Directors Association, and on area civic club boards. He has been an active member of his church, serving as a young couples leader, a Sunday school and catechism leader, and as a deacon (several terms). He presently serves as an elder and as a Bible study and small group leader.

Classis Hackensack

Joyce G. Jackson is a member of Madison Avenue CRC in Paterson, New Jersey. Trained in early childhood education, as a parent educator, and in social work, she is retired but continues as a part-time administrator in a preschool with the Paterson Board of Education. She has previously served as an advisory committee member for Worship Ministries and Race Relations. She has also served as elder at Madison Avenue CRC.

Classis Niagara

Janet deVries is a member of Covenant CRC in St. Catharines, Ontario. A fundraising professional, she is a principal of Crossroads Consulting. She served on the committee for closure of nearby Maranatha CRC and currently serves on the facility renewal team at her church. In addition, she has served on the Covenant CRC council for seven years (four years as chair) and on the church's governance and human resources committees.

Classis Northern Illinois

Bonnie Zigterman, a member of Lombard (Ill.) CRC, now retired, earned a law degree from the University of Illinois and practiced law until 1986, after which time she served as an assistant state's attorney in Sangamon County (Ill.), working primarily in the juvenile division. She has previously served on the boards of Timothy Christian Schools, Chicago Christian Counseling Center, CRWRC, Ugandan Orphanage Relief Fund, and Love Christian Clearinghouse. She has served as a deacon and elder in her local church (including service as president in each role), as chair of the congregation's COVID response team, and as a delegate to Synod 2022.

U.S. at-large

Christian Sebastia is a third-generation pastor serving at Carismah CRC in Katy, Texas (an emerging church); his membership is held by New Life CRC in Spring, Texas. He has helped to plant several emerging congregations in Texas. He currently is a member of Consejo Latino and the Classis Rocky Mountain Plantation Team, and he previously served as an adviser to Worship Ministries.

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

Classis	*Member*
Grandville	Rachel Bouwkamp
Greater Los Angeles	Thomas Byma
Illiana	Jill Feikema
Ko-Am	Jonathan J. Kim

Lake Superior	Michael Ten Haken
Muskegon	Drew Sweetman
Ontario Southwest	Nathaniel (Nate) Van Denend
Canada at-large	Melissa Van Dyk

E. Salary disclosure

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

Job level	*# of positions*	*# below target*	*# at target*
E1	1	1	0
E2	4	4	0
E3	7	7	0

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

2022-2023 Salary Grade and Range Structure

	U.S. Range		*Canadian Range*	
Level	*Minimum*	*Target*	*Minimum*	*Target*
E1	$158,538	$198,172		
E2	$143,069	$178,836	$137,632	$172,040
E3	$121,244	$151,556	$120,602	$150,753
H	$102,750	$128,437	$103,370	$129,212
I	$87,076	$108,845	$88,601	$110,751
J	$73,793	$92,241	$75,941	$94,926
K	$62,537	$78,171	$65,090	$81,363
L	$52,997	$66,246	$55,790	$69,738
M	$44,913	$56,141		
N	$38,062	$47,577		

II. Activities of the COD

A. Polity matters

1. Interim appointments

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

Classis	*Member*	*Alternate*	*Term*
Alberta South/ Saskatchewan	Rev. David J. Swinney		2024(1)
Central Plains	Rev. Brad Bierma		2024(2)
Hamilton	Rev. Michael W. Bootsma	Rev. Doug Nieuwstraten	2025(1)
Heartland	Rev. Phillip T. Westra	Rev. Brian M. Hofman	2024(1)
Kalamazoo	Rev. Hendrick De Vries	Rev. Daniel S. Sarkipato	2023(1)

Classis	*Member*	*Alternate*	*Term*
Rocky Mountain	Rev. Roger De Young	Rev. John Terpstra	2025(2)
Southeast U.S.	Rev. Gerrit Besteman	Rev. Scott A. Vander Ploeg	2025(2)

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

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

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

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

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

Data for the board diversity report (with regard to gender and ethnic diversity) for the 2022-2023 year has been received from the denominational boards (Council of Delegates, Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin University, and World Renew). In addition, data from the World Renew Joint Ministry Council (JMC) is included along with data from the World Renew Board of Delegates. *Note:* The JMC is elected from the membership of the World Renew Board of Delegates.

There are presently 154 denominationally appointed board members (not including the JMC count), and the JMC, elected from the World Renew Board of Delegates, has 15 members. So, among a total of 169 members, 63 (37%) are women, and 29 (17%) are people of color. The data received from the boards for the 2022-2023 board term reflects an *increase* of 6 percent in women delegates, while the percentage of people of color on our denominational boards is *unchanged* as compared to the 2021-2022 reporting year.

The diversity on individual denominational boards is also reported in light of synod's goal of having *at least 25 percent ethnic minority membership*. The board membership of Calvin Theological Seminary is 24 percent ethnic minority; Calvin University, 16 percent; World Renew (JMC), 20 percent; and the COD, 18 percent.

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

At the instruction of Synod 2013, each CRC agency and ministry, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Calvin University are asked to submit to the general secretary, as part of their strategic plan, diversity goals and timelines in their leadership, administrative, and regional ministry teams. This annual report was received by the general secretary, and the compliance and progress were reported to the Council of Delegates in February.

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

5. Advisers to Synod 2023

a. Young adult representatives

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

The COD has appointed the following persons to serve as young adult representatives to synod (* indicates service in this capacity in 2022). We express gratitude for their commitment and gracious willingness to serve the denomination in this way.

Daniel Choi*
Samantha Brinkman
Myiah Klinger
Luke Nieuwendorp
Gavin Schaefer
Samantha Sebastia Pina
Ana Timmer

b. Ethnic advisers

Determination of the need for the appointment of ethnic advisers to synod is based on a rolling three-year average (greater than 25) of ethnically diverse delegates appointed to synod. Due to a decrease in the diversity of synod delegates, the Council of Delegates appointed the following as ethnic advisers to Synod 2023 (* indicates service in this capacity in 2022): Hyung Jun Kim*, Darlene Silversmith*, William Krahnke, and Catherine Chan. One other ethnic adviser withdrew. We are grateful for the willingness of these advisers to offer their unique perspectives to the issues before synod.

6. Fill vacancy on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee

In October the COD appointed Jake Bentum to serve a modified first term on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, effective November 1, 2022, through July 1, 2025, with eligibility for reappointment to a subsequent term.

7. Convening church of Synod 2024

The COD recommends that synod accept the invitation of Lee Street CRC in Wyoming, Michigan, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2024, to be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the campus of Calvin University.

> *Ground:* Lee Street's multicultural focus with both English and Spanish services, as well as their partnerships with local schools and other ministries, offer synod the opportunity to celebrate diversity and outreach in the CRC.

8. Denominational structure and senior leadership

The Council of Delegates and its ministry boards continued work to respond to structure and leadership matters made evident in 2019 with regard to compliance to the Canada Revenue Agency. The Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report, adopted by the COD and Synod 2022, provides background to the following:

a. Legal entity to house the Office of General Secretary

The chief administrative officer (CAO) is working on revising/updating corporation articles and bylaws as well as the COD Governance Handbook. An updated status on this will be included in the COD Supplement report to synod.

b. Senior leadership transition

A new chief administrative officer, Shirley DeVries, was appointed by the COD in November. Shirley began her work on January 3, 2023. Simultaneously a new director of synodical services, Rev. Scott DeVries, was appointed and also began on January 3, 2023. In February the CRCNA U.S. Ministry Board decided to move forward in creating a full-time position for a director of ministry operations in the U.S.

9. Judicial Code Committee

The Judicial Code Committee (JCC) hears appeals from a decision made by a council, a classis, or an agency of the Christian Reformed Church if it is alleged that an action violates the Church Order or the agency's mandate. The procedures followed by the Judicial Code Committee are set forth in Church Order Supplement, Article 30-c. The committee's members from both Canada and the United States include people with legal expertise, clergy, and nonclergy.

a. Membership

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

John Koot and Doug Vande Griend are completing a second term in 2023 and are not eligible for reappointment. It is recommended that synod express gratitude for their years of service to the denomination.

The COD Nominating Services Committee, on behalf of the COD, has solicited nominees for the anticipated vacancies of two persons trained in law. The COD anticipates presenting these nominations by way of the COD Supplement report.

b. Reappointments to second term

The Council of Delegates recommends the following JCC members for reappointment to a second term of three years: Bomsu Kim and Deloris Carter.

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

a. Dignity Team

The Abuse of Power Ad Hoc Committee report, adopted by the COD in lieu of Synod 2021, included a proposal for the creation of a denominational Dignity Team (see *Agenda for Synod 2021*, pp. 63-68). This new team began its work in summer 2022 and meets regularly in executive session with the COD Executive Committee to discuss matters pertaining to persons with whom it has met.

b. CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and implementation plan

At its February meeting the Council of Delegates heard from the CRC Code of Conduct and Implementation Plan committee, which had compiled extensive feedback from churches and classes. Based on that feedback, revisions to the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders were made and, along with a helpful sheet of frequently asked questions, these updates are now recommended to Synod 2023 for approval. The revised Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and the FAQ sheet are included in Appendix A.

The proposed implementation of the Code of Conduct also includes recommendations for revisions and/or additions to the Church Order and its Supplements. Those recommendations were adopted by the COD for approval by synod and are included in the Recommendations section at the end of this report.

The COD also recommends that Synod 2023 encourage councils and classes to require assent to the Code of Conduct by all staff (whether or not

they are ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the local church or classis.

In addition, the COD recommends that synod mandate the General Secretary to oversee the development of training modules to orient officebearers and ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct.

c. Continued implementation and monitoring

The COD is committed to continually monitoring the progress and ensuring implementation of the decisions of Synod 2019 to aid in the prevention of abuse of power in CRCNA leadership. This is a standing agenda matter for the COD's Mercy and Justice Ministries Committee. At its February meeting, the COD received updates with regard to addressing the abuse of power. In particular, staff led trainings on "The Power to Do Good: The Use and Misuse of Power in the Church" in Classes Hamilton and Red Mesa.

11. Publications and services

a. *Yearbook*

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

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

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

The *Church Order and Its Supplements 2022* reflects revisions to the Church Order adopted by Synod 2022. The latest version of the *Church Order and Its Supplements*, published by the Office of Synodical Services, was distributed to the churches in fall 2022 and has been translated into Korean and

Spanish. The *Rules for Synodical Procedure*, last updated following decisions of Synod 2022 and translated for Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking churches, is available in digital format only. Both the *Church Order and Its Supplements* and the *Rules for Synodical Procedure* are available for download at crcna.org/SynodResources.

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

The publication of the *Agenda for Synod* and the *Acts of Synod* is the responsibility of the director of synodical services under the direction of the general secretary. From time to time some decisions need to be made by the general secretary about which material properly belongs in the *Agenda for Synod*. The general secretary may consult with the COD or Program Committee (officers of the previous synod) for advice and input when materials are in question. In many cases, erring on the side of grace seems more appropriate than erring on the side of rigid regulation. Synod itself will finally decide in all cases whether material is properly on its agenda.

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

d. *Manual for Synodical Deputies*

The *Manual for Synodical Deputies* is distributed to synodical deputies, their alternates, and the stated clerks of classes. The latest revision of the manual was completed in summer 2022 by the Office of Synodical Services, reflecting updated language for *denominations in communion* (formerly *denominations in ecclesiastical fellowship*), clarifications in reference to Church Order Article 24-a and its Supplement, and a strengthening of the appeal process. Anyone desiring to access or download a copy of this tool for the classes may do so by way of the stated clerk and synodical deputy webpage at crcna.org/SynodicalDeputies.

e. *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*

A very helpful tool for churches and classes, the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* was updated by Henry DeMoor in fall 2019 to reflect changes made to the Supplements through Synod 2019 that have been incorporated into the Church Order. The manual is currently in the process of being revised by Kathy Smith, polity professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and hopefully will be available for purchase by late spring 2023. We are grateful to Rev. Smith and Dr. De Moor for their contributions in providing a tool for use by classes, churches, and many others working and advising on polity matters. This resource is intended as a companion to the CRC's Church Order, offering commentary and explanation of guidelines set forth and decisions made by synod over the years. The manual is available for reading in the CRC Digital Library (crcna.org/DigitalLibrary), and print and downloadable versions are available through Faith Alive (faithaliveresources.org).

f. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*

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

12. Church Order changes proposed by Synod 2022

a. Synod 2022 proposed the following change to Church Order Article 45 for adoption by Synod 2023 (see *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 430-34; and *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 848):

That Church Order Article 45 be amended to allow greater flexibility to classes in formulating their delegations to synod (additions indicated by *italics*):

> Synod is the assembly representing the churches of all classes. Each classis shall *ordinarily* delegate one minister, one elder, one deacon, and one other officebearer to synod. *A classis may send no more than two delegates bearing the same office.*
>
> *Grounds:*
>
> a. This permits needed flexibility for classes in constituting their delegations to achieve full participation at synod.
>
> b. Recent history has demonstrated a persistent difficulty in classes' sending a full delegation to synod.
>
> c. The principles of Christian fellowship and unity call us to act in ways that promote justice and equality and maximize the voices present at synod, especially from minority-majority classes, rural or geographically distant classes, and smaller classes that have struggled to send a full delegation under the present system.
>
> d. Retaining four delegates while allowing a maximum of two per office maintains diversity of office while also maintaining a full complement of deliberative voices at synod.

b. Church planting in both the RCA and CRC denominations

Synod 2022 noted that "Classis Arizona is doing excellent church planting work born from the Reformed Collaborative" with the Reformed Church in America (RCA); it was further noted that "while this matter arose out a local context, there are denominational implications for our relationship with the RCA" (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 840). In response, synod instructed the COD to review those implications and to recommend any Church Order changes that could "help church plants find expression in both denominations." The COD asked the Church Planting Collaborative, an initiative of Resonate Global Mission, to carry out this review, with particular attention to allowing mutual recognition of commissioned pastor status in both the CRC and the RCA. After consultation with the CRC's director of

Candidacy and the RCA's director of Church Multiplication, it was determined that the designation "commissioned pastor" is not equivalent in the two denominations. Church Order changes are not recommended. However, the RCA's director of Church Multiplication and the CRC's Church Planting leader will continue to collaborate and converse about church planting needs, opportunities, and resources.

c. Church Order Review Task Force

In response to several overtures, Synod 2022 directed the COD "to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their supplements in conversation with Pastor Church Resources and relevant voices, and to bring an interim report to Synod 2023 through the COD and a final report to Synod 2024." Their work is to "develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions and more effective oversight of individuals in specialized ministries, including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8" (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 849).

The COD appointed members to this Church Order Review Task Force at its October 2022 meeting. The work of the task force is under way, and an interim report of their work is provided in Appendix B to this report.

d. Implementation of Code of Conduct

As noted above (in section II, A, 10, b), the Code of Conduct report (Appendix A) also includes recommendations for revisions and/or additions to the Church Order and its Supplements. Those recommendations were adopted by the COD for approval by synod and are included in the Recommendations section at the end of this report.

13. Oppose White Supremacy and Systemic Racism

In its letter summarizing Synod 2022, the COD noted synod's encouragement to classes "to ask questions of all candidates for ministry regarding their commitment to preach a biblical and Reformed perspective on race and justice" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 946). This was part of synod's response to an overture from Classis Greater Los Angeles to oppose white supremacy and systemic racism. The COD also asked the director of Candidacy to consider including this feature in resources provided for the examination of candidates. The director will communicate this directive to the Candidacy Committee at their April 2023 meeting and ask for their advice on how best to implement it. Synod also requested that Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) "report to the COD on how they are teaching a biblical and Reformed perspective on issues of race and justice" (p. 946), and the general secretary has asked CTS to report on this matter at the May COD meeting. In addition, the general secretary asked Congregational Ministries to publish a list of worship resources on this topic, and that list is expected to be ready this spring and shared with the churches.

14. Repositioning the CRC through listening and supporting

The COD, through the Congregational Ministries Committee, asked the general secretary to facilitate a "One Family Conversation." This conversation focuses on the key role that ethnic diversity is playing in the current and future reality of the CRCNA, and how classes have an important role to play in listening and supporting the growing diversity in congregational leadership. The plan for this conversation is included as Appendix E.

15. Discontinue annual review of organizations recommended for support

The COD also took up the matter of annually reviewing external charitable organizations for accreditation and recommendation to CRC churches for offerings (see Appendix E in the COD Governance Handbook). This review process has been found to require significant staff time and effort, whereas today for any such organization the information is readily available online. In addition, there is minimal anecdotal evidence that this service is being used by our churches. A recommendation to discontinue this practice is found in the Recommendations section of this report.

B. Program matters

A significant part of the Council of Delegates' work relates to the ministry programs of the denomination. With the adoption of the Structure and Leadership Task Force (SALT) report by Synod 2022, the COD itself focuses on the ecclesial aspects of these programs, while the CRCNA Canada and U.S. ministry boards (formerly called corporations) focus more on the personnel and finances. Program and personnel details are reported to synod by way of the reports of the agencies, institutions, and ministries and via this section of the COD report. Additional information regarding financial matters is contained in Appendix F to this Council of Delegates Report as well as in the *Agenda for Synod 2023—Financial and Business Supplement* that will be distributed in late May. The final budget approved by the COD, including the allocation of ministry-share pledges by churches, will be presented as information to synod by way of the COD Supplement report through synod's financial matters advisory committee.

The COD provides denominational oversight on behalf of synod throughout the year. The Office of General Secretary serves as the primary link between the COD and the denomination's ministries. Currently serving within the Office of General Secretary are the general secretary, the chief administrative officer (CAO), the director of synodical services (DSS), the director of communications and marketing (DCM), and the director of candidacy (DC). The new Office of General Secretary (OGS), implemented in July 2022, does not include agency or ministry directors; however, the OGS is responsible for ensuring that all ministries and legal entities are appropriately implementing synodical decisions and ecclesiastical mandates through the use of a reconfigured Ministries Leadership Council (MLC, see below) and through revisions to the structure and committees of the Council of Delegates.

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

The Canadian Ministries Team, convened by the executive director- Canada, provides leadership specific to the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada.

The U.S. director of ministry operations convened a U.S. ministry roundtable conversation between the ministry agencies in the U.S. office. The roundtable conversations are leading to productive collaboration between Resonate Global Mission and Congregational Ministries.

Joint ministry agreements are created annually by the agencies. These agreements are legal documents between the Canada and U.S. ministry boards. The agreements are managed through Joint Management Committees convened by the chief administrative officer. These committees are responsible for ensuring that the activities outlined in the agreement are being fulfilled and reported to the ministry boards.

The Administrative Leadership Council (ALC) is convened by the chief administrative officer of the CRCNA. This council is a forum of administrative and operations leaders in Canada and the U.S. who have the authority to design and implement policy. The purpose of the ALC is to advance a culture of administrative cooperation, collaboration, and partnership across the ministry offices and agencies of the CRCNA.

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

1. 2022 denominational survey summary report

With the rollout of *Our Journey 2020* (denominational Ministry Plan) in 2015, an *annual* denominational survey was implemented to help track progress of the Ministry Plan, in addition to metrics recorded along the way. Synod delegates are invited to read an executive summary of the 2022 denominational survey at crcna.org/survey/survey-results. The 2023 survey is currently under way.

2. Update on *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

The denominational Ministry Plan, *Our Journey 2025*, following the endorsement of the COD acting on behalf of Synod 2020, is well under way (see crcna.org/OurJourney). There's something about a *journey* that's exciting and invigorating—a promise of new horizons, new possibilities, new challenges. The Christian Reformed Church is on such a journey. It's called *Our Journey 2025*. *"Our"* because we are on it together as CRC people from congregations across the United States and Canada. *"Journey"* because we are moving ahead in our shared mission to express the good

news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide, while also striving toward specific goals that our congregations and leaders have identified. And *"2025"* to remind us that this is just one stage of a journey that will see us living and growing together in new ways and new places by the year 2025.

For the current five-year period, churches and classes helped to identify four "milestones" that we are working toward. We desire to become congregations and communities that do the following:

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

Churches can request resources including visuals, conversation cards, and other tools that can help congregations and members feel excitement and ownership of the ministry plan in more than a theoretical way. Beginning in January 2023, leaders in each of the four areas began directing more attention to the "stories, stats, and opportunities" that are arising out of these efforts. These will be shared with churches and classes through various means. Visit crcna.org/OurJourney to learn more about sharing in the excitement!

3. Our Calling

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

> *Faith Formation*—As a community of believers, we seek to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to nurture their faith through all ages and stages of life.
>
> *Servant Leadership*—Understanding that the lifelong equipping of leaders is essential for churches and ministries to flourish, we identify, recruit, and train leaders to be servants in the kingdom of God.

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

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

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

We note that these ministry priorities continue to be utilized to communicate more effectively what the CRC members and ministers, congregations and classes, and ministries and agencies are called to do. The *Annual Ministry Report* (see crcna.org/MinistryReport), the *Agenda for Synod*, and introductory brochures all utilize this categorization.

4. Ministry presentations at synod

For presentations to synod by CRC ministries, a rotation schedule reflecting the denomination's five ministry priorities was implemented by synod in 2018. Delegates to Synod 2023 will receive presentations on Faith Formation and on Gospel Proclamation and Worship from the following ministries: Calvin University and Congregational Ministries' Faith Formation and Worship.

5. Ministry evaluation

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

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

The executive committee of the Council of Delegates agreed to a request by the general secretary to pause these reporting practices temporarily until the current COD reorganization is finalized.

6. Inspire

The Council of Delegates instructed the Office of General Secretary to explore the feasibility of holding future Inspire events. A small team of staff worked on this assignment and explored a variety of options for reducing costs and expectations on staff time while increasing attendance. Weighing the report of this team, the COD decided to instruct staff to discontinue holding large-scale Inspire events and instead to encourage staff to

explore smaller-scale and/or regionalized events on particular ministry themes applicable to the churches.

7. Appointments of ministry directors

a. Appointments of Congregational Ministries directors for Canada and U.S.

In October 2022 the COD acknowledged the administrative appointment of Rev. Lesli van Milligen as the Congregational Ministries director-Canada, and Dr. Chris Schoon as the Congregational Ministries director-U.S. (effective Jan. 1, 2023) as a further step in the Congregational Ministries reorganization process.

b. Appointment of Resonate Global Mission director

Rev. Kevin DeRaaf was interviewed by the COD in February 2023 and is recommended to synod for ratification as the new director of Resonate Global Mission, effective July 1, 2023. He will be interviewed at synod, and his curriculum vitae is included as Appendix C of this report.

c. Recommendation of World Renew-Canada director

In January 2023 the World Renew-Canada board selected Jamie McIntosh to be the next executive director of World Renew-Canada. He will be introduced to the COD in May and, pending approval, will be recommended to synod for ratification of the appointment.

8. Status of Resonate Global Mission

After discussions with the interim director of Resonate Global Mission and senior leadership (general secretary, chief administrative officer, U.S. director of ministry operations, and executive director-Canada), it was determined that the transition to a COD agency-based committee structure (moving from a Global Missions Ministries Committee to a Resonate Committee) would provide the governance space intended by the recommendation from the Structure and Leadership Task Force report on this matter. This change in committee structure also responds to feedback presented by a committee that evaluated the work of the Global Missions Ministries Committee. It was determined that any further change in the status of Resonate would risk losing the benefits of the integration of Resonate into the Council of Delegates and the U.S. and Canada ministry boards.

9. Recognize Congregational Ministries as a new agency

Synod 2022 was informed of plans for a major reorganization of Congregational Ministries (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 710). Implementation of this plan is well under way and is described in detail in the Congregational Ministries reorganization document in Appendix D of this report. The COD brings a set of recommendations proposing to effectively combine the existing congregational ministries into one new agency with a new synodical mandate, vision, and mission.

10. Safe Church reporting

Safe Church has consistently gathered and reported data on the current number of churches and classes that have Safe Church teams and coordinators. That role of reporting was reviewed and affirmed by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 935), and the COD has passed along synod's instructions to Safe Church to carry on in this task.

11. Classis Renewal Advisory Team

The Classis Renewal Advisory Team was requested to "report to Synod 2023 regarding (1) new resources being developed for creating or refining a classis ministry plan and (2) an update on which classes have a ministry plan" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 856). However, the classis renewal coordinator position is currently vacant, and the Classis Renewal Advisory Team has not met for many months. Some of the classis renewal coordinator work is in the process of being incorporated into Synodical Services and Pastor Church Resources. Through the integration of Connections project principles and staff into Congregational Ministries and Resonate Global Mission, these agencies are helping to guide the CRCNA organization to build and maintain greater presence and relationship with classes and classis leaders. Further, the general secretary will assign staff to assess which aspects of the classis renewal work has been taken up now by others and which aspects remain to be apportioned. That assessment will include how best to assist classes with the development of classis ministry plans. The general secretary will bring the findings of this assessment to the COD during the 2024 fiscal year.

12. Ministry Support Services

a. Shared ministry services

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

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

b. *The Banner*

The Banner, the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church, currently prints and distributes about 70,000 copies of its paper version. Website pageviews average more than 85,000 per month, and more than 11,000 people have signed up to receive the weekly *Banner* email. Our efforts on

social media also help to ensure that *Banner* content is available to anyone in a variety of forms.

The Banner app is available for free download on iPhone and Android devices (thebanner.org/App); monthly, the app is receiving more than 10,000 pageviews.

We are most thankful for a huge show of support from *Banner* readers, as nearly 5,000 donors gave more than $470,000 for the annual appeal fundraiser in 2022.

c. Faith Alive and Libros Desafio

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

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

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

d. The Network

Over the past decade the Network has become one of the CRC's most-visited websites where people involved in their local church can connect—with each other and with denominational staff—about the practical aspects of doing church ministry. Ministry Support Services oversees the site with a half-time community manager. Launched in 2010, the Network (crcna.org/Network) was redesigned over the past year with a whole new look and improved functionality. The site receives about one million pageviews per year, as folks across the denomination read, ask questions, and share ideas with each other about their congregation's ministries.

13. CRC agency, institution, and congregational ministries reports

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

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

C. Financial matters

1. Introduction

In order to assure that synod has the most up-to-date and accurate financial information, detailed financial data will be included in the *Agenda for Synod 2023—Business and Financial Supplement,* which will be made available to the delegates at the time synod convenes. This supplement will include financial disclosure information and agency and ministry budgets for fiscal year 2024 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024). In addition, synod will be asked to approve a schedule for one or more above-ministry-share offerings for the ministries of the denomination, a quarterly offering for World Renew (in lieu of ministry-share support), and a listing of requests for accredited organization status for recommendation to the churches. Additional financial information and/or recommendations will also be included in the Council of Delegates Supplement report in May.

2. Future of recommended list of organizations for support

At its October meeting the COD heard a subcommittee recommendation regarding the process of providing a recommended list of organizations for offerings/giving to the churches and diaconates. They summarized that there is little evidence that the list is used, and that the vetting process of charitable organizations requires significant time and attention from finance staff. The COD is recommending that Synod 2023 discontinue the practice of providing a recommended list of charitable organizations to the churches.

3. Reimagining Ministry Shares update

Since June 2020 churches have been asked to pay ministry shares based on what they decide to pledge rather than on a member-based assessment. This has been called Ministry Shares Reimagined. Synod 2022 asked the COD to examine congregational responses to this relatively new practice, with particular attention to questions such as the following (see *Acts of Synod 2022,* pp. 846-47):

- Why are ministry share contributions declining, especially in the U.S.?

- How are churches contributing in alternate ways?
- What other ministry priorities are congregations funding?
- What should we be doing going forward?

The chief administrative officer and the advancement director-U.S. were asked by COD to shepherd a process of meeting with stakeholders and key denominational staff with an interest in the ministry-share system and to gather the data and information synod requested. COD members also suggested sending a letter to the classes encouraging a conversation at their fall meetings. An update on this matter is expected at the May meeting of the COD. Any changes recommended to synod by the COD will come through the COD Supplement report.

III. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Andy de Ruyter, chair of the Council of Delegates; Michael L. Ten Haken, vice chair of the Council of Delegates; Zachary J. King, general secretary; and members of the executive staff as needed when matters pertaining to the Council of Delegates, ReFrame Ministries, or Resonate Global Mission, or other ministries of the CRCNA are discussed.

B. That synod grant all requests for privilege of the floor by the COD, agencies and ministries, educational institutions, standing committees, and study committees of synod contained within the reports to Synod 2023.

C. That synod approve all requests for special offerings for the agencies, ministries, and educational institutions of the CRC that are contained within the reports to Synod 2023.

D. That synod by way of the ballot appoint Tabitha D. Manuelito (Red Mesa), Loren Veldhuizen (Heartland), and Jim Winkel (Northern Michigan), previously appointed as interim COD classical delegates, to a modified first term (I, C-D).

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

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

G. That synod approve the interim appointments made by the COD for synodical deputies and alternate synodical deputies (II, A, 1).

H. That synod accept the invitation of Lee Street CRC in Wyoming, Michigan, to serve as the convening church of Synod 2024, to be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the campus of Calvin University (II, A, 7).

Ground: Lee Street's multicultural focus with both English and Spanish services, as well as their partnerships with local schools and other

ministries, offer synod the opportunity to celebrate diversity and outreach in the CRC.

I. That synod express gratitude to John Koot and Doug Vande Griend for their years of service to the Judicial Code Committee (II, A, 9, a).

J. That synod reappoint Bomsu Kim and Deloris Carter, respectively, to a second term of three years on the Judicial Code Committee (II, A, 9, b).

K. In light of feedback about the Code of Conduct from classes and congregations, the COD presents the following recommendations to synod for adoption (II, A, 10, b and Appendix A):

1. That synod adopt the proposed revised CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (see Addendum A) and endorse the accompanying FAQ sheet (see Addendum B).

   Grounds:

   a. Classes and churches have had adequate time to give feedback and input into the Code of Conduct as requested by Synod 2022.

   b. The proposed revised CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and the FAQ sheet address the feedback, questions, and concerns received from classes and local churches about the Code of Conduct and the implementation plan.

   c. Approving the Code of Conduct fulfills the intentions of Synod 2019 in its directives regarding the abuse of power.

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

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

      Church Order Article 5-b
      All officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

      —Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

      Supplement, Article 5-b
      [The full text of the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders in Appendix A.]

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

      Supplement, Article 13-c, section c

      The duties of the minister are spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling, and such duties do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church as required by one's signature to

the Covenant for Officebearers *and as articulated in the Code of Conduct*.

Grounds:

1) These changes to the Church Order reflect the intention of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee to implement a Code of Conduct that all ministry leaders commit to uphold.

2) Concerns about the original implementation plan (found in Addendum C) were that it gave the impression that the Code of Conduct would be on the same level as the Covenant for Officebearers. This was reflected most clearly in the requirement for officebearers to sign both the Covenant for Officebearers and the Code of Conduct on all occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations. The proposed revisions correct that impression by clearly distinguishing between the Covenant for Officebearers and the Code of Conduct.

3. That synod encourage councils and classes to require assent to the Code of Conduct by all staff (non-ordained as well as ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church or classis.

   Ground: This recommendation carries out the decision of Synod 2019 in response to the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee that the Code of Conduct be upheld by all ministry personnel who are employed by the CRCNA, local churches, and classes while preserving the authority of the local council and classis to implement the Code of Conduct in their particular settings.

4. That synod mandate the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient officebearers and ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct.

   Grounds:

   a. Training modules on the Code of Conduct were requested in the feedback to help churches introduce and orient ministry staff to expectations and appropriate behaviors.

   b. Training modules will help to ensure that the Code of Conduct becomes a living document that shapes the leadership culture of our denomination and has a real impact on addressing the misuse of power.

L. That synod take note of the updates provided within the COD report on addressing directives of Synod 2019 regarding the abuse of power (II, A, 10, c).

M. That synod adopt the following change to Church Order Article 45 proposed by Synod 2022 (II, A, 12, a) (additions indicated by *italics*):

> Synod is the assembly representing the churches of all classes. Each classis shall *ordinarily* delegate one minister, one elder, one deacon,

and one other officebearer to synod. *A classis may send no more than two delegates bearing the same office.*

Grounds:

1. This permits needed flexibility for classes in constituting their delegations to achieve full participation at synod.
2. Recent history has demonstrated a persistent difficulty in classes' sending a full delegation to synod.
3. The principles of Christian fellowship and unity call us to act in ways that promote justice and equality and maximize the voices present at synod, especially from minority-majority classes, rural or geographically distant classes, and smaller classes that have struggled to send a full delegation under the present system.
4. Retaining four delegates while allowing a maximum of two per office maintains diversity of office while also maintaining a full complement of deliberative voices at synod.

N. That synod take note of the *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan) resources, including visuals, conversation cards, and other tools to aid in engaging classes and churches in the excitement and ownership of the ministry plan (II, B, 2).

O. That synod ratify the nomination of Rev. Kevin DeRaaf as the director of Resonate Global Mission, effective July 1, 2023 (II, B, 7, b and Appendix C).

P. That synod adopt the following with regard to Congregational Ministries (II, B, 9 and Appendix D):

1. That synod recognize Congregational Ministries as a ministry agency of the CRCNA to engage and accompany Christian Reformed congregations as they seek to faithfully and holistically embody the gospel in their respective contexts.
2. That synod approve the vision, mission, mandate, and core postures in the guiding document as the synodical framework for Congregational Ministries (Appendix D).
3. That synod (a) conclude the synodical mandates and directives given to the previously separate ministries in Congregational Ministries and (b) instruct Congregational Ministries to utilize these historical guidelines as valuable information for understanding synod's intent regarding the desired denominational support for congregations.

Q. That synod approve discontinuing the practice and policy of reviewing and recommending charitable organizations to CRC churches for offerings (II, A, 15; II, C, 2; see also Appendix E in COD Governance Handbook).

Grounds:

1. The annual review process requires a significant amount of staff time and effort.

2. Information about charitable organizations is readily available online.
3. There is minimal anecdotal evidence that the list of organizations recommended for offerings is used by our churches.

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

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

APPENDIX A

Code of Conduct Review Team Report

Outline of report

I. Background
II. Summary of feedback from classes and churches
III. Recommendations

Addendum A
I. Proposed Revisions to the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (changes indicated and clean versions)
II. Proposed Revised Code of Conduct (clean)

Addendum B: Proposed Code of Conduct FAQs Document

Addendum C: Proposed Revisions to Code of Conduct Implementation Plan

I. Background

Synod 2018 instructed "the Council of Delegates, in consultation with the executive director, to appoint a small team to bring recommendations through the Council of Delegates to Synod 2019 regarding how the CRCNA can best address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination" (*Acts of Synod 2018,* p. 523). In one short year, that committee produced an extensive report that included nine recommendations for curtailing abuses of power in our denomination. Synod 2019 approved all nine recommendations, including that synod mandate a committee "to draft a code of conduct for all employed ministry staff within the CRC." The draft code of conduct was to be presented "to Synod 2020 for approval and with recommendations for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches" (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 795). The rationale given for this recommendation was presented in the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee (see *Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 602).

- A code of conduct provides clarity about the attitudes and behaviors that parishioners can expect from a pastor or from ministry staff in the practice of ministry.
- The behaviors and ethical practices described in the code are essential for healthy and safe ministry.
- A code of conduct can enhance and encourage accountability for ministry leaders.
- A code of conduct can provide guidance on aspects of contemporary ministry that were not envisioned in biblical times.
- A code of conduct is different from the Covenant for Officebearers, which describes beliefs and doctrine but does not include descriptions of behavior.

Because Synods 2020 and 2021 were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Code of Conduct didn't come before synod until 2022. Synod 2022 raised some hesitations about approving the proposed Code of Conduct and implementation plan on grounds that the local churches and classes had not had adequate opportunity to provide feedback and input. To address this concern, Synod 2022 directed that the proposed Code of Conduct (with an amendment suggested by the advisory committee) and the implementation plan be forwarded "to the classes for study and input, and that these be revised in light of feedback received for consideration by Synod 2023" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 898).

To collect feedback from the classes, the general secretary sent a letter dated August 15, 2022, to the stated clerk of each of the 49 classes asking that the classes have a discussion on the Code of Conduct and the proposed implementation plan at their fall classis meeting and that they submit their feedback by December 31, 2022. Responses were received from 23 classes (16 whole classes, 12 councils, and 5 individuals). Some classes submitted a summary of the discussion that took place at their fall meeting. Others passed along the feedback submitted by individual churches.

The general secretary also assembled a Code of Conduct Review Team to review the feedback received from the classes and, based on this feedback, propose revisions to the Code of Conduct and the implementation plan. The review team was made up of six persons from across the denomination who met together six times over the course of three months with the goal of closely considering the responses and concerns reflected in the feedback and making recommendations for a way forward.

II. Summary of feedback from classes and churches

A significant number of classes and churches expressed appreciation for the Code of Conduct as a helpful resource for ministry leaders to outline what it means to conduct themselves in Christlike ways as persons with power, influence, and authority within the community of believers. In light of this, some classes and councils have already adopted the Code of Conduct and have incorporated it into their policies and practices.

Other classes and churches suggested that the Code of Conduct is unnecessary or redundant and pointed to the Bible and the confessions, as well as Church Order Articles 82-84, as sources that outline a standard of behavior for ministry leaders. Furthermore, some classes and churches reflected their concern that having ministry leaders sign a Code of Conduct would not, in itself, make the church a safer place and that this initiative will just become an administrative hoop.

Finally, some classes and churches expressed objections to implementing a Code of Conduct, expressing fear and concern that it would be weaponized against ministry leaders.

A. Suggestions from classes and churches for revisions to the Code of Conduct

Specific suggestions for revising the Code of Conduct included the following:

- Edit the opening line from "As a ministry leader, I commit to the following . . ." to "As a ministry leader, I will, to the best of my ability, commit to the following. . . ."
- Clarify terms like "abuse of power," "hospitality," "safe environment," "confidentiality," "voice of God," "conflict of interest," "spiritual abuse," etc.
- Alter wording to better reflect the language of Scripture (e.g., "kingdom of God" rather than "common good").
- Add "sexual orientation" under second bullet in Relational section.
- Add "vulnerable or dependent populations" under the second bullet in Safety section.
- Change wording to reflect a more positive tone.
- Reorder the Code of Conduct from broader to more specific principles.
- Add a reporting number to the bottom of the Code of Conduct.
- Add a section on technology/social media.

The committee considered all of these suggestions and incorporated some of them in the proposed revisions to the Code of Conduct.

B. Suggestions from classes and churches for implementing the Code of Conduct

Classes, churches, and individuals also submitted suggestions and comments about implementing the Code of Conduct. The following are common themes in the suggestions:

- Incorporate the Code of Conduct in the exercise of mutual censure by the council.
- Develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document as an addendum to the Code of Conduct.
- Develop online training modules on the Code of Conduct that include case studies.

- Make the Code of Conduct part of the onboarding process for council members and new staff.
- Make the Code of Conduct a recommended resource, not a requirement.
- In lieu of the Code of Conduct, add something like "I understand that I am called to steward my authority in ways that do not cause harm to others and have completed the 'Stewarding Our Authority' training" to the Covenant for Officebearers.

The committee considered all of these suggestions and incorporated some of them in the recommendations for implementing the Code of Conduct.

C. Common questions submitted by classes and churches

Finally, classes, churches, and individuals submitted questions about the Code of Conduct and its implementation plan. The following questions represent common themes that emerged.

- Who is a ministry leader?
- Who oversees the implementation of and accountability for abiding by the Code of Conduct?
- How is the Code of Conduct enforced?
- Who defines what constitutes an abuse of power?
- How do we prevent the Code of Conduct from being weaponized against ministry leaders?
- How will we make modifications to the Code of Conduct? Will this need to be approved by synod?
- How does the Code of Conduct relate to other documents, policies, and practices?
- Will the church be more liable for allegations of misconduct if it adopts a Code of Conduct?

The review team provided answers to many of these questions in the proposed FAQ document.

III. Recommendations

In light of the feedback from the classes and local churches, the following recommendations are presented to synod for adoption:

A. That synod adopt the proposed revised CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (see Addendum A) and endorse the accompanying FAQ document (see Addendum B).

Grounds:

1. Classes and churches have had adequate time to give feedback and input into the Code of Conduct as requested by Synod 2022.
2. The proposed revised CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and the FAQ document address the feedback, questions, and

concerns received from classes and local churches about the Code of Conduct and the implementation plan.

3. Approving the Code of Conduct fulfills the intentions of Synod 2019 in its directives regarding abuse of power.

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

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

   Church Order Article 5-b
   All officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

   —Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

   Supplement, Article 5-b

   [The full text of the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders in Addendum A.]

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

   Supplement, Article 13-c, section c

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

Grounds:

a. These changes to the Church Order reflect the intention of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee to implement a Code of Conduct which all ministry leaders commit to uphold.

b. Concerns about the original implementation plan (found in Addendum C) were that it gave the impression that the Code of Conduct would be on the same level as the Covenant for Officebearers. This was reflected most clearly in the requirement for officebearers to sign both the Covenant for Officebearers and the Code of Conduct on all occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations. The proposed revisions correct that impression by clearly distinguishing between the Covenant for Officebearers and the Code of Conduct.

C. That synod encourage councils and classes to require assent to the Code of Conduct by all staff (non-ordained as well as ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church or classis.

Ground: This recommendation carries out the decision of Synod 2019 in response to the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee that the Code of Conduct be upheld by all ministry personnel who

are employed by the CRCNA, local churches, and classes while preserving the authority of the local council and classis to implement the Code of Conduct in their particular settings.

D. That synod mandate the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient officebearers and ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct.

Grounds:

1. Training modules on the Code of Conduct were requested in the feedback to help churches introduce and orient ministry staff to expectations and appropriate behaviors.
2. Training modules will help to ensure that the Code of Conduct becomes a living document that shapes the leadership culture of our denomination and has a real impact on addressing the misuse of power.

Code of Conduct Review Team
Amanda Benckhuysen, convener
Gary Duthler, reporter
Fred Harvey
Hyung-Jun Kim
Luann Sankey
Lesli van Milligen

ADDENDUM A

I. Proposed Revisions to the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (changes indicated)

Note: In addition to the proposed revisions noted by italics/strikeout, the Review Team proposes reordering the sections and points within the Code of Conduct to move from broader categories to more specific ones: Relationships, Safety, Pastoral Leadership, Confidentiality, and Finances. A revised version that shows these changes follows in section II below.

Preamble

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

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

All of us who are united to Christ by faith and who serve in the life of the church are called, in this passage and others, to this way of being. Jesus

himself, in response to the desire for power expressed by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to *bring glory to God and* serve people, a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.[1]

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

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

In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies.[2] *(See Belgic Confession, Article 28; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A's 55, 107, 111.)* It emerges out of a response by Synod 2018 to patterns of abuse that had been brought to its attention[3] and is aimed at preventing such abuse in the future. May God's peace be among us.

Code of Conduct

~~Abuse of power is a misuse of position, authority, or influence to take advantage of, manipulate, or control.~~ *Ministry leaders have been empowered by God and the church to serve the body of Christ for good. They are called to resist all temptations to abuse that power through the misuse of position, authority, or influence.* Abuse of power *is often defined as misusing power to harm another person or using power and influence to take unjust advantage of another person* ~~occurs when a person with power, regardless of its source, uses that power to harm and/or influence another for personal gain at the other's expense~~. All abuse by ~~faith~~ *ministry* leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. ~~(For more background, see Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 587-615).~~ *For more on the use and misuse of power, see the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee (Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 587-615).*

As a ministry leader, I *will, to the best of my ability,* commit to the following:

Confidentiality

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

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

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

~~Relational~~Relationships

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

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

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

~~Financial~~Finances

I will ensure that funds *for which I am responsible or which are under my control* are used for their intended ministry purposes.

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

I will appropriately use *and encourage* accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits *of ministry funds*.

~~Intimate Relationships~~

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

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

Safety

I will actively promote a ~~safe~~ *welcoming and respectful* environment where all persons are *treated with dignity* ~~respected~~ and value~~d~~, *and* where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.

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

I will support ~~adults~~ *those* who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that ~~appropriately~~ empowers the person who has been victimized *to seek out justice and healing.*

~~Spiritual~~Pastoral Leadership

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

I will refrain from using references to Scripture or God to manipulate, coerce, or threaten another person.

I will teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical and Christ-like, ~~*and I will seek other people's well-being (Matthew 18; Colossians 1:28; 3:16).*~~ *promoting the shalom and flourishing of those to whom I am ministering.*

I will use my *power, authority, and* position ~~as a way~~ to ~~serve~~ *build up* the ~~body~~ *community* of believers~~, rather than myself, for the common good and the cultivation of the gifts of the Spirit.~~ *and seek first the kingdom of God.*

~~*Additional Commitments*~~

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

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

I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.

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

In the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, in all ~~that~~ I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly *to support and encourage all the members of his body in my care* ~~and in nonexploitive ways~~.

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

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

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

II. Proposed Revised Code of Conduct (clean)

Preamble

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

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

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

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

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

In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies. (See Belgic Confession, Article 28; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A's 55, 107, 111.) It emerges out

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

Code of Conduct

Ministry leaders have been empowered by God and the church to serve the body of Christ for good. They are called to resist all temptations to abuse their power through the misuse of position, authority, or influence. Abuse of power is often defined as misusing power to harm another person or using power and influence to take unjust advantage of another person. All abuse by ministry leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. For more on the use and misuse of power, see the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 587-615).

As a ministry leader, I will, to the best of my ability, commit to the following:

Relationships

1. I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve (1 Pet. 5; Mark 10; Phil. 2; 2 Tim. 4:2).
2. I will respect, love, and treat with integrity and truthfulness people of every position, status, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability.
3. I will maintain appropriate emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries in all relationships.
4. I will keep all my relationships free from inappropriate or unwanted physical contact, emotional or sexual intimacy, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes.

Safety

1. I will actively promote a welcoming and respectful environment where all persons are treated with dignity and value, and where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.
2. I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors or vulnerable adults to the proper authorities.
3. I will support those who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that empowers the person who has been victimized to seek out justice and healing.

Pastoral Leadership

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

2. I will use my power, authority, and position to build up the community of believers and seek first the kingdom of God.
3. I will work within my professional competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate.
4. I will refrain from using references to Scripture or God to manipulate, coerce, or threaten another person.
5. I will teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical and Christlike, promoting the shalom and flourishing of those to whom I am ministering.
6. I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.

Confidentiality

1. I will maintain and uphold confidentiality appropriately, which means I will hold in confidence whatever information is not mine to share.
2. I will not use information shared with me in confidence in order to elevate my position or to depreciate that of others.

Finances

1. I will ensure that funds for which I am responsible or which are under my control are used for their intended ministry purposes.
2. In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.
3. I will appropriately use and encourage accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits of ministry funds.

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

In the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, in all I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly to support and encourage all the members of his body in my care.

ADDENDUM B

Proposed Code of Conduct FAQs Document

1. Why do we need a Code of Conduct?

A Code of Conduct serves both ministry leaders and congregations by clearly identifying expectations for Christlike behavior. It allows churches

to be proactive in educating staff and volunteers about expectations rather than reactive when unspoken expectations are not met. Additionally, a Code of Conduct, when implemented well, helps to shape the culture of a congregation, particularly with respect to how people are treated, fostering a culture in our churches where the value of every person is protected and where everyone is free to worship God and grow in faith free from harm.

2. But we have the Bible and the confessions. Why do we also need a Code of Conduct?

The Bible is our guide for faith and life. The confessions are systematic summaries and interpretations of the Bible around which we are united as a denomination and which we confess to be faithful and true to the teachings of Scripture. The Code of Conduct is a document that outlines, in a succinct and accessible way, what the teachings of Scripture mean for specific aspects of ministry leadership today. As such, it establishes standards of behavior and practices in addressing contemporary realities related to mandatory reporting, interpersonal relationships, confidentiality, financial integrity, and pastoral leadership in one short document. One way to think of it is as a summary of Christian standards for contemporary ministry leadership. It clarifies for ministry leaders what is required for healthy and safe ministry, and it communicates to parishioners what they can expect from a pastor or from ministry staff in the practice of ministry.

3. Haven't ministry leaders already shown themselves to be people of character and integrity? Why do they need a Code of Conduct?

Ministry leaders have a significant amount of authority and emotional and spiritual influence over the people who participate in the ministries of the church. People extend a great deal of trust to ministry leaders, inviting them into their lives at times and on occasions of significant vulnerability—birth, death, sickness, times of fear, doubt, joy, and suffering. It is a rare privilege to come alongside and support someone in their faith journey, being the presence of Christ to them. But with such great power comes great responsibility—responsibility to use this power in ways that lead to the shalom and flourishing of others.

Typically, ministry leaders are mature Christians who exemplify good character and integrity, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Still, like all human beings, they are prone to sin, and they make mistakes. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and disappointment may lead them to act out of their worst selves rather than their life in Christ. As a result, they may fail at times to use their authority in a way that is good and instead use it in a way that brings about harm. When ministry leaders use their authority and influence in ways that bring harm, the whole congregation and the integrity of the church's witness to the gospel are affected. For this reason, it is crucial that the church put in place tools and measures of accountability that help ministry leaders use their authority and influence responsibly in

order to build up the people to whom they are ministering. The Code of Conduct is one such tool.

4. Who is a ministry leader?

- All officebearers (ordained ministers, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons).
- All CRCNA staff members and members of the Council of Delegates.
- Local church councils are also encouraged to require assent to the Code of Conduct by all church staff (whether or not they are ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church.

5. Who oversees the implementation of the Code of Conduct?

The implementation of the Code of Conduct is the responsibility of the local council that holds the membership or credentials of the ministry leader. A classis has responsibility to implement the Code of Conduct for its ministry leaders and employees. For CRCNA staff members, this oversight is shared with the Human Resource departments for denominational staff.

6. How is the Code of Conduct enforced?

The assembly that implements the Code of Conduct is also responsible for determining how to enforce the Code of Conduct and the ramifications for people who violate it based on the gravity of the offense and the harm done. For instance, a one-time minor offense may be made right through a heartfelt apology and acknowledgment of wrongdoing to the person or people who have been harmed. A pattern of behavior that brings harm to others may be addressed by calling the offender to repentance, establishing a plan to make amends for the harm done, requiring the offender to take "The Power to Do Good" course offered through Safe Church or other training, requiring the offender to attend counseling, and establishing greater measures of accountability for the offender. Should it be determined that the violation of the Code of Conduct rises to the level of ungodly behavior, ordained ministry staff will be subject to special discipline as outlined in Church Order Article 83, and unordained staff or volunteers who are members of a church may be subject to general discipline per Church Order Article 81. Should the violation of the Code of Conduct include a criminal act, the council will report the incident to law enforcement.

7. Who defines what constitutes an abuse of power or a violation of the Code of Conduct?

Discerning the gravity of a violation is dependent on assessing the harm done. While ordinarily it is up to the local council to enforce the Code of Conduct and determine consequences for violation, Safe Church coordina-

tors, denominational Safe Church staff, and the Dignity Team are available for consultation and advice. If in doubt, councils are encouraged to email safechurchministry@crcna.org.

8. How do we prevent the Code of Conduct from being weaponized against people?

Key to cultivating a culture of dignity and respect in the church is creating safe and receptive avenues for reporting abuse or misconduct. Those who have been harmed need to be heard and cared for by the church. This posture, however, does not assume the guilt of the accused. Allegations of violations should be examined and assessed through a fair process. The local church council is responsible for deciding the best way to follow up on the allegations (see "Guidelines to Handling Abuse Allegations against a Church Leader" at crcna.org/SafeChurch/abuse-response). Denominational Safe Church staff are available to provide counsel and support.

9. How will we make modifications to the Code of Conduct? Will this need to be approved by synod?

Because approval by synod is required for modifications to the Church Order, modifications to the Code of Conduct would need to come before synod if the Code of Conduct is incorporated into the Supplement for Church Order Article 5-b.

10. How does the Code of Conduct relate to other documents, policies, and practices?

- While the Covenant for Officebearers identifies our shared beliefs, the Code of Conduct is an invitation for ministry leaders to covenant around a shared standard of behavior. These two documents address different aspects of Christian discipleship.
- Some churches may choose to incorporate the Code of Conduct into their Safe Church policies so that it becomes part of the annual training for all church staff and volunteers.
- Furthermore, the Code of Conduct can be a helpful educational and self-assessment tool for councils in the practice of mutual censure.

11. Will the church be more liable for allegations of misconduct if it adopts a Code of Conduct?

The church is already legally responsible for providing a reasonable standard of safety, care, and commitment to the well-being of the people who participate in its ministry while they are involved in ministry programs and events. The church's legal liability increases when it fails to attend to its fiduciary duty of care, regardless of whether the church implements a Code of Conduct. The implementation of a Code of Conduct does not make the church more liable. Instead, it helps ministry leaders take greater heed of their legal responsibility toward those involved in the church's ministry.

12. How can the Code of Conduct be used effectively in annual reviews of ministry staff?

Suggested questions for annual review

Questions related to the employee's use of power

1. How are you stewarding the trust and authority that have been given to you in your work?
2. What are some of the key ways that you have been able to use your position, authority, and influence to build others up over the past year?
3. In what ways might you need to grow in how you fulfill your commitment to elements of the Code of Conduct? How might we help you to do that?

Questions related to the employee's experience of the power of those in supervision

1. In what ways are you experiencing your supervisor(s) as being faithful in the ways they steward trust and authority over you?
2. In what ways have you experienced the positions, authority, and influence of those who supervise your work in ways that have helped you to flourish?
3. Are there any ways in which you have felt marginalized or mistreated by those who supervise you? Please describe.
4. In what ways might we need to grow in how we fulfill our commitment to elements of the Code of Conduct? How might you help us to do that?

ADDENDUM C

Proposed Revisions to the Implementation Plan for the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

In light of the feedback from the classes and local churches, the following recommendations are presented to synod for adoption:

1. *That synod adopt the proposed revised CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and endorse the accompanying FAQ sheet.*
2. That synod adopt the following revisions/additions to the Church Order and its Supplements (indicated by italics):
   a. Add the following new Article 5-b and Supplement, Article 5-b to the current Church Order Article 5 and its Supplement (the existing Article 5 and its Supplement would become Article 5-a and Supplement, Article 5-a).

Church Order Article 5-b
All officebearers ~~and ministry leaders, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations,~~ shall ***uphold*** *~~signify their agreement~~ the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for ministry leaders. ~~with the expected behavior of leadership in the church by signing the Code of Conduct.~~*

—Cf. Supplement, Article 5-b

Supplement, Article 5-b
[Text of the proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders]

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

Supplement, Article 13-c, section c

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

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

~~***Church Order Article 83***~~

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

3. *That synod encourage councils and classes to require assent to the Code of Conduct by all staff (whether or not they are ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church or classis.*
4. *That synod mandate the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient officebearers and ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct.*

~~That the Council of Delegates recommend that synod adopt the following guidelines related to the CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders:~~

~~1. Who signs the code?~~

- ~~Paid CRCNA staff members.~~
- ~~New Council of Delegates members as they onboard.~~
- ~~Churches and classes to implement the Code for council members and employees as part of an annual review.~~
- ~~The Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is referenced in the Abuse of Power Training. It would also be included in the Calvin Theological Seminary Church Order course after adoption of the Church Order changes. The Candidacy Committee will recommend~~

~~that all Article 8 candidates be required to take the Abuse of Power training.~~

2. ~~Who is responsible for ensuring it is signed (e.g., councils, classes, and CRCNA ministry staff)?~~
   - ~~Councils, classes, COD, and denominational leadership.~~
   - ~~Safe Church has been encouraging churches to include a reference to the Code of Conduct in their policy. It is reviewed as part of the Safe Church training.~~
3. ~~What are the implications if individuals refuse to sign or deviate from the Code?~~
   - ~~There are guidelines in the Supplement to Church Order re gravamina.~~
   - ~~Each governing body would decide the ramifications.~~
   - ~~Another team is discussing ramifications for Council of Delegates members for consideration by the COD.~~
   - ~~Discipline would be tied to their *position* (not *membership* in the church).~~
   - ~~Discipline is a local matter (for church or classis).~~
4. ~~Suggestions for incorporating the Code of Conduct include the following:~~
   - ~~Require all ministry staff to classes and churches to sign the Code of Conduct when they sign their contract upon hiring.~~
   - ~~Annual performance reviews with sample questions to ensure that it is a meaningful conversation (see Appendix). It is suggested that an elder, human resources professional, or personnel committee conduct the review so that an employee may freely share any potential forms of abuse. Or consider holding a special conversation another time of year to review the sample questions—an employee may not be as forthright in such a conversation, tied to the possibility of promotion/demotion/raises.~~
   - ~~Incorporate into council training and orientation.~~
   - ~~Church visitor training (also with the Healthy Church Executive survey from Pastor Church Resources).~~
   - ~~The current CRCNA staff Code of Conduct and the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders could be combined and then reviewed at the annual performance review.~~

APPENDIX B

Church Order Review Task Force Interim Report

The establishment of the Church Order Review Task Force was approved by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). Following the parameters of composition and membership delineated by synod, the committee was formed with the following membership: Rev. Laura de Jong, Rev. Chelsey Harmon, Casey Jen, Pastor James Jones, Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink (reporter), Rev. John Sideco, Rev. Kathy Smith (ex officio), and Rev. Joel Vande Werken (chair). The task force is also assisted by advisors Rev. David Den Haan (Pastor Church Resources) and Rev. Susan LaClear (Candidacy).

The mandate given to the task force follows:

> to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their supplements in conversation with Pastor Church Resources and relevant voices, and to bring an interim report to Synod 2023 through the COD and a final report to Synod 2024. The task force shall develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions and more effective oversight of individuals in specialized ministries, including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849)

The background for this mandate stems from several overtures submitted to synod in 2020 and 2022, dealing with issues of transition and accountability in ministry. In particular the task force recognizes the "increasing use of Article 17 and its often-perceived stigma" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849) as an ongoing conversation within the CRCNA. While synod's mandate primarily addresses the need for administrative guidelines and potential updates to the Church Order, the task force is also keenly aware that behind every situation involving transition and supervision are real people; our goal is to find ways to process those stories so that God's grace and care can be on display as clearly as possible in the work of Christ's church.

At the time of this writing (Jan. 2023), the task force is only just beginning its work. The group has outlined its tasks and has sent a survey to classical stated clerks, seeking their input. It is anticipated that the work of the task force will fall into two main areas: (1) regulations dealing with the supervision of ministers in nonparish work and (2) guidelines for effective transitions when pastors leave a church or the denomination (or perhaps reenter ordained ministry in the CRCNA). Recognizing that the landscape of ministry has changed significantly since the last major revision of the Church Order in 1965, the task force intends to review the history behind the development of the present Articles 12-17, assumptions about the theological significance of call and vocation, and the logic of flow in these articles as we seek to fulfill the mandate of synod.

We are hopeful that the work of this task force can be completed in fall 2023, in time for its report to be processed through the fall Council of Delegates meeting and distributed to the churches and classes in advance of Synod 2024 so that any proposed Church Order changes can be submitted to synod. In the meantime, the task force welcomes both your prayers and your input (questions or comments can be emailed to ChurchOrderReview@crcna.org). It is our hope and prayer that our work will ultimately serve to strengthen the work of ministers and churches as together they serve the Lord.

Church Order Review Task Force
Laura de Jong
Chelsey Harmon
Casey Jen
James Jones
Rita Klein-Geltink, reporter
John Sideco
Kathy Smith, ex officio
Joel Vande Werken, chair

APPENDIX C

Curriculum Vitae: Rev. Kevin P. DeRaaf

Objective

My personal mission is to serve as a disciple of Jesus who is actively working to help develop and encourage other disciples into God's mission. I have a special passion for the local church, believing that God's purpose for the local church is to shine as a community of love and grace, showing in tangible ways that Jesus is the hope of the world. I recognize that God has given me a set of unique leadership gifts and experiences, and I believe that in this season of life I am to serve the church and the CRCNA in a team setting in whatever capacity the Lord calls me.

Education

General Humanities (B.Sc.), 1990, Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario

Master of Divinity, 1993, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Ministry Experience

Seminary internship at Palos Heights (Ill.) CRC (1991-1992)

- General pastoral duties with special focus on youth work

Lead pastor at First CRC in Owen Sound, Ontario (1993-1999)

- Regular preaching, pastoral care, youth work, and council leadership

Lead pastor at Faith CRC in Burlington, Ontario (1999-2017)

- Helped lead the church through a number of significant transitions and growth periods
- Focus on preaching, staff development and leadership, vision casting, and pastoral care

Canada East Regional Mission Leader, Resonate Global Mission (2017-2019)

- Oversaw and supported the development of mission-shaped churches, missional leaders, and holistic mission networks in the seven classes that make up the Canada East region of Resonate
- Special focus on church planting, campus ministry, and diaspora ministry within a changing Canadian cultural and spiritual context
- Oversaw and supported a regional team to assist in the ministry and worked closely with classis missions committees and other partners within and outside the CRC in the Canadian context
- Special projects included the Church Plant Institute, Mission Montreal, and a Community of Practice focused on Indigenous justice and reconciliation issues (now called Hearts Exchanged)

Director of North America Regional Teams, Resonate Global Mission (2019-present)

- Oversaw and supported the work of the six regional mission leaders in North America (four in the U.S., two in Canada)
- Tasks included budget support, goal development, and annual reviews
- Oversaw such mission-focused initiatives as church planting, campus ministry, congregational mission support, and work with diaspora communities in the North American context
- Represented the North America regional work on the Resonate Leadership Team where overall support, oversight, and visioning is provided for Resonate's work worldwide
- Served on several denominational leadership projects and teams, such as the Collaborative Church Planting Team and the Canadian Ministries Team

Acting Canada Director, Resonate Global Mission (2019-present)

- Supported and encouraged the work of all Resonate staff working in Canada. This includes holding regular staff meetings of Canadian staff and aiding where necessary
- Provided direction and control over Resonate's financial activity in Canada, including serving as a signatory for partnership agreements with domestic and international projects and staff; also includes overseeing the development and support of joint ministries

agreements between Resonate Canada and Resonate U.S. as well as serving on the Joint Ministries Agreement Committee

- Served on the senior leadership team for the Canada CRCNA office, helping to provide support and oversight for denominational operational matters in the Canadian context; I participated in a visioning project with other Canadian staff leaders and board members called "Establishing the Canadian Office" in 2018-19
- Served as chair of the Mission Montreal Board, a partnership between the CRCNA in Canada and a Montreal-based ministry called Christian Direction

Additional experience

Board member of the Board of Home Missions (1998-1999)

Team leader of the Burlington Church Planting Vision Team (2003-2004)

Led a team representing three local CRCs to plant a church in the city of Burlington. This work led to the call of a church planter and the formation of Living Mosaic Church.

Cofounder and teacher of the Eastern Canada Leadership Development Network (2004-2010)

Taught and administered (on a three-person team) the ECLDN, a three-year training and mentoring program for lay leaders in the region, meeting monthly in Burlington

Team member of the Eastern Canada Home Missions Regional Team (2010-2015)

Served on the support and vision team for Adrian Van Giessen when he was the regional leader for Home Missions; as a benefit of serving on this team, received professional executive coaching by John Caplin

Board member and adjunct faculty of Dunamis Fellowship Canada (2013-2016)

Taught, as an adjunct faculty member, at numerous conferences on various aspects on the person and work of the Holy Spirit

Team member of the Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder) Sustaining Team (2016-present)

Helped oversee the finances and development of Churches Learning Change in the RCA and CRC

Served as a member of the Ontario Regional Team, which involves teaching responsibilities

Classis leadership roles (1994-2017)

Served approximately ten years on various Home Missions committees; spearheaded a vision renewal team in Classis Hamilton; served as chair of classis for two years, along with various other functions

Served as a delegate to synod five times

Coach training through New Leaf Network and Coach Training Canada (2017-2018)

Achieved Level I and II Coaching Certification

Skills

- Team/staff leadership: Active experience in leading volunteers and staff at various levels of church organization (i.e., classis, classis committees, ECLDN) and in the local church. Developed and led the Canada East regional team. In Resonate roles, strengthened the team of North America regional leaders and the Canada Resonate office, creating a more inclusive and supportive team environment.
- Strategic planning/visioning: Active involvement in various vision and strategic processes within Resonate and the CRCNA. This includes vision work for the CRCNA Canada Office and design work with the Resonate Leadership Team, strengthening the operational structures of our Resonate teams. Was involved in vision-related conversations with classes, classis ministry teams and missions committees. Led churches through a number of vision exercises. Helped churches tackle a number of issues around culture and theology (i.e., women in office, children at the Lord's Supper) and helped churches develop a stronger missional mindset (i.e., conducting a Community Opportunity Scan, developing a staff position for outreach and discipleship, discipleship groups). Helped lead a vision process for Classis Hamilton.
- Leadership development: Actively involved in working with emerging leaders both formally (ECLDN, Ridder Church Renewal) and in the local church. I currently lead a lay preaching team and a Faithwalking discipleship group in my local church.
- Public speaking: Over 30 years' experience of preaching in local churches. Keynote speaker at several leadership retreats and conferences, including the annual (World Missions) West Africa missionary retreat in Gambia in 2012.
- Pastoral care: Over 24 years' experience walking with people in crisis and with spiritual concerns.

APPENDIX D

Congregational Ministries Reorganization: An Introduction to "YourNewMinistryAgency"—a Ministry of the CRCNA

I. Preface – Our denominational context

The Christian Reformed Church in North America is a denomination of over 1,000 congregations across Canada, the United States, and Venezuela who share a commitment to following Jesus and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom through Jesus Christ. Grounded in the biblical narrative and shaped by Reformed confessions, we join together as congregations to support and encourage each other, discern together what it means to be faithful to God in our world today, attend to where and how we can join in the Spirit's work in the world, and share in the work of ministry together. For over 165 years the CRCNA has sought to bear witness to Christ and his kingdom in communities across North America through faith formation, global mission, gospel proclamation and worship, mercy and justice, and servant leadership. By God's grace, the impact of our shared ministry has far exceeded what any one church or classis could do alone. In other words, we are better together. Continuing to deepen and advance our ministry together, #YourNewMinistryAgency exists to help the denomination express the good news of God's kingdom and transform lives and communities worldwide.

II. Vision – What is #YourNewMinistryAgency oriented toward?

That all Christian Reformed congregations[1] will faithfully and holistically embody the good news of Jesus Christ within their particular contexts.

III. Mission – What does #YourNewMinistryAgency do?

#YourNewMinistryAgency (YNMA) engages and accompanies Christian Reformed congregations as they seek to embody the gospel faithfully and holistically in their respective contexts.

[1] We recognize that congregations are made up of both formal and informal ministry leaders as well as a wide range of other people, some of whom might be baptized or professing members and others of whom might participate in the communal life, worship, discipleship, and mission of the church in a variety of ways. We further recognize that congregations come in diverse sizes and expressions, from microchurches and home-based worshiping communities to well-established, multistaff, multisite congregations—with a large variety in between. Within the CRC context, we also note that classis-based meetings, ministries, and gatherings can serve as a valuable location and vehicle for equipping and encouraging congregations and their leaders. As such, our understanding of "congregations" includes the various people who engage in the life of a congregation and the diverse expressions of church, as well as the classis structures that support congregations and their leaders.

IV. Mandate – What is #YourNewMinistryAgency's charge?

In pursuit of this mission, YNMA is charged to provide expertise, wisdom, and compassionate support to congregations while remaining attentive to a wide range of opportunities and challenges facing the church today. More specifically, YNMA encourages and equips Christian Reformed congregations to do the following:

- practice lifelong faith formation and missional discipleship from a Reformed perspective, across all ages and stages of life, with particular attention to children, youth, and emerging adults
- practice worship that is inspired by the Spirit, directed toward God, biblically based, theologically Reformed, and contextually relevant
- identify and engage seasons of congregational renewal, growth, transition, or challenge
- cultivate communities of increased inclusivity where everybody belongs and everybody serves, across abilities, ethnicities, languages, ages, and genders
- engage in the work of dismantling the multitude of damaging causes and effects encountered within a disordered creation, such as racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism, particularly within the body of believers
- implement and integrate safe church practices that include abuse prevention, awareness, and response
- support and care for ministry leaders, whether they serve congregations in ordained or nonordained capacities, or in specialized ministry roles such as chaplaincy
- respond to God's call to justice by advocating alongside and in support of people who are marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed

While YNMA's primary focus is on local Christian Reformed congregations, YNMA's capacity to encourage and equip congregations will be enriched and strengthened by engagement with external associations and partnerships, particularly those that focus on specialized aspects of YNMA's responsibilities.

V. Core postures

What character traits and practices do we value as we engage and accompany congregations?

Core Posture 1: We are curious listeners. Rooted in the Christian Scriptures and attentive to the Holy Spirit, we value listening practices, especially practices of prayer, Scripture engagement, and communal discernment, that help to enrich and expand attention to God, to those we serve, and to each other. As part of our listening, we value practices of wondering with and learning from people whose experiences and perspectives are different from our own. This posture empowers us and everyone we serve to encounter and respond to the robust diversity of

God's kingdom to a far greater extent than any of us could do on our own.

Core Posture 2: We are Reformed practitioners working toward excellence. Grounded in Reformed theology, we bring together a wide array of experiences and expertise that allow us to serve congregations with wisdom and compassion. We maintain an ongoing commitment to staff formation and development in order to serve congregations as competently and robustly as possible.

Core Posture 3: We are holistic and wholehearted. Believing that each person is created and called to serve, we value practices that nurture a wholehearted contribution from all of God's people to the life and ministry of the kingdom. The holistic dimensions of our salvation in Jesus Christ and the diverse gifts and interests entrusted to God's people lead to diverse and robust expressions of the gospel that can vary widely from congregation to congregation.

Core Posture 4: We are realistic. Knowing the biblical narrative and our own shortcomings, we value practices that remind and assure us that the establishment of God's kingdom is not dependent on us. Even as Jesus through the Spirit invites us to actively participate in the tangible and prophetic unfolding of the gospel here and now, we remain rooted in the biblical narrative, which declares that God, in Jesus and the Spirit, is at work making all things new.

Core Posture 5: We are hopeful. We value practices that root us more deeply in the eschatological hope of the gospel. Even as we eagerly anticipate the fullness of God's presence, we commit ourselves to faith-assuring practices that make room for both lamenting our resistance to the Spirit's renewal work and celebrating the places we see the biblical vision of God's united and diverse family becoming reality.

VI. Our Calling and *Our Journey 2025*

YNMA supports and actively participates in the CRCNA's ministry priorities (Our Calling) and *Our Journey 2025* milestones. YNMA's particular priorities, goals, and metrics are guided by these overarching strategic priorities for the CRCNA. YNMA supports and actively participates in the CRCNA's five emphases of Our Calling: Faith Formation, Global Mission, Gospel Proclamation and Worship, Mercy and Justice, and Servant Leadership. As we engage with and accompany congregations, YNMA leans into these ministry priorities by encouraging and equipping congregations to live faithfully and holistically in their particular contexts. While attentive to all five emphases, YNMA plays a supportive role to Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame Ministries, and World Renew in the area of Global Mission.

In a similar way, YNMA is committed to the milestones of *Our Journey 2025*: cultivate practices of prayer and spiritual discipline; listen to the voices of every generation; grow in diversity and unity; and share the gos-

pel. By design, YNMA gives more of its attention to the first three milestones while recognizing its supportive role to Resonate, ReFrame, and World Renew in relation to sharing the gospel.

APPENDIX E

"One Family Conversation" Report

I. Background

The general secretary was tasked by the COD with facilitating a "One Family Conversation" related to the topic of diversity and its key place in the CRCNA both now and in the future (CMC 22-19: Repositioning the CRC for Sustainability through Listening and Supporting). The conversation was to include discussion of the following:

- How the gifts and challenges of living in a diverse community can be fully included in our classes
- How to structure listening sessions, facilitated by an outside group, at classis in order to find out what is really happening with regard to diversity and inclusion of ethnic leaders
- How to structure the sharing of resources with [ethnic] fledgling churches
- Review of the historical perspective and synodical reports

The general secretary delegated the preplanning for this conversation to the following team:

Rev. Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy
Rev. Reggie Smith, director for Diversity
Rev. Pablo Kim Sun, senior leader for Antiracism and Intercultural Conciliation
Rev. Marco Avila, Resonate Eastern U.S. regional leader
Rev. Clarence Presley, Resonate Western U.S. regional leader
Deibi Lapian, Indonesian Christian Reformed Fellowship

The team met on September 26, November 9, and December 9 to pray and to discuss the following questions:

- What are the specific goals we hope to achieve through this "One Family Conversation"?
- What is the best process for having conversations about the challenges our ethnic minority groups face?
- Who should be at the table for these conversations (ethnic leaders, classis)?
- What should be the scope of the conversations? (For example, there are 49 classes, and the work needs to be manageable.)

- How can we hold these conversations in a healthy way and manage expectations on all sides?
- How can we assure that ministry leaders buy into and lead this process instead of making it just the work of denominational staff?
- How can we hold each other accountable to change?

The team reported that it had some very fruitful conversations around these questions, leading to the development of the following plan, submitted to the COD for review and input.

II. "One Family Conversation" Plan

A. Identified goals

1. To acknowledge and identify what our common identity is (true biblical theological identity—in Christ) and to re-envision who we are as a denomination (and what it means to be Reformed) seeking to be inclusive of multiple ethnicities
2. To create a space where everyone is celebrated and to build a level platform for everyone to share what Jesus is doing in their lives through storytelling, particularly from our unheard ethnic-minority leaders
3. To identify gifts and resources that haven't been opened up, learning from ethnic-minority perspectives on what it means to follow Christ and what it means to be Reformed
4. To bring healing from trauma through practices of celebrating our God-given kingdom diversity
5. To provide opportunities for the majority culture to engage in the critical self-reflection needed to understand and remove obstacles we have created and to build different habits of interaction
6. To facilitate engagement with a historical perspective on issues of diversity in the CRCNA (The team noted that the Diversity staff of the CRCNA have already compiled documents containing a scope of historical perspective on these issues, so this work can be referenced.)

B. Scope of the conversation

The goal is for this conversation to start between ethnic-group connectors and stated clerks and then spread as widely as possible.

We envision the starting and spreading as follows: *Stated clerks → Other classis leadership teams → Classis leadership teams/ethnic leaders → Ethnic leaders/bodies of classis (then hopefully councils → congregations).*

C. Plan

Step 1: Inform and equip stated clerks and invite them to be the promoters and catalysts for this conversation within their classes.

- Stated clerks can be key players and catalysts for this conversation within classes.
- At the Stated Clerk Conference (Jan. 11-13), the general secretary can cast the vision for this "One Family Conversation" and facilitate a listening session for the stated clerks to hear from some local ethnic-minority ministers who represent three different ethnic groups within the CRC. The clerks will also be given time to share their thoughts, questions, and insights.
- The clerks will be equipped with training in cultural competency.

Step 2: Stated clerks (with the help of regional catalyzers) will be asked to facilitate the equipping of all majority-culture classis leaders (including classis interim committees, classis ministry leadership teams, regional pastors, former leaders, etc.) in cross-cultural competence and awareness of key issues that were identified by ethnic-minority leaders (in step 1 above).

Step 3: Classis leaders initiate listening conversations with the ethnic-minority leaders within their classis to understand their experience (clerks to identify leaders who should be in the room and invite them to these meetings). *Note:* Ethnic-minority leaders will very likely first need "safe spaces" in which they can process issues with other minority leaders. If it is determined that they haven't already had these opportunities, classis leaders should encourage and facilitate those connections as a first step. (Reggie Smith and Pablo Kim could advise and direct them to where these conversations are happening.)

Step 4: Once a "safe space" of open conversation has been created between ethnic-minority leaders and classis leadership team members, classes are encouraged to invite ethnic-minority leaders to share with the classis.

Sharing should include the following:

- Stories of what God is doing/testimonies of faith (food, celebration!)
- Insights about what it means to be Reformed from the perspective of the minority community
- Insights about the minority culture and how it reflects the image of Christ
- Insights about the minority culture's struggles to navigate amid the majority culture

Step 5: Collect the stories and insights learned in classes and share them widely.

Condensed Financial Statements of the Agencies and Institutions

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 6,643	$ 2,349
Investments	$ 63,546	$ 58,491
Other	$ 12,256	$ 18,067
Total Assets	$ 82,445	$ 78,907
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 747	$ 690
Other Payables	$ 1,525	$ 1,279
Total Payables	$ 2,272	$ 1,969
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 56,589	$ 57,530
Unrestricted	$ 23,584	$ 19,408
Total Net Assets	$ 80,173	$ 76,938
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 82,445	$ 78,907

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Calvin Theological Seminary
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ 2,277	$ 2,143	$ 2,208	$ 1,920
% of Total Income	30.6%	27.5%	27.4%	28.7%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ 1,365	$ 1,330	$ 1,386	1,848
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Estate Gifts	$ 171	$ 198	$ 300	$ -
Total Gift Income	1,536	$ 1,528	$ 1,686	$ 1,848
% of Total Income	20.7%	19.6%	20.9%	27.6%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales	$ 2,526	$ 2,413	$ 2,230	1,898
Agency Services	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 1,092	$ 1,699	$ 1,926	$ 1,022
Total Other Income	3,618	$ 4,112	$ 4,156	$ 2,920
% of Total Income	48.7%	52.8%	51.6%	43.7%
TOTAL INCOME	7,430	$ 7,783	$ 8,051	$ 6,688
EXPENSES				
Program Services:				
Education	$ 5,139	$ 5,274	$ 4,877	$ 4,904
International	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Domestic Ministries	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service	5,139	$ 5,274	$ 4,877	$ 4,904
% of Total $	76.8%	73.7%	68.9%	68.3%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ 995	$ 902	$ 1,162	$ 1,330
Plant Operations	$ 555	$ 482	$ 594	$ 463
Fund-raising	$ 573	$ 494	$ 447	$ 480
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	1,550	$ 1,878	$ 2,203	$ 2,273
% of Total Expenditures	23.2%	26.3%	31.1%	31.7%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 6,689	$ 7,152	$ 7,080	$ 7,177
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 741	$ 631	$ 971	$ (489)
Total Program Service FTE's	32	32	32	32
Total Support Service FTE's	16	16	16	16
TOTAL FTE's	48	48	48	48

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Calvin University
Balance Sheet (000s)

	20-21 Actual	21-22 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 10,174	$ 3,624
Investments	$ 346,519	$ 354,149
Other	$ 229,681	$ 225,129
Total Assets	$ 586,374	$ 582,902
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 3,860	2967
Other Payables	$ 131,477	$ 128,545
Total Payables	$ 135,337	$ 131,512
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 177,219	176642
Unrestricted	$ 273,818	$ 274,748
Total Net Assets	$ 451,037	$ 451,390
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 586,374	$ 582,902

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Calvin University
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual	Fiscal 19-20 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
INCOME:					
Ministry Share	$ 2,221	$ 2,075	$ 2,436	$ 2,102	1,801
% of Total Income	2.1%	2.1%	2.3%	2.4%	2.0%
Other Gift Income:					
Gifts & Offerings	$ 3,451	$ 3,678	$ 3,481	$ 5,825	7,052
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Estate Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Gift Income	3,451	$ 3,678	$ 3,481	$ 5,825	$ 7,052
% of Total Income	3.3%	3.8%	3.4%	6.6%	8.0%
Other Income:					
Tuition & Sales	$ 92,175	$ 82,887	$ 93,626	$ 75,976	73,199
Grants	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Miscellaneous	$ 5,803	$ 8,411	$ 4,256	$ 4,674	$ 6,004
Total Other Income	97,978	$ 91,298	$ 97,882	$ 80,650	$ 79,203
% of Total Income	94.5%	94.1%	94.3%	91.1%	89.9%
TOTAL INCOME	103,650	$ 97,051	$ 103,799	$ 88,577	$ 88,056
EXPENSES					
Program Services:					
Education	$ 85,342	$ 80,841	$ 78,992	$ 64,780	67,694
Interenational	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Domestic Ministries	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service	$ 85,342	$ 80,841	$ 78,992	$ 64,780	$ 67,694
% of Total Expenditures	82.8%	82.8%	76.6%	78.7%	81.3%
Support Services:					
Management & General	$ 2,105	$ 2,302	$ 8,326	$ 2,327	2,713
Plant Operations	$ 7,491	$ 6,862	$ 7,603	$ 7,035	8,133
Fund-raising	$ 2,817	$ 2,298	$ 2,898	$ 2,898	$ 2,137
Debt Service	$ 5,355	$ 5,326	$ 5,300	$ 5,300	$ 2,600
Total Support Service	17,768	$ 16,788	$ 24,127	$ 17,560	$ 15,583
% of Total Expenditures	17.2%	17.2%	23.4%	21.3%	18.7%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 103,110	$ 97,629	$ 103,119	$ 82,340	$ 83,277
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 540	$ (578)	$ 680	$ 6,237	$ 4,779
Total Program Service FTE's	528	528	520	517	479
Total Support Service FTE's	143	143	135	132	120
TOTAL FTE's	671	671	655	649	599

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Central Services
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Estate Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Gift Income	-	$ -	$ -	$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales		$ -	$ -	$ -
Agency Services	6,989	$ 7,143	$ 8,219	$ 7,142
Grants/Miscellaneous		$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Other Income	6,989	$ 7,143	$ 8,219	$ 7,142
% of Total Income	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
TOTAL INCOME	6,989	$ 7,143	$ 8,219	$ 7,142
EXPENSES:				
Program Services:				
Education	$ -	$ -	$ -	
International	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Domestic Ministries	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ 5,569	$ 5,662	$ 7,112	$ 6,038
Total Program Service	$ 5,569	$ 5,662	$ 7,112	$ 6,038
% of Total Expenditures	79.7%	79.1%	86.5%	84.5%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	$ 1,420	$ 1,496	$ 1,107	1,104
Fund-raising	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	1,420	$ 1,496	$ 1,107	$ 1,104
% of Total Expenditures	20.3%	20.9%	13.5%	15.5%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 6,989	$ 7,158	$ 8,219	$ 7,142
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ -	$ (15)	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service FTE's	45	43	41	47
Total Support Service FTE's	3	4	2	2
TOTAL FTE's	48	47	43	49

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Employee's Retirement Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 361	$ 396
Investments	$ 6,408	$ 4,964
Other	$ -	$ -
Total Assets	$ 6,769	$ 5,360
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ -	$ -
Other Payables	$ -	$ -
Total Payables	$ -	$ -
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ -	$ -
Unrestricted	$ 6,769	$ 5,360
Total Net Assets	$ 6,769	$ 5,360
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 6,769	$ 5,360

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Employee's Retirement Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Operating Budget (000s)

	2019 Actual	2020 Actual	2021 Actual	2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 501	$ 505	$ 525	502
Participant Contributions	$ 83	$ 103	$ 128	122
Investment Earnings	$ 788	$ 620	$ 490	$ 222
TOTAL ADDITIONS	$ 1,372	$ 1,228	$ 1,143	$ 846
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	$ 714	$ 524	$ 969	1,292
Loss on investments	$ -	$ -	$ -	937
Management & General	$ 24	$ 29	$ 29	$ 26
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 738	$ 553	$ 998	$ 2,255
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS)	$ 634	$ 675	$ 145	$ (1,409)

TOTAL FTE's

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Employee's Savings Plan - (US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ -	$ -
Investments	$ 46,337	$ 37,134
Other	$ -	$ -
Total Assets	$ 46,337	$ 37,134
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ -	$ -
Other Payables	$ 24	$ 10
Total Payables	$ 24	$ 10
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	$ 45,313	$ 37,124
Total Net Assets	$ 45,313	$ 37,124
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 45,337	$ 37,134

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Employee's Savings Plan - (US)
Operating Budget (000s)

	2019 Actual	2020 Actual	2021 Actual	2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 2,536	$ 2,242	$ 2,243	$ 2,283
Participant Contributions	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Investment Earnings	$ 7,166	$ 5,356	$ 6,053	$ (7,531)
TOTAL ADDITIONS	9,702	7,598	8,296	(5,248)
DEDUCTIONS				
Distributions	$ 4,529	$ 4,701	$ 3,126	$ 3,871
Management & General	$ 131	$ 136	$ 139	$ 70
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 4,660	$ 4,837	$ 3,265	$ 3,941
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTIONS	$ 5,042	$ 2,761	$ 5,031	$ (9,189)
TOTAL FTE's		-	-	-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Grants
Balance Sheet (000s)

		Fiscal 20-21 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$	2,254
Investments	$	-
Other	$	-
Total Assets	$	2,254
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables		
Total Payables	$	-
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$	2,254
Unrestricted		
Total Net Assets	$	2,254
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$	2,254

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Grants
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760
INCOME:			
Ministry Share	$ -	$ -	
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	$ -	$ 3	43
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	
Estate Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Gift Income	$ -	$ 3.00	$ 43.00
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.2%	6.3%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	$ 3	$ -	348
Agency Services	$ -	$ 314	
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 1,674	$ 1,003	$ 291
Total Other Income	$ 1,677	$ 1,317	$ 639
% of Total Income	5.8%	0.0%	
TOTAL INCOME	$ 1,677	$ 1,320	$ 682
EXPENSES:			
Program Services:			
Education	$ 1,798	$ 1,644	2,000
International	$ -	$ -	
Domestic Ministries	$ -	$ -	
Disaster	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service	$ 1,798	$ 1,644	$ 2,000
% of Total Expenditures	100.0%	100.0%	
Support Services:			
Management & General	$ -	$ -	
Plant Operations	$ -	$ -	
Fund-raising	$ -	$ -	
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	$ -	$ -	$ -
% of Total $	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 1,798	$ 1,644	$ 2,000
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ (121)	$ (324)	$ (1,318)
Total Program Service FTEs	2	2	2
Total Support Service FTEs	-	-	-
TOTAL FTEs	2	2	2

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 1,814	$ 2,566
Investments	$ 86,038	$ 73,405
Other	$ 81	$ 81
Total Assets	$ 87,933	$ 76,052
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables	$ 216	$ 262
Total Payables	$ 216	$ 262
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	$ 87,717	$ 75,791
Total Net Assets	$ 87,717	$ 75,791
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 87,933	$ 76,053

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	MPF 2019 Actual	MPF 2020 Actual	MPF 2021 Actual	MPF 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 2,582	$ 2,592	$ 2,547	$ 597
Participant Contributions	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Investment Earnings	$ 11,125	$ 8,664	$ 13,420	$ (8,443)
TOTAL ADDITIONS	13,707	11,256	15,967	(7,846)
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	$ 2,943	$ 3,018	$ 3,098	$ 3,186
Management & General	$ 891	$ 952	$ 1,086	$ 895
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 3,834	$ 3,970	$ 4,184	$ 4,081
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION	$ 9,873	$ 7,286	$ 11,783	$ (11,927)
TOTAL FTE's	1	1	1	1

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 4,128	$ 4,863
Investments	$ 138,124	$ 111,698
Other	$ 240	$ 944
Total Assets	$ 142,492	$ 117,505
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables	$ 70	$ 236
Total Payables	$ 70	$ 236
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	$ 142,422	$ 117,269
Total Net Assets	$ 142,422	$ 117,269
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 142,492	$ 117,505

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Ministers Pension Plan - (US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	MPF 2019 Actual	MPF 2020 Actual	MPF 2021 Actual	MPF 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 5,117	$ 5,037	$ 4,914	4,701
Participant Contributions	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Investment Earnings	$ 21,122	$ 15,010	$ 23,995	$ (18,046)
TOTAL ADDITIONS	26,239	20,047	28,909	(13,345)
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	$ 10,271	$ 10,570	$ 10,636	10,718
Management & General	$ 1,176	$ 1,223	$ 1,545	$ 1,090
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 11,447	$ 11,793	$ 12,181	$ 11,808
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION	$ 14,792	$ 8,254	$ 16,728	$ (25,153)
TOTAL FTE's	2	3	3	3

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERIC
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Raise Up Global Ministries
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 75	$ 41
Investments	$ -	$ -
Other	$ 85	$ (256)
Total Assets	$ 160	$ (215)
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 85	$ 3
Other Payables	$ 717	$ 718
Total Payables	$ 802	$ 721
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 73	$ 442
Unrestricted	$ (715)	$ (1,378)
Total Net Assets	$ (642)	$ (936)
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 160	$ (215)

*This ministry has been rolled into Resonate Global Mission as of January 1, 2023

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Raise Up Global Ministries
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760
INCOME:			
Ministry Share	$ -	$ -	$ -
% of Total Income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other Gift Income:			
Gifts & Offerings	$ 223	$ 446	788
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	-
Estate Gifts	$ -	$ 77	$ -
Total Gift Income	$ 223	$ 523	$ 788
% of Total Income	28.1%	48.9%	67.0%
Other Income:			
Tuition/Sales	$ 211	$ 156	295
Agency Services	$ -	$ -	-
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 359	$ 391	$ 93
Total Other Income	$ 570	$ 547	$ 388
% of Total Income	71.9%	51.1%	33.0%
TOTAL INCOME	$ 793	$ 1,070	$ 1,176
EXPENSES			
Program Services:			
Education	$ -	$ -	
International	$ -	$ 308	350
Domestic Ministries	$ 915	$ 517	507
Disaster	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ -	$ -	$ 1
Total Program Service	$ 915	$ 825	$ 858
% of Total Expenditures	71.8%	72.1%	69.4%
Support Services:			
Management & General	$ 274	$ 239	301
Plant Operations	$ -	$ -	
Fund-raising	$ 85	$ 80	77
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	$ 359	$ 319	$ 378
% of Total Expenditures	28.2%	27.9%	30.6%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 1,274	$ 1,144	$ 1,236
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ (481)	$ (74)	$ (60)
Total Program Service FTE's	8	6	7
Total Support Service FTE's	2	1	1
TOTAL FTE's	10	7	8

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

*This ministry has been rolled into Resonate Global Mission as of January 1, 2023

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: ReFrame Ministries
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 2,750	$ 4,170
Investments	$ 8,350	$ 8,563
Other	$ 663	$ 727
Total Assets	$ 11,763	$ 13,460
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 183	$ 67
Other Payables	$ 450	$ 631
Total Payables	$ 633	$ 698
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 1,418	$ 1,637
Unrestricted	$ 9,712	$ 11,125
Total Net Assets	11,130	12,762
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 11,763	$ 13,460

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: ReFrame Ministries
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ 2,795	$ 2,611	$ 2,709	2,182
% of Total Income	28.8%	29.8%	26.7%	30.4%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ 3,259	$ 3,365	$ 3,598	3,422
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	-
Estate Gifts	$ 3,280	$ 2,035	$ 2,188	$ 2,246
Total Gift Income	6,539	$ 5,400	$ 5,786	$ 5,668
% of Total Income	67.5%	61.6%	57.0%	78.9%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Agency Services	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 357	$ 750	$ 1,664	$ (669)
Total Other Income	357	$ 750	$ 1,664	$ (669)
% of Total Income	3.7%	8.6%	16.4%	-9.3%
TOTAL INCOME	9,691	8,761	10,159	7,181
EXPENSES				
Program Services:				
Education	$ 165	$ 120	$ 75	-
International	$ 3,093	$ 3,130	$ 2,774	2,840
Domestic Ministries	$ 2,257	$ 2,400	$ 2,299	2,775
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	-
Other	$ -	$ -	$ -	-
Total Program Service	$ 5,515	$ 5,650	$ 5,148	$ 5,615
% of Total Expenditures	69.5%	69.0%	70.7%	70.9%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ 880	$ 990	$ 887	906
Plant Operations	$ -	$ -	$ -	-
Fund-raising	$ 1,538	$ 1,545	$ 1,246	1,404
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	2,418	$ 2,535	$ 2,133	$ 2,310
% of Total Expenditures	30.5%	31.0%	29.3%	29.1%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 7,933	$ 8,185	$ 7,281	$ 7,925
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 1,758	$ 576	$ 2,878	$ (744)
Total Program Service FTE's	21	20	18	24
Total Support Service FTE's	10	10	12	6
TOTAL FTE's	31	30	30	30

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Resonate Global Mission
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 6,415	$ 6,024
Investments	$ 18,376	$ 16,822
Other	$ 556	$ 414
Total Assets	$ 25,347	$ 23,260
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 1,388	$ 644
Other Payables	$ 773	$ 1,688
Total Payables	$ 2,161	$ 2,332
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 4,456	$ 4,495
Unrestricted	$ 18,730	$ 16,433
Total Net Assets	$ 23,186	$ 20,928
Total Liabilites and Ne	$ 25,347	$ 23,260

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Resonate Global Mission
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ 6,792	$ 6,343	$ 6,606	5,229
% of Total Income	32.9%	30.3%	30.1%	32.5%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ 9,923	$ 10,196	$ 10,183	$ 11,071
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Estate Gifts	$ 3,135	$ 2,701	$ 1,727	$ 1,124
Total Gift Income	$ 13,058	$ 12,897	$ 11,910	$ 12,195
% of Total Income	63.3%	61.6%	54.2%	75.7%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales	$ 75	$ 38	$ 21	$ 175
Agency Services	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 715	$ 1,651	$ 3,433	$ (1,489)
Total Other Income	$ 790	$ 1,689	$ 3,454	$ (1,314)
% of Total Income	3.8%	8.1%	15.7%	-8.2%
TOTAL INCOME	$ 20,640	$ 20,929	$ 21,970	$ 16,110
EXPENSES (FTE = Full Time Employee):				
Program Services:				
Education	$ 846	$ 770	$ 636	$ -
International	$ 10,119	$ 9,459	$ 8,902	$ 9,908
Domestic Ministries	$ 4,262	$ 4,122	$ 2,331	$ 4,180
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Other	$ -	$ -	$ 1,528	$ -
Total Program Service	$ 15,227	$ 14,351	$ 13,397	$ 14,088
% of Total Expenditures	79%	77%	78%	76%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ 1,641	$ 1,796	$ 1,819	2,175
Plant Operations	$ -	$ -	$ -	-
Fund-raising	$ 2,338	$ 2,439	$ 1,973	2,240
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service $	$ 3,979	$ 4,235	$ 3,792	$ 4,415
% of Total $	20.7%	22.8%	22.1%	23.9%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 19,206	$ 18,586	$ 17,189	$ 18,503
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 1,434	$ 2,343	$ 4,781	$ (2,393)
Total Program Service FTEs	77	81	81	72
Total Support Service FTEs	25	23	23	27
	102	104	104	99

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 417	$ 396
Investments	$ -	$ -
Other	$ 1	$ -
Total Assets	$ 418	$ 396
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables	$ 10	$ -
Total Payables	$ 10	$ -
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	$ 408	$ 396
Total Net Assets	$ 408	$ 396
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 418	$ 396

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Special Assistance Fund - Canada (Canadian dollars)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	SAF 2019 Actual	SAF 2020 Actual	SAF 2021 Actual	SAF 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 85	$ 87	$ 63	$ 6
Participant Contributions	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Investment Earnings	$ 6	$ 5	$ 4	$ 16
TOTAL ADDITIONS	91	92	67	22
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	$ 23	$ 28	$ 107	$ 34
Management & General	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 23	$ 28	$ 107	$ 34
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION	$ 68	$ 64	$ (40)	$ (12)
TOTAL FTE's	-	-	-	-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Year 2021 Actual	Year 2022 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 290	186
Investments	$ -	0
Other	$ 37	36
Total Assets	$ 327	$ 222
Liabilities		
Trade Payables		
Other Payables	$ 28	0
Total Payables	$ 28	$ -
Net Assets		
Donor Designated		
Unrestricted	$ 299	222
Total Net Assets	$ 299	$ 222
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 327	$ 222

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Year: 2022
Agency: Special Assistance Fund - (US)
Balance Sheet (000s)

	SAF 2019 Actual	SAF 2020 Actual	SAF 2021 Actual	SAF 2022 Actual
ADDITIONS:				
Employer Contributions	$ 162	$ 159	$ 137	9
Participant Contributions	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Investment Earnings	$ 2	$ -	$ -	$ -
TOTAL ADDITIONS	164	159	137	9
DEDUCTIONS:				
Distributions	$ 105	$ 92	$ 74	87
Management & General	$ -	$ -	$ 1	$ 1
TOTAL DEDUCTIONS	$ 105	$ 92	$ 75	$ 88
NET ADDITIONS / (DEDUCTION	$ 59	$ 67	$ 62	$ (79)
TOTAL FTE's	-	-	-	-

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Office of General Secretary/Cong Min
Balance Sheet (000s)

	Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-23 Actual
Assets		
Cash	$ 6,905	$ 8,699
Investments	$ 1,062	$ (932)
Other	$ 6,492	8,319
Total Assets	$ 14,459	$ 16,086
Liabilities		
Trade Payables	$ 582	$ 226
Other Payables	$ 2,722	$ 2,363
Total Payables	$ 3,304	$ 2,589
Net Assets		
Donor Designated	$ 377	$ 215
Unrestricted	$ 10,778	$ 13,282
Total Net Assets	$ 11,155	$ 13,497
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$ 14,459	$ 16,086

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: Office of General Secretary
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @ .7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @ .7760
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ 2,300	$ 2,283	$ 2,694	$ 2,658
% of Total Income	54.5%	34.1%	44.7%	69.0%
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ 306	$ -	$ 150	$ 595
Disaster Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Estate Gifts	$ -	$ -	$ 3	$ -
Total Gift Income	$ 306	$ -	$ 153	$ 595
% of Total Income	7.2%	0.0%	2.5%	15.5%
Other Income:				
Tuition & Sales	$ 63	$ 1,592	$ 24	$ 461
Agency Services	$ -	$ 1,573	$ 1,131	$ -
Grants/Misellaneous	$ 1,554	$ 1,246	$ 2,026	$ 136
Total Other Income	$ 1,617	$ 4,411	$ 3,181	$ 597
% of Total Income	38.3%	65.9%	52.8%	15.5%
TOTAL INCOME	$ 4,223	$ 6,694	$ 6,028	$ 3,850
EXPENSES:				
Program Services:				
Education	$ 1,670	$ 1,169	$ -	$ -
International	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Domestic Ministries	$ -	$ -	$ 199	$ 1,403
Disaster	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Other	$ 35	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service	$ 1,705	$ 1,169	$ 199	$ 1,403
% of Total Expenditures	52.7%	16.6%	4.5%	31.1%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ 1,304	$ 3,768	$ 4,236	$ 3,113
Plant Operations/Debt Serv.	$ -	$ 1,822	$ -	$ -
Fund-raising	$ 224	$ 293	$ -	$ -
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Support Service	$ 1,528	$ 5,883	$ 4,236	$ 3,113
% of Total Expenditures	47.3%	83.4%	95.5%	68.9%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 3,233	$ 7,052	$ 4,435	$ 4,516
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 990	$ (358)	$ 1,593	$ (666)
Total Program Service FTE's	11	11	9	7
Total Support Service FTE's	-	-	-	18
TOTAL FTE's	11	11	9	25

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

Schedule 1
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: World Renew
Balance Sheet (000s)

		Fiscal 20-21 Actual	Fiscal 21-22 Actual
Assets			
Cash	$	4,886	$15,095
Investments	$	27,908	$20,197
Other	$	3,299	$ 8,122
Total Assets	$	36,093	$43,414
Liabilities			
Trade Payables	$	1,133	$ 1,860
Other Payables	$	259	$ 3,000
Total Payables	$	1,392	$ 4,860
Net Assets			
Donor Designated	$	12,948	$16,627
Unrestricted	$	21,753	$21,927
Total Net Assets	$	34,701	$38,554
Total Liabilites and Net Assets	$	36,093	$43,414

Schedule 2
THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Fiscal Year: 22-23
Agency: World Renew
Operating Budget (000s)

	Fiscal 18-19 Actual @.7511	Fiscal 19-20 Actual @.7426	Fiscal 20-21 Actual @.7697	Fiscal 21-22 Actual @.7760
INCOME:				
Ministry Share	$ -	$ -	$ -	
% of Total Income	-	-	-	
Other Gift Income:				
Gifts & Offerings	$ 12,093	$ 12,226	$ 13,588	$ 15,941
Disaster Gifts	$ 12,318	$ 13,897	$ 13,918	$ 20,122
Estate Gifts	$ 5,397	$ 2,877	$ 3,480	$ 5,650
Total Gift Income	29,808	$ 29,000	$ 30,986	$ 41,713
% of Total Income	90.8%	88.9%	84.1%	101.5%
Other Income:				
Tuition/Sales	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Agency Services	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Grants/Miscellaneous	$ 3,035	$ 3,625	$ 5,862	$ (636)
Total Other Income	$ 3,035	$ 3,625	$ 5,862	$ (636)
% of Total Income	9.2%	11.1%	15.9%	-1.5%
TOTAL INCOME	$ 32,843	$ 32,625	$ 36,848	$ 41,077
EXPENSES:				
Program Services:				
Education	$ 1,443	$ 1,993	$ 1,924	$ 1,890
International	$ 11,273	$ 11,765	$ 11,339	$ 12,015
Domestic Ministries	$ 312	$ 372	$ 254	$ 253
Disaster	$ 13,974	$ 15,614	$ 14,784	$ 16,728
Other	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Total Program Service	$ 27,002	$ 29,744	$ 28,301	$ 30,886
% of Total Expenditures	84.7%	83.9%	82.2%	82.5%
Support Services:				
Management & General	$ 1,892	$ 1,982	$ 2,048	$ 2,384
Plant Operations	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Fund-raising	$ 2,974	$ 3,710	$ 4,083	$ 4,170
Debt Service	$ -	$ -	$ -	
Total Support Service $	4,866	$ 5,692	$ 6,131	$ 6,554
% of Total Expenditures	15.3%	16.1%	17.8%	17.5%
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	$ 31,868	$ 35,436	$ 34,432	$ 37,440
NET INCOME / (EXPENSE)	$ 975	$ (2,811)	$ 2,416	$ 3,637
Total Program Service FTEs	69	78	56	89
Total Support Service FTEs	36	37	19	31
TOTAL FTEs	105	115	75	120

FTE= Full time equivalent employees

REPORTS OF AGENCIES, INSTITUTIONS, AND MINISTRIES

Introduction

It is the responsibility of the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA to submit a *unified* report to synod composed of ministry updates provided by the agencies, educational institutions, and congregational ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. The reports of the ministries are organized and presented in alignment with Our Calling—five ministry priorities endorsed by synod (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 610; *Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 563): Faith Formation, Servant Leadership, Global Mission, Mercy and Justice, and Gospel Proclamation and Worship. Supplementary reports will be provided by denominational boards and standing committees of synod, if necessary.

These reports provide helpful information for local churches. Much of the material also supplies significant background for decisions that synod will be asked to make. The content also provides the transparency necessary to enhance our life together as a denomination.

Together these reports present the story of how God is blessing and guiding our work through the agencies, institutions, and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church as we covenant together. As you read the material that follows, I encourage you to respond with gratitude for what God is doing through the Holy Spirit, transforming lives and communities worldwide, by means of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Zachary J. King
General Secretary of the CRCNA

Calvin University

I. Executive Summary

The missional work of Calvin University continues with fervor: equipping students to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world. Our students, faculty, staff, and alumni seek renewal in every field of study and in every corner of the globe. Our longstanding undergraduate programs endure with excellence, alongside our ever-expanding graduate-level offerings.

Since the last meeting of synod, Calvin University has made a presidential transition, launched new programming, opened new spaces, and hosted milestone moments for our campus and community. We've experienced record-level global diversity and North American BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) representation. And fresh initiatives are emerging from three campuses: our Grand Rapids, Michigan, Knollcrest campus; our Handlon campus in Ionia, Michigan, the site of the Calvin Prison Initiative; and our global campus—reaching students wherever they are learning from.

Our hope is that this report shares the momentum happening here at Calvin University, a vibrant learning community and ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Thank you for allowing us to partner with you to empower Christ's agents of renewal and for investing to build this institution into what it has become over almost 150 years.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling and church partnerships

Calvin University is animated by a Christian faith that seeks understanding and promotes the welfare of the city and the healing of the world. In doing so, our educational community reflects the CRC's ministry priorities: faith formation, servant leadership, global missions, mercy and justice, and gospel proclamation and worship. We also connect with local churches through scholarship; service partnerships; and student, staff, and faculty church membership. We continually seek partnerships with other CRCNA ministries, such as discussions with Resonate around a partnership for missionaries to gain continuing education while serving in the field.

While faith formation happens in the classroom, through student life, among athletic teams, and across every facet of Calvin's campus, our Campus Ministries team's work in this area is also to be celebrated. LOFT, chapel, and dorm worship services bring us together and point us to God. Bible study leaders and residence hall Barnabas leaders disciple students in their faith. In addition, pastoral partners from local churches are serving within the Campus Ministries team to serve the spiritual needs of our student body.

Finally, the Ministry Leadership Cohort, an initiative of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW), is a two-year program open to incoming Calvin students from any major who show potential for all kinds of leadership in the local church. Further, through the work of the CICW, Calvin serves churches within the denomination and beyond.

III. Commitments of Calvin University

In summer 2022 a presidential transition took place: Dr. Michael Le Roy completed his tenth and final season as Calvin University president, and Dr. Wiebe Boer began his tenure as the university's twelfth president in its 147-year history.

President Boer, a lifelong CRC member and son of CRC missionaries, brings a deep faith perspective; a Ph.D. from Yale University in history; wide professional experience ranging from management consultant to impact investing and from philanthropy to alternative energy; and an innovative approach to the field of higher education.

President Boer's vision for Calvin focuses on renewing the university's call to global good. This includes the university's deep commitments in the following areas, which have already seen forward progress:

A. Diversity

Calvin takes seriously our commitment to diversity, esteeming the many cultures we represent as a community and the many ways we embody the gospel.

The 2022 first-year class hails from 42 U.S. states and 38 countries, both five-year highs for Calvin. The 173 students who enrolled from outside the United States represent more than 17 percent of the class, a record for the university. A large number of these students are the children of missionaries serving in countries across the globe. In addition, Calvin's 2022 first-year class shows domestic diversity. The 182 BIPOC students (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in the Calvin community represent 18 percent of the incoming class, an institutional high. Calvin has also experienced growth in first-generation students with more than a 20-percent increase year-over-year, reaching the institution's highest mark since 2018.

We are strategically working to increase the diversity of our staff and faculty as we strive to match the diversity of our student body and of the populations of the United States and Canada. Eventually we hope that our faculty and staff demographics are representative of worldwide diversity and reflect the global church. All five of our confirmed new faculty members for the 2023–24 academic year are from outside of the U.S.

In October, Michelle Loyd-Paige, associate to the president for diversity and inclusion, founded the Leadership Development Program for Underrepresented Faculty and Staff. Designed as a year-long program for early- to mid-career faculty and staff of color, the LDPU is intended to increase staff engagement and visibility as well as confidence, knowledge, and skills appropriate for current roles and other leadership opportunities.

Loyd-Paige also recently received the Dante Venegas Award, a prestigious honor given by the Office of Race Relations recognizing distinguished leadership in diversity and racial justice in the Christian Reformed Church.

B. Sustainability

Calvin has continued to demonstrate its Christian commitment to creation care and sustainability.

Calvin has accelerated its energy transition by starting the investigative stages of a campus-wide energy plan for carbon reduction, with benefits to God's natural world first and foremost. Calvin is also considering the potential cost-saving benefits that this emerging alternative energy plan can have for our Knollcrest campus through recent federal legislation.

In the fall, engineering students discovered a path for Calvin to eliminate its natural-gas-related net CO_2 emissions from its heating system.

In December, Calvin University was designated an arboretum—the entire campus—a rarity in higher education.

C. Deeper engagement with local and global communities

Calvin is reaching out to pursue deeper engagement with our local and global neighbors for mutual flourishing. Our vision explicitly states that we want to come alongside groups of all different Christian traditions from across the world and to ask how we can best partner with them to promote flourishing. In many ways, this starts in our Grand Rapids, Michigan, location, and we have been reaching out to connect with many communities in the area in order to form relational bridges and new partnerships.

In June 2022 accomplished scholar Adejoke Ayoola was appointed as the inaugural dean of the Calvin University School of Health. An accomplished and well-connected advisory board is leading alongside her. New partnerships such as the Pine Rest Academy are already being established.

In September the School of Business officially opened its doors with a groundbreaking ceremony. The school is set to be a hub connecting Christian leaders in business from around the globe. New connections are also being formed through program updates since 2022, including a new operations and supply chain management major. Students are even able to make their business ideas a reality with the launch of an entrepreneurial incubator, the Startup Garage.

The university recently sent a team to Indonesia to deepen Calvin's relationships with alumni, families, schools, and institutional partners. Calvin signed a memorandum of understanding with a global partner there to help provide a pathway to Calvin for Indonesian high school students.

D. A thriving and excellent experience for students, faculty, and staff

Calvin is investing in the people that make our community who we are, valuing their imagebearing nature and God-given gifts.

Calvin continues its data collection regarding workplace satisfaction and aims to improve in the metrics evaluated. These efforts are led by the Workplace Quality Task Force, a subcommittee of the Planning and Priorities Committee.

Student experience continues to be a top priority, with student life efforts prioritizing mental health, faith formation, and safety; the academic division is also continuously improving the high-caliber student experience. New first-year cohorts are also being added each year.

In July a residential master plan was announced for expanding and invigorating living spaces around the Calvin University campus. The new plan, rooted in ecological considerations, provides a roadmap toward updating all residence halls, including adding connecting lounges on each residential floor, increasing accessibility through elevators, open-air staircases connecting lobbies and residence hall basements, and updated kitchen and community spaces.

In October the board of trustees approved the university's athletics strategic plan, which adds women's acrobatics and tumbling, men's volleyball, and men's football to its portfolio of NCAA Division III athletic offerings. The plan also includes major upgrades to the university's outdoor athletic facilities that are already under way.

Finally, our students in the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) had a historic year in 2022. In May, Calvin University awarded degrees to 76 inmates in a grand celebration in Ionia, Michigan. It marked the first time in the state of Michigan that bachelor's degrees were awarded behind bars. In August the undersecretary from the U.S. Department of Education paid a visit to CPI and determined that what was happening there should be a national model for prison education.

IV. Finances

Calvin University is committed to excellent stewardship of resources, including finances. Calvin's strategic vision (calvin.edu/vision2030) helps us to focus our growth as a university, while the denomination, donors, and grants continue to support our mission in remarkable ways.

The 2021–22 fiscal year was strong for the university's advancement, with the second-best fundraising total in Calvin's history: $39.7 million, including $3.3 million for the Calvin Annual Fund. The Named Scholarship Program surpassed its $3.5 million goal by raising $3,922,517. This academic year $5 million was awarded to students through the Named Scholarship Program, with 1,170 students receiving 1,475 individual awards. A total of 23 new scholarships were established. Finally, the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship recently received $21.5 million in Lilly Endowment Inc. grants: $15 million for Shalom Worship and $6.5 million for the Compelling Preaching Initiative.

For the future, $32 million has now been committed to the forthcoming Commons Union project, a state-of-the art community space set to enhance the on-campus experience through collaboration between students, staff, faculty, and the community.

V. Board matters

A. Board officers

Board officers for the 2022–23 year are Bruce Los, chair; Mary Tuuk Kuras, vice-chair; Rhonda Roorda, secretary; and Dirk Pruis, treasurer (vice president for finance and chief financial officer).

B. Board membership

The following nomination for a new delegate is presented to the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

1. Region 1

   Richard Mast will be completing his second term. The board presents the following slate of nominees to the classes in region 1 to be voted on at their spring classis meetings:

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

   Rev. Edward Gerber is a 1999 graduate of Calvin University (bachelor of arts) and a 2004 graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary (master of divinity). He completed graduate theological education at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and earned a Ph.D. in biblical studies from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. He is currently one-third of the way through a master of arts program in clinical counseling. Rev. Gerber has served in professional pastoral ministry in Canada and the United States. He has served on church councils in Mount Vernon, Washington (Faith Community Fellowship); Cedar Rapids, Iowa (Peace CRC); Webster, New York (Webster CRC); and Langley, British Columbia (Willoughby CRC) over the past fifteen years. He also served a six-year term on the board of Surrey Christian Schools. Rev. Gerber served the Willoughby CRC from 2014-2021 and was released from ministry at Willoughby at his request last year. He has a keen interest in higher education and a love for students, faculty, and academics. He is currently the university chaplain and director of

student ministries at Trinity Western University and attends Willoughby CRC.

2. Additional board membership updates will be included in the Calvin University supplemental report to synod.

VI. Recommendation

That synod by way of the ballot elect new members, reappoint members for subsequent terms, and ratify the results of the classis elections for membership on the Calvin University Board of Trustees.

Note: Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

VII. A message from the president

As I began my leadership at Calvin University and in the CRCNA in 2022, I want to include my sincere thanks to synod and the denomination for steadfastly supporting Calvin's mission. I am excited about the future of Calvin and the ways in which we can continue to serve students from the CRCNA and other faith traditions with excellence. In welcoming students from outside the Reformed tradition, we can introduce a Reformed way of thinking and living to students from around the globe.

With only six percent of college-age CRCNA members attending Calvin, down from eight percent five years ago, we need to partner across ministries to promote Calvin as the official university of our denomination. Likewise, we are grateful to use our resources to benefit the mission of the larger denomination.

Calvin University
Wiebe K. Boer, president

Faith Formation

I. Introduction

Congregational Ministries' Faith Formation efforts join with and continue "God's mission of transforming lives and communities worldwide by encouraging and equipping local CRC congregations and their leaders in their calling to practice intentional, lifelong, intergenerational, holistic, missional discipleship and faith formation with an emphasis upon children, teens, and young adults" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, pp. 467, 589). With a deliberate presence in the various regions of the CRCNA, Faith Formation engages Christian Reformed congregations through three main sets of activities: consultations and workshops for churches and classes, coaching and network facilitation for ministry leaders, and resource curation and creation.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

One way we have engaged in the ministry priority of faith formation is through our work with the Reformed Church in America's Next Generation Ministry team, focusing on intergenerational mentoring through Generation Spark. This joint initiative equips CRC and RCA churches to nurture a sustainable mentoring culture that increases the engagement of young people (15-25 years old) within the church and more broadly in God's kingdom.

In October 2022, participants representing more than 15 CRCNA and RCA churches across North America gathered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as part of a launch event for Generation Spark. A core component of the gathering featured a panel of adults ages 30 and younger sharing their experiences with intergenerational mentoring. Intergenerational mentoring "has been a huge part of my [experience of] feeling like I belong in a church," said Kylie Kalmbach, a university student from Covenant CRC in Edmonton, Alberta. "It's meant that I know someone there; I know someone who will talk to me; I know someone I can ask questions of and who helps me feel that I can ask questions most of the time; and I know that I'm an adult who's allowed to be at church and have opinions about our church and our whole belief system." Listening opportunities like this continue to inform the ways we equip churches specific to their unique contexts and members.

III. Connecting with churches

Our work with churches this past year has particularly contributed to the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan milestone of cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline. In partnership with Worship staff, we expanded the Faith Practices Project to include resources for exploring the faith practices (spiritual disciplines) in intergenerational gatherings and worship services.

Drawing from these new resources, members at Bethel CRC in Brockville, Ontario, created a "wonder wall" during a Sunday-morning worship service. On paper "thought bubbles" that were made available in their pews, church members wrote or drew how they were experiencing wonder. Then they pinned the "thought bubbles" to a colorful board at the front of the sanctuary with the words "I WONDER" in big letters at the top. "It was encouraging to see so many participating," said Pastor Jack Van de Hoef. The service was part of a sermon series using starting points from the booklet *Faith Practices: Holy Habits That Help Us Love God and Our Neighbor, Listen to the Spirit, and Become More Like Jesus*. This is one example of the many churches across North America and beyond who are using and adapting resources from the Faith Practices Project to fit their church context and to help members of all ages grow in faith together.

In the past year Faith Formation also engaged churches through the following activities:

- released season 2 of *Open to Wonder*, a podcast exploring faith in day-to-day life. Guests from across North America and beyond shared about the faith practices they include in their daily lives
- facilitated 55 workshops and equipping events on topics including faith practices, children's ministry curriculum, young adult leadership, and more
- continued to meet (after originally gathering in 2020) with a group of emerging adult leaders in the CRCNA across North America to offer insight on faith formation in emerging adults
- led 12 workshops and set up interactive experiences on the faith practices of wondering, engaging Scripture, and remembering at the Inspire 2022 conference to demonstrate ways to use available resources
- facilitated Facebook groups for children's ministry and *Dwell* leaders
- partnered with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in the Parenting Faith research project exploring family-based faith formation practices in Canada (to be released in spring 2023)

Faith Formation
Christopher J. Schoon

Chaplaincy and Care

I. Introduction

Since 1942 the CRC has actively approved and supported chaplains as they extend the ministry of Christ to people in institutional and specialized settings (*Acts of Synod 2003*, pp. 685-87). Coming alongside congregations to encourage and equip chaplains, Chaplaincy and Care facilitates credentialing, support with calling processes, and the care of over 150 CRC chaplains serving throughout North America and around the world.

The Chaplaincy and Care support provided by the CRC includes efforts such as the following:

- overseeing the denominational endorsement process for chaplains
- providing pastoral support and advocacy for endorsed chaplains
- facilitating shared supervision with chaplains' calling churches
- informing and educating the CRCNA on chaplaincy and related ministries
- administering training grants
- recruiting chaplains
- conducting training
- promoting the development of chaplaincy
- participating in national endorsement-related organizations

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

In addition to the minimum of 800 hours of specialized training in clinical pastoral education and master's level theological training, chaplain servant leaders gather annually to further their pastoral care skills, which include providing leadership within the various institutes they serve on behalf of their calling churches.

Over 80 chaplain servant leaders met in person for three days in September 2022 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This was the first in-person gathering for our chaplains since 2019. Dr. Danjuma Gibson, Calvin Theological Seminary professor of pastoral theology, care, and counseling, served as the plenary speaker and addressed the theme "Returning, Rebuilding, Restoring." One recently endorsed chaplain commented, "This was my first chaplain's conference. I valued the chance to be with other chaplains, make connections, and meet new people." Another chaplain said, "It was very good to be together in person, and the mix between curriculum, worship, and conversation time was just right. I also appreciated Dr. Gibson's material."

III. Connecting with churches

Chaplaincy and Care works to extend the mission of the local congregation through the support of chaplains. While engaging in all four milestones, the ministry's primary focus is on equipping chaplains to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ as they minister to a diverse group of people in crisis, bringing the peace, healing, and grace of Christ to those often outside the church. Chaplaincy and Care routinely works with professional chaplaincy organizations in the U.S. and Canada to advocate for religious liberty, expression of religion, and the training of chaplains to meet the spiritual needs of diverse populations. The Chaplaincy Ministry Advisory Council (CMAC), in addition to advising Chaplaincy and Care on chaplaincy related issues, provides many hours throughout the endorsement process to chaplaincy candidates. From conducting interviews and reviewing applications, they provide invaluable service utilizing their years of experience. The council selects members for their expertise and to reflect the growing diversity in chaplaincy.

Chaplaincy and Care notes the following statistics for 2022:

- Total CRCNA-endorsed chaplains: 151 (128 in the U.S.; 23 in Canada).
- 9 chaplains newly endorsed in 2022: Eric Boer, Tricia Bosma, King Choi, Aleke Dekker, Paul Hannemann, Chadd Huizenga, Hannah Lee, Nathaniel Schmidt, and Klass Walhout.
- 24 military chaplains supported by the CRCNA: 13 active duty in the United States; 1 active duty in Canada; 6 in the U.S. National Guard and Reserves; 1 in the Canadian Reserves; 3 additional military chaplain candidates.
- 8 military chaplains served, or currently serve, overseas: Jon Averill, Kyu Hahn, Richard Hill, Peter Hofman, Joseph Kamphuis, Raidel Leon Martinez, Cornelius Muasa, and Lloyd Wicker.

Chaplaincy and Care
Timothy Rietkerk

Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.

I. Introduction

The CRC Loan Fund was established by Synod 1983 with a directive to assist organized member churches in the financing of capital improvements. The Loan Fund operates exclusively in the United States. The board of directors of the Loan Fund oversees the loan approval process, the determination of loan interest rates, and the setting of Loan Fund policies. The board also establishes interest rates for Investment Certificates sold—primarily to members, churches, classes, and agencies of the CRCNA in the United States.

II. Board of Directors

Loan Fund board members are eligible to serve for two three-year terms. Current members of the board of directors are Jeffrey Feikens (2025/2), Carl Kromminga (2025/1), Layla Kuhl (2024/1), Jack Meyer (2023/2), Howard Van Den Heuvel (2024/2), and Nancy Wiesman (2023/1).

Jack Meyer is concluding his second term on the board and is not eligible for reappointment. Nancy Wiesman is concluding her first term on the board and has decided not to serve a second term.

The board requests that synod appoint two board members. At this time, the board presents one of two slates of nominees to serve a term of three years with eligibility for reappointment to a second term; the board will present the second slate of nominees for appointment by way of a supplemental report to synod.

Position 1

Rev. Ken Krause is the pastor of Fellowship CRC in Big Rapids, Michigan. He has served as classis chair and as classis regional pastor and on the denominational Safe Church Advisory Committee. He also served as a delegate to Synod 2018 (Candidacy Committee) and to Synod 2022 (Finance Committee). In addition, he has served as a hospice chaplain, camp chaplain, Red Cross Disaster Action Team leader, president of the Newton Area Ministerial Association, and in the U.S. Navy. Before becoming a minister of the Word, he worked in security at Pine Rest Christian Services and in information technology at Old Kent Bank.

Wayne Postma is a member of Lombard (Ill.) Christian Reformed Church, where he has served as a youth leader, deacon, elder, catechism teacher, cadet counselor, and more. He has served as a board member for the Roseland Christian School Foundation, Partners Worldwide, and the Ignite Fund grant review team. He is a graduate of Calvin University and is employed as an executive vice president, senior lending officer, at Providence Bank and Trust.

III. Financial operations

The Loan Fund is eligible to sell Investment Certificates to investors in twenty-three states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. More states could be added as needed to benefit the fund.

At the close of the 2022 fiscal year (June 30, 2022) a total of $14,391,628 in interest-bearing Investment Certificates and accrued interest held by investors was outstanding. Interest rates vary from 1.00 percent to 2.00 percent. The variances in interest rates reflect the terms of the certificates and market conditions at the times the certificates were issued.

Since its inception in 1983, the Loan Fund has originated more than two hundred loans totaling nearly $75 million to churches across the United States. As of June 30, 2022, the Loan Fund had $10,806,504 in gross loans and accrued interest outstanding. Loan delinquencies do occur from time to time, but they are closely monitored and are very low. The Loan Fund maintains a loan loss reserve to help cover potential losses. The fund is blessed to have experienced only minimal loan losses throughout its history.

Financial operations are also reflected in the following data:

	2022	*2021*	*2020*
Cash and equivalents	$9,263,219	$5,199,045	$6,346,923
Net loans and interest receivable	10,806,504	6,140,937	15,893,278
Other assets	0	1,659	6,635
Total assets	$20,069,723	$21,341,641	$22,246,836
Certificates and interest payable	$14,391,628	$15,653,694	$16,569,556
Net assets	5,678,095	5,687,947	5,677,280
Total liabilities and net assets	$20,069,723	$21,341,641	$22,246,836

A summary of the audited financial report as of June 30, 2022, appears in the *Agenda for Synod Financial and Business Supplement.*

IV. Sources of funding

Funds for the Loan Fund's operations are derived from the following sources:

- the sale of Investment Certificates in those states where legal approval to offer them has been obtained
- gifts and bequests made to the Loan Fund

V. Staff

The Loan Fund is staffed by Alice M. Damsteegt, program coordinator, and Brian Van Doeselaar, interim director.

VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the Loan Fund's director or any members of the board of directors of the CRC Loan Fund when matters pertaining to the fund are discussed.

B. That synod appoint a board member from the slate of nominees provided to a first term of three years, effective July 1, 2023.

Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc., U.S.
Brian Van Doeselaar, interim director

Diversity

I. Introduction

The Congregational Ministries' Diversity initiative provides leadership to the Christian Reformed Church's globalized leaders and ministries as they engage in contextual congregational ministry in North America. The aim is to encourage, support, and resource the CRC's globalized leaders through crucial partnerships with denominational ministries to increase collaboration and integration in the CRC. To this end, the Diversity ministry serves as a bridge builder between many of the global majority communities in the CRC and its denominational ministries, including African American, Chinese, Indigenous/Native American, Latino, Korean, and Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander (SEAPI) congregations.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Most of the leaders we are connected with are servant leaders. Ethnic ministry leaders, for example, gather in safe places for fellowship, encouragement, and mission to discuss strategies and advice, funding, and other resources that can extend their effectiveness toward developing second-generation young leaders, growing into denominational leadership, and navigating denominational and classical terrain.

What do servant leaders look like among these leaders? The Diversity and Ethnic Ministries team leaders met in November 2022 in Los Angeles, California, to discuss goals for the upcoming ministry year. Five of the six legacy groups (African American, Korean, Chinese, Latino, and SEAPI) all came with plans to grow second-generation leaders, plant new churches, and create safe spaces for gatherings. But God had other plans. As we shared struggles and joys over fun, food, and fellowship, something unexpected happened—our empathy expanded beyond our own issues, and we realized that sacrificing our own projects for the sake of fellow brothers and sisters would be the right thing to do. We agreed to support several projects, including the launching of Black and Reformed Leadership Network efforts in bringing Black leaders together. We also agreed to support the second-generation leaders in the SEAPI group. This is what can happen when diverse leaders pray, have fun, and listen to each other for the sake of the full flourishing of the Christian Reformed Church.

III. Connecting with churches

In our Diversity efforts we have been focusing on the second milestone of *Our Journey 2025*: listening to the voices of every generation. One of the challenges among a few of the legacy groups has been to develop young leaders. Several groups have struggled to secure new leadership under 30 years of age. Though sometimes the challenges relate to generational misunderstandings and language barriers, one positive way forward has been to begin mentoring ethnic leaders such as Tyrell Natewa and David Shin as an example of how we can listen to and shape the lives of 21st-century leaders for the CRC.

Tyrell Natewa is a Native American student from Arizona attending Calvin Theological Seminary. Rather than taking the traditional route into ministry work, he is interested in possibly running a ministry with young people, and we have encouraged him to pursue that goal.

David Shin has been involved in some Race Relations work, and he has led several cross-cultural young people's groups. We have met with David several times over the past few years while he led a youth ministry in Pittsburgh and as he currently leads a children's ministry in the San Francisco area. Our conversations have been deep and fun at the same time.

The work of Diversity this year has included the following:

- raising nearly $50,000 for Race Relations college and graduate scholarships
- beginning the Our Family Conversation task force to make recommendations to senior leadership on improving the classical experiences of diaspora leaders
- holding our first Healing Hearts/Transforming Nations workshop with a binational team in January and February 2023

Diversity
Reginald Smith

Pastor Church Resources

I. Introduction

Pastor Church Resources (PCR) serves pastors, churches, and classes as they seek to promote healthy relationships, encourage one another in ministry, and discern next steps in seasons of growth, transition, or challenge. These efforts aim toward the well-being of pastors and churches and include consultations, support for a variety of continuing education and peer-to-peer learning opportunities, resources for pastor search teams, and guidance for regional pastors and those involved in Specialized Transitional Ministry. Our desire to resource pastors, churches, and classes is an attempt to reflect God's work to provide the church with all the gifts necessary for flourishing (Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12).

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Many of Pastor Church Resources' efforts focus on the Servant Leadership area. For example, Elaine May (Women's Leadership developer) has been coaching a congregation's executive pastor after the retirement of its beloved, longtime senior pastor. Division over COVID-19 protocols and grief over the retirement of the senior pastor caused significant disruptions. The council, recognizing the gifts and experience of the executive pastor, proposed (and the congregation affirmed) a new copastor structure going forward, with the executive pastor moving into an equal-ministry partnership with a second pastor. While the executive pastor, who is a woman, had been preaching in and serving the congregation for 20 years, some in the church became vocal about their disagreement with women's ordination in the CRC.

Through coaching, the pastor has worked to maintain a nonanxious presence in the midst of feeling hurt and betrayed. She has initiated conversations and pursued reconciliation with those who disagree with her serving in the copastor role. Through the use of the pastoral vocational assessment tool and a personal timeline exercise, the pastor has gained clarity and confidence in her calling to the church. She has led the staff, officiated weddings and baptisms and funerals, and welcomed with the hospitality of Jesus all members to the Lord's Supper. While she is uniquely positioned to provide leadership to the congregation as they search for a copastor, she has been able to clearly communicate her calling to the council and to assure them that she does not feel called to be the sole pastor of the congregation. The work of PCR has enabled her to love the people she is called to lead in spite of their disagreements.

III. Connecting with churches

Pastor Church Resources engages all four of the CRC's *Our Journey 2025* milestones in its work. The following example highlights how PCR's work in northern British Columbia engaged the third milestone: growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships. In November 2022, Sean Baker (PCR) and Liz Tolkamp (Faith Formation Ministries and B.C. Restorative

Task Force) hosted a two-day seminar in Telkwa, B.C., on "Becoming a Restorative Congregation." The previous two years had been challenging in northern B.C., where COVID-19 restrictions were particularly difficult and where three of the area's five fairly isolated congregations were without pastors. The seminar, with participants drawn from four northern B.C. congregations, became a place for leaders to learn together, pray together, and encourage one another. The group took to calling themselves "Team North" as they practiced and imagined better ways to make decisions, approach conflict, and discern together. Rev. Joe Ellis and Rev. Joel Ringma, pastors from two of the churches, mentioned that they could not remember the last time leaders from all of the northern B.C. churches got together for something like this training.

Ministry highlights from 2022:

- PCR staff connected with 335 churches and 678 ministry leaders, resulting in almost 950 personal engagements.
- 140 pastors participated in a pastoral vocational assessment and follow-up consultation.
- The *PastorSearch* webpage, available for churches searching for a pastor, had nearly 3,000 pageviews.
- PCR celebrated 40 years of walking alongside congregations and ministry leaders in ways that nurture their well-being.

Pastor Church Resources
Lis Van Harten

Pensions and Insurance

I. Introduction

The Christian Reformed Church in North America maintains employee benefit programs that provide retirement, health, life, and disability benefits for employees of the denomination in its ministries, agencies, local churches, and other CRC organizations.

II. Board matters

The ministers' pension plans, special-assistance funds, and the employees' retirement plans are governed by the U.S. Pension Trustees and the Canadian Pension Trustees. These boards meet several times per year, usually in joint session. Separate meetings of the boards are held as needed.

Lloyd Bierma is completing his second term on the U.S. Pension Trustees board in 2023 and is eligible and recommended for a third three-year term.

III. Benefit-program activities

A. Ministers' pension plans

The ministers' pension plans are defined-benefit plans. Benefits paid by the plans are defined by formula, and the required funding of the plans is determined by actuarial calculations. The primary purpose of the plans is to provide retirement benefits to plan participants. The plans also provide benefits to the surviving spouses of participants as well as to any dependent children who are orphaned. In addition, long-term disability benefits are provided through an insurance product to all full-time, active participants in the plans who have furnished the information concerning compensation and housing as required by the insurance carrier.

The following is a summary of participant counts as of December 31, 2022, for each plan and in total. Participants having an interest in both plans (generally the result of having served churches in both the United States and Canada) appear in the column where they have residence.

	United States	*Canada*	*Total*
Active ministers	648	263	911
Ministers receiving benefit payments	616	160	776
Spouses and dependents	192	50	242
Withdrawn participants with vested benefits	104	27	131
Total	1,560	500	2,060

Independent actuarial firms are employed to prepare valuations of the plans. These actuarial valuations furnish the information needed to determine church and participant assessment amounts. Both plans are required to have a valuation every three years. Information regarding church and participant assessment amounts will be presented later in this report.

1. Portfolio balances and performance

Plan assets are invested in diversified portfolios under the management of professional investment-management firms. These firms are required to adhere to the denomination's investment guidelines, and their performance is measured against established benchmarks and regularly reviewed by the trustees.

The plans' actuaries have informed us that as of the date of the plans' last valuation, on a going concern basis, the actuarial liability totaled approximately $134.7 million for the U.S. plan (as of Dec. 31, 2019) and approximately $48.2 million for the Canadian plan (as of Dec. 31, 2019). These amounts reflect the present value of the plans' future obligations to all participants including active, disabled, and retired pastors, widows, and dependents.

Market value of the portfolios is summarized as follows:

	December 31, 2022	*December 31, 2021*
United States (U.S. $)	$117,364,000	$141,110,000
Canada (Can. $)	74,548,000	86,654,000

Dividends, interest, and appreciation in the value of the plans' holdings along with contributions to the plans provide a significant portion of the resources needed to meet the plans' obligations to the active participants and to fund payments to retirees and beneficiaries.

2. Plan review

The pension plan has undergone several changes since separate plans for the United States and Canada were established in 1983. While the basic defined benefit form of the plan was not altered, changes were made to benefits provided by the plan, to clarify how the plan is administered, and to improve the protocols used to obtain funds needed to pay costs.

3. Funding

All organized churches are plan sponsors and thus are expected to pay church assessments determined by an amount per active professing member age 18 and older or, if greater, the direct costs of their first or only pastor's participation in the plan. The amount of the assessment for 2023 (in local currency) is $37.20 per member in both Canada and the United States, and direct costs have been set at $7,704 for both countries as well. These amounts are collected by means of monthly billings to each organized church, based on reported membership statistics.

All emerging churches and other denominational ministries that employ a minister as a missionary, professor, teacher, or in any other capacity, including organizations that employ endorsed chaplains (with the exception of chaplains serving in the military who are not yet entitled to receive any military pension benefits) are required to pay the annual cost of participation in the plan. All pension assessments, however determined, are billed

monthly, and the grant of credited service for pastors is contingent on timely payment of amounts billed.

B. Employees' retirement plans

The employees' retirement plans are defined-contribution plans covering most employees of participating denominational agencies and ministries who are not ordained as ministers of the Word. In the United States, contributions are paid into the two available defined-contribution plans by participating denominational agencies and ministries in an amount up to 6 percent of compensation. An additional employer contribution of up to 4 percent of compensation is made to match employee contributions of a similar amount. U.S. churches with staff participating in the 403(b)(9) plan set the contribution rates independently. In Canada, contributions of up to 9 percent are paid to the plan by participating employers. In Canada, there are no contributions made to the plan relative to matching employee contributions. In these defined-contribution plans, participants may make additional contributions up to the limits determined by federal or provincial regulation. Participants receive periodic statements indicating the dollar amount credited to their accounts, the value of their accounts, and the vested percentage.

Individual participants direct the investment of their account balances among several investment alternatives, including fixed-income and equity funds. The investment alternatives are currently managed for U.S. participants by Empower Retirement and Envoy Financial, while Great-West Trust serves as custodian of the plan's assets. For Canadian participants, Sun Life Financial Group manages and serves as custodian of the plan's assets.

As of December 31, 2022, the balances in these plans totaled approximately $38,616,000 in the United States and $5,360,000 in Canada. As of that date, there were 357 participants in the U.S. plans and 102 in the Canadian plan, categorized as follows:

	United States	*Canada*
Active	219	85
Inactive	138	17

C. Nonretirement employee benefit programs

Oversight of the denomination's nonretirement employee benefit programs is provided by the Council of Delegates.

Consolidated Group Insurance is a denominational plan that offers health, dental, and life coverage in Canada to ministers and employees of local congregations and denominational agencies and ministries. Currently there are 314 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 224 pastors and employees of local churches, 90 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and no retirees. The plan in Canada is a fully insured plan with coverage purchased through a

major health-insurance provider and is supplemental to health benefits available through government health programs.

In the United States, the denomination offers health, dental, and life coverage to ministers and employees of local congregations and denominational agencies and ministries. Currently there are 370 participants in the program. The most significant categories of participants include 144 pastors and employees of local churches, 122 employees of denominational ministries and agencies, and 104 retirees. The plans are provided by the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) through a trust established to fund benefits and expenses of the plan. RBA was established in July 2013 by the Board of Trustees of the CRCNA and the Board of Benefit Services of the Reformed Church in America to provide nonretirement benefit programs for both denominations.

Premiums charged by the plan in Canada are set by the insurance carrier. The premiums for the U.S. plan are set by RBA based on overall expectations of claims and administrative expenses for the coming year.

D. Financial disclosures

Audited or reviewed financial statements of the retirement plans and of all of the agencies and institutions are made available each year to the treasurer of each classis with the request that they be made available to any interested party. In addition, summary financial statements are included in the *Acts of Synod.* Individualized statements are furnished to active members of the ministers' pension plans and the employees' retirement plans.

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to members of the Canadian Pension Trustees and the U.S. Pension Trustees when insurance matters and matters pertaining to insurance and retirement plans for ministers and employees are discussed.

B. That synod designate up to 100 percent of a minister's early or normal retirement pension or disability pension for 2023 as housing allowance for United States income-tax purposes (IRS Ruling 1.107-1), but only to the extent that the pension is used to rent or provide a home.

C. That synod designate up to 100 percent of an ordained pastor's distributions from their CRC 403(b)(9) Retirement Income Plan in 2023 as housing allowance for United States income-tax purposes (IRS Ruling 1.107-1), but only to the extent that those funds are used to rent or provide a home.

D. That synod by way of the ballot reappoint Lloyd Bierma to a third three-year term on the U.S. Pension Trustees beginning July 1, 2023.

Pensions and Insurance
Shirley DeVries, chief administrative officer

ReFrame Ministries

I. Introduction—Mission and Mandate

ReFrame Ministries serves as the worldwide media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. ReFrame looks much different than when it launched as a single English radio program, *The Back to God Hour*, in 1939. Today our vision is that the lives and worldviews of ***all people around the globe*** will be transformed by God's gospel message.

Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we create contextual media resources that proclaim the gospel, disciple believers, and strengthen the church throughout the world using ten major languages. This work takes place through four core strategies:

- Church rooted: We believe the Holy Spirit works through the church, so we partner with churches to build and strengthen the body of Christ.
- Major languages: We strive to reach the widest possible audience, so we create content in the world's most-spoken languages.
- Context driven: We work with local partners who faithfully contextualize the gospel message and use the most effective media for connecting with diverse audiences.
- Relationship focused: Following the example of Christ, we seek to build long-term, discipling relationships with individual members of our mass audiences.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

The focus of ReFrame Ministries is primarily global mission. All of our work is guided by the Great Commission in Matthew 28. Much of our work also naturally aligns with other parts of the CRCNA's fivefold calling as we seek to work alongside churches and ministries worldwide.

A. Global mission

ReFrame carries out ministry in ten major world languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

Using media, ReFrame is uniquely positioned to provide gospel outreach in nearly every country of the world, even in places where Christian missionaries are not allowed. By proclaiming the gospel through radio, television, Internet, mobile apps, and social media, we are able to reach people who may not otherwise have access to a community of believers or a safe way to ask life's difficult questions. We regularly receive responses from people around the world who testify that they heard about Jesus for the first time through the media resources produced by ReFrame.

1. ReFrame works with about 160 indigenous staff members around the world. Through its partnerships, ReFrame has a ministry presence in 55 countries through production and discipleship centers, broadcast locations, and resource distribution. ReFrame and its partners reach people in nearly every country through Internet and mobile application resources.
2. ReFrame's international partnership ministry teams have developed 27 ministry websites in 10 languages supported by 69 social media pages. ReFrame produces 50 audio programs, about half of which are aired on the radio, and 45 TV/video programs.
3. Together with our partners, ReFrame distributes nearly 2 million printed devotional booklets each year in six languages. In general, the number of printed daily devotions has decreased as we are able to reach more people in more places digitally through email, Facebook, and smartphone apps. We send more than 600,000 devotional emails every day—and this number keeps increasing.

B. Faith formation on the global mission field

ReFrame provides faith formation resources in the English language, primarily for North American audiences. To learn more about those resources, see section III of this report or visit ReFrameMinistries.org/English.

Culturally relevant discipleship resources are also available in the other nine major languages in which ReFrame works with media ministry partners. Produced and distributed in print and online, on social media channels, and through smartphone apps, devotions and faith formation resources are bringing God's Word to people around the world.

1. Audio programs apply God's Word directly to people's lives through Bible teaching programs, offering Reformed and biblical perspectives on current cultural issues within the context of the nations where we do ministry.

   For example, in western Africa, as many internally displaced people from Burkina Faso began fleeing to the city of Kaya, ReFrame's French ministry partners responded by producing a new radio series specifically for those who were fleeing violence and needed to hear the hopeful words that the gospel offers to oppressed people.
2. ReFrame and its partners offer print resources including devotional guides in nearly every language ministry. In total, ReFrame and its partners mail or hand out about 2.1 million devotional guides and other gospel-centered material every year. Much of this content is also available online. In all ten language ministries, we regularly hear from people who are grateful to have a meaningful reflection on God's Word.

   For example, Charleen, a reader of our *Today* devotions, recently shared how the daily readings encouraged her in her faith. "I want to

tell you how much I have enjoyed your devotions this month," Charleen wrote. "I truly receive joy, encouragement, peace, and more than words can say from the *Today* devotions. God bless you."

3. As video-based programs become increasingly popular and accessible, ReFrame and our partners now have 56 different video programs around the world. These programs range from daily, two-minute devotional reflections to hour-long church services for people who tune in remotely. No matter the length, each video program offers the hope of God's truth in an easily accessible format. Most of the programs are available on social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

   After watching a video from our Hindi ministry partners, Kumar wrote, "Through your video programs on Facebook, I get real joy and peace from the Word of God—something the world could not give me."

C. Servant leadership on the global mission field

ReFrame Ministries is blessed to work with Indigenous leaders gifted in both ministry and media. These leaders and their teams provide culturally relevant outreach in each of the ten language ministries in which ReFrame works.

1. International ministry leaders include Rev. Youssef Adel Hanna (Arabic); Pastor Jerry An (Chinese); Robin Basselin and Justin Sterenberg (English codirectors); Rev. Marc Nabie (French); Rev. Arliyanus Larosa (Indonesian); Rev. Masao Yamashita (Japanese); Rev. Hernandes Dias Lopes (Portuguese); Rev. Sergei Sosedkin (Russian); Rev. Huascar de la Cruz (Spanish); and a Hindi ministry leader whose name is withheld for security reasons.

   We praise God for these leaders and for the partnerships they represent—with on-the-ground media ministry workers, denominations, and organizations.

2. The goal of all ReFrame-related training events is to equip leaders for sharing the gospel in the context to which God has called them.

   a. French ministry leader Rev. Marc Nabie hosted Timothy Leadership Training events in several West African nations.

   b. In India and nearby countries, ReFrame's Hindi ministry leader facilitated leadership training events for pastors, church leaders, media producers, and VBS teachers.

   c. Rev. Sergei Sosedkin and his team provided leadership seminars for Russian-speaking students and for future church leaders who are attending universities in Russia and Ukraine.

   d. Rev. Hernandes Dias Lopes leads online courses for church leaders and pastors in Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries.

e. Pastor Jerry An facilitates symposia for church leaders in both Asia and North America to promote the use of media for gospel outreach. In 2022, he led an event for Chinese speakers to address new laws in China and their effects on sharing the gospel on the internet.

D. Mercy and justice on the global mission field

While the mission of ReFrame is primarily global media missions, ministry teams and partners have opportunities to provide comfort and assistance to people who are oppressed, brokenhearted, and disadvantaged. Many programs ReFrame and its partners produce are messages of hope for people who are living in incredibly difficult circumstances—questioning their beliefs in places where it could be dangerous to do so, living in physical poverty, or suffering from sickness. In these ways we also address issues of social justice through our various programs in several languages.

1. Our ministry partners in India practice a holistic approach, providing for physical as well as spiritual needs. The team made a special effort to distribute food and sanitary equipment because many of their listeners are in the society's lowest castes.
2. Our English ministry's *Family Fire* staff has been producing materials for people who are experiencing pain and brokenness in their lives.
3. With the goal of teaching and encouraging Christ-followers to live out their faith, ReFrame also produces the *Think Christian* online blog and the *Groundwork* audio program, which regularly offers discussions on issues related to biblical justice.

   For example, in December 2022, *Think Christian's* blog offered a review of the *Star Wars: Andor* series by comparing scenes from the show to scenes of oppression that we see in our own world. "Andor deals with the slow but constant, suffocating chokehold of the Galactic Empire. It considers what drives people under oppression to radicalize and retaliate with rebellious and immoral acts in the name of justice," the article reads.

E. Gospel proclamation and worship

The core mission of ReFrame and its partners is gospel proclamation through a variety of media, sharing the gospel with people wherever they are in the world. ReFrame continually seeks out culturally relevant and effective ways to proclaim the gospel and to call people into relationship with God.

1. We have increasingly moved to a model of partnership with local denominations and organizations in our international ministries. This provides a greater opportunity for local ownership and sustainability. In Brazil, for example, we partner closely with congregations in the Presbyterian Church of Brazil to distribute biblical content for church

members and the communities they serve in missions, including communities as far away as Angola in southern Africa.

2. As our world moves to a more paperless society, a trend that increased during the pandemic, ReFrame expands the CRC's use of digital outreach for sharing the gospel: developing new apps, growing email and social-media audiences, and sharing almost all content online, even if it's also available offline.

III. Connecting with Churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

ReFrame offers a variety of programs and resources to help congregations and individuals work toward the milestones named in our denominational ministry plan, *Our Journey 2025*.

A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

1. Our English ministry team has grown a network of more than 8,400 prayer partners in North America and throughout the world who pray for people responding to our media outreach programs.
2. Our *Today* devotions, produced since 1950, are available in print, at TodayDevotional.com, by email subscription, on podcast websites, and through mobile applications. We print and distribute about 210,000 *Today* booklets six times each year, and more than 350,000 people have signed up to access the *Today* emails. In addition, about 75,000 people use the *Today* devotional app on their mobile devices.
3. *Groundwork* is a 30-minute audio program and podcast that builds biblical foundations for life. *Groundwork* guides listeners in casual but thoughtful conversations about practical applications of God's Word in today's world. You can listen on the air or online at GroundworkOnline.com.
4. *Think Christian* is a collaborative online magazine that invites readers to practice seeing God in all things—particularly popular music, movies, television, and other forms of pop culture. Rooted in the Reformed tradition, *Think Christian* recognizes that all of culture falls within God's sovereignty and that by his common grace believers and unbelievers alike are capable of creating beautiful things.
5. *Family Fire* is an online community (through Facebook and the website FamilyFire.com) that provides resources to spiritually strengthen families through articles, devotions, email and social-media interaction, and live retreat events.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

1. *Kids Corner* is a program especially geared toward children ages 6-12. This program has transitioned from a single audio program to a growing collection of online resources for children's spiritual growth across North America. *Kids Corner* launched a new website in 2022, making all of these new features, as well as an accompanying parent blog, more readily available and accessible.

2. People of all ages respond to messages in our *Today* devotions. A class of high school students responds to a new set of devotions each year by taking photos and writing reflections that relate to the topic presented that month. Students read the devotions, look for daily reminders of the message topics, and snap photos of them.

C. Growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships

1. ReFrame's global outreach is strengthened through crucial networks of North American and international partners. Strong collaborations create effective partnerships for mission and allow resources to be invested wisely. In addition to our sister ministries within the CRCNA, ReFrame works cooperatively with the following Reformed denominations worldwide: the Reformed Church in America, the Reformed Church in Japan, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, the Indonesian Christian Church, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt, Synod of the Nile. In addition, we partner with evangelical congregations in Eastern Europe, in Africa, in India and surrounding countries, and with house churches and Christian ministries in China.
2. ReFrame Ministries has also partnered with the CRC's Korean Council since 2008 to publish a bilingual Korean-English version of the *Today* devotions.

D. Sharing the gospel, living it missionally, and planting new churches as we connect with our local and global ministry contexts

1. *Church Juice* helps churches be intentional about how to use the wide variety of media tools available to them in order to communicate effectively with their congregations and communities. *Church Juice* offers virtual and in-person opportunities for church communicators to come together (both online and through occasional in-person events), learn, and encourage one another. If you have questions about how your church can improve its communications, start a conversation with *Church Juice* producer Bryan Haley. Email him anytime at bryan@churchjuice.com.
2. ReFrame's English language ministry produces ebooks as downloadable pdfs. Several are also available in print for group discussion or personal growth. Topics from the newest resources include principles of biblical parenting (*Family Fire*), bullying (*Kids Corner*), seeking God in suffering *(Today)*, and prayers of comfort (ReFrame's prayer ministry).
3. ReFrame's Japanese ministry partners offer videos to churches that are part of the Reformed Church of Japan. These videos help to introduce the church to prospective visitors and seekers in the area and offer a glimpse of what a Sunday is like in a typical church. In this way ReFrame helps to grow the global church in Japan using media resources.

4. ReFrame's Hindi ministry team supports the work of church planters in northern India. The team hosts radio-program listener gatherings and offers resources to communities of believers. These gatherings often take place at house churches that are growing into church plants.

IV. Recommendations

A. That Rev. Kurt Selles, director of ReFrame Ministries, be given the privilege of the floor when ReFrame matters are discussed.

B. That synod encourage congregations to use ReFrame's materials to support their own local ministries and outreach.

Note: Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

ReFrame Ministries
Kurt Selles, director

Resonate Global Mission

I. Introduction

As we look back on the past year, we are encouraged to see that mission work remains an area of unity for the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

As a denomination, we stand together on prioritizing God's call to live and share the gospel! Joining God's mission together has been a privilege throughout more than a century of deep-running tradition and commitment. Right now, Resonate Global Mission is at a crossroads—our work is focused on looking toward the future to be able to respond to God's leading and to share the gospel both at home and around the world. And we look forward soon to be able to present a candidate to be recommended as the new Resonate director who will continue to lead this agency into this future.

We are thankful for all that we've accomplished together over the past year, and we hope you will give thanks with us for all that God has done through your support. In addition to the ongoing work of Resonate ministry staff around the world, we are also seeking to sharpen our focus on Resonate's identity as the mission agency of the Christian Reformed Church equipping congregations for mission. This past year also marked the consolidation of Raise Up Global Ministries with Resonate. Raise Up served as a partnership of Timothy Leadership Training, Educational Care, and Global Coffee Break programming.

Synod has mandated Resonate to lead the denomination in its task of bringing the gospel holistically to the people of North America and the world. **In all that we do together—sending missionaries, planting churches, supporting campus ministries, and more—our key strategy is to mobilize our missional leaders.** Through Resonate, you come alongside those whom God is calling to mission-focused ministry to equip and send them to be Christ's witnesses. That's how we are investing your support and working toward a sustainable future.

Thank you for all that you do—in your own neighborhood and around the world. Resonate partners with you, your church, and Christians in more than 40 countries who minister to people of different faiths and cultures. Thank you as well for your prayers and gifts that make this ministry possible. Thanks to your support, the good news of Jesus is going out like an expanding, amplifying sound around the world!

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

As part of our effort to sharpen our focus on mission, we are working to strengthen Resonate's ministry in three important areas that connect with

Global Mission and flow from the milestones of the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan: church planting, mobilizing congregations, and sending missionaries. We also are increasing our programming and curriculum development to strengthen these areas of ministry, now enhanced through the consolidation of Raise Up Global Ministries.

These broad categories are essential to the mission work of this denomination—work that spans the globe and stretches across more than a century of passion for God's mission.

A. Church planting

Resonate partners with classes and established churches to plant new churches in places where the love of Jesus is not yet known or experienced. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Parent churches: We partner with established churches to identify church planting opportunities and the operational systems necessary to establish and sustain their ministry.
2. Partner church plants: We come alongside church planters with networking, coaching, continuing education, and funding.
3. New expressions of church: Church plants are one of the most effective ways we have for reaching new groups of people, so we are developing new methods like microchurch plants, church planter training hubs, and multisite church plants.

Example and Story: A Church Plant for People of All Abilities
Read more at resonateglobalmission.org/cityhope.

B. Mobilizing congregations

Resonate helps congregations live out a biblical and holistic gospel mission in their own communities. Your partnership with Resonate is working to deepen our passion for mission, strengthen our capacity to follow God on mission, and amplify the impact churches have. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Leadership development: We are all missionaries, and our mission field is all around us! Resonate is investing in identifying and equipping individual leaders and teachers worldwide through initiatives like seminary education and training leaders to work alongside others in their communities—whether in North America or overseas.
2. Regional and local teams: Our staff walks alongside congregations to encourage them in fulfilling God's mission. Through our teams of regional mission leaders and local mission leaders, Resonate is investing in training mission committees, forging partnerships, and working with young adults whom God is calling into mission work.
3. Campus ministry: Resonate connects churches with universities and colleges in ministry on more than 40 campuses across North America. Resonate invests in training and supporting campus ministers to be a

faithful presence on campuses and to help students discover God's will for their lives.

Example and Story: You Helped Equip a Student for Her Calling
Read more at resonateglobalmission.org/mickeelie.

C. Sending missionaries

Jesus sends all of his followers into the world as his witnesses. Your partnership with Resonate is working to see an increasing number of diverse, locally rooted, and globally connected congregations and ministries sent to faithfully proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus. Mission work using this strategy includes the following:

1. Identify, prepare, and send mission workers on long-term career mission assignments and short-term volunteer opportunities.
2. Establish and coordinate ministry partnerships with congregations that guide missionary ministry and provide financial support.
3. Offer a full suite of support for missionaries and volunteers, including training, visas, travel, housing, spiritual care, fundraising, etc.

Example and Story: "I Need Jesus"—A Journey of Faith
Read more at resonateglobalmission.org/abraham.

D. Programming to support the ministry

Resonate develops and deploys many different methods to support the three core initiatives of our ministry. Over the past year we have worked to bring a fresh focus to this work. With the recent consolidation with Raise Up Global Ministries, effective January 1, 2023, mission work in this area includes the following:

1. Developing ministry curricula such as Timothy Leadership Training, Educational Care, and Global Coffee Break to be used by ministry staff across Resonate.
2. Providing processes and tools that support and evaluate Resonate's core initiatives.
3. Continuing innovation, education, and training.

The CRCNA chose to consolidate the programming of Raise Up Global Ministries with Resonate because of its close connection and value to Resonate staff worldwide. The programs of Raise Up equip global church leaders by developing biblically based interactive materials and training leaders to facilitate learning and to support change in their lives and communities.

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

Resonate exists to serve our congregations as they share the gospel, live it missionally, and plant churches. Our Christian Reformed congregations are our most important ministry partners, and Resonate can help CRCNA

congregations in equipping young people, supporting diaspora ministry, and engaging in ministry with ethnic minorities.

Our churches and society are struggling with critical issues of diversity and justice. As CRCNA churches increasingly have opportunities to share the life-giving gospel of Christ with people in their communities who may come from diverse backgrounds, we can work together toward God's vision for his church as a unified body of people "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9).

A. Listening to the voices of every generation

Together we can open space for diverse groups of young adults and lay leaders, equipping, mentoring, and discipling them so that we may share the good news and live out the gospel in all areas of life.

Resonate provides opportunities and encouragement to young Christians in a variety of areas, including campus ministry, cohorts, leadership development, and more. The future leaders of the Christian Reformed Church of ten, twenty, and fifty years from now are already in our churches, and together we can equip them to live out their faith and lead others.

Example and Story: Four Young Leaders Living Like Jesus
Read more at resonateglobalmission.org/4youngleaders.

B. Grow in diversity and unity

Resonate ministers with diaspora and ethnic communities. Working in partnership with our regional teams and established churches, we mobilize believers inside and outside communities of immigrants, migrants, refugees, and international students in a way that welcomes and embraces them, communicates God’s love, and calls them to faith in Christ.

One of the biggest opportunities for the CRCNA is to help churches work cross-culturally. Resonate has a variety of programs that specifically resource churches as they build relationships with their communities, such as Journeys into Friendship, Go Local, Church Planting, and others.

Example and Story: A Church Home in Artesia
Read more at resonateglobalmission.org/artesia.

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant Joel Huyser, interim director of Resonate Global Mission, the privilege of the floor when matters pertaining to Resonate Global Mission are addressed.

B. That synod, along with the Council of Delegates, encourage all Christian Reformed congregations to recognize the following Sundays as significant opportunities to pray for and to receive an offering for Resonate Global Mission: Easter, Pentecost, and the second and third Sundays in September.

Note: Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

Resonate Global Mission
Joel Huyser, interim director

Committee for Contact with the Government Centre for Public Dialogue

I. Introduction

The Committee for Contact with the Government (CCG), operating as the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue, is a justice and reconciliation ministry of the Christian Reformed churches in Canada. The Centre for Public Dialogue works to encourage active Christian citizenship, studies critical issues facing Canadian society from a Reformed perspective, and interacts with policy makers and shapers in a constructive manner. Our focus issues are currently refugee rights and resettlement, Indigenous justice and reconciliation, and climate justice. We also strive to be nimble and responsive on critical issues that come up.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

A. Faith formation

We seek to work with local churches in an effort to live into the call to seek God's justice and peace in every area of life. We do this in the following ways:

1. Providing liturgical and devotional resources connected to Indigenous justice, refugee rights, and climate care via our website and social media. We support binational efforts like the CRCNA Day of Justice (August) and provide devotional resources in connection with our Lenten challenge and offering Sunday.
2. Gathering local church members to tell stories and think together about Christ's call to justice through our *Do Justice* blog (dojustice.crcna.org). Through our *Do Justice* columnists initiative, CRC and RCA writers from across North America have regularly shared the ways they are wrestling with the call to do justice in their own local contexts. Our fifteen regular columnists (including eight people of color) focus on specific issues from poverty to climate change to Reformed theological reflections to refugee sponsorship. *Do Justice* has further expanded into a podcast format. This year two seasons were produced. One focused on the intersection of charity and advocacy, and the second considered how worship shapes our approach to justice.
3. Working closely with the Canadian Ministries justice mobilizer to develop and animate learning opportunities on justice and reconciliation. We continue to respond to church requests for virtual and in-person sessions and recorded materials. We are also engaged in longer-term projects with groups like Act Five at Redeemer University.

B. Mercy and justice

We assist local churches in loving mercy and doing justice as follows:

1. Communicating with government, through direct interaction with policy makers and shapers from our office in Ottawa, Ontario, and through mobilizing Christian citizens to interact with their elected representatives. We continue to work closely with partners to help local churches respond to urgent issues of justice and reconciliation. These partnerships include World Renew, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, KAIROS, and Citizens for Public Justice. We continue to raise the issue of long wait times for refugees alongside our partners at World Renew who are Refugee Sponsorship Agreement holders. We work alongside the Climate Witness Project to encourage local responsibility and citizen advocacy for climate justice.
2. Responding to requests for information from churches and members on current issues of concern. This has included requests for information on Bill C-4 regarding conversion therapy, on refugees, and on medical assistance in dying. Our advocacy-awareness raising continues to be appreciated by constituents. We heard this feedback regarding a refugee action alert: "Thank you for sharing it. It was a shock to realize the scope of the problem."
3. Working with CRCNA partners to bring justice-themed learning experiences to churches: *Faith in Action: Practicing Biblical Advocacy* is a practical citizen planning and action tool that was launched as an online workshop this year using the Thinkific platform. The Hearts Exchanged program continues to be an important pillar of work in collaboration with Indigenous Ministries. Thirteen cohorts are taking place across Canada.
4. Advocacy continues on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. We build on churches' understanding of the importance of community involvement in education through the Education Together campaign. We advocate with them to support this essential right for Indigenous youth.

C. Gospel proclamation and worship

Doing justice and reconciliation is gospel proclamation—we know and celebrate that Christ is renewing all things and that he calls us to be colaborers in this task. When the church does justice, our witness is stronger and has more integrity. As such, the work and partnerships mentioned above are an element of gospel proclamation and are motivated by a conviction that justice and worship are integrated.

III. Connecting with churches

A. Engaging younger members

Young people make up the largest portion of our *Do Justice* blog audience: just under 38 percent of our readers are under age 34, and more than 50 percent are under age 44. Additionally, over a quarter of our social-media followers are under age 44. We continue to cultivate younger members, including through the *Do Justice* podcast, with 43 percent of listeners under age 34.

B. Assisting churches within their local contexts

We regularly connect with churches across the country to help them seek justice. We offered an online session of the Our Faith in Action workshop alongside opportunities for people to participate at their own pace. We continue to connect with churches on climate change through partnership with the Climate Witness Project—for example, hosting Christian climate scientist Katherine Hayhoe and subsequent Zoom discussion groups. We regularly respond to requests for workshops and email inquiries.

Committee for Contact with the Government/
Centre for Public Dialogue
Mike Hogeterp, research and communications manager

Disability Concerns

I. Introduction

Congregational Ministries' efforts in Disability Concerns strive toward the full participation of all people with disabilities in the life of the church. Together with Disability Concerns of the Reformed Church in America, Disability Concerns pursues its mission:

> Following God's call to mutual love and service, Disability Concerns collaborates with churches and partner organizations to break individual and systemic barriers that keep people with disabilities from full participation—so that churches truly reflect the body of Christ where everybody belongs and everybody serves.

The 2021-22 theme for Disability Concerns focused on equipping young adult disability advocates to lead the church into an accessible future. That theme played out in a variety of ways, including a year-long cohort coaching young adults in disability advocacy in collaboration with the RCA's NextGen program. The theme for 2022-23 is Let's End Ableism at Church. Learning about ableism helps us understand the experiences of people with disabilities at church and why people with disabilities are underrepresented in our churches.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

The church's call to mercy can be described as having compassion for the experiences of people on the margins. Likewise, the church's call to justice can be described as equity for all people. Within this framework of mercy and justice Disability Concerns works to raise awareness of the experiences of marginalization that people with disabilities often face at church and to make changes toward equity so that all people have access to full participation in the life of the church.

People with disabilities often feel marginalized when they ask for an accommodation and are dismissed. The responses come in many forms: "It's not in the budget," "It's not our priority right now," or even, "They can just go to a different church." That is ableism at work. The message to people with disabilities is "You're not worth it." Dr. Amy Kenny sums it up well in our book of the year, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request:*

> I picture Jesus telling the church who fought against the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act): "Depart from me, for I was in a wheelchair and you gave me no ramp; I was d/Deaf, and you gave me no interpreter; I was blind, and you gave me no visual descriptions. I needed an accessible bathroom, and you did not install one because it was too expensive. I asked you not to insult me by saying 'lame,' and you laughed at me. I wanted to be included, and you said it would violate your faith commitments. I was disabled, and you did not accommodate me."

The River Community Church in Edmonton, Alberta, is actively working to raise awareness of the experiences of people with disabilities and to

make changes that communicate the worth and value of each person. At a meeting with other disability advocates organized by Disability Concerns, Kathy Dempsey-Glegloff, a church disability advocate, shared that her church is just now starting to think about disability. Last fall their Social Justice book club read *Sitting Pretty* by Rebekah Taussig, who uses a wheelchair. As a church, they have been building awareness in their congregation by sharing the testimonies from *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*, published by Disability Concerns in 2022. They also have established an accessibility working group, written and passed an accessibility policy, worked to reduce ableist language, and completed a congregational accessibility survey. Kathy and her group are energetic and excited about what is happening. This is one story about a church that is beginning to make headway so that *everybody belongs and everybody serves.*

III. Connecting with churches

Disability Concerns helps the CRCNA work toward growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships, in alignment with the third milestone of the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan. People with disabilities are the largest minority group in North America, and yet they are often left out of the diversity conversation. Disability is an important form of diversity that deserves the same kind of intentionality as other types of diversity.

In August 2022, Disability Concerns hosted a two-day training called "Let's End Ableism at Church." One of our keynote speakers, Rev. Melinda Baber, shared how she has experienced ableism:

> "As a young child, I was first exposed to television by watching *Sesame Street* when I was six. And I remember that at the time on *Sesame Street* they were teaching young kids about categories and differences—and there was a song that played, saying, 'One of these things is not like the others; one of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell which one is not like the others before we finish our song?' I internalized that message because I was very different from most other kids I knew. The ableist message that because I was different, I didn't belong, is something that I have encountered from individuals and from the culture in the United States—and in particular from the church culture. I didn't belong, I was told, in a regular classroom; I didn't belong in ministry and leadership; I didn't belong in public spaces. And, to their credit, *Sesame Street* has changed that song."

God's people have diverse bodies, diverse ways of thinking, diverse ways of getting around, diverse ways of sensing the world, and diverse ways of communicating. Disability Concerns helps churches approach God's diverse people with openness and adaptability, celebrating the gifts that each person brings.

IV. Disability Concerns by the numbers (2022)

- 1,583 recipients (on average) of the Disability Concerns e-newsletter
- 1,234 video views on the Disability Concerns YouTube channel

- 365 church disability advocates in the CRCNA
- 199 churches that honored Disability Awareness Sunday in the CRCNA
- 149 attendees (a record number!) at our two-day training "Let's End Ableism at Church"
- 28 regional disability advocates in the CRCNA
- 20 (and counting) churches hosting book clubs on the Disability Concerns book of the year *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*
- 9 young adults participating in our year-long Disability Advocacy Journey
- 9 modules in the new Disability Concerns Ministry Advocate Training Program

Disability Concerns
Lindsay Wieland Capel

Indigenous Ministry (Canada)

I. Introduction

The Indigenous Ministry is made up of a national committee (Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee), three Urban Indigenous Ministries, and a senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation, each using their strengths to support healing and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

A. Faith formation

1. Hearts Exchanged is a learning and action journey designed to equip Reformed Christians to engage with Indigenous people as neighbors and fellow imagebearers. This colearning setting models the sacred journey of reconciliation, preparing us as Christians to build relationships with Indigenous communities that are marked by mutual respect and reciprocity. Participants are transformed in their minds and hearts as they are invited into honest dialogue about the harms of colonialism and as they encounter "hearts broken" stories and experiences. A seasonal cycle of cohorts has continued this year, with thirteen groups meeting across the country.
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministries continue to support growth in their local communities. For example, the Indigenous Family Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, engaged families in Circle of Security parenting training.

B. Mercy and justice

1. Resources, studies, and other tools are available as reconciliation becomes a stronger theme in CRC churches—not just reconciliation with God through Christ but also with people in Canada. Given the history of the church in Canada, the process of reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples is an important part of the way the Canadian CRC has made real the work toward shalom. This year we featured several Indigenous voices regularly on the *Do Justice* blog and podcast to equip congregations for further justice conversations.
2. Together with the Centre for Public Dialogue and KAIROS, the KAIROS Blanket Exercise is a workshop we continue to share throughout Canada. It has provided many people with an opportunity to understand the injustices faced by Indigenous people in the history of Canada, especially with regard to land claims.
3. Advocacy for Indigenous rights is another important component of Indigenous ministry in Canada. The work on Indigenous education reform carried out by the Committee for Contact with the Government/Centre for Public Dialogue (crcna.org/publicdialogue) involves

working with a broad coalition of churches and Indigenous organizations to encourage public awareness and action in Indigenous education.

4. Creative and winsome programs continue at each of the Urban Indigenous Ministries. The Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan, and the Native Healing Centre in Edmonton, Alberta, served meals in the thousands and offered other opportunities such as beading circles and exercise classes.

C. Gospel proclamation and worship

1. Resources were created for Indigenous Ministry Sunday. The bulletin insert this year featured materials on welcome through music. We created a call to worship and collaborated with Cree musician Don Amero to provide a special song for Indigenous Ministry Sunday. We continue to hear feedback of appreciation like this from local churches: "Yesterday our congregation marked Indigenous Peoples Day. We did so by using the prayer prepared by CIMC, which was a great assist, and very helpful in our speaking to the Lord in this regard. The congregation really appreciated it, and many told me it was a great way to learn and hear the Word of God."
2. The Urban Indigenous Ministries in Winnipeg, Regina, and Edmonton help to meet the spiritual and social needs of Indigenous Canadians. These ministries are highly regarded by the communities they serve. Ministry participants value the dignity and respect they experience as they attend and participate in the programs and community activities.

III. Connecting with churches

A. Cultivating practices of prayer and spiritual discipline

The Indigenous Ministry regularly offers prayers and devotions for churches. These are available in print form and on our growing YouTube channel. This year a prayer reflection for National Truth and Reconciliation Day was widely used. Each of the urban ministries regularly hosts culturally appropriate prayer.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

The Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee currently has a mix of ages and backgrounds serving on the committee, including two members under the age of 30. Resources are shared to engage kids in Indigenous justice, and the urban ministries offer programming for kids such as music classes and bike exchanges.

C. Growing in diversity and unity

The senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation regularly responds to community requests asking for regional support for reconciliation. This included speaking at events such as "Place, Home, and Land:

An Evening of Storytelling," hosted in collaboration with Redeemer University, Meadowlands CRC, and the Act Five program.

D. Sharing the gospel

We echo the words of our justice and reconciliation partners at the Centre for Public Dialogue: "Doing justice and reconciliation is gospel proclamation—we know and celebrate that Christ is renewing all things and that he calls us to be colaborers in this task. When the church does justice, our witness is stronger and has more integrity. As such, the work and partnerships mentioned above are an element of gospel proclamation and are motivated by a conviction that justice and worship are integrated."

Indigenous Ministry (Canada)
Adrian Jacobs, senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation

Race Relations

I. Introduction

Race Relations has been an important ministry within the CRC for over 50 years. In the past two years, as contextualized ministry conversations have continued to develop across the denomination, distinct efforts have emerged in Canada and the U.S. in relation to the work of antiracism, diversity, and race relations. This report focuses on the efforts of U.S.-based staff.

In 2021 the Council of Delegates approved a temporary mandate for the U.S. Race Relations staff while a broader review and vision for Race Relations is being developed. The current operational mandate is as follows:

> CRC Race Relations staff will create and provide effective and collaborative training programs and organize actions with congregational, classis, synod, and agency leaders to increase their commitment and competence in addressing racism. Staff will seek opportunities to
>
> - engage leadership and field inquiries for collaborative learning programs and organizing actions that envision intercultural conciliation throughout the CRCNA.
> - mobilize congregants and staff members to help lead them into greater awareness of racialized injustice.
> - engage CRC members and staff to stand against racism in their personal lives, work to dismantle racism in all its forms, and experience true biblical reconciliation as a diverse and unified people of God.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Race Relations expresses God's love by living into mercy and justice goals through creating resources, leading workshops, training facilitators, and consulting with church leaders. By working alongside the body of believers, Race Relations seeks to dismantle the causes and effects of racism. In this reconciliation work, churches are called to express God's love through living justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

Ivanrest CRC (Grandville, Mich.) reached out to the Race Relations team in November 2022 (Native American Heritage month) and invited us to make a presentation and help build their cultural intelligence. We brought two of our facilitators, Harry Descheene and Darlene Silversmith from the Dine' Nation, to talk about the history of Indigenous people with the church. They shared personal stories of interactions in the past and of the results occurring today. Because of this encounter, the Ivanrest congregation felt the need to participate in the Blanket Exercise workshop, which delves into U.S. history from the Native American perspective. After the workshop one participant said, "I feel betrayed by the [school] education I received. My experience today completely changes my concept toward

Native Americans." The congregation invited Race Relations staff to continue in conversation with them about racism and about further steps they can take to become active agents of change.

III. Connecting with churches

Our Race Relations team has prioritized the third milestone in the *Our Journey 2025* ministry plan: growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships. Through the Multiracial Student Scholarship Fund, for example, Race Relations works to develop multiracial congregational leadership in the CRCNA. In 2022, Race Relations awarded six scholarships to students attending institutions of higher learning affiliated with the denomination. HoonJae Lee, a scholarship recipient and student at Calvin Theological Seminary, commented: "The scholarship has allowed me to enter this seminary year knowing that finances will not get in the way of my studies."

Along with providing economic assistance, our staff meets with scholarship recipients throughout the school year to mentor, encourage, and build relationships. These relationships are reciprocal. As students share their personal stories and contexts, their diverse narratives expand our awareness of the ongoing need to build unity through racial reconciliation.

Race Relations staff engaged with congregations through several other initiatives this year, including the following:

- Outreach events: We bring churches and community members together to learn about moving themselves and mobilizing their peers toward healing the wounds and racial divide caused by hundreds of years of racial injustice in the United States. These experiential events such as our 50th-anniversary celebration, MLK celebration, and Sankofa Journey immerse people and lead toward transformation and restoration.
- Relationally-focused engagement: Through training, mentoring, and caring, Race Relations facilitators go out to congregations, share their knowledge, and engage people with impactful stories and experiences, building new relationships in the process.
- Creating resources: By consulting with church leaders and training facilitators, Race Relations staff discern churches' needs and develop new resources to help congregations dismantle racism. They promote and make the materials widely available through social media, newsletters, webinars, and special training.
- Promoting education: Through collaborative efforts with the CRCNA Antiracism and Reconciliation Team, Race Relations provided antiracism training for core leadership, including CRCNA staff, the Council of Delegates, and local churches.

- Workshop opportunities: Race Relations facilitated a variety of workshops, including Cultural Intelligence Building; Leadership and Race; the Blanket Exercise; Ideology of Whiteness; Racism: Looking Back, Moving Forward; and sessions at Inspire 2022.

Race Relations
Sarah Roelofs

Safe Church

I. Introduction

Congregational Ministries' Safe Church team equips congregations in abuse prevention, awareness, and response to help build communities where the value of each person is protected, where people are free to worship and grow in their faith free from abuse, and where the response to abuse is compassion and justice, which foster healing.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Synod formed Safe Church as a response to the cries of people who have experienced the tragic and traumatic wounding of sexual, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual abuse. Recent statistics suggest that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men in North America experience abuse in their lifetime. Unfortunately studies of church populations suggest that the statistics within the body of Christ are no different. The work of Safe Church continues, then, to be a response to this grievous reality and a testimony to the denomination's commitment to do all it can to come alongside people who are vulnerable to protect and care for them.

This year's abuse awareness theme, Safe Church Basics: Five Steps to a Safer Church, helped churches to live more fully into this commitment to protect and care for people who are vulnerable. The second of the five steps, making/revising a safe church policy, gained a significant amount of traction this year as churches began assembling more freely in person after the lifting of pandemic cautions and restrictions. To help churches get started in making or revising their policies, Safe Church launched a safe church policy template, which includes guidelines for safe pastoral care, policies regarding safe use of social media and technology, and a list of guidelines and expectations for all ministry leaders around conduct and faithful use of power. A growing number of churches have decided to take advantage of this resource and have invited Safe Church staff to consult with them on developing or revising their policies in ways that attend to the specific contours of their ministries. It is exciting to see churches take this initiative, and we hope this year to work with more churches on creating safe environments in our congregations and ministries.

III. Connecting with churches

Safe Church contributes to *Our Journey 2025* by working with churches to cultivate the necessary conditions and culture that enhance the church's effectiveness in all of its ministry plan milestones. When a church is not safe, when abuse, misconduct, or mistreatment of others goes unchecked, those who attend are not able to participate freely in prayer and other spiritual disciplines. Youth and children feel too vulnerable to raise their voices. People outside the majority culture do not feel welcome. And our very witness to the gospel is compromised. In other words, our milestones of cultivating spiritual practices, listening to the voices of every generation, growing in diversity, and sharing the gospel can only be realized

when our churches attend to protecting the value of each person and putting in place policies and practices that prevent abuse.

One focus of Safe Church in connecting with congregations this year was on the use and misuse of power by ministry leaders. Since 2021, all candidates for ministry in the CRC have received training in the use and misuse of power through an online course titled *The Power to Do Good*. This year, however, more and more churches and classes have invited Safe Church to lead this training for current pastors, elders, deacons, ministry staff, and volunteers.

In fall 2022, for instance, Classis Hamilton set aside time during their classis meeting to provide training on abuse of power to all present. Participants were introduced to the basic concepts of what constitutes abuse of power and were given a scenario to engage with in order to discuss it more fully. A similar workshop was hosted by Classis Niagara earlier in the year. In evaluations conducted after the trainings, participants commented that they learned a lot and that they appreciated the different opportunities to engage the topic through Bible study, small group conversations, personal reflection, exercises and worksheets, and case studies. One thing that became evident throughout the training events was that even if a leader is not prone to misusing power, gaining a better understanding of the use and misuse of power is critical toward cultivating a safe and healthy culture within a congregation and toward being attentive to why some feel welcome and safe while others do not. Safe Church believes that training all ministry leaders on how to steward their power intentionally in ways that serve the ministry and mission of God is a key step to making our churches and ministries safer and more hospitable places for all.

In 2022, Safe Church also connected with Christian Reformed congregations through the following ministry activities:

- 61 persons received training to facilitate restorative listening circles.
- 82 people completed abuse of power training.
- Safe Church had over 120 interactions with churches and individuals about distinct situations regarding abuse prevention and response.
- 6 webinars provided Safe Church training to safe church coordinators, teams, and individuals.

Safe Church protocols in churches across the CRCNA

Synod 2018 asked Safe Church to keep track of and report on the efforts of churches throughout the CRCNA to implement Safe Church protocols. The data below is based on the responses of 772 congregations to the annual *Yearbook* survey in 2022 (659 responded in 2021).

- 83.7% have a written safe church or abuse prevention policy (88.5% reported in 2021).
- 62.1% have protocols in place for responding to church leader misconduct (65.4% in 2021).

- 39.1% have a safe church team or committee (42.5% in 2021).
- 35.5% require training for pastors, elders, and deacons regarding the use and potential abuse of power associated with their position (32.6% in 2021).
- 15.8% use a prevention program with children and youth (16.5% in 2021).

Classical safe church coordinators and teams in the CRCNA

Synod 2018 also requested annual reporting on the names and number of classes that have safe church teams. According to data received from the *Yearbook* questionnaire and input from our coordinators, we can report the following:

- 35 of 49 classes have a safe church team and/or a safe church coordinator (10 of 11 Canadian classes; 25 of 38 U.S. classes).
- 14 classes do not appear to have either a coordinator or a safe church team (1 of 11 Canadian classes; 13 of 38 U.S. classes).

Following are lists of the classes that have or do not have a safe church team:

Classes that have a safe church coordinator or team:

Alberta North
Alberta South/ Saskatchewan
Arizona
Atlantic Northeast
B.C. North-West
B.C. South-East
California South
Columbia
Eastern Canada
Georgetown
Grand Rapids East
Grand Rapids South
Grandville
Greater Los Angeles
Hackensack
Hamilton
Heartland
Holland
Hudson
Huron
Iakota
Illiana
Kalamazoo
Lake Erie
Minnkota
Muskegon
Niagara
Northcentral Iowa
Ontario Southwest
Pacific Northwest
Rocky Mountain
Southeast U.S.
Toronto
Wisconsin
Zeeland

Classes that do not have a safe church team or coordinator:

Central California
Central Plains
Chicago South
Grand Rapids North
Hanmi
Ko-Am
Lake Superior
North Cascades
Northern Illinois
Northern Michigan
Quinte
Red Mesa
Thornapple Valley
Yellowstone

Safe Church
Amanda Benckhuysen

Social Justice

I. Introduction

The CRC's Social Justice efforts help Christian Reformed people put Christ's love into action around the world and in their own communities. The mandate for these efforts is

> to encourage and assist the CRCNA—its leaders, agencies, institutions, and members—to better 'live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God' (Mic. 6:8). It focuses primarily on the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, and powerlessness, as well as those social injustices to which synod or the [Council of Delegates] has directed it.
> (*Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 75)

Working with churches and individuals, Social Justice team members assist the CRC in responding to social justice issues identified by synod—primarily climate change, immigration and refugees, sanctity of human life, religious persecution, hunger and poverty, and restorative justice. The Committee for Guidance and Support of Social Justice assists in

> effectively addressing all relevant levels of U.S. government on significant and pressing issues of the day from an integrally biblical, theological, and confessional perspective, expressed in terms of a Reformed worldview, emphasizing whenever possible the official positions of the CRCNA as adopted by synod. (*Agenda for Synod 2019*, p. 45)

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

One of the ways in which we engage in the work of mercy and justice is through equipping churches and individuals to work for their neighbors' good at a systemic level. In equipping congregants to understand advocacy as a spiritual discipline, we support people to contact their legislators on synodically mandated topics. This year we celebrated the passage of the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act.

Laura Jen with Princeton CRC in Kentwood, Michigan, shared how she has lived out the church's calling to mercy and justice through advocacy: "In the past I have found the OSJ/CWP pre-scripted emails helpful, with the contact info to the correct legislator available with the click of a button. Personally, I trust info that comes from your office. Your work and research make it easy to take action, giving me no excuse not to contact my legislator."

III. Connecting with churches

The work of Social Justice supports growing in diversity and unity as we build relationships, especially through workshops, webinars, and public-policy advocacy work. Our most popular workshops, developed at synod's request and regularly offered throughout the denomination, continue to be helpful to congregations seeking to take steps to engage in justice and advocacy.

We offered our Church between Borders workshops to U.S. congregations—providing an opportunity for educating members about the process for immigrating, the history of immigration policy, scriptural guidance in considering the issue of immigration, and how to raise a collective voice for justice. In response, we continue to hear stories like this from church members: "Just wanted to note that the resources listed on your website for immigration conversations were INCREDIBLY helpful to me in putting together a talk on immigration at the southern border for some high school students earlier this week. . . . It's work like yours that keeps us focused (and sometimes—on the hard days—keeps us serving within the CRC). Thank you!!"

Social Justice staff engaged with congregations in a variety of other ways this past year, including the following:

- Our Climate Witness Project, conducted in partnership with World Renew, worked with more than 200 congregational members in more than 40 Christian Reformed churches across the U.S. and Canada to respond to the biblical call to love others and be good stewards of creation through a variety of events and communications.
- We also provide focused training and leadership development through the Faith in Action workshop, Justice 101 workshops, and restorative justice consultations and trainings.
- Engagement with the *Do Justice* blog and podcast continues to be strong. The podcast has over 7,000 listeners. And this year more than 25 percent of writers were people of color.
- We continue to connect with a wide range of people. This includes a Facebook audience of over 5,000 people and email lists of over 7,000 subscribers. Advent devotions went out to over 4,100 people this year.

Social Justice
Sarah Roelofs

World Renew

I. Introduction

A. Mandate

In 1962, twelve years after the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America was formally asked to "consider the advisability of appointing a Synodical Diaconal Committee" (*Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 63), synod approved the formation of the denomination's diaconal agency. Its mandate was "to minister in the name of our Lord to those distressed by reason of the violence of nature, the carnage of war, or other calamities of life, and to relieve the suffering of the needy in the world."

For 60 years World Renew has fulfilled this mandate, reaching out in Christ's name to support vulnerable people around the world. In its essence and existence, World Renew works to respond to God's call to live justly and to love mercy as the global community faces extreme poverty, hunger, displacement, and disaster. Because we serve a God whose heart is most concerned with people who are oppressed, we seek to help renew hope where there is despair, contributing to a world where every one of God's people can flourish.

B. Mission and ministry

Over the past year World Renew has recognized the particular urgency around hunger as it threatens more and more people. According to the World Food Programme, "a record 349 million people across 79 countries are facing acute food insecurity—up from 287 million in 2021. This constitutes a staggering rise of 200 million people compared to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. More than 900,000 people worldwide are fighting to survive in famine-like conditions." And while the pandemic has contributed dramatically, we recognize the compounding effects of conflict and climate change as all three of these factors contribute to a "perfect storm" causing so many people to struggle to survive.

With your prayers, involvement, and support World Renew was able to partner globally with 57 Christian churches and outreach partners, helping 649,667 participants change their stories of fear, despair, and trauma to stories of new-found strength and hope in 2022. Walking alongside participants as they begin to flourish the way God intended is an honor for our team.

World Renew strives to be an instrument of peace to be used for God's glory—all the more so as we work to shift power to the partners and communities in the 30 countries where we have programs. Through the church worldwide and the servants called to ministry, lives are transformed, and all glory goes to God.

In 2022, World Renew had the great joy of celebrating its 60-year anniversary with supporting communities across the United States and Canada. Looking back on the faithfulness God has shown, we were also able to

look forward as we imagine what God may have in store. To continue fulfilling our mandate, we believe that working with communities in the areas of food security, economic opportunity, disaster response, community health, and peace and justice is the key to opening doors for the Spirit to change lives in amazing ways.

Through community development programs in 1,339 communities, 261,033 participants were reached in the key areas of food security, economic opportunity, community health, and peace and justice. They were able to build new health, agriculture, livelihood, and leadership skills that improved their lives for the long term. Additionally, 388,634 survivors of violence, drought, flooding, storm, and COVID-19 benefited from World Renew's disaster response programs in 2022.

World Renew has never received CRC ministry shares. Instead it depends primarily on the generous donations and offerings of God's people to support its work in communities of poverty. In 2022 in the face of remarkable economic uncertainty, World Renew received more than $16.5 million (USD) in gifts from individuals and churches who understand that the neighbors Jesus calls us to love live not only next door but on the other side of the world as well. This work was supported by 604 volunteers who donated their time and gifts to people in need, totaling 48,009 hours of time, or the equivalent of over 20 full-time employees. Seventeen international relief managers volunteered their time to serve in places of greatest need, able once again to travel after waiting patiently and working remotely during the pandemic.

For a more detailed account of our work over the last year, please refer to the World Renew 2022 Ministry Report at worldrenew.net (U.S.) and worldrenew.ca (Canada).

Compelled by God's deep passion for justice and mercy, World Renew works alongside partners and communities, building programs that focus on every area of need and that allow participants to tap into God-given resources and talents to find renewed hope for the future. Because of its integrated nature in addressing the whole person, World Renew's work not only touches all five of the CRC's ministry priorities but makes a focused contribution to the church's mercy and justice ministry and servant leadership development. World Renew's work is not only integrated; it is a fully fledged collaboration by the church of Jesus Christ with Christian partners who help people in need, advocate for justice, train local leaders, and develop biblically based community values that strengthen the message of the local church around the world.

In 2022, World Renew continued to fulfill its mission to "engage God's people in redeeming resources and developing gifts in collaborative activities of love, mercy, justice, and compassion." But the true mission leaders in our work are the project participants who decide that in faith they will imagine more for their lives and who God created them to be. "They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for

they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them" (Isa. 65:23).

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

A. Faith formation

At World Renew faith formation serves as a foundation for keeping our motivation for justice and mercy front and center. Our staff participate in prayer times, devotions, small groups, book studies, and educational experiences that develop their faith. There are ongoing conversations around how we can ensure that our faith in God guides every step.

In North America, World Renew's faith formation resources include devotions, videos, webinars, and in-person educational conversations and curriculum for churches. Our Justice team (U.S.) and our Church and Community Engagement Team (Canada) focus on how churches and Christian leaders can align their work with God's heart for people on the margins of society. Our team offers instruction and interaction at schools and universities to challenge young people to consider how their faith and deeds can be aligned with God's purposes for the body of Christ. Meanwhile, our Southern Africa team is developing an app that offers a biblical basis for conservation agriculture, healthy families, good stewardship, and more so that community leaders can be inspired and led by the Holy Spirit to participate in activities that support the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health of their neighbors. And in Latin America our partnerships with local diaconal ministries inspire action and advocacy that flow from deep faith building and thoughtful engagement with the Word. Across all of our ministry teams our 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence have encouraged thought about how our faith should inform healthy relationships, particularly through the use of a devotional guide throughout the campaign. The *Do Justice* podcast hosted by World Renew, the Office of Social Justice, and the Centre for Public Dialogue is a conversation starter for people wishing to pursue justice in and through the Christian church, finding new ideas and perspectives, sharing better ways to engage in justice work, and growing in faith. For example, addressing gender roles in Tanzania let to some positive results:

- In places like Tanzania, faith formation takes place through a local church that has been leading community dialogues and gender-inclusive interventions in partnership with World Renew. That has led to an evolution in the role of the church in the community. "People have been going to church to learn only to be saved and to stop sinning," says Mary Onyango, a member of the church. "But it has come to the point that a Christian has to be different, has to take positive steps."
- One of the steps bringing the greatest impact in Mary's community has been in reviewing marriage and family roles, specifically the treatment of women and children. In one memorable intervention, the church held a "children's party" in which kids were the first

served. This was a radical change. "According to local traditions and customs, children and women should not be the first at all when items are being received," Mary explains. "But because we are in the church, there should be changes. What does Jesus state about women? What does he state about children as family members? Our Lord Jesus valued them and used them greatly."

- The result of these trainings? Remarkable change. Church members now see ideas like respecting girls and treating them fairly with new eyes. "When they are taught or empowered," Mary says, "their minds open up to see that everyone is created in the image of God."

Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Luke 10:27).

B. Servant leadership

Recruiting and training servant leaders is one of the great joys of the World Renew team. Across the world, building leadership capacity is a fundamental part of our calling. This can mean training birth attendants to help serve women in labor, hiring interns to contribute to and learn from our teams, or supporting program participants as they pursue new skills to build income for their families.

Another significant way that World Renew nurtures servant leadership is through our volunteer programs. For instance, participants in our Global Volunteers Program take time and resources to come and learn from God's people in different contexts. World Renew's amazing international relief managers put their expertise to work for no personal gain except the experience of living and working with people in the most dire circumstances. And our Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement program is run almost entirely by volunteers who raise support for newcomers to Canada, except for a small team to make World Renew's tremendous responsibilities as a Sponsorship Agreement Holder happen.

The majority of those who have volunteered with World Renew, though, may be our "Green Shirts"—the Disaster Response Services (DRS) volunteers. These dedicated and hardworking individuals make our efforts to assist with long-term recovery after a disaster in North America possible. In 2022 in Canada, recovery efforts from Hurricane Fiona were supported through partnerships rather than direct volunteers. The majority of DRS projects take place in the United States, where flooding and severe storms are so commonplace in many regions that residents can't get insurance and can lose their homes. Following Hurricane Ian, teams are working in Fort Myers and Daytona, Florida. Many disaster-recovery efforts are long-term and remain ongoing for years. The following account describes a part of the recovery from Hurricane Hanna, which made landfall south of Corpus Christi, Texas, in July 2020:

- In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Texans like Umbelina, who is disabled and elderly, faced Hurricane Hanna and the damage it did in their communities. Coming from the Gulf of Mexico with sustained winds of 93 m.p.h. and 12 inches of rainfall, Hanna wrecked homes, tore through roofs and walls, and downed tree limbs and power poles.
- When Hurricane Hanna made landfall, Umbelina fearfully sheltered in her home with her caregiver. The strength of the wind made holes in the walls, and water that came in stood for months afterward, resulting in mold. Several places in the ceiling and walls needed repairs, and one hallway was left without sheetrock or a ceiling. Elderly and unable to take on rebuilding projects on her own, Umbelina lived in her bedroom while the rest of her home was filled with construction materials waiting to be used in a rebuild project. Umbelina felt stuck, unsure of how to solve the problems Hurricane Hanna had left behind.
- Disaster Response Services volunteers spent two weeks transforming Umbelina's house while she stayed with her caregiver. The volunteers rebuilt the main bedrooms and closets. They installed new lighting, patched concrete walls, painted the concrete floor, and repaired and painted the walls and ceilings. When the assignment was completed, they led Umbelina in a "last-nail ceremony," celebrating her new rebuild by tapping in the last nail and gifting her a quilt and a Spanish Bible.

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).

C. Global mission

At World Renew we believe our call to be witnesses of Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth starts and ends with local churches and denominations. Our expertise is in building strong partnerships with churches from Grand Rapids to Guatemala, from Bangladesh to Burlington, and so many in between.

We view church partnerships as long-term relationships. We plan and dream together, taking our lead from a community and then building a bridge with them and with another party whose passions align with theirs. Some might call this fundraising, but at World Renew this part of our work often feels more like matchmaking as we seek to align kingdom purposes across the world. Some of these partnerships have been continuing for years, with congregations in Alberta or California connecting regularly with their counterparts in Kenya or Laos.

World Renew both depends on and supports the church worldwide in times of crisis. When disasters occur, whether because of climate or conflict, we look for local denominations, congregations, and other organizations who are already responding, and we ask them what they want in or-

der to be able to do their God-honoring work of compassion more effectively. Consider the following story of our work with a partner in Lebanon:

- Nearly one in three people in Lebanon is a refugee, the majority of whom fled from Syria's civil war. Many have no homes to return to and remain in limbo, hoping to be resettled elsewhere. For several years, World Renew has been working through MERATH, a reliable partner organization, to mobilize local churches to respond to the many needs of these displaced people. But new pressures are complicating the situation.
- Lebanon is a country that relies most heavily on grain exports from Ukraine for its food supply, but that supply has been affected by conflict in Ukraine. The lack of access to food is compounded by political unrest within Lebanon, high inflation, a financial crisis that paralyzed banking transactions, and, of course, the Beirut explosion of 2020 that destroyed several months' worth of grain reserves held in siloes. MERATH communications manager Sophie Nasrallah said, "People don't know where their next meal is going to come from. It reminds me of God's people in the wilderness, when they had to rely on God's manna every day."
- Shortages of medicine and fuel are a tremendous concern right now in Lebanon, and even residents who can access money are finding prices impossible. "Many of our qualified people are leaving because they can't earn a decent income anymore," Nasrallah said. For everyone else, she explains, "It's hard to even ask how they're doing. Everyone is burnt out."
- Because funding has been decreasing for supporting churches as they respond to needs, MERATH has had to make some very difficult decisions about whom they can assist. The same church members who made the difficult choice to serve their Syrian neighbors despite a fraught history are now struggling to make ends meet themselves.
- "Funding is decreasing as compared to previous years, so we are not only making tough decisions about whom we can assist, but we are making even tougher decisions about whom we will stop helping, although everyone still needs it so badly and our partner churches have established meaningful relationships with them. This means we're scaling down when we should be scaling up," explained Nasrallah.
- World Renew's Global Food Crisis fund is helping to support our partners in Lebanon and other countries as they imagine more for those experiencing food insecurity at extremely high risk of hunger. "Our comfort is in believing that God is in control and that even though we might not be able to keep on supporting all families, we trust God will provide, and we know that our local partner

churches who have established meaningful relationships with vulnerable families will continue to check up on them and help in any way they are able to," Nasrallah said.

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

D. Mercy and justice

The CRCNA formally acknowledges mercy and justice as integral to its mission, vision, and calling. In World Renew's global ministry of community development and disaster response, mercy and justice are inseparable in experiencing the wholeness that God intends for all people, particularly for those who face extreme poverty, hunger, and the effects of disaster.

As an agency that firmly believes we are all imagebearers of God (Gen. 1:26), we emphasize gender justice through our programs. In 2022 we continued to implement our global gender strategy in all our programs by encouraging staff and partners to see gender justice connecting with the exclusion of other marginalized groups such as young people, seniors, and disabled persons. A gender justice manual was developed for World Renew, and we continued to build capacity and awareness of gender-based violence as a wrongdoing that has been escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardships, and humanitarian crises. World Renew also began preparing for showcasing our work and proactively advocating for gender justice and the rights of other vulnerable groups within the United Nations.

The Refugee Sponsorship and Resettlement program in Canada embodies our justice work as it equips churches in and beyond the Christian Reformed Church to welcome newcomers who have fled their countries of origin in fear of their safety. Across North America the Climate Witness Program directs church communities wishing to steward the earth in thoughtful and creative ways. Our Community and Justice Team colleagues inform and inspire advocacy.

Prayer is an essential part of the work of mercy and justice as well, so we offer devotional and prayer resources alongside our annual campaigns and designated Sunday offerings. When we bring these overwhelming issues of injustice before the Lord, our work can be blessed in incredible ways. A situation in Kenya provides an example:

- In Turkana, Kenya, there has been a long history of young men raiding their neighbors' cattle. The raiders, called warriors, have been known to return from raids with thousands of cattle. Raids not only ended in the loss of cattle for farmers but also often in the loss of human life. And raided communities have often sought revenge and tried to recapture their stolen cattle—furthering the violence.

- For over a century the culture of the Turkana and neighboring communities has revolved around livestock keeping and cattle raiding. But in the past decade, through collaborative efforts by the Kenyan government and humanitarian organizations, the longstanding pattern of theft and violence has become less prevalent as these two entities implemented initiatives toward achieving peace and normality and restoring dignity to human life in the region. These initiatives have included setting up alternative livelihood projects, conducting disarmament exercises in all conflicting communities, and more. World Renew has been part of the effort.
- Since 2013, World Renew has been implementing a number of projects in the area—particularly in Katilu Ward—including livelihood and peacekeeping programs and drought responses. Through village savings and loans (VSL) groups, people with similar livelihood skills and interests are brought together to learn new skills and to save for the future. In the Katilu Ward, the Nachacha Young Farmers VSL group has over 50 reformed warriors. Established over seven years ago, the group has had opportunities to learn new farming skills that have helped equip them to earn a living by farming instead of cattle raiding. The members farm over 50 acres of cultivated land on a former cattle-raiding battleground. Through World Renew, they have been trained and supported to set up farming plots, with each farmer owning an average of one acre.
- The young farmers have grown a variety of grains and vegetables to sell at a nearby market, including maize, millet, kale, spinach, and more. From the income they have earned from farming, many of them have been able to help their children achieve their academic dreams; over ten of the members have children in high school, and three have children at university.
- Benson Nachodo, the Nachacha VSL group chairperson, says, "We are not going back to fighting with our neighbors! We have decided to use this land to make our living. We have manpower, and all we need is skills and someone to show us the way out of poverty. We are glad to work with World Renew, who have shown us the way and walked with us in every step."

"The LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isa. 30:18).

E. Gospel proclamation and worship

We proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ and seek to worship him in all that we do. Jesus tells us John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Our life in Christ is now and for eternity, so our worship offering is to contribute to flourishing and fullness of life on earth, waiting for the day when Christ will return and complete the story of salvation. When our neighbors around the world are experiencing

barriers to their well-being, how can they believe that God loves them and wants that fullness of life for them? As one of our colleagues working in West Africa explains, "We come with the gospel in one hand and development tools in the other."

Our work consists of many conversations, webinars, collaboration with deacons and Diaconal Ministries Canada, and events to explore together what God's great plan of justice involves—and then going out and doing it. When justice comes, the body of Christ praises God. A story from Haiti illustrates:

- In June 2021, bullets flew, and some bystanders were killed as gangs clashed in Martissant, Haiti. Monique Guerrier, 46, and her four children, like many other families, abandoned their home to escape the violence. The family spent some time in an evacuation facility and finally made their way to Morcou, in southern Haiti. The journey to Morcou was not an easy one. Monique shared, "I spent days looking for food and other essential items for my children."
- On August 14, a magnitude 7.2 earthquake rocked Haiti, and Monique again found herself homeless; her house was one of about 130,000 buildings destroyed or damaged in the earthquake. She lamented, "No house in Martissant, no house in Morcou now, and no livelihood to provide at least for our daily bread. I am 100 percent depending on God's mercies." Monique wrote worriedly, "Morcou is hardly accessible; organizations won't reach here. It will require difficult trudging—no one will distribute aid to affected families."
- But Monique held to her faith in God, praying that he would provide for her and her children. World Renew has been on the ground in Haiti and has distributed emergency food, tarps for shelter, seeds, and water purification tablets to 3,110 families displaced by the earthquake, including families in Morcou. Monique said, "I never expected World Renew staff to come to Morcou. We are so grateful."

"He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever—holy and awesome is his name" (Ps. 111:9).

III. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

A. Cultivating practices of spiritual discipline

World Renew contributes to this milestone by providing resources to churches such as devotions, prayer guides, and worship resources in connection with our designated Sundays and special-offering resources. Throughout the world we integrate prayer and spiritual development into our work in communities. And we model prayer through resources and reminders to our supporters so that they can lift up the prayers and praises of our ministry teams.

B. Listening to the voices of every generation

Through visits, videos, podcasts, and webinars, World Renew offers peer-to-peer learning opportunities. We collaborate with ministries such as Diaconal Ministries Canada, Social Justice, and the Centre for Public Dialogue to contribute to meaningful dialogue around living out our faith. Our volunteer opportunities have the exciting characteristic of often consisting of intergenerational groups who can come together to learn, experience, and reflect. In many of our communities elders are highly esteemed, but youth are often overlooked. Our youth-engagement programming helps to motivate young people to pursue education, make healthy choices around sex and substances, and overcome trauma.

C. Growing in diversity and unity

World Renew is deeply committed to diversity, mandating that staff pursue gender and antiracism training each year. A staff member was recently licensed to facilitate Intercultural Development Inventory assessments, allowing staff the opportunity to consider their own understanding of diversity and unity. Group sessions provide time to process and learn from each other. In our programs, peacebuilding and trauma healing allow participants to overcome differences and become unified in their visions for their communities. Through our communications, every effort is made to represent diversity and dignity in our participants and to highlight their own voices as much as possible.

D. Sharing the gospel and living missionally

Contributing to the flourishing of all people as imagebearers of God is central to the good news that Christ came to bring us life in all its fullness, both in this world and the next. World Renew's global partnerships with churches give room for missional living in a remarkable way as communities across the world share with each other, pray for each other, and build each other up.

IV. Board matters

The World Renew Board of Delegates is a key support of World Renew's ministry. The board's primary function is to set the vision and mission of World Renew and to encourage and track the accomplishment of that vision.

World Renew's governance structure is made up of delegates from each CRC classis, in addition to as many as sixteen members-at-large, who together constitute the Board of Delegates of World Renew.

The delegates are a vital communication link with CRC classes and churches. They select member national governing boards, with up to seven members on the U.S. board and up to nine members on the Canadian board. The two boards together form the Joint Ministry Council, which provides governance for World Renew as a whole.

Board of Directors of World Renew-Canada
Andrew Geisterfer, president; Edmonton, Alberta
Dennis DeGroot, vice president; Langley, British Columbia
Darryl Beck, treasurer; Grimsby, Ontario
Margaret Van Oord, secretary; Jewetts Mills, New Brunswick
Rev. Joseph Hamilton, pastoral advisor; Sarnia, Ontario
Jane VanderVelden, member at large; Kitchener, Ontario
Ray Anema, member at large; Simcoe, Ontario
Echo MacLeod, member at large; Ottawa, Ontario

Board of Directors of World Renew-U.S.
Rebekah Vanderzee, president; Bellflower, California
Shanti Jost, vice president; North Haledon, New Jersey
Jeff Banaszak, treasurer; Holland, Michigan
Monika Grasley, secretary; Merced, California
Bonny Mulder-Behnia, pastoral advisor; Bellflower, California
Charles Udeh, member at large; Kentwood, Michigan
Thomas Christian, member at large; Grandville, Michigan
Charles Adams, board member emeritus; Sheboygan, Wisconsin

In January 2023 the World Renew-Canada Board of Directors approved Jamie McIntosh for appointment as executive codirector (Canada). McIntosh will be introduced to the Council of Delegates in May for their recommendation that the appointment be ratified by synod.

A. Board nominations, reappointments, and term completions

1. Classical delegate appointment - Canada

   The board requests that synod approve the appointment of Nell Vrolyk to serve a first term of three years as a classical delegate for Classis Ontario Southwest.

2. Reappointment of Canada members

   The following Canadian delegates are completing their first term on the board and are recommended for reappointment to a second three-year term: Margaret Hoogland (Classis Alberta North), John Batterink (Classis Quinte), Jane VanderVelden (member at large).

3. Canada members completing terms

   World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board member on completing a second term of service: Joseph Hamilton (pastoral advisor).

   Cindy Bendictus, classical delegate for Classis Ontario Southwest, resigned from service on the board mid-year (nominee for this position noted above). The board also received the resignations of Daniel Mack mid-year as the classical delegate for Classis Lake Superior (Canada) and Lisa Kuipers (member at large). Gerda Kits (member at large) has chosen not to serve a second term and will conclude service to the board on June 30. Efforts are under way to identify nominees for these new vacancies.

4. *U.S. delegate appointments*

   The Nomination Committee is in the process of actively recruiting for current and upcoming vacancies.

5. *Reappointment of U.S. members*

   The following U.S. delegates are completing their first term on the board and are recommended for reappointment to a second three-year term: Jim Groen (Classis Illiana), Gerald Van Wyke (Classis Lake Erie), Linda German (Classis North Cascades), Rev. Bonny Mulder-Behnia (pastoral adviser), Jeff Banaszak (member at large), Charles Udeh (member at large), James Zwier (member at large).

6. *U.S. members completing terms*

   World Renew would like to recognize and thank the following board members completing their service on the board: Monika Grasley (Classis Central California), Abbie Schrotenboer (Classis Chicago South), Lynrae Frens (Classis Georgetown), Marc Faasse (Classis Grandville), Rebekah Vanderzee (Classis Greater Los Angeles), Rod De Boer (Classis Heartland), Clifford Hoekstra (Classis Iakota), Linda German (North Cascades), Jay DeBoer (Classis Pacific Northwest), Debra Chee (Classis Red Mesa), Dale Compagner (Classis Zeeland), LaVonne Koedam (member at large).

B. Financial matters

1. Salary disclosure

In accord with synod's mandate to report executive salary levels, World Renew reports the following:

Job level	*Number of positions*	*Number below target*	*Number at target*
E2	2	2	0
E3	1	1	0
H	11	10	1

2. Detailed financial information

Detailed financial information and budgets will be submitted to synod by way of the *Agenda for Synod 2023—Business and Financial Supplement*, which will be made available at the time synod convenes.

C. Human Resources management

World Renew continually evaluates the excellence of its programs and relies on its human resource (HR) systems to provide support to its teams. World Renew's diverse, professional, skilled staff is expected to meet goals set around its vision and mission.

World Renew has a rigorous recruiting process and successfully hired sixteen highly skilled staff last year. We continually expand our recruitment

activities to ensure that we meet our diversity and professional learning goals. To that end, we promote professional development and learning and continue to develop competencies across the organization.

Annual performance reviews are routine for all World Renew staff. This practice gives staff an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and to critically review their growth areas. World Renew is thankful for all of its human resources, who are essential to providing program excellence in communities in need around the globe.

D. Resource Development report

For the 2021-22 fiscal year, World Renew was blessed to receive over $40 million (USD) from all sources in the United States and Canada. These funds were then leveraged into greater ministry dollars through grants, partnerships, and collaborations. In 2022, 83 percent of each gift World Renew received benefited people in need. The other 17 percent supported World Renew's core mission through administration and fundraising. Six percent helped to administer our programs effectively, and 11 cents of each dollar provided donors with communication and accountability about how their gifts were used.

World Renew directed approximately $12 million (USD) of its 2022 financial resources toward core international development programs, and $16.5 million (USD) went to disaster response. Over $282,426 (USD) was used for community development in North America, and just over $1.9 million (USD) was directed to education and justice.

World Renew's connections to international organizations such as Canadian Foodgrains Bank, ACT and Integral alliances, and Growing Hope Globally provided technical and financial resources that expanded our reach to more people and communities. For example, in 2022, as a member of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, World Renew committed $16.5 million in resources to food-related programming in 20 countries, while Growing Hope Globally supported World Renew with $483,00 (USD) for food security programs in 10 countries.

In 2022, World Renew continued to receive accolades from nonprofit monitoring organizations for its financial and management practices. The star rating provided by Charity Intelligence for World Renew remains at five stars, and the results reporting grade has improved to an A. Charity Intelligence looks at how each charity spends the money they receive, and how transparent they are in providing this information.

In the U.S., World Renew has achieved a Gold Star of Transparency from GuideStar. We continue to maintain excellent standing with Christian monitoring organizations—CCCC in Canada and ECFA in the United States. World Renew is committed to its mission and to carefully stewarding with absolute integrity the financial gifts we receive, and we thank God for these recognitions of its values: faith, people flourishing, effectiveness, and stewardship.

V. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rebekah Vanderzee, president of World Renew-U.S.; Andrew Geisterfer, president of World Renew-Canada; Carol Bremer-Bennett, executive codirector of World Renew-U.S.; and Jamie McIntosh, executive codirector of World Renew-Canada designee, when World Renew matters are discussed and need to be addressed.

B. That synod commend the work of mercy carried on by World Renew and urge the churches to take at least four offerings per year in lieu of ministry-share support.

C. That synod, by way of the ballot, appoint and reappoint members to the World Renew Board of Delegates.

Note: Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

World Renew
Carol Bremer-Bennett, executive codirector, World Renew-U.S.
Kenneth Kim, interim executive codirector, World Renew-Canada

Calvin Theological Seminary

I. Introduction – Mission Statement

The Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees presents this report to Synod 2023 with gratitude to God for his provision in the past year. The seminary has experienced God's faithfulness and looks toward the future with hope and anticipation.

Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) has been involved in the training and teaching of students for ministry for 147 years since 1876 and was the first agency or institution developed by the Christian Reformed Church. As God so leads, we look forward to a 150th anniversary celebration of God's faithfulness and for affirming the tie between church and seminary.

Mission statement: As a learning community in the Reformed Christian tradition that forms church leaders who cultivate communities of disciples of Jesus Christ, Calvin Theological Seminary exists to serve the Christian Reformed Church in North America and wider constituencies by preparing individuals for biblically faithful and contextually effective ministry of the Word and by offering Reformed theological scholarship and counsel.

II. Highlights from the past ministry year

The global COVID-19 pandemic affected us all, including Calvin Theological Seminary. Thankfully this past year has been marked by a full return to residential instruction, enhanced by the use of a fully remodeled facility featuring updated technology and collaborative learning spaces. We are grateful as well for the investment made many years ago in an online delivery system of education, which became necessary as we moved back and forth from offering in-person classes to online options—all in addition to our usual online distance-learning classes.

May 21, 2022, marked the first in-person CTS commencement since 2019 because of the pandemic. We were able to celebrate the completion of programs of study for 61 graduates, who attended CTS from ten nations: Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, and the United States.

Another highlight was the presentation and approval of two faculty candidates at Synod 2022: Dr. Wilson Cunha, now serving as professor of Old Testament; and Dr. Yudha Thianto, now serving as professor of the history of Christianity and Reformed theology. Dr. Cunha is originally from Brazil, and Dr. Thianto is originally from Indonesia. Their journey to Calvin Theological Seminary illustrates the impact and reach of Reformed theology throughout the world. For more information on these new faculty members, see the following articles published in *The Banner*:

- thebanner.org/news/2022/06/synod-2022-appoints-professor-of-old-testament-to-seminary

- thebanner.org/news/2022/06/synod-welcomes-yudha-thianto-as-seminary-professor

At the time of this writing, the CTS Board of Trustees approved faculty openings for a director of Latino/a Ministry and for teaching the New Testament. We anticipate an update on these searches to be presented by way of our supplemental report to Synod 2023.

We are glad to report that at the time of this writing in the academic year 2022-23, we have been able to maintain in-person instruction along with our online educational delivery system. We have also been able to offer an intensive period of face-to-face instruction for our online students as is a key component of our educational ministry.

We also want to acknowledge and give thanks for ongoing, faithful support from the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination and from individuals, churches, and classes. We are blessed by this community that continues to care for and encourage us—board members, faculty, staff, and students.

III. Reflecting on Our Calling

Over the past number of years, Calvin Theological Seminary faculty, with input and final approval from the seminary's Board of Trustees, produced a "Vision Frame" document that includes our mission statement (*What* are we doing?) and continues as follows:

Values—Why are we doing it?

- Reformed theology—All our teaching and formation grow from a shared understanding of God's Word as articulated in the Reformed confessions.
- The church—We are formed by and serve the church, God's agent of hope for the world.
- Cultural context—We give our students tools to sow the gospel in a multicultural world. We challenge one another to have hearts that engage the broader world God so loves.
- The whole person—We cultivate meaningful relationships with our students to foster personal and spiritual growth throughout our learning community.

Strategy—How are we doing it?

Through the power of the Holy Spirit,

- we are known for academic excellence and scholarship.
- we provide innovative learning environments.
- we pursue synergy with our graduates and other ministry leaders.
- we nurture a community of hospitality.
- we enrich the student experience through vital partnership.

Measures—When are we successful?

When graduates of Calvin Theological Seminary

- preach and teach the Bible (*message*).
- grow in their pastoral identity (*person*).
- discern and engage ministry contexts (*context*).
- cultivate and lead communities of disciples (*goal*).
- equip the church to renew communities for the glory of God (*purpose*).

A scan of this material shows significant convergence with the ministry priorities of the Christian Reformed Church in North America:

Faith Formation—Calvin Theological Seminary seeks to train disciples who become the trainers of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Servant Leadership—Calvin Theological Seminary is seeking to identify, recruit, and train leaders to be servants in the kingdom of God. From resident and online education programs followed by continuing education programs and resources, Calvin Theological Seminary is training leaders.

Global Mission—The world is at our doorstep. Every year around 25 different nations (this past year nearly 40 percent of our degree-seeking students came from outside the U.S. and Canada) are represented in the student body of Calvin Theological Seminary. The training for global mission takes place not just in classrooms but also over lunch in the Student Center.

Mercy and Justice—Calvin Theological Seminary trains students through cross-cultural internships and exposure to environments that help form the hearts of Christian disciples. For example, experience with prison ministry through Calvin Theological Seminary has led students to witness the need for ministry to prisoners and to understand the structures of society that need to be addressed.

Gospel Proclamation and Worship—Along with the priority of Servant Leadership this is probably our leading edge within the CRC ministry priorities. Our core degree is the master of divinity (M.Div.), which helps to form preachers and teachers of the gospel. This past year we were able to secure additional long-term funding for our Center for Excellence in Preaching and to continue our launch of a doctor of ministry (D.Min.) degree that continues this formation process for practitioners in ministry.

IV. Connecting with churches: *Our Journey 2025* (Ministry Plan)

Making and maintaining connections with churches is a foundational component of education for Calvin Theological Seminary. Whether this involves church-based internships or assignments related to the local church environment, the local church is the key partner for nurturing, developing, and training students.

In fall 2017, Calvin Theological Seminary set up a new way for M.A. and M.Div. students to fulfill a significant part of their contextual learning requirements. From early on in their program, students are placed in a church or ministry organization where they serve for two years, concurrent with their course work, through internship hours coordinated with churches during the ministry year. The office of Vocational Formation—led by Geoff Vandermolen, administrative coordinator Chris Wright, and administrative assistant Jennifer Manders—continues to develop partnerships to help bridge the classroom and the church. The following organizations and churches are part of this concurrent, contextual learning approach:

African Community Fellowship, Kentwood, Michigan
Caledonia CRC, Caledonia, Michigan
Church of the Servant, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Creston CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Eagle's Wings Church, Holland, Michigan
Fuller Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Hahn-In CRC, Wyoming, Michigan
Heritage CRC, Byron Center, Michigan
LaGrave Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Lee Street CRC, Wyoming, Michigan
Long Beach CRC, Long Beach, California
Monroe Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
New Hope Church, Hamilton, Ontario
Princeton CRC, Kentwood, Michigan
River Rock Church, Rockford, Michigan
Shawnee Park CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Sunlight Ministries, Port St. Lucie, Florida
Westview CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Woodlawn CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Because internship hours may now occur during concurrent internships throughout the academic year, we have opened a new way of connecting students to churches for summer service. We appreciate the number of churches that have served as "additional" places of formation, including these cross-cultural and international sites:

A Christian Ministry in the National Parks (Yellowstone)
Mel Trotter Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center, Austin, Texas
Mepkin Abbey Monastic Guest Program, Moncks Corner, South Carolina
The Refuge, Oshawa, Ontario
Lethbridge Correctional Centre, Lethbridge, Alberta
Resonate Ministries, India
Al Amana Centre, Muscat, Oman

We also continue to welcome the opportunity to connect our students with churches in need of summer ministry leadership as a result of pastoral vacancy, sabbaticals, or new ministry initiatives. Please contact the Vocational Formation office for more information about this process (vocationalformation@calvinseminary.edu or calvinseminary.edu/church-resources).

Calvin Theological Seminary also offers continuing education opportunities throughout the year that are open to pastors and lay leaders alike. Many of these opportunities are presented through the Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) led by director Rev. Scott Hoezee. CEP continues to serve as one of the premier Reformed preaching sites in North America (cep.calvinseminary.edu/).

Since 2005 the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary has provided busy preachers with the resources they need to create and deliver fresh, compelling, and vibrant sermons from God's Word. CEP strives to spark every pastor's creativity in engaging God's Word, inspiring them to produce lively sermons of power and beauty. CEP offers weekly, quarterly, and liturgical season resources. Following the fall 2021 launch of a completely revamped website, the year 2022 saw website traffic increase to record numbers. Whereas prior to the new site a good month might have seen 15,000 different visitors, in 2022 new records were set monthly until nearly 64,000 unique visitors came in one month in the fall of 2022! A few years ago we set a goal to increase the visibility of the CEP website via web impressions (people exposed to our content) to 1.6 million impressions per year. In 2022 we far exceeded that goal with nearly 12 million impressions. Content on the website is now available in English, Spanish, and Korean.

In November 2022 the Center for Excellence in Preaching learned it had been approved to receive a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. for nearly $1 million as part of Lilly's "Compelling Preaching Initiative." CEP's five-year program will concentrate on peer learning groups, colloquia on the Calvin campus, and summer seminars—all aimed to help pastors navigate the changed preaching landscapes brought on by the pandemic and an array of other new challenges in recent years.

In January 2020, Calvin Theological Seminary called Rev. Shawn Brix as its first Canadian church relations liaison (CCRL), a "pastor-ambassador" who builds and strengthens bridges between Calvin Theological Seminary and Canadian churches and ministries. This position is a part of the seminary's strong commitment to serving churches in Canada, and it reflects our desire to imagine and build new partnerships and initiatives. This connecting, listening, and serving role will help Calvin Theological Seminary be more present and available to serve leaders and churches in Canada. Rev. Brix has served congregations in Acton, Burlington, and Peterborough, Ontario.

Rev. Brix has been a key encourager and staff support, coming alongside donors in the development of a new initiative whereby tuition for Canadian students will be at par between Canadian and U.S. dollars. We are grateful for this opportunity to remove one of the key barriers for Canadian students in their discernment about attending Calvin Seminary.

V. Additional program and ministry highlights

Calvin Theological Seminary moved forward into the following new key initiatives:

1. The seminary completed a major renovation/remodeling project that was planned before the pandemic, focusing on classrooms, the Student Center, and the chapel to upgrade technology, to provide flexibility in use of space, and to develop collaborative learning environments.

   This project resulted in updating parts of the building that had not been changed since 1959. Our last major renovation of a part of the building was in 2004. We give thanks for the support that has been received above and beyond our annual operating fund.

2. Lilly Endowment recently opened a grant program called "Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative" to aid seminaries as we look toward an uncertain future. CTS is one of 234 schools to receive a planning grant and one of 84 schools (out of the 234) to receive a million dollar grant in response to our planning request. This affirmation of all we have been developing at CTS is coupled with our vision and desire to see our educational programs and ministry formation expand to meet the needs of the church.

   The purpose of the project is to serve adult learners who need innovative educational support in order to take the next steps in their ministry leadership development. Specifically, the Next Steps Initiative will

   - prepare and equip adult learners who might not desire to complete a full seminary degree, such as commissioned pastors and ministry leaders seeking continuing education.
   - make ministry training more accessible to adult learners with diverse family situations, schedules, languages, and income levels.
   - develop a network of "teaching congregations" with whom we will collaborate to facilitate innovative and customizable learning opportunities for those congregations' adult learners and ministry leaders.

   Calvin Theological Seminary still trains church pastors, but it is also providing theological education for the church. Consistent with our Reformed heritage, we will be able to do more for the "priesthood of all believers." CTS is called to serve the church, and this Lilly Endowment award helps us take more and even new steps in that service! A press release listing funded proposals is available at lillyendowment.org.

We invite you to follow the unfolding implementation of this grant. Dr. Aaron Enfield (formerly CTS director of admissions) has taken up responsibilities as director of lifelong learning and partnerships, which includes his work as project director of the Lilly "Pathways for Tomorrow – Next Steps" implementation. He holds a Ph.D. in higher, adult, and life-long education from Michigan State University, and his doctoral research was on adult learning and development in online environments.

3. CTS completed the master of arts and master of divinity curriculum revision under the capable leadership of dean of academic services and registrar Joan Beelen and dean of faculty and chief academic officer David Rylaarsdam.

   The curriculum revision has identified outcomes aligned with the understanding that Calvin Seminary seeks to form graduates who will discern, together with those they serve, answers to the following questions:

   - What is our ministry CONTEXT?
   - How does the GOSPEL engage our context?
   - What is God CALLING us to in this context?
   - What is the PERSON and role of a servant leader in this context?

   These program goals are intimately and necessarily connected because every ministry situation occurs in a particular CONTEXT where the GOSPEL of God's redemptive activity is communicated, where God is CALLING people to participate in his mission, and where God is forming the PERSON and role of a servant leader.

4. During the fall 2023 semester, CTS launched a competency-based theological education (CBTE) program called Empower. This program offers students the opportunity to earn a certificate or a master of arts in Christian leadership by demonstrating competence in program outcomes. This approach is designed to make ministry training more collaborative, flexible, accessible, and integrated.

   During the pilot phase, enrollment is limited to students participating through contextualized partnerships with Grand Valley State University Campus Ministry (Grand Rapids, Mich.) and Sunlight Ministries (Port St. Lucie, Fla.). Students work with a CTS faculty mentor and two partner mentors to complete learning experiences that develop competence—head, hands, and heart—for ministry. Our partners provide contextualized learning experiences, localized mentoring, and regular and substantive student support.

5. For 10 years CTS has offered residential programs in Spanish for ministry leaders in West Michigan. This effort, the Latino/a Ministry Program, has been led by Dr. Mariano Avila, emeritus professor of New Testament.

The Latino/a Ministry program at CTS is currently in a period of transition. As of June 2022, Dr. Avila retired from full-time teaching at the seminary, and CTS has been conducting a search process for a new director of Latino/a Ministry. We aim to have a new director in place in 2023.

During this time of transition, CTS has continued a process of developing a master of arts degree to be offered in Spanish. The format for the courses in this program will combine in-person cohort learning and online learning. Students from around the world will enroll in the same online course but will also gather as cohorts for in-person classes at local partner seminaries and ministry organizations. CTS launched a pilot version of this model in fall 2023, and 51 students at three partner institutions participated in the pilot.

6. The doctor of ministry program at CTS continues to develop with programming, coursework, and student research in service of effective ministry praxis across a plurality of contexts. The expectation is that the first program graduates be granted their degrees in spring 2024 (see calvinseminary.edu/academics/doctor-of-ministry).
7. On September 8, 2015, Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary were blessed to open prison doors by beginning classes at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, as part of the Calvin Prison Initiative. Twenty new students from within the prison system came together to begin a five-year bachelor's degree program accredited through Calvin University. A total of 93 students are now enrolled in the program. This program began in response to a request from the State of Michigan and is a coordinated effort of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary. It is our hope that this "seminary behind bars program" will be used by God to transform not only the students in the classroom but also the prison system as these students are deployed within it. In addition, we testify that professors and students at Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary are changed and affected by their involvement in the lives of students at Handlon. To date, 45 students have earned bachelor's degrees, and 76 students have earned associate degrees in faith and community leadership. Program graduates serve prison communities across Michigan from Muskegon to Jackson as peer mentors, providing leadership to faith communities behind bars, supporting academic programs as tutors and teaching assistants, and leading life skills and addiction recovery classes for fellow prisoners.

We are grateful for partnerships with congregations and pastors in the training of our students. Ten of our sixteen formation group leaders are pastors, and the other eight are seminary faculty/administration members. They include Ruth Boven, Gloria Curry, Cara DeHaan, Samantha DeJong McCarron, Dorothy Jenkins, Layne Kilbreath, Jessica Maddox, Sarah Roelofs, David Rylaarsdam, Heather Stroobosscher, Albert Strydhorst, Lisa Taylor, Corey Van Huizen, and Cory Willson.

We appreciate all the support of the church and alumni for their encouragement to expand our offerings for academic and ministry leadership for local churches and the global church.

VI. Administration

The seminary administration includes Rev. Julius Medenblik, president; Dr. Margaret Mwenda, chief operating officer; Dr. David Rylaarsdam, dean of faculty and chief academic officer; Ms. Joan Beelen, dean of academic services and registrar; Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, director of vocational formation; Mr. Robert Knoor, director of development; Rev. Jeff Sajdak, dean of students; and Ms. Sarah Chun, dean of international students and scholar services.

VII. Faculty

The seminary faculty continues to serve the church in numerous ways. Although preparing students for various forms of ministry continues to be central to their work, members of the faculty also provide education and counsel to many local congregations and broader assemblies, preach regularly, publish scholarly books and articles, participate in significant conferences, and in various ways seek to stay attuned to developments in ministries in the Christian Reformed Church and the church of Christ worldwide.

VIII. Board of Trustees

The board met in plenary session online in October 2022 and via conference call in February 2023. It plans to hold an in-person/flex plenary session in May 2023.

The board officers are Dave Morren, chair; Scott Greenway, vice-chair; and Susan Keesen, secretary.

Trustee Scott Greenway (Region 11) is completing his first term on the board and is eligible for reappointment to a second, three-year term. The board recommends that synod reappoint him to an additional three-year term.

Completing a second term on the board are Frank Zee (Region 2) and Susan Strikwerda (Region 10 at-large). We are very grateful for their service and wise counsel to the seminary and to the church.

The following single nominee has been submitted to the classes in Region 2 for a vote. The results of the election will be presented to Synod 2023 for ratification.

Region 2 – clergy

> *Rev. Cecil Van Niejenhuis* is a retired minister of the Word who served churches in Ancaster, Ontario (1981-85); Lacombe, Alberta (1985-91); Kitchener, Ontario (1991-93); and Edmonton, Alberta (1993-2009), after which he served with Pastor Church Resources in Grand Rapids, Michigan, till 2020. He graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary in

1981 (M.Div.) and earned a Th.M. degree from Newman Seminary and a D.Min. degree from Bethel Seminary. Pastor Cecil is known for his support and counsel for pastors and churches and continues in this capacity as part of Classis Alberta North's Healthy Church Task Force.

Regional at-large nominees are presented by the CTS Board of Trustees to synod for appointment.

Region 10 – nonclergy – at-large

Synod has approved that Calvin Theological Seminary is allowed a single nomination where a region has multiple trustee positions. The CTS Board of Trustees hopes to present the nominee for this position for election by way of the supplemental report to Synod 2023.

IX. Students 2022-2023

The composition of the seminary's student body indicates a growing national and ethnic diversity. The following statistics from fall 2022 indicate the impact the seminary is having beyond the Christian Reformed Church:

A. *Denominational affiliation*

Christian Reformed: 112 (46%)
Presbyterian: 48
RCA: 6
Other Reformed: 10
Pentecostal: 4
Other/None listed: 46
(23+ total denominations)

B. *Geographical information*

U.S. students: 115 (48%)
Canadian students: 29 (12%)
Korean: 46 (16%)
Chinese: 10 (4%)
Other: 27 (11%)
Total countries represented: 23

C. *Student body*

Male students: 166 (69%)
Female students: 71 (31%)

D. *Programs and students enrolled*

M.Div.: 84
Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy: 22
M.A. (English): 22
M.A. (Spanish): 6
M.T.S.: 10
Th.M.: 25
Ph.D.: 32

D.Min.: 18
Hybrid/Distance Learning: 76 (this number does not reflect residential students who also take a hybrid/distance class)
English Certificate: 2
Spanish Certificates: 8
Non-degree seeking: 10

E. Prison initiative

In addition, we have 94 students who are part of the joint Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary program known as the Calvin Prison Initiative.

F. Pilot courses

In addition to these programs and opportunities for learning, we are working on pilot courses in worship and preaching (taught in Spanish to an additional 51 students in fall 2022) and in competency-based theological education (CBTE—involving another 20 students).

X. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Dave Morren, chair, and Julius Medenblik, president, when seminary matters are presented.

B. That synod, by way of the ballot, ratify the election and reappointment of trustees from the slates of nominees presented.

Note: Recommendations on financial matters are included in the report of the denominational Council of Delegates and will be presented to synod by way of the Finance Advisory Committee.

Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees
Susan Keesen, secretary

Worship

I. Introduction

Congregational Ministries' Worship efforts aim for every worshiping community to experience Spirit-filled worship and preaching—being called each week to worship that is biblical, Reformed, creative, and inspired; that helps to form faith in all generations; and that equips us to be sent into God's world to worship in spirit and in truth. Within this vision, we seek to support the work of worship leaders and pastors by strengthening networks of learning and encouragement and by equipping them for their priestly task. In collaboration with the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Worship staff have also facilitated the development and distribution of *Reformed Worship*, a quarterly journal and collection of online resources that continue to make a global impact.

II. Reflecting on Our Calling

Every congregation is a worshiping congregation. As we engage with churches, we gain glimpses of the beautiful diversity, steadfast faithfulness, and contextual creativity in the weekly gathering for worship and Word. At first glance, much of our work in Worship is not immediately obvious. Churches predictably gather—marking milestones and seasons, celebrating and grieving, volunteering and evangelizing. It might even appear that it takes little effort to plan weekly worship—choosing songs and readings, searching out participants, and hanging banners. But in the weekly rituals of corporate worship, the slow and steady work of faith formation takes root, and the relationship between God and God's people grows and flourishes. We recognize that this faithful work happens when leaders are healthy, feeling supported and encouraged, and are also energized with fresh ideas and new resources. We are mindful that this work takes place in worshipers who deeply love and appreciate what it means to participate in "the work of the people" as they gather each week. We are hopeful that as this work happens in congregations of every size, ethnic background, and geographical location, we might find joyful unity in our shared worship of the one, true God.

Much of our work in the past year has been twofold: building up healthy systems where worship leaders experience a network of support, and providing resources in the form of both the practical and the possible. We have done this through roundtable discussions and collaborative worship planning opportunities in online gatherings. Our team of endorsed worship coaches has grown to sixteen, and they worked with twelve congregations this year on topics ranging from mentoring youth in music, the theology of worship planning, running a praise team rehearsal, and leading worship well in times of conflict. There are currently eleven CRC worship leaders enrolled in a worship leader certificate course through Samford University, studying the biblical and theological foundations for worship, practical skills and musicianship, and how to strengthen their soul

for their particular calling in the church. We have worked this year to resource leaders, making use of the Network, our e-newsletter, and the quarterly publication *Reformed Worship*. We have also left ample space to welcome one-on-one conversations with churches and church leaders who come with particular burdens or questions. We have seen the Spirit's work in CRC worship, and we rejoice. We have seen tender spots and hurts, and we lament. We remain ever hopeful in God's faithfulness to God's church from generation to generation, and we give thanks.

III. Connecting with churches

At the start of 2022, CRC Worship began using the tagline #ThisIsCRCWorship around much of our content. Our goal was to both highlight the diversity in the denomination's worship practices while also emphasizing our unity in shared faith and shared commitment to weekly worship. Through this campaign, we framed many of our resources and much of what we continue to offer to churches as we network with ministry leaders. From the outset, we recognized the importance of listening and learning from congregations. However, we were surprised by the joy in the stories we heard.

We began hosting Zoom gatherings by classis clusters specifically for worship leaders with the goal of reaching every classis in two years. Pastors have the support of fellow pastors several times a year through their classis, but worship leaders are often more transient and disconnected from one another. In these gatherings, leaders not only meet each other but also are encouraged to think about ways to organically foster connections and relationships with one another regionally. In one meeting, two worship coordinators less than five miles apart met for the first time and thought of a way to share musicians during vacation-filled summer months to prevent burnout. In another meeting, three churches began brainstorming what a joint worship service might look like, highlighting their diversity and unique worship styles. In one particularly heartfelt meeting, a closing church offered up their physical resources to the group in hopes that nothing would go to waste. These gatherings not only connect leaders but also provide a time for sharing joys and sorrows, strengths, and areas for growth. There is great value in listening to one another's stories as a way to build up the body of Christ in small and faithful ways. It is our hope that as these gatherings continue, we will strengthen leaders who will strengthen congregations in their Spirit-filled, God-honoring worship.

Our efforts to encourage and equip people involved in worship leadership this past year also included the following:

- #ThisIsCRC worship videos: We released four videos highlighting the diversity and emphasizing the unity in worship in the CRC; these videos are available on our YouTube channel (youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtqNVBgcsQAfnS_j6GVL5b-Vt10kkr9om).

- We released a January 1, 2023, sermon and service package with full liturgy and prerecorded video from Rev. Matt Ackerman (Campus Chapel, Ann Arbor, Mich.)—55 downloads.
- We teamed up with the *DoJustice* podcast for a season on "worship and justice." We released study guide questions in hopes that worship teams and small groups would engage more deeply.
- We published four issues of *Reformed Worship*, including our theme issue on children and youth in worship. Conversations around this issue led to the formation of a small group of pastors who meet to talk about ways to be more intentionally intergenerational.
- We completed the "Faith Practices Summer Series," offering worship services, take-home resources, and build-your-own ideas with Faith Formation (see crcna.org/faithpracticesproject).

Worship
Katie Roelofs

STANDING COMMITTEES

Candidacy Committee

I. Introduction

Synod 2004 established the concept of the Synodical Ministerial Candidacy Committee, which is now known as the Candidacy Committee. The committee began meeting in late 2004 and was provided with a full-time staff person in late 2007. The committee mandate is available in a document titled Journey Toward Ordination, accessible on the Candidacy Committee website (crcna.org/candidacy).

II. Committee membership

The members of the committee meet three times per year. As with other synodical standing committees, Candidacy Committee members serve a potential of two three-year terms.

The following people currently serve on the Candidacy Committee: Rev. Henry Kranenburg (2025/1), Rev. Andy Sytsma (2025/1), Rev. Andrew Beunk (2024/1), Pastor Caleb Dickson (2024/1), Pastor Debra Chee (2024/1), Judy Cook (2025/2), Rev. Felix Fernandez (2025/2), Rev. Moon Kim (2023/1), Rev. Ashley Bonnes (2023/2), Rev. Susan LaClear (staff), Rev. Jul Medenblik (ex officio, as the Calvin Theological Seminary representative), and Zachary King (ex officio, as general secretary).

Rev. Moon Kim is completing his first term on the committee and is willing to serve a second term. Rev. Ashley Bonnes is completing her second term and is not eligible for reappointment. Therefore, the Candidacy Committee presents to synod the following slate of nominees for appointment to fill one vacant position:

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink is the pastor at Grace CRC in Cobourg, Ontario. She also served Ancaster (Ont.) CRC for seven years and Lucknow (Ont.) Community CRC for five years. Before going into pastoral ministry, she worked in administration and development at Redeemer University for twelve years. She is also a graduate of Redeemer. Rita studied for one year at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and she completed her M.Div. at Calvin Theological Seminary. She has served on the board of World Renew and on multiple classical committees, including the ministerial leadership team of Classis Huron and the interim committee of Classis Hamilton. She currently serves as vice-chair of the interim committee of Classis Quinte and is on the Church Order Review Task Force.

Rev. Lora (Byker) Copley received degrees from Dordt University (1998, theology) and Calvin Theological Seminary (2002, M.Div.) and served churches in Washington, Florida, and New Mexico before being ordained in 2006 and proceeding to serve two churches in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Lora ministered seven years as a coordinator/instructor of Classis Red Mesa's Leadership Development Network, training and credentialing

church leaders for Native contexts—both CRC and RCA. Lora is currently called to raise disciples in a CRC campus ministry at Iowa State University. She has served on the Council of Delegates and on several classical and regional boards and committees. Lora is the daughter of CRC home missionaries and is the mom of four children and married to educator/administrator Joel.

III. Report on the implementation of candidacy requirement modifications reported to Synod 2022

In the Candidacy Committee Supplement report to Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 792-94), the committee reported several modifications to candidacy requirements that would take effect in fall 2022. These modifications came about through conversations with Calvin Theological Seminary as they formed plans to revise their master of divinity (M.Div.) program curriculum. The modifications to candidacy requirements were designed for the benefit of potential candidates and for the purpose of keeping candidacy requirements closely in sync with the seminary's new curriculum. These modifications were successfully implemented in fall 2022, and the committee reports the following positive outcomes:

A. Modifications to the biblical language requirement

In fall 2022 the three-credit "Hebrew Grammar and Tools" and "Greek Grammar and Tools" courses became the minimum requirement in Calvin Theological Seminary's M.Div. program. Each of these courses covers the range of skills in vocabulary, grammar, and exegesis that are needed to give students a solid proficiency in exegeting Scripture through a combination of learned knowledge and the use of digital tools. The Candidacy Committee reported to Synod 2022 that they would adjust the candidacy requirements to accommodate this change. Starting in fall 2022, completion of these two "Grammar and Tools" courses would be acceptable fulfillment of the biblical language requirement. However, for those transferring in biblical language credits from other seminaries, two semesters of Hebrew and two semesters of Greek have continued to be required unless the student has taken either the one-semester "Grammar and Tools" courses at Calvin Seminary as part of their M.Div. program or equivalent courses at their own seminary. Since first-semester language courses at most seminaries span only grammar and vocabulary, not exegesis, the committee did not deem such courses acceptable for completion of the biblical language requirement. The committee deems the ability to exegete Scripture in both languages as essential to a minister's training.

B. Modifications to the preaching requirement

The candidacy requirement for preaching courses was expanded this year in response to the opportunity created by Calvin Theological Seminary to require not only a certain number of credits but also an assessment of competency. All candidates from CTS were required to take the foundational three-credit preaching course as well as any additional one-credit courses that were assigned through evaluation of a student's sermons.

These one-credit courses are designed to hone specific skills in delivery, structure, or other aspects of preaching. Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy participants from other seminaries were asked to submit two sermons for evaluation by the preaching faculty at CTS within the first few months of their program. The preaching courses required in their individual learning plans will be based on the results of the assessments of their sermons.

Because Calvin Seminary began providing this rigorous process of evaluation of each student's preaching, the Candidacy Committee deemed it unnecessary to continue with the practice of also asking candidates to preach four evaluated sermons in three different contexts. Thus the Candidacy Committee requirement has been reduced to two evaluated sermons in two contexts other than the student's own.

IV. Report on the ongoing development of the Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy

The Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy (EPMC) is a 24-month program designed for potential candidates who earn their M.Div. degree at an institution other than Calvin Theological Seminary. It is directly overseen by the recently established EPMC Facilitation Team, which is a subcommittee of the Candidacy Committee. This team is composed of Christian Reformed ministers of the Word and is assisted by strategic partners from Calvin Theological Seminary who help facilitate the coursework and vocational formation components of the program. The EPMC Facilitation Team meets regularly (six times last year) to discuss elements of the program and to report on work with participants. Team members work in pairs to guide and support four to five participants who have been assigned to them. The team's work with participants includes conducting an initial interview to determine the content of the individualized learning plan, making recommendations regarding the vocational formation process and denominational licensure for the participant, checking in every six months throughout the person's EPMC journey to help them navigate the program's requirements, conducting a final interview with the participant, and then making a final recommendation to the Candidacy Committee regarding the participant's readiness for ministry.

When the team was first organized in 2020, it consisted of eight members. But throughout that first year of implementation, it became apparent that in order to provide close and ongoing support for all participants in the EPMC program, more pastors would need to be added to the team. So during 2021 the team expanded to include eighteen members, and they have worked diligently to serve and support the EPMC participants assigned to them. The Candidacy Committee is deeply grateful for the excellent work and servant-hearted devotion of the following members of the EPMC Facilitation Team:

Rev. Al Gelder, general member for Classis Grand Rapids East
Rev. Steve Hull, general member from Classis Thornapple Valley

Rev. Shawn Brix, staff adviser from Calvin Theological Seminary and Canadian church relations liaison for the seminary
Rev. Ernesto Hernandez, general member from Classis Arizona
Rev. Jose Rayas, general member from Classis Arizona
Rev. Daniel Mouw, general member from Classis Grandville
Rev. Maria Bowater, general member from Classis Kalamazoo
Rev. Anthony VanderSchaaf, general member from Classis Grand Rapids South
Rev. Marg Rekman, general member from Classis Ontario Southwest
Rev. Charles Dillender, general member from Classis Central California
Rev. Jack Van de Hoef, general member from Classis Eastern Canada
Pastor Debra Chee, general member from Classis Red Mesa
Rev. Timothy Kooiman, general member from Classis Wisconsin
Rev. Kelsi Jones, general member from Classis Chicago South
Rev. Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy
Joan Beelen, staff adviser from Calvin Theological Seminary
Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, staff advisor from Calvin Theological Seminary

We are also deeply appreciative of the valuable contributions of the following members who completed their terms on the EPMC Facilitation Team in February 2023: Rev. Ashley Bonnes, Rev. Emily VandenHeuvel, Rev. Jen Rozema, and Rev. Kangwon Kim.

The desired outcomes of the EPMC program are for participants to

- develop a deep sense of call, commitment, and connection to the CRC.
- embrace and apply a confessionally Reformed, biblical hermeneutic that shapes their preaching and teaching ministry.
- exhibit spiritual and emotional readiness for pastoral ministry.
- demonstrate competency in a range of areas of pastoral ministry.

Note: Prior to Synod 2022 the EPMC program had a list of ten desired outcomes, several of which were very similar to each other, and the committee felt that it would be beneficial to combine them into a more succinct list (above) for the sake of clear and retainable communication. However, the committee would like to emphasize that all ten desired outcomes are still addressed specifically in each participant's learning plan and that the components of the EPMC program are still designed intentionally to create opportunities for a participant's growth in all of those previously stated objectives.

In fall 2022 the EPMC Facilitation team began to implement the following strategies envisioned by the team in 2021:

A. Toward the objective of helping participants establish deeper connections

Participants who attended their first connection trip were assigned to a formation group of four to six persons with whom they met in-person

during the trip and then continued to meet online every other week throughout the course of two semesters. Formation group leaders were trained to lead their groups in discussions on the following eight topics: calling, spiritual life, character, emotional health, identity, context, healthy leadership, and understanding of power.

B. Toward the objective of helping participants demonstrate competency in ministry skills

The new process for helping participants achieve greater competency in sermon writing and delivery, proposed in the committee's report to Synod 2022, is now being implemented. Instead of evaluating incoming participants' preaching competency on the basis of the number of credits they have taken at another seminary, all new participants were asked to submit two sermons (one based on the Old Testament and one based on the New Testament) for evaluation by the preaching faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary. Sermons were evaluated in the following areas: accurate exegesis, structure, life application, delivery, use of illustration. Then a recommendation was made as to whether the participant should be required to take the foundational "Gospel Preaching and Communication" course or another one-credit course that would target a specific weakness in their sermons. A participant whose sermons were assessed as demonstrating strong competency would be exempt from the preaching requirement. It was noted that only 20 percent of the participants displayed strong enough sermon-writing skills to be exempt from any preaching coursework in their individualized learning plan.

C. Toward the objective of developing spiritual and emotional readiness

Rev. Geoff Vandermolen, director of vocational formation at Calvin Theological Seminary, has joined the EPMC Facilitation Team meetings as an advisor. Dr. Vandermolen also spends a full day leading EPMC participants in spiritually formative conversations and practices during their CTS Connection Trip. Those who have participated in these conversations and exercises have said they appreciated them and found them formative.

V. Conversations regarding theological education and leadership development of Spanish-speaking pastors

The Candidacy Committee has been in conversation with both Consejo Latino and Calvin Theological Seminary about the significant efforts they are making to provide theological education and leadership training to aspiring Latino leaders. With the leadership of Rev. Marco Avila of Resonate, Consejo Latino has developed a program to train Latino leaders in the required subjects for commissioned pastors. The program is called "Luke 10" and is hosted by Revelation University in Miami, Florida. Revelation University also provides associate- and bachelor-level theological training. Calvin Theological Seminary is in the process of forming a competency-based master's program entirely in Spanish, which can be accessed through distance learning and combined with local mentorship.

A summit was held at Revelation University on January 18-19, 2022, to discuss the possibilities for partnership between the two programs. The Candidacy director attended this summit along with representatives from Calvin Theological Seminary, Consejo Latino, Revelation University, and Resonate. The two days of listening and conversation led to some significant developments in the pathway to master's-level theological education for Spanish-speaking leaders, and we are deeply grateful to God for this spirit of collaboration and partnership. The Candidacy Committee will continue conversations with these parties in order to establish a pathway for Spanish-speakers to acquire the training needed to become a minister of the Word in the CRCNA.

VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy, and to an additional member of the Candidacy Committee, if one is present, when the Candidacy Committee report is discussed.

B. That synod by way of the ballot appoint one new member to the Candidacy Committee from the slate of nominees presented, and reappoint Rev. Moon Kim to a second three-year term.

Candidacy Committee
Susan LaClear, director

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee

I. Introduction

There are two distinct and important aspects to our work: *ecumenical* relationships with other Christian denominations and organizations and *interfaith* interactions between the CRC and non-Christian faith traditions. According to our Ecumenical Charter, "the CRC recognizes its ecumenical responsibility to cooperate and seek unity with all churches of Christ in obedience to the gospel."

To guide the work of the EIRC relative to the ecumenical directive in bilateral (denomination-to-denomination) relationships, we have continued to use synodically approved categories. First is the category of *churches in communion*—those with whom the CRC has a particular affinity or history. Churches that are so designated may be engaged in joint ventures with the CRC and/or its agencies, exchange delegates at synod, welcome each other's members at the Lord's Supper and each other's pastors into the pulpit, and generally encourage each other in ministry and faithfulness. Second is the category of *churches in cooperation*—a classification that recognizes all the other varied bilateral relationships the CRC has with Christian churches. Some of these relationships have originated through correspondence around mutual interests, others from historic ties, and still others through mutual ministry, whether by way of ecclesiastical connection, the work of CRC agencies, or a specific memorandum of understanding. In addition to bilateral relationships, we pursue our ecumenical work with organizations that allow for numbers of denominations to come together in unity (sometimes known as multilateral relationships).

Interfaith efforts between the CRC and non-Christian faith traditions are led by a subcommittee of the EIRC. As a result of decisions by the Reformed Church in America's General Synod 2019 and the CRCNA's Synod 2019, we have continued to work together to spur on this work, particularly as it relates locally between and among Reformed congregations and those whose house of worship may be a synagogue, mosque, or temple.

II. Membership and meetings

The members of the EIRC for the current year ending June 30, 2023, are Jake Bentum (2025/1); Lyle Bierma (2025/2); Joy Engelsman (2024/1); InSoon Hoagland (2023/2); Ruth Hofman (2024/1); James Joosse (2024/2); William Koopmans, chair (2024/2); Ruth Palma (2023/2); Shirley Roels (2025/1), and Yvonne Schenk (2023/1). The general secretary and the transitional executive director-Canada serve as ex officio members of the EIRC.

The EIRC met in person in October 2022 and virtually in January 2023. Another virtual meeting is scheduled to be held in April 2023.

III. Nominations for membership/protocols

InSoon Hoagland and Ruth Palma are concluding two terms of service on the EIRC. The EIRC recommends that synod express its gratitude to them for their faithful service.

Yvonne Schenk is completing her first term on the EIRC, and, given her contributions and willingness to continue, the committee recommends that synod reappoint her to a second three-year term.

The Council of Delegates, by way of exception, appointed Jake Bentum to the EIRC on behalf of synod, effective November 1, 2022.

In keeping with the synodical guidelines and requirements for diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and ordination among the membership of the committee, the EIRC will present a slate of two nominees for the USA Central and USA East positions in its supplementary report to Synod 2023.

IV. Bilateral relationships

The CRC maintains a relationship of *churches in communion* with 23 denominations and of *churches in cooperation* with 18 denominations/partners. Of these categories combined, we have 22 partners on the African continent; five partners in Central and South America (including the Caribbean); two partners in Europe; six partners in Asia and the Pacific Rim; and six partners in North America. A complete list is available on the "Relationships" page of the EIRC website (crcna.org/EIRC).

A. Activities with bilateral partners

Interchanges with four bilateral partners call for specific mention. In addition, CRCNA representatives had communications with several other partner churches.

1. Reformed Church in America

   Our arrangement with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) as well as the accord we struck together in Pella, Iowa, in 2014 leads us to many collaborative efforts. The general synod of the RCA and the synod of the CRC both adopted a plan in 2018 to combine our interfaith efforts. That work continues; the Interfaith Subcommittee of the EIRC met with the RCA's Interreligious Committee two times in the past year to share updates and ways to collaborate.

   Reformed Collaborative meetings continue quarterly between the RCA and the CRC, focusing primarily on the relationship and the church planting process. Conversations are also developing around international church affiliation processes.

2. Kingdom Network, USA

   Synod 2022 approved recognizing the Kingdom Network, USA, as a *church in cooperation*. Representatives of the EIRC and the Kingdom

Network met in January 2023 to discuss potential next steps. The Kingdom Network has indicated that they are content with the current ecumenical relationship. They welcome project partnerships with World Renew and Resonate Global Mission.

3. Christian Reformed Church in Cuba

   Pastor Yordanys Díaz, former president of the CRC in Cuba, met with CRCNA staff and EIRC representatives in November 2022 for a time of prayer and sharing.

4. Christian Church of Sumba

   Rev. Ivan Santoso, assistant professor of systematic theology and theology of worship at the Reformed Theological Seminary of Indonesia, has indicated his willingness to promote an ecumenical presence in Indonesia with the Christian Church of Sumba. The EIRC will continue to work with Rev. Santoso to best represent the CRCNA in various contexts within Indonesia and throughout Asia.

B. Formal exchanges

Throughout the past year formal exchanges remained curtailed due to COVID-19 restrictions or concerns. Still, many letters and communications with denominations were received and sent. Lyle Bierma was able to attend the general synod of the Reformed Church in America in June 2022. An invitation was received to attend a celebration with the Reformed Church in Africa to celebrate 60 years of ministry. As of the writing of this report, the EIRC is looking at the possibility of sending a representative to this celebration in August 2023.

V. Multilateral relationships – ecumenical organizations and dialogues

We belong to a number of ecumenical organizations, including the Canadian Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the Global Christian Forum, the National Association of Evangelicals, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Reformed Fellowship. We also participate in important dialogues among those of various Christian faiths. The organizations and dialogues with which we have made specific connection this past year are highlighted in the following:

A. World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)

The WCRC is divided into nine regions, six of which are represented by regional councils. One such group is the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC). As executive director emeritus of the CRCNA, Colin P. Watson, Sr., continues to serve on the steering committee of CANAAC.

B. Canadian Council of Churches

Transitional executive director-Canada Al Postma as well as other EIRC members (see section V, D) routinely participate in gatherings and initiatives of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) and represent the CRCNA on the council's governing board.

C. Other multilateral organizations and dialogue

We benefit from partnership with the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and we participate in the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. The ninth round of dialogue for the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue began in March 2022 on justification and justice, and an in-person meeting was held in June 2022. The sixth general assembly of the World Reformed Fellowship met in Orlando, Florida, in October 2022 on the theme of the nature and mission of the global church. Due to travel disruptions, Zachary King, general secretary, was unable to attend.

D. Appointed representatives and observers

The EIRC appoints representatives and observers to many of the aforementioned multilateral ecumenical organizations and to other ecumenical efforts; often Christian Reformed Church members are asked by these organizations to serve as well.

1. Colin P. Watson, Sr., serves as the CRCNA's representative on the board of directors of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and on the steering committee for the WCRC's Caribbean and North American Area Council.
2. Al Postma and Ruth Hofman serve on the governing board of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). The Christian Reformed Church also has a number of representatives who serve on various standing committees, reference groups, and commissions of the CCC. Michael Wagenman is a member of the Youth Involvement Committee, and Anthony Elenbaas is a member of the Nominations Committee. Greg Sinclair serves on the Christian Interfaith Reference Group. Jessica Joustra represents the CRC on the Commission of Faith and Witness. Working groups associated with the Commission of Faith and Witness are served by Zachary DeBruyne (National Muslim Christian Liaison Committee) and Elly Boersma (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity). Ben Vander Windt represents the CRC on the Commission on Justice and Peace. Bruce Adema serves as chair of the board of Project Ploughshares, a Canadian peace research institute that seeks to advance policies and actions to prevent war and armed violence and to build peace.
3. Mike Hogeterp serves on the board of KAIROS; a number of CRC members serve on KAIROS's partnership circles.
4. Al Postma represents the CRCNA to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).

5. The CRCNA does not have a representative currently serving on the World Reformed Fellowship board. The EIRC is working to identify a representative.
6. Ronald Feenstra is the ecumenical staff officer representative of the CRCNA to the United States Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. Two additional representatives include Matthew Lundberg and Clair Mesick.
7. Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. has extended an invitation for a CRCNA representative to engage in learning projects. The EIRC is working to identify a representative.
8. Matthew Lundberg indicated his desire to step down as representative on a commission of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. After further discussion, it was decided that the EIRC will not actively seek a replacement for the Faith and Order group. This matter will be revisited in two years.

VI. Interfaith activities

The Interfaith subcommittee of the EIRC continues its work. Membership includes Bernard Ayoola, Zachary DeBruyne, Michael Kooy, Greg Sinclair, Frans van Liere, Eric Verhulst, Cory Willson, and the general secretary. The subcommittee met in September 2022 and January 2023. Another meeting is scheduled for March 2023.

The Ecumenical Charter that guides the EIRC states that our "responsibility is expressed locally (between and among neighboring congregations), regionally (among churches in a given geographical area), and denominationally (among churches nationally and internationally)." For interfaith efforts, the EIRC and its Interfaith subcommittee emphasize regional and local engagement. To that end, they seek to highlight regional groups that are open to CRC members and to publicize local efforts.

Members of the Interfaith subcommittee met with the EIRC in January 2023 to begin discussions around the Interfaith subcommittee mandate (crcna.org/EIRC). Due to effects of COVID-19, interfaith dialogues and encounters have stopped, and churches are no longer reaching out to other faiths to participate in dialogues. Because of this, it has been suggested to update the Interfaith subcommittee mandate to include more interaction with churches.

The RCA Interreligious group and the CRC's Interfaith subcommittee met on June 27, 2022, and November 1, 2022. Another meeting is scheduled for March 2023. Members of the RCA Interreligious group are drawn from many different ministries and regions of their denomination. Collaboration between CRC and RCA leaders continues with the Peer to Peer Interfaith Network and Journeys into Friendship. Possible new joint activities continue to be discussed.

VII. Synodical assignments

A. EIRC membership distribution/nomination process

The updates regarding EIRC membership in various regions that the EIRC proposed to Synod 2022 were received for information.

B. Categories of affiliation

After Synod 2022 approved Church Order changes relating to the new categories of affiliation, the EIRC updated their information and website to reflect approved changes regarding *churches in communion* and *churches in cooperation*.

C. Kingdom Network, USA

As mentioned earlier in this report, Synod 2022 approved recognizing the Kingdom Network, USA, as a *church in cooperation*. The grounds presented with that decision (see *Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 842) have proven helpful in discussions toward recognizing similar church bodies (see section VIII, C).

VIII. Additional updates

A. World Council of Churches

The report of the EIRC to Synod 2022 noted the intention to send a representative to the next assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), that was scheduled to be held in September 2022. The purpose of that representation included an opportunity to meaningfully engage in the advancement of the CRCNA's ecumenical involvement at a global level and to provide observations and feedback that would assist in a consideration of possibly seeking membership in the World Council of Churches.

Zachary King, as general secretary of the CRCNA, currently serves as the denomination's ecumenical officer. However, because of his newness to the role, he asked William T. Koopmans, chair of the EIRC, to attend. The 11th Assembly of the WCC took place in Karlsruhe, Germany, August 31-September 8, 2022. Dr. Koopmans provided an extensive report to the EIRC at its meeting on October 24, 2022, the content of which is summarized here.

The theme for the 11th Assembly of the WCC was "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity." This theme overtly hints at some of the key aspects included in the agenda for this meeting. There was a clear focus on addressing crises of war (particularly the Ukraine-Russia conflict), climate change, calls for reconciliation, and greater Christian cooperation in addressing many other issues of justice in local and global settings.

Significantly, the first meeting of the World Council of Churches took place in Amsterdam in August 1948 amid the aftermath of World War II. The 11th Assembly was also painfully aware of the ravages of war, this time most prominently occurring in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The assembly is generally held every seven or eight years. The 11th Assembly

had been canceled once due to COVID-19 concerns and was almost canceled a second time because of COVID disruptions and the war in Ukraine. However, organizers decided that despite these challenges it was important for the event to proceed. The presence of representatives from both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Orthodox Church of Russia created a context of considerable emotional challenge and some awkward and tense moments for the Russian delegation, but it also set a context for urgent and prayerful pleas for peace and unity in the world as well as in the church.

1. Observations regarding the 11th Assembly
    a. This assembly, despite ongoing challenges from COVID-related concerns, brought together approximately 4,000 people from 350 denominations representing 130 countries.
    b. The greatest addition of new members to the WCC over the past couple of decades reportedly has come from evangelical, Pentecostal, and independent churches (for comparison, see comments by George Vandervelde in 1999 reported in Appendix A below, noting trends to monitor regarding membership in the WCC in years to come).
    c. At this assembly there was a very conspicuous presence of observers from Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches around the world.
    d. The establishment of the Global Christian Forum, while not directly under the auspices of WCC, occurred to afford opportunity for churches such as the CRCNA to participate with other churches in initiatives that intersect with the mission of the WCC.
    e. The appointment of Dr. Jerry Pillay as general secretary of the WCC entails that one of the key leaders of the WCC has familiarity and some connections with the CRCNA by virtue of previous roles in the World Council of Reformed Churches (WCRC).
    f. The 11th Assembly focused on key issues involving world peace, reconciliation, justice, unity, global stewardship, and the church's witness and action in such areas.
    g. The setting of the 11th Assembly, hosted in the Rhineland area of Germany, provided a context for the observation of the church's efforts and achievements in the realm of reconciliation following World War II.
    h. The worship times at the assembly were celebratory, varied, trinitarian-focused, often evangelical in flavor, and generally widely appreciated by assembly participants.
    i. Participants engaged in a great variety of formats, including themed workshops, committee meetings, key speakers and panel discussions, plenary presentations (including topical Bible studies),

regional meetings, plenary business meetings, and weekend excursions.

j. The venue provided opportunity over meals and refreshment breaks to engage in countless conversations. For participants who already had ecumenical connections, it provided opportunities to reengage many friendships and networking connections. The CRCNA representative had the opportunity to meet with many people known from previous WCRC settings, CANAAC contexts, Canadian Council of Churches gatherings, and some bilateral ecclesiastical relationships, while also making many new acquaintances, resulting in the opportunity to share with them the ministry and vision of the CRCNA.

k. To prepare for and benefit from the 11th Assembly of the WCC, preassembly regional meetings and a postassembly debriefing were set up via Zoom.

l. The regional meeting of North American participants included a focus on prioritizing key topics and issues that the members wished to highlight for further consideration by the central committee, as well as a presentation of nominees from the region for consideration to serve as one of eight regional WCC presidents. The participants identified the following six topics, ranking them in order of urgency:

    - racism, white privilege/supremacy
    - climate justice
    - poverty and wealth inequity
    - reconciliation with Indigenous peoples
    - Christian nationalism
    - polarization and division

m. The plenary meetings of the WCC employ a consensus model of decision making, and the atmosphere in these business meetings is generally very orderly and amicable (although some delegates lamented more privately that "politicking and power struggles" were happening at committee levels and behind the scenes).

n. While some churches that are members of the WCC hold and promote theological positions that differ significantly from those of the CRCNA, the clear intent of the WCC leadership is to focus on biblical essentials that are widely accepted in the global Christian church. The WCC clearly aims to provide a forum for Christian denominations to work together in a spirit of tolerance and unity.

o. The 11th Assembly was well organized and for the most part ran very efficiently for a meeting of its size.

p. There were many more opportunities for involvement and engagement than any one person could participate in, since various committee meetings, discussion groups, and workshops overlapped.

q. There was an intentional focus on youth, though some participants suggested that the inclusion of youth and young adults did not go far enough. A very large group of youth were present as stewards.

r. The presence of many, many Christian organizations from all around the world, set up with displays in booths at the assembly site, created something of a "trade fair" environment and the opportunity to be informed about or to network with countless other institutions, schools, and ministry groups.

2. Reconsidering the issue of CRCNA membership in the WCC

a. Background considerations

In 1950 and following, membership by the CRCNA in the WCC was discouraged and rejected by our synods. This was due largely to the understanding of the goal and mandate of our ecumenical engagement when compared to the makeup and function of the WCC. In the seven decades that have elapsed since 1950, the charter of the EIRC and the actual ecumenical engagement of our denomination have evolved considerably. The EIRC, which for decades was titled the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) initially focused on establishing and maintaining relationships with other denominations that were theologically and historically closely aligned with the CRCNA. A primary goal of such relationships was mutual accountability in maintaining a biblically true Reformed theology and practice.

Over the decades, the mandate and vision of the committee broadened—to a large extent due to evolving ecumenical movements in the world. A key consideration in these developments can be identified with the Lund Principle, which "affirms that churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately." This Lund Principle was agreed to by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the WCC held at Lund, Sweden. The adoption of this principle had immediate results in the worldwide ecumenical movement and eventually also influenced perspectives and practices of ecumenicity in the CRCNA.

At around the turn of the millennium the IRC did send observers from the committee to WCC meetings for the purpose of evaluating the advisability of becoming more involved with the WCC. At around the same time, the CRCNA was expelled from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) and had recently joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) while continuing a longer standing membership in the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) (formerly Reformed Ecumenical Synod). The conclusion was to have the secretary of the REC—who at the time was a CRCNA member, Richard van Houten—monitor what was happening with WCC. However, in 2010 the REC and WARC merged into the World Communion of Reformed Churches

(WCRC), with the CRCNA playing a key role in that merger. Since then, the CRCNA has prioritized engagement in and with the WCRC rather than with the WCC. Reconsideration of this situation was initiated at the October 2021 meeting of the EIRC, resulting in the decision to send an observer to the 11th Assembly of the WCC.

Additional information regarding our synodical engagements of the issue of the WCC and possible membership, as well as references to the reports of previous observers, is included below in Appendix A.

b. Key present deliberation points and considerations

A thorough and informed consideration of potential membership of the CRCNA in the WCC needs to address numerous aspects, including but not limited to the following pros and cons:

Some pros of membership:

- demonstrates ecumenical solidarity with the worldwide church, underscoring principles of ecumenicity that have become part of our charter
- provides opportunity to celebrate with and work with the global church; "we are stronger together," considering that the voice of the WCC to the world is much more influential than the testimony of individual denominations
- many of the goals and initiatives of the WCC to promote justice, reconciliation, unity, and stewardship align with key interests of the CRCNA and its ministries and agencies
- membership in the WCC would provide or enhance networking opportunities
- our involvement in the Global Christian Forum could be seen as a significant step that could progress toward membership in the WCC

Some cons of membership

- considerations of costs that would be involved; the costs would include membership dues (see Appendix B) as well as funding our regular involvement (e.g., on various committees of the WCC that meet regularly between assemblies). These costs need to be considered in conjunction with other ministry priorities.
- meaningful membership and engagement in the WCC might likely require establishing a structure in the CRCNA for ecumenical work that moves significantly beyond the present system, which includes limited staff involvement and ad hoc and volunteer roles. If the CRCNA intends to be fully engaged in the WCC and its various committees, then serious consideration must be given to expanding our model for ecumenical leadership and to the resulting need for increased staff time allocated to this realm of denominational engagement.

B. Christian Reformed Church in Liberia

Requests have been received from within the denomination to explore formal relations with the Christian Reformed Church in Liberia. Throughout the past months, the EIRC has researched and begun the process of drafting a memorandum of understanding. This will be recommended to a subsequent synod.

C. Request from the Alliance of Reformed Churches

The Alliance of Reformed Churches is the largest segment of churches that have left the Reformed Church in America as part of its plan for gracious separation. The Alliance would like to develop an ecumenical relationship with the CRCNA because of the exchange of pastors and shared ministry initiatives. To ensure transparency with the RCA, a communication was sent to the general secretary of the RCA for feedback. The general secretary responded and indicated that he had no concerns about the CRCNA's establishing ecumenical relationships with newly formed networks including the Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The EIRC recommends that synod recognize the Alliance of Reformed Churches as a *church in cooperation* for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a *church in communion*, and, by way of exception, that while designated as a *church in cooperation*, congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA. The EIRC also recommends that synod appoint a task force to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address matters related to *church in communion* status, Church Order matters regarding "orderly exchange" of officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8), and other matters related to benefits of CRC officebearers.

IX. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to William T. Koopmans, chair, and Zachary J. King (ex officio) when matters relating to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee are discussed.

B. That synod express its gratitude to InSoon Hoagland and Ruth Palma for serving the cause of ecumenicity for the CRC.

C. That synod reappoint Yvonne Schenk to a second three-year term.

D. That synod receive the report on the World Council of Churches as information, noting that a formal recommendation regarding membership will come to a subsequent synod.

E. That synod recognize the Alliance of Reformed Churches as a church in cooperation for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a church in communion, and, by way of exception, that while designated as a church in cooperation, congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA.

F. That synod appoint a task force to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address matters related to *church in communion* status, Church

Order matters regarding "orderly exchange" of officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 8), and other matters related to benefits of CRC officebearers.

Grounds:

1. Synod has asked the EIRC to facilitate good ecumenical relations with bodies of former RCA congregations.
2. This body testifies to being Reformed in persuasion and ministry.
3. This body describes itself as an association and is developing their vision, values, frameworks, and other documents.
4. This satisfies the immediate needs of affiliated officebearers and congregations while providing a space for discernment of future relationships.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee
William T. Koopmans, chair
Zachary King, general secretary (ex officio)

APPENDIX A

World Council of Churches background references from *Agenda*s and *Acts of Synod*

The following references to the WCC in previous *Agenda*s and *Acts of Synod* provide some background on the treatment of this topic in our denominational history.

I. Index of references prior to 2000

World Council of Churches (see also National Council of Churches; International Council of Christian Churches; Interchurch relations)

1950 Membership discouraged by RES, 432
1954 Observers, 40; Report, 549
1955 Publication of 1953 RES position on WCC, 29ff.; Report, 269ff.
1956 Communication, 64; Report, 250
1957 Request of New Zealand churches, 102; Report, 301ff.
1959 Re membership in both RES and World Council, 262
1962 Report, 392, 397, 592
1966 Position of *Gereformeerde Kerken*, 59; Report, 228
1967 Reaction to decision of *Gereformeerde Kerken*, 87ff.; Observers, 91
1969 Report of observers, 35, 144ff.
1970 Report of observers, 36, 320
1974 Observer to 1975 meeting, 57, 348
1975 Observer, 24; Report, 351
1976 Observer, 321
1983 Observers to be appointed, 157, 682
1984 Report of observers, 183-86
1985 No contact with, 205; History of our contact with, 219-20; Relationship to WARC, 226-27

1987 IRC report, 175
1990 Report, 198-99
1991 Report, 168
1993 IRC investigation toward contact with, 209
1998 IRC report, 293; Observer to, 176
1999 IRC report, 490; Observer to, 188, 490; New document re structure of WCC, 490
2000 IRC report, 196-97; Forum for nonmembers to be held in September 2000 at Fuller Theological Seminary, 196-97

II. Specific excerpts presented for ease of reference

A. Dr. George Vandervelde was an observer at the WCC assembly in Harare in 1998 (*Acts of Synod 1999*, p. 490):

> Dr. Vandervelde reported that the WCC adopted *Forum of Christian Churches and Ecumenical Organizations*, a document which explains a new structure for the WCC as proposed by the committee mandated in 1989 to study "the common understanding and vision of the WCC" (CUV). According to Dr. Vandervelde, ". . . this new structure is intended to reach beyond WCC's present constituency to churches and organizations that for various reasons are not now members of the WCC. Chief among these is, of course, the Roman Catholic Church. But the CUV document mentions specifically Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, as well as world communions and regional ecumenical organizations." This provides an opportunity for the IRC to monitor carefully the present direction and future shape of the WCC. The IRC intends to study the requirements for and implications of participation in the WCC forum.

B. IRC report in *Agenda for Synod 2000*, pp. 196-97:

> As reported in the *Acts of Synod 1999* (p. 490), the WCC is creating a forum to be held September 5-10, 2000, at Fuller Theological Seminary, to which a representation from the CRCNA is invited. The forum will include churches and organizations that for various reasons are not now members of the WCC. Invitees to the forum include a broad spectrum of churches, including Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and a variety of others, who will come together to discuss concerns that are common to all of them. The forum carries no mandate from any particular agency and is answerable to no particular organization. It will be made up of a group of individuals who are concerned "to explore ways to facilitate greater cooperation between Christian churches and organizations, so that our witness to Jesus Christ will be clear and compelling" (Feb. 7, 2000, letter of invitation). The IRC is considering participation in the consultation.

C. IRC report in *Agenda for Synod 2001*, p. 219:

> In the *Agenda for Synod 2000*, the IRC reported that plans were being made for a consultation to be held at Fuller Theological Seminary in September 2000 and that IRC was considering participation in that meeting.

> Dr. David H. Engelhard and Rev. Leonard J. Hofman attended the consultation. The idea for such a consultation arose in conversations within the World Council of Churches (WCC), but was called by an independent committee to explore the concept of a Global Christian Forum where a wide range of traditions may have a common platform to discuss issues of mutual concern. Some thirty church leaders from throughout the world gathered September 9-11, 2001, to discuss what might be the contours of a future forum. Another consultation made up of members of churches who are not now members of the WCC may be invited to carry the discussion further. Dr. George Vandervelde participated in making arrangements for the September meeting.

D. An appendix to the IRC report in the *Agenda for Synod 2001* notes the following resolution made by the Reformed Ecumenical Council: "that the REC maintain contact with the WCC through its secretariat" (p. 233).

APPENDIX B

Cost of Membership

Correspondence from the WCC membership income coordinator regarding cost of membership in the World Council of Churches:

> The amount of each member church's annual membership contribution is determined in agreement with the church in question, based on what they would like and can contribute. Much more than an amount, what matters is that each member church, through its giving, help us to maintain a vibrant fellowship of churches working for unity, justice, and peace. A church's membership commitment is more than a financial contribution. In fact, it is a multifaceted gift that not only helps provide a solid financial foundation for our mutual work but also illustrates the good stewardship of the fellowship of churches, inspiring other partners to support our work.
>
> Should the Christian Reformed Church in North America join us as a member church, we would start by suggesting a starting annual contribution based on contributions from churches of similar size in the region, and continue the discussion from there so that the amount fits with what your church is willing and able to contribute.

Estimated cost of membership

To gain a further sense of the estimated cost of membership, contact was made with Rev. Laura Osborne, coordinator for Interreligous Relations of the Reformed Church in America, who noted that the RCA currently pays $15,000 annually but will reevaluate that contribution in the light of present changes regarding RCA denominational membership numbers.

Historical Committee

I. Introduction

Synod 1934 established the Historical Committee as a standing committee of the Christian Reformed Church, and the committee's revised mandate, approved by Synod 2022, states the following (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 81; *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 853):

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

Synod 2022 also approved expanding the membership of the committee. Current administrative committee members are Wiebe Boer (ex officio, as president of Calvin University), William Katerberg (ex officio, without vote, as curator of Heritage Hall), Zachary King (ex officio, without vote, as general secretary of the CRCNA), and Jul Medenblik (ex officio, as president of Calvin Theological Seminary). Current synodically elected members are John Bolt, chair (2023/2); James A. De Jong, secretary (2024/2); Herman De Vries (2025/2); and Tony Maan (2025/2). Synod 2022 also approved adding two additional synodically elected members by virtue of expertise; nominations for these two new positions are presented in section II, B below.

Since its 2022 report to synod, the committee met in person and via Zoom on October 26, 2022; November 15, 2022; and January 31, 2023.

II. Committee activities

A. Organizational matters

At its October meeting the committee reviewed and set the schedule and focus of its meetings as follows: to hold its first meeting of the year in September to review synodical actions, determine projects for the year, and make assignments; to hold its second meeting in November to consider assigned reports or proposals; and to hold its third meeting in January to take follow-up actions and finalize its report for the forthcoming synod report. A meeting will be held in early April only if necessary to present a supplementary report to synod.

The committee also reviewed the expectations and requirements of elected committee members as being (1) expertise in CRCNA history and the Reformed legacy, or some aspect thereof, and (2) availability and making a commitment to be creatively involved in the committee's work.

The committee has also decided that it will designate someone to communicate with its network of classical representatives once a year with information, reminders, and suggestions.

In implementing Synod 2022's decisions concerning the expanded and integrated nature of the committee (cf. *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 853-54), the committee clarified the respective roles of the general secretary and the committee itself regarding oversight of the archives. In doing so, it approved the following delineation:

The responsibilities of the general secretary shall be as follows:

1. To oversee and ensure that all CRC agencies comply with synodical rules concerning their archives.
2. To serve as the final authority with respect to security, confidentiality protocols, and usage.
3. To oversee and facilitate the denomination's financial obligation to Heritage Hall.
4. To ensure the collaborative functioning of the three stakeholders to promote the mandate of the Historical Committee.
5. To participate in the meetings and work of the Historical Committee ex officio.

The responsibilities of the Historical Committee shall be as follows:

1. To participate in the work of the Archives Advisory Council (AAC).
2. To consult with and advise the AAC on matters such as these:
   - annual budget and major budget expenditures
   - major strategic policy initiatives
   - key staff positions
3. In cooperation with Heritage Hall staff, to maintain contact with regional (classical) representatives.
4. To encourage and support the use of the CRC archives.
5. To encourage and solicit gifts to the *Origins* endowment fund.
6. To cultivate, maintain contact with, and actively participate in networks of people interested in the content of the denominational archives.

The committee recommends that synod endorse the delineation of the respective duties of the general secretary and the Historical Committee regarding oversight of the denominational archives. This provides the necessary clarification lacking in the past.

B. Nominations for new synodically elected positions

At its October meeting, the committee decided that the new positions approved by synod should reflect the growing diversity of the denomination. Our nomination slates this year reflect both gender and ethnic diversity. These are not meant to be exclusive but represent a place to begin in promoting more diversity on the Historical Committee. These slates of nominees reflect the ethnic Korean membership of the church and the Native American membership of the church. Each of these groups has contributed significantly to the CRCNA's spirituality and has broadened its expression of Reformed faith and life. Their contributions deserve to be captured and preserved in our archives.

Korean nominees

Rev. Christian Oh was raised in a devout Christian family in South Korea. He earned a B.A. in theology and philosophy from Chongshin University (1980), an M.Div. from Calvin Theological Seminary, and a doctor of intercultural studies degree from Grace Theological Seminary, focusing on syncretism in Korean churches (2016). He was ordained as a minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church in 1988 and planted the Han Bit CRC in greater Detroit, serving there until his retirement in 2020. He has served in numerous CRCNA capacities, including on several study committees and implementation teams, the CRCNA Board of Trustees, and the Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees (1996-2002 and again at present). He has been an ethnic advisor at synods, is an advisor to Korean pastors and churches, has been an instructor in the CRCNA Korean Institute for Ministry (2011 to the present), and is a frequent lecturer, speaker, and translator in Korean churches and seminaries.

Rev. Jay Shim is a professor of theology at Dordt University. He was born in Seoul, South Korea, baptized as a Roman Catholic, and came to the United States to study graphic design. He worshiped with the Korean CRC in southern California and explored Pentecostalism before finding and committing to the Reformed faith at Calvin College (B.A.) and Calvin Theological Seminary (M.Div., Ph.D.). Ordained as a minister of the Word in 1993, he has served two terms on the CRCNA Candidacy Committee, helped found the CRCNA Korean Institute for Ministry, served as its director for five years, and completed two terms on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee. He has translated the three forms of unity into Korean. He has assisted the CRCNA executive director by gathering information on Korean churches and assisting that office in collaborating with those churches. He works with Chongshin and Kosin universities in various ways, including their exchange programs with Dordt University. He has lectured and published on Reformed theology in both North American and Korean churches and academic venues.

Native American nominees

Pastor Evelyn Bennally serves Sanostee (N.Mex.) Christian Reformed Church. She is the first Navajo woman to be ordained as a commissioned

pastor in the CRC. She came to faith through vacation Bible school as a child, and as a young adult she led religious instruction classes. She is a graduate of Reformed Bible College and Calvin College. She served as a schoolteacher for forty years, and after retiring, she heard God's call to be a pastor. During the pandemic she completed a three-year training program in biblical/theological knowledge, ministry skills, and spiritual formation with Classis Red Mesa's Leadership Development Network. She has served on the denomination's committees on race relations and faith formation. She is currently a member of Classis Red Mesa's interim committee, its missions committee, and its nominations committee. She served as a delegate to Synod 2022.

Rev. Stanley Jim is a member of the Navajo tribe and pastor of the Window Rock (Ariz.) Christian Reformed Church. He is a graduate of Reformed Bible College and Calvin Theological Seminary. He has served the Christian Reformed Church as a member of the synodical committees on "The Official Acts of Ministry" and "The Planning Team for the Sesquicentennial Celebration" and as one of the first ethnic advisors to synod. He also served as the Native American/First Nations ministry leader with Christian Reformed Home Missions, as the second clerk of Synod 2015, and as a member of the Council of Delegates. For Classis Red Mesa he has served on the classical interim committee and the classical home missions committee, and he currently serves the classis as its regional pastor and as chair of its theological education and ministry skills committee.

While reflecting on the denomination's growing diversity, the committee also discussed the importance of collecting and archiving perspectives from overseas churches planted and supported by CRCNA missions. Their reflections on Reformed faith and life constitute part of the CRCNA legacy. Accordingly, the committee has invited Dr. Tersur Aben of Nigeria to be a ministry partner to offer advice on archival and historical matters that reflect on Nigerian-CRCNA relations. He has graciously accepted to serve in an advisory capacity for three years, and this will not require synodical approval. Anticipating that this experimental partnership will prove fruitful, the committee may invite others to participate in a similar way.

C. Nomination to fill an existing vacancy

John Bolt is completing his second term on the committee and is not eligible for reappointment. The committee submits the following slate of nominees for a first term of three years.

Henk Aay was born and lived in the Netherlands until he was twelve years old, when his family immigrated to Canada and settled in Kitchener, Ontario. He earned a B.A. (with honors) from Waterloo Lutheran University (now Wilfrid Laurier University) in 1969 and a Ph.D. in geography from Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1978. He taught at Wilfrid Laurier University and at the University of Toronto, and he served as a professor at Calvin University from 1982 until retiring in 2012. His academic fields are geography and environmental studies, in which he has

frequently lectured and is widely published. From 2006-2012 he held the Meijer Chair of Dutch Language and Culture at Calvin University, in which capacity he has lectured, published, and facilitated tours for students and others. Since 2013 he has been a senior research fellow at the Van Raalte Institute, Hope College. He has also served on the board of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies (including as president).

Janet Sheeres was born in the Netherlands and immigrated to Canada at age eleven. She attended business college and has experience in office work and administration. She has lived in both Michigan and Washington, where her husband has served as a CRCNA pastor. She has served two terms on the Historical Committee (2001-2007), including as committee chair. She is a published specialist in genealogical studies, has served as editor and annotator of the English translation of CRCNA synodical minutes from 1857 through 1880, has taught in Calvin's CALL program, and has lectured elsewhere on Dutch-American topics. She has published a biography on D.J. Vander Werp, a leading pastor and first theological educator of the CRCNA; a study of A.C. Van Raalte's attempt to found a Dutch colony in Virginia; and a collection of ten biographies of the wives of early CRCNA pastors. She has also served as interim editor of *Origins*, as a volunteer in the Heritage Hall archives, and as a president of both the Zeeland Historical Society and the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies.

III. Report of the curator, William Katerberg

A. Archives staff

The past year was marked by noteworthy transitions in staff. Will Katerberg continued his work as curator of Heritage Hall during the winter, spring, and summer of 2022 and spent the fall on sabbatical. Laurie Haan continued her work as archival assistant, focusing on material related to the seminary and university. Emily Koelzer moved on to a full-time position at Aquinas College. And, as we noted last year, Hendrina Van Spronsen retired in June 2021 from her work as office manager, production assistant for *Origins: Historical Magazine of the Archives*, and archival assistant after serving in Heritage Hall for over three decades.

Heritage Hall combined the two vacated part-time positions into a full-time position of assistant archivist and digitization specialist. Serving in that position is Jen Vos, a graduate of Calvin University and the Cooperstown Graduate Program at the State University of New York, Oneonta. She worked most recently at the Tri-Cities Historical Museum in Grand Haven, Michigan.

Volunteers and student workers have long been essential to the work of Heritage Hall. Heritage Hall had two volunteers in 2022. Phil Erffmeyer collects and processes minutes from congregations and classes. Congregations and classes with questions can contact him and the archives staff

most easily by emailing crcarchives@calvin.edu. He also processed new material, mostly related to the denomination. Clarice Newhof worked on cataloging our extensive photo collection into subcollections labeled People, Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin University, Christian Reformed Church, and General.

Student employees worked on our online collections index (archives.calvin.edu/) and organized oversized photos and a digitization program related to Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte, founder of the first Dutch immigrant colony in Michigan in 1846-1847.

B. Archival activity during 2022

1. Collections

   The archives accessioned a variety of material related to its three funding organizations (denomination, university, and seminary), along with manuscript collections mostly related to the history of Reformed Christianity and Dutch immigration and ethnic communities in North America. These accessions included the following:

   - Records of a CRC pastor who led worship services for German POWs housed in Michigan during World War II
   - Files from retired university and seminary faculty members, including Joel Carpenter, Richard Mouw, Quentin Schultze, John Stek, and Davis Young
   - Photographs
   - Records from congregations that closed in 2022
   - World Missions material from the CRCNA
   - Material from the Tract League, which is associated with the CRCNA
   - Records related to the Dutch American Historical Commission
   - A rich collection of letters between former Calvin College professor Walter Lagerwey and his wife, Wilma Lagerwey, when he was stationed overseas during World War II
   - Records from the Christian Association of Psychological Studies
   - Papers and manuscripts from the poet James Den Boer

2. Research

   Heritage Hall received regular "walk in" visitors eager to use its collections during 2022. As in recent years, however, most of the patrons were virtual, making requests via email or phone and hoping to access material digitally or as photocopies. Requests came from local congregations, clerks of classes, and staff from CRCNA, Calvin University, and Calvin Theological Seminary offices. Whether walking in, calling, or emailing, several hundred patrons a year make requests for material and research help.

The most requested material in 2022 was related to immigrant letters and memoirs, genealogy and family history, photo collections, congregational and classical minutes, the history of the CRCNA with respect to various topics, and rare books. Specific requests involved research being done on Geerhardus Vos, immigration, Christian Reformed missions among the Navajo and Zuni peoples, Bill Fyfe and the architecture of the seminary and university buildings, William Henry Jellema, Meindert De Jong, Dutch immigrants in Nova Scotia, missionaries in China, and the Calvin-Hope basketball rivalry.

The curator, William Katerberg, posted articles on *Origins Online* (origins.calvin.edu) on history related to the CRCNA, the seminary, the university, and Dutch North American immigration and enclaves. He also contributed an article in the spring 2021 issue of the *Origins* print version on his maternal grandfather, the family's immigration to Canada, and the founding of a Christian Reformed congregation in Drayton, Ontario. With Donald Bruggink and Dennis Voskuil, he also edited and published *Dutch Immigrant Stories* (Van Raalte Press, 2022), a collection of essays from the 2021 biennial conference of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies. The conference was the first meeting of this organization conducted online, due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns.

3. Digitization and indexing

   Digitization continued in a variety of areas: building a database of Heritage Hall's photograph collections; finishing the compilation of an online catalog of our collections; focusing on Calvin University records, the largest of the archive's collections (archives.calvin.edu/).

   The most noteworthy digital project of 2022 (begun in 2020) continued; it is being done in cooperation with the Van Raalte Institute at Hope College (VRI) and is supported by the Dutch Consulate in New York City. It involves digitizing and making publicly available the A.C. van Raalte and Dirk van Raalte collections in the two institutions. Doing so will aid scholars and local history researchers. The two collections will be available on the Digital Commons of Hope College and Calvin University (see digitalcommons.calvin.edu). Heritage Hall and the VRI also hope to create a website for general audiences interested in this history. Scholars can navigate the larger collection of Dutch-language, translated, and English-language material in the Van Raalte collections. But the volume of material is intimidating for nonscholars. The website will introduce Van Raalte and the creation and evolution of the colony he founded, putting them in the broader context of North American history. It also will provide links to material from the Heritage Hall and VRI Van Raalte collections that will most interest local history enthusiasts, middle and high school teachers and students, and those interested in Reformed Christianity and Dutch immigration to North America.

The work of indexing *The Banner* and various other magazines related to Reformed Christianity continued. We hope to digitize *The Banner* in the next few years, and we have had discussions with staff at *The Banner* about this idea. The project will depend on securing funding, since digitization is expensive. We also hope to digitize several publications related to the university and seminary, such as *Chimes*, the student newspaper. Heritage Hall expects to pursue a variety of digitization projects in the next few years related to the 150th anniversary of the seminary and university in 2026.

4. Promotion and outreach

   Staff presentations were made to Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary classes via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

   Origins: Historical Magazine of the Archives and *Origins Online* (origins.calvin.edu) continue to be vibrant forms of outreach to a variety of audiences. The spring 2021 issue of the print magazine had a variety of stories; the fall 2021 issue focused on the history of women, Dutch immigration, and Reformed Christianity. The spring 2023 issue will include a variety of material on A.C. van Raalte and nineteenth-century Dutch immigrant colonies in the midwestern United States. Back issues of the print magazine can be found on the blog website. There also is a Heritage Hall Facebook page, which enables the blog to reach out to local audiences for some stories. Heritage Hall will continue to assess its social media presence and find ways to connect with denominational, university, and seminary related audiences and people interested in the history of Dutch North Americans.

IV. Regional classical representatives and significant anniversaries

A. Classical representatives—revised procedure

In the mid-1960s, when the congregational and denominational agency archives were being consolidated with those of the college and seminary and being centralized in Heritage Hall, Egbert Post was appointed as the archival field agent. His assignment was to establish and work with a network of classical field agents in highlighting the importance of archiving and collecting important material, especially congregational records. In the early years of that effort, synod funded Post's travel to classical meetings to promote this effort. One dimension of that work was to compile for synod an annual list of forthcoming congregational anniversaries and key anniversaries of ministerial ordination and service.

The position and work of field agent continued through the service of Robert Bolt, which concluded several years ago. Subsequently, the Heritage Hall staff and the Historical Committee have carried on that activity. On reassessing the position and in the interests of efficiency, the committee and curator have concluded that the network of representatives should in fact be the stated clerks of classes, augmented in several instances by

others who wish to continue being involved in promoting archival interests. The archives staff and volunteers will do the work rather than an individual field agent. Congregations and classes can conveniently contact the archives at crcarchives@calvin.edu and 616-526-6313, to which all archives staff can respond.

Under the revised arrangement, staff will compile the anniversary lists that will continue to be published annually in the committee's report to synod. This year we have added a new feature: campus ministry anniversaries. Stated clerks and others will be contacted annually with important information and specific requests to be communicated to the churches.

Classical representatives specifically involved besides stated clerks in enhancing our denominational archives are as follows:

Arizona – Rodney Hugen
B.C. North-West – Anne Kwantes
Eastern Canada – Jean Lauziere
Iakota – Garry Zonnefeld
Pacific Northwest – Matthew Borst
Southeast U.S. – Stan Workman

B. Ordained ministers—anniversaries of service

Names are listed according to years of ordained service in the CRCNA, with dates of prior ordination in another denomination indicated in parentheses.

50 years (1974-2024)
Begay, Anthony
Belanus, Donald G.
Bultman, Roger D.
Cok, Ronald H.
De Vries, Albert J.
De Young, Maurice
Genzink, Terry L.
Helleman, Adrian A.
Huttinga, Jack
Kamper, Dennis A.
Kuperus, Harry
Nydam, Ronald

55 years (1969-2024)
Bergsma, Paul J.
Brink, Harvey Allen
Buwalda, Jerry D.
Buwalda, Merlin N.
De Jong, Wieger
De Young, Hendrik
Dirksen, Willem D.
Dykstra, William
Fisher, Ronald G.
Gebben, Nelson J.
Gelder, Alvern
Gray, Jack M.
Heyboer, Marvin W.
Hiemstra, Harold
Hogeterp, Peter C.
Hommes, Raymond
Hutt, Gary P.
Jansen, John K.
Machiela, Alvin J.
Mulder, Dennis M.
Natelborg, John D.
Ritsema, Robert D.
Rozeboom, John A
Salomons, C. Harry
Stadt, Paul D.
Stroo, William A.
Van De Griend, Kenneth D.
Vander Ley, Rodney
Vander Veen, Dale
Van Essen, Larry
Workman, Stanley J.

60 years (1964-2024)
De Vries, James Edward
Geurkink, Vernon F.
Hertel, Richard A.
Hoytema, Jerry J.
Salomons, Herman
Vanden Einde, Harlan G.
Van Til, John
Yang, Peter S.

65 years (1959-2024)
Groen, John G.
Hugen, Melvin D.
Swets, Walter
Vanden Ende, Anthonie (1954, GKN)

70 years (1954 – 2024)
Arkema, Alan
Beelen, Marvin
Rooy, Sidney

C. Church anniversaries—at 25-year intervals

25th anniversary (1999-2024)
Courtice, Ontario – Hope Fellowship (Oshawa, Ont.)
Grand Rapids, Michigan – Korean Grace
Holland, Michigan – Maple Avenue
Lincoln, California – Granite Springs
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – Spirit and Truth Fellowship
Savage, Minnesota – Bridgewood

50th anniversary (1974-2024)
Chicago, Illinois – Hyde Park
Sioux Center, Iowa – Covenant
Sparta, Michigan – Trinity

75th anniversary (1949-2024)
Alymer, Ontario – Alymer
Bloomfield, Ontario – Bethany
Caledon, Ontario – Immanuel (Brampton)
Clinton, Ontario – Clinton
Elmhurst, Illinois – Elmhurst
Escalon, California – Escalon
Grandville, Michigan – Trinity (Jenison)
Iron Springs, Alberta – Iron Springs
Trenton, Ontario – Ebenezer
Woodstock, Ontario – Maranatha

100th anniversary (1924-2024)
Alameda, California – Alameda

D. Campus ministry anniversaries—at 25-year intervals

25th-anniversary campus ministries (1999-2024)
Ypsilanti, Michigan – Eastern Michigan University

50th-anniversary campus ministries (1974-2024)
Iowa City, Iowa – Geneva Campus Ministry at University of Iowa
Kingston, Ontario – Momentum Campus Ministries (Geneva Fellowship)

V. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to John Bolt, chair, and to James A. De Jong, secretary, when matters pertaining to the mandate and work of the Historical Committee come before synod.

B. That synod endorse the delineation of the respective duties of the general secretary and the Historical Committee regarding oversight of the denominational archives.

Ground: This provides necessary clarification.

C. That synod by way of the ballot appoint new members to the Historical Committee from the slates of nominees presented to a first term of three years.

D. That synod recognize with appreciation the service of retiring member John Bolt, who has served as committee chair for his two terms on the committee, and of curator William Katerberg and the Heritage Hall staff and volunteers.

Historical Committee
Wiebe Boer
John Bolt, chair
James A. De Jong, secretary
Herman De Vries
William Katerberg
Zachary J. King
Tony Maan
Jul Medenblik

DENOMINATIONALLY RELATED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Dordt University

Greetings to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church! Dordt University is grateful for the many blessings God has given us, including our connection to the CRC.

It is our mission at Dordt University to "equip students, alumni, and the broader community to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life." When Dordt began in 1955, our founders envisioned that Christian education would go beyond devotional work—"in the larger and deeper sense that all the class work, that all of the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity." Thanks in part to that bold vision and clear mission, we have continued to stand firm in our Reformed Christian perspective and faith and to provide students with a unique, faith-infused educational experience.

This past fall we had a record total degree-seeking undergraduate enrollment of 1,460. In addition, we have seen growth through "Planting for the Future," Dordt's largest-ever capital campaign. To date, we have raised $87 million toward our $90 million goal. This will help us to develop and expand research and innovative programs, to develop and improve spaces for students to live and learn in Christian community, and to increase access to a Christ-centered education at Dordt. Because of our donors' generous gifts to the campaign, we will soon break ground on some construction projects, including a new dining commons, updates to the B.J. Haan Auditorium, the Rozenboom Family Athletic Center, and a new set of apartments overlooking the Dordt Prairie. We debuted several new buildings in the past year as well; the Agriculture Stewardship Center is now home to a monoslope building featuring two lots for a small dairy herd and market cattle. We also added the American State Bank Sports Complex, an indoor turf facility that will draw about 200,000 visitors each year.

Faith formation and a Reformed perspective continue to be integral to Dordt's purpose. Our students regularly attend Wednesday chapel, which has an average attendance of more than 850 students. Many students also participate in a praise and worship gathering on Thursdays and take part in regular Bible studies. Even after graduation, Dordt alumni make their faith a priority: according to a recent alumni survey, 93 percent of alumni report that they attend church on a weekly basis. And being Reformed means something here—so much so that we require faculty and staff to attend confessionally Reformed congregations and to enroll their children in Christian day school or a homeschool setting. We also want our biblical and missional fidelity to be clear to outside entities, as seen through our recent interactions with the Higher Learning Commission for our ten-year accreditation. In their summary report, the commission team stated that "the institution's primary strength is in its deep and abiding commitment to its mission and providing a positive and uplifting learning environment

for its students." It is encouraging that they recognized that every person they interacted with—students, faculty, staff, and others—were exceedingly clear and in alignment with Dordt's Christ-centered mission.

At Dordt we strive for excellence in both a curricular and cocurricular manner. This is evident through our academic achievements—for example, 100 percent of nursing graduates from the class of 2022 passed the National Council Licensure Examination on their first attempt, which is impressive. Over the past ten years, 83 percent of Dordt students who applied to medical school were accepted; according to the national average, only about 10 percent of medical school applicants are typically accepted. Also, of the Dordt engineering majors who took the fundamentals of engineering exam in 2021, 90 percent passed; the national pass rate is 64 percent. From a cocurricular standpoint, our men's cross-country team in November claimed the 67th Annual NAIA Men's Cross-Country National Championship—the team's first cross-country national title and the first team from the Great Plains Athletics Conference to win nationals. Head coach Nate Wolf was named the 2022 NAIA Men's Cross-Country Coach of the Year. In addition to athletics, our on-campus clubs are having a global impact. The Gaming Guild provides a community for gamers who are committed followers of Jesus to think more broadly about their calling as gamers and to develop their own gaming-related gifts to serve God's kingdom. The Gaming Guild is one of a kind in its Reformed Christian approach to gaming, and it has caught the attention of the Gospel Coalition, EA Sports, and many others this past year.

Our alumni embody Christ-centered renewal in the work they do and are being recognized for it. Wendy Gomez Matamoros, a 2012 graduate, received the Young Alumni Award this year from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, which includes over 185 Christian institutions and tens of thousands of alumni eligible for this award. Wendy is transforming special education in Nicaragua through her work as director of Tesoros de Dios, a Christian nonprofit that seeks to help children with disabilities achieve their full potential. The seriousness with which Wendy takes Jesus' call to serve his imagebearers with disabilities is inspiring.

A Dordt education is a valuable investment for students who want to be equipped as effective kingdom citizens. One hundred percent of students who graduated in the class of 2021 were employed or in graduate school within six months of graduation, allowing them to go out and be salt and light in their respective career paths. In addition, our graduates are diligent about repaying their student loans, with Dordt's historic repayment rate above 99 percent.

Dordt is also making an impact on the broader community. Article 71 of the CRCNA's Church Order says, "The council shall diligently encourage the members of the congregation to establish and maintain good Christian schools in which the biblical, Reformed vision of Christ's lordship over all creation is clearly taught." The Center for the Advancement of Christian Education has sought to live this out by walking alongside Christian

schools committed to teaching from a biblical perspective, aiding in the sustainability, improvement, innovation, advocacy, and promotion of Christian education at all levels of learning. The Thrive Center is making a difference in Iowa by providing resources for persons on the autism spectrum or with other learning challenges who are looking for behavior therapy, skills acquisition, and more. Also, the K&K Dooyema Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation provides students and alumni with business practices and guidance rooted in a Reformed Christian context, connecting them to businesses and other entities both regionally and around the globe.

Dordt has been blessed immensely, and we are grateful for the continued support of the Christian Reformed Church in our shared work of "expressing the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide." We look forward to maintaining this shared vision for years to come as Dordt fulfills its mission to work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of life.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Dordt University
Erik Hoekstra, president

Institute for Christian Studies

I. Overview

Coming out of the global pandemic, the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) has learned much from our pivot to online course delivery. During this time, several students have enrolled in our programs who are not otherwise able to relocate to Toronto. For this reason, and because our smaller seminar sizes translate well to a videoconferencing format, we have decided to continue to offer our courses online in the near term and are considering making this change permanent. Strategically speaking, removing a geographic barrier to program access creates the potential for ICS to reach more students and increase its global impact. Moving forward, we plan to combine this form of online program delivery with shorter-term residency requirements through which the ICS academic community can meet and get to know one another in person.

At the time of writing this report, we have recorded 75 course enrollments for the 2022-23 academic year. When we combine this figure with the number of full-time students in the post-coursework stage of their programs, our full-time-equivalency (FTE) student enrollment is roughly 19 students. The final FTE number will be slightly higher than that because we do not yet have enrollment figures for courses we are offering in April-June 2023. In addition, because ICS has one faculty member on sabbatical this year, we have offered fewer courses than we would in a regular year. This enrollment level is lower than the previous academic year, where our FTE was 31 students, and it indicates that ICS has not been immune to declining enrollment trends taking place in social sciences and humanities programs throughout North America.

Eighteen students are currently registered in ICS's M.A. (Philosophy) program (11 of which are enrolled in the "Educational Leadership" stream, or M.A.-E.L., a unique professional development program for Christian school teachers and administrators), seven students registered in ICS's Ph.D. program, and three in our Master of Worldview Studies program, for a total of 25 enrolled program students (both full-time and part-time). Forty-three individual students took at least one course at ICS this year. Finally, our convocation ceremony takes place on May 26, when we hope to celebrate the graduation of six junior members (students), including three students in the M.A.-E.L. program.

II. Faculty transition

After 32 years of faith-filled academic service to ICS, this year also marked the final year of Prof. Robert Sweetman's full-time tenure as professor in the history of philosophy. As part of several farewell events to mark his retirement, Bob will deliver this year's convocation address. We thank and praise God for the gifts Bob has shared over these years, and for the blessing his service has been to the many students and colleagues who for over three decades have benefited from his wisdom and discernment.

In light of Prof. Sweetman's retirement, this year ICS undertook a search for a new faculty member in philosophy, and we are pleased to announce that Prof. Neal DeRoo will be joining the ICS faculty as professor of philosophy on July 1, 2023. Prof. DeRoo completed his B.A. at Calvin University, his M.A. at ICS, and his Ph.D. at Boston College. He has previously served as a philosophy professor at both Dordt and The King's Universities. At Dordt he also served as the director of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service, and at King's as the Canada research chair in phenomenology and the philosophy of religion. We pray for God's blessing on Dr. DeRoo as he takes up this new position, that he may continue to be a strong voice for faithful Christian scholarship and that he will play a formative and redemptive role in the lives of the graduate students he will teach and supervise at ICS.

III. Some highlights

This year ICS entered a collaboration with Calvin University's master of education program, drafting an agreement that will allow Calvin M.Ed. students to take ICS M.A.-E.L. courses for credit in their program while also giving ICS students the opportunity to take Calvin's M.Ed. courses for credit toward their M.A. (Philosophy) in educational leadership at ICS. This collaboration allows ICS to offer two new concentrations to its M.A.-E.L. program, literacy and inclusion, to the existing educational leadership and administrative leadership concentrations. We pray that this collaboration will benefit the programs and students of both schools and that together both programs can continue to produce innovative and visionary leaders for Christian education in North America and beyond.

For the upcoming 2023-24 year, I am happy to report that we have received significant pre-registrations to once again offer the "Art in Orvieto" study abroad program taking place in Orvieto, Italy, July 9-29, 2023. Led by Dr. Rebekah Smick, ICS associate professor of arts and culture, "Art in Orvieto" is an advanced summer studies program in art, religion, and theology. The program offers an ecumenical exploration of Christian understandings of the arts, including artists and writers workshops.

IV. Public outreach through the Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics (CPRSE)

During the 2022-23 academic year, ICS's Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics (CPRSE) embarked on an exploration of diverse understandings of the notion of "tradition" aimed at identifying ways in which the traditions we inhabit as scholars and people of faith can foster justice and human flourishing for all. Some of the reflections of our community members and institutional partners on this thematic focus can be found in the fall 2022 issue of our institutional magazine *Perspective* in the article "On Tradition and Generation," and in our most recent *Critical Faith* podcast episode, "Inhabiting Tradition with Bob Sweetman." In addition to these publications, the CPRSE continued to cultivate and foster public outreach collaborations with key institutional partners such as Citizens for

Public Justice, Shalem Mental Health Network, Canadian Interfaith Conversation, Emmanuel College, Trinity-St. Paul's United Church, and Martin Luther University College. Our partnerships also helped to respond to our thematic focus on tradition while strengthening ICS's public outreach and academic profile.

The following is a summary of CPRSE activities in 2022-23:

In May 2022 the CPRSE helped to sponsor the conference "Seeking Justice in our Institutions," hosted by Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ). This virtual conference offered participants a space to reflect and dialogue about the pursuit of equity and inclusion in institutional and congregational settings. In addition to providing financial support to the conference, the CPRSE team led the workshop "Decolonizing Faith as Individuals and Institutions," thus contributing to CPJ's ongoing dialogue on antioppression scholarship and practice.

In June 2022 the CPRSE presented the summer community conference "Difficult Conversations, Difficult Journeys, Difficult Justice," which served to launch a year of reflection on the role of tradition in contemporary Christian scholarship and pedagogy. This conference included workshops by CPJ and Shalem Mental Health Network and keynote presentations by four of ICS's faculty.

On August 5-6, 2022, and in collaboration with the Centre for Religion and Its Contexts (Emmanuel College), Trinity-St. Paul's United Church, and the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, the CPRSE hosted the third annual Christian Left Conference "Creation, Land, and Indigeneity: Resistance on Turtle Island and Beyond." The conference explored the struggles for justice among Indigenous peoples across the globe, and how Christian narratives can provide tools to achieve reconciliation between nations.

On October 27, 2022, the CPRSE hosted its first hybrid-mode academic event, as we celebrated the publication of *Seeking Stillness or The Sound of Wings: Scholarly and Artistic Comment on Art, Truth, and Society in Honour of Lambert Zuidervaart* (Wipf & Stock, 2021). Volume contributors Michael DeMoor, Allyson Carr, Shannon Hoff, and ICS alumni Dean Dettloff and Joseph Kirby participated in a panel discussion on some of the central themes of Dr. Zuidervaart's scholarly work. You may view the panel discussion at ICS's YouTube channel.

On March 31, 2023, the CPRSE welcomed Dr. Amber Bowen, assistant professor of philosophy and core studies at Redeemer University, to lead our winter 2023 Scripture Faith and Scholarship Symposium. Dr. Bowen's keynote, "On Seeing Further than the Present: A Kierkegaardian Hermeneutic of Hope," featured her research on the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and her scripturally grounded understanding of time.

On May 7-9, 2023, the CPRSE joined the Canadian Interfaith Conversation and Martin Luther University College in presenting the biannual conference "Our Whole Society." This edition of the conference, titled "Finding

Common Ground in a Time of Polarization," explored the potential contributions of people of faith and faith communities in addressing North America's increasing polarization. This conference featured Kathleen Wynne (former premier of Ontario) and Prof. Miroslav Volf (founding director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture) as keynote speakers.

Following the "Our Whole Society" conference, the CPRSE hosted a separate keynote presentation by Prof. Volf, in which he discussed with the ICS community the research that concluded with the publication of his most recent book, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Brazos Press, 2022).

V. Conclusion

On behalf of everyone who participates in and benefits from the academic ministry of ICS, I wish to thank the CRCNA for supporting ICS's efforts to serve God faithfully in the realm of Christian education. Support from Christian Reformed churches allows ICS to offer several unique graduate academic programs, all of which encourage students to bring their Christian faith to wider discussions of leading questions of life and society, thereby shaping future educational leaders in both Christian and public universities as well as primary (K-12) Christian schools. This support also helps ICS sustain a program of community outreach for lifelong learners in the Christian community and beyond. We thank God for his provision to ICS in 2022-23, and we pray that God grant you wisdom and discernment as you undertake the important work of synod this year.

Institute for Christian Studies
Ronald A. Kuipers, president

The King's University

Many universities experienced decreased enrollment in fall 2022 as some of the longer effects of the pandemic, like student preparedness, came into view. King's faces these realities too. We experienced a slight decline in our student enrollment this past fall but are very encouraged by the strong application numbers for fall 2023. We are confident that our enrollment will bounce back from the disruption we experienced over the past couple of years. Despite the challenges we face, we are a people of hope and have seen, time and time again, the faithfulness of our God and his people.

King's is currently in the process of developing two micro-credential programs—in financial accounting and sustainable agriculture. Both programs will consist of six parts, with a credential awarded to those who complete all six components of the program. These micro-credentials will provide a unique opportunity to access King's education in a bite-sized format and will equip participants with specific skills. We anticipate that the financial accounting program will be available by summer 2023 and will be delivered online. The sustainable agriculture credential is in earlier stages of development and will include both online and hands-on learning opportunities.

Our education faculty have been approved to deliver courses that meet the requirements for Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) certification. This program has been designed for Alberta-certified teachers who aspire to be school principals in the Alberta education system. We are working to offer this two-course (80-hour) certificate program in the summer and fall of 2023.

Two King's professors were recently awarded research grants from the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and Parks Canada. Dr. Ben Cameron received a highly competitive NSERC Discovery grant of $90,000, and Dr. Darcy Visscher received a $30,000 NSERC Discovery grant as well as a Parks Canada grant of $73,000. These grants will be used mainly to provide undergraduate research opportunities for King's students, which sets them apart when applying for graduate or professional programs. Dr. Cameron's research is on network modeling theory, a mathematical study of the structure of networks. Dr. Visscher's research includes the study of (1) a zoonotic parasite, (2) the impacts of the Roosevelt elk population on Vancouver Island and their conflict with farmers and local agricultural interests, and (3) Edmonton's rabbit population.

With the generous support provided by one of our donors and in conjunction with the Northern Alberta Diaconal Conference, local church partners, and our university community, we have established the Pakitinâsowin Reciprocity Fund at King's. This Indigenous-led fund expresses a vision for reconciliation by church communities in Edmonton and central Alberta and will typically disburse three grants each year to

an Indigenous-led children's initiative, women's initiative, and broader community initiative.

A new multiuse trail has been constructed along the southern perimeter of campus. The 710-meter loop builds on the planting of hundreds of trees and newly established naturalized areas. This initiative serves as the only naturalized parkland within a 40-minute walk of campus and an excellent example of the benefits of naturalization initiatives. It also provides new recreational opportunities on our campus for students, employees, and the local community.

While the shift in the structure of ministry shares in relation to support of area colleges has had a financial impact on King's, we are thankful for the churches in western Canada who have continued to demonstrate the value they put in Christian higher education through maintaining their support. We are incredibly thankful for the faithful and generous support that King's continues to receive from various churches that are a part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Their investment in our university is equipping students with university education that is underpinned by our Christian faith and preparing them for lives of service in their communities. Together we are ensuring that Christian university education is available and accessible to all students. Thank you for your continued partnership!

The King's University
Melanie Humphreys, president

Kuyper College

I. Introduction

Welcoming. Christ-centered. Relational. Biblical. Community. Intentional.

These were the most-suggested words shared in a Google survey this fall by our students, staff, and faculty when asked to describe Kuyper College's campus culture in one word. These words express the qualities we value and share as we purposefully learn, work, and serve together.

As a spiritual formation initiative this year, we are focusing on, and even memorizing, Romans 12. The six words above fit the living-sacrifice lifestyle that Paul calls us to. A lifestyle shaped by serving, encouraging, giving, leading, teaching, and caring. A lifestyle committed to being transformed by God's grace and truth rather than being conformed to culture. A lifestyle in which we recognize our gifts and strengths and work together as we love God and our neighbor and fulfill our mission, a mission we have been living out since 1939.

Recently I came across the 50th-anniversary publication of the Reformed Bible Institute (RBI, now Kuyper College), "Born in Faith, Nurtured in Prayer" (1989). In it, Rev. John Schaal, long-serving CRCNA pastor and RBI academic dean, reflects on the missional impact of RBI. He writes, "The foundations laid in RBI's early years in the teaching of Reformed truth have marked the school through all the years. We never lost sight of the goal to train students to be more effective lay witnesses, full-time mission workers, and Reformed Christians, trained to be capable and dedicated witnesses for the Lord and every kingdom endeavor. Graduates have continued to carry on those truths in the many areas of service they entered. As one meets graduates today, the remark is often heard that their years at RBI were the best years of their lives."

A Kuyper alumnus and CRCNA pastor echoed these very words in a chapel service this past year. Because of the significant impact of his experience at Kuyper, he is intent on helping to raise up the next generation of Christian leaders for the church and the world. The church and the world need such leaders, and we are committed to preparing more and more students toward our end goal of education—"to live faithfully for Jesus Christ in God's good world."

As we build on the past and envision the future, we are going forward with an increased awareness of the changing needs and expectations within higher education and the workplace. We are committed to providing our undergraduate and graduate students with a robust Bible and theology foundation; quality, affordable programs; workplace-ready skills and experiences; and well-fitted student services within an innovative, caring, and applied learning environment.

II. Highlights to share

Here are some highlights we'd like to share from this past year, shaped around the three themes from our new strategic plan.

A. Integrate purposeful learning, work, and service

As a federally recognized Work College through our KuyperWorks program (see Kuyper's report to Synod 2022 for more details), we are providing our students with purposeful learning, work, and service in order to assist affordability and to prepare them well for their areas of vocation.

- The faculty and Student Development staff are working together to integrate KuyperWorks competencies into curricular programs and to develop a theology of work.
- We are engaging with a new communications firm to help us tell the story of being a Work College and how this aligns with our mission.
- We continue to explore and expand opportunities to engage our students within the broader community, particularly through our new additional location at the Center for Community Transformation in the Madison Square area of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

B. Innovate for the future

We are planning and implementing innovative and relevant programs and partnerships that fit our mission in order to effectively prepare a growing and diverse demographic of students.

- We are developing our master of ministry program to be fully online, having recently received approval from the Higher Learning Commission. We welcomed Dr. Tim Howerzyl, a former CRCNA pastor, as the new graduate program director and assistant professor of theological studies.
- We joined the National Christian Collegiate Athletic Association (NCCAA) and are preparing to launch an intercollegiate athletic program in fall 2023 to deepen our engagement as a college community as we celebrate God's gift of play and sport. Our new athletic director, Gary Bailey, is widely known as someone dedicated to building and maintaining a vibrant Christian culture in athletics.
- We are exploring opportunities to offer microcredentials as a way of serving a broader audience (pastors, business leaders, social workers, etc.) with our biblical and praxis-based programs.

C. Inspire people

We are earnestly working to encourage and embolden our students, staff, faculty, board, donors, churches, and other organizations to join us in advancing the gospel.

- We significantly extended our dual enrolled programs with area Christian high schools and the area homeschool network, offering a variety of courses and a pathway to study at Kuyper.
- We are growing partnerships with churches and parachurch organizations to expand our community engagement and provide external placements for our KuyperWorks program.

- We are building institutional self-esteem, supported by a culture of diversity, belonging, and trust. In fall 2022 our board approved a Statement on Racism, written by a group of faculty, staff, and students, which serves as a guidance document for our community as we love God and our neighbor and earnestly pursue our mission, vision, and values.
- Most importantly, we celebrated another year of graduates who are serving the church and the world as pastors, teachers, social workers, business leaders, writers, and so much more.

In the past year the Kuyper College community has vividly demonstrated its ability to draw together to prepare students to become the next generation of Christian leaders, leaders who are fulfilling our end goal of education—"to live faithfully for Jesus Christ in God's good world"—as our alumni are doing throughout the world.

We give thanks for our continued partnership with the CRCNA, its churches, pastors, and members, and we look forward to more tangible ways to serve Christ's church and his world together.

Kuyper College
Patricia R. Harris, president

Redeemer University

Greetings from Redeemer University! Thank you for allowing us this opportunity to share an update on how we have experienced God's guidance, provision, and grace over this past year.

In September 2022, 40 years after Redeemer's doors opened on September 6, 1982, we welcomed nearly 1,100 students, offering over 100 scholarships and awards to support them. A record number of students (500) came to live in residence, a key feature of Redeemer's unique community experience. Almost all Redeemer students are learning on-site, with a few exceptions for distance learning. We endeavor continually to meet students' needs with the best possible options for an optimal learning environment.

Investment in students—practically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually—continues to be Redeemer's highest priority. After a major tuition reduction in 2019 and a four-year freeze—thanks to generous donor support—Redeemer has committed to affordable tuition for the long term. Costs will remain comparable with other universities in Ontario, which is truly remarkable in the wider context of higher education. For more details, visit redeemer.ca/resound/affordable-christian-university-education.

In 2022 the bachelor of kinesiology (B.Kin.) degree launched along with a new Innovation Centre to support design thinking and entrepreneurship across all undergraduate programs. Two new music programs—music in worship and church music ministry, honors—as well as a new law and public policy minor program were introduced. With program investments such as these, Redeemer is ensuring that students have access to relevant programs that address the challenges of today and tomorrow from an integrated Christian perspective.

Redeemer is also ensuring that students have access to crucial mental health support. We recently launched the Mental Health Support Action Plan, which includes increased mental health care support, a new student health clinic, additional crisis support, and the creation of a mental health task force.

On January 26, Dr. Daniel Lee Hill, Redeemer's 2022 Emerging Public Intellectual, officially received his award and spoke on the lessons and inspiration that can be found in the life of 19th-century Christian abolitionist William Still. It was an honor to have Dr. Hill speak on campus as part of the annual lecture series *The World and Our Calling*.

Redeemer is excited and privileged to host the Kuyper Conference on May 9-11, 2023. The conference was founded in 1998 at Princeton Theological Seminary, and this year Makoto Fujimura will be speaking on the theme "Kuyper and Kintsugi: Public Theology for Repair, Reconciliation, and Restoration."

We remain mindful and thankful for the dedicated financial and prayer support that the CRCNA denomination continues to provide to Redeemer University. The importance of Christian university education in discipling

the next generation of faithful Christian leaders for the sake of the gospel remains the focus of our work—and may God be glorified in all things.

Redeemer University
David Zietsma, president

Trinity Christian College

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update to synod on behalf of Trinity Christian College. We are grateful for this partnership with the CRCNA in our mission of providing a distinctive Christian higher education experience at Trinity. Our prayer is that Trinity continues to be a resource for the denomination, classes, congregations, and families of the CRCNA.

Trinity Christian College educates students in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its resounding *yes* to God's healing, restoring, and saving work in the world. In every field of study, whether for 18-year-old traditional undergraduates, 28-year-old graduate students, or 48-year-old adult undergraduate students, we seek to shape students for meaningful and wise participation in the life-bringing work of God for the sake of their neighborhoods, churches, families, and wider society. This gospel calling orients all that we undertake at Trinity.

Trinity undertakes this mission during a time in which higher education in general, and Christian higher education in particular, faces significant challenges that limit the flourishing of students and of institutions. The ever-escalating costs of higher education, the epidemic of student debt that results from those costs, and the challenges that complex financial aid processes create for families are proving to limit access to Christian higher education. Trinity has taken bold and transformational steps, trusting in God's care, to pursue new pathways that solve some of the most significant challenges in higher education—all so that the doors can be opened wide for any who seek Christian higher education. We do not believe that cost or challenging aid processes should limit access to our Christian educational mission—and we are taking steps to ensure that those barriers are lowered or removed.

During the past year, Trinity has transformed significant aspects of its approach to the economics of higher education, to student well-being, and to mutually beneficial partnerships. All of this has been rooted in the deep conviction that institutions can create structures that align with God's economy of gift, connection, and mutuality and are aimed at opening the door as wide as possible to Christian higher education. This has occurred through a transformed approach to time, money, and partnerships.

We have seen the impact that a scarcity mindset around time has on students. In response, we radically shifted our academic schedule, creating a class-free day that we call Well-being Wednesdays. We create structures for our Wednesdays to encourage students to pursue academic, spiritual, social, emotional, financial, and professional well-being on those days. All of this was done by simply rethinking taken-for-granted assumptions about college scheduling. It allowed us to create a more efficient schedule, with no reduction in courses, in ways that create ample time for students to pursue a holistic Christian vision of human flourishing. The early returns have been promising. We saw a 50 percent improvement in fall to spring retention. We have seen a 50 percent reduction in counseling

needs. Anecdotally, students are expressing deep gratitude for this new rhythm. We know that—as is the case for all of us—when our students are well, they can do well. This transformed approach to time is helping our students thrive.

We have seen the adverse impact that ever-increasing college tuition—and the student debt resulting from that tuition—has on our families. The predominant economic model in higher education, which features high tuition with high discounts, is confusing to families and particularly disadvantages families without long histories of college education. In response, we have transformed our approach to tuition by reducing our tuition by 40 percent (from $33,800 to $19,800) and simplifying our aid process. We want our process to be accessible, realistic, and transparent. We know that two-thirds of first-generation college students do not explore a college based on sticker price alone. We know that tuition is typically set far above the actual cost of educating a student. We are aiming at a different pathway that simplifies the process for families and puts Christian higher education within the reach of anyone who desires it.

We have seen how the economic risk of higher education falls almost completely on students in ways that benefit colleges (through tuition) and employers (through the training and formation colleges provide). We have also seen rich opportunities for mutual collaboration with partners in the greater Chicago region and beyond who are both seeking to do good work and seeking quality employees. In response, we are building a web of paid internship opportunities that are allowing students to use the revised class schedule to participate in internships paying up to $5,000 per semester. Combined with our new tuition model, this helps students begin to approach debt-free tuition. Significantly, this also provides professional formation and powerful mutual benefits to employer partners. In just our pilot months, we have reduced the student debt load by more than $100,000 for our participating students.

All of this is an effort to open our eyes wide to the abundant gifts with which God has surrounded us and to open our doors wide to all who seek Christian higher education. God has blessed us richly with a student body whose racial and ethnic diversity exceeds that of almost all other Christian institutions (nearly 40 percent students of color) and a faculty whose racial and ethnic diversity (25 percent faculty of color) far exceeds the average for Christian institutions (14 percent). We are blessed to be growing into a community that reflects God's kingdom, and we are working hard to be a place where all can feel at home. We have a powerful opportunity to help all who encounter Trinity to learn what it means to live—united in Jesus Christ—across lines of difference. We give thanks to God, and we see the work that is before us, which seeks to ensure that every student can flourish at Trinity.

All of this, of course, is designed to open wide the doors of access and belonging so that we can keep on educating students with excellence in light

of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our academic and job placement outcomes remain excellent, with top-rated nursing and education programs, an over 98 percent graduate school or employment rate for graduates, and powerful anecdotes from employers and churches about the impact of Trinity students. We gather weekly for worship, formation, and the hard and good work of learning in community.

We recognize deeply that this work takes a community of support. We are humbled and give thanks to God for the support and partnership of the CRCNA, which has been invaluable in supporting Trinity's pursuit of its Christian mission. We are particularly eager to deepen partnerships for innovation and mutual good, and we invite any who desire that conversation to connect with us. Our institutions need collaboration now more than ever—and we look forward to learning new ways to walk together in the service of our triune God.

Thank you for your steadfast support and for helping Trinity continue to grow toward its calling. May God bless all of our communities and institutions with the life that is truly life, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Trinity Christian College
Aaron Kuecker, interim president

TASK FORCES

I. Background, mandate, and methodology

A. Background

Mandating a committee to study some aspect of marriage is not new to the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Several study committees have been appointed in the past in order to articulate the essence, nature, and purpose of marriage as well to grapple with questions related to divorce, remarriage, and the distinctive character of Christian marriage. Recently, though, churches across the denomination are being confronted with questions that the CRC's previous statements and studies on marriage address only indirectly or not at all. The new questions are being driven by complexities involved in an increasing number of late-in-life second marriages, other unique life situations such as increased immigration, and a growing divide between civil and religious definitions of marriage. In brief, the new questions concern the advisability and legality of performing ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages and how pastors and elders should respond to situations in which a couple specifically requests an ecclesiastical marriage only, apart from any civil obligation. Synod 2019, in response to an overture from Classis Georgetown, mandated an "Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force" to address these questions and to articulate a biblically grounded, theologically informed, and pastorally nuanced response. Acceding to the overture, synod identified the need to study the advisability, legality, and morality of ecclesiastical marriage on the following grounds:

a. Churches are being confronted with questions and situations related to specifically ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages.
b. Pastors and elders need guidance on how to respond to these questions.
c. The current CRCNA position on marriage does not specifically address the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical marriage.

(*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 791)

B. Mandate

On these grounds Synod 2019 mandated this task force to study and address, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Is it legal in the various states, provinces, and territories of Canada and the United States to perform an ecclesiastical (non-civil) wedding ceremony?
2. What implications do the current CRCNA position on marriage and the Church Order have on ecclesiastical (non-civil) weddings and marriages?
3. Is it morally legitimate to perform an ecclesiastical (non-civil) wedding in order to avoid the financial costs and obligations of a civil marriage?
4. If people are declared married in a non-civil ceremony in a home country outside the United States or Canada, should that marriage be recognized by the CRCNA?
5. What are the implications for the church with regard to a specifically ecclesiastical marriage?
6. What are the implications of ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages for senior citizens, including such matters as pensions and end-of-life care issues?
7. What, if anything, have other faith communities done with regard to this issue?
8. Consult with the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality for insights that might be beneficial to this task force.

(*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 792)

C. Methodology

To fulfill this mandate, the task force undertook the following approach. First and foremost, the task force listened to the stories of people seeking or raising questions about ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages so that we could understand their stories and identify the kinds of situations that pastors and elders are facing. Second, having listened to some of the stories and having read through the mandate, the task force developed a working definition of *ecclesiastical marriage*. The task force recognized that the definition of *ecclesiastical marriage* was often assumed, and thus remained implicit rather than explicit, in the synodical mandate and in people's minds. As a result, the task force sought to develop a clear and concise definition of *ecclesiastical marriage* that would help provide clarity and coherence to the questions surrounding ecclesiastical marriage. The task force also realized that their conclusions and pastoral recommendations would depend on what is and is not considered an ecclesiastical marriage. Third, the task force studied the biblical, theological, and legal aspects of ecclesiastical marriage with an emphasis on understanding the feasibility or nonfeasibility of ecclesiastical marriage from a scriptural and up-to-date legal perspective. Fourth, the task force approached other denominations to see if they have grappled with the issues and might have some wisdom to share. In its consultation, the task force found that other denominations had not addressed the question and were interested in the CRC's study. Finally, the task force thought through recommendations concerning the advisability of ecclesiastical marriage as well as how to provide pastoral care to those seeking such a marriage because of unique or challenging situations.

II. Hearing the stories: Listening to couples in unique and challenging situations[1]

As the task force listened to stories, it realized that there were many situations in which couples considered entering into an ecclesiastical marriage or thought they had obtained one. The following is a sample of the kinds of stories the task force heard. Each story here raises certain questions about marriage pertinent to the work of the task force.

A. Late-in-life couple finding love after each lost their spouse

Denise and John are lifelong friends in their late sixties who have each lost their spouse to a serious illness. Sometime after grieving their spouses' deaths, Denise and John begin to spend significant time together and to bond with one another in surprising and unexpected ways—so much so that they begin to talk seriously about getting married to one another. Eventually they get engaged. But as they begin to plan their wedding, they start to ask questions about whether or not it is possible to get married in the church and by the church. This will be their second marriage, and civil marriage comes with all sorts of implications—especially with regard to financial matters. John and Denise both have adult children and are concerned about the implications for their children if they enter into a civil marriage. So they go to meet with Denise's pastor to ask about the possibility of an ecclesiastical marriage. In their conversation they mention how they do not want the entanglement

[1] The names of the individuals in these stories are pseudonyms.

of a civil marriage and that they just need the blessing of the church, which they believe would be the simpler solution in their situation. They want to care for each other and be the companions that they both now feel they need. They also raise the point that if civil authorities allow for common-law marriage, how would an ecclesiastical marriage be any different? Beyond the matter of similarities and differences in civil and ecclesiastical marriages, Denise and John's story raises several questions: Can an ecclesiastical marriage be a way to avoid the legal entanglements of a civil marriage? Should the church perform a marriage that is never going to be solemnized by the state (civil government)? How should the pastor of the church approach Denise and John in terms of pastoral care?

B. Immigrant couple straddling two cultures

Joseph and Ruth are a Sudanese couple who have been married for ten years. They met in a refugee camp in Kenya prior to immigrating to the United States. After coming to the United States, Joseph and Ruth decided that they wanted to get married. Desiring to maintain and honor their cultural customs, the couple began the process of getting married according to their tradition in Sudan. This meant that even while Joseph and Ruth were far away in the United States, their families in Sudan participated in the process and enacted the marriage customs, after which Joseph and Ruth were pronounced married—and they moved into an apartment together. Today, Joseph and Ruth still have not completed one important part of the marriage custom, however: according to their local tradition, Joseph's father and Ruth's father are to give their blessing to the couple in person. But expenses and difficulties with visas have prohibited them from doing so.

After 10 years of marriage and living in the United States, Ruth and Joseph have not obtained a civil marriage in the state in which they live, and they have no intention of doing so—for two reasons. First, they want to honor their customs and family by saying that what their family did is sufficient for them and should be sufficient for anybody else. Though they have been accused by some in their church as not being married but simply living together, they vigorously contest that accusation. The second reason is that they see no value in a license to help them stay together. They argue that the divorce rate is exceedingly high among couples who have marriage licenses, but separation is almost unheard in their tribe. The entire family has a stake in their marriage, and their honor of their culture gives them great strength in keeping their marriage intact.

Joseph and Ruth's story raises legal and pastoral issues. How should the church embrace and celebrate the marriage customs of Joseph and Ruth's culture? Should a pastor offer legal advice about getting married or recommend that Joseph and Ruth get legally married in the United States? If Joseph and Ruth do not desire to get legally married in the United States, does that make a difference in how the church should engage them as a couple? What can the church learn from Joseph and Ruth's cultural understanding of marriage and its relationship to the community?

C. Young couple worried about debt

Tim and Angie are recent college graduates and are engaged. Tim, however, has significant school debt. As they learn that getting married means that the couple will bear the burden of Tim's debt together, they begin to

wonder if there is a way to get married without Angie accruing and bearing Tim's debt. They seek advice and hear their grandparents talking about something called an ecclesiastical marriage, which could help them avoid the implications of a civil marriage. Tim and Angie bring it up to their pastor at their next marriage counseling session. Tim and Angie's story is raising concerns similar to those in Denise and John's story, showing that these kinds of questions are not just related to late-in-life second marriages. Is marriage intended to be a full joining of lives with its joys and responsibilities?

D. Couple kept apart by COVID-19 restrictions

Peter and Kate are both anxiously awaiting their wedding. They found each other late in life after each had lost their spouse to illness. Their wedding plans, however, have been postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. They are unable to get a marriage license due to the closure of government offices, and they are not sure when the offices will reopen. Peter and Kate both live alone at their own residences in a senior-living complex, and they were planning to move in together as soon as they got married. With the onset of a strict quarantine in their residential complex, they want to get married as soon as possible so as not to be apart for months. They approach their pastor to see if she is willing to perform a wedding ceremony even though they do not have a marriage license. They tell their pastor that they are going to obtain a license as soon as they are able, but they would like to get married as soon as possible so that they can live together during quarantine.

Should the pastor perform an ecclesial ceremony for Peter and Kate so that they can live together during quarantine? When are they really married? Who needs to be involved in the marriage for a couple to be fully married? Must all the parties (state, couple, witnesses, church community) be present at only one ceremony for the marriage to be considered valid? Or is it acceptable to perform separate ceremonies in extenuating circumstances, provided the intent is to have both a civil ceremony and a religious ceremony?

E. Couple with cross-border connections

Jennifer and Jared meet at Dordt University, date, and eventually become engaged. Jennifer is a Canadian citizen, and Jared is a United States citizen. Since Jared has a job lined up in the U.S. and Jennifer has already been accepted into a graduate program near his job location, the couple are planning to settle there, and it would make the most sense for them to get legally married in the U.S. However, Jennifer's extended family members all live in Alberta, where she grew up, so she and Jared decide to have a large church wedding and reception in Alberta several weeks before they move to settle in the U.S. together. Jennifer then crosses the border into the U.S. with her student visa. They also have a small commitment ceremony and get legally married before a judge in the U.S. several weeks after their church wedding date, thus separating the civil and ecclesiastical marriage ceremonies. When are they really married? Again, is this acceptable because the intent is to have both a religious ceremony and a civil ceremony, even if the two events cannot take place at the same time and location?

Listening to these and other stories, the task force recognized that there are many questions to be answered. The task force also recognized that the

stories they heard are not exhaustive and that many other possible stories include scenarios that these accounts do not capture.

III. Definition of *ecclesiastical marriage*

For the content of this study we are particularly interested in knowing (1) what "makes" a marriage, (2) what the life implications of such a relationship are in terms of its purposes and mutual responsibilities by the parties, and (3) what the church's obligations are toward the state (civil government) in our North American context.[2] Knowing the reasons why people may want to bypass state involvement, both intentionally and perhaps unintentionally, is also an important consideration. Since the CRC has considered the matters of marriage and divorce in some depth previously in several reports and has dealt with individual cases, it seems unnecessary to cover all of that ground again. Instead, the main focus of this task force is on delineating, as far as possible, the relationship between the church and the state in the matter of marriage.

In determining the first point—what "makes" a marriage—the task force is concerned particularly with what parties are required to solemnize a Christian marriage. More specifically, the questions under consideration deal with what the respective roles are of both church leadership and the state, considering our current North American context.

Some might argue that marriage is simply a commitment rite between two people, with God as their witness. In their view, such a private ceremony of covenant vows should be enough to be considered married in the eyes of God.

Some might argue that for a marriage to be Christian, these commitments need to be solemnized and validated by a pastor or other certified officiant.

Some would add that, in addition, these vows or commitments need to be witnessed by others. In this view, there needs to be a public rite of commitment. As with baptism, the public nature of the ceremony invites witnesses to support and pray for the couple making commitments, and the witnesses can participate in holding the marriage partners accountable to their vows.

Finally, in recent centuries it has also become the norm to cooperate with the state in solemnizing such a marriage commitment. Marriages are registered with the state, and certain obligations are followed in order for a marriage to be considered legal. In fact, in North America ministers are licensed to formalize marriage on behalf of the state.[3]

One of the primary questions before this task force is this: Must the marriage ceremony be approved and cemented by the state, or can a Christian marriage be considered solemnized without that? Behind this lie questions about what joining one's life with that of another means concretely in terms of shared relationships, goods, income, pension, property, duty of care, and so on. Does the state have the authority and right to regulate these matters if the need arises? Further, our denomination asserts that, aside from being a personal commitment, marriage is also "a structure that enriches society

---

[2] See Report 29, *Acts of Synod 1980:* "What is marriage? What is its essence, its purposes, and its obligations?" pp. 468ff.

[3] It should be noted that in his theology of what "makes" a marriage, John Calvin identifies each party (God, couple, pastor, witnesses, and magistrate) as essential components to the solemnization of marriage. See Section III, B ("Historical/theological") of this report for further information.

and contributes to its orderly function."[4] How does that assertion affect our understanding of the state's role in solemnizing marriage?

As this task force considered these questions, it developed a definition of ecclesiastical marriage in order to provide clarity and consistency in its responses to these questions and pastoral care issues. It is hard to respond to a question about whether a pastor should perform an ecclesiastical marriage when the definition of ecclesiastical marriage is unclear. Using the synodical mandate and the original overture, the task force developed a definition of ecclesiastical marriage. For the purposes of this report, an *ecclesiastical marriage*, therefore, is a marriage sanctioned and solemnized solely by the church to the exclusion of the state (civil government) whereby a couple is considered "married in the eyes of the church but not in the eyes of the state."[5] By this definition, then, ecclesiastical marriage should be differentiated from religious marriage or even from a religious service/ceremony/celebration because ecclesiastical marriage intentionally excludes the state as a sanctioning or governing authority.

For many, as evidenced in the stories in section II of this report, ecclesiastical marriage seems like a plausible solution to a myriad of distinct problems. It could be seen as a way to avoid the legal and financial implications of civil marriage, particularly in late-in-life second marriages like Denise and John's. Similarly, ecclesiastical marriage could be a way to help or aid immigrant couples who were married ceremonially in their home countries—and yet for one reason or another their marriage is not recognized or they cannot obtain a civil marriage in their new country. Alternatively, ecclesiastical marriage could serve as a way to protest against the state's redefinition of marriage insofar as an ecclesial marriage refuses to participate in or seek a marriage sanctioned by the state. Further, as definitions of civil and religious marriage diverge, many proponents of ecclesiastical marriage seem to argue that if a couple can get legally married without the church, should the reverse not also be the case? Why can't a couple receive a Christian marriage without the state? And, if that is the case, then why not allow the church to perform ecclesiastical marriages? These are the kinds of situations and questions that pastors and elders are facing in their local contexts.

The answers to these questions, as our task force discovered, are not simple, and they require addressing complex issues about the legality of ecclesiastical marriages in Canada and the United States. They also require thoughtful reflection within a larger scriptural and theological framework concerning the relationship between the church and the state with regard to marriage. The complexity extends to considering any unintentional legal consequences to the parties, the officiant, and the church as a result of entering into or performing an ecclesiastical marriage.

A. Biblical background [6]

Within our denominational context, any discussion of marriage will necessarily begin with a biblical consideration of the topic. As previous CRC studies have covered the nature, essence, and purpose of marriage in Scripture, our task force focused on biblical material pertinent to the

[4] CRC Form for the Solemnization of Marriage (1979).

[5] *Agenda for Synod 2019,* Overture 14, p. 518.

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are from the *New International Version* (2011).

question of ecclesiastical marriage. While no biblical accounts explicitly spell out stipulations about marriage ceremonies and relative obligations, we can nonetheless glean answers and implications from various texts and accounts. Consideration of Christian marriage begins, of course, in the opening chapters of Genesis. Relying simply on that narrative, it would seem that what happens is only between the marriage partners and God. There is only one man and one woman. God created them to be fitting complements to each other, and that is God's design. The man rejoices that he has found a suitable partner. Genesis 2:24 then adds, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." There is no state license needed; no publication of banns; no cleric; no witnesses; and no signing of forms. Yet we understand this to be a marriage in which "a man and a woman covenant to live together in a lifelong, exclusive partnership of love and fidelity."[7] However, the "leaving" part also indicates that there is something public and formal about this relationship, with a shifting of allegiances and responsibility from one household to another relationship that is publicly acknowledged and recognized.

Information about Old Testament marriage customs, ceremonies, and obligations has been deduced from some of the biblical narratives and the Mosaic legal code concerning betrothal, marriage, and divorce, as well as from material recorded about other civilizations in the ancient Near East.[8] Although these texts do not provide a full picture of what is involved in arranging a marriage, it "seems likely that there was a formal set of rites and procedures that accompanied the arrangement of a marriage alliance."[9] Marriage in the Old Testament was not without its rules and protocols: intentions were declared, parents were asked for permission, a bride price was paid, a sort of contract was entered into, and there would be a brief ceremony before the couple would live together.[10] David W. Chapman asserts that during the Second Temple period (roughly 516 B.C. to 70 A.D.) the formal union of marriage "was generally preceded by a betrothal and often vouchsafed by a marriage contract obligating certain financial arrangements."[11] The woman might also be given a significant gift by her father with the understanding that it could provide for her if the marriage was dissolved. In addition, in the case of Rebekah leaving her parental household to "marry" Isaac, her family also formalized matters by sending her off with a blessing (Gen. 24:60).

---

[7] CRC Form for the Solemnization of Marriage (1979).

[8] "We recognize the wide variety of literary genres that yield information on ancient family life: laws, narratives, polemical prophetic texts, songs, didactic wisdom compositions, etc."; Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel" in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World,* ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), p. 34.

[9] Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East" in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World,* ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), p. 7.

[10] We see some of these elements in Genesis in the marriage arrangements between Rebekah with Isaac, and then Jacob with Rachel and Leah. "For a marriage to be arranged, the groom's family must provide a bride price, while the bride's family provides a dowry"; John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), p. 531.

[11] David W. Chapman, "Marriage and Family in Second Temple Judaism" in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World,* ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), p. 184. "Certainly some marriage and family practices could be left to custom, but other aspects of family life required legal discussion—especially when money was involved"; Chapman, p. 239.

Indeed, phrases referring to parents "giving" sons and daughters in marriage (cf. Deut. 7:3) "suggests that the institution itself involved more than the mere union of one man and one woman; this was a momentous occasion uniting families."[12]

Another consideration is that throughout the Old Testament we see God's care for vulnerable people, especially in a patriarchal society in which women had few rights and could be economically destitute without a male (father, husband, brother, or son) who would provide and care for them. As Daniel Block explains,

> Practically, in the ancient context, unless a woman was taken in by her father or brothers, divorce put her in extremely vulnerable economic protection. Like the widow or the orphan, she would be without male provision and protection, and in many instances would turn to prostitution simply to earn a living.[13]

Witness, for example, God's continued concern for "the widow and the orphan," as well as protections for women in cases where they had been taken advantage of sexually, legally, by divorce or otherwise.[14] Protocols, regulations, and provisions were a necessary part of regulating sinful society and protecting persons with lower social status. By supplying procedures and a legal code, God was at work enacting his plan for maintaining some order, right relationships, and justice in society.

In the New Testament we can see that again more is assumed about marriage than is explained. The Old Testament theme of God in relationship with his people, as in a covenant of marriage (in Hosea, for example), is expanded in the New Testament in an extended metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ. Thus marriage is held in high regard as something to be regulated and guarded. Infidelity and divorce were not matters to be taken lightly, since the marriage covenant was representative of God and his people. In fact, Jesus intensifies the teaching on divorce, saying that God had allowed it because of hardness of heart but that it was not God's original intent (Matt. 19:8).

It is not possible to ascertain from the New Testament alone exactly what the relationship between Christians and the state was in terms of legalizing a marriage. Peter Coleman says that in the Second Temple period (up to 70 A.D.), "the actual procedures for marriage were largely the same in Palestine as in other parts of the Near East, unchanged for centuries."[15] He adds that the Jewish marriage ceremony itself was a simple procedure that "did not involve a visit to the synagogue nor the presence of a rabbi, but this did not mean it was a civil rather than a religious ceremony. Prayers and blessings would be said by senior members of the families. . . ."[16] It seems that early Christians continued wedding practices unattached to church authorities. In researching marriage rites during the New Testament and the early centuries of Christian practice, Willy Rordorf found that marriages proceeded "according to the contemporary laws" and that "the first generation of Christians

---

[12] Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," p. 56.

[13] Ibid., p. 51.

[14] Deut. 24:1-4.

[15] Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient times to the Third Millennium* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 86.

[16] Ibid., pp. 86-87.

gave no additional juridical or liturgical form. . . . It is only from the fourth century onwards that we begin to see the clergy participating in marriage festivities."[17] Rordorf summarizes his findings about early Christian marriage conventions in a manner that is worth quoting at length:

> First, we have to admit that the Early Church did not conceive a new form of marriage; it simply took over and conventionalized those local rites which it found. Secondly, we see that it is not an ecclesiastical act of blessing which makes a valid Christian marriage, but each marriage, contracted by either Christian or non-Christian according to the ordinary civil laws of a given time and place, is recognized as valid by the Church. In reality, during long centuries, the religious ceremony of marriage was considered optional rather than obligatory.[18]

Surprisingly, then, the conclusion here is that the early church abided by state regulations and practices regarding marriage, and only later did some ecclesiastical oversight or involvement become an optional convention.

On the other hand, given the New Testament's silence on the matter, perhaps this conclusion is not surprising. The New Testament is simply assuming that people will follow the customs of the day to solemnize a marriage. There does not seem to be any discussion or argument about how such a Christian marriage should be solidified. In addition, the fact that writers such as Paul address divorce as a procedural reality means that it was also a formalized possibility, not only under rabbinic teaching but also for Christians.

Attending to the more general topic of the relationship of Christians to the state, the New Testament is not ambiguous, even in a time when, under Roman rule, that relationship was detrimental to Christians in many instances. This is most clearly addressed in the letter of Romans, where Paul says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Rom. 13:1). Paul asserts that, on the whole, government has been instituted for the good of citizens and has been given authority to regulate and enforce orderly judgment of right and wrong in society, a theme that we find in God's expectations of rulers in the Old Testament also. Paul then goes on to spell out respect for government in more concrete terms as well, saying, "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Rom. 13:6-7). Respect, honor, and obedience to governing authorities was and is expected of Christians.

Further, writers of the New Testament were pretty clear about the importance of how believers interacted with, and were perceived by, their unbelieving family, colleagues, civil authorities, friends, and neighbors. Part of this obligation involved obeying authorities that were placed over them. In 1 Peter 2:13-17, for example, the apostle Peter exhorts believers this way:

---

[17] Willy Rordorf, "Marriage in the New Testament and in the Early Church," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (20:2; Oct. 1969), p. 209.

[18] Ibid.

> Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Such teaching applies to the whole life and practice of the Christian and should also be taken seriously in relation to marriage. Andreas Kostenberger comments: "Marriage, as well as other human relationships, is thus set in the framework of a believer's Christian testimony in the surrounding unbelieving world."[19] In our North American contemporary context, where marriage commitments are often treated lightly or disregarded altogether, this is an area where Christian commitment and fidelity can speak volumes.

Summarizing, then, what we might ascertain of the biblical witness, it seems that God's people in the Old Testament acted within certain accepted procedural parameters for marriage that included a contract of some sort and the exchange of a dowry or similar payments. A marriage was understood to include mutual obligations, and there was also a legal code surrounding divorce. The New Testament does not expressly address the matter of how a marriage was constituted and what the relative involvement of religious or civil authorities was. So it is safe to assume, as scholars do, that in this era, as well, believers adhered to local customs and cooperated with civil authorities to ratify a marriage, however that was done in their region. What is clear is that in both the Old and New Testaments God intends law as a benefit to regulate society in a sinful world. In the New Testament believers are clearly instructed to respect and honor governing bodies. As we shall see, this is a theme that continues in the Reformed tradition through its leaders, particularly John Calvin.

B. Historical/theological

Although there is ample scriptural evidence that marriage is a God-ordained institution and a societal norm, Scripture does not dictate that the civil authorities must be involved in the solemnization of marriage. It does, however, teach that marriage is a creational and societal good with benefits beyond the married couple. Further, there are no scriptural grounds claiming that the solemnization of marriage belongs solely to the church, meaning that the state does not usurp ecclesiastical authority if it claims marriage as its own.[20] In summary, there is no set marriage form or ceremony in Scripture, and yet that does not mean that any kind of ceremony or understanding of the parties involved in a marriage is allowed. Scripture provides guidance, guidelines, and an underlying logic concerning marriage and the parties involved in "making" a marriage. As mentioned above, the goal of this report is not to cover this ground again but to focus on the specific question of whether or not the CRC's scriptural, theological, and historical understanding of marriage would allow for its pastors to perform ecclesiastical marriage.

---

[19] Andreas Kostenberger, "Marriage and Family in the New Testament" in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World,* ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), p. 254.

[20] *Acts of Synod 1955,* p. 247.

1. The CRC's forms and statement on marriage guidelines

While the institutional shape and practices of marriage have differed throughout history and throughout many cultures, in the Reformed tradition both the church and the state are considered to have a God-given, relative authority with respect to marriage. In most cases this means that the state is considered to have authority over the governance, regulation, and registration of marriages, and that the church has authority over the spiritual and moral aspects of marriage. These exist side by side, with each having its own role to play on the basis of its sphere of authority. Such an approach of granting dual yet relative authority to church and state is rooted in the tradition's theology of marriage, particularly its identification of marriage as a divinely ordained institution established at creation, its conception of marriage as a covenant, and its commitment to marriage as a good because it serves as a foundation for society. These aspects of marriage are evidenced in the CRC's forms for the solemnization of marriage as well as its 1980 statement on marriage guidelines. In the 1912 Form for the Solemnization of Marriage, marriage is described as "instituted by God himself at the very dawn of history," "a divine ordinance intended to be a source of happiness," and "an institution of the highest significance to the human race." The 1979 Form for the Solemnization of Marriage explicitly describes marriage as a covenant "instituted by God" in creation and "a structure that enriches society and contributes to its orderly function." In addition, synod's study and statement on marriage in 1980 affirms marriage as a foundational creational structure,[21] a covenant, and a vital relational and societal reality.[22]

While affirming marriage as a creational reality, covenant, and societal good, the forms and the 1980 statement often assume or allude to a particular understanding of the authority of the church and state in relation to marriage. The 1912 and 1979 forms recognize the minister as an agent of the church who is at the same time vested by the authority of the state. Thus the minister serves as an agent of the church and the state in the solemnization of a marriage, and marriage is presented as both an ecclesial and civil institution. The forms also clearly identify that in the case of marriage, the pastor's authority to solemnize the marriage is tied to the state and the church. The pastor's authority from the church is granted by virtue of his or her ordination, while the capacity to solemnize the marriage is granted to the pastor by the state. As the 1979 form states:

> As a minister of the church of Christ and by the authority which the state has vested in me, I now pronounce you, (name) and (name), husband and wife, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:6).

The Synod 1980 statement similarly reaffirms the essence, purpose, and obligations of marriage as it identifies changing societal norms and

[21] *Acts of Synod 1980,* pp. 468-69: "Marriage was instituted by God at creation. Declaring that it was not good for the man to be alone, God created woman as a helper fit for him (Gen. 2:18). Man and woman, created in the image of God, were made for each other to become one flesh in marriage. Thus marriage is not a human invention nor an experiment in social relationships which can be altered or abandoned at will. It is a God-ordained, monogamous structure, requiring faithful commitment on the part of husband and wife."

[22] Ibid., pp. 469-71.

discusses divorce and remarriage. While the 1980 statement does not specify the roles or authority of the church and the state in relation to marriage, it does not respond to changes in societal norms by resituating marriage within the jurisdiction and authority of the church alone.

2. Church Order Article 69 (formerly Art. 70)

A similar approach is evident earlier in the CRC's history, when societal norms regarding marriage and divorce were changing. Between 1947 and 1955 the CRC debated whether or not Church Order Article 70 (now Art. 69),[23] regarding marriage, should be removed or changed. Article 70 at that time read, "Since it is proper that the matrimonial state be confirmed in the presence of Christ's Church, according to the Form for that purpose, the consistories shall attend to it."[24]

The question of whether this article belonged in the Church Order arose for discussion in 1947 when Peter Van Dyken submitted an overture to synod requesting that Article 70 be removed. While recapitulating the entire overture is unnecessary, some of Van Dyken's grounds in the overture are pertinent. First, Van Dyken argued that

> *there is . . . nothing spiritual or ecclesiastical in a marriage.* The married state as such and its consummation are matters in the realm of common grace. Whereas God solemnized the first marriage, it is proper, that God's representative in the territory of common grace, which is our civil government, now performs this rite.[25]

He also argued that the CRC Church Order represented the cultural context of the Netherlands. Van Dyken maintained that the language of confirmation was not valid because a marriage solemnized by the state did not need confirmation by the church in the United States. He claimed that in the Netherlands such a practice was a "relic" of Roman Catholicism. Further, he noted that within the United States the government grants judges and ministers of the gospel the power to solemnize marriages. In other words, ministers are agents of the state when they solemnize a marriage, acting on behalf of the civil government, not the church. To Van Dyken, including an article on marriage in the Church Order causes confusion by presenting marriage as "semi-civil" and "semi-ecclesiastical," when in reality the solemnization of a marriage properly belongs to the state as an "authoritative representative of God's justice."[26]

In summary, Van Dyken argued on the basis of common grace and the God-ordained role of civil government that an article on marriage does not belong in the CRC Church Order. In response to Van Dyken's overture, Synod 1947 commissioned a study to determine if the article should be removed, retained, or changed.

Synod discussed these issues until 1955 and ultimately decided to retain but change Article 70 (now Art. 69). For the purpose of this report, while it is not necessary to trace the discussion from 1947 to 1955 in full,

---

[23] At the time of discussion, the Church Order article regarding marriage was Article 70 (now Art. 69). The numbering of this article changed after Synod 1965 adopted a revision of the Church Order.

[24] See *Agenda for Synod 1947*, p. 181.

[25] *Agenda for Synod 1947*, p. 181.

[26] Ibid., pp. 181-82.

it will be helpful to highlight some of the arguments given by the Church Order Revision Committee to Synod 1955 for retaining but changing the Church Order article. First, they acknowledged the authority of the state in marriage. They wrote, "Ministers of the Gospel, when they solemnize marriages, act upon a prerogative attributed to them by the civil government."[27] However, the Church Order Revision Committee also highlighted that pastors "have received this prerogative because the churches ordained them."[28] Drawing a balance between the role of the state and the church, the committee argued that the church should retain an article on marriage and recommended that it be rewritten as follows:

> Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care to marry only in the Lord. Christian marriages should be solemnized with appropriate admonitions, promises, and prayers, as provided for in the official Form. Marriages may be solemnized either in a worship service or in private gatherings of relatives and friends. Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God.[29]

By adopting the revised version of Article 70 (now Art. 69), Synod 1955 highlighted the pastor's role in solemnizing marriage, which is a role granted to them by the state. But in acknowledging that civil and religious definitions of marriage may differ, they also required pastors to solemnize marriages in line with the Word of God.

The CRC's discussion of this Church Order article shows that the CRC has engaged in discussions regarding the relationship between the state and the church. Further, throughout this discussion the CRC affirmed the role of the civil government in marriage, sometimes even going so far as to claim that the civil government has sole jurisdiction over marriage. However, the question remains whether the references and allusions to the roles of the church and the state in the CRC's forms and statements on marriage are a result of the CRC's context, or if they are rooted deeper in the CRC's theology regarding marriage itself. Simply affirming marriage as a creational, covenantal, and societal reality does not necessarily imply that the church and the state should be granted relative authority with respect to marriage. It is possible and could be argued that these realities could be identified and maintained within an ecclesiastical marriage. To be clear, the CRC's current forms and statements are certainly influenced by its cultural context. The legal structures of Canada and the United States, in which ministers are granted the authority of the state to perform legal marriages, allow for one ceremony to be both civil and religious.

3. Reformed theology of marriage

For the Reformers, issues related to marriage and marriage reforms were not peripheral concerns. Rather, they were rooted in and were an expression of the theological and societal concerns of the Reformers. As historian Joel Harrington asserts, marriage "stood by implication at the heart of almost every major legal, religious, and social reform of the period."[30]

---

[27] *Acts of Synod 1955,* p. 251.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., p. 250 (cf. Article 69 in the current Church Order).

[30] Joel F. Harrington, *Reordering Marriage and Society in the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 26.

Concerned with the medieval Catholic Church's practices and abuse of marriage, the Reformers accepted the traditional church's teaching of marriage as a divinely ordained institution rooted in creation, but they rejected the sacramental model of marriage and the Catholic Church's jurisdiction over marriage. John Witte, Jr., articulates in his book *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* that the Reformers saw the "Catholic Church's jurisdiction over marriage [as] . . . a particularly flagrant example of the church's usurpation of the magistrate's authority."[31] For the Reformers, marriage was a creational, God-ordained, human institution and as such could not fall under the jurisdiction of the church alone. In fact, for Luther, marriage was an institution of the earthly kingdom alone, meaning that the proper jurisdiction of marriage belonged to the magistrates (the state). The church, according to Luther, should not have formal legal authority over marriage but should serve the Christian magistrate as a pastoral aid. While following Luther's early theology of marriage, Calvin developed his mature theology of marriage around the idea of marriage as a covenant. For Calvin, the covenant of marriage was grounded in the order of creation and was a public and God-ordained human institution whose formation involved the whole community. As Witte articulates,

> Marriage . . . was . . . a covenantal association of the entire community. A variety of parties participated in the formation of this covenant. The marital parties themselves confirmed their engagement promises and marital vows before each other and God—rendering all marriages triparty agreements, with God as a third-party witness, participant, and judge. The couple's parents, as God's lieutenants for children, gave their consent to the union. Two witnesses, as God's priests to their peers, served as witnesses to the marriage. The minister, holding God's spiritual power of the Word, blessed the couple and admonished them in their spiritual duties. The magistrate, holding God's temporal power of the sword, registered the couple and protected them in their person and property. Each of these parties was considered essential to the legitimacy of the marriage, for they each represented a different dimension of God's involvement with the covenant. To omit any such party was, in effect, to omit God from the marriage covenant.[32]

According to Calvin, the formation of the God-ordained covenant of marriage involved the minister, the magistrate, the couple, and the community. As all of these parties participated in the formation of the marriage covenant, the marriage itself was both private and public, a civil and ecclesial reality. The magistrate's role was to register the couple and protect their person and property. The minister's role was to bless the couple and remind them of their spiritual duties as a married couple. The magistrate and the pastor served different roles, pointing to different aspects of marriage—the spiritual and the social. Therefore, by highlighting the different parties, Calvin affirmed that marriage was under the dual yet relative authority of both the church and the state.

---

[31] John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition,* 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), p. 113.

[32] Ibid., p. 8.

While the working out of Calvin's covenantal theology of marriage in Geneva represents a unique practical example of his theology that the church today need not nor should not try to emulate, his teaching about marriage as both civil and ecclesial has shaped the Reformed tradition and the Western legal tradition. The state or civil government is considered to have rightful authority and governance over the registration of marriage. It is also called on to protect the persons entering into the marriage relationship. The church is considered to have authority not as the body that registers or protects the persons and property in marriage but in the spiritual health and care of the marriage partners, admonishing and encouraging the couple to embody the biblical conception of marriage. Calvin's teachings were carried forward by other Reformed thinkers, such as Herman Bavinck, and Calvin's understanding of marriage can be found in the CRC's teachings about marriage and its marriage forms. Thus, while the CRC's forms are representative of their North American context, their affirmation of marriage as an institution of the state and of the church—each with its own respective and God-given authority—is rooted in the CRC's Reformed theological heritage.

4. The relationship between the church and the state in other CRC reports

Interestingly, the CRC's affirmation of marriage as civil and ecclesial is evidenced by Appendix C in the majority report to Synod 2016 by the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-Sex Marriage.[33] While the whole report was only received as information, Appendix C grappled with the relationship between the church and state regarding marriage, identifying four different options that it had earlier asked delegates to Synod 2015 (in a listening session) to consider regarding the church-state relationship:

> a. Marriage is fundamentally a religious institution. The state should recognize the religious nature of marriage and only authorize marriage as understood by religious authority.
> b. Marriage as the covenantal union of a man and a woman is grounded both religiously and by proper recognition of the created order. The state, even if it attempts to be religiously neutral, makes a profound error when it ignores what nature itself teaches. . . .[34]
> c. Both the state (civil government) and the church have a direct interest in family structure and well-being, but these interests are not identical. Both the state and the church have latitude (within limits) to define marriage to pursue their legitimate interests, even though those interests may not be the same. The state and the church may end up with different definitions of marriage.
> d. The church does not tell civil authority what to do. The church simply defines marriage as it finds itself compelled by Scripture and orders its internal life as Scripture and the gospel requires. What the state does is the state's business.
>
> (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 421)

[33] See *Agenda for Synod 2016,* pp. 421-25.

[34] This option has been modified for the purposes of this report. The modification was made in order to focus this section of the report on the relationship between the church and the state outside of the question of same-sex marriage, which this task force was not commissioned to study.

Appendix C identifies the first option (marriage as fundamentally a religious institution) as corresponding to the medieval Roman Catholic view and the fourth option (separation of church and state) as "expressive of an Anabaptist approach."[35] Appendix C also reports that the majority of delegates to Synod 2015 identified the second and third options as fitting within a Reformed framework. The study committee's minority report—received for information as well—also affirmed the second and third options as two different ways of applying a Reformed understanding of the relationship between the church and the state. However, the minority report implicitly argued that option 2, wherein marriage is described as a covenantal union grounded religiously and by proper recognition of the created order, is closer to the historic Reformed position. Thus, while option 3, wherein marriage is a concern and a legitimate but distinct interest of the state and the church, may represent some voices within contemporary Reformed theology, option 2 is closer to the historic position developed by Calvin and his followers. Further, the minority report highlighted the role of the state as a God-ordained yet relative authority that is called to discern the patterns of creation with regard to marriage. What is important here is not to rehash the debate surrounding the 2016 report or to enter into a discussion on the redefinition of civil marriage and its attendant issues. What is important is that both options 2 and 3 point toward the role of the church and the state in the Reformed tradition's theology of marriage.

To reiterate, it would be impossible to address all the attendant issues related to our current context regarding the societal redefinition of marriage. However, it is important to note that when considering the definition of ecclesiastical marriage, one could identify it with either option 1 (medieval Roman Catholic) or option 4 (Anabaptist) but not option 2 or 3 (Reformed), both of which can be considered variations of the Reformed approach to the relationship between the church and the state in relation to marriage.

Recognizing options 2 and 3 as Reformed does not mean that a couple who has been married by a civil magistrate must have a religious ceremony upon coming to faith in Christ. This is an essential point that highlights the central role the Reformed tradition grants to the civil government in authorizing, solemnizing, and legally registering marriages. As long as the marriage in question is in line with the Word of God as articulated in the CRC's forms and synodical decisions, Christian churches recognize a couple as married even if they have had only a civil ceremony.[36] Rather, upon coming to faith in Christ, the couple enters into the rich theological conception of marriage that the CRC teaches.

Further, the CRC's understanding of the relative relationship between the church and the state means that even though the church has a vested interest in the health and vitality of the marriage and has some measure of ecclesial authority over the marriage, it does not have the power to grant a

[35] *Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 422.

[36] This statement is made so that no couple who comes into the church will have to go through the process of having a "religious ceremony" to make their marriage "valid."

divorce. That power belongs to the state. This is one of the challenges presented by the idea of ecclesiastical marriage. If there were such a thing as an ecclesiastical marriage regulated only by the church, would the church then also have to regulate an ecclesiastical divorce? The church continues to deal with marriages that break down and end in divorce. This simply begs the question, *What will the church do with an ecclesiastical marriage that breaks down?* Not only does the idea of ecclesiastical marriage contradict the CRC's theological understanding of the relationship between the church and state in relation to marriage, it also presents practical problems.

IV. Legal issues

Civil and legal implications of marriage and ecclesiastical marriage

We begin with two caveats. The first is that this report is absolutely not intended as legal advice for any specific persons or situations. Across all of the states of the U.S. and the provinces and territories of Canada, there is no common approach to the set of questions raised by ecclesiastical marriage that can be definitively spelled out.[37] This is because so much is contextual, and in both Canada and the U.S. each province and state has its own set of regulations and laws. Further, the case law that has interpreted the legal code in each jurisdiction is widely varied. It is therefore not possible or advisable for this task force to gather legal advice from each different locale. Instead, we looked at some broader issues and their consequences in terms of considering whether the denomination could bless ecclesiastical marriage. The second caveat, therefore, is that this material, while pertinent, is decidedly not exhaustive or even comprehensive. It is only intended to give a taste of some of the possible implications.

As the task force began to research the implications of pursuing ecclesiastical marriage as a valid option, it became increasingly clear how complex the issue is, and that a myriad of complications and possible consequences, whether intended or unintentional, exist. This is partly because, despite views to the contrary, governments in both of our nations take the marriage relationship seriously. There is an expectation that certain commitments and responsibilities are to be upheld in a marriage partnership, and in some jurisdictions this applies even if it is a common-law relationship.[38] Such commitments and responsibilities are especially pertinent to matters of financial support and have specific implications, even if the common-law marriage breaks down or if one partner in the relationship dies.

There are some major differences between Canadian and American law and practice that make the repercussions of this discussion even more complicated. The most prominent difference is whether or not there is a legal

[37] For more information on the Canadian context, see the Appendix to this report.

[38] Common-law marriage is rooted in the British common-law tradition. An early example of common-law marriage in the British commonwealth legal tradition in North America was the 1730 union of Benjamin Franklin and Debbie Read in Boston. The thread of this cultural practice runs through the shared fabric of U.S. and Canadian marriage laws and customs. See H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010).

recognition of common-law spouses and common-law partnerships with some rights and duties afforded such spouses. Such official recognition of common-law relationships is central to this discussion because the task force assumes that ecclesiastical marriages (done outside of any civil contract) would be considered common-law relationships or marriages wherever such a designation would apply.

In Canada there is a widespread legal recognition of common-law partnerships, even if they are not officially recorded legal marriages; whereas less than a dozen U.S. states presently recognize any aspect of such a common-law relationship. A relationship is considered common-law in Canada when someone is living with a person who is not his or her spouse but is having a conjugal relationship with that person. In addition, at least one of the following situations also needs to apply to that relationship—namely, that (1) the parties have been living together in a conjugal relationship for at least twelve continuous months, (2) the parties are the parent of a child by birth or adoption, and/or (3) the parties have custody and control of a child (or had custody and control immediately before the child turned 19 years of age) and the child is wholly dependent on that person for support.

In the U.S. only seven states have legislation describing and accepting a common-law marriage. They are Colorado,[39] Iowa,[40] Kansas,[41] Montana,[42] New Hampshire,[43] Texas,[44] and Utah.[45] Two other states—Rhode Island[46] and Oklahoma[47]—and the District of Columbia[48] have created common-law marriage (and still recognize it) via case law only.[49] Despite some recognition of common-law marriage, most state courts do not favor it, preferring parties to be "legally" married for cases of dividing property, settling estates, receiving Social Security benefits, and so on. The elements that define a common-law marriage can have slight variations from state to state, but the generally recognized elements in the U.S. are these:

---

[39] C.R.S 14-2-109.5.

[40] IA Code Ann. §595.1A. It should be noted that this portion of the Iowa Code does not expressly reference common-law marriage (and thus neither prohibits nor endorses common-law marriage). However, Iowa courts, as recently as 2019, have noted that Iowa does recognize common-law marriage.

[41] Kan. Stat. §23-2502 (parties must be over 18 for the state to recognize common-law marriage); Kan. Stat. §23-2714 (in a dissolution action, testimony regarding common-law marriage is admissible).

[42] Mont. Code Ann. §40-1-403.

[43] N.H. Stat. §457:39. New Hampshire requires that the parties cohabitated for at least three years prior to the death of one of the parties. New Hampshire has very limited case law regarding common-law marriage; it seems to be only for probate/inheritance purposes.

[44] Tex. Family Law §1.101; Tex. Family Law §2.401-402.

[45] Utah Stat. §30-1-4.5. Utah requires a court order to establish the validity of a common-law marriage. If a relationship terminates, then the parties must petition for recognition of the marriage within one year of the end of the relationship.

[46] See, e.g., *Luis v. Gaugler,* 185 A.3d 497, 502–03 (R.I. 2018), *as corrected* (June 21, 2018).

[47] Brooks v. Sanders, 2008 OK CIV APP 66, 190 P.3d 357, 358.

[48] See, e.g., *Coates v. Watts,* 662 A.2d 25, 27 (D.C. 1993) ("The District of Columbia has long recognized common law marriage. . . .").

[49] Since only seven U.S. states explicitly recognize common-law marriage, there is also far less case law to study in order to ascertain the implications.

– present agreement to be married;
– living together as husband and wife after the agreement; and
– representations to others that the couple is married.[50]

Additionally, though not explicitly stated in all the common-law states, a fourth element should be included—that of competency/capacity. Courts will not recognize a common-law marriage if one of the parties is not competent or does not have capacity to enter into the marriage (i.e., a minor at the time of the marriage).[51]

We will now proceed to spell out some of the intended but also unintended complications that may arise from an ecclesiastical marriage, particularly in jurisdictions that legally accept common-law marriages. As will be explained, though, while a common-law partnership is excluded from some marital obligations, many of these responsibilities still do apply to the partners in case of death or a breakdown of the relationship. If, as the task force surmises, those who enter an ecclesiastical marriage are considered as having a common-law marriage, that does not nullify some of the legal and financial responsibilities the parties would have to each other, some of which the parties might think they could avoid.

Although many of the complicating issues surrounding ecclesiastical marriage might only apply in situations where difficulties arise (incapacitation, expensive care or financial obligations, death, or the dissolution of the relationship), these nonetheless need to be taken seriously. In a legal marriage there are certain rights and obligations that the partners have toward each other. Laws guard matters such as the rights to spousal support, division of family property, the right to benefit from increased property or business value, and the right to occupy the family residence. The rights to these are prescribed in law (depending on the circumstance), and some have also applied in cases of common-law relationships. Thus ecclesiastical marriages would not be exempt from some of these same responsibilities, even if the couple intended to bypass them by means of a nonlegally compliant marriage.[52]

More serious, perhaps, are the many issues related to end-of-life situations. Late-in-life ecclesiastical marriages present parties and their families with additional complications and concerns. Where persons fail to plan for end-of-life issues, there are numerous instances when the law intervenes to provide guidance in relation to a person's estate. In the province of Ontario, for example, a will is automatically revoked once a person gets married.

---

[50] See, e.g. *Martinez v. Furmanite Am. Inc.,* 2018 WL 4469973, at *3 (Tex. App. Sept. 19, 2018), *review denied* (Mar. 29, 2019). See also *In Re Dallman's Estate,* 228 N.W.2d 187, 189 (Iowa 1975); *Budd v. Tanking,* 425 P.3d 373 (Kan. Ct. App. 2018), *review withdrawn* (Apr. 17, 2019); In *re Estate of Ober,* 62 P.3d 1114, 1115 (Mont. S. Ct. 2003).

[51] *Estate of Ober* at 1115.

[52] In Canada, ecclesiastical marriages as we have defined them would generally be regulated by the body of law that governs common-law marriages. That body of law may make one party subject to an obligation to provide financial support for the other party after the relationship ends, whether by death or by separation. While there is no statutory protection for ecclesiastical marriage partners with regard to the division of family assets, this has not stopped the courts from intervening in situations where one partner has benefited from the union more than the other has.

This means that the entire will is canceled unless it was made with the new marriage in mind. However, if parties engage in ecclesiastical marriage, would their last will be revoked? What if the last will benefits persons other than, or not including, the ecclesiastical marriage partner, such as a former partner or their children, without accounting for the present partner? Or what if the ecclesiastical marriage lasts for fifteen years with one partner bearing a considerable burden of caring for the other? None of that would matter. The ecclesiastical marriage would not revoke the previous will, whereas a legally compliant marriage would. Thus the surviving ecclesiastical marriage partner would have little recourse to access from the estate—no matter what the couple might have lived through, or no matter what the surviving spouse might have contributed through personal and financial support.

There are, however, also instances in which an estate can be challenged, since some places have laws to ensure that an individual who provided support for dependents while alive must continue to provide adequate and proper support after death. Ecclesiastical marriage partners could meet the definition of a spouse for purposes of a dependent's relief claim in some jurisdictions, since, in such a case, the definition of the spouse would include a common-law spouse who had lived with the deceased continuously for a period of at least three years, or a person with whom the deceased had a relationship of some permanence and with whom the person had a child. Thus, again, ecclesiastical marriages might in fact lead to some consequences that a partner might think they could avoid.

Canadian law also provides another instance in which an ecclesiastical marriage partner would be treated in the same manner as a legal marriage partner. This would be in regard to being executor of a will if no executor has been appointed or if the named executor is unable or unwilling to act. Canadian succession law generally attributes the right to administer an estate to the deceased's spouse, legal or otherwise. In Ontario, for example, the Estates Act, R.S.O. 1990, Chapter E.21, provides at section 29(1) that where a person dies intestate or the executor named in the will refuses to prove the will, administration of the property of the deceased may be committed by the Superior Court of Justice firstly to "the person to whom the deceased was married immediately before the death of the deceased or person with whom the deceased was living in a conjugal relationship outside marriage immediately before the death." In this regard, it appears that an ecclesiastical marriage partner would have no different rights than a legal spouse, even if the partners entered an ecclesiastical marriage thinking they might avoid this complication.

If a person dies without leaving a valid will (thus dying "intestate"), Canadian provinces have different approaches to whether a common-law partner could inherit (and thus be considered as a legal partner for the sake of the inheritance). Eastern provinces (from Ontario to the east coast) do not consider such partners to be eligible for the estate in cases of intestacy, while western provinces (Manitoba to British Columbia and north) do. The western provinces have a broad definition of the term *spouse*, which includes common-law partners (as defined by each province). Thus common-law partners in these provinces will have a statutory entitlement to the estate in the event that their partner dies intestate.

Common-law marriage in the U.S., though recognized in some states, may still be difficult to prove upon the death of one of the common-law partners

because courts are concerned about fraud when examining a claim for common-law marriage. Thus, when the first person in a common-law partnership dies, the living party has the burden of proving that a common-law marriage existed. The elements to establish the existence of a common-law marriage, as defined by Iowa courts for example, are as follows: (1) intent and agreement to marriage (by both parties) together with continuous cohabitation and public declaration that the parties are husband and wife; (2) burden is on the party asserting the claim; (3) all elements of relationship as to marriage must be shown to exist; (4) claim of marriage is regarded with suspicion and will be closely scrutinized; (5) when one party is deceased, the essential elements must be shown by clear, consistent, and convincing evidence.[53]

Ecclesiastical marriages, as defined in the Classis Georgetown overture to Synod 2019, which cites the example of a marital union officiated by clergy and in which the process has been designed by the parties and the officiant to be deliberately noncompliant with local marriage legislation, are not legally valid. These would eventually be considered as any other common-law relationship in locales that recognize such, but it is not lawful for a minister to conduct them. In both the U.S. and Canada, officiants who solemnize marriages in churches claim to do so, saying, for example (as in the CRC's 1979 marriage form), "As a minister of the church of Christ and by the authority which the state has vested in me, I now pronounce you . . . husband and wife . . ."—thus clearly acknowledging that their state authority to do so is dependent. Officiants are required by law to register marriage ceremonies that they lead, just as couples must get official marriage licenses. The state thereby assures that the people are not barred from legal marriage (by close familial relationship or because they are still legally married to someone else, for example). For a minister to perform an ecclesiastical marriage is, by this very reason, quite simply against the stated law of the land.

In the U.S., state regulation of marriage is assumed, and very little case law exists regarding state recognition of "ecclesiastical marriage." However, Illinois tackled this exact issue, releasing an opinion in 1991 regarding a marriage that had been conducted in a church and "without a marriage license."[54] In that case, the state criminally prosecuted the defendant for conducting a marriage ceremony "knowing that his performance was not authorized by law, in that the celebrants had not obtained a marriage license. . . ."[55] In Canada, likewise, officiants who lead ecclesiastical marriage ceremonies stand open to penalization for abuse of relevant marriage legislations. In addition, it is possible that churches might leave themselves open to legal proceedings, as well, if a party of such a marriage might become aggrieved.

Where disputes have arisen between people who deliberately avoided a legal marriage, the record shows a lack of legislative certainty as well as inconsistent judicial interpretations of such situations. This is especially so in contexts where it appears that the participants tried to manipulate or avoid the application of law that would otherwise apply if they were legally

[53] In *re Dallman's Estate*, 228 N.W.2d at 189.

[54] *People v. Schuppert*, 577 N.E.2d 828 (Ill. 1991).

[55] Ibid. at 829.

married. These examples should warn the church of the risks that ecclesiastical marriage participants and officiants would assume if they actively engaged in such ceremonies without expert legal counsel regarding the impact of the union. In light of the complexity and uncertainty of existing laws, participants would be well advised to seek legal advice about entering into future partnerships if they wish to have a more reliable understanding of the legal impact such a relationship would have upon them and their estates. The task force can foresee situations in which pastors or churches could become liable if they enthusiastically supported and conducted an ecclesiastical marriage but then the couple later became disgruntled at not having understood all the legal implications and then held the pastor or church responsible for not informing them properly. For these matters alone, we would deem it ill-advised to pursue ecclesiastical marriage as a valid option.

In addition, the task force can foresee many possible scenarios in which ecclesiastical marriage could make matters messy, particularly in the event of a radical change in the relationship, such as the incapacitation or death of one partner or the dissolution of the conjugal relationship.[56] What if a partner from an ecclesiastical marriage went into an expensive care home or medical facility—would their "spouse" then use their own savings to pay for that? What if the spouse's adult children protested such an arrangement, claiming that the savings were their inheritance and were not to be used to support a partner in a nonlegal marriage? The reality in late-in-life marriages in particular is that children of the unions also have a vested interest in property rights and distribution of assets, and that they may interfere and pursue legal action even if the partners in the ecclesiastical marriage have intended something different. Laws have been written to protect people from unjust situations, and it seems exceedingly wise that any people entering a new relationship should seek legal advice and clarify all such matters so as to avoid future possible litigation.

Finally, if people are entering an ecclesiastical marriage explicitly in order to avoid certain obligations of a civil union (i.e., the requirement to give up benefits from the pension or social security plan of a deceased spouse), is the church not simply aiding in perpetuating fraud? Such action cannot be condoned, since it would be deceptive and unlawful. If God's intention is for people to become "one" in marriage, then people must assume a new relationship with new loyalties and responsibilities. The task force would advise this high view of marriage, even if, as in some late-in-life marriages, no conjugal relations are intended.

V. Pastoral care for people who might contemplate entering into a non-civil marriage

A. General considerations

In stating what pastoral care and advice we would give to churches, pastors, and constituents, we want to follow the biblical and historical advice in this report, along with the wisdom of adhering to established laws. Each situation and circumstance can be very different; however, there is enough guidance already given to propose this counsel to the churches.

[56] Would the church then also have to consider granting an ecclesiastical divorce?

First, we advise all couples thinking of marriage to consider seriously not entering into an ecclesiastical marriage as defined in this report. Based on the biblical and historical information as well as the legal matters mentioned here, we cannot condone an ecclesiastical marriage. Though the Bible does not seem to clearly anticipate such a thing as an ecclesiastical marriage, it does show that the early church submitted to the authority of the civil government, even allowing it to regulate both marriage and divorce. Historically, the Reformed tradition has given a prominent place to the role of the state regarding marriage. Additionally, if one considers the legal considerations already noted, there could be serious legal implications for all parties involved in conducting an ecclesiastical marriage.

As shown in the stories we told at the beginning of the report, people of all ages might try to avoid certain financial complications and feel that an ecclesiastical marriage is the answer. However, a deeper question needs to be asked, and it has to do with the depth of commitment expected of a couple entering into a Christian marriage. A Christian marriage has long been understood as a couple coming together and covenanting to live together, come what may. Through tough and trying times they promise to stay with each other and to care for each other with the help of the Lord. Married couples face difficult times with confidence in the Lord's provision. In fact, times of difficulty can often strengthen a marriage. In contrast, an ecclesiastical marriage could well begin with the assumption that the parties would not share in life's difficulties and trials with the same level of commitment.

B. Possible temporary exceptions

In defining ecclesiastical marriage here as intentionally excluding the state as a sanctioning or governing authority, we want to allow for possible temporary exceptions in which the state would not initially be involved but would be involved later. Here are a couple of examples.

A young woman from the United States is engaged to be married to a man from Canada. They intend to settle down and live in Canada, but they want to get married in the U.S. at the woman's home church. So instead of getting a marriage license in a state in the U.S., they perform the wedding ceremony at her church in the U.S. and, after moving to Canada, they proceed to get a marriage license from the province in Canada where they go to reside. From the time of the ceremony in the U.S. until they are married in Canada there has been a lapse of two months. However, during that intervening time, they and the church have considered the couple married.

Or let's say a young couple has been planning their wedding day for over a year. They have the details worked out, and the date is set. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, they are unable to follow through with their plans. They, along with their church and pastor, decide to go ahead with a simple wedding in the church with only immediate family. They have not been able to obtain a marriage license because in their area the county clerk office has been closed. However, they have gone through with the ceremony with the intention of obtaining a marriage license and getting legally married in their state when possible. In this case, the church has considered them married ever since the wedding service took place in the church.

In both of these cases (and potentially others), the couples are not seeking an ecclesiastical marriage because they are not intentionally excluding the state.

Their intentions include both the church and the state in "making" their marriage. However, for one reason or another, they have stretched the process and included a religious ceremony at a time different from that of the civil ceremony. A religious ceremony in such a situation is distinct from an ecclesiastical marriage insofar as it is not done to the exclusion of the state. In fact, most religious ceremonies in the U.S. and Canada include the state as the minister acts as an agent of both the state and the church. In these special circumstances, the religious ceremony does not include the state, but the couple still intends to obtain a legal marriage. The task force does recommend that if a couple wishes to extend the process in a way like this or to have a separate religious ceremony to celebrate the marriage with a particular community, it would be best to obtain the civil marriage first. However, it may be that, as in circumstances such as those described above, such a process may not be possible. The task force also recommends that pastors seek legal advice from an expert before engaging in an exclusively religious ceremony. We recommend this because of the legal context of the U.S. and Canada in which the pastor is vested with the power of the state to solemnize marriages. The pastor's dual role as an agent of the state and of the church in marriage is something that should not be overlooked even in these types of circumstances in which there could be legitimate reasons to extend the marriage process or have multiple ceremonies.

C. Special circumstances that seniors can face

People who have been widowed can become lonely for companionship and may wish to enter into a marriage with someone with whom they have developed a loving relationship. As previously mentioned, some people in situations like this do not want the involvement of the civil authorities because of pension or social security issues. These couples do not want a situation in which they would lose significant financial benefits from the pension or social security plan of a deceased spouse.

However, as our legal research has shown, if people want to be married and still keep the financial benefits from a previous marriage, they could be committing fraud, and the pastor and local church could be accomplices in such cases. This is not something that the pastor and church should take lightly. As we have noted above, the church has biblically and historically been very careful about submitting and honoring our governing authorities because they are seen to have been instituted by God. It would be very unfortunate if churches in general and pastors in particular disregarded this understanding by officiating at an ecclesiastical marriage that is designed to exclude the authority of the state.

D. The value of maintaining a strong commitment to marriage

We have to acknowledge the need for companionship for people of all ages, but we should not diminish what the church has determined to be expected in a marriage bond. Marriage values the idea that we are totally committed to each other and are willing to sacrifice for each other. We put it all on the line together. An ecclesiastical marriage seems to amount instead to a "marriage lite." Sanctioning such a marriage, which is distinct from the civil marriage recognized both by the church as well as the state, would bring the church into a dangerous situation whereby we would be serving as arbitrators of quasilegal relationships that could easily put us in legal conflict with the states and provinces in which we reside.

Because of the possible legal consequences and the different types of legislation in states and provinces, pastors should recommend that couples seek independent legal advice—especially if there are estates and children from previous marriages involved. Seeking such advice could allow for couples to think through ways to care for children from a previous marriage and for each other in the marital relationship. Pastors can walk couples through spiritual and ethical questions that may arise as they work with independent legal experts, but pastors should never consider themselves legal experts or let their congregants presume that they are. Rather, pastors have the wonderful role of working with a couple to enrich their relationship and to walk with them as they ask spiritual and ethical questions.

E. Cultural considerations

Culture and context play a large role in shaping understandings and traditions. While the CRC was first considered an immigrant church in North America, it is now itself also continually welcoming a diversity of new immigrants into its fellowship. Every different immigrant group brings new life, color, culture, and customs, as do Indigenous peoples who were present before European immigrants settled here. As there has been in the past, there is now a great opportunity to learn from our immigrant sisters and brothers with regard to marriage. After all, many aspects of the marriage ceremony and the marriage itself are heavily steeped in cultural background.

An increasingly common situation today with many immigrants coming to North America is that the persons have spent considerable time in refugee camps. In such camps many immigrants have grown up and even married, often without being able to obtain a state certificate of marriage. Others have obtained certificates of marriage so as to be able to immigrate as a couple or as a family at the same time and to the same place. Additionally, there are people who have come to North America having a "common-law" marriage because getting a marriage certificate is a hardship in their home country due to geographic isolation or cost. How is the church to respond to these situations and others like it with people who have immigrated to North America?

Our advice is that the church recognize such marriages regardless of the authorizing body. This approach respects the couple's commitment to each other and their intention to establish a family in their new homeland. Certainly care should be taken to evaluate and encourage their commitment to each other and their desire to establish a Christian home. Additionally, care should be taken in their assimilation process to meet the expectations of their host country, state, or province with regard to marriage regulations. But this should be done in a way that does not imply the immigrant couple has a deficient marriage. However, at the same time, care should be given to help them understand the marriage laws of their new home and, in the event that there needs to be a recognition of their marriage by the state, to help them move in that direction. Again it is advisable to gain legal advice as warranted.

We must also be mindful that there are immigrant couples who do not feel a need to obtain any type of recognition by the state regarding their marriage. For them to do so would almost serve as an insult to their families, who sanctioned the marriage and gave them their blessing in the first place. For them to think that their marriage was not complete would be to imply that their family's blessing was insufficient. They might even add that, as far

as they know, marriages from their culture end in divorce much less frequently than marriages solemnized legally in churches in North America—and they might be correct in that view. They might also know that the tribal/familial/cultural marriage that they are privileged to be a part of might not be something their children will participate in, at least not entirely. In such situations we must use care and understand that, as the church helps immigrants assimilate into their new homeland, it would be a shame to lose their culture, beauty, customs, and traditions that in so many ways can help us understand how the gospel has flowered in other contexts. We should look for ways in which we can learn from the strong social and familial ties that have brought immigrant couples together and have kept them together in loving relationships. We can and should learn from our brothers and sisters who have come to us as blessings from God to enrich us by demonstrating the gospel as it has grown and flourished in their cultural context. It is important to remember that we are not the proverbial melting pot in which any variety is destroyed and blended into one metal. Instead it is better to see the church as a stew pot in which each element adds its own unique flavor, color, and texture to a meal that becomes more delicious with each addition.

VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Gerry Koning (chair), Gayle Doornbos (reporter), and Loren Veldhuizen when the report of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force is discussed.

B. That synod instruct the executive director to disseminate the report on ecclesiastical marriage to the churches of the CRC to serve as guidance regarding the issue of ecclesiastical marriage.

C. That synod strongly advise pastors of the CRC not to solemnize ecclesiastical marriages (as defined in this report) as sanctioned and solemnized solely by the church to the exclusion of the state (civil government) whereby a couple is considered "married in the eyes of the church but not in the eyes of the state."[57]

Grounds:

1. The biblical record clearly teaches us to submit to the governing authorities in all matters that do not conflict with the Word of God.
2. Historically, Reformed churches have acknowledged the role and right of civil authorities to regulate marriage in their jurisdictions.
3. In both the United States and Canada there could be negative legal consequences for the participants and/or for pastors who solemnize a non-civil or ecclesiastical marriage.

D. That synod encourage the churches to respect and honor the marriages of immigrants who did not obtain a civil marriage prior to arriving in Canada or the United States and counsel them in the understanding of Christian marriage and its relationship to civil authority in our countries.

[57] *Agenda for Synod 2019,* p. 518.

Grounds:

1. It is not the case that in every country where immigrants have come from that the civil authorities regulate marriage, so it might not have been possible for a civil marriage to occur.
2. In the interest of grace and acceptance, we want to acknowledge the beautiful Christian marriage traditions that have developed in various cultures.
3. The law is permissive but not prescriptive in this regard.

E. That synod caution pastors against acting as legal experts or offering legal advice, especially with regard to the issue of ecclesiastical marriage, and that synod encourage pastors to advise couples to seek independent legal counsel as necessary.

F. That synod accept this report as fulfilling the mandate of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force and dismiss the task force.

Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force
Bernard T. Ayoola
Joan DeVries (reporter)
Henry Doorn, Jr.
Gayle Doornbos (reporter)
Gerry Koning (chair)
Loren Veldhuizen
David van der Woerd
Lis Van Harten (staff adviser)

Appendix
Ecclesiastical Marriages—A Canadian Legal Perspective
Memorandum from Legal Counsel, David van der Woerd

I. Introduction

Synod 2019 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America considered an overture submitted by Classis Georgetown and appointed a committee to study the morality and advisability of ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages. Classis Georgetown believed that this type of study committee would assist congregations and pastors in their ministry to couples seeking to be united in marriage where they requested the omission of the registration of the marriage with the relevant governing authorities for reasons to avoid the financial entanglements that are associated with civil marriage unions. Classis Georgetown posed a number of questions relating to the topic.

In acceding to the overture, Synod 2019 acknowledged that churches are being confronted with questions and situations related specifically to ecclesiastical (non-civil) marriages and that pastors and elders need guidance on how to respond to these questions. Synod also observed that the CRCNA position on marriage does not specifically address the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical marriage. Synod 2019 declared that the synodical task force's mandate was to include, among other things, what the law of various states, provinces, and territories of Canada and the United States had to say

about performing ecclesiastical (non-civil) wedding ceremonies. This memorandum provides a Canadian legal perspective.

Among other things, this memorandum asks the basic question whether ecclesiastical marriages are even recognized in Canadian law. On its face this question may seem puzzling, because in this memorandum an ecclesiastical marriage is a marriage that is deliberately not registered with the relevant governing authorities. That, of course, is not the end of the analysis. In this memorandum the term *ecclesiastical marriage* is sometimes also interchanged with other terminology, such as *non-civil marriage* or *non-compliant marriage*. These types of unions have found their way into the Canadian court system on many occasions.

There are many instances in which couples have sought to unite with one another in a marriage-type relationship that is established by a form of a ceremony but have deliberately, inadvertently, or otherwise not registered the union with the government. That may be to avoid the financial entanglements of civil marriage, as Classis Georgetown points to in the rationale for their overture. Such couples may seek to unite as couples in a committed relationship in which all the attributes of a traditional marriage are present, while not wishing to be encumbered by the legal implications that are associated with civil marriage, such as the establishment of spousal support obligations or entitlement to a division of property. Some may do it for religious reasons, such as wishing to be married to more than one person at the same time, but are unable to do so in Canada, which does not recognize polygamous marriages or polyamorous unions. Others may desire to marry but for practical or other reasons have been unable to register with the governing authorities for the marriage. Some may have intended to marry civilly but failed to complete the formal validity requirements to have their marriage properly registered. Some religious beliefs collide with civil marriage practices. Some unite for reasons of immigration. Some desire to enter into polyamorous marriages. These are all examples of non-civil unions. Canadian law has delved into some of them, not all, but in time it likely will.

The Canadian judiciary has been asked on many occasions to adjudicate situations in which the parties have engaged in a non-civil marriage ceremony and to rule upon the legal implications of that union. In my research I have been unable to find examples of how the law treats the myriad of non-civil unions in Canada as described above, and there are likely other examples of existing non-civil unions that I have not considered or found legal authority on. This memorandum deals with the law of the courts and statutes in Canada that I have uncovered. The common law is a living organism that is prone to change, especially as societal norms evolve. This is not necessarily an exhaustive summary, but it is instructive and elucidates various principles that can be drawn from the Canadian cases that have considered non-civil unions, and it can help us to forecast how non-civil unions may legally affect people who engage in the process of them, either as participants or as officiants.

II. Analysis

Ecclesiastical marriages are, in general, not recognized by Canadian law. What I mean by that is that generally the same rights and privileges granted by provincial statutes for parties that have met civil marriage requirements

do not apply to parties who are married only through ecclesiastical ceremonies. However, marriage legislations across Canada do allow for ecclesiastical marriages to be recognized as valid marriages if parties solemnized the marriage in good faith, intended to comply with legislation, are not legally disqualified to marry, and cohabit as a married couple after the ecclesiastical ceremony. If a marriage is solemnized in good faith, parties who have been married through an ecclesiastical ceremony will be considered to have a valid marriage and afforded the same statutory rights and privileges as traditional married couples. Furthermore, there may be a risk for a church or officiant to perform ecclesiastical ceremonies for parties engaged in these unions without registering such marriages, as provincial legislation across Canada requires officiants of ceremonies to register marriages.

A. Instances in which ecclesiastical marriages have been recognized as valid marriages

Ecclesiastical marriages, as defined here, are non-civil unions in which parties undergo a religious or cultural ceremony without obtaining a provincial marriage license. These unions are generally not recognized as traditional marriages because they do not comply with the relevant legislation. However, a principle that has been affirmed throughout Canada is that legislatively non-compliant marriages formed in good faith may still be recognized as valid (see the case of Dwyer v Bussey, 2017 NCLA 68). Many provinces, such as Ontario, Alberta, and Newfoundland have saving provisions in their marriage legislations that allow for the courts to recognize a legislatively non-compliant marriage, such as an ecclesiastical marriage, as valid if the parties intended to marry in good faith.

In Ontario, for example, section 4 of Ontario's Marriage Act, RSO 1990, c M-3, says that no marriage can be solemnized except under the authority of a license. However, under section 31 there is a saving provision that allows an ecclesiastical marriage to be recognized as a valid marriage under certain conditions. That section says, "If the parties to a marriage solemnized in good faith and intended to be in compliance with this Act, are not under a legal disqualification to contract such marriage, and after such solemnization have lived together and cohabited as a married couple, such marriage shall be deemed a valid marriage."

The case of Isse v Said, 2012 ONSC 1829 is an example in which the courts recognized a religious marriage as a valid legal marriage, having been solemnized in good faith—and because of that, the legal implications of a validly registered marriage were attributed to the couple. In Isse v Said the parties had participated in an Islamic wedding ceremony with an officiant who had the authority to perform civil marriages in Canada. After a breakdown of the union, the respondent filed for equalization of marital property. The court deemed the marriage to be valid under section 31 because the respondent was found to have had an honest but mistaken belief that the marriage was valid in Canada. The court found therefore that the parties were married in good faith and, as such, recognized the respondent's claim for a division of marital property after the breakdown of the relationship.

In comparison, consider the case of Debora v Debora [1999] 116 ONCA 196, 167 DLR (4th) 759. In that case the parties engaged in an ecclesiastical ceremony but deliberately failed to comply with provincial marriage laws (in this case in Ontario). They participated in a Jewish religious ceremony in

1987. They later became married in a civil ceremony in 1994. The marriage then broke down. They disputed over whether the equalization date for the division of assets was to be 1987 or 1994. The husband had acquired significant assets after the ecclesiastical marriage in 1987 and before the civil ceremony in 1994. However, the parties wanted the husband to continue to receive his widower's pension under the Canada Pension Plan Act, so they deliberately avoided the registration of their religious marriage with authorities in 1987. The court concluded that the 1987 religious marriage was therefore not solemnized in good faith and was found to be invalid. The equalization date for the division of property was therefore set at 1994, when the parties entered into legal marriage. With the benefit of 20-20 retrospect, it seems puzzling that the court decided that where the parties together colluded to obtain pension benefits and that during the same time frame one of the parties enjoyed a disproportionate increase in wealth, that the determination of the religious marriage's validity was such to benefit only one of the colluding parties.

Nevertheless, a principle can be annunciated that a party that is seeking relief from a court will likely bear the burden to prove that they intended to comply with the relevant laws of the jurisdiction and were ignorant of any non-compliance if they hope to succeed in upholding a legislatively non-compliant marriage. This issue also arose in the case of Alspector v Alspector, [1957] 9 DLR (2d) 679, OR 454. This decision established the notion that has been affirmed as a Canada-wide principle, that the burden of proof for a party to prove an ecclesiastical marriage to be valid lies on the party seeking relief on a balance of probabilities. In another case, Lin v Re, (1999) Carswell Alta 200, [1993] AWLD 081, 99 DLR (4th) 280, the applicant attempted to prove that his marriage to the respondent was valid although they had only engaged in a traditional Chinese ceremony in Alberta and did not obtain a marriage license. This is an Alberta case, and the Alberta Marriage Act, similar to the Ontario statute, contains a saving provision at section 23 that provides that a marriage will not be invalidated by reason of non-compliance with that Act if the courts find the marriage to be lawful. In that case the marriage was found not to be lawful due to the fact that both parties understood the requirements of the statute but made no effort to comply with them and only completed their Chinese ceremony.

The previously referred to Newfoundland case of Dwyer v Bussey established that Canadian courts have consistently followed the policy that an invalid marriage was formed in good faith if parties thought it would be legally valid, but any instance of fraud is not considered to be good faith. There are many reasons that couples may avoid the legal consequences of marriage, such as difference in ages, values, stages of life, or aspirations, so "good faith" must be interpreted as an intention to be legally married. This principle should resolve any confusion, clarifying that only couples who believe they are legally married will be considered to be legal spouses when they are found to have a valid marriage. Thus, ecclesiastical marriages will generally only be found to be valid if it is proven on a balance of probabilities that the parties intended to validly marry in good faith.

B. Statutes that are applicable to ecclesiastical marriages

When parties have engaged in an ecclesiastical marriage in good faith and their marriage has been deemed valid by courts, then provincial legislation

regarding the equalization of property, the treatment of the matrimonial home, and support obligations will apply. In Ontario, the Debora case referred to above established that the definition of a spouse under the Ontario Family Law Act does not extend to individuals that have only been married through religious ceremonies in place of civil marriages. Spouses under Ontario's Family Law Act are defined parties that have been married under the laws of Ontario; however, marriage under the Marriage Act gives purpose to the definition of a spouse consistent with the Family Law Act. Where parties recognized that their religious marriage ceremonies would not be recognized in Ontario, then they would not be spouses within the Family Law Act.

C. The application of support obligation provisions to ecclesiastical marriages

When parties are found to be married in good faith, then they will also be considered spouses under the federal Divorce Act (see Nafie v Badawy, 2015 ABCA 36). This principle is demonstrated in the case of Javed v Kaukab, 2010 ONCJ 606, in which the parties had been married in a Muslim religious ceremony instead of a legal marriage. Upon a breakdown of the relationship the applicant claimed in court for spousal support. The court found that there was a genuine marriage between the parties even though it was non-compliant with the statute. The marriage had been recognized in order for the respondent to sponsor the applicant to enter into Canada, so the court would not allow the respondent to argue that she was not his legal spouse to avoid paying him spousal support. The respondent was therefore found to have support obligations to the applicant.

By contrast, consider the case of Harris v Godkewitsch [1983] 41 OR (2d) 779, 20 ACWS (2d) 107. This case shows that parties may not always be considered spouses for the purpose of support obligations. In this case the parties chose not to be married under Ontario law but instead to be committed to each other spiritually through a Jewish ceremony. The court said that extending the definition of spouse under the legislation to cover a person who has participated in a religious ceremony in good faith in the non-legal sense of a moral and religious commitment would create confusion, so in that case good faith was defined as the intention to comply with the relevant law. The support claim was denied.

D. Equalization of property, the matrimonial home, and ecclesiastical marriages

Parties that have been married though ecclesiastical ceremonies may still be subjected to equalization depending on whether their marriage is deemed valid and whether they are considered spouses. Courts will look to the evidence, such as how the parties coexisted after their ecclesiastical ceremony or where they lived or how they presented themselves to others, and whether they had joint bank accounts and/or joint status on their tax returns, to determine the validity of their ecclesiastic union.

As with support, in order for a property to qualify as matrimonial property, both parties must be spouses as defined by the relevant legislation. Once the parties separate, in the case of the matrimonial home, the property must also have been occupied by both parties as a family residence prior to separation (see Kanafani v Abdalla, 2010 ONSC 3651). In the Isse v Said case already referenced above, the parties were found to have a valid marriage although they were married under Sharia law and the marriage did not comply with Ontario law. Nevertheless, the court observed that after their

religious ceremony they cohabitated, went on vacations together, maintained joint bank accounts, and stated that they were married on their tax returns. So the court concluded that they were spouses for the purpose of equalization of assets, and their residence was declared to be a matrimonial home.

However, the case of Kanafani v Abdalla exemplifies an instance in which a joint residence between parties who engaged in an ecclesiastical ceremony was not to be considered a matrimonial home. In that case the respondent asked the court to declare that the condominium the parties resided in was not to be considered to be a matrimonial home. The parties had been married in an unregistered religious ceremony in Toronto by a religious leader under Sharia law. The judge observed that the parties made no attempt to comply with Ontario law and therefore found that it was not a valid marriage, so the property was not considered to be a matrimonial home.

Ultimately, it appears that when parties deliberately avoid the legal consequences of marriage, it is unlikely that they will fall within matrimonial property regimes. Nevertheless, this analysis demonstrates that there are many conflicting cases in point. Cases are often fact driven, and one cannot count upon any particular interpretation by the courts. In many cases the determination of the validity of the marriage is not germane to the issues between the parties or a stepping stone or link in a chain of logic that allows the court to achieve a particular result. There is an inherent risk in relying upon any principles that may become apparent from the case law.

E. Common-law principles and ecclesiastical marriages

Religious marriages that do not meet the civil requirements for marriage are not generally sufficient to consider the parties legal spouses, but they are likely sufficient for them to be considered to be common-law spouses. That is especially so where the parties have cohabited or had children together.

In the aforementioned Dwyer v Bussey case, the judge, in finding that no valid marriage existed, said, "There are only two categories of conjugal relationships outside of marriage in compliance with the Ontario Marriage Act, one where the parties intended to comply but for some technical reason failed to comply with local legislation, and a common-law union." In Dwyer, the parties began cohabiting with one another in 2006 and separated in April 2014. Ms. Dwyer said that they had gone through a "form of marriage" in July 2008 in a private ceremony in Mr. Bussey's home, in which Mr. Bussey quoted a passage from the Bible often used at weddings. The parties had exchanged rings, and that had been blessed by their pastor. Thereafter they referred to each other as husband and wife. Mr. Bussey, however, said that he never intended to be married, they never applied for a marriage license, there had been no officiant or witnesses present at the ceremony, and their relationship was not subsequently registered at any church or public registry. It was determined that there was no valid marriage for the purpose of property division. The rules about dividing property, including the matrimonial home, do not apply to common-law couples. The property the parties bring into the relationship, plus any increase in its value, typically continues to belong to the property owner. Upon separation there is no automatic right to divide property or to share in its value. Ownership usually determines entitlement to property.

Ultimately, the conclusion is that anything that does not reach the standard of an intended legal marriage will likely lead to a common-law union. While parties in common-law unions are not entitled to access the statutory property equalization provisions, property of division can sometimes be addressed by back-door means through use of equitable concepts such as constructive trusts or compensation for unjust enrichment. Courts have been known to utilize such principles to allocate an advantage realized by one party to another or for recompense to a disadvantaged party relating to contributions during the relationship or inequities arising from it. The case of Chhokar v Bains, 2012 ONSC 6602, is an example of parties that underwent an ecclesiastical ceremony who were not considered to have a valid marriage but instead were deemed to have a common-law union. The parties had gone through a Sikh wedding ceremony but never applied for a marriage license. Throughout their relationship, they lived separately but stated that they were common-law on their tax returns. After consideration of all the evidence, the court concluded that the parties were not legally married but instead had a common-law relationship in which common-law principles would be applicable.

F. Risks involved in solemnizing ecclesiastical marriages

There are typically three parties to an ecclesiastical marriage ceremony, the two parties seeking to be married and the officiant. As shown above, there are risks for the marrying parties if they seek an ecclesiastical marriage to avoid legal responsibilities. There may also be risks for the officiant.

In British Columbia, when a marriage is solemnized, it must be registered by either the religious representative or the marriage commissioner. In Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, every person who is authorized to solemnize marriages is required to register marriages in accordance with the provincial vital statistics legislation. More particularly, the Alberta Marriage Act specifies that "no person shall solemnize a marriage except for under the authority of a marriage license or within 3 months after the date that the license is issued." Furthermore, in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the church or marriage commissioner is required to provide a certificate of marriage to the parties. Likewise, in Ontario, after a person has solemnized a marriage, they are required to make an entry in the appropriate registry and, if requested, give a record of the marriage.

Since those who solemnize marriages are required to register the marriages, it therefore stands to reason that officiants who participate in legislatively non-compliant marriage ceremonies may create risks for themselves if they do not comply with governing legislation. In the case of Upadyhaha v Sehgal, [2000] OJ 3508, [2001] WDFL 71, 11 RFL (5th) 210, a priest performed a marriage ceremony between the parties on the basis that they would later apply for the necessary marriage license as soon as possible. However, the parties did not apply for a marriage license, and performing the ceremony was referred to by the court as "an egregious breach of the Marriage Act." The Lin v Re case describes policy reasons for legislating the registration of marriage, since the legislature has contemplated the issues in which an officiant may fail to issue a license or comply with provincial legislation. In this scenario, if the parties truly believe they have a valid marriage and the marriage is invalid by error of the officiant, the marriage may still be declared lawful.

Performing such ecclesiastical ceremonies without registering the marriage as a legal marriage carries penalties that can vary by province. In Alberta and Saskatchewan, anyone who solemnizes a marriage in contravention with their respective Marriage Act is guilty of an offense and liable to a fine. Similarly, in Manitoba and Ontario anyone who violates the Marriage Act will be liable to a fine. There are no other penalties provided. Ultimately, conducting ecclesiastical ceremonies in contravention with the Marriage Act could carry the risk of a fine and may compromise the officiant's ability to perform future marriage ceremonies. It would also seem that where an officiant has enabled a non-compliant marriage ceremony, the legal effect of which later proves to disappoint one or both of the participating parties, the officiant may be civilly liable for damages.

III. Conclusion

This memorandum provides a glance at law in Canada that has touched upon ecclesiastical marriages. It should be noted that in most of the cases referred to in the memorandum where ecclesiastical marriages have been considered by the Canadian courts, the fact and consideration of the ecclesiastical marriage has been mostly in the nature of *obiter dicta* in the ultimate decision of the court. *Obiter dicta* is Latin phraseology for incidental remarks that are made by a judge in the course of making a decision. *Obiter dicta* does not refer to the main thrust of the case, instead *obiter dict*a are additional observations or remarks or opinions expressed by the court on other issues made by the judge which often explain the court's rationale in coming to its final decision. *Obiter dicta* may offer guidance in similar matters in the future, but they may not be binding upon future decisions by the court. As such, the principles that may have been pronounced in this memorandum need to be read in that context and need to be reviewed with a certain degree of apprehension. The law is not clear or settled.

Nonetheless, there are patterns that can be identified in the cases referred to in this memorandum and which will be included in summary below. Ecclesiastical marriages may be recognized in Canada as valid marriages if an applicant can prove on a balance of probabilities that the parties intended to comply with provincial legislation when undergoing an ecclesiastical ceremony. Provincial legislation gives jurisdiction to the judiciary to determine whether parties have intended to comply with marriage legislation when engaging in ecclesiastical ceremonies, and to deem these marriages valid. However, if these marriages are not deemed valid, they will likely be considered to be a common-law union in which common law principles will be applicable. The church and marriage commissioners should be cautioned from performing such ecclesiastical marriage ceremonies, because legislation across Canada requires officiants to register any marriage that they perform and a fine could be applicable if they fail to comply with legislation.

A final remark relates to the limitation of this memorandum. It should be apparent to the reader, but it is worth a reminder that this memorandum is restricted to the legal treatment of ecclesiastical marriage in Canada. It is, quite frankly, only one factor (and likely one of the less interesting factors) that the task force will consider in its report. There are broader, more compelling biblical, theological, cultural, or policy questions that Synod 2019 has asked the task force to comment upon regarding ecclesiastical marriage, and that this memorandum does not address in a fulsome manner.

STUDY OF BIVOCATIONALITY TASK FORCE

I. Background and mandate

In January 2017 the CRC received a grant from the Lilly Endowment's National Initiative to address Economic Challenges Facing Pastoral Leaders. The Financial Shalom Advisory Team was established in 2018 and gathered information. On April 24-25, 2018, a group of bivocational pastors, church planters, and other church leaders gathered to discuss "What Is the Future of Bivocational Ministry in the CRCNA?" "One surprise discovery during the gathering and in the report was that many pastors find that bivocational arrangements fit in well with their ministry design and their Reformed perspective. They are bivocational by choice rather than by need" (Council of Delegates Bivocational Task Force Report, May 2019).

Following this initial conversation, the Council of Delegates (COD) in the fall of 2018 put together a task force with the following mandate:

> to explore the challenges and opportunities for bivocational pastors in the CRC by listening to those within and beyond the CRC in bivocational situations (both pastors and congregational leaders), identifying the opportunities of such situations, and by addressing the challenges (to preparation, to the individual, to the congregation, to the denomination). Areas of specific focus could include reconsideration of items in our Church Order to facilitate normalization of bivocational ministry, improvements in denominational databases related to ministerial status, and the like. As a result, a series of recommendations would be provided to the Council of Delegates.
>
> —Council of Delegates Supplement, *Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 545

In May 2019 the task force presented their report identifying six areas with suggestions for the COD to consider: Church Order requirements, theological basis for bivocational ministry, practices of the denomination, contextualization between the United States and Canada, educational matters, and supporting a cultural change.

The COD concluded that a more in-depth study should be done on the topic and asked synod to appoint a synodical task force to continue the work of the Bivocational Task Force (see *Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 552-53).

II. Mandate

Synod adopted the following mandate for our task force:

> [To continue] the work of the Bivocational Task Force as reported in the Council of Delegates Supplement, Appendix A [pp. 558-77], to examine what it means to be a bivocational pastor today and report to Synod 2021. The new task force will be mandated to give consideration to matters such as the following:
>
> – Create a definition of bivocationality
> – Give biblical support to bivocationality
> – Address financial implications and responsibilities (clearly defined "proper support"; see Church Order Supplement, Art. 15) relative to church, classis, pastor, and the like
> – Classical oversight
> – Cultural differences
> – Church Order implications
>
> *Grounds:*
> a. A compelling biblical, theological, and historical case supporting bivocational ministry is needed.

b. The report provides sufficient examples of issues needing review and of possible options for remedies.
c. Addressing this issue will provide care for pastors in varying cultures and contexts.

(*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 780)

The task force also received the following note from the executive director at the time of appointment:

> In addition, the officers of synod and the advisory committee chair and reporter suggest that the task force feel free to consider other key matters that may impact a bivocational pastor, including spouses serving the same church/ministry when both are part-time, and benefit plans (e.g., retirement and insurance).

The task force is made up of the following members: Rev. Bernard Bakker (chair), Rev. John Bouwers, Pastor Beth Fellinger, Rev. Ernesto Hernandez, Ms. Sharon Jim, Rev. Michael Vander Laan (reporter), Rev. Phillip Westra (secretary), Pastor Robert Zoerman, Rev. David Koll (staff).

III. Stories from the CRC

What do bivocational and other nontraditional ministry arrangements look like in the CRC? Before we get into the details of our mandate, the task force thought it would be helpful to hear some stories of the varied experiences of our pastors. This small sampling gives us a glimpse of the much broader and varied ministry arrangements present in the CRC today.

Rev. Jose Rayas – Socorro, Texas

"Prior to serving in ordained ministry, I studied engineering and worked on defense contracts until 1997, when I retired from that work. In 1997 I attended Westminster Seminary in California. I came to work for the CRC in 2002.

"I am a bivocational pastor with the CRC. [Jose continues to do engineering consulting.] I originally came as a church planter to El Paso, Texas. At the present time, the church is working toward moving from emerging status to organized status. However, El Paso is an economically depressed area. Because of this, the church does not pay my salary. The Borderplex is a local organization that does the fundraising for my position. Samuel Estala, on the other hand, is being paid by the church (Samuel was called from Monterrey, Mexico, to come to El Paso to help the church back in 2008, and he was ordained associate pastor in 2014.) What I had done early on was to build a ministry house where the pastor could stay. This would mean a one-time investment, but the pastor would receive a smaller salary, considering that all utilities and housing are provided for him. In my personal case, I built my own home with my funds, but the Borderplex helped to find the lot and the builder. Part of my call was to raise leaders. We have several other leaders in training. But as Samuel moves up to a stronger leadership position, he will eventually become the lead pastor, and I will step away to continue efforts in raising leaders—and possibly starting new church plants with these leaders."

Rev. Scott Van Voorst – Sergeant Bluff, Iowa

"I have been at an emerging church for nearly three years. While the church is just under average size for a church in the U.S., it is small for a CRC. The church has received outside support for many years. In addition to needing outside financial support, the church has a shortage of individuals

who are qualified to lead. Making a switch to an intentional bivocational team was seen as a way to increase our leadership while also getting us closer to financial sustainability without outside help. I have taken on a role as a reserve chaplain to make this possible. I want to be clear that I felt called, not pressured, to add this second role. I am only just getting into the role and haven't worked out all the kinks. That said, by the end of the year I will have my family's insurance and a retirement plan secured through a part-time job that increases my ministry connections. Getting off of RBA insurance and onto military insurance will save my family and my church enough money to cover most of the cost of bringing on a ministry intern or a bivocational second pastor. There are challenges. It doesn't appear that our structures help us find bivocational candidates, and it seems like being bivocational is seen exclusively as a negative in our denomination. I see it as a positive that increases community impact, increases pastoral relational capacity, and increases the gifts being leveraged for the ministry when it is done specifically to build a team."

Rev. Rick Abma – Lacombe, Alberta

"Having served as an associate pastor in four different churches, the need to address discipleship on mission seemed to be hard to do. Basically, the 'come and see' had always seemed to trump or hijack the 'go and be.' So in 2015 I resigned from my pastoral position and embarked on a missionary journey that primarily works through neighborhoods. Essentially the model is to find people to train and disciple in hopes of reaching and loving their neighbors. At the same time this started, my love for roasting coffee created a direct relationship with CRC missionaries and farmers in Central Honduras through a group called Carpenteros and Friends. This allowed for the coffee roasting to become a business, which in turn started to create funds for the missionary journey and also became a platform for the ministry. We use the retail packages to publish true stories from local neighborhoods, and we purchased an espresso bicycle (complete with umbrella), which serves a full coffee-bar drink menu at no cost when the neighborhood has a leader who has taken our training. Neighbors gather around the coffeebike with a mug in hand as we tell them why it is important to hear the message of loving one's neighbors. We do not talk about the coffee roasting business, and we remove all monetary transactions, which sets the stage for unique conversations. The training begins with a one-hour introduction and is followed by a three-hour training course, which I lead via material published in book form (*Neighbouring for Life*). We host 30 neighborhood initiatives per year, and with each neighborhood having anywhere from 10 to 80 people, those events can last a few hours. We are not trying to be literal about the term *neighbors*, but we know that we have missed many opportunities by not 'blooming where we are planted.'"

Jennifer Burnett, Commissioned Pastor – Kelowna, British Columbia

"I am pastoring a small church plant where I am currently employed for 20 hours a week. I began with an arrangement of 15 hours a week with an administrator working 5-10 hours a week. After she left, my hours increased because of the extra duties, which are not among my strengths. This leaves me as the only staff person for the church. We have no building for ourselves, so we rent a space for Sunday morning, and I do most of my

church work from my kitchen table. Along with this I am working toward a doctorate and parenting four children ages 4-15. The positives include having the flexibility to balance these roles, and my study and parenting both give me resources from which to teach and lead the church. The church receives fresh learning and deep reflection on the current moment—whether that be political or health-related or otherwise. The difficulty is of course that some weeks happen to be demanding in all three areas. Boundaries are constantly being blurred, and it can be difficult to feel 'successful' on any front."

Rev. Andrea Baas and Rev. Nicholas Baas – Truro, Nova Scotia

"I (Nick) and my wife, Andrea Baas, are copastors at John Calvin CRC. Together we fill one full-time role. We both preach and do pastoral care. We both came into this position new to pastoring. That presented some challenges, as we each had to figure out our pastoral identity/role while at the same time working at half-speed (part-time). Sharing everything in life, including work, really requires a strong and healthy marital relationship. Council has sometimes found the logistics of having two employees challenging. Having come through the challenges of starting in ministry together, we now have the benefit of a partner who knows us and our ministry life deeply. We have had to grow up quickly in our marriage and have a very deep understanding of how to encourage and empower one another. The church has been blessed by our unique gifts and personalities and by having both sexes in leadership."

Regarding issues and concerns: "Our classis has tended to treat us as two pastors when it comes to classical roles/tasks. For instance, they have struggled with understanding that when they assign me, a male, to do classical supply at a church that does not affirm women in office, they are requiring me to spend even less time preaching at my own church than a full-time pastor would in the same circumstance. Governing bodies struggle to understand what it means for two people to split one role. Sometimes this is understandable. At other times – like when your wife is the first female minister in a classis – it comes off as hurtful.

"On a more practical note, we have found that the way disability insurance works for copastors is less than satisfactory. Disability insurance requires more than part-time work, so technically neither of us qualify."

IV. Biblical, theological, and historical support

A. Biblical support

As we begin exploring the topic of bivocational ministry, we should first listen for God's guidance through Scripture. Our biblical analysis starts with a brief survey of the ministries that God's covenant people are called to support through their tithing. Three categories of ministry are introduced in the Old Testament and carried into the New Testament. We begin here because it has direct relevance to the resource constraints causing some to engage in bivocational ministry out of necessity as well as the strategic embrace of bivocationality as a choice. After the topic of tithing, this section of the report explores the apostle Paul's tentmaking in the New Testament. Here we find not only the clearest example of bivocational practice but also principles to guide us today.

1. Three purposes of tithing

A survey of the main passages about tithing from the Pentateuch reveals that Israel's tithes were to be used for three purposes. First, tithes were used for festive celebrations in God's presence (Deut. 12:17-18; 14:22-29). Second, tithes provided for the material needs of the priests and Levites (Num. 18:8-24; Deut. 12:19; 14:27-29). Third, tithes generously assisted the vulnerable and needy, mainly foreigners, orphans, and widows among the people (Deut. 14:29; 26:12-13). In other words, the firstfruits of the products and revenues of God's people were to be set aside to facilitate worship and fellowship, to support those who were ministers, and to provide tangible goods to the needy. The Lord placed the priests in charge of administering these resources (Num. 18:8; 2 Chron. 31:11-13; Neh. 13:5) and required that they also tithe the best tenth of all they received (Num. 18:25-32).

Leviticus 27:30 says the tithe "belongs to the LORD" and calls it holy. Devoting one's best to the Lord entailed providing for those whom God had designated to receive those resources. The practice of tithing was integral to carrying out the divine commands Israel had received for its religious practices and social morality. Micah 3:6-10 states on behalf of the Lord that neglecting tithes and offerings is robbing God of what rightfully belongs to him.

Two examples of how tithes were used for festive celebrations in God's presence are the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles, described in Deuteronomy 16:9-17. In both cases, joy-filled worship was funded by offerings from God's people as they were called to give "in proportion to the blessings the LORD has given you" (vv. 10, 17). These celebrations welcomed not only whole families to participate but also Levites, foreigners in the land, orphans, and widows (vv. 11, 14).

As noted above, Israel's tithe gave tangible provisions for people whose vocation it was to minister in the Lord's temple. Commenting on Numbers 18, Peter J. Naylor writes that tithing was "practical in that it ensured priests were able to serve full-time in their office, since they would not be anxious about their food" ("Numbers," *New Bible Commentary*, p. 186). When the promised land was divided up among the twelve tribes of Israel, the Levites were only given cities to live in and pastures for their flocks, as they relied on God's provisions in the form of tithes from the people (Josh. 14:3-4; 18:7). The great reforms enacted by Hezekiah included the reconstitution of the priests and Levites, and the restoration of tithes to support them, according to 2 Chronicles 31:3-21. In the account given in Nehemiah 13:4-5, the tithes of the people supported several people who served in the house of God, including priests, Levites, singers, and gatekeepers.

The three most common categories of people described as poor and disadvantaged in the Old Testament were widows, orphans, and foreigners. These categories of people, along with the Levites, were to receive the tithe of food, according to Deuteronomy 14:28-29. The Old Testament also made provisions for landowners to leave a portion of their harvest for people who needed to glean (Lev. 19:9-10), as illustrated in the story of Ruth gleaning the fields of Boaz (Ruth 2:2-3). Tithing for the sake of the poor and vulnerable is a dimension of God's call to love such neighbors and should be taken alongside the imperatives to defend them

from injustices (Ps. 82:3; Prov. 31:9; Isa. 10:5; Amos 2:7). While the wisdom literature of the Old Testament acknowledges that personal irresponsibility can also lead to poverty (Prov. 10:4; 13:18; 21:17), Scripture consistently calls God's people to use tithes to care for the poor and vulnerable in our communities.

Our focus is on how the gifts of God's people support those who are ordained to gospel ministry. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the other needs the Lord ordained tithing to serve. While churches are called to support their ministers, they are also called to allocate resources needed to hold meaningful worship as well as to address the needs of the poor and vulnerable. These imperatives are carried over into the New Testament and have guided the Christian church throughout its history. It is important to factor these into our discussion about bivocational ministry today.

The New Testament emphasizes voluntary generosity among followers of Christ. Christians are to give with joy and confidence, knowing that the Lord will use such gifts for their own blessings, to provide for others, and to bring glory to God (2 Cor. 9:6-11). Being generous with the blessings the Lord has given us is a dimension of Christian discipleship, because "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:34). Believers are instructed to give generously through church leaders for proper distribution (Acts 4:34-37; 1 Cor. 16:1-3) and encouraged to help people in need directly (Matt. 5:42; Luke 12:33; James 2:15-17). Jesus criticizes tithing Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 23:23 for neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."

The New Testament upholds the practice of providing for ministers through the generosity of God's people. When Jesus sent his twelve disciples throughout Judea to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, he said, "the worker is worth his keep" (Matt. 10:10). When he sent out the seventy-two, he included the following instructions: "Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). The apostle Paul echoes this same conviction in 1 Corinthians 9:1-12; Galatians 6:6; and 1 Timothy 5:17-18. The most pointed passage is 1 Corinthians 9:13-14, which states, "Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." In speaking to this issue in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 2 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." As oxen trampled on the grain, they were to eat some of it for sustenance as they worked. This is used as a metaphor for those who devote their lives to ministry. The church should provide for the needs of their pastors and teachers so that they can continue working for the Lord.

2. Paul the tentmaker

The apostle Paul is our best biblical case study for bivocational ministry. While he asserted his right to material support for his work as an apostle, he also worked as a tentmaker and did not always receive

financial gifts from churches. For example, in 1 Corinthians, immediately after Paul mentions his right to compensation, he states, "But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me" (9:15). Elsewhere in this letter he mentions working with his own hands (4:12), which enabled him to preach the gospel "free of charge" (9:18). In 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:8, Paul states that he and his companions worked very hard to "not be a burden to anyone." Paul expressed his gratitude for financial support from the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:10-20) and urged churches to take up offerings for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-15).

Acts 18:3 mentions that Paul was a "tentmaker." Paul met Priscilla and Aquila, who worked in this trade. Paul likely worked in this trade in the cities of Corinth, Thessalonica, and Ephesus, all urban centers of trade where the opportunity for such work was available. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul says, "We worked night and day . . . while we preached the gospel of God to you." Commenting on this passage in his article on "Tentmaking," Paul Barnett states, "This probably means that Paul talked to people while he worked and also, almost certainly, that on some days, or during part of the day, he laid aside his apron and tools and taught the gospel. His lifestyle was characterized by both work and preaching" (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 926).

Why did Paul lay aside his right to earn a living from his gospel ministry and engage in tentmaking? A survey of the relevant passages reveals three strategies behind the apostle's decisions. Paul engaged in tentmaking as a form of bivocational ministry to embrace missional opportunities, to distinguish himself from other traveling philosophers, and to model godliness and dignity of work. We will explore each of these strategies and apply them to our contemporary situations.

a. Embrace missional opportunities

First, tentmaking allowed Paul to strategically embrace missional opportunities. On his missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor, where he set out to establish new churches, Paul engaged in tentmaking because there was not yet a local body of disciples who could support him. Paul was blessed with financial support from established churches in Macedonia while laboring for the gospel in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:9), and he received financial gifts from the church in Philippi while he labored in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16). But Paul could not expect support from the community where he ministered before a Christian community was formed there. In this way, his tentmaking enabled him to bring the gospel to new places.

In telling the Thessalonians he did not want to be a financial burden to them (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8), Paul engaged in tentmaking to embrace the opportunity to proclaim the gospel among people who were not financially well off. Tentmaking allowed Paul to establish a church among people who would find it difficult to support him financially.

We follow this same principle today when we fund a pastor, missionary, or church planter to serve a financially disadvantaged community with resources from other churches and donors. A bivocational

ministry arrangement is another way to apply Paul's tentmaking to contemporary missional endeavors. There is a biblical warrant for some church planters to both lean on funding from established churches and find work in the community to make ends meet financially. Bivocational ministry arrangements should not diminish the importance of support from other churches; nor should the availability of funds preclude pastors from pursuing bivocational opportunities.

Bivocational pastors serving small or financially challenged churches do so to not be a burden to those they serve. Such men and women inhabit the spirit of the apostle Paul. They ought to be honored for their sacrificial service rather than sidelined because their model of pastoral ministry does not fit denominational norms or historic practices in the Western church. Such pastors are embracing a missional opportunity that would not be available if they were not engaging in bivocational ministry.

b. Distinguish himself from other traveling philosophers

The second reason the apostle Paul purposefully engaged in tentmaking was to distinguish himself from other itinerant teachers and philosophers of his day. This comes through clearly in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6, where Paul contrasts himself with greedy people pleasers who speak with flattery. He also draws a contrast between himself and others who took advantage of the church as he defends his apostleship throughout 2 Corinthians. Paul identifies his adversaries as those who "peddle the word of God for profit" (2 Cor. 2:17) and who "use deception" and "distort the word of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). A false teacher is one who "exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face," according to 2 Corinthians 11:20.

J.M. Everts summarizes the complicated historical background in Greek culture to traveling philosophers and how they supported themselves.

> In contemporary Greek society there was much debate about how philosophers and teachers should support themselves. Most philosophers either charged fees or accepted the patronage of a wealthy individual. The major criticism of this method of support was that it placed a philosopher under obligation to a patron and therefore jeopardized the philosopher's freedom to teach the truth. In Hellenistic society the giving and receiving of benefactions was an extremely important component of the social structure. The wealthy expressed their power by becoming patrons, and since benefaction was the basis of friendship, refusing a gift was an act of enmity. Philosophers who wished to avoid this network of obligation could either beg, as the Cynics chose to do, or work. However, since most of Greek society looked down on those who worked at a trade or begged, not many philosophers chose these methods of support. Those who did gained freedom at the expense of social status.
>
> ("Financial Support," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 295)

Given this background, it is reasonable to believe that the apostle Paul was also careful about who funded him, because he understood that patronage entailed influence on what he was to teach about. Gordon Fee sees this denial of patronage as the meaning of Paul's "boast" in 1 Corinthians 9:15 and goes on to explain that "in offering the 'free'

gospel 'free of charge' his ministry becomes a living paradigm of the gospel itself" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 417, 421).

Our world has grown increasingly suspicious of the church in recent times. Like the traveling philosophers of Paul's day, some churches are inordinately focused on money and commission leaders who use religion as a means to financial gain (1 Tim. 6:5). Therefore it is wise to ask what impression we are giving to our surrounding community. How are we to distinguish ourselves from religious peddlers of our day? Bivocational ministry can be an embodied apologetic for a ministry of servanthood that is God-glorifying rather than one of financial gain.

c. Model the godliness and dignity of work

In contrast to the Hellenistic devaluation of physical labor, Paul upheld the biblical perspective of work as God-given and God-glorifying. He warned the church in Thessalonica against idleness (1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6) and urged them to follow his example of work as an economic and social responsibility (2 Thess. 3:7-10). Working with our own hands helps us to avoid sin and enables us to be generous toward others (Acts 20:35; Eph. 4:28). It is also clear that Paul conducted some of his ministry in the marketplace and therefore modeled for others what it meant to be followers of Jesus Christ in and through their daily work.

One can detect a resurgence of the old Hellenistic sentiments in our current cultural climate. Many today aim their lives toward getting the most money for the least amount of effort, viewing labor as a necessary evil, and are captivated by a vision of the good life that entails perpetual vacations with little productive contribution to society. Some Christians are finding a growing disconnect between their daily work and their life of discipleship. Bivocational ministry can help churches recover a biblical perspective of work.

Pastors who gain credibility and influence in the marketplace are given opportunities to communicate with people they would not know otherwise, to lead as a model for people to be disciples of Jesus in the workplace, and to provide an embodied apologetic for the goodness of human labor that reflects God's character.

B. Historical considerations

A cursory glance through church history reveals unity and diversity in applying the biblical principles outlined above. While some have tried to make sweeping statements about how tithing and ministers' compensation developed over the years, these usually do not hold up to further analysis. Throughout all eras of Christian history, some churches have been able to provide abundantly for ministers while others struggled to provide for their needs. Some who have committed themselves to ministry gained wealth and prestige while others' entry into ministry involved a vow of poverty. In some eras of church history, tithes have supported one cause to the neglect of others, whether that be church facilities for worship and fellowship, compensating clergy, or giving to the needy.

The Didache, one of the earliest writings about Christian teachings, distinguishes between traveling prophets, to whom the church was to give hospitality, and prophets who settled down to serve a particular community and were to receive financial compensation. It warned the early church

against supporting itinerant prophets who only took advantage of Christian hospitality ("The Didache," *Early Christian Writings*, pp. 195-96).

It is helpful to remember that in the monastic movement, many who committed their lives to the full-time service of the church also worked gardens, produced books, maintained the building and grounds, and incorporated other productive labors into their daily rule. To this day many monasteries contain nonprofit organizations that grow or build things to sell in order to support their religious communities, which supplement any share of tithes they might receive. Most monks throughout history have been essentially bivocational.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin briefly surveys the church's practice of dividing the revenue from tithes into four categories: "one for the clergy, another for the poor, a third for the repair of churches and other buildings, a fourth for the poor, both foreign and indigenous" (pp. 1074-75). This guideline served as an application of Scripture to prevent leaders from being able to leverage their position to take more than their share of resources for themselves. Imagine how different our congregations would operate if our annual budget were divided into four equal parts this way. While some might operate in this way, we know this is not the norm across our denomination.

The Christian Reformed Church has historically been able to use its tithes to support its pastors, build adequate church facilities, do the work of benevolence in their congregation and community, and support denominational agencies, while its members establish and maintain Christian schools and support other nonprofit organizations. Until fairly recently, bivocational pastors have been rare in our 163-year history. The CRC's letter of call template for ministers of the Word notes that "laborers are worthy of their hire" (see Luke 10:7 [KJV]; Matt. 10:10) before spelling out a compensation package. We do not believe we ought to change this value but adapt it to make room for churches and ministers to live out new, diverse arrangements of ministerial vocation.

V. Definitions

The word *bivocationality* implies two vocations or callings from God, one in ministry and the other in another field of work. This simple definition falls short theologically and practically. All Christians have multiple callings from God. Likewise, this definition does not reflect the various callings a pastor may be called to. Thus defining *bivocationality* simply in terms of calling or vocation is problematic.

The COD Bivocational Task Force defined *bivocationality* in terms of financial income. Bivocationality is "any arrangement in which a pastor gains financial support from more than one employer." This definition is helpful in its practicality. Financial dynamics are often an important factor related to bivocational ministry. Yet it is not the desire of the task force to define *bivocationality* exclusively in financial terms. There are other dynamics in play.

One of those dynamics for pastors in bivocational ministry is accountability. An individual involved in bivocational ministry is accountable to at least two entities, one of which is the supervising council (and/or in cooperation with other congregations, institutions, or agencies involved). The other entity could be a corporation, the customers of one who is self-employed, a

nonprofit or parachurch organization, or another ministry. Being accountable to multiple entities is an important factor for persons in bivocational ministry.

Finally, bivocational ministry requires individuals to spend time and energy in multiple settings. The time and energy one uses ought to be significant in order to be considered bivocational. Some ministers have activities "on the side" that generate some income but do not interfere with their pastoral duties. Bivocational ministry is distinct in that the nature and time-demands of the work require mutual discernment between the pastor and the supervising council.

Given the importance of these factors, we suggest the following definition: "*Bivocationality* is the arrangement in which a pastor spends time and energy working for compensation and is accountable to another in addition to the setting in which s/he has been called to minister." It is worth noting that in this definition pastors are those ordained to the offices of minister of the Word or commissioned pastor.

However, our task force observes that this definition does not cover all the possible situations surrounding "what it means to be a bivocational pastor today" per our mandate. Historically, the CRCNA has seen pastoral ministry as a full-time profession. This is reflected in our Church Order as well as in our denominational culture and administration. In today's world creativity and necessity have resulted in multiple nontraditional arrangements that are furthering the work of God through the church and its pastors. Some of these arrangements do not properly fit *bivocationality* as defined above. While much of this report refers to bivocationality or bivocational ministry, it may be better to view this report as reflecting nontraditional pastoral arrangements rather than only bivocationality.

To help in providing this wider perspective, the task force here details nontraditional arrangements as follows:

A. Bivocational – the arrangement in which a pastor spends time and energy working for compensation and is accountable to another in addition to the setting in which s/he has been called to minister. This may mean working in a part-time or full-time capacity in a nonecclesial occupation while also leading a church or church plant and receiving financial support for that work in ministry. It may also mean working in more than one ordainable ministry position (e.g., as a local church pastor and as a hospital chaplain).

1. Bivocational by necessity – this arrangement describes a pastor whose calling congregation cannot afford to support a full-time position. Thus the pastor is required to find additional financial support through another occupation.

2. Bivocational by choice – this arrangement describes a pastor who has chosen to be bivocational, working by design both in vocational ministry and in another occupation. Often this is done for missional reasons.

B. Covocational – in this arrangement the pastor's calling and ministry occur in a traditionally nonpastoral setting. In other words, the pastoral calling is combined with a nonecclesial occupation. For example, a church planter may

open a coffee shop as a vehicle for ministry. The coffee shop is a business, yet it also provides the setting for pastoral ministry and evangelism.

C. Other arrangements

1. Part-time position – this arrangement describes a pastor who for various reasons works part-time hours. This may be dictated by the ministry position (i.e., a small congregation or an interim position) or may be due to a personal issue such as the pastor's health or family situation.

2. Clergy couples in shared or part-time positions (a clergy couple is a husband and wife who are both ordained pastors) – many different arrangements may occur for clergy couples. For this report, we have focused on arrangements in which neither spouse as an individual is in a full-time position. This may include a clergy couple who are job sharing a single full-time position or a clergy couple in which each spouse has a separate part-time pastoral position.

3. Volunteer, unpaid ministry – this arrangement describes a pastor serving a ministry without financial compensation. A situation like this can occur when the pastor's family income is provided through their spouse or when the pastor has sufficient income through other means. This kind of arrangement can occur in congregations that have little or no financial means.

It is worth observing that in the descriptions above we have referred only to part-time positions or arrangements. We have not referred to *part-time pastors*, because there is no such thing in our polity and understanding of ordination. Any ordained person, whether a minister of the Word, commissioned pastor, elder, or deacon, by God's calling through the church and by virtue of the ecclesiastical office, always bears that office regardless of the activities they are engaged in at a given moment. Every pastor in a nontraditional arrangement is fully and at all times the pastor of the community they have been called to serve. Thus we discourage any reference in any context to a part-time pastor.

VI. Cultural and contextual considerations: what is, what will be, and why it matters

A. What is

What are the cultural and contextual experiences of bivocational ministry within the CRCNA? What follows is dependent on several informal and qualitative surveys done within the CRCNA and on external resources such as the Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project: Research Report[1] and the Wellness Project @ Wycliffe (University of Toronto).[2]

Although bivocational ministry is relatively rare within churches of the CRCNA that are monoethnic and middle class, the same is not true among

[1] Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project: Research Report; James W. Watson, Wanda M. Malcolm, Mark D. Chapman, Elizabeth A. Fisher, Marilyn Draper, Narry F. Santos, Jared Siebert, Amy Bratton; May 22, 2020; canadianmultivocationalministry.ca.

[2] wycliffewellnessproject.com/

CRCNA churches that reach ethnic minorities and economically challenged communities.

To gain some qualitative understanding of the blessings and challenges of bivocational ministry among churches that reach ethnic minorities within the denomination, an informal survey was conducted among seven leaders of several ethnic subgroups within the CRC— namely, African American, Korean, Chinese, and Hispanic leaders.[3] The informal survey revealed that the percentage of pastors who are doing ministry bivocationally is 70-75 percent among African American pastors, 40 percent among Chinese pastors, and 65-70 percent among Hispanic pastors. Korean congregations had less than 5 percent of lead pastors working bivocationally while the majority of Korean associate pastors worked bivocationally.

Mixed in this informal survey were factors including the relative newness of a church as well as the economic challenges within a supporting community. Resonate Global Mission indicated that, as of April 2020, 48 percent of new churches planted today are led by bivocational leaders. This percentage would be higher if it included church planters who are paid part-time hours but are not bivocational. For example, in some cases the planter does not receive full-time pay, but their spouse provides the family's primary income.

A third factor affecting the level of bivocational leadership has to do with whether the churches served exist in economically challenged areas, such as the inner city or in a remote rural community.

In short, congregational ethnicity, the newness of a church, and the level of economic challenges facing the supporting community are key indicators of increased levels of bivocational leadership within the CRCNA today.

B. What will be

The percentage of pastors working bivocationally in the CRCNA will likely radically increase in the coming years for the following reasons.

Changing population trends in North America have spurred the conversation around bivocational ministry. When the CRC began, North America was a largely rural country, and our churches were generally monoethnic, multigenerational, and growing congregations. In the years following World War II the CRC produced an influx of suburban daughter churches. We are now a denomination with many struggling inner-city and rural congregations in which supporting a full-time pastor position is a challenge.

The average CRC congregation size has been historically larger than that of most non-CRCNA congregations in both Canada and the United States. While the 2020 CRCNA *Yearbook* statistics show that our average congregational attendance is 156 people, less than half of that number (70 regular participants, including children[4]) are in attendance in the average congregation in the United States. Our task force was unable to find comparable gross numbers for Canadian church attendance averages since 2001. Our denomination has not struggled with maintaining smaller congregations as much as have many other denominations in North America. However, current CRCNA statistics indicate that an average 2 percent annual decrease in

[3] These were informal and qualitative surveys connected to bivocational ministry experiences among ethnic-minority church leaders (by David Koll), church planters (by Erica Ezinga, Kevin Schutte) and CRCNA church leaders (by Beth Fellinger) in general.

[4] See soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf

congregational size will put increasing pressure on congregational financial sustainability based on full-time pastorate models. In other words, more of our established and declining congregations who wish to continue as functioning churches will be led by bivocational pastors as their budgets decline below the capacity to pay a full-time pastor.

Positively, if we continue to plant new churches, then more of our new and emerging congregations will be led by bivocational pastors. And they will likely continue to be, as they are now, an important resource in growing the church.

Also positively, we expect to see an increase in immigrant and ethnic-minority congregations. These congregations are more likely to be led by bivocational pastors. Bivocational pastorates or other nontraditional arrangements will be an important tool for the CRCNA in pursuing the growth of the church in new fields of harvest.

C. Why it matters: challenges and opportunities

The current experience of bivocational ministry and its expected increase in the coming years present bivocational pastors and our denomination with challenges and opportunities.

1. Bivocationality and proper care

   In this context the importance of proper care for pastors and their families will increase. Bivocational pastors face many challenges, as highlighted in the surveys we have reviewed. These challenges include the following:

   - Financial care: Because financial resources are low, a tension between financially supporting a pastor versus financially supporting ministry growth can arise. This tension can be difficult for both the pastor and the church council to hold in balance in a healthy manner.
   - Quality of life care: Various challenges exist for bivocational pastors, such as
     - health insurance choices (a top concern in completed surveys).
     - life, ministry, family-time balance.
     - anxiety about supporting one's family.
     - busy households with both parents working more than full-time.
   - Call satisfaction: Many pastors can struggle with a sense of having a divided mind between direct ministry work and their other job(s), whereas some love and thrive on the diversity of their experiences. Many may wish they had more time for ministry. Others may feel that their other job is part of their ministry and part of their divine call. Others may prefer full-time ministry and even feel that their work is not honored when not fully compensated.

   There is an intensity to the challenges that may be faced by pastors working bivocationally. Beyond the anxieties of finance, life balance, and foundational understanding of one's call to ministry, there may also be experiences of feeling defeated, emotional and relational breakdown, and even ministry-ending trauma.

   The following four suggestions highlight moves that the CRCNA can make to help pastors discern their calling for bivocational ministry,

balance ongoing bivocational ministry, prevent breakdown, and learn from breakdowns that occur.

a. Multivocational training

Multivocational training is the first step in bivocational leader care. Various forms of training, such as leadership skills development, business skills, and job application training can help future bivocational leaders. Pastors who have developed a second collection of skills while in college or university will be better prepared for the eventuality of needing to work bivocationally.

While it's not within the mandate of our task force, we encourage Calvin Theological Seminary to consider ways to provide training with the realities of bivocationality in mind. Future pastors need to be prepared for challenges and opportunities that come from bivocational and nontraditional ministry arrangements.

b. Balancing unique stressors and satisfiers

All pastors, including bivocational pastors, need a unique balance in their vocations to sustain both their ministry and other aspects of their lives. The Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project (canadianmultivocationalministry.ca), a multidenominational and multiagency research project, released their findings in May 2020. The project was launched to learn about issues faced by multivocational pastors, including both challenges and opportunities. The report provided our task force with insight into the importance of balance for long-term, healthy ministry and life.

Relying on the work of the Wellness Project @ Wycliffe, an online questionnaire for assessing wellness in congregational ministry run by Wycliffe Seminary at the University of Toronto, the report notes that every pastor is wired differently in what tasks and responsibilities are core satisfiers and core stressors. By knowing what these are, pastors can minimize the potential for burnout. The report noted that 90 percent of multivocational participants identified time and workload strain as a core stressor (p. 9). Positively, shared ministry and workload among ministry partners, both vocational and volunteer, was noted as essential (p. 10).

A challenge to bivocational leaders is that even moderately satisfying tasks can become a potential irritant when frequently required. In the study, one example of a positive role becoming an irritant was management responsibilities. One may enjoy doing these tasks in small amounts, but as the demand for administrative work escalates, it can become an irritant. The pastor perceives a lack of balance that, over time, contributes to burnout. An inventory of stressors and satisfiers shared within the context of team ministry can yield a greater chance of bivocational longevity.

The report notes that perceived balance in bivocational ministry depends on how one categorizes the interplay between ministry work and other work—namely, is it *integrated* ("a synergistic relationship between congregational leadership and other work"), *complementary* (in which the arrangement provides a benefit beyond financial support to the pastor that is not ministry related), *lucrative* (in which the arrangement

only provides financial benefit), or *conflicted* (making the arrangement unsustainable)? "Asking questions which help the multivocational leader clarify to what degree they fit with any of these categories . . . can encourage reflection on how the different forms of work are perceived. If other work is perceived to be a positive contributor to ministry, then there are positive implications for sustainability. If other work is considered more important than the congregational ministry or detrimental, something will need to change in the current situation" (p. 18).

In the CRC, the respondents to our ethnic-minority bivocational leaders survey included people in each of these categories of bivocational balance. Intermixed with these perceptions of balance are unspoken theologies of work, particular understandings of the division of or mixing of sacred and secular, and the cultural importance of pastoral honor and value being linked to a fully paid position.

The most significant challenge toward satisfying bivocational ministry is having a clear sense of call that fits the bivocational reality. If the sense of call to bivocational ministry is absent, the leader will remain at best seeing other jobs as lucrative and at worst conflicted.

We encourage pastors, especially bivocational pastors, to learn what contributes to stress and satisfaction in their vocations. Such information will help pastors and supervisory councils design and execute a healthy ministry plan that contributes to long-term, healthy ministry and life.

c. Ongoing wellness assessment

Because the challenges of care for bivocational pastors are ongoing, our third suggestion is to initiate regular (and also by request) ministry wellness assessment for pastors in bivocational ministry. A tool similar to the Wellness Project @ Wycliffe questionnaire would be beneficial to bivocational pastors and the congregations they serve. It generates helpful feedback, including a burnout score. Such an assessment could help anticipate challenges before they happen, guide plans to reverse any decline, and return ministry to a positive direction.

The results of a regular ministry wellness assessment would foster regular conversation between pastors and their supervisory council regarding a shared understanding of financial support, hours at work, responsibilities, and other expectations between the congregation and the pastor.

d. Ministry postmortem

Our final suggestion assumes that some form of bivocational ministry burnout has already occurred. We recommend intentional exit interviews for the pastor and the ministry as a means of both picking up the pieces and providing healing and learning from what happened. Although this is an emotionally charged moment and would seek voluntary participation by the participants, exit interviews can yield healing while also teaching us how to avoid future burnout or breakdown for churches and pastors.

We recommend that Pastor Church Resources create an exit interview/ministry postmortem learning process for classes, churches,

leaders, and their families to heal and for our denomination to learn from the occurrence of burnout in bivocational ministry.

2. Bivocationality and opportunity

   Alongside the challenges that call us to care for bivocational leaders, there is also a transformative and creative opportunity for the CRCNA in this conversation.

   a. Incarnational witness

      Our culture, as in Paul's day, is more and more suspicious of the motives of the church and church leaders. Churches and pastors are often seen as financially motivated with self-preserving intent while seeking to reach out with gospel ministry. Many pastors who use bivocational ministry as a strategy testify that they are better able to enter into a respectful relationship with others in the community. Thus they are given better access to the lives and spiritual needs of persons who need to encounter Jesus Christ.

   b. Greater organic flourishing

      As a thought experiment, if one assumes $80,000 USD or $100,000 CDN per year as the payroll cost of a full-time pastor position, this creates two interconnected challenges for a 21st-century North American congregation. First, the congregation must have an approximate minimum size to cover this full-time salary. Second, the congregation and the community the congregation is reaching must have the financial capacity to support this full-time salary. In short, they need both minimum numbers and minimum wealth.

      Bivocational pastors, however, can help congregations flourish regardless of their size or wealth. Bivocational pastors can help sustain and sometimes grow small congregations. Bivocational pastors or pastors in nontraditional arrangements are also instrumental for ministry in low-income and socially disadvantaged locations. This provides greater opportunity for organic flourishing in these otherwise challenging settings.

      Larger congregations can also benefit. Rather than focusing on pastors in only full-time positions, a large church with bivocational pastors can provide ministry leadership that matches the organic growth of the congregation. For example, a congregation may have one full-time pastor and then add a bivocational pastor in a 1/3 FTE arrangement as it grows. Some evidence of this type of arrangement surfaced in our survey among ethnic-minority leaders in the CRCNA. It was noted that most Korean churches have full-time senior pastors but that they also have bivocational leaders in other positions in the church, positions that would likely add to more continuous or organic growth.

   c. Ecclesiological toughness

      Bivocational leadership provides an ecclesiological toughness for small or underfunded congregations. These congregations may not be able to pay a pastor full-time. Thus they may feel forced to choose to either limp along without pastoral leadership or to close. Bivocationality could help those congregations maintain a greater ecclesiological toughness to weather the storm and perhaps experience renewal.

d. Missiological flexibility

Bivocational leadership provides missiological flexibility. With bivocational leadership, congregations can have the flexibility to target specific towns or neighborhoods that have challenging demographics for church growth.

Bivocational pastors also help small congregations fulfill their distinct and important roles in the spread of the gospel. For example, small congregations can have an attractive intimacy that larger congregations are unable to provide. Small congregations provide a unique and important setting for faith nurture and gospel proclamation that are necessary for the health of the broader church. Bivocational pastors help small congregations have the missional flexibility to continue their important ministry.

VII. Council and classis oversight

A. Minister of the Word

At present, ministers of the Word do not receive the letter of call until it is reviewed and signed by the classical counselor (Church Order Art. 9). This ensures that all ecclesiastical regulations for the call (Art. 8) have been followed and that the minister is provided with "proper support" (Art. 15.) There may come a time when the minister's job description changes into a bivocational ministry, and at that time it will be essential that classis, perhaps through church visitors, review and approve changes from that in the original signed letter of call.

In our recommendations in this report (section XI) we encourage supervising councils to review bivocational ministry arrangements on an annual basis to see if any changes need to be made. For example, they could consider questions like these: Does the bivocational pastor have the support of the council and congregation? Is the ministry of the church to the community benefiting from bivocational ministry? These and other questions can help to generate mutual reflection and discussion so that the work of the Lord moves forward.

B. Commissioned pastor

Commissioned pastors, including those in bivocational or nontraditional arrangements, are called by the council of their calling church. At present, classis and synodical deputies must approve the job description of the commissioned pastor (Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-a). The Commissioned Pastor Handbook gives guidelines regarding "proper support," but there is no requirement for approval by classis in the letter of call. We propose that the job description for commissioned pastors include the calling congregation's support plan, including financial support, for classis review and approval before the calling of the pastor. In section VIII of this report we recommend such changes to Church Order Article 23. This will ensure a healthy discussion.

For both ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors, we believe there needs to be a healthy discussion among the parties before the call to ensure a clear understanding about the conditions spelled out in the letter of call. Is there a clear understanding regarding "proper support"? sabbatical? personal time? self-care? time expectations? etc. In some cases, we

have heard of bivocational pastors agreeing to minimal or no salary because the alternate work outside of the church was financially sufficient or the spouse's work supported the family. Not all scenarios can be spelled out, but before the call there should be a clear and shared understanding that ensures "proper support" for the pastor and the pastor's family.

Classis also provides oversight through the annual church visit (Church Order Art. 42). Church visitors are urged to ensure the health and welfare of the church's ministry and its pastors (i.e., that there is "proper support"). We encourage all classes to ensure that its ministry of church visiting is healthy for the sake of the churches and our pastors.

VIII. Financial considerations

Synod also mandated that our task force "address financial implications and responsibilities (clearly defined 'proper support'; see Church Order Supplement, Art. 15) relative to church, classis, pastor, and the like."

Much of this is addressed in section IX of this report in our proposed changes to Church Order Article 15 and its Supplement, and in a proposed addition to Article 23 and its Supplement. In that section of the report we also clearly define the term "proper support" for both minister of the Word and commissioned pastor.

It is the responsibility of the calling church and classis to ensure that the pastor who enters into a bivocational, covocational, or other nontraditional ministry arrangement has a plan that adequately addresses matters such as income, medical insurance, disability insurance, housing provision, pension or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items. The majority of proper support may come from the calling church or other employer(s) or entrepreneurial business. Unfortunately, there are situations in which a pastor does not receive proper support and yet is expected to provide full-time work. Before the calling of the pastor, there needs to be a thorough discussion of and assurance of proper support. Not every situation will be the same, so the calling church, classis, and pastor must discuss proper support and where it is coming from.

In light of these concerns, we are proposing changes to the Church Order Supplement for Articles 15 and 23 in order to provide "Guidelines for Churches in Conversation with Pastors about 'Proper Support.'" Specifically, the task force is recommending that a calling council provide a support plan for the pastor. Included in the support plan should be a financial plan that includes arrangements for income, medical insurance, disability insurance, housing provision, pension or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items. For ministers of the Word, the support plan, including the financial plan, should be included in the letter of call. Classis should provide its input by way of the classical counselor who will approve the letter of call. For commissioned pastors, the support plan should be approved by classis as part of approving the position description. (During our work, denominational employees noted that other aspects of Church Order Supplement, Art. 15 require revision. Current guideline 1 is no longer valid because there is no longer a "synodically stated minimum salary" provided. Likewise, guideline 4 is no longer valid because ministers can only be 100 percent in the pension plan, not credited "proportionate to the percentage of time devoted to the duties of the church." These matters have

been taken into account in the proposed Church Order changes in section IX of this report.)

We encourage supervising councils to initiate annual discussions to review existing financial plans. We also encourage supervising councils to initiate annual discussions to review support plans, including areas such as emotional health, self-care, any changes in support, and other factors relating to pastors' well-being. This is also an area that church visitors are called to discuss during the annual visit with the church council (Church Order Art. 42).

A. A living salary

For ministers of the Word, before 2019 the CRCNA published the Ministers Compensation Survey, based on the outcome of a detailed survey mailed to churches and pastors. Over the years the returned surveys continued to drop. Since 2019 the CRCNA now publishes the "Average Total Base Salary plus Housing by Classis" report. This information is updated after synod and can be found in the Church Administration and Finance Guide on the CRCNA website (crcna.org). This information, along with regional and ministry contexts, can be used to guide the discussion of proper support for pastors.

Regarding commissioned pastors in bivocational, covocational, or nontraditional positions, proper support guidelines are found in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook posted on the CRCNA website (crcna.org).

B. Health insurance, disability insurance, and other benefits

Health and disability insurance presents particular challenges to pastors in bivocational or part-time arrangements. This is especially true in the United States, where health insurance costs have skyrocketed while coverage has decreased. Long-term disability insurance is provided as part of the ministers' pension plan. However, the pension plan is only available to ministers of the Word who pay as if they are full-time and requires a minimum of 30 hours of work per week as clergy. This excludes ministers of the Word whose positions call for less than 30 hours per week, and it excludes all commissioned pastors. The task force affirms that health insurance and disability insurance are required aspects of "proper support." Supervisory councils need to discern together with their pastors how health and disability insurance and other benefits will be provided for the pastors and their dependents.

C. Pension and other retirement considerations

While the ministers' pension plan has been a wonderful provision for ministers of the Word in full-time positions, it does require full premium payment even if the minister is in bivocational or part-time ministry. Commissioned pastors, on the other hand, have sought out other retirement-funding tools, many of which have been after-tax savings options. In November 2019, the CRCNA began rolling out a new 403(b)(9) retirement plan that supervising councils in the United States can make available to commissioned pastors and ministers of the Word (as well as church staff). This development has been welcomed. Canadian pastors continue to rely on government retirement programs such as registered retirement savings plans (RRSPs) and personal savings plans such as tax-free savings accounts (TFSAs).

The ministers' pension plan does not recognize the ordination of both spouses who share ministry together as ministers of the Word, thus requiring

two full premium payments for two separate pension accounts at a significant cost to the clergy couple and their congregation. This situation has resulted in many couples choosing one spouse to receive the ministerial recognition in the plan, while the other spouse, who is also ordained as a minister of the Word and sharing the work, is simply registered as a spouse and is limited to spousal benefits only. We urge synod to direct the U.S. Board of Pensions and the Canadian Pension Trustees, in consultation with clergy couples, to amend the pension plan to recognize the ordination of both spouses who are ministers of the Word by providing the option of a single, full membership and benefits to both spouses as a single entity who contribute to a single pension plan. Thus, when one ordained spouse dies, the surviving, ordained spouse will be recognized and honored as a minister of the Word. While we recognize that there are challenges and difficulties related to this request, we urge the boards to take this request seriously and find a way to provide due recognition.

D. Classis student aid funds (cf. Church Order Article 21)

Church Order Article 21 states, "The churches shall encourage individuals to seek to become ministers of the Word and, in coordination with classis, shall grant financial aid to those who are in need of it." Each classis has its own set of rules or guidelines regarding the financial aid it offers to students in master of divinity programs who are seeking to be ordained as ministers of the Word. The classis committees overseeing these funds may struggle with how to respond to former students who then enter into bivocational ministry or another nontraditional arrangement.

While specific decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, we offer the following observations and encouragement to these committees. First, as stated earlier in this report, there is no such thing as a part-time pastor; there are only part-time arrangements. Second, we encourage these committees to view these individuals through their ordination, whether minister of the Word or commissioned pastor. The goal of Church Order Article 21 is to encourage persons to be and serve as ministers of the Word, not that they serve in a particular way or context. Third, we ask student fund committees to remember the importance of bivocationality and other nontraditional arrangements for church planting, small or impoverished congregations, and immigrant congregations. These gospel activities are hindered when their ministers are burdened with repaying financial aid. Fourth, we encourage classis student fund committees to continue to be generous. While it is not the role of our task force or synod to direct the forgiveness of aid that has been granted, we encourage financial forgiveness for pastors who are bivocational or serving in other nontraditional arrangements.

IX. Church Order considerations

The Church Order currently states in Article 15 that

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

While well-intentioned, this and other sections of the Church Order treat bivocational ministers, covocational ministers, and ministers in other ministerial situations as exceptions to the rule rather than as normal. The Church Order also assumes in places that these arrangements are by financial necessity only rather than driven by mission and vision or other important factors. Article 15 has remained in place with its current wording since 1988 and reflects the understanding of ministry at that time, but it needs to be updated to include new trends in ministry that approach various forms of ministry as a valid choice rather than as a result of financial need.

In response, our task force recommends the following changes to the Church Order and Its Supplements (with additions indicated by underline and deletions by ~~strikethrough~~).

A. Article 14-d

Article 14 deals with the release of a minister of the Word from ordained ministry. Article 14-d specifically deals with a minister who has forsaken the office (see Art. 14-c) and has entered a vocation that is judged by their classis to be nonministerial. In its current form, however, Article 14-d implies that a nonministerial vocation conflicts with the work and ordination of a minister of the Word. In other words, it assumes that bivocational ministry is not an option. We believe that the addition noted below clarifies that forsaking the work of the office is cause for a minister to be released, not simply having another vocation in addition to the calling of a minister of the Word.

Current Article 14-d

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

Proposed Article 14-d

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

B. Article 15

Article 15 deals with the support the church provides for ministers of the Word in their covenantal relationship together. This support includes, but is not limited to, financial, physical, emotional, and spiritual support. While all of these are important for all pastors, these aspects can be particularly complex for pastors in bivocational or other nontraditional arrangements.

Our task force is proposing changes to Article 15 to allow flexibility of local congregations in discerning "proper support." The phrasing "attend to" (in place of "provide for") maintains the covenantal relationship between pastor and congregation while giving flexibility with regard to where "proper support," especially financial support, is coming from.

We are also proposing removal of the latter section of this article because it discriminates against bivocational ministry. The resulting simplified Article 15 will provide the flexibility required while supporting the acceptance of

various forms of ministry and maintaining the covenantal relationship of service and support between ministers and congregations.

Current Article 15

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

Proposed Article 15

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

C. Supplement, Article 15

The supplement to Article 15 defines "proper support," especially with regard to financial considerations, and provides "Guidelines for Churches Whose Ministers Receive Salary Support from Other Employment."

It was noted to the task force that this supplement has been in need of revision, and some matters in need of change are described in section VIII of this report ("Financial Considerations"). The proposed changes below address some of these issues, give further clarity to the proposed Article 15, and support flexibility in the covenantal arrangement between the minister and the calling church. We have also revised this supplement to include nonfinancial support.

Proposed Supplement, Article 15

"Proper Support" Defined

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

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

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

~~1. The church is responsible for a total compensation package proportionate to the time spent in ministry to the church (forty-eight hours equals full time). The compensation package shall ordinarily be based on synodically stated minimum salary, fringe benefits, and housing costs.~~

~~2. Since the compensation package includes a percentage allowance for health insurance, the minister is expected to secure adequate health insurance for the minister and the minister's family.~~

~~3~~1. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.

~~4~~2. ~~The minister shall receive pension credits in the Ministers' Pension Fund proportionate to the percentage of time devoted to the duties of the church.~~ Eligibility for full pension credit may be secured if full contribution to the Ministers' Pension Plan is made.

~~5~~3. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) ~~other than ministry shall be specified~~shall be mutually discerned by minister(s) and the supervising council. The support plan in the letter of call, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by the classical counselor, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and nonministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.

4. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of ministers, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

D. Article 23-d (new)

The task force proposes an addition to Article 23 that calls for the proper support of commissioned pastors. This parallels the role of Article 15 for ministers of the Word. The same purpose and phrasing choices that are mentioned regarding Article 15 apply here as well.

Proposed Article 23-d

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

E. Supplement, Article 23-d (new)

The proposed supplement to proposed Article 23-d reflects similar proposed changes to Supplement, Article 15, with some alterations bearing distinctly on the nature and processes regarding the office of commissioned pastor.

Proposed Supplement, Article 23-d

"Proper Support" Defined

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

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

Guidelines for Churches in Conversations with Pastors about "Proper Support"

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

X. Postscript

As a task force, we are grateful to God for the men and women who serve in bivocational or other nontraditional arrangements. We pray for God's blessing on these and all pastors so that they may know "the gift of God's grace given . . . through the working of his power" (see Eph. 3:7-13). We ask synod and the congregations of the CRCNA to join us in prayers of thanksgiving and supplication for our shared mission as a denomination and for the pastors who serve our congregations.

XI. Recommendations

The Study of Bivocationality Task Force presents the following recommendations for consideration by Synod 2021:

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Bernard Bakker (chair) and Rev. Michael Vander Laan (reporter) when matters pertaining to the Study of Bivocationality Task Force report are discussed.

B. That synod propose to Synod 2022 the following changes to Church Order Articles 14, 15, and 23 and their Supplements for adoption (with additions indicated by underline and deletions by ~~strikethrough~~):

1. Proposed Article 14-d

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

   Grounds:

   a. Without this addition, Article 15 implies that a nonministerial vocation is in conflict with the work and ordination of a minister of the Word.
   b. The addition clarifies that forsaking the office is cause for a minister to be released.

2. Proposed Article 15

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

   Grounds:

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

3. Proposed Supplement, Article 15

   "Proper Support" Defined

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

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

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

~~1. The church is responsible for a total compensation package proportionate to the time spent in ministry to the church (forty-eight hours equals full time). The compensation package shall ordinarily be based on synodically stated minimum salary, fringe benefits, and housing costs.~~

~~2. Since the compensation package includes a percentage allowance for health insurance, the minister is expected to secure adequate health insurance for the minister and the minister's family.~~

~~3~~1. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.

~~4~~2. ~~The minister shall receive pension credits in the Ministers' Pension Fund proportionate to the percentage of time devoted to the duties of the church.~~ Eligibility for full pension credit may be secured if full contribution to the Ministers' Pension Plan is made.

~~5~~3. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) ~~other than ministry shall be specified~~shall be mutually discerned by minister(s) and the supervising council. The support plan in the letter of call, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by the classical counselor, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and nonministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.

4. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of ministers, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

Grounds:

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

4. Proposed Article 23-d

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

Grounds:

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

5. Proposed Supplement, Article 23-d

"Proper Support" Defined

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

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

Guidelines for Churches in Conversations with Pastors about "Proper Support"

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

Grounds:

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

C. That synod encourage classical student funding committees (providing financial aid for seminary students—cf. Church Order Article 21) to treat those who are in or anticipating bivocational or other nontraditional ministry arrangements in the same manner as those who are in or anticipating full-time arrangements.

Grounds:

1. Bivocational pastors and pastors in nontraditional arrangements retain the honor of the office they have been ordained to and remain accountable to the work to which they have been called.
2. Burdening bivocational pastors and pastors in nontraditional arrangements with financial debts does not serve the church as a whole, nor does it serve the cause of the gospel.

3. Article 21 states that "the churches . . . in coordination with classis, shall grant financial aid to those who are in need of it" and thus make their decisions based on their knowledge of specific situations.

D. That synod instruct the executive director to direct Pastor Church Resources to create an exit interview/ministry postmortem learning process for classes, churches, leaders, and their families to use when burnout occurs in bivocational ministry.

Grounds:
1. Exit interviews/postmortems can provide healing to those involved.
2. Exit interviews/postmortems may help to teach us how to avoid future burnout or breakdown situations between churches and pastors.

E. That synod instruct the executive director to direct Pastor Church Resources to provide a ministry wellness assessment for pastors in bivocational ministry and their supervisory councils to use as part of their regular conversations.

Grounds:
1. Such an assessment could provide helpful feedback regarding a bivocational pastor's well-being.
2. Such an assessment could provide a helpful tool in the regular conversations between a bivocational pastor and the supervisory council.

F. That synod direct the CRCNA's U.S. Board of Pensions and Canadian Pension Trustees, in consultation with clergy couples, to amend the pension plan to recognize the ordination of both spouses who are ministers of the Word by providing the option of a single, full membership and benefits to both spouses as a single entity who contribute to a single pension plan.

Ground: The current rules of the pension plan do not equally recognize and honor the ordinations of clergy couples who are both ministers of the Word.

G. That synod encourage all pastors together with their supervisory councils to annually review the "proper support" required for pastors, including the financial plan.

Grounds:
1. An annual review of "proper support" will help to encourage the ongoing health of pastors and their families.
2. Annual reviews that include a review of "proper support" will fulfill the requirements regarding the same in proposed Church Order Articles 15 and 23-d and their Supplements.

H. That synod encourage church visitors to inquire about the health and welfare of pastors, including whether they have "proper support."

Grounds:
1. Inquiry about the health and welfare of pastors will encourage the same.
2. Inquiry about whether pastors have "proper support" is included in the church visitors' mandate to ascertain whether a church's office-bearers "observe the provisions of the Church Order" (see Art. 42-b).

I. That synod encourage the classes and congregations of the CRCNA to affirm the challenges of bivocational ministry, support the leaders of adaptive changes that are happening in our current ministry settings, and celebrate the dedicated and creative pastoral work many are doing and will do for the sake of the gospel as led by the Holy Spirit.

Ground: Bivocational pastors, those in nontraditional ministry arrangements, and their work require affirmation, support, and celebration by the broader body of believers.

Study of Bivocationality Task Force
Bernard Bakker (chair)
John Bouwers
Beth Fellinger
Ernesto Hernandez
Sharon Jim
David Koll (staff)
Michael Vander Laan (reporter)
Phillip Westra
Robert Zoerman

Appendix
Internet Resources regarding Bivocational Ministry

"Why I Choose to Be a Bivocational Pastor"—story of a Canadian bivocational pastor in Saskatoon; thegospelcoalition.org/article/chosen-bivocational-pastor/

Eight Characteristics of the New Bivocational Pastor; factsandtrends.net/2018/01/26/eight-characteristics-new-bi-vocational-pastor/

"The Art of Bivocational"—Theology on Mission podcast by Northern Seminary; seminary.edu/the-art-of-bi-vocational-theology-on-mission-podcast/

Bivocational Pastor Job Description; bscln.net/ministry-description/bivocational-pastor-job-description/

Understanding Bivocational Ministry; nph.com/vcmedia/2419/2419936.pdf

"A Bivocational Minister Warns against Bivocational Ministry"—*The Christian Century;* christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-08/bi-vocational-minister-warns-agains-bi-vocational-ministry

Video presentations from speakers at "What Role Will Bivocational Ministry Play in the Future of the CRCNA?"; network.crcna.org/pastors/resources-bivocational-ministry-gathering-last-month

Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project; canadianmultivocational ministry.ca/master-report

The Wellness Project @ Wycliffe College (University of Toronto); wycliffewellnessproject.com/

NELAND AVENUE CRC *IN LOCO* COMMITTEE REPORT

NELAND AVENUE CRC *IN LOCO* COMMITTEE REPORT

I. Background, mandate, and committee process

A. Background

The *in loco* committee mandated by Synod 2022 has been at work since August 2022. As instructed by Synod 2022, our general secretary appointed a committee consisting of those willing to take on the task and follow the mandate given by synod. Our committee consists of Greg DeMey (Classis Northern Illinois), Paul De Vries (chair, Classis Thornapple Valley), William Koopmans (Classis Hamilton), John Mondi (Classis Grand Rapids North), Josh Van Drunen (Classis Grand Rapids South), and Beverly Weeks (Classis Grand Rapids North). The general secretary, Zachary King, served as an adviser.

One of our first items of business was to ensure that we properly understood our mandate and authority. Since synod rarely appoints *in loco* committees (2005 was the most recent time such a committee was appointed, while before that it was the 1970s), precedent is limited. Moreover, the Church Order does not specifically mention *in loco* committees.

Despite the limited historical precedent, with our collective knowledge, experience, and understanding, along with some good research and direction from Church Order experts, we discerned that an *in loco committee* has no more (or less) authority than what synod has explicitly given it in their mandate. As an *in loco* committee, we are authorized to carry out synod's specific mandate after synod adjourns. Synod, as the broadest assembly, is responsible for denominational adherence to the confessions and for bringing expression to the God-given unity of the church. If synod specifically assigns "oversight for compliance," the *in loco* committee carries the authority of synod as specified in its mandate. Our synodical mandate (as quoted below) is very specific and has clear boundaries. We have not been authorized to negotiate, expand, or in any way mitigate the decisions of synod. Nor have we been directed to address matters related to the Human Sexuality Report and synod's actions in that regard. We want to acknowledge that we have heard the voices of those who suggest that we should violate the mandate and do something different. We are free, some have said, to find a "third way" beyond what synod decided and mandated. We, however, have agreed to serve on the committee and pursue its mandate. Failing to do so would be disingenuous and a breaking of covenant. All of these remarks bring us to synod's actions and our specific mandate.

B. Mandate

Synod 2022 adopted the following motions in regard to our work (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 926, 941-42):

1. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying this deacon's current term.
2. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures as laid out in the Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers.
3. That synod instruct the executive director to appoint a committee *in loco* with the following mandate:
   a. Meet with Neland Avenue CRC to oversee its compliance to synod's rulings.
   b. Meet with Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish them regarding their responsibility to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures as laid out in the Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers.
   c. Report to Classis Grand Rapids East at the autumn meeting (September 15, 2022; classisgreast.org) and make pertinent recommendations for its deliberations and action.
   d. If necessary, invite three other classes to assist the committee in dealing with the issues regarding Neland Avenue CRC.
   e. Report to Synod 2023, by way of the published *Agenda for Synod*, its own actions and any classical actions taken, and present its recommendations.

   Grounds:

   1) Neland Avenue CRC has taken action contradictory to the position of the CRCNA. As per Report 47, section IV, B, 2 (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603): "Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters . . . shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances."
   2) Neland Avenue CRC willingly chose a path of noncompliance. It did not use the proper means to enact change in the CRCNA or to seek clarification.
   3) Failing to take firm action has negative consequences on the CRCNA. It sends a message to other churches that noncompliance is acceptable in the CRCNA. It threatens our unity and undermines our witness to the world. Failure to address a publicly wayward church is to disregard the third mark of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).
   4) Synod can intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b). According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 12, "All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable." Synod is free to deal with any

matter that it judges to be of importance for the well-being of the denomination. Synod appointed a committee *in loco* for First CRC of Toronto while the congregation intended to ordain an officebearer living in a same-sex relationship. Neland Avenue CRC has already ordained such an officebearer, and thus a committee *in loco* is all the more warranted.

C. Process and chronology of the in loco *committee's work*

Note: Please see the appendix for exact meeting times and formal communications.

Our work began in earnest in the late summer and early fall of 2022. We met multiple times as a committee and quickly determined the need to carefully listen to Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East. We met both formally and informally with members of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East. Our chairperson and general secretary met with Neland Avenue CRC's council in late August, and then the full committee met with the council, some congregation members, and visitors from the classis in September. We followed these meetings by informally gathering with a collection of pastors from Classis Grand Rapids East prior to the formal meeting of the classis on September 15. As these in-person gatherings occurred, we continued corresponding back and forth via email on a regular basis with members of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East.

We prayed together and spoke together. There were tears and some laughter. We were together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the early meetings with Neland Avenue CRC, two things became quickly apparent. First, Neland Avenue CRC affirmed they had no intention to rescind their action in ordaining a deacon in a same-sex relationship. Second, they affirmed their intention to appeal synod's decision. Moreover, during the brief oral report and exchange of questions at the September 15 Classis Grand Rapids East meeting between the *in loco* committee and classis, the officers of classis made clear their belief that they had been faithful in their work and responsibilities with regard to Neland Avenue CRC and would await further action from the *in loco* committee.

Following the September classis meeting, our committee continued to meet and exchange correspondence with Neland Avenue CRC regarding their decisions and actions (see Appendix). As we moved toward Christmas and the New Year, the *in loco* committee began to formulate its report for the January meeting of Classis Grand Rapids East. In preparation for that meeting we met with members of the executive committee of classis to ensure proper processing of the report and to address its inclusion in the January 2023 classis agenda. In December we met again with Neland Avenue CRC's council, some members of the congregation, and visitors from classis. Throughout the course of all our communications we have made it a priority to listen with care and love.

During these conversations with one another we have encountered a number of misunderstandings, concerns, and misgivings. We have had some opportunity to gently clarify and encourage each other when necessary. We on the *in loco* committee have appreciated the opportunity to listen, hear stories, and experience some of the pain and wrestling done by Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East.

Our report to classis was duly submitted to Classis Grand Rapids East, included in the agenda for the January 19, 2023, meeting, and brought to the floor of classis. After a brief discussion of our report, classis moved on with other business without taking any action on our recommendations. They had a number of related items on their agenda that also needed consideration, including an overture from Church of the Servant CRC, stating that "Classis GRE will wait for the adjudication of Neland's appeal by Synod 2023 before discerning any further action to take about Neland Avenue CRC." The Church of the Servant overture was adopted. As the meeting was concluding, and upon the specific request of the *in loco* committee chair, Classis Grand Rapids East took formal action on the committee's recommendations prior to adjourning. The minutes of that meeting record the following: "Classis receives the work and the report of the committee with gratitude and in particular acknowledges the admonition in the report," and the classis "declares this action [adoption of the Church of the Servant Overture] be our response to the report of the synodically appointed committee *in loco*" (Classis Grand Rapids East, 1-9-23, Minutes 123.2).

Following the January classis meeting, our committee met three more times to process Classis Grand Rapid East's action. While we appreciated their noted gratitude and acknowledgment of the admonition, we were disappointed that they did not approve our recommendations.

D. Completion of the mandate

Before we could finalize our report for synod, we had to determine if we would invite three classes to assist us. Our mandate states that the synodical *in loco* committee may, "if necessary, invite three other classes to assist the committee." The synodical *in loco* committee did not find it necessary to invite three classes to complete its work, as the committee was able to fulfill the aspects of its mandate by doing the following:

- "meet[ing] with Neland Avenue CRC to oversee its compliance to synod's rulings"
- "meet[ing] with Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish them"
- "report[ing] to Classis Grand Rapids East at the autumn meeting"

While the synodical *in loco* committee did not oversee *full* compliance, as Neland Avenue CRC did not comply with synod's direction and is appealing synod's decision, the *in loco* committee worked within the limits and scope of its mandate to encourage Neland Avenue CRC to respond to the directions of synod.

Moreover, as the synodical *in loco* committee considered a potential meeting with three classes, several questions surfaced related to the process and how possible outcomes from a three-classis meeting could best serve synod. These concerns included, but were not limited to, which three classes might become involved and how they might be chosen; how many members of each classis might participate in such a meeting; how many meetings might be necessary to properly ensure that synod could be best served by the outcomes; and what authority might be given to the conclusions reached by the three classes. In addition, the committee recognized that these concerns could introduce more debatable decisions and thus ultimately be unhelpful to the process. Finally, the synodical *in loco* committee is composed of members from several classes (see Background).

In light of all the realities mentioned above, the *in loco* committee decided not to invite three other classes to assist the committee.

II. Observations

A. Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East are important parts of the denomination and are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have deeply appreciated their hospitality and welcoming spirit toward us in our work as the *in loco* committee.

B. We understand that Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East have deliberated, studied, and pastorally cared for one another as they have discussed LGBTQ+ issues through the years. They perceive themselves, through the Spirit and through their study of the Word, to have made decisions that are faithful to their unique congregational identity and to the wider CRCNA community.

   However, Neland Avenue CRC's decision to ordain a same-sex married deacon has demonstrated an unwillingness to appropriately observe and work within the Church Order and synodical decisions to enact change. We observe that a foundational component of our covenantal unity as a denomination rests on the patient humility to work through processes and procedures of the CRCNA's Church Order.

C. In the midst of our current challenges, it is essential that the member congregations of the CRCNA keep covenant with one another when there are sharp disagreements. It is not helpful to lash out at one another and to assume the worst of the other party. Likewise, we note that our synods are an important part of the denomination as a mechanism of discernment and unity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Various synods and their study committees have carefully deliberated, studied, and pastorally cared for one another as they have discussed LGBTQ+ issues through the years. They have done so imperfectly, but they clearly state and believe, through the Spirit and through their study of the Word, that their decisions have been and are faithful. We believe that the actions of Neland Avenue CRC have disrespected and disregarded the deliberation and decisions of our corporate body and therefore are a breaking of covenant.

D. We observe that in our meetings with Neland Avenue CRC (and in their materials provided to Synod 2022) great attention and weight were given to "story" and the incontestable nature of "sharing one's story," while comparatively little attention was given to how Neland Avenue CRC has attempted to work within the Church Order or CRCNA processes to implement its understanding of same-sex sexual relationships within the denomination. We shared then, and share now, our deep appreciation for the telling of these stories and especially *for the people* whose stories they are. We also note that while our testimonies and experiences are an essential part of our spiritual journeys, our personal stories are insufficient to bear the weight requisite in the rigorous debates and communal discernment held over many years and across the cultural differences even within a small denomination like the CRCNA.

E. We commend Neland Avenue CRC for striving toward a unified vision of Christ and community where all look to Christ as their uniting principle. We observe that human sinfulness distorts our ability to see Christ and his community perfectly (1 Cor. 13:12). Thus, any vision of Christ and love of community ought to embrace the clarity and boundaries provided by historical Christian faith. In contrast, Neland Avenue CRC's vision and practices do not demonstrate humility toward the boundaries provided by historical perspectives and broader denominational deliberations and decisions.

F. We detected no proactive attempt by Neland Avenue CRC to listen to the CRC's rural, Korean, African, and Latino perspectives on human sexuality. Nor has Neland Avenue CRC demonstrated an appreciation of how its decisions and actions might deeply affect the wider CRCNA.

G. We note that while Classis Grand Rapids East acknowledged the admonishment of synod, it did not meaningfully engage with, or respond to, the substance of the admonishment that calls out a failure to hold Neland Avenue CRC accountable to the larger body, thereby disrespecting our shared covenants and procedures for how to bring change within the CRCNA.

H. We grieve the heightened polarization within our denomination. We have observed that members of Classis Grand Rapids East and Neland Avenue CRC, as well as other churches and classes in our denomination, often fail to engage and dialogue openly with those with whom they disagree. There is a growing collective failure to dialogue through the deliberative processes we have covenanted to in the Church Order. Instead, we develop our own echo chambers where we hear and align ourselves with those of our own chosen viewpoint. Moreover, the growing development of advocacy groups for which church leaders are expected to "sign on" in agreement with specific agendas and viewpoints has a negative impact on how we relate to one another as

sisters and brothers in Christ. These groups function outside our intentionally designed denominational processes for deliberating with one another. Our ability to hear one another in our church assemblies and to engage in issues of our shared sinfulness and kingdom work are hampered when we have primarily aligned ourselves elsewhere.

I. We observe our struggle with a lack of clarity in all of our assemblies to know how best to engage one another in appropriate intervention of discipling and discipline.

For example, the minutes of Classis Toronto at its November 10, 2005, meeting, state the adoption of this recommendation: "That Classis, noting that First CRC has chosen a contrary position on a significant biblical/ethical guideline, one which the denomination has carefully considered and is 'settled and binding,' regretfully inform the Council of First CRC that its action constitutes a breaking of the denominational covenant," with this ground: "As churches of the denomination we have covenanted to abide by and uphold our commitments to Scripture, the creeds, as well as synodical pronouncements on doctrine and ethics which are considered 'settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are contrary to Scripture and the Church Order.'"

In contrast, at that very same meeting, Classis Toronto declined to adopt the following recommendation: "That Classis Toronto regretfully inform the Council of First CRC that if it does not accept the current position of the Christian Reformed denomination with respect to guidelines pertaining to homosexuality, Council in effect removes the congregation of First CRC from the denomination. We pray and trust Council is aware of its awesome responsibility and plead that it not choose to proceed on that route."

Synod 2022 received a number of overtures and communications related to this matter, having a wide variety of recommendations—from heavy-handed pronouncements to statements suggesting the giving of more flexibility.

Over the years, classes have deposed officebearers and/or councils. However, synod has not ever done so.

The current matter involving Neland Avenue CRC illustrates our struggle of knowing how to move forward in calling ourselves to mutual covenant-keeping with each other.

J. We observe the use of the phrase "we are in uncharted and unprecedented territory" in multiple applications, and we lament the brokenness that it reveals.

Neland Avenue CRC has entered unprecedented territory by rejecting a "settled and binding" decision of synod regarding its ordination of a same-sex married deacon and refusing the correction of synod and its *in loco* committee. Classis Grand Rapids East has entered into uncharted territory by refusing to take disciplinary action with Neland Avenue CRC (both formally and informally) despite the admonition of

synod, its *in loco* committee, and many other bodies (councils, classes, and the COD).

For these reasons, synod is also in uncharted territory, faced with the decision of Neland Avenue CRC to ordain the same-sex married deacon in direct violation of synod's declarations on the matter in years past and now including the decisions in 2022. This has resulted in unprecedented actions from synod—and perhaps more in the summer of 2023.

III. Recommendations

Note: The *in loco* committee recognizes that there are multiple additional overtures and communications that have been submitted to Synod 2023 related to this matter. Bearing that in mind, the following recommendations are presented.

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of the *in loco* committee: Paul De Vries, chair; and Josh Van Drunen.

B. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind any and all decisions to ordain officebearers who are in a same-sex, sexual marriage/relationship, thus nullifying any current or future terms of such officebearers.

Grounds:

1. As of March 2023, Neland Avenue CRC has not complied with the instruction of Synod 2022.
2. As of March 2023, Neland Avenue CRC has made clear its intentions not to adhere to synod's confessional declarations regarding same-sex, sexual-relationship individuals serving in church office.
3. Even as Synod 2023 deliberates based on the recommendations of this report and varied overtures and communications on the larger issues of human sexuality and confessional status, it is important for all congregations to comply with due process.

C. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures as laid out in the Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers.

Grounds:

1. As of March 2023, Neland Avenue CRC has not complied with the instruction of Synod 2022.
2. As of March 2023, Neland Avenue CRC has not made clear its intentions to adhere to all of synod's confessional declarations.
3. Even as Synod 2023 makes decisions based on the recommendations of this report and varied overtures and communications on the larger issues of human sexuality and confessional status, it is important for all congregations to comply with due process.

D. That synod instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to guide the Neland Avenue CRC congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex, sexual relationships.

Grounds:

1. Having heard the instructions of Synod 2022, Neland Avenue CRC has determined not to comply.
2. While our shared Church Order states that "the discipline of church members is the responsibility of the local council" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 674), when this fails to occur, it falls to the classis to intervene.
3. "Their [the church visitors of classis] task shall be to ascertain whether the officebearers of the church faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe the provisions of the Church Order, and promote the building up of the body of Christ and the extension of God's kingdom" (Church Order Art. 42-b).
4. Rather than working within our shared covenants and practices, Neland Avenue CRC, by its own admission, is "seeking the denomination's acknowledgment of differing interpretations" (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 605, Q&A I).
5. Classis Grand Rapids East is in the best position to disciple its congregations and officebearers, even when no formal appeal has come from a member of the congregation and even as appeals to a broader assembly are being adjudicated. The fact that this has not happened is not promoting the spiritual well-being of Neland Avenue CRC or the other churches.
6. As of March 2023, Classis Grand Rapids East has not complied with the instruction of Synod 2022.

E. That synod adopt the recommendations from Overture 11 to Synod 2022 (deferred to Synod 2023): Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 516-17 [Classis Hackensack]).

Grounds:

1. "Christ gave authority to the church as a whole and thereby entrusted authority to the occasions of its exercise in classis and synod as gatherings of the churches to maintain the unity of the congregations in both doctrine and discipline" (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 28—regarding Goderich CRC in Classis Huron).
2. "The Synod of 1980 declared that it is indeed proper according to Reformed church polity for either classis or synod to intervene in the affairs of a local congregation, if the welfare of that congregation is at stake" (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 55—regarding Goderich CRC in Classis Huron).

3. In previous iterations of *in loco* committees, councils have responded in humility to the authority and direction given by synod. We are now in new territory, which should give all of us pause. It should give pause to Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East that they are disregarding not only Synod 2022 and its *in loco* committee but also 156 years of shared covenantal history. And the unheard of nature and severity of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East's action should give pause to the CRCNA as it considers its response.

F. That synod instruct the members of the denomination to recommit themselves to the methods and processes that we have adopted in the Covenant of Officebearers and the Church Order.

G. That synod declare the work of the Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee to be completed.

Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee
Greg DeMey (Classis Northern Illinois)
Paul De Vries (chair, Classis Thornapple Valley)
William Koopmans (Classis Hamilton)
John Mondi (Classis Grand Rapids North)
Josh Van Drunen (Classis Grand Rapids South)
Beverly Weeks (Classis Grand Rapids North)
Zachary King, general secretary (adviser)

Appendix

I. Meeting dates

The *in loco* committee met August 15, 2022; September 1, 2022; September 29, 2022; November 3, 2022; November 17, 2022; December 2, 2022; January 4, 2023; January 30, 2023; February 20, 2023; March 2, 2023; and March 13, 2023.

II. Formal communications

A. Letter to Neland Avenue CRC – September 13, 2022

Dear Neland Ave CRC Council,

The *in loco* committee of synod appreciates the opportunity to meet with you on the evening of September 13. Thank you for hosting us.

Our team members will be working through the material that you have sent us in your recent email. For your part, we trust that you have read the HSR report (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 313-490) and the *Acts of Synod 2022* which pertain to the report, Neland Ave CRC, and Classis Grand Rapids East (pp. 904-26). With this material firmly in our minds, we are confident that we can have meaningful presentations and productive listening.

As was mentioned in an email from Zach on 9-2-22, our agenda could look like this:

- Opening Devotions (*in loco* committee)
- Presentation and Sharing from Neland (1 hour)
- Questions for information from *in loco* committee (1 hour)
- Closing Prayer (Neland member)

Here are some questions that we might ask in the second segment:

- Please share Neland's responses to the decisions of synod in their immediate aftermath and over the past couple of months.
- We understand that you plan to appeal synod's direction to remove the deacon in the same-sex marriage. What are the grounds for this appeal and is there any openness from Neland's council to altering its current position on same-sex sexual relationships?
- How does Neland understand its relationship to synod and its confessional declarations?
- What were the most influential sources of information that led the council to the position it holds now regarding same-sex sexual relationships?
- Neland Ave has interacted with its local sister congregations in Classis Grand Rapids East. How has Neland considered the broader church, the CRCNA as a whole and the worldwide church, as it communicates and lives out its beliefs on human sexuality?
- Recognizing the clear difference the *in loco* committee and your council hold on the presenting issue, how could the *in loco* committee show love and care to your congregation?

In Christ,

The *In Loco* Committee of Synod

B. Neland Avenue CRC's responses to questions – September 29, 2022

1. Please share Neland's responses to the decisions of synod in their immediate aftermath and over the past couple of months.

A: We spent the days after synod in prayer and in small groups, using a new COVID-era method of outdoor gathering—the "fire pit." Various Nelanders offered their fire pits for members to meet, and we did so, sharing our griefs and hopes. One poignant moment was the closing prayer at one such fire pit by a saint of our congregation, Rev. John Van Ryn (retired from his post as Executive Secretary of CRC Home Missions), lamenting the tone of Synod 2022 and asking God to be with this faithful congregation and the entire denomination. John went to heaven just days later and his funeral was both sad and a joyful testament to the long road of obedience.

For our first Sunday service after Synod, we planned a liturgy that gave room for confession, lament, and plaintive petition. As we prayed and sang – especially singing "O Lord, Hear My Prayer" – we felt the Holy Spirit turning our petition to praise, transforming our brokenness to trust

in God, the wellspring of life. This was not our own doing, not our design, but the Spirit of God moving within us and among us. It was a remarkable experience that continues to sustain us, and to affirm God's call and direction for our congregation.

Council met on June 29 and every member had a chance to speak. Some in the CRC may not understand that we at Neland don't all agree on the same-sex issues raised by the HSR. But we do agree on paying attention to the call of the Holy Spirit and the fact that this issue is not a salvation matter that should shatter churches or denominations. Council ended with a unanimous vote to (a) not rescind our decision to elect our deacon; and (b) appeal synod's decision. Those decisions were sent to the General Secretary.

On July 10, after worship, we held a congregational forum to address the matter with our faith family. The committee has the PowerPoint outline of that forum in its possession. There was robust discussion, affirmation, prayer, and song.

We met briefly with General Secretary King and *in loco* chair De Vries at the start of our August 29 Council meeting and appreciated their pastoral tone. We agreed to arrange a September meeting. Later in that Council meeting, many (but not all) Council members submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina regarding Synod 2022's confessional status decision, and these were accepted by voice vote.

While we appreciated having the attention of the *in loco* committee on September 13 and they listened respectfully, it is fair to say that we still don't think our story or position is well-understood by denominational authorities, and certainly not at Synod 2022 nor throughout the denomination.

2. We understand that you plan to appeal synod's direction to remove the deacon in the same-sex marriage. What are the grounds for this appeal and is there any openness from Neland's Council to altering its current position on same-sex sexual relationships?

A: We have an ad hoc committee working on an appeal and have received much advice about using one of two options—Church Order Article 30 or Article 31. We will make a Council-approved decision on which to file in the weeks ahead. The heart of the appeal will be that Synod 2022 usurped the authority given to local congregations to select officebearers (Church Order Articles 3-4) when it instructed Neland to rescind the election of a deacon, and usurped the authority given to local councils for discipline, except upon appeal (Church Order Article 80, Supplement Articles 82-84), when it essentially instructed Neland's Council to begin discipline upon this deacon.

It is important to realize that Neland does not have a "position" as a church on same-sex relationships. We have disagreement, but we have worked for 10 years on creating "Generous Spaciousness" as it applies to our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ. We are always open to the Spirit's leading,

and in listening to anyone interested in serious and compassionate conversation on this matter, as we have for the entirety of our study and journey.

3. How does Neland understand its relationship to Synod and its confessional declarations?

A: We love the CRC and have been a faithful, productive, and generous member for 106 years. We don't want to leave the denomination and will not do so voluntarily. Throughout our entire history we have participated at every level of denominational life. Neland is thoroughly Reformed in theology, worship, ecclesiology, world and life view, and mission in the world. We have always paid the full allotment of our ministry shares (and are still doing so). Neland Church does nothing with haste or on a whim or to be trendy. We respect the deliberations and pronouncements of every synod. It is excruciating when a church must choose between its biblical convictions—confirmed by the Holy Spirit in our local church—and denominational loyalty. It is our belief that 2022 Synod should not bind Neland's conscience, and in fact overstepped its authority by reaching into the pastoral work of a council and the Spirit-led actions on an individual congregation. This "top-down" action, taken despite the warning of church polity experts, was not representative of the Reformed church polity of the denomination we hold dear.

4. What were the most influential sources of information that led the council to the position it holds now regarding same-sex sexual relationships?

A: Neland has been studying this matter for 10 years now and constituted a "Generous Spaciousness" committee in 2015 to help the congregation minister in a more effective way with LGBTQ+ members. After three years of pondering the issue, Neland established a Council-directed effort in response to Synod 2015—a year before there was an "HSR" committee, five years before the HSR was available to review, and seven years before the HSR report was taken up at synod. Over the years, Neland has hosted speakers, forums, presentations, talk-backs, and scripture studies. Our main emphasis throughout has been that there ought to be a place for all and an acknowledgement that we won't all agree on these matters. "There's a place for you at Neland" has been our long-standing church motto; the contentious issue of same-sex relationships and marriage should not cause a rift at Neland nor in our denomination. Other sources: the Classis GR East same-sex marriage report; the Colossian Forum; guest speakers from a range of perspectives; and testimonies from persons from the LGBTQ+ community.

We believe the Holy Spirit was involved in our choice of this deacon, confirmed four times: by many nominations of the individual from the congregation to the Council; by the Council's deliberative and prayerful decision to ask the nominated individual to consider a call; by the individual's agreement to be nominated; and finally, by the congregation's overwhelming vote to elect the deacon. Perhaps we should add a fifth confirmation:

the obvious blessing of the work of this gifted deacon in our congregation and neighborhood.

As stated above, Neland does not have a "position" on same-sex relationships. Unlike the HSR which labeled these issues as "clear," our Council does not think they are at all "clear" and that we should accommodate a range of views on same-sex related matters. Gravamina objecting to Synod 2022's actions were not submitted by every council member and there is no "litmus test" for nomination to Council regarding same-sex beliefs. We have not issued an "affirming church" statement; we simply say, "All are invited to experience the deep welcome of Christ."

As an example, during the *in loco* committee's conversation with us on September 13, one of our elders gave a personal testimony. Part of the testimony included these statements: "I'm an elder at Neland and I hold a traditional view of marriage. So why am I still here? Fundamentally, it's because of our bonds of fellowship together. We're a faith family together. I'm still at Neland because I continue to be made welcome. In the spring of 2020, the same Council that put the deacon in question up for congregational vote, also put me up for vote, knowing full well my traditional views. Over the last two years, I feel I've been heard and that my suggestions have even been invited, not dismissed. I'm still at Neland because I don't think this issue, though very important, is a salvation issue. I know too many wise and godly people who come down on the affirming side of same-sex marriage. That includes many around this circle. That includes my own spouse. We hold differing views yet feel that we can be in a covenant of marriage."

Of late, the book *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* by Mark D. Baker (IVP Academic, 2022) has been formative in our thinking. Baker describes three kinds of churches: bounded (defined by boundaries, in-or-out); fuzzy (no real commitments to anything); and centered (focused on pointing all people to the center, Jesus Christ). Our point of view is that Synod 2022 directed churches to be "bounded" on this issue, to decide who is "in" or "out." Anyone who knows even a little about Neland would never describe this commitment-driven congregation as a "fuzzy" church. Instead, we emphasize pointing all in our fellowship and our neighbors to Christ as our first and foremost mission, and that's our fervent prayer for the CRC.

5. Neland Ave has interacted with its local sister congregations in Classis Grand Rapids East. How has Neland considered the broader church, the CRCNA as a whole and the worldwide church, as it communicates and lives out its beliefs on human sexuality?

A: Neland did not act for years on the election of a same-sex married deacon primarily out of sensitivity to the broader church of which we belong. It is, in fact, because of this respect that we reached out to the denomination in the form of communications and overtures for consultation and accountability. In exchange, we received no offer to dialogue, only a letter from the Council of Delegates that chided our congregation. Letters from

CRCs that feel differently on this issue were accusatory, strident, and uninviting to consider a response or a meaningful conversation. Other communications from around the CRC and from individual LGBTQ+ persons, both current and former CRC members, were full of gratitude for trying to open the door to conversation. To them, as to us, this matter is extremely far from "clear." To the worldwide church, our willingness to dialogue and state that a congregation can disagree on same-sex relationships and yet remain together and thrive in ministry (not "bounded") may be seen as a hopeful direction—instead of the "winner take all" mantras of current American church, civic, and political life.

6. Recognizing the clear difference the *in loco* committee and your council hold on the presenting issue, how could the *in loco* committee show love and care to your congregation?

A: We ask that you tell our Neland story accurately and with some acknowledgement of our purposeful study, commitment to prayer, attention to the leading of the Spirit, and humility that we don't think we have all the answers. We don't demand that everyone in our church or the denomination should come to the same conclusions. We would also hope that there is a shared conviction that when things are not so clear-cut, we should not bind the conscience where Scripture does not clearly bind the conscience.

We would also like to know this: How is the Jesus Christ we read about in the Gospels honored by this action against a single church with a long history of faithfulness and prayerful service? Neland is, as our recently departed saint Rev. John Van Ryn said, "still asking questions because there are still questions out there." This issue is not "clear" and honest and faithful study and conversation should continue rather than pronouncing this matter as "settled and binding," which has the effect of ending all sincere study and dialogue. This position has the tragic result—despite all protests to the contrary—of slamming the door of the CRC on the overwhelming majority of LGBTQ+ Christians, their loved ones, and those who minister with them.

Neland intends to be obedient to the call of the Holy Spirit to be a community that points everyone to Jesus, where all are invited to "experience the deep welcome of Christ."

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on each one of us.

C. Letter to Neland Avenue CRC – October 7, 2022

Dear Council of Neland Avenue CRC,

The Synod *In Loco* Committee has carefully considered what we had received from you during our September 13 in-person meeting and the written communications dated September 29, 2022. In response, we first wish to express our thanks.

We appreciate the gracious manner in which our committee was received by you, and the way that your council and congregation engaged in conversation with us on September 13, 2022. We had the opportunity to hear the details of your congregational journey leading to the decision to ordain as a deacon one of your congregational members living in a same-sex marriage. Members of your congregation and council clearly described for us many pastoral dynamics that have been involved in this journey, as well as the responses that the decisions of synod evoked within your church. You also openly shared with us the Power Point presentation that you prepared for your congregation following the decisions of synod. Your latest correspondence is detailed and specific, and you have forthrightly responded to the inquiries that were posed by the Synod *In Loco* Committee. For all of these considerations we thank you.

The correspondence from your council dated September 29, 2022 (a response to our questions shared on September 13) confirms Neland Ave CRC's intentions regarding the instruction of Synod 2022 to rescind the ordination of the deacon that is living in a same-sex marriage. You have confirmed that you are rejecting synod's request, and have reaffirmed your intent to file an appeal. We are not surprised by the details included in this correspondence as they are consistent with what we were told in our September 13 meeting.

On a parallel timeline with this course of action to which you have committed, the *In Loco* Committee will continue to pursue the mandate given to us by Synod 2022. To this end, we continue to prayerfully implore you to reconsider your decision. Our next step will be to correspond with Classis Grand Rapids East, seeking its cooperation with us in prayerfully urging you to reconsider your course of action, and to submit instead to the decisions of synod. We will copy you on our correspondence with Classis Grand Rapids East.

Please note that the Synod *In Loco* Committee will continue to pray for God's guidance for the appropriate resolution of this difficult matter. We also assure you that representatives of our committee would be most willing to meet with you again in response to any matters arising from this letter. It is our desire that, based on the foundation of God's Word, we can all live into the ideal together that is expressed in the apostle Paul's prayer in Romans 15:5-6, *"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Sincerely and in the service of Christ Jesus,

The members of the *In Loco* Committee

D. Letter from Neland Avenue CRC – October 27, 2022

To the *in loco* committee:

On behalf of the Neland Avenue CRC Council, I thank you for this official response. The Council was grateful for your time with us last month, and

for the listening spirit displayed by the *in loco* committee. It is because that spirit was evident, that we are a bit surprised that your letter indicates that our work together is finished. We thought listening was the beginning of your process, as you indicated, and that naturally it would move on to a dialogue aimed at reconciliation. You had questions for us, which we answered both during our September 13 meeting and in writing on September 29. We also had questions for you and had assumed that we would have an opportunity to hear your responses to those questions.

Your letter closed with an expression of willingness to meet with Neland's Council again. We would like to accept that offer, so that we may have an opportunity to listen to you. You have heard from our hearts; we would sincerely like to hear the committee's responses to questions such as these, raised by our Council members:

1. You have heard (and read in our overtures) the in-depth testimony we shared about our congregation's journey. Please tell us where we have gone wrong.

2. Please explain how Neland has "broken covenant" with the denomination. What specifically are we being admonished for?

3. We are disappointed by Synod 2022's shift in language from "covenant" to "compliance." The CRC has a long history and detailed polity that emphasize the covenant nature of congregations' relationship with one another. Synod 2022's actions in demanding compliance without engaging in dialogue, and in breaking due process by declaring a brand-new interpretation of a confession without ratification by a subsequent synod, constitute breaking covenant with not only us, but all CRC congregations. How do you justify enforcing compliance with decisions that defy both the spirit and letter of our denominational polity?

4. How can an interpretation of a confession be deemed to have confessional status as the binding interpretation for all, when the original authors of that confession were wise enough not to include lists of particular sins?

5. How is Neland's "third way" (making room to live in community while holding differing perspectives) considered divisive? And how is the stance of the HSR and Synod 2022 (which calls into question the salvation of some members and is causing CRC members and officebearers to leave the denomination) not considered divisive? As you are aware, we do not wish to leave the CRC, and do not intend to do so voluntarily. Where is the divisiveness coming from?

6. Neland Ave CRC has been faithful to God and to the denomination for 107 years, and we have shared how our journey over the last decade is an outpouring of our desire to be faithful. How does Synod 2022's action toward Neland honor our legacy and testimony of Spirit-led faithfulness? How does that action glorify Jesus?

We worked hard to answer the committee's six questions with integrity and sincerity, and we trust that you will do the same with our six questions. We look forward to the opportunity to continue this dialogue, and to listen in the same way that you listened to us when you visited in September.

In Christ,

Michael Van Denend, Vicar, for The Council of Neland CRC

E. Letter to Neland Avenue CRC – November 10, 2022

To the Council of Neland Ave CRC,

Thank you for your communication dated October 27. Thank you also for your willingness and desire to meet again to listen to us. We do intend to continue the dialogue and had no intention of indicating our work with you was finished. Instead, we sought written clarity as to your position on the issue that our synodical mandate specifically speaks to. Thank you for your dialogue with us so far, and we are pleased to continue it with you.

We note at the outset of our response that the six questions you have posed to us invite us into a conversation that goes well beyond the mandate provided to us by synod. We cannot speak on synod's behalf beyond the mandate given and hesitate to do so. Nor do we have authority to adjust synodical decisions. Our intention is not to engage in prolonged discussions to defend the interpretation of Scripture that underlies the conclusions of the HSR or synod's decisions on these matters. Nevertheless, we do wish to continue in dialogue and to be heard, even as we have sought to hear you. Therefore, we provide the following brief responses to your questions, as well as some references to the HSR and synod's own words on these matters.

1. You have heard (and read in our overtures) the in-depth testimony we shared about our congregation's journey. Please tell us where we have gone wrong.

Since 1973, the CRCNA has maintained the position that engaging in same-sex practice is sinful. Nevertheless, Neland Ave CRC proceeded to ordain a deacon who was known to be living in a same-sex relationship. Neland Ave CRC continues to justify their action in ordaining as a deacon a person living in a same-sex relationship despite the biblical teaching affirmed by synod. While we respect and appreciate your congregation's unique journey, as a denomination we covenant to journey together in submission to the Spirit's will as discerned collectively as a community.

2. Please explain how Neland has "broken covenant" with the denomination. What specifically are we being admonished for?

As noted in response to the previous question, since 1973, the CRCNA has maintained the position that engaging in same-sex practice is sinful. In 2005-2006, in response to circumstances involving Toronto First CRC and Classis Toronto, synod made clear that ordaining as an officebearer any member who was engaged in a same-sex sexual relationship would be

considered a breaking of covenant with the denomination. In 2016 Synod established a study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality. Nevertheless, Neland Ave CRC proceeded to ordain a deacon who was known to be living in a same-sex relationship. This decision was enacted without following a procedure of overture to Synod receiving denominational approval to act in this manner contrary to what has been the existing denominational policy. The actions of Neland Ave CRC drew a response of reproof from the Council of Delegates in 2021 making very clear that the body serving in the interim of synod viewed your actions as a breaking of covenant. Continued rejection of the position affirmed by Synod 2022 is therefore understandably viewed by many as an ongoing breaking of covenant with the denomination.

3. We are disappointed by Synod 2022's shift in language from "covenant" to "compliance." The CRC has a long history and detailed polity that emphasize the covenant nature of congregations' relationship with one another. Synod 2022's actions in demanding compliance without engaging in dialogue, and in breaking due process by declaring a brand-new interpretation of a confession without ratification by a subsequent synod, constitute breaking covenant with not only us, but all CRC congregations. How do you justify enforcing compliance with decisions that defy both the spirit and letter of our denominational polity?

First, we do not speak for synod nor do we explain synod. We are simply carrying out synod's mandate. Our actions are justified by the mandate from the broadest assembly of the denomination. If Neland Ave believes synod was wrong and broke covenant with all CRCNA congregations, this matter would warrant appeal, as you have already stated you will complete. This is not a matter for us to adjudicate.

Second, we would nevertheless like to draw your attention to several resources to help you understand both the process and legitimacy of synod's decisions on the confessionality of the CRC's position on same sex. For example, the Synod 2022 FAQ document (question #4) speaks to the process used by Synod 2022 for its decision.

Furthermore, we would also encourage you to consult the *Acts of Synod 1975* (pp. 601-604) which acknowledge that synod has the right to interpret and apply Scripture and the confessions in a way that is confessionally binding on CRC congregations, leaders, and members.

Third, while your appeal is developed and awaiting processing by synod, we believe that you ought to comply with synod's directive, even if doing so 'under protest' while seeking a future synod's corrective action.

Fourth, we note biblical interpretation avoids a false dichotomy between covenant and compliance. In fact, the two are inextricable in the relationship that the Bible envisions for God and his people (John 14:15; 1 John 5:1-5).

4. How can an interpretation of a confession be deemed to have confessional status as the binding interpretation for all, when the original authors of that confession were wise enough not to include lists of particular sins?

All of the essential confessions of the church receive interpretation. That is equally true, for example, of creedal and confessional teachings on the nature of God, the deity of Christ, and the authority of Scripture. The church, when exercising its responsibility as a denomination, does not leave matters of essential confessional interpretation to the discretion of individual congregations. Please note our answer to question #3 regarding the right of synod to interpret the confessions.

5. How is Neland's "third way" (making room to live in community while holding differing perspectives) considered divisive? And how is the stance of the HSR and Synod 2022 (which calls into question the salvation of some members and is causing CRC members and officebearers to leave the denomination) not considered divisive? As you are aware, we do not wish to leave the CRC, and do not intend to do so voluntarily. Where is the divisiveness coming from?

Synod's response to Neland Ave CRC's actions may perhaps be judged by some to be divisive in calling for a unity that is based upon mutually agreed biblical interpretation. However, the counterpoint to that observation is that true unity is not attained by simply making space for a variety of biblical interpretations. True unity comes from standing side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:27; Eph. 4:3) and mutual submission to the Word of God to avoid divisions in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 1:10). Without doubt, there are matters in Scripture in which members of the church were allowed to take contrary actions (as long as by doing so these groups didn't damage the faith of others). However, synod discerned that with regard to same sex, there cannot be diverse practices among the churches.

6. Neland Ave CRC has been faithful to God and to the denomination for 107 years, and we have shared how our journey over the last decade is an outpouring of our desire to be faithful. How does Synod 2022's action toward Neland honor our legacy and testimony of Spirit-led faithfulness? How does that action glorify Jesus?

Synod 2022 was aware of your congregation's history and received copious documentation regarding your journey. Nevertheless, synod has concluded that Neland Ave CRC's actions in this matter have not been faithful to God's Word and asks the leadership of this congregation to humbly submit to the denomination's position on this issue.

We hope and pray that these brief responses to your questions will help with our ongoing dialogue and your movement toward compliance with synod's directive. Please also note we have included below some quotes directly from the HSR and Synod that touch on aspects of your questions.

We also once again thank you for your willingness to meet again with representatives of our committee. In your response to this communication, please indicate what time would work best for you to receive members of the committee.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we always celebrate the opportunity to engage in dialogue with one another. We are grateful for your willingness to participate in the process, and look forward to further dialogue and to your compliance as part of your mutual fellowship in this small part of God's kingdom called the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

With love and prayers for you,

The *In Loco* Committee of Synod 2022

Some additional quotes from the HSR and Synod 2022

From HSR, p. 460:

> …We observe that we stand with the majority church worldwide, including the Roman Catholic Church, all branches of Orthodoxy, the non-Western global church, and a majority of active Protestants in North America and Europe. Indeed, the global church finds the Western church's challenges to biblical teaching on human sexuality incomprehensible and offensive. To refuse to uphold Christian teaching on sexual immorality would signal that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is deviating not only from Scripture but from the shared confession of the historic and worldwide church.

From HSR, p. 405:

> The Christian Reformed Church's 1973 synodical report on homosexuality broke ground by making a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. As the report put it: "We must distinguish between the person who is homosexual in [their] sexual orientation and the person who engages in explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex." It also noted that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person." [*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 612-13] In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.

From the HSR Executive Summary, p. 7 (at crcna.org):

> Yet many church members cannot imagine denying anyone the intimacy of a sexual relationship. Indeed, humans need the intimacy of regular human touch and strong social networks for health and resilience. All of us long to be deeply known and accepted as we are. Jesus taught and modeled a radically new kind of intimate community—sisters and brothers caring for each other daily in practical ways. But the church has not provided intimate community for people attracted to the same sex, nor indeed for most single people. Instead, it has condemned people in gay relationships while ignoring premarital sex, pornography use, and adultery throughout the church. *We note, therefore, that for many people, no repetition of biblical teaching on homosexuality will be persuasive unless the*

church repents of this hypocrisy and becomes the loving, supportive community of Christ.

From the HSR Executive Summary, p. 9:

> Scripture's clear prohibition of homosexual acts is accompanied by its equally clear exhortation to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of all who struggle with sexual sin. Since the church, including the CRCNA, has all too often ostracized, shunned, or ignored some sisters and brothers, and not treated them as equal and valued members of the body of Christ, the church's response to homosexuality must begin with confession. The church's response must continue with good teaching about human sexuality, including the reminder of the important distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity, as well as the dangers of promoting the false expectation of orientation change. The church must demonstrate in a myriad of concrete ways to those who are same-sex attracted that it is a grace-saturated community that equips all of its members, both heterosexual and homosexual alike, to walk in sexual holiness.

From *Acts of Synod 2022* (pp. 941-42)—Grounds pointing to the study, deliberation, and decision that has been deemed directive to the work of the *in loco* committee, along with the decisions of synod in the past, as aided by the various study committees. (When we received your recent letter, we, too, benefited from reviewing them.)

Grounds:

1) Neland Avenue CRC has taken action contradictory to the position of the CRCNA. As per Report 47, section IV, B, 2 (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603): "Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters . . . shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances."

2) Neland Avenue CRC willingly chose a path of noncompliance. It did not use the proper means to enact change in the CRCNA or to seek clarification.

3) Failing to take firm action has negative consequences on the CRCNA. It sends a message to other churches that noncompliance is acceptable in the CRCNA. It threatens our unity and undermines our witness to the world. Failure to address a publicly wayward church is to disregard the third mark of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

4) Synod can intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b). According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 12, "All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable." Synod is free to deal with any matter that it judges to be of importance for the well-being of the denomination. Synod

appointed a committee *in loco* for First CRC of Toronto while the congregation intended to ordain an officebearer living in a same-sex relationship. Neland Avenue CRC has already ordained such an officebearer, and thus a committee *in loco* is all the more warranted.

F. Report to Classis Grand Rapids East

Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee Report and Recommendations

I. Background

The *in loco* committee appointed by Synod 2022 has been at work since August of 2022. We have met multiple times as a committee. We have met both formally and informally with members of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East. Our chairperson and general secretary met with Neland's council in late August, and then the full committee met with the council, some congregational members, and visitors from the classis in September. We followed these meetings by informally gathering with a collection of pastors from Grand Rapids East and then a formal meeting with the classis on September 15. At the same time, we have been corresponding back and forth via email on a regular basis. We have prayed together and spoken together. There have been tears and some laughter. We have always been together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

More recently we have had two more group gatherings in preparation for the January 2023 meeting of Classis Grand Rapids East. We met with members of the Executive committee of classis to ensure we were on the same page regarding the processing of this report and address its inclusion in the January 2023 Agenda. We also met again with Neland's council, some members of the congregation, and visitors from classis. Throughout the course of all our communications we have made it a priority to listen carefully and lovingly.

In all of our meetings we have been greeted with Christlike love and an openness to our presence and communication. There have been times of disappointment, frustration, and perhaps even anger, but these emotions have always been mutually expressed and received in the bonds of Christian fellowship.

We do not think anyone should be surprised to hear that in our conversations with each other we have come across a number of misunderstandings, concerns and misgivings. We have had some opportunity to gently educate and push each other when necessary. We on the *in loco* committee have appreciated the opportunity to listen, to hear stories, and to experience some of the pain and wrestling of Neland Ave CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East. We make the following observations based on our listening.

- Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East are important parts of the denomination as brothers and sisters in Christ. We understand that they have deliberated, studied, and pastorally cared for one another as they discussed LGBTQ+ issues through the

years. They have done so imperfectly, but they clearly state and believe, through the Spirit and through their study of the Word, that their decisions have been and are faithful.

- Likewise, we think it is important to note that our synods are an important part of the denomination as brothers and sisters in Christ. Various synods and their study committees have carefully deliberated, studied, and pastorally cared for one another as they have discussed LGBTQ+ issues through the years. They have done so imperfectly, but they clearly state and believe, through the Spirit and through their study of the Word, that their decisions have been and are faithful.
- The issue here is how do we keep covenant with one another when there is sharp disagreement. It is not helpful to lash out at one another and to assume the worst of the other party. Instead, we must seek to honor one another and hold each other accountable. This brings us to our mandate from synod.
- Our synodical mandate (as copied below), is very specific and has clear boundaries. We have not been authorized to negotiate or in some way to mitigate the decisions of synod. We have heard the voices of those who suggest that we should violate the mandate and do something different. We are free, some have said, to find a "third way" beyond what synod decided and mandated. We, however, have agreed to serve on the committee and pursue its mandate. Failing to do so would be disingenuous and a breakage of covenant.

II. Our Mandate

Synod 2022 adopted the following motions (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 926, 941-42):

1. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying this deacon's current term.

   —*Adopted*

2. That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures as laid out in the Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers.

   —*Adopted*

3. That synod instruct the executive director to appoint a committee *in loco* with the following mandate:

   a. Meet with Neland Avenue CRC to oversee its compliance to synod's rulings.

   b. Meet with Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish them regarding their responsibility to uphold our shared denominational

covenants and procedures as laid out in the Church Order and the Covenant for Officebearers.

c. Report to Classis Grand Rapids East at the autumn meeting (September 15, 2022; classisgreast.org) and make pertinent recommendations for its deliberations and action.

d. If necessary, invite three other classes to assist the committee in dealing with the issues regarding Neland Avenue CRC.

e. Report to Synod 2023, by way of the published *Agenda for Synod*, its own actions and any classical actions taken, and present its recommendations.

Grounds:

1) Neland Avenue CRC has taken action contradictory to the position of the CRCNA. As per Report 47, section IV, B, 2 (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603): "Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters . . . shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances."

2) Neland Avenue CRC willingly chose a path of noncompliance. It did not use the proper means to enact change in the CRCNA or to seek clarification.

3) Failing to take firm action has negative consequences on the CRCNA. It sends a message to other churches that noncompliance is acceptable in the CRCNA. It threatens our unity and undermines our witness to the world. Failure to address a publicly wayward church is to disregard the third mark of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

4) Synod can intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b). According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 12, "All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable." Synod is free to deal with any matter that it judges to be of importance for the well-being of the denomination. Synod appointed a committee *in loco* for First CRC of Toronto while the congregation intended to ordain an officebearer living in a same-sex relationship. Neland Avenue CRC has already ordained such an officebearer, and thus a committee *in loco* is all the more warranted.

—*Adopted*

III. Admonishment

Classis Grand Rapids East declared, "We also recognize that the classis will need to address the question of whether it believes Neland's actions are 'allowable' within the pastoral guidelines of synod." (Correspondence

November 10, 2020: to CRC Council of Delegates, Attn: Colin Watson, Executive Director; From: The Executive Team of Classis Grand Rapids East). Classis Grand Rapids East has not effectively followed through on its own recognition. Instead, it has issued statements of support for Neland while never holding Neland accountable for actions outside of synod's directives. For example, its communication to synod (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, Communication 6) stated, "At its May 20, 2021, meeting, Classis Grand Rapids East adopted the following communication to Synod 2021 for inclusion in the supplemental agenda. The communication originated with Neland Avenue CRC and has not been edited. *Classis affirms this communication from Neland Avenue and is deeply grateful for it." (italics ours)*

This communication of affirmation and gratitude, alongside a failure to hold Neland accountable, stands against our shared Covenant of Officebearers, where we "promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements." While it is true that, to date, no one from Neland Avenue CRC has appealed its decision to ordain a same-sex married person as a deacon to classis (or synod), Classis Grand Rapids East has a responsibility to promote accountability to our synodical and confessional decisions on this and all other matters as part of our shared covenant as congregations, classes, and as a denomination.

We admonish Classis Grand Rapids East for failing to hold Neland Ave CRC accountable to the larger body, and for failing to adhere to our shared covenants and procedures in how to bring change within the CRCNA.

IV. Recommendations

1. That Classis Grand Rapids East acknowledge the admonition of Synod 2022, as communicated via the synod *in loco* committee.

2. That Classis Grand Rapids East, in response to the admonition of Synod 2022 and its *in loco* committee, establish an oversight committee to guide the Neland Avenue congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex sexual relationships.

Grounds:

a) Having heard the instructions of Synod 2022, Neland Avenue CRC has determined not to comply.

b) While our shared Church Order states that "the discipline of church members is the responsibility of the local council" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 674), when this fails to occur, it falls to the classis to intervene.

c) Rather than working within our shared Covenants and practices, Neland, by its own admission, is "seeking the denomination's acknowledgment of differing interpretations" (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 694, Q&A I (letter i)).

d) Classis Grand Rapids East is in the best position to disciple its congregations and officebearers, even as appeals are being adjudicated. The fact that this has not happened is not promoting the spiritual well-being of Neland or the other churches.

3. That Classis Grand Rapids East continue to pastorally care for those most directly affected by synodical and classical decisions regarding same-sex sexual relationships.

Grounds:

a) The CRC has always stated and claimed a pastoral posture toward same-sex attracted persons, recognizing that they are imagebearers of God for whom Christ has died and been raised to life. Nevertheless, we have often failed to live out this posture effectively.

b) We recognize that all suffer from sexual brokenness and it creates understandable pain and ambivalence that one kind of brokenness is now being singled out.

c) The classis itself, along with its churches, is in the best position to care for the same-sex married deacon, the officebearers and congregation of Neland, and other members of their classis.

4. That Classis Grand Rapids East communicate to synod its response to the admonition regarding this matter and provide a progress report to Synod 2023.

G. Classis Grand Rapids East's Response

Communication from Stated Clerk on January 24

Classis Grand Rapids East met last Thursday, January 19, 2023. As part of our business for the evening we adopted a local overture (see attached). In addition we declared that adopting this overture is classis' response to the report of the committee *in loco*. My read is that Classis GR East does not intend this to be an end point of discussion. Rather it is the response classis is able to make at this juncture prior to Synod 2023 and with the agenda deadline for synod in mind.

Overture Asking Classis Grand Rapids East to Adopt a Response to Neland Avenue CRC

I. Overture

Church of the Servant CRC ("COS") overtures Classis Grand Rapids East ("Classis GRE") to adopt the following position as its response to the actions of Neland Avenue CRC ("Neland") in appointing an officebearer in a same-sex marriage:

Classis GRE will wait for the adjudication of Neland's appeal by Synod 2023 before discerning any further action to take about Neland. This is consistent with both accountability and due process for Neland under the Church Order and prior decisions of Synod.

Grounds:

1. Classis Has Responded Sincerely and Faithfully About Neland.

   When Neland told Classis GRE in August of 2020 that it had ordained a deacon in a same-sex marriage, the Classis GRE Executive team brought the communication to the next classis meeting in September 2020 and asked for comments and questions from the member congregations. (*Minutes of 9-17-20 Meeting of Classis GRE,* p. 7.)

   Following the meeting, the Classis Executive team proposed several actions, including:

   - meeting with Neland.
   - holding a special Executive team meeting following the meeting with Neland, if needed; and
   - planning for a classis-wide discussion at the next scheduled classis meeting in January 2021.[1] (*Minutes of 10-27-20 Meeting of Classis GRE Executive team*, p. 4.)

   The Classis Executive team also anticipated that there would be many expectations within the denomination about how classis should respond. (Id.) The Executive team also recognized additional challenges. The member congregations have different opinions about Neland's actions. (Id.) Thus, the team had to consider whether member churches who disagreed with Neland would want to remain in the classis if Neland wanted to stay in the denomination. (Id.) However, the Executive team opened itself to the leading of the Holy Spirit and considered whether this was an opportunity to model how to live together with differences. In short, the Classis GRE Executive team gave thoughtful, Spirit-led consideration about how to respond and about some potential consequences.

   The Classis Executive team also responded to a letter sent directly to Neland from the Council of Delegates ("COD"). The Executive team assured the COD that Classis GRE has never minimized the importance of the issue. (*11-10-20 Letter to Council of Delegates from Classis GRE Executive team*.) The team acknowledged that classis would need to address whether it believed Neland's actions were "allowable" within the pastoral guidelines of Synod. (Id.)

   In reply, the COD agreed that it had no jurisdiction over Neland's council and that the appropriate process for churches and classis to

[1] Classis GRE ultimately held three classis discussions/education hours—September 20, 2020, May 2021, and May 2022. (*Minutes from 9-20-20 Meeting of Classis GRE*, p. 7; *Minutes from 5-20-21 Meeting of Classis GRE*, p. 2; and *Minutes from 5-19-22 Meeting of Classis GRE*, p. 4.)

adjudicate the matter was to engage with synod via overtures. (*12-18-20 Letter to Classis GRE from the COD*.) The COD also affirmed the original authority of the local churches and that it respected the delegated authority of the classes and synod as described in the Church Order. (Id.)

Consistent with the advice of the COD, the member congregations of classis filed overtures and communications seeking clarity about the Human Sexuality Report ("HSR") and the nature of the prior advice by synod about same-sex sexual relationships. Following Synod 2022, Classis GRE has continued to engage by forming an ad hoc committee charged with making recommendations about how classis should respond after Synod 2022. This committee has drafted an overture for classis to consider that asks synod to reverse its 2022 decision on confessional status.

2. Waiting for Synod 2023 to Rule on Neland's Appeal Respects Both the Appeal Process and the Original Authority of the Local Churches Provided in the Church Order.

   The Classis Executive team also explained to the member congregations at the September classis meeting that a member of Neland must first file an appeal before the classis or synod may involve itself in the disciplinary decision of a local council. (*Minutes of 9-17-20 Meeting of Classis GRE,* p 7.) This statement is supported by the opinion of Rev. Kathy Smith, the church polity expert for the CRCNA and synod parliamentarian. Rev. Smith shared this opinion with the synod advisory committee at Synod 2022 that considered the overtures related to Neland and she repeated this opinion on the floor of Synod 2022 in response to a question from a delegate. [see Wednesday Afternoon session - June 15 - Synod 2022 – YouTube.com, at 50:13 – 51.33].

   In its *Neland Avenue CRC In Loco Committee Report and Recommendations* ("*Report*"), the *in loco* committee acknowledged that no member of Neland filed an appeal. (*Report*, Section IV, p. 4). It also acknowledged that the discipline of church members is the responsibility of the local council, (*Id*, citing *Acts of Synod* 2015, p. 674). However, the *in loco* committee then said that "when this fails to occur, it falls to the classis to intervene." (*Report*, Section IV, p. 4).

   However, the cited selection from the *Acts of Synod 2015* states the opposite: "Synod *cannot* instruct a classis or a council to exercise discipline, *except upon appeal* (one consistory cannot ask another consistory to act as its proxy in matters of discipline, as indicated in decisions of Synod 1988, *Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 613). The discipline of church members is the responsibility of the local council (see Church Order Articles 37, 78-81, 85)." (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p 674, emphasis added).

   Further, Neland informed Classis GRE that it appealed its discipline by Synod 2022. Article 30 of the Church Order describes the

option to appeal. Because Synod 2022 issued the discipline, the appeal will be heard by the following synod, Synod 2023. The Church Order contains no provision for a classis to intervene to prevent a local church from appealing its discipline by synod.

3. The Report of the *In Loco* Committee Did Not Show That Classis GRE Must Respond Again About Neland Before Synod 2023 Hears Neland's Appeal.

   The *in loco* committee outlined the mandate from synod in its Report. The committee stated that it must admonish Classis GRE and cannot deviate from that mandate. (*Report*, Section II, pp. 2-3). Despite presenting the admonishment of Classis GRE as a predetermined requirement of its mandate, the *in loco* committee offered two reasons in support of its admonishment.

   First, the *in loco* committee pointed to the statement by the Classis GRE Executive team to the COD that classis needed to address whether Neland's actions were allowable within the pastoral guidelines of synod. (*Report,* Section III, p. 3). The *in loco* committee stated Classis GRE "never" followed through. (*Report*, Section III, p. 3). However, the *in loco's* conclusion ignores the ongoing responses by the Classis GRE Executive team and the member congregations since receiving notice about Neland in 2020. The committee's conclusion also relies upon a misreading of the *Acts of Synod 2015*, cited above, about the proper role of a classis in matters of local discipline.

   Second, the committee pointed to a sentence of affirmation and gratitude towards Neland that Classis GRE made in an introductory paragraph added to a communication from Neland. (*Report*, Section III, p. 3). However, Classis GRE believes the *in loco* committee read more into these statements than was intended.

   At the 5-20-21 meeting of Classis GRE, Classis acceded to an overture to accept a comprehensive communication from Neland that outlined its long journey to appointing an officebearer in a same-sex relationship. (*Minutes of 5-20-21 Meeting of Classis GRE,* p. 3.) The Classis GRE Executive team recommended that classis accept this communication on the grounds stated by Neland, "*It is important that Neland's response* to Overtures 4 through 11 and Communication 2 *be heard by synod*." (*Agenda for 5-20-21 Meeting of Classis GRE*, p. 5, citing *Grounds for Overture,* p. 28, emphasis added.)

   In acceding to the overture, Classis did not affirm or adopt any position by Neland on same-sex relationships. Neland voluntarily prepared the detailed communication specifically for synod and did so with a goal of transparency and accountability. If, as the COD said, the proper way to adjudicate the matter is through overtures and communications to synod, then Classis GRE does not believe it was unfaithful for classis to affirm and express gratitude for

Neland's participation in the process nor in the information shared in the communication.[2]

Classis GRE also notes that the *in loco* committee felt similarly about the communications that it received from Neland. The committee specifically mentioned in its Report to Synod that Neland greeted the committee with "Christlike love and an openness to our presence and communication" and that the committee "appreciated the opportunity to listen, to hear stories, and to experience some of the pain and wrestling of Neland Ave CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East." (*Report*, Section I, p. 1.) The committee separately wrote to Neland to thank it for its open sharing and clear, detailed, and specific communications.[3] It is then both surprising and disappointing that the *in loco* committee said that similar expressions by Classis GRE were grounds for admonishment.

The two justifications for admonishment offered by the *in loco* committee do not mention two years of the classis work responding to the HSR and the decisions by Neland and considered what was done as "never following through," or by implication, not following through in good faith. The proffered justifications appear to be based upon an over reading of Classis GRE's intended meaning in one sentence of an introduction to the communication by Neland as well as an apparent misreading of the *Acts of Synod 2015*. For all these reasons, the Report has not shown that Classis GRE must respond again about Neland before Synod 2023 hears Neland's appeal.

---

[2] Classis GRE further notes that the communication contained a summary of several conversations with Rev. Smith about the nature and authority of synodical decisions and reports related to homosexuality. (*Minutes of 5-20-21 Meeting of Classis GRE*, Appendix, p. 18). Rev. Smith's opinion was that these were pastoral advice and thus of a less authoritative nature than confessional or church order matters. (*Id.*, citations omitted.) This information helped to address the question that classis was trying to answer about whether Neland's actions were "allowable" within the pastoral guidelines of synod.

[3] The *in loco* committee thanked Neland in its letter dated October 7, 2022:

> The Synod *In Loco* Committee has carefully considered what we had received from you during our September 13 in-person meeting and the written communications dated September 29, 2022. In response, *we first wish to express our thanks*. *We appreciate the gracious manner in which our committee was received by you*, and *the way that your council and congregation engaged in conversation with us* on September 13, 2022. We had the opportunity to hear the details of your congregational journey leading to the decision to ordain as a deacon one of your congregational members living in a same-sex marriage. *Members of your congregation and council clearly described for us many pastoral dynamics that have been involved in this journey*, as well as the responses that the decisions of synod evoked within your church. *You also openly shared with us* the Power Point presentation that you prepared for your congregation following the decisions of synod. *Your latest correspondence is detailed and specific, and you have forthrightly responded to the inquiries that were posed by the Synod In Loco Committee*. *For all of these considerations we thank you*." (*10-7-22 Letter from in loco committee to Neland*, emphasis added.)

II. Conclusion

The *in loco* committee said that a central issue is how to keep covenant with one another when there is sharp disagreement. (*Report*, Section I, p. 1). Classis Grand Rapids East agrees.

The member congregations of Classis GRE have different positions about how to respond to Neland and the decisions of Synod 2022. In adopting this overture, they are agreeing to act with unity to recognize that under the authority of the Church Order Neland may appeal its discipline to Synod and has already done so. Classis GRE does not believe that forbearing with each other while waiting for the outcome of Neland's appeal is the same thing as "never following through," nor is it forsaking accountability or challenging the authority of our denominational governance structures. Classis GRE respects the Church Order and will wait to discern any further response about Neland until the outcome of the appeal at Synod 2023. Classis GRE hopes that this overture will create a season of mutual forbearance, respect, and continued conversation in the classis while Neland's appeal is pending before synod.

Classis GRE also suggests for future consideration that the member congregations use the denominational resources of Pastor Church Resources following Synod 2023 to guide their next steps of discernment in the classis about Neland rather than using an oversight committee.[4] An oversight committee inevitably creates an adversarial posture instead of a pastoral posture of positive engagement.

The *in loco* committee recommended that Classis GRE continue to provide pastoral care for those most directly affected by synodical and classical decisions regarding same-sex sexual relationships, including Neland. (*Report*, Section IV, p. 4). Classis GRE joins the committee in encouraging that such care continue in these challenging times. Classis GRE humbly submits this overture as a suggestion of how mutual love, forbearance, and care might be implemented as an example of Christ-like love for each other in the body of Christ.

[4] The *in loco* committee recommended but did not require that Classis GRE establish an oversight committee to guide the Neland congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex sexual relationships. (Report, Section IV, p. 3)

OVERTURES, COMMUNICATIONS, AND APPEALS

OVERTURE 1

Refrain from Reading Repetitious Notes at the Beginning of Synod

Classis Niagara overtures Synod 2023 to consider the inappropriate nature of the message conveyed by the note appended to the credentials submitted by the Classis Minnkota delegates to Synod 2022 (hereinafter referred to simply as "the note" (and their related Communication).

I. Introduction

"The note" reads as follows:

> The following delegates and alternates from Classis Minnkota protest the seating of women delegates to synod for reasons of conscience: [list of current delegate names]. They wish to make clear that their protest is not against women or against using the gifts of women, but they wish to uphold their understanding of Scripture's teaching regarding the roles of women and men. The Classis Minnkota Communication sent to this year's synod offers a fuller explanation of their convictions.

The related Communication reads as follows:

> The churches of Classis Minnkota affirm that men and women are created by God with equality in essence and dignity but with distinction in some roles. We praise God for the beautiful diversity he created when he made us male and female. These distinct roles are taught in Scripture, derive from God's creative will, and are to be manifest in complementary roles in the family and church. This belief is reflected in an accurate translation of the Belgic Confession, Article 30, which reads, "when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy." (See the original French wording, which refers to persons using the masculine gender.) This belief is therefore not rooted in chauvinism or patriarchy but in Scripture and in our historic confession of faith. It is our hope and prayer that this communication will provide a clear and respectful understanding of our convictions in this matter.
>
> We believe that men and women are created equal as imagebearers of God and as heirs of salvation. We also believe that men and women complement each other in mutually enriching ways and that God has given each gender specific callings in the church and home. We seek to honor and glorify God by celebrating and using the gifts and abilities he has given to us within the roles he has established for us.

A. As a classis we affirm the following convictions:

1. That men and women equally bear the image of God and are called to serve him throughout their lives (Gen. 1:27-28).
2. That we are to follow Christ's example when he honored and respected women during his earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42) and as he continues to equip them for service in his church today (1 Cor. 12:4-7).
3. That the roles for men and women in the church must be defined solely by the Word of God and not by human ideologies such as feminism, male chauvinism, patriarchy, or sexist oppression (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
4. That from the beginning of creation God assigned headship to males in the family and in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:12-13; 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).
5. That the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" and then grounded this argument in the good created order (1 Tim. 2:12-13). The church, therefore, should not ordain women to its authoritative offices.
6. That the purpose of spiritual gifts is not self-fulfillment but service to God and others, to the end that God receives all the glory (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26).
7. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women is contrary to Scripture.

B. We also offer the following observations:

1. That even though Synod 1995 declared that both complementarian and egalitarian views are faithful interpretations of the Word of God, synodical practice since that time has become markedly egalitarian, making it difficult for complementarians to participate in good conscience.
2. That the complementarian position is held by many male and female members and by other officebearers, churches, and classes in the CRCNA.
3. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women has resulted in offense, division, strife, loss of members, and our expulsion from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council in 1997.
4. That celebration of the egalitarian position and practice through video and song (as done at Synod 2018) causes offense and pricks the consciences of those who hold to the historic complementarian position regarding women in church office.

As members of the body of Christ in the CRCNA, Classis Minnkota does not present this communication in order to offend our brothers and sisters who hold to the egalitarian view; rather we wish to explain that our convictions are rooted in the Word of God. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

[Similar notes and communications were submitted by the respective Classis Minnkota delegates at prior annual synods.]

II. Background

While "the note" includes the statement "their protest is not against women or against using the gifts of women" and "Classis Minnkota does not present this communication in order to offend our brothers and sisters who hold to the egalitarian view," consider the practical effect of reading their protest verbatim to the assembly when credentials are reported. For female delegates, all of whom have been ordained, chosen, and delegated by their respective classes, they are obliged to sit quietly and be told that a subset of the other delegates do not accept them as legitimate delegates who "contribute to the broader wisdom."

Certain classis delegations have been submitting these and similar notes in their credentials and related communications for a quarter of a century. If the intent was or is to convince those who hold to an egalitarian view of women in ministry to hew instead to a complementarian view or to refrain from ordaining female officebearers, that has not taken place. A quarter of a century ago, the CRCNA did not ordain female pastors, but year after year, more and more women have been ordained as CRCNA officebearers. Today the count of female pastors alone in the CRCNA surpasses 200.

Registered objections to the ordination of women as officebearers and delegates to synod has persisted for some 25 years, and with a painful impact on female delegates who have served synod over that time (and those who will serve our denomination at future synods). That is not conducive to working collegially on the important tasks that synod must address.

III. Overture

Classis Niagara overtures Synod 2023 to request that, in a spirit of common ministry and the unity of the body of Christ, synod refrain from reading these repetitious notes.

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA has adopted the position that both egalitarian and complementarian views are valid interpretations of Scripture, making annual promotion of the complementarian position superfluous.
2. Reading these registered credential notes verbatim at synod causes harm to female delegates by making it clear that a subset of the synod delegates do not want them there, which undermines our unity and encourages polarity.

Classis Niagara
Wendy de Jong, stated clerk

OVERTURE 2

Make a Statement on Assisted Suicide

I. Background

The Christian Reformed Church in North America has never made a definitive statement on assisted suicide. Meanwhile, public approval of the practice is high, and its legalization is expanding under various monikers such as "death with dignity," "end of life options," and "medical assistance in dying."

The Bible strongly emphasizes the value of human life. Human beings—male and female—were created in the image of God, unique from all other creatures (Gen. 1:27). Even after the fall into sin, this imagebearing status continues and is the reason for prohibiting one person to curse another (James 3:9). Combined with this, Jesus connects insults and cursing with anger when teaching on the sixth commandment (Matt. 5:21-22). His connection is reason to believe that God's moral command against insults and murder is rooted in the inherent value of human life. The Heidelberg Catechism also ties sins of the tongue with anger and God's prohibition of murder (Q. and A.'s 105-107). Human beings are of such value that even verbal insults are sin in God's eyes.

Legalization of assisted suicide is expanding rapidly. In the United States, Oregon was the first to legalize assisted suicide when voters approved the "Death with Dignity Act" in 1994. Others would follow: Washington (2008); Montana (by court case in 2009); Vermont (2013); California (2015); Colorado (2016); Washington, D.C. (2016); Hawaii (2018); New Jersey (2019); Maine (2019); and New Mexico (2021).[1]

In Canada, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Carter v. Canada* on February 6, 2015, that laws against assisted suicide are unconstitutional. The following year, Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) would be implemented. In the years 2016 to 2021, a total of 31,664 people used MAID to end their lives. Alarmingly, the number using MAID has increased each year. Canada's laws on assisted suicide are some of the loosest in the world, to the point that human rights advocates have "grave concern." In 2019, 61-year-old Alan Nichols, who had a history of depression and other medical issues, was approved for MAID and was killed. Nichols listed "hearing loss" as the only health condition. Some disabled Canadians are opting to kill themselves through MAID in the face of mounting bills.[2] MAID is set to expand eligibility on March 17, 2023, to persons with a mental disorder as the sole condition.

---

[1] See euthanasia.procon.org/states-with-legal-physician-assisted-suicide for details on each state's laws and how they were adopted.

[2] "'Disturbing': Experts Troubled by Canada's Euthanasia Laws," by Maria Cheng, Associated Press, Aug. 11, 2022; apnews.com/article/covid-science-health-toronto-7c631558a457188d2bd2b5cfd360a867.

Public opinion polls show significant support for assisted suicide in the United States and Canada. In 2022, Gallup found that 55 percent of Americans said doctor-assisted suicide is morally acceptable, while 41 percent said it was morally wrong.[3] In Canada, a 2020 poll showed that while majorities of Canadians have concerns and caveats about implementation, 77 percent of Canadians support access to MAID as a basic right.[4] Ipsos polls sponsored by Death with Dignity Canada show vast majorities of Canadians favor assisted suicide even when death is not "reasonably foreseeable," even for those whose only underlying condition is mental illness, and also for mature minors.[5]

We live in a secular culture of death, where death is preferable to suffering. A 2022 study has shown that legalizing assisted suicide also raises the overall, or "self-initiated," suicide rates.[6] We, however, follow the Savior who was the man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. He voluntarily left eternal glory for a life of suffering that culminated in death even on a cross for the sake of our eternal life.

Synod has made no official statement on euthanasia or assisted suicide. In its position on abortion, the church condemned "the wanton or arbitrary destruction of any human being at any stage of its development from the point of conception to the point of death" (*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 64). However, it could easily be rationalized that ending the suffering of a terminal patient is hardly "wanton or arbitrary," and therefore assisted suicide might be considered permissible by CRC standards. Especially when under extreme pressure of suffering, human judgment searches for any means to end the suffering. For the sufferer, ending suffering, even by death, is not "wanton or arbitrary." A clearer statement of life is needed.

II. Overture

Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2023 to make a definitive statement on the practice of assisted suicide in all of its forms.

Grounds:

1. The value of human life in God's image is a strong biblical teaching.
2. The CRCNA has not made a statement on euthanasia or assisted suicide.

---

[3] "Americans Say Birth Control, Divorce Most 'Morally Acceptable,'" by Megan Brenan, June 9, 2022; news.gallup.com/poll/393515/americans-say-birth-control-divorce-morally-acceptable.aspx.

[4] "Broad Support for MAID in Canada Has Caveats and Concerns," by Ray Pennings and Angus Reid, Nov. 10, 2020; cardus.ca/research/health/reports/broad-support-for-maid-in-canada-has-caveats-and-concerns.

[5] 2021 Poll: Support for medically assisted dying in Canada; dyingwithdignity.ca/media-center/poll-support-for-medically-assisted-dying-in-canada-2.

[6] "Does Legalizing Assisted Suicide Make Things Better or Worse?" by Anscombe Bioethics Centre; bioethics.org.uk/research/euthanasia-assisted-suicide-papers/suicide-prevention-does-legalising-assisted-suicide-make-things-better-or-worse-professor-david-albert-jones.

3. Legal opportunity for assisted suicide is expanding rapidly for CRCNA members with ailments, tempting them to believe death is preferable to life.
4. Mainstream public opinion is largely in favor of assisted suicide, and CRCNA members breathe the air of a culture of death. Without a definitive statement by the church, members can easily default to popular thinking.

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 3

Refocus Ecclesiological Communication

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

OVERTURE 4

Receive Code of Conduct as Helpful but Not Required

I. Observations

Synod 2022 sent to the churches the proposed Code of Conduct, asking for a closer look and feedback. We understand that this proposed code arose out of a desire by the broader church to speak into the problem of abuses of power that is around in every age, and in more recent history has come to light through lamentable and evil expressions of sexual abuse present also in the church. Truly we are a people who sin in thought, word, and deed, which is why we always need a great Savior, not only to forgive our grievous sins but also over time to powerfully conform us more and more into his likeness.

We greatly desire Christ's church to contend for righteousness and holiness, in our doctrine and in our life as a people. So our concerns about the proposed Code of Conduct do not arise from a deficiency in a desire for holy living; rather, our concerns arise from not only some particular wording but also how this code would actually weaken the church and make her more susceptible to abuse in the future.

II. Overture

Therefore Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2023 to gratefully receive the proposed Code of Conduct as providing some helpful guidance in churches dealing with the problem of abuse, but not to adopt it as a requirement for serving as an officebearer or a ministry leader in the CRCNA because of significant concerns and weaknesses.

Grounds:

1. The proposed Code of Conduct's language is too often filled with vague terminologies that are themselves open to subjective interpretation, not objective points of rule-keeping that the code desires to put forward.
2. The proposed code is heavy on man-made legal, business, and academic terminologies, as well as on phrases that do not appear to organically arise from Scripture, all of which give the code the flavor of arising from a human resources office or a dean's desk rather than arising from the church or God's Word.
3. The proposed code presumes that the problem with abuse comes about from a lack of having specific rules in place rather than from a lack of a changed heart, and therefore can be fixed by writing more rules; we as Reformed believers understand, however, that the law is powerless to change a heart when it comes to dealing with others. The problem is not with a lack of rules but rather with a lack of a changed heart.
4. The Christian Reformed Church has proven in its history that, while not always doing so perfectly, it has and does take the sin of abuse seriously and has a history of acting to remove abusive individuals from

positions of leadership in the church when such abuse has been uncovered.

5. All officebearers must already sign the Covenant for Officebearers and make a public vow when they take office, where they promise before God and his people to "do the work of [their] offices faithfully, in a way worthy of [their] calling" (Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons) and to uphold not only in faith but also in life the Reformed confessions, where we are taught how "I am not to belittle, hate, insult . . . my neighbor" and that "God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 40).
6. The Ten Commandments, as well as being a summary of God's law, consistently lay out for Christians (leaders of all types) how we ought to behave and conduct ourselves; abuse toward others does not arise from our lack of knowing right from wrong, for we in the Reformed tradition make knowledge of the Ten Commandments an important part of our weekly worship services and Sunday school/catechism instruction.
7. The "spiritual" section guidelines will weaken the elders and deacons in the church by restraining their speaking as God's voice into the hearts and lives of a people who at times need to be challenged and rightly made to feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their present way of living.
8. The "spiritual" section guidelines will weaken the pulpit of the church by restraining ministers of the Word in their preaching, though in that moment when they preach (when in alignment with Scripture) they are to be heard as the "voice of God" to God's people ("Among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them"—Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.1.5).
9. The "safety" section guidelines never objectively define what is a "safe environment" but rather give a vague subjective description ("where all persons are respected and valued"). A key weakness in that is that officebearers or ministry leaders will become more hesitant to address problems of sin, leaving church members in that sin longer, which is spiritually dangerous and leaves a more fertile ground for future abuses in the church.
10. There is confusion in the proposed Church Order changes as to whom the code would apply (proposed changes to Art. 83 speak of only officebearers being held accountable, though proposed changes to Art. 5-b speak of officebearers and "ministry leaders" being required to sign it).

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 5

Commend Code of Conduct as Helpful but Not as a Church Order Revision

I. Background

Synod 2019 adopted a series of recommendations from the Committee Addressing the Abuse of Power, including a recommendation that synod "draft a code of conduct for all employed ministry staff within the CRC" (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 554, 795). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this matter was not taken up until June 2021 at the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates, at which time the COD was instructed "to devise a plan for implementation for the denomination, classes, and churches, per the instruction of Synod 2019" (*Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Council of Delegates 2021*, p. 633). Synod 2022 was asked to revise the Church Order with the inclusion of the Code of Conduct, to be signed by "all office-bearers and ministry leaders" (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 899).

Synod 2022 did not accede to that recommendation but instead chose to forward an amended Code of Conduct to the churches for consideration at Synod 2023. If adopted, this Code of Conduct would be incorporated into the Church Order, and all "ministry leaders" would be required to sign it—and those who violate this code could be subject to special discipline.

We want to acknowledge up front the very serious problem of abuse of power within the church; indeed, the church has long been too willing to look the other way in cases of misconduct and abuse, and this has indeed caused great harm. We lament this reality, and we can affirm the need for the local church to do better. Indeed, those who are guilty of gross misconduct should indeed be held accountable for their actions—up to and including special discipline when it is warranted.

However, this Code of Conduct is likely not the solution that we need. The following examples illustrate the weaknesses.

A. Language

The language in this document is vague and is subject to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. For example, it is expected that "ministry leaders" will all have to sign this Code of Conduct, but nowhere is it specified who this refers to; surely elders and deacons, but what about greeters and ushers? What about the chairperson of the hospitality committee? And on it goes. What are the ramifications if a greeter, who signs on, violates the form? They are not subject to special discipline—so would they be liable to church discipline?

Even words that appear at first glance to be self-defined are not. Words like "safe" can mean a lot of different things. Indeed, for some, having their ethical positions challenged or contradicted is not "safe"; encouraging people to step into areas of ministry that are not familiar can feel "unsafe" in the moment. Even the definition of the word "abuse" is often not

agreed on. For some, hearing a differing viewpoint has been termed "abuse." "Unwanted physical touch" could mean a hug given by a well-intentioned person during the greeting time in a worship service to a person not expecting or wanting it. Does this count as abusive? None of this is clearly defined by the Code of Conduct.

B. Overreach

Originally synod intended that the Code of Conduct was to be signed by employees of the denomination; however, the Council of Delegates expanded that mandate to include "all ministry leaders" of all churches and classes; in other words, they took the unusual step of broadening the scope far beyond what synod intended. In fact, they did this without intending to hear any feedback from the churches! It was only when Synod 2022 put the brakes on that the Code of Conduct was distributed more broadly for feedback from the wider church. Such a major change to our governance, should, at the very least, have been brought to churches for input. Perhaps more importantly, it is generally not our practice to have such specific church policies imposed upon the churches from the denominational leadership. The denominational structures should be serving the local church by resourcing them, not setting their policy for them. Those churches who wish to make use of this Code of Conduct should feel free to do so; other churches may wish to adopt their own code, and they should have the freedom to do this. It is ironic that a document that is meant to prevent the abuse and misuse of power is being required of all churches in this way.

> Furthermore, the Code of Conduct requires behaviors that are beyond the scope of what the church can monitor or expect. Signees are expected to "create an environment of hospitality"—but that's not clear. Are all members expected to be warm and social? Invite others over for a meal? These are valuable practices, but should they be expected of everyone? Signees are expected to keep all of their "professional relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors . . . [including] jokes." This is good—but again, who will monitor or enforce this? Should the pastor visit congregants at work, to ensure that no inappropriate comments are being made? Are the elders responsible to ensure that fellow church members don't exercise "inappropriate emotional behaviors" (whatever those are) at the office? And if so, who will monitor or enforce this?

Again, we stress that recognizing and preventing such cases of misconduct is important. The church is no place for any form of misuse of power, or of abuse. But this Code of Conduct, while well intentioned, is not something that should be required of all churches and all "ministry leaders" (whatever is meant by this). Rather, synod should commend this as a useful document to the churches, to adopt or use as they see fit.

II. Overture

Classis Columbia overtures Synod 2023 not to adopt the Code of Conduct as a revision to the Church Order but instead to commend it to the churches as a helpful resource for their leaders.

Grounds:

1. The proposed Code of Conduct reflects a significant expansion of the original mandate given by Synod 2019. The COD was instructed to create a Code of Conduct for ministry staff within the CRC; what is being proposed is a mandate for those in leadership in the local church.
2. The proposed Code of Conduct reflects a top-down approach, which mandates church policy at the local level rather than allowing churches to determine for themselves what is most suitable for their context.
3. The proposed Code of Conduct has language that is vague and subject to misinterpretation:
   a. "Ministry leaders" could include anyone from greeters, coffee servers, youth ministry leaders, to officebearers—but this is not specified. Who is held to this Code of Conduct?
   b. "Abuse" is not clearly defined; for some, "abuse" could mean speaking truth in a way that is less than sensitive, or hearing an opinion that is contrary to their own.
   c. "Safe" is highly subjective, as indeed the gospel confronts us in ways that are never "safe"; for some, having their moral or ethical positions challenged can be construed as "unsafe."
   d. "Unwanted physical touch" could mean a hug by a well-intentioned person during the greeting time at church, directed at someone who is not comfortable with receiving affection.
4. Those who violate the proposed Code of Conduct would be subject to special discipline, meaning that a person (again, it is not clear who this applies to) could be removed from office for a violation of a mandate that is vague to begin with.
5. The proposed Code of Conduct is expansive, requiring behaviors that are beyond the scope of what such a document should include:
   a. "To the best of my ability, I will contribute to an environment of hospitality." But it is not clear what this means: Are all signers expected to be warm and social? Are all to be engaged in opening their homes to guests?
   b. "I will keep all of my professional relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors . . . [including] jokes." Who will monitor this? Who decides what is an inappropriate joke?
   c. "I will appropriately use accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits." This mandates church officers to require the church to have audits/reviews by outside auditors. This would add a substantial expense and burden that is unnecessary.

6. The Code of Conduct offers helpful guidance to address real concerns within the church, and thus it should be commended to the churches for consideration, and for inclusion, or modification as the local church deems best.

Classis Columbia
Roger D. Kramer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 6

Reject the Proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to reject the proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

I. Introductory comments

A. We are wholeheartedly supportive of discipleship and accountability within the body that aims to ensure that godly, servant-like leadership marks our church life.

B. We are earnestly opposed to any abuse, whether it be emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological, sexual, or other.

C. We are aware that abuse happens, sometimes in places where we might least expect it, and sometimes we least expect it because we don't look hard enough for it.

D. We believe that abuse by those in authority does significant harm to those who have suffered from it and brings dishonor to Christ's name.

II. Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to reject the proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

Grounds:

1. The Code of Conduct clarifies nothing of our beliefs. We subscribe to (and theoretically hold each other accountable to) the Three Forms of Unity precisely because they clarify what we believe vis-à-vis matters of faith and biblical teaching that have been at times the subject of doubt or dispute. The Code of Conduct serves no such purpose and merely layers onto moral commitments we have already made in numerous ways. In what way, then, is the code necessary or helpful?

2. We are not under confusion as to whether or not abuse is acceptable before God. Knowing already from Scripture that abuse is not acceptable, we should not expect that a Code of Conduct will operate to effect where Scripture has failed. We are promised that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, but have no similar promise concerning codes of conduct.

3. The Code of Conduct, as proposed, targets only certain sins, and as such is incomplete as a Code of Conduct. The code says nothing of other moral commitments before God and to his people, as if they were lesser. Additionally, the code is almost entirely horizontal in nature and does not cover any vows for sins mainly of a vertical nature. Certainly we do not believe that these sins are less heinous.

4. Currently we have Scripture, the Church Order, the Confessions, the Contemporary Testimonies, the Covenant for Officebearers, our profession of faith vows, our ordination and installation vows, the charges to officebearers, and the counsel of our brothers and sisters in Christ—all of which are means for accountability in the carrying out of our duties. We should not suppose that when we find these to be lacking, layering a Code of Conduct will be effective where these have failed.
5. The Code of Conduct has already been expanded from the original mandate—that being a Code of Conduct for employees—to now include all officebearers. Given that the code is titled as being for "Ministry Leaders," it is reasonable to believe that some may plan for another mandatory expansion of its applicability to all church volunteers. We oppose such proliferation and micromanagement of the life of the local church.
6. Introduction of the concept of "safety" in a moral code is undefined and ripe for abuse. The Bible knows nothing of the world's currently popular notions of safety. Scripture does not demand (or even prize, at times) safety. It does demand holiness, but this code seeks to demand an undefined notion of safety. This concept is routinely weaponized in service of the devil—and even now is being used to criticize and impugn decisions of Synod 2022.
7. Where existing accountability has been lacking, greater accountability should be exercised through existing means rather than supposing that we only lacked the means and not the will. God has equipped his church with Spirit and Word. God has provided pastors, elders, and deacons to lead in accountability to one another. God has called for holiness and servanthood in his church. We have the tools and the tasking that we need. Those ignoring the tools and tasking provided by God ought to be held accountable to existing standards before adding new.
8. The Code of Conduct contains ambiguous and confusing language that will inevitably lead to a host of interpretation and application problems. Examples include the following:
    a. "I will support adults who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that appropriately empowers the person who has been victimized." Just what constitutes "support" and "appropriately empowers" in this statement? Further, does this statement insinuate that anyone who alleges abuse (including emotional) has in fact been victimized even before that has been established?
    b. "I will actively promote a safe environment. . . ." Will it be considered by some to be unsafe to uphold biblical sexual ethics? The charge is already being wielded.
    c. "I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest." Disclose to whom? The minister? The president of council? A denominational representative? Safe Church? Also, perceived by whom?

The officebearer or anyone who wants to make a charge of conflict of interest?

d. "I will work within my professional competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate." What does that mean for a carpenter, farmer, welder, accountant, or what have you on council? When is a farmer deemed to be outside of his "professional competence" when counseling a parishioner? Who determines "as appropriate"? Remember, this is a vow, and it is supposed to provide clarity and uniformity.

e. "I will keep all of my professional relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors. This includes not engaging in inappropriate intimate contact or a sexual relationship, unwanted physical contact, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes." Who will parse "inappropriate emotional behavior"? What about "unwanted physical contact"? An unwanted handshake in cold season? A touch on the elbow at a funeral visitation? Using sweeping subjective terms such as appropriate and inappropriate is inappropriate for a document purporting to provide clarity and uniformity. Do we suppose that judgment of these terms is universal? Can we say, then, that this Code of Conduct sets us up to have more harmonious and godly relationships?

9. Abuse in any form is deplorable, especially in Christ's church, so the CRCNA is right to aggressively push against it. However, the best way for the church to fight against this sin is by properly using the means (tools) prescribed to it in God's Word—namely, the means of grace summarized in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. To that end, we've prepared an "Acknowledgment of Officebearers' Obligation to Prevent Abuse in the Church" (see Appendix) that individual churches may want to consider in lieu of the proposed Code of Conduct.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

APPENDIX

Acknowledgment of Officebearers' Obligation to Prevent Abuse in the Church

This document is offered not as a code to adopt, but rather as an acknowledgment that if elders and ministers are fulfilling the marks of the church, no additional codes are necessary.

The best way to prevent abuse and all other sins is by regular participation in God's ordinary means of grace. As a minister, elder, or deacon in

the CRC, my primary duty is ensuring that my local congregation faithfully makes these means available by fulfilling the marks of the true church as summarized in Belgic Confession Article 29.

The vows I have taken at my profession of faith and ordination and in signing the Covenant for Officebearers commit me to guide my congregation in faithfully fulfilling these three marks as follows:

A. Engaging in the pure preaching of the gospel

   I will work to provide worship services and other activities which communicate God's hate and wrath for the sin that drives abuse as well as his grace, mercy, and peace for both the victims of abuse and also those who repent of it. I will do this by means of the following:

   - Using orthodox hermeneutics consistent with the Reformed tradition rather than eisegetically derived interpretations influenced by a culture that promotes sin and abuse in antithesis to God's truth. The greatest form of abuse is authoritatively lying about what God's Word says.
   - Feeding our congregation a robust diet consisting of the full counsel of God's Word. Ordinarily, a sufficient diet includes two worship services on the Lord's Day centered on expository preaching of the Word, as well as additional catechetical training for all ages throughout the week. Well-fed Christians are better equipped to recognize and abate temptations to abuse others and have greater confidence to protect themselves from abusers.
   - Regulating our worship according to God's Word by including all of the worship elements God commands and abstaining from practices he has not commanded. We will remind ourselves weekly of God's manifest law so as to be convicted to confess our sin, be assured of God's pardon made possible by Jesus Christ, and be challenged to gratefully live in a way that repudiates abuse in any form.

B. Making use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them

   The physical nature of the sacraments reminds our congregation that we each belong in body and soul to our faithful Savior, so we must not use what belongs to Christ to abuse others or allow ourselves to be abused. Victims of abuse will be reminded in the sacraments that no matter how deeply they've been wounded, Christ's mark on their life will never be erased. I will do this by means of the following:

   - Making sure our congregation is adequately prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper by discerning the body of Christ and calling each individual to deeply examine his faith, hope, and love and to search out indwelling sin.
   - Reminding fellow congregants that the mark placed on our heads at baptism, no matter how long ago it was applied, or whether or

not we remember it being placed there, is still present though the symbol of the water is long gone. God's promises to us are certain forever. We must be diligent to remember that every person in our congregation has been given this mark as well and therefore must be royally treated as a child of the King.

C. Practicing church discipline for correcting faults

Our discipline will be both positive (building up the church in knowledge and sanctification) and negative (convicting sin and calling for repentance). I will be vigilant to identify and eradicate abuse in our congregation by means of the following:

- Training both our children and our adults in solid theology so that they properly understand who God is, who mankind is as a fallen imagebearer of God in need of salvation, how salvation can be obtained in Christ, and how that then obligates us to live. At its core, abuse is made possible (certainly for the perpetrator and often for the victim) when people misunderstand what it means to be an imagebearer of God.
- Submitting myself to the oversight of fellow council members through robust mutual censure and eagerly inviting church visitors from classis to examine our life and work. The light this oversight sheds may seem uncomfortable at times, but abuse hides in the shadows.
- Being quick to confront sin in every form within our congregation. Large serious sins such as abuse most often begin as small ignored sins.
- Working to keep the wolves out of our flock, understanding that wolves can appear from both inside and outside the church.

I will work to limit the scope of church activities to fulfilling these three marks, understanding that fulfilling these obligations requires every resource we've been given, and that the church has no scriptural or confessional mandate to do otherwise.

The Belgic Confession goes on to describe the fruits of consistent use of these marks to form "Christians [who] by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ . . . love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works. Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him" (Art. 29).

In short, by committing myself and my congregation to diligent use of these means, by God's grace our church environment will be a hostile, unsafe habitat for any form of abuser.

OVERTURE 7

Do Not Accept and/or Use Code of Conduct as a Binding Document

I. Overture

Classis Lake Superior overtures Synod 2023 not to accept and/or use as a binding document the Code of Conduct presented to churches for review and input by the Synod 2022.

Grounds:

1. The Preamble insufficiently sets up the Code of Conduct.
2. The Code of Conduct uses phrases, inferences, and opinions that are not sufficiently laid out to get an understanding of the motives and intentions of the authors.

II. Background

Below is a discussion of the Code of Conduct statements, pointing out the phrases, inferences, and opinions that seem to include hidden motives and intentions.

A. Preamble

1. In an attempt to possibly drive its agenda, the Preamble presents an interpretation of Philippians 2, which is not the intent of the passage and pulls from this misunderstood emphasis a "calling" for "all of us who are united to Christ," which confuses salvation in Christ with a humble use of power.
    a. Even if one insists on using the Philippians hymn as an opening, it would be better to focus instead on "putting on the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5). Christ consistently challenged the spiritual leaders in not-so-kind words, especially when he spoke as one with authority. However, would it be better to start with Jesus' direct statements about leadership in response to the apostle's mother's seeking positions of leadership for her sons in the coming kingdom? He explicitly speaks against such selfish leadership, starting with the statement "Not so with you . . ." then gives them instruction toward humble service to others (Matt. 20:20-27).
    b. The hymn of Philippians 2 is not intended to show us how Christ, in use of his power, was "humbling himself toward a life-sacrificing kind of obedience" so that we, in turn, will accept our calling and use our power for "others to thrive." Rather, the hymn of Philippians 2 is a beautiful statement of the eternal plan of God for his Son to pay the debt for our sins by his death on the cross.
    c. To read that this hymn is about the "use of power" and then to errantly say that we are "called, in this passage and others, to this way of being," is to elevate "use of power" as the primary message of salvation by God—as if a Christian is saved if he accepts the call

to use his power in "humbling himself toward a life-sacrificing kind of obedience."

2. The Code of Conduct also quotes the Confession of Belhar in the second footnote, elevating this confession erroneously to be on the same level of authority within our denomination as the Heidelberg Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession (and even Our World Belongs to God). Therefore, quoting the Confession of Belhar within the same level of authority is implying that we need to accept this confession as carrying the weight of a Form of Unity within our denomination. But this is indeed not the case.

B. Code Statement One

1. As a ministry leader, I commit to the following:

   Confidentiality

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

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

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

2. Response—Our recommended rewrite

   Confidentiality

   I will use a biblical concept of confidentiality which honors a trustworthy holding of a person's information responsibly and respectfully.

   Because my ministry leadership is to elevate Christ, I will not use for my own gain any information of others which I may hold.

   My use of confidentiality will respect the laws of any 501(c)3 to report situations of obvious neglect, physical, or sexual abuse to the proper authorities.

3. Scripture references

   - Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. —Proverbs 11:13
   - Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. —Philippians 2:3-4

4. In reference to Code Statement One as written

   - The code statement is referring to an unknown source when it says, "I will use confidentiality appropriately . . ." Where is this source? Who determines the church leader's use of confidentiality? The local classis constitution?

- The one reference stated is "required by law." Although this is true, it does raise questions of the author's intent. The code statement comes off as disrespectful and coercive of the very people who are to sign this code.

C. Code Statement Two

1. **Relational**

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

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

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

2. Response—Our recommended rewrite

   Relational

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

   I will conduct myself with respect, love, integrity, and truthfulness toward all—no matter one's human status or condition.

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

3. In reference to Code Statement Two as written

   - On first reading, this code statement is admirable. But without a source to reveal the motivations and intentions of the author concerning "position, status, race, gender, age, or ability," this code statement is subject to judgments and manipulation.
   - It is impossible for anyone to truly follow this code statement. No one is able to "speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ . . ." unless they have the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit within them. Yet this code does not refer to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit within people of church leadership. So the code statement presents itself as an unachievable ideal.
   - Again, the motives of the authors of this code statement are in question. The list of "position, status, race, gender, age, or ability" in this code statement seems to be a human construct based on a list of people who have been hurt in the church. If a church leader signs this document, is that leader not allowed to disagree with someone on this list without the disagreement taken as an "abuse of power"?

D. Code Statement Three

1. **Financial**

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

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

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

2. Response—Our recommended rewrite

   Financial

   I will seek to match designated funds to their intended purposes.

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

   I will appropriately use accounting practices agreed upon by my authorities and submit to agreed-upon reviews and/or audits.

3. In reference to Code Statement Three as written

   - The extreme presentation of this code statement causes the signer to wonder: Does "I will ensure that funds are used for their intended ministry purposes" mean that if the funds are accidently misused because of a flawed system of accounting, the people in authority are now labeled as abusers?
   - To sign this document with the final current sentence written in the code statement, a leader would be agreeing to the "accepted accounting practices" of people he doesn't know or trust, and this is disrespectful of hardworking and diligent ministry leaders.

E. Code Statement Four

1. **Intimate Relationships**

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

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

2. Response—Our recommended rewrite

   Intimate Relationships

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

Because of biblical standards and appropriate boundaries, I will professionally represent my ministry influence by keeping all ministry relationships free from inappropriate emotional and sexual behaviors. I will be especially careful concerning inappropriate intimate contact or a sexual relationship, unwanted physical contacts, sexual comments, gestures, or sexually based humor.

3. In reference to Code Statement Four as written
   - This is the first time the code says, "which are informed by the Scriptures." And, therefore, it can trusted and understood what is meant by the "boundaries in all relationships."
   - However, the code statement is again misleading as to the motives and intentions of the author. If there is an accusation against a person in authority from someone who feels that a comment made or a gesture was inappropriate, does that accusation now determine the person in authority to be an abuser? If a leader signs this code of conduct and someone makes an accusation against him, is he an abuser even if the accusation is either made up or a mistaken response to something that is completely innocent?

F. Code Statement Five

1. **Safety**

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

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

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

2. Response – Our recommended rewrite

   Safety

   I will actively promote a safe environment where the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit is welcomed and the power of evil is driven out in Christ's authority. This environment will be a place of a balance of the love and truth of Christ. There will be no tolerance of an evil mode of operation including flattery, intimidation, slander, threats, and rage, for these promote abuse, bullying, and harassment.

   I will follow professional and legal requirements to report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors to the proper government authorities.

I will be a support to all adults who are accused of abuse as well as those who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that appropriately seeks the truth, and I will seek to apply godly strategies of healing and discipline.

3. In reference to Code Statement Five as written
   - Because we do not know the motives or intentions of the author, this code statement sets up a potentially dangerous atmosphere with differing opinions of what a "safe environment" is. Our world and our church have too many opinions as to the definition of a "safe environment," and without biblical support, this code statement is dangerous.
   - There is an assumption that all who sign this code of conduct will know the definitions of "any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment." However, what happens if a preacher humbly and perhaps even quietly teaches from the Word of God about a sin issue in our world today and it offends someone? Would that preacher now be an abuser or a bully? Who is in charge of determining these definitions?
   - Also, the last sentence does not have a source of definition of what it means to be a "victim." This raises red flags to any leader who is trying hard to understand parameters of being a strong yet compassionate leader. Is a victim someone who disagrees with a sermon? Just what is a victim?

G. Code Statement Six

1. **Spiritual**

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

   I will teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical and Christlike, and I will seek other people's well-being (Matt. 18; Col. 1:28; 3:16).

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

2. Response

   Well, there you go—well-written code statement.

H. Code of Conduct Additional Commitments

1. First commitment

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

   a. Response—Our recommended rewrite

I will commit to a strategy of evaluation of my professional competence and make references to other professionals as appropriate.

b. In reference to first commitment as written

At first read, this "commitment" seems agreeable, but again, it borders on disrespect for people in places of church authority and reveals a motivation or intention that is unhealthy.

2. Second, third, and fourth commitments

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

I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.

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

a. Response—Our recommended rewrite

Second, third, and fourth commitments

In the presence of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ and the present Holy Spirit, I will promote working in "truth and love," which means I will be transparent and honest.

I will speak and act directly to situations and people without seeking to use agendas to manipulate.

In all that I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority which reflects God's call to humility, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity in heart, and peace (Matt. 5:3-9).

b. In reference to the second, third, and fourth commitment as written

- Again, what is the source of definition of "nonexploitive ways," and who is going to be the jury to determine whether a leader is following this commitment?
- There is a weak understanding of commitment presented here, based perhaps upon "psychological" rather than "biblical" parameters. First, commitment needs to be a surrender to operate according to the will of the Father, through the grace of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, "In the presence of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ and the present Holy Spirit, I will promote . . ."

3. Fifth commitment

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

ensure that I use any power entrusted to me fully in service to Christ.

a. Response—Our recommended rewrite

   In the event that I, by the conviction of the Holy Spirit and by submission to clear evidence, come to the conclusion that I engaged in a misuse of power either intentionally or unintentionally, I will listen to and be compassionate toward those harmed. I will work toward rebuilding the trust that has been broken and turn toward the Lord in surrender, submission, obedience, and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. I will prayerfully seek restoration with God's justice, Christ's compassion, truth, and grace. I will humbly submit to the insight and accountability of those in God-given authority over me to ensure that I engage in humble and accountable ministry in service to Christ. I firmly resolve with the help of God's grace to commit to the humble and competent use of authority as a leader.

b. In reference to the fifth commitment as written

   Again, this commitment is disrespectful of pastors who operate with a genuine call to represent the Lord Jesus Christ in all they do. In order for many pastors to sign a commitment like this, it would need to include surrender, submission, obedience, cooperation with the Holy Spirit, and most certainly prayer.

Classis Lake Superior
Henry G. Gunnink, stated clerk

OVERTURE 8

Do Not Implement or Mandate the Code of Conduct

I. Background

Lamenting and responding to the reality of abuse of power within the church, Synod 2018 mandated the formation of a committee to "bring recommendations . . . to Synod 2019 regarding how the CRCNA can best address the patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 523-24). Among the committee's subsequent recommendations, adopted by Synod 2019, were the creation of training on abuse of power for pastors, taking steps to prevent abuse in CRCNA offices (including new limits on the use of nondisclosure agreements), the formation of a Dignity Team, and the drafting of a code of conduct "for all employed ministry staff within the CRC." The mandate further directed that the code of conduct, to be presented to Synod 2020 for approval, "shall be . . . signed by all ministry personnel who are employed by the CRCNA, local churches, and classes" and shall be "reviewed annually, as part of annual evaluations" (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 611, 795).

The Council of Delegates, acting on behalf of Synods 2020 and 2021, followed that mandate in the formation of a Code of Conduct presented to Synod 2022 for adoption. After robust discussion, Synod 2022 deferred action, giving time for congregations and classes to provide feedback.

In discussion throughout Classis Iakota, it became clear that while there is deep appreciation for the spirit and intent of the Code of Conduct and a shared commitment to eliminating abuse of power at all levels of Christ's church, there are specific concerns with the theological framework of the Code of Conduct and the polity implications of the scope of Synod 2019's mandate. Specifically, we find the Code of Conduct's implicit theology of power and authority to be one-sided and reductionistic, and we question the polity precedent and pastoral wisdom of synod mandating a static document across all local contexts and reaching into nonordained ministry leaders, including at the microlevel of annual reviews. Such a centralized approach does not reflect deep trust in the integrity or contextualized ministry wisdom of local councils and classes. It also seems out of step with the reconciling admonishment of the Belhar Confession that reconciled unity "can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God" (Art. 2).

II. Overture

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to take the following actions:

A. Acknowledge the tragic reality of the abuse of power within the church and our denomination.

B. Recognize that deficiencies in the present Code of Conduct preclude its healthy functioning as a tool to prevent abuse, and therefore synod should not encourage that it be required throughout the denomination.

C. Encourage church councils and classes to appropriately respond to the reality of the abuse of power within the church and our denomination by doing the following:

   1. Examining their governance models and procedures to (a) assess whether all officebearers and ministry leaders are truly held accountable to scriptural standards of behavior and the right exercise of authority and (b) ensure that the governance models and procedures are transparent and open to all members of the church.
   2. Making clear the expectation that all officebearers and ministry leaders will be held accountable to the standards of Scripture regarding the exercise of power and authority for all those who govern in the church.
   3. Studying and reinvigorating the exercise of mutual accountability and church discipline, noting that when an abuse of power is tolerated, the failure is ultimately the failure of officebearers to exercise church discipline and robust scriptural oversight of one another.

Grounds:

1. The Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is redundant and therefore unnecessary. Everything the Code of Conduct attempts to achieve is better accomplished by Scripture itself and by the process of church discipline that is outlined in Scripture and in the CRCNA's Church Order.
2. The opening paragraphs of the Code of Conduct's preamble reveal a questionable theological foundation. The preamble presents an often one-sided and reductionist view of Scripture's treatment of the gift and exercise of authority and power, highlighting the need for kenosis (emptying) while giving insufficient attention to the need for the exercise of power in the church to govern the body of Christ in order to confront, admonish, convict, and call to repentance those who are in sin (as modeled by Jesus himself in his earthly ministry and as compelled by the epistles of Christ's apostles).
3. The vague and extrabiblical terminology in the Code of Conduct (e.g., "abuse of power," "bullying," "harassment") lacks the scriptural context in which those terms might be accurately interpreted; that terminology is thus open to broad and potentially abusive interpretation. Scripture names specific sins in biblical contexts that allow the church to properly identify specific sins and appropriately hold accountable brothers and sisters in Christ (including those in positions of institutional power).
4. A mandated, one-size-fits-all Code of Conduct does not reflect the beautifully varied contextualized realities of the CRCNA. God has

blessed the CRCNA with different Canadian and U.S. legal and cultural contexts, rural and urban contexts, and ethnic majority and minority contexts where the understanding and proper exercise of authority find varied healthy expressions captured by unique grammars and patterns of community formation that cannot be adequately captured in a uniform document.

5. Mandating the use of the Code of Conduct for unordained ministry leaders and employees in classes and in local churches establishes a new and unhealthy precedent, seeking to enforce orthopraxis in areas where we have refrained from enforcing orthodoxy. As God is Lord of our hearts and minds and not just our words and actions, for synod to mandate unordained local ministry leaders to sign a Code of Conduct but not something akin to the Covenant for Officebearers would be to privilege behavior over belief in ways that are neither Reformed nor wise. It would also establish a precedent of increasing centralized control of local ministry personnel, including local human resource practices, that could unintentionally contribute to the very patterns of institutional abuse of power that the code itself seeks to avoid.

Classis Iakota
Bernard J. Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 9

Reject the Proposed Code of Conduct

Classis Southeast U.S. overtures Synod 2023 to reject the proposed Code of Conduct to be signed by ministry leaders.

Comments

- We condemn any abuse of power, the misuse of one's position and authority as a ministry leader that may lead to take advantage of, manipulate, or control another person.
- As reported by previous synods, incidents of abuse occur in the church and should be handled in an appropriate manner; however, we do not believe that a Code of Conduct is the correct way of eliminating or curbing abuse in the church.
- The Code of Conduct recommended for adoption is one-sided and an overreach in regard to the oath ministers take at their ordination.

Grounds:

1. The Code of Conduct is an overreach since the role and responsibility of the pastor is prescribed in broad terms in the Form for the Ordination/Installation of Ministers (1971). Those entering into the ministry of the Word are exhorted,

   > Keep watch over yourself and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Shepherd the church of God which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Love Christ and feed his sheep, serving as an overseer not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly. Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Hold in trust those matters confided to you in counsel or confession.

2. Part of the ordination/installation of officebearers is the signing of the Form of Subscription. Asking officebearers to sign the Code of Conduct elevates the code to the standard of the Form of Subscription.
3. Requiring all church staff and volunteers to sign the Code of Conduct means that all enter voluntarily into a contractual agreement. It is not clear what the possible legal ramifications are for the church and also for individuals who sign the Code of Conduct.
4. The Code of Conduct as presented does not specify any repercussions for those violating the code. Besides, the denomination already has an avenue in place for dealing with abuses in the church.
5. Having *all* ministry leaders (which we understand to include not only pastors and councils but also church staff, all teachers, and helpers) sign the Code of Conduct will make it much more difficult to recruit volunteers for these positions over concerns of possibly being accused of a form of abuse.
6. It is not clearly defined what happens when pastors, councils, staff, and volunteers refuse to sign the Code of Conduct.
7. The wording of the Code of Conduct is vague and one-sided. There are clear examples of abuse that should be dealt with by means already available in the church; however, the Code of Conduct leaves it up to the individual to determine what to them constitutes abuse. For instance, a student who needs correcting in class, a hand placed on a person's shoulder, a poorly expressed thought, or a misinterpreted gesture, all done with the best intentions, may be interpreted as abuse.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

OVERTURE 10

Provide Procedures for Discipline of Church Leaders

I. Introduction

The CRCNA has made significant strides in addressing abuse of power by leaders in its congregations. In 2016 the Church Order Supplement, Article 84, was amended to include specifics regarding sexual abuse. The Code of Conduct for church leaders will be considered for adoption at Synod 2023. And the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee regarding the training program for pastors makes a significant step toward abuse prevention (*Acts of Synod 2019,* pp. 587-615). This overture seeks to address the identification of abuse of power, its prevention, and the church's response in more specific ways.

II. Overture

John and Debra Kamer, in obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and for the benefit of the church of Jesus Christ through the denomination of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and as members of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, humbly submit this overture to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

We overture synod to do the following:

A. Provide procedures for the reporting of abuse and the appropriate application for the accountability, transparency, discipline, and restitution relevant to abuse of power by existing and past church leadership, in keeping with the intent of the 2019 Addressing the Abuse of Power report.

B. Assure that each member and attender of a CRCNA congregation have the safety and protection from all aspects of abuse of power as designated in Church Order Articles 82-84, in the Addressing the Abuse of Power report, and in the Code of Conduct.

   1. Provide a procedure for two or more members to bring formal action of abuse to the denomination by reporting abuse of power committed by specifically named individuals in leadership, who in specific ways meet criteria for abuse of power as defined in the Addressing the Abuse of Power report and by the denomination.

   2. Streamline and make the reporting procedure effective by requiring mandatory training in abuse of power prevention, including an accountability system for the designated member of the safe church team at the local congregation and at classis.

C. Define the leadership (church leaders) to include present and past ministers of the Word, elders, deacons, youth pastors, church staff, volunteers, and present and past classis leaders.

D. Provide alleged victims procedures for working through the process of addressing abuse, as guided by the Safe Church ministry of the

CRCNA to address the formal action, to include, but not be limited to, testing, diagnosis, harm assessment, restitution, and reconciliation so as to provide relief to victims of abuse and provide godly compliance and the process of accountability of existing church leaders in their calling—all in keeping with the attitude of the Addressing the Abuse of Power report and the denominational structure.

E. Establish a Chart of Offenses that will measure the seriousness of the abuse and include actual and prospective penalties, where abusive leadership can result in suspension, removal, disciplinary action, and financial consequences for the purpose of restitution, with Church Order Articles 82-84 being updated and amended to include these specifics.

F. Define and require, in part, that mandatory psychological testing include either the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) or the MCMI-III (Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory) as administered and evaluated by a qualified psychotherapist, a mental health professional selected by the victim(s) who is experienced in this therapeutic discipline to provide a diagnosis, including an evaluation of a level of severity, as well as recommended actions for intervention based upon these results. Testing should also include familial and close acquaintance interviews, if the health professional deems necessary, in order to provide a more accurate and timely diagnosis. Refusal to cooperate with counseling and the recommended psychological testing will result in applicable appropriate consequences as outlined in the Chart of Offenses.

G. Allow for, encourage, and cooperate with the assignment of an independent investigatory agency, such as, but not limited to, G.R.A.C.E. (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) and others, to pursue unbiased assessment and potential recommendations to remediate abusive behaviors perpetrated by church leadership. Also, review for effectiveness and adjust if necessary the current existing criteria and procedures for the recommending and calling for an independent investigation.

H. The independent investigation (in item G above) can be called by any entities listed in items K and L below; items B, B1, and B2 above; and /or by the victim when the leader has been charged with abuse. The independent investigation will include inviting prior potential victims that might have had a problem with the leader in the past but did not speak up for reasons that most victims will not say anything until their experience is validated by someone else.

I. Guard against the abuse of weaponizing preaching, effectively targeting individuals involved in conflict situations for not adhering to "biblical authority," perpetuating a distorted message that provides justification for disciplining and shunning members. Classis shall institute measures to guard against this abuse.

J. Assure victims of abuse that as they engage in this process, they will experience the biblical love and support of the denominational structure, applying the recommendations of the Addressing the Abuse of Power report, section X, and that those recommendations will help facilitate exposure of leadership abuse in a timely manner and will provide immediate protection to all possible and potential victims from such abuse, including disclosure to the congregation that one or more members are in need of ongoing prayer and emotional support.

K. Provide victims of abuse the assurance and access for safety, support, and compliance to recommended actions for healing by the denominational structure, including but not limited to assistance and funding from Pastor Church Resources, Safe Church, the general secretary, the Council of Delegates, Candidacy, Calvin Theological Seminary, or any other sources of denominational support.

L. Provide that any such established committee, including those listed or referenced in items above, also include membership of no less than 40 percent participation and 40 percent voting rights of individuals who are not associated with CRCNA departments, nor are employees. Such individuals would be elders, deacons, or past elders or past deacons. This is to establish committee membership inclusion of lay members (nonpastor) and fair membership representation of abuse victim peers.

Grounds:

1. The grounds are the same as those which are stated and argued in the Addressing the Abuse of Power report under section "I. Introduction and mandate."
2. This overture is helpful and necessary for the process of dealing specifically with the presence of abuse of power in existing and former leaders.
3. Christians and especially those in church leadership positions must more and more model their Savior Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Some helpful Scripture in processing these issues are James 3:1, Ezekiel 34:1-10, 1 Peter 5:1-4, 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, 2 Peter 2:1-3, and 2 Peter 3:15-17.
4. Jesus, when speaking to his disciples about which one was to be regarded as the greatest, said in Luke 22:25-26 (ESV), "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. . . ." May we be more like Jesus, and may we bring all to the glory and honor of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and may he be praised.

We believe this overture is in harmony with the intent of previous work and is a necessary requirement to all of the previous work of the denomination in dealing with abuse of power. We also believe this overture is helpful and necessary for the process of dealing specifically with the presence of abuse in existing leadership. We look forward to positive and

healthy results for the denomination through the approval and implementation of this overture.

John and Debra Kamer, St. Joseph, Michigan

Note: This overture was submitted to the council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, at its summer meeting and was not adopted. This overture was then submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland and was not adopted.

OVERTURE 11

Revise Church Order Article 61; Encourage Churches to Include Lament in Their Public Prayers

I. Background

The church has long seen the importance of prayer as part of a person's daily life as well as part of our corporate worship service. In Scripture we often see prayer as part of a corporate gathering, and, as Church Order Article 61 states, these times of prayer shall include prayers of adoration (1 Chron. 16:7-36), confession (Ezra 9:4-10:5), thanksgiving (1 Chron. 23:30), supplication (2 Kings 19:14–19), and intercession (Acts 12:5). The inclusion of specific types of prayer in the public prayers during worship was brought before synod in 1961. "The congregational prayers constitute, by common consent, such an important part in our worship services that it is well for the Church Order to indicate the chief elements of a normal congregational prayer" (*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 449). In 1962, Article 64 (it became Article 62 in 1965) was changed to read: "The public prayers in the worship services shall include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession for all Christendom and all men" (*Acts of Synod 1962*, p. 92). Synod 1965 was asked to adopt Article 62 as follows:

> *Article 62*
>
> a. The public prayers in the worship services shall include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession for all Christendom and all men.
>
> b. In the ministry of prayer the approved liturgical prayers may be used.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 1965*, pp. 77, 180)

This article (renumbered to 61 because another article [Art. 18] was deleted in 1965) remained unchanged until the request for a complete review and revision of the Church Order, due to all the changes which had been

made in the past number of years, was brought to Synod 2007: "The Board of Trustees proposes that synod initiate a process for a complete review and revision of the Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure" (*Agenda for Synod 2007*, p. 28). This was adopted by synod "for the purpose of an orderly updating to incorporate the synodical decisions and regulations that govern the life of the denomination and the churches" (*Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 597). The Board of Trustees appointed a task force, which presented a report to Synod 2010 (*Agenda for Synod 2010*, pp. 510-34), and synod adopted the following recommendation for Article 61:

> Remove the concluding phrase "for all Christendom and all humanity" from Article 61-a, and remove Article 61-b.
>
> *Grounds:*
>
> a. The reference to "Christendom" is archaic and problematic, and delimiting prayers to the social and political realms discourages other appropriate sorts of prayer (such as prayer for the creation).
>
> b. A provision stating that certain written prayers may be used is superfluous and can be eliminated.
>
> *Article 61*
> The public prayers in the worship service shall include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 905)

With only these minor variations over the past sixty years, it has served the church well, and we have been blessed by the times of communal prayer within our services. When we review the past decade, we realize there have been many times when these elements of prayer have been appropriate. We have also witnessed many moments in which prayers of lament are also very appropriate. As we read the Psalms, we see songs/prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession, as well as many prayers of lament. Almost a third of the Psalms are psalms of lament, and almost a third of those are communal psalms of lament. David was called "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), and we see how he authentically struggled and wrestled with God in the deepest parts of his emotions concerning the difficult circumstances he faced in life. We see how Job was also very real in his emotions with God. Both men dared to ask God "Why?" or "How long?" The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk also questioned what God was doing; Jeremiah wrote a book about laments. Both dared to challenge God while fully understanding that God is in control and knew there would be a time of thanksgiving and adoration and praise at the end. However, during the struggle, there is a need for the difficult questions. Throughout Scripture we see examples of how prayers of lament authenticate the faith of God's people.

Lament is a Christian's calling out to God in the midst of their struggles, waiting for the hope they know comes from their sovereign Lord. Lament is the way a Christian turns to God in deep faith, rather than turning to a life of bitterness. Lament is handing one's sorrow over to a loving Father, who is big enough to handle our questions and complaints.

We are currently witnessing a tragic number of our young people leaving the faith. One of the reasons may be due to the desire for an authentic faith in God, a faith in which we are able to question God about the reality of our lives. Walter Brueggemann in his article *"The Costly Loss of Lament"* writes:

> One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology.
>
> Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can uncritically praise or accept guilt where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a 'False Self', bad faith which is based in fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.
>
> (Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament" in *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], pp. 98-111)

When we include lament in our public prayers, we are modeling the authenticity of our struggles in our faith.

In the past few years there has been an increasing sense of struggle in the hearts of all people due to issues of equality and injustice, both in the church and in the world. As a community we need to bring these issues before God in a public way and allow for others to see the pain and struggle we have as a church. Walter Brueggemann in his article "The Costly Loss of Lament" also writes:

> A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justly questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually to despair. (Ibid., p. 107)

We need to practice and model lament in our churches before people look to other places for answers or give up hope altogether. The world needs to

see the body of Christ lamenting over the inequalities and injustices of the world.

Prayer remains essential to the life of the church and its members. When we look at the Lord's Prayer, it includes the same elements as mentioned in Article 61, and thus our public prayers reflect the example given to us by the Lord. We also see Jesus praying a prayer of lament when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, as well as quoting a prayer of lament while on the cross (Psalm 22). This prayer shows the struggle of the human heart wrestling with God and yet acknowledging the sovereignty of God. Throughout Scripture we see different kinds of prayers, often used in different circumstances. Charles Spurgeon in his commentary on Psalm 42:9 wrote, "Faith is allowed to enquire of her God the causes of his displeasure, and she is even permitted to expostulate with him and put him in mind of his promises, and ask why apparently they are not fulfilled. If the Lord be indeed our refuge, when we find no refuge, it is time to be raising the question, 'Why is this?'" (*The Treasury of David: An Expository and Devotional Commentary on the Psalms, Volume II, Psalms 27-52* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Guardian Press, 1976], p. 304). Within the church we have songs of lament, and many songs are forms of prayer. Both songs and prayers of lament show the reality of life and draw us together as a community before the Lord. We need to bring the aspect of lament into our services, and by adding "lament" to Article 61 we can remind and encourage churches to be authentic in their prayers as with their singing. We need to remind ourselves to take time to bring authentic hope in times of despair, knowing our God reigns and his mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:19-26).

II. Overture

To encourage churches to include prayers of lament in their services, Classis Quinte overtures synod to include the word "lament" in Church Order Article 61 (change indicated by italics):

> *Article 61*
> The public prayers in the worship service shall include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, *lament,* and intercession.

Grounds:

1. Our practice of prayer follows the practice and instruction of prayer in Scripture. Throughout Scripture we see evidence of prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession. We also see significant evidence of prayers of lament, both personal and communal.
   a. Almost one third of the Psalms are psalms of lament, and almost one third of those are communal psalms of lament.
   b. Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk all display prayers of lament.
   c. Jesus prayed prayers of lament in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross.

2. Lament recognizes our pain and struggles while acknowledging God as sovereign.
3. Lament brings authenticity to our struggles and gives permission to move beyond simple obedience into a covenant relationship with God.
4. Sharing prayers of lament brings the body of Christ together in the reality of life. This practices authentic faith and demonstrates to our children how God is our refuge, even when we can't see him.

Classis Quinte
Joan Crawford, stated clerk

OVERTURE 12

Develop a Strategy to Reverse the Trend of Membership Decline and Require Annual Reporting of Progress

I. Background

In 2017 synod received an overture from Classis Southeast U.S. titled "Discover Cause for CRC Membership Decline; Develop Strategy to Reverse the Trend of Decline through Church Renewal and Planting; Require Annual Reporting of Progress" (*Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 429-34).

At that time, utilizing CRCNA *Yearbook* statistics, the overture took note of the alarming trend of decline throughout our denomination since the early 1990s. Those statistics revealed that the denominational decline was geographically widespread and appeared to be increasing in the rate of decline. The following were among the key findings within the overture:

- At the time of the publication of the 2016 *Yearbook*, CRC membership stood at 235,921. Only ten years prior in 2006, membership stood at 272,127. Twenty years prior in 1996, total membership of the CRC was 291,796.
- Thus there was a 6.7 percent decline in membership for the years from 1996 to 2006, but this decline rate doubled (13.3%) for the years from 2006 to 2016.
- During that twenty-year period of time, 45 of the then 47 classes in the Christian Reformed Church declined. Almost half of the 45 declining classes (22) declined at a rate of 10 percent or more. Twelve classes declined at a rate of more than 15 percent over this time frame.
- Assuming that each classis would continue to decline at the same rate as it had for the previous ten years, the following projections were made about CRC total membership: By 2026 the total membership of

the CRC will be reduced to 206,995. By 2036 the total membership of the CRC will be reduced to 184,107.

The overture contained the following warning: "If these projections prove to be anywhere near accurate, it is certain that this decline will have a profound impact on the entire denomination and all its ministries. It is difficult to see how, if nothing changes, the CRC's kingdom impact will not be severely reduced."

The overture asked synod to act with urgency and to make the following two items a top priority: (1) gaining a full understanding of the causes of our membership decline, and (2) developing a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring a positive trend-line of membership growth to our denomination through both church renewal and church planting.

The overture at that time also requested that synod "instruct the executive director, the Board of Trustees, and each agency to report its progress to synod annually until such time as synod decides that this issue has been satisfactorily addressed."

In response to the overture, Synod 2017 took into consideration the efforts of denominational leadership already under way in the area of church renewal—especially in the denomination's strategic planning regarding *Our Journey 2020*. The synod advisory committee concluded "that the denominational leadership of the CRC has made a good start in beginning to address the concerns raised in this overture with strategies for growth and renewal. We see hopeful possibilities also emerging from our new unified global mission agency and the structural changes of our new Council of Delegates."

For this reason, Synod 2017 declined to ask the executive director to develop the comprehensive and unified strategy requested by the overture and also declined to request the CRC leadership to make an annual progress report to synod. Instead the following four recommendations were adopted (*Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 706):

1. That synod instruct the executive director to make available a list of current denominational resources related to church renewal, including church planting with emphasis on training for evangelism.
2. That synod instruct the executive director to work with each agency and educational institution to seek out best practices and resources related to church renewal in the CRC and similar denominations and share these with classes and congregations in order to more faithfully carry out our commitment to Church Order Articles 74-76.
3. That synod instruct the executive director to work with each agency and educational institution to collaborate in finding areas of convergence related to church renewal and to develop effective strategies for implementation by classes and churches.

4. That synod instruct the executive director to keep the call to prayer for church renewal, church planting, and evangelism continually before God's people.

II. Five-year update

More than five years have passed, and it is worthwhile for synod to revisit and reevaluate issues surrounding denominational membership decline. Despite the hopeful feelings that were expressed by Synod 2017, the rate of decline has not improved. In fact, a study of *Yearbook* statistics reveals the following:

- At the time of the publication of the 2021 *Yearbook*, CRC membership stood at 211,706. For points of reference, membership stood at 235,921 in 2016; 272,127 in 2006, and 291,796 in 1996.
- There was a 6.7 percent decline in membership from 1996 to 2006. The decline rate doubled to 13.3 percent from 2006 to 2016. It is now clear that the rate of decline continues to increase. In only five years, 2016 to 2021, the CRCNA has declined by another 10.3 percent. This means that (assuming no further acceleration in the rate of decline) the decadal rate of decline from 2016 to 2026 will be approximately 21 percent.
- The decline continues to be widespread. Forty-seven of the 49 classes in the Christian Reformed Church sustained membership losses in the past five years. More than half of these declining classes (26) declined at a rate of 10 percent or more. Sixteen classes declined at a rate of more than 15 percent over this time frame.
- If the CRC continues to decline at the same rate as it has for the past five years, the following projections can be made about CRC total membership: By 2026 the total membership of the CRC will be reduced to 189,984. By 2031 the total membership of the CRC will be reduced to 170,491.
- Finally, we must acknowledge that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CRCNA membership is not fully taken into account and that the true rate of decline may actually be understated here. (See Appendices 1 and 2.)

The decline that our denomination has experienced in the past twenty-five years is already affecting us today in innumerable ways beyond articulation. The same warning from 2017 must be now repeated: "If these projections prove to be anywhere near accurate, it is certain that this decline will have a profound impact on the entire denomination and all its ministries. It is difficult to see how, if nothing changes, the CRC's kingdom impact will not be severely reduced" (*Agenda for Synod 2017*, p. 430).

Despite all previous efforts, we must now admit that as of yet we have not developed satisfactory solutions to arrest—much less reverse—this alarming trend. It is now time to place this issue at the very top of the denominational priority list. We must act with urgency. If immediate, bold, and decisive action is not taken to find solutions that actually work to solve the

problem, then together we are failing to take hold of the strategic opportunity that this moment in our history provides. Making this issue a top priority must entail that all other denominational decisions and initiatives should be evaluated in light of this priority.

III. Overture

Classis Southeast U.S. requests that synod instruct the Office of General Secretary, the Council of Delegates, and each agency to act with urgency to make the following a top priority: developing a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend-line of membership growth to our denomination.

Classis Southeast U.S. further requests that synod instruct the Office of General Secretary, the Council of Delegates, and each agency to report its progress regarding this plan to synod annually until such time as synod decides that this issue has been satisfactorily addressed.

Grounds:

1. A satisfactory comprehensive strategy for church planting and church renewal that adequately addresses our membership trend-line has yet to be developed.
2. The past five-year history has revealed how costly it has been not to take comprehensive, swift, and bold action on this issue. The old adage seems quite appropriate, "If nothing changes, nothing changes."
3. "Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14). These actions should not be undertaken for our own sake. The love of Jesus and the Great Commission must compel us in a North American context where ignorance, apathy, and hostility toward the gospel is on the rise.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to Synod 2022. However, because it was submitted after the March 15 deadline, it was not published in the *Agenda for Synod 2022* nor presented to synod. Classis Southeast U.S. therefore submits this overture to Synod 2023 along with the following addendum giving updated figures for 2022 and 2023.

2023 ADDENDUM

Since the writing of this overture, two additional years of data for CRCNA membership are now available:

- In 2022 the total membership of the CRCNA stood at 204,664, which means that the total membership loss for 2022 was 7,042 members, a 3.3 percent drop.

- In 2023, the total membership of the CRCNA now stands at 195,704, which means that the total membership loss so far for 2023 has been 8,960 members, a 4.4 percent drop.

It is instructive to note the underlying realities behind the macro membership numbers. The number of children being baptized annually has now fallen consistently below 2,000 per year; the amount of transfer growth annually has also now fallen consistently below 2,000 per year; the amount of annual evangelism growth has alarmingly fallen below 1,000 per year.

	Children Baptized Baptized	*Transfer Growth*	*Evangelism Growth*
1996	4,397	2,534	3,170
2001	3,398	3,074	3,005
2006	3,768	4,570	3,373
2011	3,650	3,826	3,089
2016	3,204	3,180	2,292
2017	3,097	3,227	2,118
2018	2,834	2,992	1,553
2019	2,799	3,359	1,848
2020	2,627	2,801	1,771
2021	1,914	1,885	1,294
2022	1,586	1,120	625
2023	1,815	1,921	833

APPENDIX 1

Total Membership by Classis

Classis	*1996*	*2006*	*2016*	*2021*
Alberta North	9,472	9,781	9,069	8,880
Alberta South/ Saskatchewan	4,833	4,763	4,357	4,134
Arizona	1,612	849	481	478
Atlantic Northeast	4,114	3,314	3,132	2,598
B.C. North-West	5,318	5,052	4,039	3,709
B.C. South-East	7,371	7,369	6,584	5,508
California South	6,825	5,450	4,894	3,915
Central California	7,809	7,874	6,945	6,361
Central Plains (formerly Pella)	7,322	5,883	5,097	4,488
Chicago South	6,236	5,913	4,789	4,004
Columbia	2,858	2,213	2,131	1,690

Eastern Canada	5,402	5,038	4,125	3,570
Georgetown	10,357	9,342	9,012	8,030
Grand Rapids East	9,330	8,668	8,270	7,694
Grand Rapids North	9,483	7,718	4,848	3,660
Grand Rapids South	9,347	8,817	7,678	7,279
Grandville	8,965	8,588	7,468	6,907
Greater Los Angeles	5,425	6,718	3,985	5,523
Hackensack	3,059	2,853	2,556	2,156
Hamilton	6,618	6,952	6,374	5,511
Hanmi (formerly Pacific Hanmi), Est. 1996		1,479	1,669	1,636
Heartland	5,907	5,045	5,092	4,932
Holland	11,424	11,992	11,096	9,004
Hudson	3,955	2,905	2,347	2,055
Huron	8,213	8,763	7,742	6,996
Iakota	8,345	8,217	8,022	7,587
Illiana	8,947	7,556	6,469	6,119
Kalamazoo	6,672	5,308	3,635	2,793
Ko-Am, Est. 2014			638	1,106
Lake Erie	4,296	4,243	3,241	2,623
Lake Superior (formerly Minnesota North)	7,682	7,459	5,727	5,227
Minnkota (formerly Minnesota South)	4,426	3,411	4,322	4,087
Muskegon	6,329	6,089	5,096	4,477
Niagara	5,855	5,728	4,958	4,658
North Cascades				2,349
Northcentral Iowa	2,537	1,861	1,678	1,383
Northern Illinois	5,560	5,574	5,322	4,278
Northern Michigan	3,848	3,520	3,000	2,932
Ontario Southwest (formerly Chatham)	11,156	9,806	7,852	7,061
Pacific Northwest	8,595	7,196	6,117	2,580
Quinte	7,561	7,639	6,295	5,551
Red Mesa	1,745	1,824	1,712	1,543
Rocky Mountain	5,120	4,755	4,550	3,829
Southeast U.S. (formerly Florida)	2,616	2,476	2,289	2,294
Thornapple Valley	4,803	4,901	4,220	4,173

Toronto	8,406	7,730	5,880	4,579
Wisconsin	5,935	5,303	4,949	4,366
Yellowstone	2,622	1,732	1,363	1,188
Zeeland	7,485	6,460	4,806	4,205
Total Membership	291,796	272,127	235,921	211,706

APPENDIX 2

Decadal Rates of Increase or Decrease by Classis for 1996-2006, 2006-2016, and Five-Year Rate of Increase or Decrease by Classis for 2016-2021

Classis	*1996 - 2006*	*2006 - 2016*	*2016-2021*
Alberta North	3.26%	-7.28%	-2.08%
Alberta South/ Saskatchewan	-1.45%	-8.52%	-5.12%
Arizona	-47.33%	-43.35%	-0.62%
Atlantic Northeast	-19.45%	-5.49%	-17.05%
B.C. North-West	-5.00%	-20.05%	-8.17%
B.C. South-East	-0.03%	-10.65%	-16.34%
California South	-20.15%	-10.20%	-20.00%
Central California	0.83%	-11.80%	-8.41%
Central Plains (formerly Pella)	-19.65%	-13.36%	-11.95%
Chicago South	-5.18%	-19.01%	-16.39%
Columbia	-22.57%	-3.71%	-20.69%
Eastern Canada	-6.74%	-18.12%	-13.45%
Georgetown	-9.80%	-3.53%	-10.90%
Grand Rapids East	-7.10%	-4.59%	-6.96%
Grand Rapids North	-18.61%	-37.19%	-24.50%
Grand Rapids South	-5.67%	-12.92%	-5.20%
Grandville	-4.21%	-13.04%	-7.51%
Greater Los Angeles	23.83%	-40.68%	-10.70%
Hackensack	-6.73%	-10.41%	-15.65%
Hamilton	5.05%	-8.31%	-13.54%
Hanmi (formerly Pacific Hanmi), Est. 1996		12.85%	-1.98%
Heartland	-14.59%	0.93%	-3.14%
Holland	4.97%	-7.47%	-18.85%
Hudson	-26.55%	-19.21%	-12.44%
Huron	6.70%	-11.65%	-9.64%

Iakota	-1.53%	-2.37%	-5.42%
Illiana	-15.55%	-14.39%	-5.41%
Kalamazoo	-20.44%	-31.52%	-23.16%
Ko-Am, Est. 2014			73.35%
Lake Erie	-1.23%	-23.62%	-19.07%
Lake Superior (formerly Minnesota North)	-2.90%	-23.22%	-8.73%
Minnkota (formerly Minnesota South)	-22.93%	26.71%	-5.44%
Muskegon	-3.79%	-16.31%	-12.15%
Niagara	-2.17%	-13.44%	-6.05%
North Cascades*			-18.77%
Northcentral Iowa	-26.65%	-9.83%	-17.58%
Northern Illinois	0.25%	-4.52%	-19.62%
Northern Michigan	-8.52%	-14.77%	-2.27%
Pacific Northwest*	-16.28%	-14.99%	-18.77%
Ontario Southwest (formerly Chatham)	-12.10%	-19.93%	-10.07%
Quinte	1.03%	-17.59%	-11.82%
Red Mesa	4.53%	-6.14%	-9.87%
Rocky Mountain	-7.13%	-4.31%	-15.85%
Southeast U.S. (formerly Florida)	-5.35%	-7.55%	0.22%
Thornapple Valley	2.04%	-13.90%	-1.11%
Toronto	-8.04%	-23.93%	-22.13%
Wisconsin	-10.65%	-6.68%	-11.78%
Yellowstone	-33.94%	-21.30%	-12.84%
Zeeland	-13.69%	-25.60%	-12.51%
Total Membership	-6.7%	-13.3%	-10.26%

*In 2016 Classis Pacific Northwest became two classes: Pacific Northwest and North Cascades. Their combined membership in 2021 stands at 4,969, a decrease of 18.77 percent from 2016, when the membership stood at 6,117.

OVERTURE 13

Declare that a Virtual Church Is Not a Church

I. Background

Our classis is considering planting a "virtual church," which, as we understand it, is a church that would "meet" only online. So far, there has been little discussion about whether such a concept conforms to the Scriptures and to our confessions. While we appreciate the desire to use technology to reach out to others with the good news of the gospel, we have serious concerns about calling this initiative a "church."

II. Appreciation

We appreciate the sincere desire to use technology for the glory of Christ, for the salvation of unbelievers, and for the edification of the saints. We believe that technology is a gift from God when used with these purposes in mind, and we have seen God use technology to bless many people in their walk with him. Over the past couple of years, churches, including many in our classis, have invested in their livestreaming capabilities, resulting in a significant increase in gospel proclamation throughout the world. We praise the Lord for this, and we offer our sincere appreciation to those among us who are using their gifts to proclaim the gospel through technology.

This overture is neither "antimission" or "antitechnology."

III. Concerns

Our main concern about the "virtual church" concept is this: Is it a church? That is, is a virtual ministry, which exists online only, a church? We believe that the answer to this question is no and that describing such a ministry as a "church" is unbiblical and may harm our churches as well as individual believers. Below are some of our concerns:

A. Concern for ministering to the whole person

Our church affirms that each person is made of a united body and soul. Our catechism begins with the declaration that we belong, "body and soul," to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, and that theme of body and soul is repeated throughout the catechism.

- We deserve "eternal punishment of body and soul" (Q&A 11).
- God provides "whatever I need for body and soul" (Q&A 26).
- "We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul" (Q&A 109).
- "My very flesh will be raised by the power of Christ, reunited with my soul, and made like Christ's glorious body" (Q&A 57).

At the center of the gospel is the act of Christ's incarnation, the Word becoming flesh. "Christ sustained in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. This he did in order that, by

his suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, he might deliver us, body and soul, from eternal condemnation. . . ." (Q&A 37).

The "virtual church" concept separates the person's body from their soul and, in essence, ministers to disembodied souls. The argument is that it doesn't really matter where your body is as long as you are spiritually connected to other believers online. This view of church, one whose members are connected spiritually but not in person, is out of step with the Scriptures and our Reformed confessions. While at times, and for various reasons, a church's members may be physically isolated from one another, this is not healthy or normal. Our physical isolation from one another in the body of Christ is something to lament.

B. Concern for the public, corporate, in-person worship of God

God calls his people to gather together regularly to worship him. The writer of Hebrews reminds us not to neglect to meet together (Heb. 10:25). The book of Psalms regularly calls us to worship God in a way that is public, corporate, and in person, while at the same time lamenting our separation from the corporate worship of God:

> What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.
> (Ps. 116:12-14)

> These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. (Ps. 42:4-6)

"Virtual worship" falls short of the worship that is commanded in the Scriptures, and it normalizes what the Scriptures lament: the isolation from in-person corporate worship of God.

C. Concern for pastoral care

Church leaders are called to "care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). This care calls for leaders to have a close in-person relationship with the members of their church. The Scriptures tell us that the apostles conducted their ministry by visiting "from house to house" (Acts 5:42; 20:20). Similarly, James instructs believers who are ill to call the elders, who will go to them in person, anoint them with oil, and pray for them (James 5:13-14). The apostle Paul, who often communicated with churches via letters, expressed his ongoing desire to care for them in person (1 Thess. 2:17–3:2; Rom. 1:9–12).

As church leaders, it is our privilege and calling to be physically present at the bedside of believers during times of illness or death, to hold their hand, to pray for them, and to sing hymns with them during the

times that they need it most. We are not called to be "virtual pastors," "virtual elders," or "virtual deacons" to the sheep under our care.

D. Concern for the fellowship of believers

One of the distinctive characteristics of the early church was the close in-person fellowship among believers. The book of Acts describes it this way:

> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. *And all who believed were together* and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes,* they received their food with glad and generous hearts.
> (Acts 2:42-46, emphasis added)

The fellowship among members of a congregation is much more than meeting together in a church building once or twice a week. It includes many organic interactions that take place as part of living in the same local community. We run into another member at the local grocery store and chat about how we're doing. We speak to one another at local events. We occasionally visit one another in our workplaces as we conduct our daily business. We practice hospitality when we eat together in one another's homes.

"Virtual fellowship" falls very short of the biblical picture of the fellowship of believers.

E. Concern for the proper administration of the sacraments

In the sacraments God uses tangible and physical signs to convey spiritual realities. More than mere symbols, the physical administration of the sacraments corresponds to the spiritual realities being represented, and therefore ought to be administered properly.

The Scriptures repeatedly command us to "come together" (several times in 1 Cor. 11) to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul attributes significance to the practice of believers sharing one bread as a symbol of being united together:

> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:17)

Our catechism also emphasizes the importance of pastors and elders personally feeding the flock with the Lord's Supper:

> . . . as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood. (Q&A 75)

Similarly, in baptism, the outward physical administration of the sacrament corresponds to spiritual realities. The washing with physical water by the pastor corresponds to Christ's washing away our sins. This takes place in the midst of the Christian congregation, symbolizing our belonging to the covenant community.

While some advocate for the practices of "virtual communion" and "virtual baptism" (with some even using digital avatars and digital water), we must continue to affirm the importance of the proper physical administration of the sacraments.

IV. Summary of concerns

The "virtual church" concept, like any cultural trend, needs to be assessed in the light of biblical principles. It is our opinion that "virtual church" does not meet the biblical criteria set for the church in the areas of worship, pastoral care, fellowship, and the sacraments. Therefore, while such an initiative may be a useful ministry or a discipleship program, we must make it very clear that it is not a church. If "virtual church" is presented as a viable substitute to church, we may unintentionally end up harming our churches as well as individual members who choose to isolate themselves from the body of Christ.

V. Overture

The council of Wyoming (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church asks synod to do the following:

A. To declare that a "virtual church" (i.e., a "church" which by design "meets" only online) is not a church.

   Ground: A "virtual church" does not meet the biblical and confessional criteria for a church in the areas of worship, pastoral care, fellowship, and the sacraments.

B. To encourage any "virtual churches" within our denomination to refrain from using the label "church" and to come up instead with a more appropriate title.

   Ground: Using distinct language will help to make it clear that this initiative is meant to supplement and not replace a member's participation in their local church.

C. To add the following supplement to Article 51-a in the Church Order:

   Article 51-a
   The congregation shall assemble for worship on the Lord's Day, to hear God's Word, to receive the sacraments, to engage in praise and prayer, and to present gifts of gratitude.

   Proposed supplement
   The congregation shall assemble for worship in person. If for extraordinary reasons a congregation is unable to meet in person, they shall resume in-person worship as soon as circumstances permit.

Grounds:

a. Assembling in-person is in mind here, but the language is no longer explicit enough.

b. A "virtual church" extends beyond the geographical boundary of any classis as its leaders and members reside throughout the world. Therefore, the broader assembly should be consulted.

Council of Wyoming (Ont.) CRC
Brenda Beintema, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Ontario Southwest but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 14

Adopt Belhar Confession as a Confession of the CRC

I. Background

From biblical times to the present, Christians have united the church, fought heresy, testified to outsiders, defied persecution, taught newcomers, and worshiped God—all by the use of creeds and confessions. . . .

> So it is with the Belhar Confession. Forged in the fires of racial injustice in South Africa in 1986, the Belhar speaks eloquently to the need for unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church. The church should witness to these great realities, model them to the world, and become an agent for spreading them. All because of the costly work of Jesus Christ —the one through whom God was reconciling the world to himself.
>
> —Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., in the *Calvin Theological Forum,* Fall 2010, p. 2; digitalcommons.calvin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=cts_forum

We find in the Belhar a compelling call to North American Christians to embody the gospel message—which, like that of the prophets, *does* make God "in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged" (Belhar Confession, Art. 4).

The current cultural moment that we are living in demands that we make a statement against the injustices born out of racial prejudices and discrimination. One cannot think that this is a unique moment that will have its day in the sun, only to be replaced by another cultural movement in a few years' time. The need for the church to have a confessional statement against racism is long overdue and will be needed until Christ's return. This charge to be active participants in the reconciliation of all things must

be seen as a fundamental aspect of being a member of the church, particularly for those called to one of the offices.

> The only way is forward, forward into God's freshly storied world, forward with the symbols that speak of death and resurrection, forward with the humble praxis of the gospel—and forward in that multilayered context with fresh thoughts, fresh arguments, fresh intellectual understanding.
>
> —N.T. Wright in *Sewanee Theological Review* 41.2, p. 199

II. Overture

The council of First Hamilton Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2023 of the CRC to adopt the Belhar Confession as a fourth confessional standard of the CRC.

Grounds:

1. The Belhar Confession fully comports to Scripture. The only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and reconciliation, true peace among people. God calls the church to follow him in this. And if God calls us to be agents of justice, he will empower us to do the job (see Ps. 112:5; 106:3; John 17:20-23; Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Pet. 2:18-25; 3:15-19; Eph. 2:11- 22).
2. The Belhar brings a unique expression of embodied faith that augments the other confessional standards. It is a call to justice and mercy that is more experiential and less doctrinal. It makes more explicit what is implicit in the Three Forms of Unity. We are called afresh to consider the marginalized and the wronged, of which there are many, and whom we too easily overlook in everyday life. And as such the Belhar is not redundant with the other confessional standards of the CRC (see Eph. 2:11-22; 4:1-16; Ps. 133; James 5:1-6).
3. The themes of the Belhar are biblical, universal, and timeless—of which the North American experience is no exception in the functional racial divisions deeply embedded in our culture, whether it be First Nation residential schools, reservations, slavery, refugees, the containment of Japanese citizens, et al. (see Isa. 1:10-22; 3:16-24; Hos. 8:14; 12; Amos 3:16-24).
4. The Belhar calls on churches to be witnesses against injustice. God uses his people to work toward greater biblical faithfulness. The church-in-mission must then take sides: for life and against death; for justice and against oppression (David Bosch). God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. And he will equip it for this task (see Heb. 12:2; Deut. 32:4; Luke 2:14; Ps. 146; James 5:1-6).

Additionally, it should also be stated that the Belhar Confession's intent is to speak to race, as stated in endnote 2 (at crcna.org/belhar):

> It is clear, given the original context of the Belhar Confession, that race is the intent here. Because the ambiguity of the term *social factor* could lead to misinterpretation or misapplication, Synod 2009 noted that "the Belhar Confession does not negate the biblically derived statements of synod" with regard to human sexuality (e.g., Synod 1973, 1996; *Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 606).

Council of First Hamilton CRC, Hamilton, Ontario
George Van Kampen, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to Classis Hamilton at its winter meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 15

Revise Belgic Confession Articles 18 and 34

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan overtures Synod 2023 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America to receive, as a confessional-revision gravamen, this request to revise Articles 18 and 34 of the Belgic Confession regarding the specific naming of Anabaptists.

I. Background

Our beloved Belgic Confession was written at a particular historic time, but it is also a current confession of our faith to which we bind ourselves and which we also use in the catechism of our people, in one-on-one conversations, classes, and even larger settings such as Sunday-morning worship services.

At the time when the Belgic Confession was written, prominent leaders of the Anabaptist movement did hold to the teachings referenced by the Belgic Confession but today those teachings are no longer specific to Anabaptists.

The following overture seeks to revise the Belgic Confession to make it more helpful in addressing current error.

II. Confessional Revision Gravamen

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan proposes the following revisions to the Belgic Confession:

A. Article 18 – Replace the words "the Anabaptists" with "those."

B. Article 34 – Replace the words "the Anabaptists" with "those."

Grounds:

1. The revised wording would be helpful in our use of the Belgic Confession in settings where historical explanations are not easily made.
2. While the errors mentioned were specific to the Anabaptists at the time the confession was written, these errors are no longer specific only to the Anabaptist. The suggested revision broadens our understanding of those who may hold these errors.
3. The suggested revision would help us to respect our confession as an accurate statement of belief that we confess in our churches today, and not simply as a good historic statement.

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan
Nelly Eyk, stated clerk

OVERTURE 16

Change Decision re Confessional Status of Sins to Agreement

I. Background

In June 2022 the synod of the Christian Reformed Church had before them the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). As they processed this document, they accepted a number of recommendations. Two of the recommendations that synod approved are as follows,

> That synod recommend the HSR to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 919)

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 920)

The decision to declare that this interpretation has confessional status has created significant discussion as well as concerns within the denomination. The idea of declaring a certain synodical decision to have confessional status seems to be a new thing, and with it, it has created a whole host of concerns for officebearers. This means that when one agrees to the Covenant for Officebearers, one is therefore also agreeing with Synod 2022's understanding of unchastity.

II. The concern

We believe that synod should change their decision from "this interpretation has confessional status" to "this interpretation is in agreement with the confessions." The reasons are as follows:

First, in making the statement that "this interpretation has confessional status," synod has created a list of "confessional sins" that is incomplete and therefore unhelpful. Anytime one attempts to make a list of sins, it will always be incomplete. It should be noted that the list of sins that falls under "unchastity" is missing other significant sins such as bestiality or pedophilia. That means someone who sees no problem with pedophilia can agree to the Covenant for Officebearers without concern but that someone who has questions about "extramarital sex" cannot. To fix this discrepancy, will the denomination now create a full and complete list of sins that might be deemed "confessional" in order to ensure the purity of the church? To create such a list would push us close to the legalism that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

Second, the list is problematic because it does not give a full definition for each sin. Synod was right to condemn pornography and label it as a significant sin, but just what is pornography? Do we work with the famous test of saying "I'll know it when I see it"? The fact of the matter is that what was deemed pornography in the 1960s is now very common in advertisements and on TV shows and movies. Many of the officebearers in our churches consume such porn without a second thought and probably wouldn't even label it as such. Should that then keep them from being able to sign the Covenant for Officebearers? Quite simply, we don't know, because our denomination has not created a clear definition as to what is or is not pornography, so we are again failing to give helpful direction.

In all of this we must recognize the problematic nature of the legalism we are walking into by labelling some sins as "confessional." The fact of the matter is that all sins are "confessional," and we need to recognize the seriousness of all our sin. At the same time, picking certain sins to be the epitome of hedonism while ignoring other sins, such as pride and judgmentalism, which are just as damaging to our churches, is problematic.

III. Overture

Classis Ontario Southwest overtures synod to change their decision from "this interpretation has confessional status" to "this interpretation is in agreement with the confessions."

Grounds:

1. Synod has created a list of "confessional sins" that is incomplete and therefore unhelpful.
2. The list is also problematic because it does not give a full definition of each sin.
3. This change would be in agreement with the spirit of synod's original decision but would eliminate the legalism it has created.

Classis Ontario Southwest
Ron Middel, stated clerk

OVERTURE 17

Clarify and Affirm that the CRC's Doctrine of Marriage Is Confessional Doctrine

I overture Synod 2023 to clarify and affirm that the doctrine of marriage, as historically defined and affirmed by our synodical study reports (1973, 2022), is a doctrine contained in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and so is confessional doctrine.

I offer the following grounds in support of the above, clarifying (1) the nature of what "confessional" means; (2) the authority of the assemblies in this area; and (3) why a traditional doctrine of marriage is contained/implicit in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.

Grounds:

1. **What "confessional" means:** In Reformed theology and polity, to say that something is "confessional" is simply to say that it is a doctrine contained in our confessional standards. The following statements from our Covenant for Officebearers and Church Order make this clear:

   a. We "affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose *doctrines* fully agree with the Word of God" (Covenant for Officebearers, emphasis added). At the heart of the confessions is their doctrinal content—doctrine that is derived from, and which then shapes how we read, Holy Scripture.

   b. Later in the Covenant for Officebearers, officebearers pledge, "We heartily believe and promote and defend [the confessions'] *doctrines* faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them" (emphasis added). When officebearers promise "to be formed and governed by [the confessions]," therefore, it is the doctrines they contain to which officebearers are regulating their life and ministry.

   c. This is made explicit in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, which clarifies what it means to affirm the confessions when we sign the Covenant for Officebearers. It says, "The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the *doctrines contained in the standards* of the church as being *doctrines* that are taught in the Word of God" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1, emphasis added). This does not mean that the confessions state each of these doctrines perfectly, nor that the confessions include everything Scripture teaches on the doctrine in question, nor that the standards confess all scriptural doctrine (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 2). It simply means that "a signatory is bound only to those *doctrines*

that are confessed" and that what are confessed are "all the doctrines *contained* in the standards of the church" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1 and 3, emphases added).

d. From all of this, it is clear: to say that something is "confessional" is simply to say that it is a doctrine contained in our confessional standards (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort)—a doctrine that we believe "fully agree[s] with the Word of God."

2. **The authority of the assemblies to clarify confessional doctrine (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3):** At times, a question arises as to whether or not a doctrine is confessed in the standards, and thus whether or not it is a doctrine that officebearers agree via subscription to heartily believe, promote, and defend. When such a question arises, the decision belongs not to individual members or officebearers but rather to the assemblies (council, classis, synod). As Church Order Supplement, Article 5 states, "No one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3). It is the "decision of the assemblies," then, and not the personal belief of the individual, that is the final authority on what is (and is not) a doctrine contained in the confessions, and thus what is "confessional."

3. **Affirming a traditional doctrine of marriage in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108:** In view of that authority, and in view of recent teaching and practice in our denomination to the contrary, I am asking Synod 2023 to clarify and affirm (per Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3) that the *doctrine* of marriage—as historically defined and interpreted by our denomination (1973, 2022)—is a doctrine contained in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 (i.e., "doctrines contained in the standards of the church"), and thus is a confessional doctrine to which officebearers subscribe via the Covenant for Officebearers. I offer the following grounds for this, in addition to the two above:

   a. *Connection of marriage and chastity:* Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 asks what the seventh commandment ("You shall not commit adultery") teaches us. From this narrow beginning (a commandment about adultery), the catechism's answer is expansive. From this command we learn that "God condemns all unchastity" and exhorts us to "live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage." In four short lines, a question about the prohibition of adultery opens up into teaching about unchastity, chastity, and marriage—each of which is referenced directly. Unchastity (of which adultery is one instance) is forbidden because it undermines the "holy state of marriage." Chastity is enjoined because it preserves the "holy state of marriage." Unchastity and

chastity, then, are behaviors that either preserve or undermine marriage. Likewise, the "holy state of marriage" helps clarify what behaviors are sexually chaste and unchaste. In all of this, a *doctrine* of marriage is presumed in the catechism, apart from which the language of chastity and unchastity do not make sense. That is to say, a doctrine of marriage is *contained* in Q&A 108, apart from which its prohibition of unchaste behavior and its exhortation to chaste living lack meaning. What is this doctrine of marriage?

b. *Definition of marriage:* It is the one-flesh union of one man and one woman in a mutual, exclusive, and enduring covenantal relationship, within which sexual union serves both natural and symbolic ends: the joining of male and female in one flesh (Gen. 2:24); the bearing of children (Gen. 1:28); and the nuptial union of Christ and church (Eph. 5:31-32).[1] This vision of marriage originates in creation (Gen. 2:21-24), is ensconced in Israel's law (Ex. 20:14), grounds the prophetic articulation of the God/Israel relationship (Isa. 54:5-6; Hos. 2:14-20), is confirmed by Jesus (Matt. 19:1-12), is deepened by the apostles (Eph. 5:22-33), and culminates in the new creation with the climactic marriage of Christ and the church (Rev. 19:1-10; 21:1-27), to which all earthly marriage points. I offer, then, a threefold defense that this traditional definition of marriage is the doctrine presumed by and contained in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.

Historical consensus: This account of marriage, derived first from Scripture, has also been the historic and universal doctrinal witness of the church, and remains the majority witness of the global church today.[2] That our own Reformed catechism, written in 1563 and confessed ever since, would think outside of that doctrinal consensus when it speaks of the "holy state of marriage" in Q&A 108 is untenable.

Scriptural priority: Moreover, the two study reports on this topic in our denomination's history both share and defend this doctrinal consensus from Scripture (1973, 2022). This matters a great deal, for our first commitment is to Scripture, to which the confessions are subordinate. As we say in the Church Order, we confess our "complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word" (Art. 1). In the Covenant for Officebearers, we say that the doctrines in the confessions "fully agree with the Word of God." Scripture thus has priority. At the same

---

[1] Beyond our own study committee reports, see the useful exploration of this consensus definition in Scripture and the tradition in Darrin Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2021), pp. 29-55.

[2] In addition to Snyder Belousek's work cited above, see also Christopher C. Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007). Specifically, on the form of marriage as unitive of the sexes (male/female), Roberts shows that this is the univocal witness of the Christian tradition.

time, our confessions (which faithfully reflect and synthesize Scripture) continue to "define the way we understand Scripture." To reinterpret (or make ambiguous) a doctrine in the confessions, one would have to reinterpret *Scripture*; likewise, to reinterpret Scripture *could* lead to a reinterpretation of confessional doctrine. But Scripture is where we begin. If all of the above is true, then it follows that if our reading of Scripture on questions of marriage and sexuality is governed ("settled and binding") by our study reports (1973, 2022), it is impossible for the "holy state of marriage" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to mean anything other than the traditional doctrine of marriage summarized above (3, b). This doctrine in Q&A 108 "fully agree[s] with the Word of God" as we have interpreted that Word, and, conversely, this doctrine also shapes "the way we understand Scripture." It is this doctrine of marriage that is contained in Q&A 108 and that underlies the catechism's teaching on chastity and unchastity.

Contemporary (synodical) interpretation: Finally, in its interpretation of "unchastity" in Q&A 108 (i.e., its "interpretation of [a] confession"), Synod 2022 confirmed a traditional account of chastity/unchastity, which presumes a traditional *doctrine* of marriage, in keeping with the conclusions of our study reports (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). To say this differently, Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" is inconsistent with a revisionist account of marriage in Q&A 108. Both "unchastity" *and* "marriage," then, need to be understood in accordance with the traditional understanding of these terms in order to maintain the internal consistency of the catechism's answer. To be sure, Synod 2022's interpretation of unchastity is not "confessional," but it is "settled and binding" as *the* "interpretation of [a] confession" (see the Classis Holland overture elsewhere in this agenda that makes this case). In clarifying unchaste behavior as it did, Synod 2022 thus presumed a traditional doctrine of marriage present in Q&A 108 when the catechism speaks of the "holy state of marriage." If this is *not* the doctrine of marriage contained in Q&A 108, Synod 2022's "settled and binding" interpretation of unchastity does not make sense, and should be reversed. I suggest the opposite. For reasons historical, scriptural, and contemporary/synodical, and in light of recent pressure toward revisionist accounts, I am asking Synod 2023 officially to clarify and affirm (per Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3) that a traditional doctrine of marriage, which underlies Synod 2022's interpretation of unchastity, is in fact the doctrine of marriage contained in Q&A 108, and thus a confessional doctrine to which officebearers subscribe via the Covenant for Officebearers.

4. If Synod 2023 were to adopt this overture together with Classis Holland's overture ("In Pursuit of Scriptural and Confessional Unity, Alter Synod 2022's Decision on Confessional Status in Three Ways"), it would helpfully clarify what is confessional and what is not in our

denomination's position on matters pertaining to human sexuality. In short, Synod 2022's "*interpretation* of [a] confession" is "settled and binding" via synodical pronouncement; our long-standing traditional *doctrine* of marriage is confessional via Q&A 108 as a doctrine "which fully agree[s] with the Word of God" (Gen. 2:18-25; Matt. 19:3-9; Eph. 5:22-33). The implications of this for each when it comes to the "extent of their jurisdiction," the "nature of their authority," and the "measure of agreement expected" are spelled out in the *Acts of Synod 1975* (pp. 601-602).

Benjamin J. Petroelje, minister of the Word at
Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meetings of the council of Fourteenth Street CRC and Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 18

Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of Q&A 108 and Declaration on Confessional Status; Provide an Alternative Interpretation

We, the undersigned members of Fourteenth Street CRC of Holland, Michigan, overture Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as encompassing "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex" as well as "sexual violence within and outside of covenantal marriage," and its decision to declare that its interpretation of the confession has "confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922), since synodical pronouncements themselves cannot have the status of a confession (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598); and instead to do the following:

A. Adopt the following definition of "chastity" as a guide for the meaning of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108: "the state or practice of refraining from all sexual activity outside of the marriage of one man and one woman, and sometimes within marriage as well."

B. Affirm that "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment," comprise a helpful and representative list of what constitutes "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.

C. Declare that this definition of "chastity" and this affirmation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 is an interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism that shall be considered "settled and binding" (Church Order, Art. 29) in its use and function as "an interpretation of the confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022's citation to Synod 1975[1] as authority for declaring its interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism to have "confessional status" is confusing and potentially misleading, given Synod 1975's statement "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, 598). Synod's 1975 report on the relationship between synodical pronouncements and the confessions quotes with approval the following statement of Synod 1926 when it reaffirmed Synod 1881's interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism:

> "The six points of 1881 are to be regarded, even as the three points of 1924, as an interpretation of our Confession. First, the Synod of 1881 did not add a new confession to the Forms of Unity, but accepted the six points as an interpretation of the confessional writings, in so far as they express the Reformed position relative to the

[1] "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603).

fourth commandment. Secondly, such an interpretation given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group. Thirdly, one cannot place one's personal interpretation of the Confessions or a part thereof above the official interpretation of synod. That would make void the significance and power of the Forms of Unity" (*Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 191-92).[2]

Notwithstanding the unique function served by synod's interpretations of the confessions, the 1975 synodical report concludes that "*this use does not elevate them to the status of the confessions*" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598, emphasis added). Synod 2022 inexplicably disregarded the settled and binding authority of Synod 1975's decision when it declared its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to have "confessional status."[3]

2. In declaring its interpretation to have "confessional status," Synod 2022 blurred lines that are clear in the 1975 report, setting a poor and potentially confusing precedent for future synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters.

3. Synod 2022's declaration of "confessional status" could be misconstrued to mean that Synod 2022 intended its interpretation to have the same authoritative status as the confession itself; this confusion could lead to unintended consequences, such as the following:

   a. thwarting otherwise permissible discussions of Synod 2022's interpretation, since dissent "to a synodical decision is permissible, although this is not tolerated with respect to the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 602).

   b. applying church discipline without just cause, since, as Synod 1975 noted, "there is a difference in the nature of the authority of the confessions and synodical pronouncements" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601).

   c. causing thoughtful and conscientious people to unnecessarily decline nomination to serve as officebearers since a greater measure of agreement is expected with respect to confessions than synodical pronouncements. "Full agreement with the *confessions* is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all officebearers by signing the Form of Subscription. While *synodical decisions* are 'settled and binding,' subscription to synodical decisions is not required" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-602).

4. While synod has authority to adopt new confessions and amend its current confessions, Synod 2022 decided against adding its interpretation as a footnote to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108. Such a measure was not necessary since synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and

---

[2] *Acts of Synod 1975,* p. 598.

[3] "Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922).

ethical matters are, by themselves, considered settled and binding unless proven to conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order, Art. 29).

5. Synod 2022's list of unchaste behaviors does not constitute a definition but rather offers a representative list. The church would be well served by a simple definition of "chastity" that provides guidance for recognizing and avoiding unchaste behaviors regardless of nomenclature.

Members of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan
Timothy Dykstra
Paul Katerberg
Doug Rooks
Rebecca Rozema

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meetings of the council of Fourteenth Street CRC and Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 19

Reverse Synod 2022's Declaration That Its Interpretation of "Unchastity" Has Confessional Status; Instead Make the Interpretation Nonbinding

I. Background

Synod 2022 considered the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, and a majority of delegates voted to recommend the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) to churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality. More significantly, synod declared that same-sex sexual activity is sinful under all circumstances by asserting that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment" (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 922). This codified an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, thereby granting this interpretation "confessional status." Confessional teachings must be upheld by all who hold office in the church, including clergy, elders, deacons, and professors at denominational schools.

II. Overture

Classis Lake Erie overtures Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's declaration that an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 defining homosexual sex as unchastity *already* has confessional status in the CRCNA, instead making this interpretation advisory and nonbinding.

Grounds:

1. Synod's interpretation of a confession does not have the same authority as a confession itself. The claim that an interpretation of Q&A 108 already has confessional status is without precedent. Homosexual sex in the context of a committed same-sex marriage is not addressed in the confessions of the church, and officebearers of the church should not be bound to adhere to an interpretation of the confessions for which there is not widespread agreement or sufficient study that includes diverse voices and opinions.
2. The Human Sexuality Report does not adequately represent the full breadth of Reformed scholarship on issues of human sexuality. There is significant disagreement among scholars, theologians, and pastors about what constitutes a faithful and biblical sexual ethic. Since those in disagreement with the prior 1973 synodical report on homosexuality were not allowed to serve on the committee, a diversity of Reformed voices was not included, and the report is limited and affected by their absence. Reformed scholarship values a diversity of opinions and trusts that Christ is present in culture. By rejecting the input of our members who held a different interpretation than the 1973 report, the report is not complete.

3. The Human Sexuality Report relies on incomplete and flawed scientific and medical claims. By not including the contributions of science, we fail to seek wisdom from general revelation. While we strongly affirm that the Bible is the Word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation, general revelation also plays an important role in Reformed theology and practice. In fact, the Belgic Confession begins answering the question "How do we know God?" by naming general revelation when it says, "We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God" (Art. 2).

III. Elaboration of the grounds

A. Synod's interpretation of a confession does not have the same authority as a confession itself. The motion brought before Synod 2022 read as follows: "That synod affirm that 'unchastity' in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation 'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status."

   This motion referenced the *Acts of Synod 1975* out of context. The study report on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions adopted at Synod 1975 made clear that the authority of the confessions is subordinate to Scripture and the authority of synodical decisions is subordinate to the confessions. Granting confessional status on the basis of a synodical interpretation of a confession is not the process to follow in a matter as weighty as this, is unprecedented, and will inevitably lead to division in the CRCNA.

   Beyond this illegitimate route to confessional status undertaken at Synod 2022, a more fundamental concern is the application of confessional status in the first place to declare homosexual sex sinful in all circumstances, including within a committed same-sex marriage. Confessional status should be reserved for the core doctrines of our faith and have a purpose of maintaining the integrity of the gospel, but the Human Sexuality Report fails to establish that this "issue involves the heart of the message of the gospel" (HSR, p. 456). In light of scientific understanding in regard to human sexuality and differing conclusions of Reformed scholars regarding human sexuality (see sections III, B and C below), it is not appropriate to raise any particular belief about this complex issue to the level of confessional status. Doing so causes irreparable harm to the denomination, creates a crisis of conscience for officebearers, and further alienates those in the LGBTQ community who have already been isolated and harmed by the actions of our church.

B. Requiring affirmation of the CRC's 1973 Statement on Homosexuality as a prerequisite to serving on the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality eliminated the possibility of a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. Excluding otherwise-qualified potential members from this committee resulted in insufficient Reformed engagement with the topic, as evident in the report's treatment of individual texts as well as the whole arc of Scripture. Significant voices within the Reformed tradition with differing conclusions about matters of human sexuality were not considered within the report. This was a missed opportunity to engage with ongoing Reformed scholarship in this area.

C. The presentation of conclusions derived from scientific literature in the Human Sexuality Report is flawed and incomplete. There was no evidence of a formal process of consultation with medical or scientific experts in the writing of the report. There was no description of the literature review used in the report, which casts doubt on the reliability of the scientific evidence cited in the report. The HSR erroneously concludes that a failure thus far to identify genetic factors that predict homosexual disposition with high accuracy suggests that being gay is not an innate condition (HSR, p. 405), and in this way the HSR even contradicts the 1973 report, which states that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 613). Members of the CRCNA who are also professionals in the medical or social sciences have criticized the report for its handling of these matters.[1]

   Incomplete understanding of the medical and scientific literature increases fear and stigmatization, and it impairs the church's discernment. The treatment of the Belgic Confession, Article 2, by Synod 2022 is incomplete. The HSR references Synod 1991's statement regarding the "primacy of special revelation" as grounds to deemphasize the importance of medical and scientific scholarship in the area of human sexuality. In doing so, Synod 2022 adopted a position that ignores three elements of the Reformed tradition for interpreting general and special revelation as advised by Synod 1972 and Synod 1991.

   First, the report of the Committee on Creation and Science (Report 28, Synod 1991) warns against allowing science to dictate our interpretation of Scripture but goes on to cite the *Acts of Synod 1972* (p. 515) as

[1]Video, "Misuse of Research" by Dr. Emily Helder, youtu.be/bJndecsMpvs; video, "Intersex Children and the CRC Approach to Sexuality" by Kathy VanderGrift, youtu.be/4ELd_WIvn0U; excerpt from "Sexuality Report Letter of Concern" signed by 147 Calvin University faculty members 12/10/2020: "The report insufficiently engages with relevant scholarship from our disciplines, leading to a biased view of the theological, scriptural, and scientific basis for the report. The discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation lack the scientific and hermeneutic rigor and accuracy of prevailing peer-reviewed scholarship. . . ." drive.google.com/file/d/1beBncK-OEjnMSVqMqwlh5lDuHtmzcCizS/view

background as it states that "scientific discovery can become the occasion for reexamining a traditional interpretation and in this way can lead to a reinterpretation of certain aspects of the Bible" (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, p. 384). But the Creation and Science report doesn't interpret "primacy of special revelation" as grounds to cut off dialogue, debate, or research between special and general revelation. Rather, the report encourages debate, as in the days of Copernicus, to take place in such a way that both special and general revelation are allowed to speak, saying, "So today we may not foreclose the possibility that something similar could occur under the impact of certain contemporary scientific perspectives" (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, p. 384).

Second, the report on Creation and Science addresses how Reformed Christians should approach "apparent" conflicts in the dialogue between the Bible and science. The report humbly asserts that acknowledging an "apparent" conflict "means to affirm as a religious confession that the conflict is ultimately *only* [italics original] apparent . . . that in the mind of God there is no contradiction or incompatibility even when we do not understand how this is so" (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, p. 402). As Reformed Christians, we are not called toward an approach in which the "primacy of special revelation" means an end to debate or an unqualified rejection of science. Instead, "as Reformed Christians who recognize the authority of general revelation and the legitimacy of the scientific enterprise as a God-given task, we also resolutely reject [an unqualified rejection of the scientific account]"; rather, "being Reformed means that we accept the problem in all its difficulty" (*Agenda for Synod 1991,* p. 402).

Third, the *Acts of Synod 1991* advocates for a Reformed approach to reading and interpreting general revelation through the glasses of special revelation and the confessions that was not allowed in the mandate to the HSR study committee. The decision of Synod 2022 is inconsistent with the traditional Reformed approach to scholarship advised by Synod 1991, which advises a process that welcomes ongoing debate: "The church urges its scholars who seek to provide guidance to the church on sensitive issues of faith and learning to first submit their ideas and theories to peer review as the most appropriate arena for adequate scholarly assessment of their biblical, confessional, and scientific validity" (*Acts of Synod 1991*, pp. 775-76). When Synod 2022 declared an interpretation of the word "unchastity" to be confessional, it sought to end dialogue and debate. In its decision Synod 2022 failed to heed the pastoral advice of Synod 1991, which says, "The church reminds its members of the necessity of distinguishing in the context of the present debate what is essential to the faith from what is not and of the importance of allowing open and vigorous discussion on matters pertaining to the latter. Fellowship within the body of Christ should not be broken over such matters" (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 776).

Classis Lake Erie
Benjamin W. Van Arragon, stated clerk

OVERTURE 20

Confessional-Revision Gravamen

I. Acknowledgments

A. The signatories to this confessional-revision gravamen are current officebearers of New Life Christian Reformed Church in Guelph, Ontario ("New Life CRC, Guelph"), within Classis Huron of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

B. By an act of Synod 2022, Synod 2022 adopted the following (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922):

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

C. This gravamen is submitted out of concern and love for the Christian Reformed Church, which has by its own admission declared that "we have failed each other."

II. Gravamen request

We, the signatories of this confessional-revision gravamen, overture Synod 2023 to reverse the decision by Synod 2022 that its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has "confessional status."

Grounds:

1. The interpretation of "confessional status" is based on theological arguments from a report (Human Sexuality Report [HSR]) that was written by a selected committee of CRC members "who adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 926). This interpretation was limited to exclude discussion of broader context and interpretation regarding many aspects of human sexuality and especially committed same-sex relationships.
2. Synod 2022 took an unprecedented step in the matter of declaring its synodical interpretation of the act of homosexual sex to have "confessional authority." As such, it is not applicable for a revision of the confession and should not be used with such authority. A reversal of the "confessional status" will provide important clarity in this matter of authority within the CRCNA.

III. Further implications

1. The decision of Synod 2022 to entrench its interpretation as "confessional status" has already resulted in deep division and sorrow within the CRCNA membership and effectively requires some congregations to limit hospitality and grace historically extended to the LGBTQ+

community. This interpretation will severely limit any future denominational guidance provided for pastoral counsel.

2. The synodical decision regarding "confessional status" limits local congregations in their search for officebearers, since many members are unwilling to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, given this interpretation of "confessional status."
3. The history of decisions made within the CRCNA provides alternatives to the present situation, such as provisions made for churches and classes in response to the position of the CRCNA on "Women in Ecclesiastical Office." It is our hope that the CRCNA denomination will in future be able to provide generous space for local churches and regions/classes to proceed with actions believed to be consistent with biblical principles, despite different perspectives and convictions within the denomination.

IV. Additional explanation and references for Grounds 1 and 2

A. Ground 1

Previous synods have made revisions or added footnotes to confessions of the CRCNA following comprehensive studies of broader contextual interpretations. Synod 2022, in its discussions about the HSR recommendations, acknowledged but did not recognize or include concerns about the limited scope of the HSR (e.g., a minority report, overtures) in its adoption of recommendations. Nevertheless, some recommendations were postponed on the grounds that "congregations and classes need time to reflect on the implications of this year's decisions" and "future synods can prioritize which of the many suggested tasks related to human sexuality . . . will be most urgent" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 909-10). We suggest that our request to reverse the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022 is indeed urgent, to allow for a more gracious space within our midst.

The Hesed Project (hesedprojectcrc.org/) includes extensive analysis of the HSR in broader biblical and current context and cites many concerns about and potential errors in the HSR.

Other Reformed authors have built strong arguments based on historic context, wherein same-sex acts described in the Bible were deemed to be cultic or temple prostitution, sexual debauchery, pederasty, and/or controlling acts of power. The Bible does not provide explicit advice on committed relationships/faithful marriage between same-sex partners. "Any use of the text [referring to Romans 1] that fails to take the context of the biblical texts into consideration is deeply suspect. Faithful reading always occurs in the context of the whole narrative, centred on Jesus . . . in biblical times the idea of same-sex orientation would not have made any sense."

". . . Paul is not making a point about the creational normativity of heterosexuality. . . . Paul is attacking erotic practices that transgress what is known about God from the very creation of the world, not

what is known about human gender identity and reproduction. Sexual lives that are steeped in infidelity, injustice, and insatiable consumption are brought under judgment because they fall so short of our calling to image God in faithfulness, justice, and love." The latter statement about sexual lives is very much congruent with Q&A 108 in the Heidelberg Catechism. We believe that committed same-sex relationships/marriages are neither inconsistent with the teachings of Scripture nor in contravention to the Heidelberg Catechism.

B. *Ground 2*

A critical difference in the authority of a synod versus the confessions has been explained as follows: "Synods do adopt confessions (Church Order Article 47). . . . Synods can also change the confessions. For example, [Synods 1958, 1985, 2010]. . . . All of these are changes in the confessions made by synods. But this is not what Synod 2022 did. It didn't claim it was changing anything in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108; it claimed that it was merely explaining what the catechism had always meant and that its interpretation of the catechism answer was confessional. It did so on the basis of a decision about the authority of synod made in 1975. . . . Synod 1975 did not say what Synod 2022 says it says. Quite the opposite, Synod 1975 said that a synodical decision never has the authority of a confession. So, Synod 2022 declared its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to be confessional on the basis of an egregious misreading of an earlier synodical decision. Synodical decisions deserve respect, but when they are wrong, they are wrong. Synods make mistakes. . . . The 1975 decision does not say that a synodical interpretation of a confession is itself confessional. It says that a synodical interpretation of a confession is just that: a synodical interpretation. It comes with the authority of the synod, not the authority of the confession it interprets. . . . Synod 1975 recognized that decisions of that kind are not actually confessional. They don't express our joint faith. . . . They have the authority of the synod, but not of the confessions. It's important in this time that we observe this difference between what a synod does and what's actually confessional." Similar concerns have been raised by others, acknowledging that the HSR's "conclusion about 'confessional status' appears incorrect or at least significantly misleading."

We believe this misinterpretation by synod is damaging and divisive within the CRCNA in its unauthorized, yet authoritative, use of the Synod 1975 decision, and we therefore ask for a reversal of this "confessional status" declaration in 2022.

V. Additional explanation and references for Further Implications 1, 2, and 3

A. *Implication 1*

A church congregation must be a place of fellowship and hospitality, supported by gracious space and pastoral counsel. While the adoption

of the HSR was intended to provide guidance for CRCNA congregations, we note this is not mentioned, nor is the HSR referenced, in the Position Statement section of the CRCNA website. We agree with the observation of the Reverend Clay Libolt, in which he asks, "But what happens if a synod takes a part of a confession and narrows it down to a specific and controversial interpretation. The 'us' is gone. It no longer speaks for us; it speaks for some of us and not for others. It drives a wedge into denominational life."

Indeed, New Life CRC, Guelph, has asked in its overture (see Overture 70 from Classis Huron) that synod direct the denomination "to affirm our commitments to manage disagreements within our congregations, and among churches, with love, charity, and grace, and to ensure that all who seek to follow Christ are afforded a safe place to honestly share their views and listen to those of others"; and "to develop resources and tools . . . to equip congregations to minister pastorally with and to LGBTQ+ people."

B. *Implication 2*

The misuse of the synodical interpretation regarding "confessional status" further limits potential officebearers in their willingness to serve amid tensions and divisions. We quote further, "A signatory [to the Covenant for Officebearers] is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3). ". . . By declaring sex in a same-sex marriage as unchaste by definition and then declaring that declaration to be confessional, Synod 2022 suddenly put many holders of office in the CRC on the wrong side of ecclesiastical law" (peripateticpastor.com/2022/10/14/hold-those-gravamina-why-filing-a-gravamen-might-not-be-the-right-move-for-those-who-disagree-with-synod-2022/).

We note that the CRCNA website's "FAQ about the Human Sexuality Report" provides some discussion of options for officebearers such as the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen. However, the CRCNA website appears to provide only one article as a resource to guide decisions of potential officebearers. Members are welcomed to hold office, even if with a gravamen of confessional difficulty, yet comments in response to the online article suggest that such use of a gravamen is not meant for consistent practice.

C. *Implication 3*

Historically the CRCNA has sought to make provisions for churches and classes, to honor local differences in the characters and makeup of congregations. We note, for example, in the position statement of the CRCNA on "Women in Ecclesiastical Office," that such recognition and flexibility was provided wherein the "CRC recognizes that there

are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God." Indeed, there is even allowance provided for regional differences wherein classes may declare limitations on officebearers delegated to their classis, and churches may exercise an option "to move to the classis in closest proximity that is willing to receive them and which they are willing to join."

The CRCNA does not currently support such local/regional options to address differences in biblical interpretation regarding homosexual sex specifically and human sexuality in general. It is our hope that the CRCNA, in its Church Order and Supplements, can provide direction that sustains unity and grace within our denomination in the future, while also acknowledging and providing space for important matters of difference in perspective and conviction.

Officebearers of New Life CRC, Guelph, Ontario
James Bryson (deacon)
Dirk Kroon (deacon: representative on council)
Patricia Vanderkooy (pastoral elder)
Jacinda Laning-Wallace (pastoral elder)
Kathy Zettler (deacon)

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Huron according to the regulations in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, C, but was rejected.

OVERTURE 21

In Pursuit of Scriptural and Confessional Unity, Alter Synod 2022's Decision on Confessional Status in Three Ways

I. Background: Our present situation

Before moving to the overture, we wish to reflect briefly both on the biblical and theological convictions out of which this overture arises, as well as on the realities of our present situation as a denomination. We note the following points:

1. In John 17, Jesus prays that his church may all be one, on the model of the perfect unity of the Father and Son (vv. 20-23). In Ephesians 4, Paul confesses that there is "one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (vv. 4-6). These texts of Holy Scripture are the bedrock foundations on which the theological doctrine of the church's unity is built. As readers of Scripture, we are not invited to neglect these vital texts, nor to pit truth against unity, as is so often done. The unity of the church—the answer to Jesus' prayer, and the core of Paul's confession—*is* a matter of the truth of the gospel and of right doctrine. The church's unity, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, is a mark of the church. It is precious—"both a gift and an obligation," a Spirit-given reality to be received and a Spirit-empowered call to be earnestly sought. Our challenge is to receive and guard this gift and "together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity" (Belhar Confession, Art. 2).
2. Strikingly, however, in the very same two key New Testament texts just cited, we find a deep concern not just for the church's unity but also for her holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Jesus' disciples are "not of the world," and so he prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:16-17, 19; cf. Eph. 4:17-24; 5:3-14, 25-27). This holiness is not just a matter of life but also of doctrine; the church is to desperately avoid error and pursue truth (Eph. 4:14, 25; 5:17; 6:14; cf. John 17:14). Moreover, the church is built on an apostolic foundation and equipped with apostolic gifts, all so that she might "attain to the unity of the faith"—a oneness through which "the world may believe" (Eph. 2:20-21; 4:11-13; John 17:21, 23). If it means anything in Ephesians to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (4:15), it means to grow up in *all* of these ways. In John 17 and Ephesians 4 (and more broadly), then, it is vital that we find *all the marks of the church there together*. As readers of Scripture, we are not invited to pit these marks against each other, or teach any single mark in a way that undermines another. The church is "one holy catholic and apostolic church." These are Christ's gifts to the church, to be received by the Spirit; as such, they are also to be guarded and protected, earnestly pursued and sought.

3. This, of course, is very far from our present reality. Within our own small corner of this "one holy catholic and apostolic church" we are at war with one another. Synodical decisions are openly disregarded and disdained, or hastily used to try and silence any questions and purge all disagreement; we withhold both admonishment and comfort because we are scared; we seek control because we are angry; we mock one another, label each other, are suspicious of one another, stop talking with each other, and withdraw from one another. For all our concern for the seventh commandment and Q&A 108, we have belittled, hated, insulted, and killed each other in thoughts, words, looks, and gestures (Q&A 105), and we have twisted words, gossiped, slandered, and rashly condemned, failing to do all we can to guard and advance each other's good names (Q&A 112). In these ways, we have broken the sixth and the ninth commandments. "No one is righteous; no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). We are not healthy, and we should admit as much. In the words of the town clerk in Ephesus, we really are "in danger of being charged with rioting today" (Acts 19:40). Worse, we're acting schismatically toward each other. We're in danger of "devouring one another" and thus in danger of being "consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:15). Lord, have mercy upon us.
4. All of this is sin. This is not primarily conflict that needs to be mediated, but sin that requires repentance. To break the body is sin (1 Cor. 1:10-13). To bless the "works of the flesh" of any kind in the body and call them good is sin (1 Cor. 5:1-13; Gal. 5:19-21). To introduce falsehood into the church is sin (2 Pet. 2; Jude 1:3-16). To not herald a kingdom of radical and surprising welcome is sin (Matt. 23:13; Luke 14:15-24). We are here, by way of negative statement, back to the marks of the church. We have broken every single one. These are Christ's gifts, but we have not received them. This is the Spirit's call, but we have not followed. The church is not one, not holy, not catholic, and not apostolic. And insofar as we are not, we are breaking the very means by which the world is meant to know that the Father sent the Son, and that the Father *loves* the world (John 17:23). To break the marks is a failure of mission, and we each have contributed to its breaking. This is a tragic failure. The "principalities and powers" are toying with us (Eph. 6:12). We are caught in Satan's schemes (2:2). We are sinners, all of us, "children of wrath like the rest" (2:3), who dare not stand save the grace of Christ, "so that every mouth may be stopped" (Rom. 3:19).
5. ***But God!*** He is rich in mercy! Because of the great love with which he loves us, even when we are dead in our trespasses, he makes us alive together with Christ—*by grace we have been saved*—and he raises us up with him and seats us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. He does all this so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace we are saved through faith. This isn't our own doing; it's the gift of God—not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:4-9). "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to

an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). "Ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

6. It is just this—the common depth of our misery ("children of wrath"), solely attributable to us ("every mouth may be stopped"), together with the common heights of our salvation ("raised together with Christ"), solely attributable to God ("so that no one may boast")—that provides the scriptural basis for the call to humility. That, and Christ himself: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). Taking its cue from the nature of salvation and from Christ's own example, Scripture then repeatedly enjoins humility on God's people—first toward God himself (James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6), and then also toward one another (Phil. 2:3; 1 Pet. 5:5). "Have this mind among yourselves," Paul says in Philippians 2, "which is yours in Christ Jesus"—just before he goes on to describe the astounding descent of Christ's own humility. Our call to humility is modeled on Christ's own. It is, in fact, a sign of new creation, one of those heavenly virtues we are to seek and to clothe ourselves with (Col. 3:12). Such humility, toward God and neighbor, will usher forth in concrete realities like forgiveness and love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:13-14). It will be a sign that Christ's peace is at work in our hearts, "to which we were called in one body" (3:15).[1]

7. That is a vision very different from our present reality. If we are to "put to death" all that is earthly in us (Col. 3:5-11) and instead "grow up in every way into Christ" (Eph. 4:15; cf. Col. 3:12-17), the road there is paved with repentance and humility. That gate will be narrow, and that way hard, but it is the road that leads to life (Matt. 7:14). This humility, in particular, will have to take quite concrete forms, as we forsake "anger, wrath, malice, and slander" (Col. 3:8), and pursue instead "what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19)—as we practice, in real life, what it means to "count others more significant than ourselves" (Phil. 2:3). Such humility will, of course, need to be displayed among all members of the body, but also from ordained

[1] The whole passage from Colossians 3 is worth quoting in full, as a way of shining the light of Scripture into our present darkness: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (vv. 12-17).

leaders to members (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Matt. 20:26-28), from members to ordained leaders (1 Pet. 5:5; Heb. 13:7, 17), and from all of us to the assemblies (council, classis, synod) that govern us under "Christ, the only head of the church" (Church Order, Art. 1; cf. Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18). This is what humility will look like in concrete practice. As we then "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21), "humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God" (1 Pet. 5:6), and give ourselves over in "complete subjection to the Word of God" (Church Order, Art. 1; Isa. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:24-25; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), perhaps God will have mercy, make our darkness light, and see fit to exalt us at the proper time (1 Pet. 5:6). Perhaps he will draw us ever nearer to becoming that "one holy catholic and apostolic church" that he has given us as a gift for the life of the world. Until that day, we ought earnestly to pursue and seek that gift and to "cast all our anxieties on him, because he cares for us" (1 Pet. 5:7).

Toward this end, we offer the following overture (along with the communication to Synod 2023 adopted by Classis Holland) as our hope for how we might live together in Scriptural and confessional unity, while "bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).

II. Overture

We, Classis Holland, overture Synod 2023 to alter Synod 2022's decision to affirm that its "interpretation of the confession" (i.e., its interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as encompassing "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment" and as encompassing "sexual violence within and outside of covenantal marriage" [*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 922-24]) has "confessional status" pursuant to the *Acts of Synod 1975* (p. 603). Instead, we overture Synod 2023 to alter that decision in the following ways:

A. Adopt the following definition of chastity in order to guide the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism *Q&A* 108: "Chastity is the pursuit of that purity of heart which Jesus calls blessed (Matt. 5:8). Whether in married or single life, chastity is the preservation of sexual union for the one-flesh union of one man and one woman in marriage, within which such sexual union serves both natural and symbolic ends: the joining of male and female in one flesh (Gen. 2:24); the bearing of children (Gen. 1:28); and the nuptial union of Christ and church (Eph. 5:31-32). Chastity is thus a gift which preserves the holy state of marriage and signals our ultimate betrothal to Christ, and unchastity is any transgression that undermines this state and this betrothal."

   Ground: Synod 2022's list of seven unchaste actions does not constitute a definition but rather offers a representative list. The church would be well served by a definition of chastity that is in keeping with the biblical and theological conclusions of our study reports (1973/2022). This

definition will provide further guidance to the churches to recognize and pursue chaste living within and outside of marriage.

B. Affirm that Synod 2022's "interpretation of the confession" offers a helpful and representative list of what constitutes "unchastity" in light of the conclusions of our synodical study reports (1973/2022), but revise the language of "encompasses" to "includes, but is not exhausted by." The full text of the affirmation would thus read: "that 'unchastity' in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 includes but is not exhausted by adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, sexual violence within and outside of covenantal marriage, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment."

   Ground: In discerning "the need to call the church to radical obedience for chaste living" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922), Synod 2022 rightly recognized that representative lists of sins can be helpful and should be affirmed.

   1. Such a list is not to be regarded as a legalistic set of rules to follow by which one deems oneself righteous or another unrighteous (an attitude against which Jesus warns—Matt. 23:23-28), but rather as examples which help us to understand what sort of life is enjoined upon those who are new creations in Christ, living not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:16-25). In doing this, Synod 2022 simply followed the pattern we see in the law (e.g., Ex. 20:1-17) and the teaching of Jesus (e.g., Mark 7:20-23) and Paul (e.g., Gal. 5:19-21), not to mention the Heidelberg Catechism itself (e.g., Q&A's 99, 105, and 110).
   2. The language of "includes, but is not exhausted by" better captures both the spirit of subpoint 1 above and of lists in the Bible themselves, whereas "encompasses" suggests a complete list, which is not true of the list adopted by Synod 2022.

C. In agreement with Synod 2022, declare that this interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 is an "interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). However, alter Synod 2022's declaration that this interpretation has "confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) and declare instead that Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" shall be considered "settled and binding" (Church Order, Art. 29) in its use and function as an "interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603), which is the most significant category of pronouncement on doctrinal and ethical matters available to synod (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 597).

   Ground: Synod rightly has the authority to pronounce on doctrinal and ethical matters that concern the whole church (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 597). Such decisions may fall into one of several categories, which are listed and described by Synod 1975's Report 47 on "Synodical Decision and the Confessions" (p. 597). Regarding the authority of these decisions, the following statements all pertain to Synod 2022's decision and serve as the grounds for our recommended alteration:

1. Synodical decisions "shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Church Order, Art. 29).
2. At the same time, "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). That is to say, no synodical pronouncement *itself* (even an "interpretation of the confession") can ever be "elevate[d] . . . to the status of the confessions" (p. 598).
3. Instead, "clothed with 'synodical authority,' [such pronouncements] serve that precise use and function for which they were specifically designed by synod" (p. 598). At Synod 2022, this pronouncement took the form of an "interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). As such, "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). It follows, then, that Synod 2022's "interpretation of [a] confession" does not itself have "confessional status" but is rather "settled and binding" (Church Order, Art. 29) in its "use and function" as an "interpretation of the confession."
4. As "settled and binding" in this way, what authority does Synod 2022's decision have? How should this "interpretation of the confession" (i.e., synod's reading of "unchastity" in Q&A 108) *function* for our body, within our covenantal commitments to one another and in our "complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word" (Church Order, Art. 1)? Synod 1926 has told us, as quoted by the 1975 report, "Such an interpretation given by synod must be regarded as the official interpretation, and is, therefore, binding for every officer and member of our denominational group. . . . *One cannot place one's personal interpretation of the Confessions or a part thereof above the official interpretation of synod. That would make void the significance and power of the Forms of Unity*" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598; quoting *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 191-92; emphasis ours). All teaching, preaching, discipleship, and discipline within CRCNA churches should therefore conform itself to the "settled and binding" character of this interpretation.
5. To summarize: Synod 2022's *interpretation* of "unchastity" in Q&A 108 does not (should not) have confessional status (per *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598), but it does represent the most significant category of pronouncement on doctrinal and ethical matters available to synod, and is "settled and binding" as such, as defined above (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 597, 603).[2]
6. Two things follow from the above, and should be recognized by all members and officebearers in the CRCNA:

[2] As the 1975 report says, "There is an obvious difference between the use and function of a pronouncement as interpretation of the confessions and a decision involving 'guidelines' or 'pastoral advice'" (p. 598).

- On the one hand, it should be acknowledged that the "measure of agreement expected" *is* different for a synodical decision than it is for a confessional doctrine. As the 1975 report says, "Full agreement with the *confessions* is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all officebearers by signing the Form of Subscription. While *synodical decisions* are 'settled and binding', subscription to synodical decisions is not required. Registering a negative vote with regard to a synodical decision is permissible, although this is not tolerated with respect to the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 601-2). As this makes clear, disagreement with a synodical decision is possible/allowable, even as that decision remains "settled and binding" on the church.[3]
- With that said, and charges of divisiveness notwithstanding, it should also be acknowledged that in making the decisions it did, Synod 2022 was attempting to call local churches, officebearers, and members *away* from such disagreement and back towards unity on this doctrinal/moral subject. In this way, Synod 2022 attempted to use the confessions as what we say they are—"Forms of *Unity*." As the 1975 report says, "The well-being of the church is fostered when there is substantial unity with respect to all the decisions of synod" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 602).

7. In sum: by declaring its *interpretation* to have "confessional status," Synod 2022 blurred lines that are clear in the 1975 report, setting a poor and potentially confusing precedent for future synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters. Altering Synod 2022's decision in the way described above brings it in line with the position of the 1975 report on the relationship between synodical decisions and the confessions. At the same time, it honors synod's intent to clarify the meaning of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 in the strongest way possible, so as not to allow divergent practice at the local church level by appeal to the suggestion that previous synodical deliverances were "pastoral advice" that can be set aside. As such, the purpose of this overture is to alter Synod 2022's decision so as to bring it in line with the conclusions of the 1975 report, while affirming the "settled and binding" authority and significance of its interpretation of "unchastity" in Q&A 108.

Classis Holland
Calvin Hoogstra, stated clerk

---

[3] On this same point/balance, see also section IV.B.2 in Report 47, in which Synod 1975 adopted the following recommendation, "Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions and 'shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order' (Church Order, Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603).

OVERTURE 22

Confessional-Revision Gravamen

The council of Maranatha Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, is deeply disappointed with Synod 2022's decision to put more power into a modern interpretation of a word in the Heidelberg Catechism than in the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. By making this decision, synod has, in effect, put a wall between nonhomosexual members and homosexual members, saying that they are not welcome. That is the reality of the outcome of the decision. Whether intended or not, the perception is unmistakable, and the message will be interpreted as closing a door or building a wall rather than showing welcome and love to all our congregants.

Furthermore, enacting the very rare synodical decision to "read into" the catechism this new interpretation of the definition of "unchastity" and, additionally, declaring that this definition has *confessional* status is unnecessary and provocative. Unnecessary because of the redundant nature of including "homosexual sex," which is already included in the definition of extramarital sex within our denomination, and provocative by singling out homosexuals and adding an emphasis where no emphasis was needed. This sends a loud message that we do not welcome homosexuals in our churches.

It puts up a clear wall against our duty to love all people—all sinners. Synod's decision makes a statement—one that puts aside Jesus' love for an interpretation of the law. It seems to put us on the side of Pharisees rather than on the side of Jesus. Our mission is to love. Our mission is to open doors, not to close them; to learn to recognize the difficulties that our homosexual members experience rather than throwing the Heidelberg Catechism in their faces and pointing a finger and saying, "You sinners!" Do we really presume to cast that stone?

Synod's decision also seems hypocritical. If synod was going to begin listing the various sins individually that make up what we understand as "unchastity," there are a number of other sexual sins not included in this list, including divorce. Are we pretending that divorce is not also clearly stated in the Bible as a sin? We have managed to stop pointing that finger, and while there are differences, we cannot escape the hypocrisy of ignoring or conveniently skipping over divorce in this decision.

Perception in this case, unfortunately, has almost the same power as the truth. The truth is that synod gave insufficient thought to God's unfailing love for all undeserving sinners. They lost sight of our need as a church to reflect Jesus' love first and foremost, above the need to single out a word in the Heidelberg Catechism. This synodical decision is causing divisiveness and the perception of exclusivity. We at Maranatha want to be a church that shows Jesus' love to all people—to all sinners. Synod's action now forces us to be embarrassed and explain what synod's decision means

to members of our congregation and guests, distracting us from our true mission to reflect God's love to all.

A further consequence of this decision is to put additional barriers to finding members of our congregation willing and/or able to serve as elders and deacons. We now have the potential of members not being able, in "good conscience," to sign the Covenant for Officebearers upon their ordination.

We have added to the bureaucracy of our church rather than helping to ease that burden. Synod has created another unnecessary barrier.

We cannot help asking, "Why was this necessary?" Why did synod have to force an issue that did not need to be forced? They have potentially created an irrevocable rift within our denomination, between congregations and between our congregants. Love is why we are here and what we are meant to show. Our job as Christians is not to point out the sins of others but to embrace those sinners and remind them that, even though we are all sinners, God loves us all unconditionally. While we understand we must teach God's truth, we do not believe this change was necessary or improves upon what we already know to be God's Word and the wisdom of the Heidelberg Catechism. This decision is not the way. We choose to show Jesus' love instead.

Therefore, the council of Maranatha CRC makes an overture, as a confessional-revision gravamen, that synod reverse its decision to

> affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status. (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922)

To be clear, this overture can be satisfied by either removing the phrase "and homosexual sex" from the above list or changing the interpretation from "confessional status" to "pastoral advice."

Grounds:

1. There is no precedent for adding this kind of interpretive list to the Heidelberg Catechism in its entire 460-year history.
2. The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality was not mandated to revise the Heidelberg Catechism. Therefore, the classes and churches have not been given the opportunity to consider the implications of this revision.
3. The list itself is problematic. For example, the terms "adultery, premarital sex, and extramarital sex" are all encompassed with a single term, "extramarital sex." If we are going to attempt a list to define "unchastity," then this list is incomplete. It does not include other sexual sins (e.g., divorce, incest, bestiality, intimate partner violence) that are also prohibited in the Bible.

4. The subsequent decision (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 923) to not publish this list with the catechism is confusing. It appears that synod has made a momentous and unprecedented decision and does not want to tell anyone about it.
5. This interpretation assumes the catechism author's intent but does not support this supposition. It can be equally assumed that the author did not define "unchastity" because the definition changes over time and social context. For example, if the author were to visit a modern-day Christian Reformed church, we could assume he would be aghast at the revealing nature of clothing worn by men, women, and children at worship. He would certainly define that as unchaste, given his own social context, and might consider that to be a greater concern than those we now list.
6. The act of attempting to define "unchastity" with a list of prohibitions is a step toward legalism and is not in accord with Jesus' desires for us to be Spirit led. We are also taught by Paul (especially in Galatians but also in Romans) that we are to live by the Spirit, not by law, that Jesus has fulfilled the law on our behalf, and we have been set free.
7. Finally, this decision detracts from our need to spend our energies on finding ways to love and minister to all sinners (ourselves included), not on developing and arguing over lists of particular sins that, at the time, seem to be more important than other sins. Ultimately this is dehumanizing and negates the glorious salvation of our Lord, demanding compliances that we cannot hope to achieve.

Council of Maranatha CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
David Paszek, clerk

Note: This confessional-revision gravamen was adopted by the council of Maranatha Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, at a meeting of council held on January 31, 2023. This confessional-revision gravamen was not adopted by the classis and therefore comes to synod as an *appeal* of the classis decision, per Church Order Supplement, Article 5, C, 5. Such gravamina will be processed according to Church Order Supplement, Article 30-a, B-C.

OVERTURE 23

Remove Confessional Status from Interpretation of "Unchastity"

I. Introduction

Synod 2022 of the CRCNA adopted the following resolution:

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922)

We believe the confessional status granted to this interpretation should be removed because it presents serious theological, pastoral, and Church Order issues, outlined below.

A. Issue 1: Church Order

The decision of Synod 2022 incorrectly bases its "confessional status" decision on the report "Synodical Decisions and the Confessions" adopted in 1975. This report states that "no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598) and that such pronouncements are "subordinate to the confessions" (p. 603). Regarding interpretations of a confession, the report states: "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function" (p. 603). That is to say, the "use and function" of an "interpretation of a confession" is just that: an interpretation which does not itself attain the status of a confession (as per p. 598). It is instructive to note that the 1975 report distinguishes between the status of the confessions, which are "binding upon all confessing members," and synodical interpretations, which "all officebearers and members are expected to abide by" (sections B, 1 and B, 2, p. 603). The spirit and aim of the 1975 report was to create as broad a basis for Christian unity as possible rather than narrowing the scope of unity, as the 2022 decision does.

B. Issue 2: Threatens the gospel

Making a specific interpretation of "unchastity" confessional presents the most serious problem, a challenge to the gospel of grace as articulated in the Reformed confessions. Synod followed the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) in shifting the gospel sequence from one of grace to one of duty. In its discussion of confessional status, the HSR stated, "At the heart of the gospel is the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 459). This misses the gospel by a degree, but a dangerous degree. The heart of the gospel is, first, the declaration of God's acceptance and adoption of unworthy sinners through the merits of Christ Jesus, and,

based on this prior gracious[1] acceptance and new identity, follows the imperative call to sanctification, a life of repentance and faith (cf. Gal. 2:16; 3:2). Elsewhere the HSR rightly notes the heart of the gospel, that "the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality is our identity in Christ. . . . First and foremost we are children of God, 'heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3:29), and we are called to practice our sexuality in accord with this purpose" (p. 339). The necessary sequence of the gospel is, first, acceptance by God and adoption in Christ, and then a call to a changed life;[2] the priority of grace, then a life of gratitude. Reverse this sequence, and you have constructed something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

C. Issue 3: Impedes pastoral care

The HSR contains helpful pastoral guidance for receiving, enfolding, and caring for LGBTQ+ persons in the church. For example, the report highlights the need for "nonjudgmental presence and support" (p. 364), hospitality ("Individuals who identify as transgender or have gender dysphoria need to be received without judgment as persons made in God's image, valuable to God as they are. In other words, they need to be welcomed with unconditional love"—p. 398), and acceptance ("Accept those who have already fully transitioned (i.e., have had hormones and surgery) as they are"—p. 399). In addition, the report calls the church to establish relationships with believers who hold to different views on same-sex marriage ("Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who affirm same-sex marriage. . . . Encourage their relationship with Jesus and affirm them for continuing in their faith"—p. 430). In these statements the report assumes a spectrum of conviction regarding human sexuality among confessing believers in the church. It recognizes that the church is a field filled with both wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24-30) in our sexual expressions and convictions—this is the pastoral context of the church.[3] However, the confessional status of the interpretation of "unchastity" places an impediment to the provision of the important acts of pastoral care called for in the HSR. In fact, this confessional boundary around membership in the church prevents pastoral care from functioning in the

---

[1] Belgic Confession, Article 21 (1985): "Therefore, we rightly say with Paul that we 'know nothing but Jesus and him crucified'; we consider all things as 'dung for the excellence of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' We find all comforts in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever." Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 60 describes how we are righteous: "Without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is accept this gift with a believing heart."

[2] Belgic Confession, Article 24: "These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable to God, since they are all sanctified by his grace. Yet they do not count toward our justification—for by faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do good works."

[3] Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 114 also recognizes this context, noting, "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience."

first place and removes the communal context needed for the development of Christian holiness.

D. Issue 4: Unnecessary expansion of the scope of necessary beliefs for membership

Synod's decision concerning the confessional status of its interpretation of "unchastity" adds to the scope of necessary beliefs for membership in the Christian Reformed Church, as stated in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 22:

> **Q. What then must a Christian believe?**
>
> **A.** All that is promised us in the gospel, a summary of which is taught us in the articles of our universal and undisputed Christian faith. [i.e., Apostles' Creed]

Synod's decision creates an additional criterion for confessing members, thereby adding a barrier to many people's membership and participation (cf. John 20:31; Acts 16:30-34). Additionally, it complicates and creates confusion about important parts of the life of the church, including communion and baptism. May people who disagree with this interpretation still make profession of faith or be baptized, present children for baptism, or serve as officebearers? Should the people who have not come to a place of agreement with the HSR's perspective and synod's interpretation be barred from the Lord's Supper? Would someone who at one point rejects this interpretation and leaves the CRC but later recants and accepts this teaching then need to be rebaptized or make a new profession of faith? The church is what it is only through a living relationship with the living Lord. The essence of the church is in the union of the whole church with Christ, not in the personal character of certain select Christians. The holiness of the church is not derived from the virtue of its individual members but is derived from the holy nature of its head, Jesus Christ.

E. Issue 5: The list of proscribed sexual practices is selective and pastorally inadequate

Synod's list of sexual practices deemed to be violations of the confessions "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex." This list targets several specific activities but does not mention (except by omission) other practices that have historically been regarded as unchaste (e.g., masturbation). Most importantly, this list fails to address the matter of unchastity within the marriage relationship, such as marital rape or the withholding of sexual relations by a marriage partner. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 109 wisely allows for broader pastoral application, directing Christians to the heart as the wellspring of "all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires" (see also Matt. 5:27-30).

F. Issue 6: Unity of the church

The unity of the church was a great concern for our Lord Jesus (John 17), and this decision by synod is unnecessarily divisive, effecting a separation

within the communion of saints that proceeds beyond the unity that "believers one and all . . . share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 55). Our Lord cautions against such inclinations to judge and separate, instead leaving any weeding out to God's final judgment (Matt. 13:28-30, 40-43).

II. Overture

Classis Toronto overtures Synod 2023 to remove the confessional status granted to the interpretation of the word "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022's decision runs contrary to the Synod 1975 report, which states that interpretations of confessions do not themselves have confessional status.
2. Synod 2022's decision threatens the core of the gospel.
3. Synod 2022's decision is an impediment to pastoral care.
4. Synod 2022's decision unwisely expands the scope of necessary belief for full membership in the CRC in a manner that creates barriers and confusion.
5. Synod 2022's decision selectively and inadequately addresses issues of unchastity.
6. Synod 2022's decision unnecessarily threatens the unity of the CRCNA.

Classis Toronto
Matilda Berg, stated clerk

OVERTURE 24

Declare that Synod 2022's Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Has Synodical Authority but Not Confessional Status

Classis Rocky Mountain overtures Synod 2023 to rule and declare that the interpretation of Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism adopted by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) has the weight of synodical authority but does not have confessional status.

Synod 2022 of the CRCNA adopted the following resolution:

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922)

We believe the confessional status granted to this interpretation should be removed because it presents serious Church Order, theological, and pastoral care problems.

A. Church Order concern

Synod 1975 determined that there is "a difference in the nature of the authority of the confessions and synodical pronouncements" as recognized in how earlier synods handled the relationship between confessional authority and synodical authority (*Acts of Synod 1975,* p. 601). On the basis of their study, they concluded that synodical decisions *have not* been given confessional status, "even when the particular decision involved was an interpretation of the confessions" (p. 599). The report makes it very clear that synodical decisions *do not* have confessional status.

Part of the work of the 1975 committee was to sort through various synodical pronouncements and distinguish how those pronouncements should be taken by the church. They noted that synodical pronouncements do various things. They distinguished six kinds of synodical pronouncements: (1) interpretation of a confession, (2) extension of church teaching into a new area, (3) adjudication of doctrinal or moral disputes, (4) public testimony, (5) guidelines for further study, and (6) pastoral advice. Each of these has its own kind of authority, but the authority remains synodical authority. It does not become confessional authority.

Interpretation comes with the authority of the synod, not with the authority of the confession. This is an important and fundamental principle of Reformed polity. If synodical interpretations of a confession are themselves confessional, then what is confessional can be extended infinitely. Every time the synod makes an interpretation of a confession, the confession grows, and the meaning of one's subscription to the confession

changes. For this reason, Reformed polity has distinguished between the authority of the confessions and the authority of synods.

Synod 2022, however, did not observe the deeply embedded principle of distinguishing confessional and synodical authority. Among its decisions on human sexuality, Synod 2022 declared

> that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

"When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603).

If officebearers are to subscribe not only to the confessions as written but also to synodical interpretations of the confessions, then they cannot be certain to what they are subscribing. Those who opposed the actions taken by Synod 2022 on the basis of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) are faced with many questions about what their previous subscription to the confessions now means. Do they need to resubscribe? Is their previous subscription invalidated by the decisions of Synod 2022?

Synod 2022's decision also creates an additional criterion for confessing members. It complicates and creates confusion about important parts of the life of the church, including communion and baptism. People who disagree with the confessional nature of this interpretation may make profession of faith or be baptized, present children for baptism, or serve as officebearers. Should people who have not come to a place of agreement with the HSR's perspective and synod's interpretation be barred from the Lord's Supper? Would someone who at one point rejects this interpretation and leaves the CRC, but later recants and accepts this teaching, be required to make a new profession of faith?

B. Theological concern

Making a specific interpretation of "unchastity" confessional presents a serious challenge to the gospel of grace as articulated in the Reformed confessions. It adds to the scope of necessary beliefs for membership in the Christian Reformed Church as stated in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession:

1. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 22:

   Q. What then must a Christian believe?

   A. All that is promised us in the gospel, a summary of which is taught us in the articles of our universal and undisputed Christian faith. [i.e., Apostles' Creed]

2. Belgic Confession, Article 21 (1985):

   Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we "know nothing but Jesus and him crucified"; we consider all things as "dung for the excellence of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." We find all comforts in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever.

The heart of the gospel is, first, the declaration of God's acceptance and adoption of unworthy sinners through the merits of Christ Jesus, and, based on this prior gracious acceptance and new identity, follows the imperative call to sanctification, a life of repentance and faith.

C. Pastoral care concern

The HSR contains helpful pastoral guidance for receiving, enfolding, and caring for LGBTQ+ persons in the church. For example, the report highlights the need for "nonjudgmental presence and support" (p. 364), hospitality ("Individuals who identify as transgender or have gender dysphoria need to be received without judgment as persons made in God's image, valuable to God as they are. In other words, they need to be welcomed with unconditional love"—p. 398), and acceptance ("Accept those who have already fully transitioned (i.e., have had hormones and surgery) as they are"—p. 399). In addition, the report calls the church to establish relationships with believers who hold to different views on same-sex marriage ("Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who affirm same-sex marriage. . . . Encourage their relationship with Jesus and affirm them for continuing in their faith"—p. 430). In these statements, the report assumes a spectrum of conviction regarding human sexuality among confessing believers in the church. It recognizes that the church is a field filled with both wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24-30) in our sexual expressions and convictions.

However, the confessional status of the interpretation of "unchastity" places an impediment to the provision of the important acts of pastoral care called for in the HSR. This confessional boundary around membership in the church prevents pastoral care from functioning in the first place and removes the communal context needed for the development of Christian holiness.

With all that in mind, it would seem more than prudent for Synod 2023 to reconsider the decision of Synod 2022 to declare their interpretation of Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism to be confessional. We would hope that Synod 2023 would reinstate the principle of Synod 1975 that synodical pronouncements, even when they are interpretations of a confession, do not themselves have confessional status.

Classis Rocky Mountain
Kelly Vander Woude, stated clerk

OVERTURE 25

Alter the Action of Synod 2022 regarding Confessional Status of Interpretation of "Unchastity"

I. Goal of this overture

The goal of this overture is to ask Synod 2023 to alter the "confessional status" action of Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) and thereby forbear all action for a period of three years to allow churches time to reflect, discuss, and discern. This overture, if passed, does not rescind synod's decision of 2022 but does give more time for the churches to discern and address all of the issues.

II. Background: Understanding the context of the past fifty years

Synod 1973 provided a seminal assessment on same-sex relations in differentiating between the condition of homosexuality and acting upon the orientation, which was labeled *homosexualism*.

Key to understanding the 1973 action is that it was provided as *pastoral advice*. Furthermore, synod adopted further pastoral recommendations stemming from a report from the Committee to Give Direction about and for Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members. Again, the intention of synod is clear by means of the wording of the particular decision:

> That synod recommend this report (as amended) with its appendices to the churches for their use in ministering to persons who experience sexual attraction to others of the same gender.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 484)

While the adopted report is lengthy, a key paragraph is this:

> We have different views on the subject of homosexuality. Emotionally charged issues tend to bring quick reactions, personal attacks, threats to secede, and so forth. But Scripture says, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (James 1:19-20). As Christians we must learn to exercise justice and grace when we disagree. (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, p. 337)

One of the most significant changes in Canada and the United States in the past 50 years is the legalization of same-sex marriage. While many have sensed that this change in context has something to do with how the church should respond, Lewis Smedes's analogy is helpful:

> Harsh as it seemed, the church believed that its exclusion of such [divorced] people was nothing else but obedience to the clear teaching of the Bible. The Bible said that adulterers cannot be members of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said that divorced and remarried people are adulterers. And so any Bible believing church had to exclude the remarried from the Kingdom of God and the Body of Christ.

> Finally, in the middle 1950s, the church did reverse its policy of exclusion and began embracing divorced and remarried couples into its family circle. The grace of Jesus Christ, it decided, could bless and support remarried people in their second marriage. The result is that today, rather than requiring them to break up their second marriages and families, it devotes itself to helping them keep those marriages alive and well.
>
> [There were] three shifts in the church's consciousness that were going on behind the scenes and preparing the way for their embrace by the church. Let me recall them. For one thing, the church became sensitive to the growing number of divorces and remarriages among their own sons and daughters. For another, the church began to see and feel the sacrament more as medicine for our spiritual illness than as a symptom of our spiritual health. And, thirdly, it became more aware that it could not tell how the Lord's Word about marriage should be applied to real people unless they also had eyes for the real people it affected. It seems to me that our attitudes toward Christian homosexual partners are being modulated these days in exactly the same way.
>
> —Lewis B. Smedes, "Like the Wideness of the Sea?" *Reformed Journal* (Oct. 1, 2014)

A quickly moving river is more difficult to navigate than settled waters. Smedes's reflections about the Christian Reformed Church's ultimate decisions about divorce and remarriage are readily understood in hindsight, but in the middle of the discussion those who were there would tell us it was a time of great dissension and debate.

We have lived these past 50 years with *pastoral advice* to minister to those with same-sex attractions. And now, possibly for the first time, synod has given *confessional status* to its interpretation of a confession.

This is a dramatic change—a change that has left some but not all congregations confused. Yet all congregations seek to minister in the swirling waters of this world, a task that requires not only conviction but grace, time for reflection, and honest discussions. In addition, Synod 2022 gave its decision "immediate effect."

III. Overture

The council of Monroe Community Church hereby overtures Synod 2023 of the CRCNA to take the following three actions:

A. Declare that for a period of three years, concluding with Synod 2026 (see Rules of Synodical Procedure, p. 22), the action of Synod 2022 with regard to the confessional status given to the interpretation of "unchastity" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922), be altered by forbearing its implementation during these three years. In addition, Synod 2023 hereby urges Synod 2024 and Synod 2025 to refuse to accept overtures regarding this issue and asks those synods to encourage that all such overtures go to Synod 2026.

B. Declare that during these three years, the church shall refrain from judgmental communications and actions toward each other—congregation to congregation and classis to classis—but instead shall encourage discussion between churches and classes as facilitated by the general secretary of the CRCNA.

C. Ask that during these three years all churches study this matter and discern with the Holy Spirit how they can minister most effectively to persons with same-sex attraction.

Grounds:

1. A specific action that changes fifty years of synodical pastoral advice needs time to be reflected upon and understood, as these fifty years have evidenced a variety of approaches to pastoral care. Such a weighty issue as this should require more time for its churches to reflect on how synod's declaration will affect *pastoral care* for its members.

2. A change in creeds, Church Order, or even adopted liturgical forms in the CRCNA requires an affirmative vote of one synod to propose followed by an affirmative vote at the following synod to adopt (Church Order Supplement, Art. 47). This is surely because of the gravity of the decisions. How much more impactful is it when Synod 2022 declares this affirmation "'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). Synod 2022 then gave this decision immediate effect. Logic, however, would require such a decision to be treated with at least as much gravitas as a change in creeds, Church Order, or even adopted liturgical forms, requiring an affirmative vote by the following synod, which, in turn, would give the churches twelve months' time for discernment. In addition, it is possible that Synod 2022 erred in following proper procedures by declaring immediate effect to its own decision.

3. As the 2002 approved report suggests, "We have different views on the subject of homosexuality. Emotionally charged issues tend to bring quick reactions, personal attacks, threats to secede, and so forth. But Scripture says, 'You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness' (James 1:19-20)." A three-year forbearance will show that members of the CRCNA can live out Scripture's guidance to listen, be slow to speak, and be slow to anger as we discern God's guidance for the future.

4. The original mandate given by Synod 2016 to the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality states,

   > The study will include the following three components:
   >
   > 1) Discussion . . .
   >
   > 2) Dialogue . . .

3) Reflection and evaluation of whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider

- changing the main text of Church Order Article 69 (see Overtures 18, 19, 20, 21, 31, 38).
- declaring a *status confessionis* (see Overture 16). . . .

(*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920)

The original mandate from Synod 2016 contemplated a time sequence of a report back to synod and then further discussion and discernment by the churches and later synods. Synod 2022 did not follow this expectation but received the report and acted immediately to declare a *status confessionis*. The churches must, therefore, be given more time now to discern and address all of the issues.

Council of Monroe Community Church
Jess Brummel, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 26

Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108

I. Introduction

This overture presents grounds for vacating an action made by Synod 2022 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America regarding Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 108. The action of synod officially added a definition of the term "unchastity." In effect, this grants confessional status to the definition, which then can be used as grounds for ecclesiastical discipline.

This overture was taken up by the council of Fourteenth Street CRC at its December 2022 meeting. After it was discussed, a ballot was taken resulting in a decision not to adopt the overture and hence not to forward it to Classis Holland. The motion to support the overture lost by only two votes. Throughout the process of writing the overture and preparing it for presentation to the council, promoters of the overture were in communication with the council and pastor, as well as with interested members of Fourteenth Street Church.

The overture was considered at the December 2022 Classis Holland meeting but was not adopted. Hence classis did not forward it to synod. Therefore, we, the undersigned, request that the overture be considered at Synod 2023 and be adopted.

II. Overture

We respectfully request that Synod 2023 reverse Synod 2022's declaration that the meaning of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 encompasses "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex" and that this is now the official interpretation of this confession which, therefore, has confessional status pursuant to the *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603: "When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function."

Grounds:

1. Imparting confessional status on synod's interpretation of "unchastity" is a significant use of synod's authority that should be used sparingly. Synod's declaration of confessional status is neither necessary nor crucial, given that synodical reports and decisions are already binding. There are better ways to emphasize the binding effect of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) without making synod's interpretation of "unchastity" confessional.
2. Giving confessional status to synod's definition of "unchastity" seems to concede that its synodical reports and decisions are not binding unless coupled with an interpretation of a confession or creed.

3. Synod's list of six unchaste behaviors is neither an interpretation nor a definition. Synod's short list of examples does not provide helpful guidance for recognizing and avoiding other forms of unchastity without returning to synod for further instruction on unlisted behaviors.
4. Synod 2022 mischaracterized Synod 1975's pronouncement on the relationship between synodical pronouncements and confessions, which Synod 2022 cites as authority for declaring its interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism to have "confessional status." Synod 1975 clearly and repeatedly says synodical pronouncements are subordinate to the confessions. After quoting Synod 1881's interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism, the report on "Synodical Decisions and the Confessions" to Synod 1975 stated, "It is obvious that these particular synodical pronouncements of a doctrinal and ethical nature serve a unique function. However, *this use does not elevate them to the status of the confessions*" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598, emphasis added). Synod 2022's declaration of "confessional status" is contrary to the settled and binding authority of Synod 1975's ruling that "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Ibid.*). While synod has authority to change confessions, as Synod 1985 and Synod 1958 did with the Belgic Confession, Synod 2022 rejected a proposal to amend Q&A 108 by adding its interpretation as a footnote.
5. Synod's declaration that its interpretation of "unchastity" has confessional status is ill-timed, unwise, and divisive, and the value of its interpretation is substantially outweighed by the discord and division it has caused, evidence of which is shown by the many concerns, complaints, and criticisms being expressed, which include the following:
    a. That by declaring its interpretation of "unchastity" to be confessional, synod has thwarted a full and frank discussion by its membership, since anyone voicing opposition to this decision now is exposed to church discipline.
    b. That this decision will make it increasingly difficult to fill church council seats because thoughtful and conscientious people will decline nominations to serve as officebearers rather than pursue the process of submitting a confessional-difficulty gravamen, which does not promise to resolve ambiguities about their role and place in the CRC denomination.
    c. That synod's action breaks with a long tradition of not identifying specific sins as confessional and seems to single out certain sins for harsher discipline.
    d. That synod either gave insufficient consideration and/or weight to the division its decision would cause or it intended such division as a means of encouraging nonconforming churches and members to leave the CRC.

e. That synod's action signals to dissenting members that if they do not leave the CRC voluntarily, they could be stigmatized and purged from the denomination.

f. That synod's interpretation of "unchastity" now begs for an interpretation of "polyamory," "sex," "marriage," "adultery," "pornography," etc., and raises the question "Is synod's interpretation of its interpretation of a confession likewise to be treated as having confessional status?"

III. Scope and limitations

A. This overture does not question synod's authority to define "unchastity" as it did in approving the HSR, but it questions the wisdom and necessity of declaring its definition to have confessional status.

B. This overture does not diminish in any way the authority of synodical reports, such as the HSR, which remain binding and to which teaching and ministering within the CRC must conform.

C. Voting to adopt this overture does not necessarily mean that a synodical delegate believes any of the following:

1. That synod should not have adopted the HSR.
2. That synod does not have authority to impart confessional status on its interpretation of "unchastity" as used in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism.
3. That the delegate agrees with all the grounds stated above.
4. That the delegate agrees with any of the subpoints of Ground 5.

D. If a synodical delegate votes to adopt this overture, the reason(s) for doing so may or may not agree with the reason(s) of other delegates who vote to adopt it. A unified body of believers can agree on a decision even though the individual believers may arrive at that decision for different reasons.

Members of Fourteenth Street CRC,
Holland, Michigan

Benjamin Algera
Emily Algera
Barry Bandstra
Debra J. Bandstra
Jack Berghoef
Nancy Berghoef
Roger Brummel
Elizabeth Cook
Daniel Day
Lois Day
Ben DeVries
Jeffrey DeVries
Kristen Sytsema DeVries
Philip DeVries
Katherine Dickey
Mary Dood
Andrew E. Fisher
Lynnae K. Fisher
David Genzink
Deborah Genzink
Giny Hoekman
Mark Hoekman

Greg Hofman
Jonathan M. Hofman
Judith Hofman
Julie Hofman
Marvin J. Hofman
Mary Hofman
Mary Jellema
Brenda Brummel Katerberg
Paul Katerberg
Laura Keeley
Robert J. Keeley
Mary Koster
Steve Koster
Jacob Nyenhuis
Leona M. Nyenhuis
Amy Peterson
Clinton Peterson
Kris Pikaart
Jason Roelofs
Martha Roelofs
Douglas Rooks
Maria Rooks
Rebecca Rozema
Melanie Scholten
Benjamin Shank
Suzette Stall
Barbara Steen
Norman Steen
Raymond Swierenga
Meredith VanderHill
Micah S. VanderHill
A.C. VanderKolk
Gary Vander Veen
Benjamin VanderWoude
Kathyrn VanderWoude
Kellye VanderWoude
Meika Weiss
Michael Weiss
Bethany Wolter
Ryan Wolter
Christina Wood
Tim Wood

OVERTURE 27

Allow Classes of the CRCNA to Declare Article 65, Item 2 of the Acts of Synod 2022 Inoperative

I. Introduction

For nearly fifty years, congregations in the Christian Reformed Church have struggled to create safe and welcoming spaces for those who identify as LGBTQ+. The synodical Human Sexuality Report (HSR) counters those efforts as follows:

- While seeking to be inclusive and empathetic, Synod 2022's endorsement of the HSR (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 919) and adoption of Recommendation D of the report to declare confessional status (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) results in the opposite.
- The binding nature of the report hinders efforts of local congregations.
- The report places heavy burdens on officebearers. This overture seeks to address these three concerns.

II. Background

In 1973 the *Acts of Synod* stated (using the language of that time), "The homosexual may not, on the sole ground of his sexual disorder, be denied community acceptance, and if he is a Christian he is to be wholeheartedly received by the church as a person for whom Christ died" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 632).

Synod 1999 reiterated this pledge when it called "the churches to repentance for their failures to minister to those who experience same sex attractions" (*Acts of Synod 1999*, p. 603).

The Human Sexuality Report expands on this commitment by acknowledging that

> the church's response to homosexuality must begin with confession and lament. Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers. Congregations need to honestly examine their attitudes and actions toward people who are attracted to the same sex and need to repent when such attitudes and actions are sinful: treating homosexuals as if they are worse sinners than those who are caught up in pornography, premarital, or extramarital sex; overlooking them for positions of leadership, including those of pastor, elder, and deacon instead of considering whether they are, like all officebearers need to be, living holy and godly lives; keeping them physically and emotionally at a distance because they make some feel uncomfortable; failing to stand in solidarity with them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.
>
> (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 426)

A. While Synod 2022 acknowledges this deficit, it fails to realize that its decision to clarify the word "unchastity" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922) to include "homosexual sex" will continue to make members of the LGBTQ+ community feel less than welcome. Further, elevating an interpretation of a confession regarding what constitutes "unchastity" to confessional status itself is not only contentious but becomes even more unwelcoming to members of this community.

B. The report places a heavy burden on local congregations to accept synod's decision to include "homosexual sex" in the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 understanding of "unchastity" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). Though some congregations are united in their agreement with the decision, many others are divided in their biblical understanding of God's design for human sexuality. This has resulted in high levels of fear, anxiety, confusion, suspicion, and division throughout the denomination. It has also kept the local church from being a welcoming place for the LGBTQ+ community.

C. The primary burden of Synod 2022's decision has fallen on officebearers who serve on the front lines of local church ministries. Like the congregations they serve, officebearers are also divided on the issue of human sexuality, particularly regarding "homosexual sex." Some are contemplating stepping down because of their disagreement with the synodical report. Others have written gravamina to their local councils to acknowledge their struggle to accept the decision of Synod 2022. Still others are seeking to bring their congregations into alignment with this decision. As such, this decision of synod has not only created division and discord within the denomination but has also made it difficult for officebearers in local congregations to welcome members of the LGBTQ+ community.

III. Overture

Classis Eastern Canada, in the interest of denominational healing and unity, and for the sake of welcoming members of the LGBTQ+ community into our congregations, overtures Synod 2023 to declare that a classis of the CRCNA, in response to local needs and circumstances, may declare that Article 65, item 2 of the *Acts of Synod 2022* (p. 922) be considered inoperative, thereby allowing officebearers from local congregations who disagree with the decision to continue serving and ministering within their local contexts without being subject to discipline.

Grounds:

1. The decision of Synod 2022 harms the unity of local congregations, classes, and the denomination. Requiring officebearers to accept Synod 2022's decision will cause deepening rifts within congregations and the denomination. Looking back, Synod 1995, in addressing the division surrounding women in ecclesiastical office, allowed each classis unique authority for a time to deal with matters of ordination of women largely as an act of maintaining unity (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 727).

Granting classical authority in this matter helped to guard against congregationalism while allowing individual congregations to consider what was best for local realities where theological differences exist.

2. The decision of Synod 2022 mistakenly declares an interpretation of a confession to be confessional in nature. The study report on Synodical Decisions and the Confessions, approved by Synod 1975, stated, "No synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). This same report goes on to recommend that "when a synodical decision involves pronouncements that are related to the confessions or go beyond the confessions, the use and function of such decisions is to further express the faith of the church without such statements thereby becoming additions to the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, pp. 603-604). Synod 2022's decision sets a troubling precedent by sidestepping the 1975 decision of synod and requiring all officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church to agree with what is recognizably an interpretation of a confession.
3. The decision of Synod 2022 to clarify the meaning of the word "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 makes CRC congregations inhospitable places for members of the LGBTQ+ community. God calls all people to live in holiness as sexual beings. But Synod 2022 unfairly targets the LGBTQ+ community by declaring "homosexual sex" a sin even within a committed and loving relationship. This clarification reinforces the message that our faith communities are not welcoming places for those from the LGBTQ+ community. It harms the witness of the gospel message of grace and hinders officebearers from ministering in a way that is welcoming to all people.

Classis Eastern Canada
B. Bernard Bakker, stated clerk

OVERTURE 28

Reverse Decision re Definition of "Unchastity"

I. Background

It is the practice of the CRCNA, when significant changes are made to Church Order or our confessions, to ratify these changes at a subsequent synod (Church Order Supplement, Article 47). It has been argued that the imposition of a definition of the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism was merely a clarification and not a change, and therefore did not need the ratification of a subsequent synod. By taking this stance, the committee and Synod 2022 failed to adhere to the polity that we have upheld together, imposing a perspective rather than seeking God's will through a patient process. Questions being raised include the following: Is the definition of "unchastity" the right one? What about divorce and remarriage, the transgender question, abuse within marriage? What is the effect on the rest of the catechism's teaching in raising one word in importance over another by giving it a specific definition? A year of study and deliberation would have been fruitful and in order and may have served to bring a conclusion that would have had a more unifying influence on our denomination.

II. Overture

The council of Bethany CRC in Bloomfield, Ontario, overtures Synod 2023 to reverse the decision of Synod 2022 that imposed a definition of the word "unchastity" as found in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 922) without the usual ratification of such a change at the subsequent synod.

Grounds:

1. While recommendation D of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) stated that "the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status" (HSR, p. 461), it did not impose any definition of that confession but instead pointed to "the biblical portion of [the] report" (HSR, p. 459) as the teaching of the church and the basis of confession.
2. The wording of the definition of "unchastity" as found in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism came out of the work of the advisory committee (Advisory Committee 8, Recommendation 2), was never presented to the churches, and was a significant narrowing of the work of the HSR committee and a deviation from its overall report. As such, the churches were not able to consider and debate this particular recommendation prior to the meeting of Synod 2022.
3. A large number of classes and churches submitted overtures to Synod 2022 asking that Recommendation D of the HSR not be adopted. Synod instead imposed an even more specific confessional statement than had been made by the committee in its report.

4. The imposition of this narrow, binding interpretation of the confession stifles conversation and debate, preventing congregations and office-bearers from actively participating in the process of discovering the application of God's Word to the world in which we live together as a denomination.
5. The impact of Synod 2022's decisions regarding the definition of "unchastity" has had distressing consequences. Valued members have resigned their membership from congregations. People have refused to serve as officebearers, to make public profession of faith, or to have children baptized, as it requires public assent to a teaching that these members do not believe has an adequate biblical basis. Congregations are considering withdrawing from the denominational fellowship.

Council of Bethany CRC,
Bloomfield, Ontario
Joanne Adema, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to Classis Quinte at its January 21, 2023, meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 29

Declare that Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Does Not Have Confessional Status

I. Background

Synod 2022 decided that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment." It described this decision as "'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603)" and declared, "Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 922).

Although Synod 2022 aimed for clarity, its action has generated disagreement but also significant confusion among the congregations in the CRCNA related to an interpretation of a confession with the same status as a confession itself. Our classis includes congregations and individuals who hold the traditional view of marriage, those who accept/affirm same-sex marriage, and those with a range of pastoral approaches to same-sex attracted individuals in the church.

Our classis and congregations have been working together in faith and hope, engaging in open and honest discussion, and making "every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) in the face of a contemporary moral question. By declaring the one view to be confessional, Synod 2022 has impaired this work, generated disagreement and confusion, made pastoral care difficult, and conveyed to many people that they are not welcome in the body of Christ. Many in our classis who hold the traditional view of marriage nevertheless do not believe this view should be held with confessional status. For the reasons stated below, we are concerned about the confusion this has created in Christian Reformed congregations among people with varying viewpoints.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Grand Rapids East overtures Synod 2023 to declare that Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 does not have confessional status but that instead this can function as a reasonable interpretation of "unchastity" to provide guidance for the church in dealing with these matters.

Grounds:

1. Making synod's interpretation of a confession itself on the same level of the confessions has generated many questions churches are unable to answer regarding present and future officebearers:
    - Does this confessional interpretation, and any given person's understanding of its meaning, become a determining factor in who may be nominated for elder or deacon?

- Do candidates for the ministry have to be asked about this specifically by synodical deputies, or is a person's overall adherence to the confessions sufficient?

2. Similarly this has led to confusion regarding current and future members of the church, including young people and people who may come into the church through evangelism:

   - Is this a determining factor in accepting a young person's (or anyone's) profession of faith or in the baptism and profession of faith of those received through evangelism?
   - Can pastors serve communion to members who differ about this or baptize the child of parents who may have a spectrum of views on this one particular topic?

   Removing the confessional status adopted by Synod 2022 and keeping this interpretation in a different category would clear up this confusion and allow the insight and wisdom of local pastors and consistories to make determinations regarding specific individuals.

3. The Forms of Unity and the historical doctrinal standards in the CRCNA communion have traditionally included three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian) and three Reformed confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort). Across these three creeds and three confessions is a rich array of ecumenical and Reformed orthodox theology from which the church teaches and preaches and to which members and officebearers give their assent. The aim of these creeds and confessions is to unite the church around a common theology. But the confusion surrounding the interpretation of the single word "unchastity" in just one of these documents has seemed to make that one word, its interpretation, and its application stand alone as the primary mark of confessional orthodoxy in all matters regardless of one's commitment to everything else in the creeds and confessions. Such confusion could be cleared up by designating this as a reasonable interpretation to be used as guidance for the churches.

4. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) had been before the churches in the CRCNA for a longer-than-usual period of time due to the interruptions of the global pandemic. Thus when Synod 2022 recommended the report as a useful summary of biblical teaching, this action was within the bounds of good procedure since the churches had had time for prior consideration. However, this does not apply to the new action of Synod 2022. When the advisory committee and then Synod 2022 adopted a recommendation to declare an interpretation of the word "unchastity" to itself be confessional, this specific matter had not been before the churches for prior consideration. In its grounds for this decision Synod 2022 claimed this was similar to the "intent" of the HSR, but it was not the same as the report's conclusion. Additionally it was noted in another ground that what was in the HSR had already created confusion, as evidenced by multiple overtures that pointed this out.

But the new decision undertaken by the advisory committee and then Synod 2022—in addition to not having been before the churches ahead of time—has resulted in further confusion, which this overture seeks to address.

5. Synod 2022 acted on the matter of this interpretation despite the mandate to the study committee from Synod 2016 that, because of the weightiness of this particular issue, the study committee should make recommendations on confessional status "for future synods to consider" (*Acts of Synod 2016,* pp. 919-20, emphasis added). By making a motion and passing it all in a single synod, the Synod of 2022 created uncertainty and confusion in the denomination that the original mandate to the study committee desired to avoid. Time was needed subsequent to the synod that received the study committee report for the church to weigh and discuss this matter before a synod acted on questions about confessional status. Synod 2023 can give the church that time and clear up the confusion by putting the interpretation of "unchastity" into a different category.

6. Synod 2023 can declare that a decision of a previous synod does not stand. When the Rules for Synodical Procedure discusses "rescinding" a decision, it applies to decisions taken by the synod in session. However, "a succeeding synod may alter the stand of a previous synod; it may reach a conclusion which is at variance with a conclusion reached by an earlier synod. In such cases the most recent decision invalidates all previous decisions in conflict with it" (Rules for Synodical Procedure, VIII, I, 2). This action by Synod 2023 would address the confusion that has been expressed by many since Synod 2022.

Classis Grand Rapids East
Robert A. Arbogast, stated clerk

OVERTURE 30

Reverse the Interpretation That "Unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism Has Confessional Status

Classis Lake Erie received the following as an overture from River Terrace Church (RTC) of East Lansing, Michigan, located near Michigan State University and dedicated to serving its students:

I. Background

The decision of Synod 2022 to declare its interpretation of "unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism as having confessional status has been difficult for RTC. Prior to 2022, we understood that the decision of Synod 1973 relating to same-sex attraction and same-sex intimate relationships were intended as pastoral advice. This advice had considerable weight, but it was not determined to have confessional status. This was great for RTC. It reflected the CRC's teaching on the subject but left room for differing viewpoints. It allowed us to focus on the gospel and remain in good relationship with each other and the CRC. We recognized that in view of changes to societal norms we had work to do on how to faithfully and effectively address human-sexuality matters in our ministry. We think we were positioned to address this challenge in a constructive way.

Since Synod 2022, RTC's reality has changed. The "confessional status" decision now severely hampers full engagement on this matter. Many who previously felt safe to disagree, now feel unable to express their sincerely held beliefs. They must agree with synod or accept a limited status within the CRC. Some are now reluctant to be associated with the Christian Reformed denomination. This matter has potential to divide us.

II. Scope

Our overture is limited in scope. It is not intended as an objection to or an endorsement of the biblical position articulated in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). Our overture focuses on the process that led up to the report, and that ultimately assigned confessional status.

Per Church Order Article 29, "Decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be reached only upon due consideration." By specifying that "the committee will be constituted of up to twelve individuals, CRC members who represent diversity in gender, ethnicity, binationality, and ministry location, and who adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 926), due consideration was significantly compromised.

We believe that if a synodical committee had intentionally been composed of those adhering to the CRC's long-standing position, along with those not in agreement with that position, it would have been a good step in meeting the threshold of due consideration. A discovery process where opposing positions could be fully represented, compared side-by-side,

and placed before the churches and synodical delegates would have supported the requirement of due consideration.

Such a process, at minimum, champions for all voices in the church. We think such a process would contribute to unity and understanding.

III. Conclusion

We cannot change the past. The work of the HSR committee, as constituted, is complete. The HSR has been published. However, we contend that the process leading to a determination of confessional status lacked the necessary rigor required for "due consideration."

IV. Overture

Classis Lake Erie overtures synod to reverse the interpretation of "unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism as having confessional status. The Human Sexuality Report would remain as pastoral advice, as was the original report in 1973.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Article 29 provides, in part: "Decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be reached only upon due consideration."
2. "Due consideration" includes the ability to reflect on the work of advocates committed to the positions under consideration.
3. The limitation of the HSR study committee's composition mandated by Synod 2016 precludes "due consideration" and is therefore an inadequate basis for Synod 2022's decision regarding confessional status.

Classis Lake Erie
Benjamin W. Van Arragon, stated clerk

OVERTURE 31

Do Not Implement the Interpretation of "Unchastity" before 2027

I. Preamble

Synod 2022 recommended to the churches the Human Sexuality Report (HSR), including its findings that homosexual sex is always and under all circumstances sexual immorality, unchastity, and sin. But synod did more than that. It went one step further by interpreting Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to mean that homosexual sexual relations are included in the definition of "unchastity." This makes the HSR's (and synod's) interpretation of the Bible and confessions regarding homosexuality binding on all

CRC members. A significant segment of the membership understands the Bible's teachings on homosexuality differently from that of the HSR and synod. What happens to them? What is the status of their membership? Are they welcome at the Lord's table? Are they to be disciplined? If their membership status is to be diminished, what shape will that take and be effective when?

Decisions were made at Synod 2022, the implications of which are not immediately obvious and understood. If those decisions are to stand, the practical implications need to be worked out going forward. The denomination and its membership need time to do that responsibly.

II. Overture

Nick Loenen overtures Synod 2023 not to implement or make effective Article 65, pt. 2, of the *Acts of Synod 2022* (p. 922), regarding the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, before Synod 2027, or for a longer period if deemed necessary.

Grounds:

1. While the CRC has a long history of believing that the church should not bind the consciences of believers more than Scripture does, Synod 2022 in its decisions did not address the matter of binding consciences.
2. The denomination, its classes, and local church councils need time to understand and work out the practical implications of binding the consciences of all its members on whether homosexual sex is always and under all circumstances sexual immorality, unchastity, and sin.
3. As it stands, Synod 2022's decision may invoke church discipline against a significant segment of the membership, pursuant to Article 81 of the Church Order.
4. It is not prudent to make major decisions affecting a significant segment of the membership before understanding the practical implications.
5. Settling the practical implications before implementation will avoid unnecessary speculation, suspicions, and mistrust.

Nick Loenen, member of Ladner CRC,
Delta, British Columbia

Note: This overture was presented to the council of Ladner CRC and to Classis B.C. South-East but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 32

Declare that Synod 2022's Definition of "Unchastity" as Having Confessional Status Was a Change to the Confessions

I. Preamble

Synod 2022 declared the following (*Acts of Synod 2022,* p. 922):

> . . . "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

This decision to raise to confessional status an interpretation of the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108 has raised questions about procedure as to whether such a declaration can be made by a single synod or whether it constitutes a change to the confessions. It has also led to confusion and disagreement in many churches with uncertainty about the scope of synod's decision: Can members who disagree with this interpretation make public profession of faith, remain members, present their children for baptism, serve as officebearers, or sign the Covenant for Officebearers? We also note that this is following on the heels of a pandemic and its subsequent continuing effects. This has placed considerable strain on church councils and congregations who are finding themselves working through the implications of the Synod 2022 decision before they have restored community post-COVID.

We believe, for both pastoral and process reasons, that Synod 2022 acted too hastily and should have given the churches, agencies, and institutions of our denomination time and opportunity to reflect on, and speak into, such a decision before the decision was made. This would include addressing how the church should pastorally address the different beliefs members have on this issue. Regardless of our views on matters of human sexuality, recognizing that the church may not be able to resolve these differences, we believe the process regarding confessional "change" and allowing the churches to consider and speak to such changes is very important. The issue of how we live together with those differences is the immediate concern we need to address to pursue unity in the faith and in the church.

We believe that Synod 2023 would help the church in this by withholding implementation of the 2022 change to the confessions to pursue a more holistic, pastoral, and proper process. This does not address the position the CRC has had, but asks specifically to withhold implementation of the function of such a position by not declaring it to have confessional status at this time.

II. Overture

Classis Alberta North overtures synod to take the following actions:

A. That Synod 2023 declare that Synod 2022's definition of unchastity in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism as having confessional status *was a change to the confessions,* and that Synod 2023 withhold implementation of that decision of Synod 2022 to allow time for proper process to be followed.

   Grounds:

   1. Q&A 108 prior to Synod 2022 did not define the word "unchastity."
   2. By its declaration Synod 2022 elevated an *interpretation* of that word to the level of the confessions. With many others, we see this as being in conflict with the report that Synod 1975 adopted, titled "Synodical Decisions and the Confessions," which states that "no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements to be considered on a par with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598).
   3. This introduced a specific change to the confessions during the sessions of Synod 2022 that did not receive prior discussion and deliberation by the church and classes.
   4. Insufficient rationale was given to explain the significant change in function from pastoral advice (1973) to confessional status (2022).
   5. The churches did not receive sufficient time to consider and properly weigh the implications and effects of this declaration upon the churches, its officebearers, and its members.

B. That synod review the implications of such a confessional assertion, and of how such a definition attached to or included in the confessions functions, before implementing such a declaration.

   Ground: The confusion, lack of direction, and conflict within our churches, agencies, and institutions in seeking to work out the implications of the Synod 2022 declaration demonstrate that much more deliberation and planning are required before a declaration of this kind is made.

C. That synod, pending the above, submit any clarification of “unchastity” and the interpretation of Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism with appropriate rationale to the churches for consideration, with deliberation and a subsequent vote at a future synod.

   Grounds:

   1. Such changes will have momentous impact on our congregations, assemblies, agencies, and institutions, so all due diligence must be done to ensure that these changes are worthy and that any negative results will be sufficiently mitigated.

2. This will allow a period of dialogue as a denomination, before the potential of schism, to discern if there is a way to "be one" (John 17:20-21) in spite of differences—and, if not, what might be the most God-honoring way forward.

Classis Alberta North
Gary Duthler, stated clerk

OVERTURE 33

Revise Definition of Homosexuality

I. Introduction

The historic Christian church since its inception has committed itself to theological precision not only in its understanding of biblical truths but in the precise language it has used to communicate these truths. In this vein, it is necessary for the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) to scrutinize its past definitions and positions on homosexuality, especially in light of its current efforts to examine human sexuality from a biblical perspective. The biblical, historical, and confessional grounds provide the basis for these proposed changes, and the practical theological considerations demonstrate the unity and love within the body that these changes actually promote.

In light of the decision of Synod 2022 to affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses, among other things, pornography, we must reconsider our stance that homosexuality is not sinful. The CRC, in 1973, made the distinction that having a homosexual orientation (i.e., homosexuality) is not sinful but that the homosexual action (i.e., homosexualism) is sinful. However, the CRC's subsequent decision to determine that pornography is sinful clearly indicates the understanding that sin is not merely an action but rather, at its core, is the desire to go against God's will. Acknowledging that pornography, which occurs without any sexual act, is sinful must also acknowledge that all sexual sin begins when the human heart desires sex that is outside of God's perfect will. As such, we must acknowledge that homosexuality is sinful and those who possess this condition share with all humanity a sinful condition in which, from their birth, their very desires are depraved and must be redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

II. Overture

Classis Southeast U.S. overtures synod to revise the definition[1] of *homosexuality* to the following: h*omosexuality:* a condition of personal identity, stemming from the desires of the same sinful nature that all people inherit through original sin, in which a person is sexually oriented (that is, possesses a pattern of romantic and/or sexual attraction) toward persons of the same sex.

We further overture synod to revise the current stance on homosexuality as follows: Homosexuality, like all conditions of the fallen human nature where human desires and inclinations, tainted by original sin, incline someone to act against God's will, is a condition of the sinful human nature and makes one guilty of sin before God. But, praise be to God, it is also, along with all conditions of the fallen nature, covered by Christ's blood for all who believe in him. As such, there is no counting of sin for believers in Christ, who, while they may have inherited a homosexual attraction, desire to live not in accordance with that attraction but in accordance with the Spirit that is now in them, and therefore, homosexual believers, along with all those in Christ, are considered righteous.

III. Background

Page 613 of the *Acts of Synod 1973*, Supplement Report 42, states the homosexual "is not responsible insofar for his resulting homosexuality." The 2020 Human Sexuality Report (HSR) quotes this line from the 1973 report and goes on to add, "In other words, *there is no sin* in being attracted to the same sex" (emphasis added). Page 616 of the 1973 report also states, "to lay blame on the homosexual for his condition can be . . . cruel and unjust."

This imprecise phraseology has caused profound confusion within the CRC. It may cause some to believe that sexual disorders may not be part of the fallen sinful nature. The current definition of *homosexuality* as adopted by the CRC as well as the modified definition proposed herein indicate that homosexuality is a condition in which a person is sexually oriented toward persons of the same sex. According to the American Psychological Association, "Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes.[2] "The HSR correctly, then, makes the connection between the definition of *homosexuality* and "being attracted to the same sex." An attraction, in turn, is, by definition, a desire toward something, and the Bible, along with many writings of the historic church, indicates that it is humankind's very desires themselves that are sinful, not simply the actions stemming from those desires.

---

[1] Current definition contained in the *Acts of Synod 1973* as follows: "Homosexuality is a condition of personal identity in which the person is sexually oriented toward persons of the same sex."

[2] Cited 19 February 2021, apa.org/topics/lgbtq/orientation.

A. Biblical grounds

A careful look at the creation and fall story in Genesis demonstrates that the root of the problem in "the Fall" was not foremost that Adam's actions were evil but that his desires became so—the ensuing actions were the necessary outcome of a tainted desire. In Genesis 3:6 Eve first saw the tree was to be desired (from the Hebrew root word חָמַד) to make one wise, and as a result she acted by taking and eating the fruit. At the core, it was her desires that were turned evil—misaligned with God's perfect will.

The next time that a derivative of this same Hebrew root word (חָמַד) is used in Scripture is in the tenth commandment (generally translated "covet"). Various theologians[3] have commented that this commandment implies far more than a prohibition on desiring other people's possessions. Rather, it serves as an inclusio, or bookend, with the first commandment to cover all the other commandments, thereby making the case that having no other gods but the one true God necessarily means having desires that align perfectly with his. All other desires are sin.

Our Lord teaches us this truth regarding the sin of desire in Matthew 5:28 when he explains that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He hereby contends that the human condition, being steeped in evil desire, is sinful because of its automatic attraction power. These desires are an uncontrollable characteristic of being human. In this case, the heterosexual orientation/condition as Jesus explained is just as skewed by the Fall.

Paul expands on this idea throughout many of his letters. Speaking in Romans 1 about the natural evil desires (ἐπιθυμίαις, which is the Greek translation of מִדָּחְנָו in the tenth commandment as used in the Septuagint and the same root as the verb used by Jesus in Matthew 5:27, often translated "lustfully") that all humans have inherited from Adam, Paul explains that while "they claimed to be wise, [humankind] became fools" (v. 22, NIV; cf. Genesis 3:6 when Eve professed that the tree would make her wise, she became a fool) and as a result "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for" created things (v. 23; cf. the first and second commandment). Therefore, "God gave them over in the sinful desires [ἐπιθυμίαις] of their hearts" (v. 24; cf. the tenth commandment).

Paul tells the Colossians to "put to death" (Col. 3:5) these evil desires (ἐπιθυμίαις) that all people possess in their "earthly nature"; these desires include, among other things, many sexual desires. Furthermore, in Romans 5, Paul states, "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin" (v. 12), and he goes on to explain that "many died by the trespass of the one man" and "one trespass resulted in condemnation for

[3] Calvin's *Commentary* on Ex. 20:17 states, "This commandment extends to those that have proceeded it." God's "condemnation of lusts . . . not only imposed obedience on our hands and feet, but also put restraint upon our minds, lest they should desire to do what is unlawful." Keil & Delitzsch says that the "tenth commandment is directed as a root against desiring from which every sin against a neighbor springs." Hodge calls it a comprehensive command that "forbids a state of the heart."

all people" (vv. 15, 18). If God has condemned all people due to their condition found in their inherited sinful nature, then he has determined that they are all guilty. They are guilty not just of the evil they do but of their sinful desires stemming from the sinful nature with which they are born. In other words, to separate the inclination toward sin (the condition) apart from acting on sin (the action) has no biblical precedent.

B. Historical grounds

This idea of inherited guilt has been the historic understanding of many theologians throughout the centuries and continues to be the understanding of those in the Reformed tradition.

Augustine states, "That, therefore, which is born of the desires of the flesh is . . . not of God. . . . The guilt of this desire, regeneration alone remits."[4] Clearly, he demonstrates that the desires themselves make people guilty, not simply acting on them.

Calvin points to Galatians 5:19 to conclude that all humans inherit a corruption from Adam; it is this corruption itself that is called sin, "while the works which proceed from it, such as adultery, fornication, theft, hatred, murder, revellings, [Paul] terms . . . the fruits of sin."[5] Calvin goes on to explain that, "those who term [original sin] concupiscence [i.e., strong desire, especially sexual desire, from Latin *concupiscentia*, used in Vulgate for Greek ἐπιθυμία] use a word not very inappropriate, provided it were added . . . that everything which is in man, from the intellect to the will . . . is defiled . . . with this concupiscence; or to express it more briefly, that the whole man is in himself nothing else than concupiscence."[6] In other words, the original sin pervading all human beings' intellect and will can in essence be summed up as evil desire. These desires are not merely part of being evil, they are the heart of human corruption. Calvin goes on to say human beings are "merely on account of such corruption, deservedly condemned by God. . . . This is not liability for another's fault. For we, who are in ourselves innocent and blameless, are bearing his guilt."[7] Calvin demonstrates here the difficulty and balance that is needed in precisely explaining that humans are not to blame for the specific acts of Adam yet at the same time are guilty for these inherited desires—finally concluding with Augustine that although original sin is "another's sin," it is indeed "each individual's own sin."[8] Calvin further points out that human beings do not merely have some evil desires but have a nature or condition of evil desire in which they all stand condemned. Therefore, any attempt to parse the concept of desire from that of inclination or nature changes nothing, since both bear the guilt of sin.

---

[4] St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Retractions,* "On Marriage and Concupiscence."

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2.1.8, p. 218; ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

It needs to be considered then, how this is applied to those redeemed in Christ yet still possessing attractions that tempts them to sin. Anselm perhaps can be of some assistance when he parses the difference between what he terms the "essence of the appetites" versus the "rational will which complies inordinately with them."[9] He echoes the statements of Paul in Romans 7 who, speaking of the war waged within himself, explains, "Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (v. 21). It needs to be noted what Paul, Augustine, Anselm, and Calvin do not do; they do not explain that those desires or inclinations placed there by the Fall are not sin. Rather, calling those inclinations evil, Paul points to God who delivers him through Christ so that he no longer stands condemned since he is in Christ. So, these inclinations of the flesh are evil, but, in Christ, the true desire of the believer is to delight in the law of God. Because these inclinations of the flesh themselves are sin, all who are in Christ must war against them—they must hate them and not consider them "the way God made me" as if God were the author of sin or the impetus of the sinful nature.

C. Confessional grounds

The Belgic Confession, in Article 15, states that original sin is "enough to condemn the human race," and the Canons of Dort state that Adam "brought forth corrupt children" and "all people . . . are born children of wrath" indicating a state of being guilty at birth. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Answer 7, explains that "we are . . . corrupt from conception on" and, in Answer 10, says that "[God] is terribly angry about the sins we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit" which "increase our guilt every day." This indicates that people are born with a sinful condition that bears with it guilt even before they personally commit sins.

The Heidelberg, in answering what God's will is in the tenth commandment, states "that not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any one of God's commandments should ever arise in my heart."[10] The authors of the Heidelberg clearly understood that even the slightest desire that is contrary to a commandment of God is against his will and is therefore, by definition, sinful.[11]

Modern Reformed theologians continue to uphold this historical biblical understanding of inherited guilt. Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, states, "The Western Church reached their culmination in Augustinianism which stressed the fact that humankind is both guilty and polluted in Adam. . . . The Reformers shared the views of Augustine."[12] He goes on to conclude that "Adam sinned not only as the father of the human race, but also as the representative head of all his descendants; and therefore the guilt of

---

[9] Anselm of Canterbury, *The Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, chap. 4.
[10] See Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 113.
[11] "Sin, then is any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law." Saint Augustine, *In Reply to Faustus the Manichæan*, Book XXII, Para. 27, ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf104/npnf104.iv.ix.xxiv.html.
[12] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 240.

his sin is placed to their account, so that they are all liable to the punishment of death. It is primarily in that sense that Adam's sin is the sin of all. . . . It is not sin considered merely as pollution, but sin as guilt that carries punishment with it."

James K. A. Smith in *You Are What You Love* states that "you are what you love because you live toward what you want."[13] He goes on to explain that "love, as our most fundamental orientation to the world, is . . . a baseline inclination, a default orientation that generates the choices we make." In other words, what people desire is what they love, and their actions spring from this desire. Smith recognizes here that the root of bad behavior is a fallen condition of sinful desire.

This fallen condition is the plight of all human beings. It is responsible for all human desires that orient people away from the will of God, and homosexual desires are no less a part of this condition.

D. Practical theology grounds

Understanding this issue correctly goes beyond just a pursuit of theological precision or even a dedication to holiness sparked by love for God—although it is certainly that. Understanding that homosexual desires are sinful is also paramount in order to avoid undermining both the unity of Christ's body and the gravity of his gospel. Stating that homosexual acts are sinful while maintaining that the homosexual inclinations or desires are not tells homosexual brothers and sisters that their sin and their very status before God is somehow different than that of other believers. The sexual desires of all believers suffer from the taint of original sin. Before any sinful act takes place, all heterosexual believers are pervasively and radically inclined to want sexual things contrary to God's will. They need more than just to avoid acting on these desires; they need to be washed in their inner being. It is remiss to tell homosexual believers that they are different—to tell them that when it comes to their sexual desires they merely need a behavioral adjustment and not a transformational cleansing from within. It is to rob our homosexual brothers and sisters of the unity found in this shared redemption experience in which members are built up by encouraging one another to take each of their desires captive.

Further, it is to curtail the complete joy of the gospel. Failing to see the gravity of the sinful nature fails to see the gravitas of the crucified Savior. It is then the most loving response to convey to our homosexual members that they are just like all other believers, stained from deep within to the core of all their desires and with the whole church are made righteous through faith and fully share in the peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

---

[13] James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2016), p. 13.

IV. Conclusion

Therefore, it is problematic and will inevitably be largely misleading to state "there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex." It is biblical and loving pastoral advice to warn against showing partiality, calling out particular sins over others, and leveling greater accusation of blame for the fallen human state on any one particular group. Conversely, however, it is patronizing and strains theological precision to exclude any particular sinful desire or inclination from being part of the fallen condition. Rather, the church might be well to state that, like all human desires, human sexual desires have been tainted by the condition of original sin inherited from Adam. Homosexuality is merely one result of this. Therefore, all these tainted desires that incline someone to act against God's desires, including homosexuality, are conditions of the sinful human nature and are thus in themselves sin and deserving of death. However, even though all believers continue to struggle with this sinful nature,[14] the gospel reminds us that the sins of all these evil desires are covered by Christ's blood for all who believe. As such, there is no counting of sin for believers in Christ, who, while they may have inherited a homosexual attraction, desire to live not in accordance with that attraction but in accordance with the Spirit that is now in them, and therefore, homosexual believers, along with all those in Christ, are considered righteous.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

[14] See Romans 7:15-25.

OVERTURE 34

Alter the Interpretation Given to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and Remove "Homosexual Sex" from the List of Sins That Constitute "Unchastity"

We, the council of Church of the Savior CRC, submit this confessional-revision gravamen as an overture to Synod 2023 to alter the interpretation given to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 by Synod 2022—specifically, to remove "homosexual sex" from the list of sins that constitute "unchastity."

Our difficulty with Synod 2022's interpretation is on several fronts. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but will, we hope, illustrate the tremendous difficulty we have with Synod 2022's interpretation of Q&A 108.

A. Our most pressing and urgent objection is that this interpretation teaches "the sinfulness of desire," the idea that not just homosexual sex but same-sex attraction and desire itself are sinful. This effectively overturns the CRC's position on homosexuality laid out in Report 42 to Synod 1973 from the Committee to Study Homosexuality[1]—namely, that same-sex attraction and desire are not in themselves sinful, a position which has been taught in the CRC since 1973 and with which we heartily agree.[2]

B. Our second objection is that we are not convinced that Scripture teaches that all homosexual sex is wrong. There are good arguments to be made that the handful of verses in the New Testament forbidding homosexual sex have to do with exploitative homosexual sex.[3] They don't speak to (nor could they even know about) homosexual sex within a committed, lifelong Christian marriage. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) gave short shrift to these alternative interpretations, claiming that Scripture was "clear, consistent, and compelling" on this issue—when it is anything but for many readers and scholars.

C. Our third objection has to do with the semantic and hermeneutical contortions required for Synod 2022 to interpret Q&A 108 as it did. Q&A 108 has to do with the seventh commandment: You shall not commit adultery. The plain meaning of this commandment is that the sexual relationship within a marriage is to be respected and protected. Yet Synod 2022's interpretation of Q&A 108 serves to *forbid* sex within gay marriages. Whatever one thinks of gay marriage, marshalling the seventh commandment in particular to forbid married people from having sex is far afield from its original intent.

---

[1] crcna.org/sites/default/files/1973_report_homosexuality.pdf
[2] Lord's Day 41 overture
[3] classisgreast.org/downloads/ssmstudyreport2016.pdf

Homosexual sex is not named specifically in Q&A 108; Synod 2022 brought it in by interpreting "unchastity" to include homosexual sex. The plain meaning of the word *unchastity* has to do with "sexual suggestiveness, transgression, or excess; lascivious; bawdy." A person who has sex only with one's marriage partner would never aptly be described as "unchaste," according to any plain and commonly understood definition of the term. The ironic upshot of all this is that a married gay couple in which each partner remains faithful to the other for a lifetime is both breaking the seventh commandment ("Don't commit adultery") and living unchastely. This strains common sense to the breaking point.

If Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism is the best we can do for declaring that opposition to (all) homosexual sex is "confessional," that is a shaky foundation indeed. It indicates that opposition to homosexual sex is not a "confessional" matter at all. It is simply not to be found in the CRC's creeds and confessions, unless artificially forced into them.[4] If homosexual sex was so clearly forbidden at this point in the Heidelberg Catechism, why was it not brought into the 1973 report on homosexuality?[5] Why is it only now entering into the denominational conversation? We realize that there are some people within the CRC who want opposition to homosexual sex to be a confessional matter. We are in a cultural moment when emotions in the church are running high over various aspects of the culture war, and most especially over gay marriage. However, to shoehorn this interpretation into the Heidelberg Catechism does not serve the church well. It simply demands compliance on a very complicated and controversial issue, about which there clearly is disagreement among people of good faith in the church.

D. Our fourth objection is that this interpretation shows a lack of faithfulness to what Scripture actually says, with the result that male experience is privileged and female experience is marginalized. Synod (following the HSR) failed to account for the differences between how male homosexuality and female homosexuality are treated in Scripture. Even after explicitly citing sources that show how the male experience is privileged and preferred in studies about homosexuality in the research (and the problems that result when one tries to extrapolate research results to include female homosexuality),[6] the HSR proceeded to do the very same thing in its treatment of homosexuality in

---

[4] Ursinus, one of the Heidelberg Catechism's framers, no doubt had homosexual sex in mind with Q&A 108. However, we are not confessionally bound to Ursinus's opinions but to the text of the catechism.

[5] The framers of the 1973 report were tasked with advising synod on what the CRC's position on homosexuality ought to be. If it was so clear that homosexual sex was forbidden in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, why did they not say so? How could they have missed that? If it wasn't so clear, then Synod 2022 did indeed give Q&A 108 a novel interpretation (as far as the CRC is concerned). Either the framers of the 1973 report didn't know their catechism, or Synod 2022 was introducing something new. We can't have it both ways.

[6] HSR, Appendix A (Agenda for Synod 2022, p. 471).

Scripture. The HSR looked almost exclusively at what the Bible had to say about *male* homosexuality and then extrapolated its findings to include *female* homosexuality.

Quite possibly this is because if one takes female homosexuality on its own terms in the Bible, there is hardly anything to find at all. Female homosexual sex is possibly addressed in only one verse in the entire Bible (Rom. 1:26[7])—and (since it is not named directly) that is only *if* we assume it is included as one of the types of "unnatural" intercourse women can engage in.[8] And yet, on the "evidence" of one ambiguous verse, the HSR (and Synod 2022) made sweeping declarations about all homosexual sex, female homosexual sex included. That is not good Reformed hermeneutics.[9] And it is certainly not a good basis for making something "confessional." It is simply not possible that Scripture speaks in a "clear, consistent, and compelling"[10] way on lesbian relationships when Scripture devotes (at most) one verse to the subject. This is a clear case where our prejudices have shaped our interpretation of Scripture instead of letting Scripture speak (or not speak, as the case may be) on its own terms.

E. Our fifth objection has to do with the application of Scripture. It is one thing to know what Scripture says, and another thing entirely to know how and when to apply what Scripture says. The HSR gave a one-sided and biased accounting of what Scripture says on this matter, and it compounded the problem by ignoring entirely the question of how and when to apply that Scripture.

To give an obvious example: Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22), and Peter told them to submit to their master's beatings (1 Pet. 2:18-20). It is not hard to understand what these texts say; anyone who can read can do that. The difficult thing is to know how and when to apply them. Were white preachers in the antebellum South (United States) honoring Scripture by quoting and applying these verses to African American slaves? Of course not; they were abusing Scripture, using it to uphold an evil institution. Simply knowing what Scripture says is not enough; we need to think carefully about how and when to apply it, lest we use Scripture to the opposite end of its Author's[11] intentions.

---

[7] "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural. . . ."

[8] It has been well documented in other places that there were a myriad of ways that women could engage in "unnatural intercourse," including with male partners.

[9] On p. 165 of Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Louis Berkhof notes that the greater the number of books and authors in Scripture who treat a particular topic, the more compelling the case. Specifically, he notes that twelve texts are more compelling than six. What would he say about making a point "confessional"—not to mention (effectively) deposing a deacon—based on a mere one verse of Scripture?

[10] HSR, p. 424.

[11] That is, God's.

This is not an idle example. Reformed hermeneutics, for all that it serves as an aid to help us rightly interpret Scripture, also has the potential to lead to the wrong conclusion. In Calvin Theological Seminary's own journal, a Reformed scholar made the case that there is nothing inherently wrong with the institution of slavery, provided that both slave and master (and especially the master) obey the law of neighbor-love within the constraints of the institution.[12] It is incredible to us (and to many) that anyone could believe that *owning* one's neighbor is consistent with *loving* one's neighbor—yet in recent memory Calvin Seminary itself published this perspective in its peer-reviewed journal. Among other things, this shows that simply applying "Reformed hermeneutics" as a tool to interpret Scripture does not necessarily lead us to an obvious, we-all-agree-on-this conclusion. It leads some to accept the institution of slavery, and some to reject it.[13] Clearly, much depends on the assumptions and prejudices of those who are using the tool.[14]

Real people are being harmed by Synod 2022's interpretation of Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism. The damage done by the church to those who identify as LGBTQ+ is well rehearsed: depression, suicide, leaving the church and the Christian faith entirely. This "fruit" of our blanket opposition to homosexual sex must not be ignored. It is a real-life example of Jesus' sober warning in the parable of the good Samaritan.

In this parable, a priest and a Levite choose to pass by on the other side of the road rather than to offer aid to a suffering man. It's not because they are cruel or uncaring people. It is because if the man is dead, or dies under their care, they will be unclean according to the law, and they care very much about abiding by the law. When push comes to shove, they care more about abiding by the law than about the life and well-being of the suffering man. It is the Samaritan, who is not so caught up with law observance, who is free to stop, show compassion, and tend to the man. Jesus does not leave us in any doubt about who chose the better part: "Go and do likewise," he says—about the Samaritan.

The message is clear: there are times when our attempts to honor the law actually cause us to go contrary to the (heart of the) law, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We believe this is what Synod 2022

---

[12] Guenther Haas, "The Kingdom and Slavery: A Test Case for Social Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 74-89.

[13] See, for example, Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals, where William J. Webb marshals the abolition of slavery as an obvious and "neutral" example, which he uses as a foil for the more controversial example of women's equality and as the obvious and opposite (to him) example of homosexual practice in the New Testament.

[14] We are not in the dark about what the previously held viewpoints of the HSR committee members were: only those who were already opposed to gay marriage were allowed to serve on the committee. It is no wonder that the application of Reformed hermeneutics brought them to that conclusion. The tool can only be used according to the hands that wield it.

did in its interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108. Wholeheartedly and sincerely attempting to abide by the law, it went contrary to the heart of the law. Synod chose to maintain purity according to (its perception of) the letter of the law, and passed by on the other side of the road. Not content with that, it is making it compulsory for the whole Christian Reformed Church to do the same.

The reality is that even if the framers of the Heidelberg Catechism intended to include "homosexual sex" in their definition of unchastity, that would not solve the problem we have here. The Christian church has always held to a sexual ethic in which (consensual) sex within marriage is acceptable, but sex (whether consensual or not) outside marriage is not. When the Heidelberg Catechism was written, all homosexual sex was by definition outside marriage, and so could be condemned as unchaste without having to give it much thought. We now live in a cultural moment when something new has emerged that the Heidelberg Catechism knew nothing of, and probably couldn't have imagined: legal gay marriage. Instead of giving this new situation careful and thoughtful consideration, Synod 2022 chose to side-step the whole discussion by claiming that married homosexual sex was somehow addressed and condemned by a document written hundreds of years before there was such a thing as married homosexual sex. This is a lamentably inadequate response to the cultural moment we are living in, and we call on the Christian Reformed Church to give a better reasoned and more thoughtful one.

For these reasons, we are asking for a change to the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 put forward by Synod 2022.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

Note: This confessional-revision gravamen was not adopted by the classis and therefore comes to synod as an *appeal* of the classis decision, per Church Order Supplement Art. 5, C, 5. Such gravamina will be processed according to Church Order, Supplement Art. 30-a, B & C.

OVERTURE 35

Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" as Including a List of Specific Behaviors

We, the council of Church of the Savior CRC, overture Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as including a list of specific behaviors—namely, "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex."

Grounds:

1. This list of behaviors has proven very divisive for the CRC as a whole and has caused hurt and tension within and among many of our congregations. Reversing the decision about this list would honor the spirit of Heidelberg Q&A 54, which encourages and even mandates the unity of the church. It would also give space and safety to nurture deeper conversations about Christian discipleship among diverse groups within the CRC.
2. It is highly unusual, and perhaps even unprecedented, for a Reformed governing body to create an illustrative list of behaviors that constitute "unchastity."[1] This reticence is with good reason because as Reformed Christians, we have always respected the Spirit's work within individual believers and within the church to interpret what is chaste and unchaste within a particular time and a particular culture.
3. It is not practical to enumerate a list of behaviors that can cover the full range of unchaste activities of which fallen human beings living in a fallen world are capable. As a result, a specific list of unchaste behaviors runs the very real risk of condemning certain behaviors while condoning, downplaying, or ignoring others.
4. Enumerating this particular list of unchaste behaviors limits the witness and mission of the Christian Reformed Church in the context of global Christianity, as it disregards cultural differences in what is considered "unchaste."

I. Background

A. Our primary purpose in presenting this overture is to maintain the precious unity of the Christian Reformed Church, for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20-26. The present list of unchaste behaviors divides the church and violates the spirit of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54, which states, "I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and

[1] This reticence appears to be intentional, from the earliest history of Protestantism. In contrast with Roman Catholic church leaders, who did present lists of chaste and unchaste behaviors (both in written catechisms and from the pulpit), Martin Luther consciously avoided doing so, and the other Reformers followed suit. See Tilmann Walter, *Unkeuschheit und Werk der Liebe: Diskurse über Sexualität am Beginn der Neuzeit in Deutschland*, *Studia Linguistica Germanica* 48 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 125–26.

Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith." We have already seen evidence in our churches of the divisiveness of Synod 2022's controversial decision. Henry DeMoor, professor emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary and an expert in CRC Church Order, summed it up this way: "Synod [2022] has squandered the unity of the church and damaged its mission."[2]

Unity has long been a driving concern when synod has had to make controversial decisions. For example, Synod 1995 approved the recommendation that "synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist."[3] This same concern for unity must remain front and center in present conversations concerning the Human Sexuality Report (HSR).

B. One has only to consider a sample of the history of interpretation on Lord's Day 41 to see this. For example, neither Hoeksema, Kuyvenhoven, nor Klooster[4] offer the kind of list that Synod 2022 did. Only Hoeksema mentions homosexuality, and that only in passing. One would never guess from these sources that polyamory might be a problem. However, both Hoeksema and Kuyvenhoven talk a great deal about divorce and remarriage (the "hot-button issue" of their day).

This brief survey illustrates how discussions of specific forms of unchastity rapidly become dated, as Spirit-filled believers wrestle with what behaviors are in and out of bounds in their unique and particular context and the challenges it faces. New generations are, sadly, always creating new ways of being unchaste (e.g., internet pornography) that cannot be anticipated beforehand. Although it is quite necessary and appropriate for the secondary sources to discuss the specifics of such context-dependent behaviors (making them very relevant for their time but often obsolete within a decade or two), it is not fitting or helpful for a primary source such as the Heidelberg Catechism to do so.[5] Historic creeds and confessions are intended to apply and remain relevant across time and space. Getting into the "weeds" of the hot-button issues of any given age, such as Synod 2022 did, guarantees that they

---

[2] See "After Synod 2022: Discerning What's Next," *The Banner* (Sept. 2022), p. 14.
[3] *Acts of Synod* 1995, p. 727.
[4] Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism,* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), pp. 342-76; Andrew Kuyvenhoven, *Comfort and Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), pp. 239-43; Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism,* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001), pp. 1003-10.
[5] See footnote 1. We know the catechism's authors did not hesitate to offer lists in other places (see for example Q&A 110). Refraining from doing so in Q&A 108 appears to be intentional, and their decision ought to be respected.

will become obsolete and lose their relevance, diminishing their power to speak to the church across the ages.

The wisdom of Gamaliel applies today, as it did in Acts 5. After Peter answers the authorities, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (5:29), the authorities want to kill the apostles. But Gamaliel advises caution: "So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (5:38-39).

C. Several examples will illustrate the point. Synod 2022 did not list bestiality among the list of behaviors that constitute "unchastity." Was Synod 2022 condoning bestiality by its lack of inclusion on the list? Or was this omission unintentional?

Synod 2022 also did not list masturbation in its list of unchaste behaviors, despite the fact that it does not conform to the norm of heterosexual marriage as laid out in creation (Gen. 1-2).[6] Was Synod 2022 intending to give tacit approval to (all instances of) masturbation, as a chaste way to live out our sexuality?[7]

Synod 2022 named "pornography" in its list of unchaste behaviors, but it did not specify which aspect(s) of pornography are to be condemned as unchaste. Giving a blanket condemnation of pornography as "unchastity" fails to recognize that many of the subjects involved in the industry (particularly women) are involved against their will or because they themselves are being exploited. Simply equating "pornography" with "unchastity" runs the very real risk of blaming the victim.[8]

As a further example, prostitution rightly falls under the category of "extramarital sex." But again, women and men often become involved in prostitution as a result of marginalization and exploitation. One supposes that prostituting oneself should be considered "unchaste"—but did Synod 2022 really intend to declare that all those who engage in prostitution (some of whom are sex slaves) are engaging in behavior that puts them outside the kingdom of God?[9] This does not seem to be a judgment that Jesus himself would make.

The problem is becoming clear. Making a list of what constitutes "unchastity," such as Synod 2022 did, creates more and worse problems than it solves. This is precisely why Reformed governing bodies, over 500 years of history, have avoided making such lists.

---

[6] See HSR, p. 328.
[7] See HSR, p. 360.
[8] That synod gave a blanket condemnation of pornography is particularly disappointing in light of the careful and nuanced discussion of pornography in the HSR itself.
[9] See HSR, pp. 344, 415, 458-59.

D. The specific list of unchaste behaviors provided by Synod 2022 does not take into account cultural differences in what is considered "unchaste." For example, chastity related to head coverings for women, while unimportant in most Western cultures, is very important in several Eastern cultures. Having an interpretive list is necessarily culture specific, effectively limiting the CRC to being and remaining a predominantly Western denomination and making it less relevant and nimble in bringing Christ to other cultures that might have quite different but still very appropriate and biblical norms for what is considered chaste.

II. Conclusion

Over and over again, Scripture instructs us not to judge our brothers and sisters:

> Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. (Rom. 2:1)

> Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. . . . We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Rom. 14:4, 7-8)

Composing a specific list of sins that God condemns, as Synod 2022 did, has the potential of judging brothers and sisters in Christ who are pursuing authentic Christ-following in a rapidly changing culture, and in diverse cultures around the world. Therefore, based on the above grounds, we urge synod to reverse the list of sins associated with "unchastity."

Council of Church of the Savior CRC,
South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 36

Remove "Homosexual Sex" from Definition of "Unchastity"

I. Background

Mill Creek (Wash.) Community Church (MCCC) has been a part of the Christian Reformed Church since its formation as a church plant within Classis Pacific Northwest. We value our relationship with our denomination as a source of blessing to our congregation and desire to continue and deepen that relationship while being true to our calling to minister within our local cultural context.

MCCC is committed to reaching out, in word and deed, to our surrounding community with the good news that Jesus is Lord, that abundant and eternal life is found in Christ. This has led MCCC to become a diverse community of people who joyfully strive to serve Christ in our individual lives and together as a congregation.

MCCC is known for being a welcoming and loving presence in our community. This community focus has resulted in attracting seekers and believers in Jesus Christ who identify as LGBTQ+, as well as families with loved ones, friends, and coworkers who identify as LGBTQ+. We do not see a distinction or perceive a separation between followers of Jesus based on one's sexual identity or orientation. We believe the love of Jesus is inclusive, not exclusionary, embracing all who seek to follow him. Our love for members of the LGBTQ+ community and our calling by God to bring the hope of the gospel to them and their family members has opened our hearts and minds to the fresh and new interpretation of Scripture that Peter demonstrated in Acts 11 and Acts 15.

While treasuring and honoring the Bible as the revealed Word of God, we see the handful of passages that explicitly address homosexual behavior (Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-10) as condemning lust, not addressing same-sex orientation or healthy, same-sex relationships within a covenantal marriage. The clear and dominant message heralded throughout Scripture calls us to bless others with unconditional love (Matt. 22:39; John 13:35). If there is some doubt about how to interpret these very sparse verses which specifically address homosexual behavior, then we must imitate our Lord and extend unconditional grace and assume a loving posture of radical hospitality toward LGBTQ+ people.

Synod 2022 overlooked the fact that there are honest differences of interpretation of key Bible passages (along with volumes of theological arguments by Reformed theologians advocating for the full inclusion of both celibate and married LGBTQ+ Christians in the life of the church) when they made their decision to define all homosexual sex as a violation of the seventh commandment. Making this a confessional issue is forcing one narrow theological interpretation based on disputed readings of a handful of Scriptures onto the entire denomination.

Synod 2022's adoption of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) and decision to include all homosexual behavior as a sinful violation of God's commandments perpetuates a history of homophobia within our churches that will continue to harm and alienate LGBTQ+ members and their loved ones. This rigid stance does not allow local churches to be supportive, grace-saturated communities that "choose together to live anew as the nurturing family of God; to give and receive grace as we learn together how to walk in sexual holiness; to support each other in celibate singleness or faithful marriage" (HSR, p. 407). The lament that "despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers" (HSR, p. 426) will only continue unless the church allows grace and love to season our posture toward LGBTQ+ persons.

At MCCC we view LGBTQ+ persons as fellow imagebearers of God, equally valued as such without discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. Since June 2022, our council, members, and regular attenders have participated in a season of focused study, including sermons, reviews of reading resources, prayerful reflection, and open dialogue on the issues presented in this appeal. This process has strengthened our desire to welcome all to serve in every area of the church's life and ministry according to their calling and gifts. This would include leadership positions for those members called and gifted for leadership. As we live, love, and minister together as a community of believers, we call all of our members and attenders to embrace a radical obedience to the path, walk, and teachings of our Lord as we each strive to live a Christlike life, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, producing the spiritual fruit of abundant life (Gal. 5:22-23).

We are living in a time and place where the institution of marriage is open to all couples. The Bible passages addressing homosexual behavior seem to focus on extramarital sexual activity fueled by lust. Thus we believe that the church should bless and celebrate monogamous covenantal marriage, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation. We encourage members of the LGBTQ+ community as well as heterosexual members to express their sexuality within the confines of the covenant of marriage. MCCC believes that solemnizing and celebrating the weddings of same-sex Christian couples is not in conflict with the Word of God (Church Order, Art. 69-c.).

II. Overture

The council of Mill Creek Community Church overtures Synod 2023 to remove the phrase "and homosexual sex" from the following decision (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922):

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in the Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the

seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

Grounds:

1. This blanket condemnation of all homosexual acts overlooks the availability of monogamous, covenantal marriage for same-sex couples.
2. Given the diversity of interpretations of relevant Scriptures by Reformed scholars, officebearers should not be bound to a confessional interpretation based on one narrow interpretation of several hotly debated Scriptures.
3. The phrase "extramarital sex" applies to all extramarital sexual activity regardless of the gender identities or sexual orientation of those involved.
4. The phrase creates an unnecessary barrier to the gospel by excluding married LGBTQ+ persons from the life and membership of the church.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, we are not asking that all churches interpret these passages as we do, but that we be given the freedom to minister to our community from a foundation of biblical interpretation that does allow for same-sex intimacy within the covenant of marriage. We are asking that the CRCNA recognize that the conclusions of the HSR are but one interpretation of Scripture and allow for other readings that would compel local churches, like MCCC, to be open and affirming to full participation of LGBTQ+ persons in the life and membership of our congregation while still belonging to the covenant community of the CRCNA.

Council of Mill Creek Community Church,
Mill Creek, Washington
Carol Bowker, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 2, 2023, meeting of Classis Pacific Northwest but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 37

Reverse the Synod 2022 Decision Defining "Unchastity"

I. Introduction

Alger Park Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has spent much time and energy over the past months and years studying a variety of interpretations and perspectives regarding the participation of same-sex-attracted people in the life of the church. As a result, our congregation has grown in our understanding of relevant issues, as well as in our understanding of those who hold opinions different from our own. Our congregation has grown to appreciate the variety of sincere, biblically based perspectives and the persons who hold them.

We desire to follow the will of God in our lives together, and we have become increasingly convicted that God may not require the polarized, all-or-none perspective that we read in the 2022 Human Sexuality Report (HSR). As a result, we have deep concerns regarding synod's definition of the word "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and regarding the decision to make that definition confessional. Alger Park CRC holds a wide variety of opinions about how best to love and serve our same-sex-attracted family members, friends, and neighbors. But we also strongly believe that our variety of perspectives need not divide us.

By making our differences a matter of *confession* rather than a matter of *interpretation* and *pastoral care*, we effectively shut down ongoing discussion, threaten the unity of the Spirit, and forsake the very gifts that have served the CRCNA so well in the past.

II. Overture

The council of Alger Park CRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan, overtures Synod 2023 to reverse the decision of Synod 2022, which defined the word "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 to include specific sexual behaviors (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922).

Grounds:

1. *Unity in Christ*. We believe that our unity is found in Christ—not in singular interpretations of Scripture. Our denomination has a long history of struggling and growing because of interpretive differences within our tradition. In our best and humblest moments, we have made space for our differences because we know that our theology, our interpretation of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit are never static. In living with this diversity of interpretations, we trust the leading of the Spirit, the faithful preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments. These practices make room for changes in practice—even as we grow in faith and in the gifts God gives.
2. *Removing stumbling blocks*. In Romans 15, Paul instructs the early church concerning differences of interpretation and practice to refrain from passing judgment, constructing stumbling blocks, and destroying

the work of God. He encourages the church to make every effort that leads to peace and mutual edification. He calls on those early believers to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom. 15:7).

The elevation of our disagreements about human sexuality to that which threatens a person's salvation runs counter to Paul's admonition. The decision of Synod 2022 that this interpretation is embedded in the confessions in such a manner that to believe otherwise is to be acting like the "false church" is damning to our congregation, to those we love and serve, and to the broader mission of the church.

It strikes us as prudent and faithful to follow Paul's guidance on this matter. In our ministry we try to remove barriers to the gospel and nurture a culture of acceptance so that all might know the grace of God expressed in Christ Jesus. We believe that synod's decision in 2022 undercuts those efforts.

3. *Ecclesiological unity*. There is ample evidence that other denominations have not been able to navigate this discussion without splintering. Often unity is sacrificed at the altar of confessional precision. And yet—even as a theological tradition with a robust commitment to creed and confession—we have long made space for discussion, disagreement, and learning from the work of the Spirit in one another. We believe that continuing to make space for discernment and the work of the Spirit will serve us well and allow us to remain unified rather than fracturing the church.

   Synod 2022's decision to narrow and specify the scope of Q&A 108 runs counter to that tradition. Additionally, the HSR's delineation of "true church" and "false church" initiates a dangerous game through which, for thousands of years, the church has tragically divided itself, excommunicated itself, and taken eternal judgment into its own hands. Something similar is currently happening in the CRCNA.

   We recognize that such commitments to unity require a great measure of humility and a willingness to remain in communion. We bear witness that the CRCNA has remained unified through significant disagreement concerning issues of race, the baptism of adopted children, divorce and remarriage, the role of women, and more. Those ongoing disagreements did not lead to irreparable division. To the contrary, each of those debates highlights either a commendable commitment to unity (i.e., the role of women), or God's faithfulness to us during a season of theological foolishness and pastoral malpractice (i.e., race, baptism of adopted children).

   The decision of Synod 2022 regarding Q&A 108 mitigates against our tradition of unity and reflection. It is not clear to us why this matter requires such divisive action. Our strength is in belonging to Christ, being signed and sealed by the sacraments, and seeking to follow the way of Christ in this world—not by a singular standard of confessional scrupulousness.

4. *Care for same-sex-attracted people***.** Christians have catastrophically failed in their care for same-sex-attracted people, causing many of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters to feel exiled from and deeply wounded by the church. The HSR laments and seeks to rectify those injurious behaviors; however, making same-sex relationships a confessional issue actually limits the ability of churches to effectively minister to individuals and unnecessarily binds the consciences of our officebearers. Each situation is different, and each LGBTQ+ person receiving pastoral care is at a unique point in their spiritual journey. The type of care and inclusion extended to one person might not be appropriate for another. In making same-sex relationships a confessional issue, pastors and congregations have very little leeway in deciding what will be most appropriate, helpful, and loving to the individual people they encounter. In short, it propagates a system that could easily lead the church to cause even more harm to an already marginalized community.

III. Conclusion

The request to reverse the decision of Synod 2022 is not to advocate for one position over another but to leave the care of those in a same-sex committed relationship in the realm of pastoral care. It is to allow individual congregations to faithfully live out their biblical understanding of how they are called to include LGBTQ+ members in their church community. It is, in fact, to leave Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as a matter of interpretation and not salvation. It is to recognize that we can be united in baptism, worship, mission, and communion without agreeing on all issues of interpretation.

The members of Alger Park CRC hold our variety of views in tension, mutual respect, and, at our best, in conversation and prayer. We try to hold all of this in humility, love, and unity in Christ. Conferring confessional status on one particular interpretation has proven to be hurtful and divisive. Rather than strengthening congregational life and enhancing our gospel witness, the decision of Synod 2022 has distracted and weakened our collective life and witness.

Council of Alger Park CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Jeff Helmus, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 38

Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108

I. Overture

The council of Kibbie Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as including a list of specific behaviors, namely "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex."

Grounds:

1. By removing the list, while still preserving Synod 2022's affirmation of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR), the status of the report would be that of a synodical decision rather than having confessional status. This approach would mirror Synod 1973's decision on homosexuality, which provided fifty years of broad unity while nurturing deeper conversations about Christian discipleship. It would thus keep the spirit of Heidelberg Q&A 54, which encourages and even mandates the unity of the church.
2. It seems unusual for a Reformed governing body to create an illustrative list of behaviors that constitute "unchastity" or any particular sin. As Reformed Christians, we have always respected the Spirit's work within individual believers and within the church to interpret what is chaste and unchaste within a particular time and a particular culture.[1]
3. Given the debate over same-sex marriage in our denomination, in our broader culture, and at synod itself, the list of behaviors constituting unchastity adopted by Synod 2022 draws attention to that one issue over against a host of other sins. A specific list of unchaste behaviors runs the risk of condemning certain behaviors while condoning, downplaying, or ignoring others that vex the broader church. Further, if that sin targets a marginalized demographic, it risks appearing like the judgmentalism condemned by our Lord. A reversal of synod's decision to hold its list of unchaste sins confessional would signal synod's respect for those who remain unconvinced of its position in a time of discernment, without compromising synod's adoption of the Human Sexuality Report.

[1] This reticence appears to be intentional, from the earliest history of Protestantism. In contrast with Roman Catholic church leaders, who did present lists of chaste and unchaste behaviors (both in written catechisms and from the pulpit), Martin Luther consciously avoided doing so, and the other Reformers followed suit. See Tilmann Walter, *Unkeuschheit und Werk der Liebe: Diskurse über Sexualität am Beginn der Neuzeit in Deutschland*, Studia Linguistica Germanica 48 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 125–26.

II. Background

Our primary purpose in presenting this overture is to maintain the unity of the Christian Reformed Church for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20-26. The unity to which we are called is summarized in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54, which states, "I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith." This primary calling rooted in the mission of Christ to the nations is being threatened by the confessional status of synod's list of unchaste behaviors. We have already seen evidence in our churches of the divisiveness of Synod 2022's controversial decision. In the words of Henry DeMoor, a professor emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary and an expert in CRC Church Order, "Synod [2022] has squandered the unity of the church and damaged its mission."[2] We acknowledge and appreciate synod's guidance in contemporary moral issues, as offered for example in 1973 and again in the HSR. Yet, in matters as widely and passionately debated as same-sex marriage, we would humbly ask synod to offer its guidance without threatening the unity of the denomination.

We find the reflections of John Calvin in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book 4) to be pertinent. The Belgic Confession, Article 29, maintains that the marks of the true church are in the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the practice of church discipline, and that no one should be separated from the true church. When doctrinal disagreements arise, when differences of interpretation become pronounced, is the unity of the church to be threatened? Calvin argues only in the most central of doctrines.

> The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.
>
> What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith. . . . Here are the apostle's words: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be of the same mind; and if you be differently minded in anything, God shall reveal this also to you" [Phil. 3:15]. Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential

[2] "After Synod 2022: Discerning What's Next," *The Banner* (Sept. 2022), p. 14.

> matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.[3]

In keeping with this advice, unity has long been a driving concern when synod has had to make controversial decisions. For example, Synod 1995 approved the recommendation that "synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist."[4] This same concern for unity must remain front and center in present conversations concerning the HSR. Preserving Synod 2022's affirmation of the HSR without making its conclusions "confessional" follows the wise example of Synod 1973's decision on homosexuality, which has provided fifty years of broad unity while nurturing deeper conversations about Christian discipleship within the CRC.

Indeed, for those who maintain with Synod 1973 and the HSR that homosexual activity is sinful, Calvin would add this advice about zeal for righteousness and the bonds of Christian unity. While calling on the church to preach true righteousness and seek what is morally good and true, Calvin warns against an "immoderate severity" that sets aside the kindness of the Lord and threatens unity, vainly seeking "a church besmirched with no blemish."[5]

> But [those zealous for moral purity] cry out, it is intolerable that a plague of vices rages far and wide. Suppose the apostle's opinion here again answers them. Among the Corinthians no slight number had gone astray; in fact, almost the whole body was infected. There was not one kind of sin only, but very many; and they were no light errors but frightful misdeeds; there was corruption not only of morals but of doctrine. What does the holy apostle—the instrument of the Heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the church stands or falls—do about this? Does he seek to separate himself from such? Does he cast them out of Christ's Kingdom? Does he fell them with the ultimate thunderbolt of anathema? He not only does nothing of the sort; he even recognizes and proclaims them to be the church of Christ and the communion of saints. . . . The church abides among them because the ministry of the Word and sacraments remains unrepudiated there.[6]

---

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1970), 4.1.12.

[4] *Acts of Synod* 1995, p. 727.

[5] *Institutes*, 4.1.13.

[6] *Institutes*, 4.1.14.

We believe our churches and officebearers in the CRCNA share deep commitments to the preaching of the Word and the sacraments that mark them as genuine. While synod ought to speak to contemporary issues and give clear guidance, we would ask synod to reconsider a decision that threatens the unity of the church as taught in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54.

One has only to consider a sample of the history of interpretation on Lord's Day 41 to see this. For example, neither Hoeksema, Kuyvenhoven, nor Klooster offer the kind of list that Synod 2022 did.[7] Only Hoeksema mentions homosexuality, and that only in passing. One would never guess from these sources that polyamory might be a problem. However, both Hoeksema and Kuyvenhoven talk a great deal about divorce and remarriage (the "hot-button issue" of their day).

This brief survey illustrates how discussions of specific forms of unchastity rapidly become dated, as Spirit-filled believers wrestle with what behaviors are in and out of bounds in their unique and particular context and the challenges it faces. New generations are always creating new ways of being unchaste (e.g., internet pornography) that cannot be anticipated beforehand. Although it is quite necessary and appropriate for the secondary sources to discuss the specifics of such context-dependent behaviors, it is not always fitting or helpful for a primary source such as the Heidelberg Catechism to do so. Historic creeds and confessions are intended to apply and remain relevant across time and space, providing both foundation and framework for the church's ongoing work of discipleship.

Consider the broad strokes of the Belgic Confession, Article 24, which speaks eloquently of the process of sanctification. The Spirit produces faith through the hearing of God's Word, regenerating believers and causing them to live in newness of life. Indeed, "it is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being." The confession then speaks of "faith working through love," and works that "are good and acceptable to God, since they are all sanctified by his grace." These general terms and phrases provide bedrock theological statements that draw believers together across generations. Again, we have no issue with synod seeking to define in our context what is holy and righteous: we argue rather that synod should maintain the distinction between that contemporary work and the more broad-speaking confessions.

We again acknowledge and welcome synod's need to speak to contemporary issues and bring issues brought before synod to resolution. This work is good and necessary. However, raising this list of unchaste actions to

---

[7] Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), pp. 342-76; Andrew Kuyvenhoven, *Comfort and Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), pp. 239-43; Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001), pp. 1003-10.

confessional status in the midst of heated debate highlights the issue of same-sex marriage and opens the denomination to unwelcomed accusations.

We are concerned how those in opposition to the HSR might read the following passages:

> "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"
> (Matt. 7:1-3, NIV)

> Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. (Rom. 2:1, NRSV)

> Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. . . . We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.
> (Rom. 14:4, 7-8, NRSV)

For those guilty of judging others, Paul has this question in Romans 2:4 (NIV): "Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" Our concern is that making a list of condemnable sins runs the risk of committing a contemptible sin.

While it is within the right of synod to make conclusions settled and binding, we would ask synod—as Calvin counseled kindness over against severity—to signal its commitment to kindness, patience, and respect toward those who disagree with the HSR, within and outside the denomination, by reversing its decision to make confessional its list of unchaste behaviors.

In conclusion, synod's adoption in 2022 of a specific list of unchaste sins as confessional in a time of broad debate threatens the unity of the denomination. While we welcome synod's clear counsel in the matter of same-sex marriage, we ask synod in a spirit of mutual respect and faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit to reverse its decision to designate its list of unchaste sins as confessional.

Council of Kibbie CRC, South Haven, Michigan
Don Bemis, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 39

Reverse Synod's Endorsement of the Human Sexuality Report

The council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana, overtures Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's recommendation of the Human Sexuality Report to CRC churches as "useful information."

Grounds:

1. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) teaches doctrine on sexual sin that violates all three of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church.

   a. Teaching #1: "Like idolatry, unrepentant sexual immorality destroys one's place in the church and kingdom of God" (HSR, p. 344).

      This teaching straightforwardly implies that someone who *has* a place in the church and kingdom of God but then sins sexually and fails to repent (perhaps as a result of dying in the very act) thereby *destroys* their place in the church and kingdom of God. Against this doctrine, Article 22 of the Belgic Confession states: "For it must necessarily follow that either all that is required for our salvation is not in Christ or, if all is in him, then he who has Christ by faith has his salvation entirely. Therefore, to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior. And therefore we justly say with Paul that we are justified 'by faith alone' or by faith 'apart from works.'" Repentance on the part of a believer in Christ in the wake of sin is, of course, a *work*. Thus, Teaching #1 commits "a most enormous blasphemy."

      - It may be objected that underlying this remark is the familiar idea that those who live in "unrepentant sin" are, in fact, showing themselves by their unrepentance to be non-Christians. In reply, we say the HSR cannot possibly mean this, because in the invitation to confession at the beginning of the document, the authors declare (and thereby invite the rest of us, as believers, to declare), "Instead of confessing our sins and praying for each other, we live in unrepentant sin" (HSR, pp. 321-22).

      The teaching also straightforwardly contradicts the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints in the Canons of Dort, specifically at Fifth Point, Article 9: "Concerning this preservation of those chosen to salvation and concerning the perseverance of true believers in faith, believers themselves can and do become assured in accordance with the measure of their faith. By this faith they firmly believe that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life."

b. Teaching #2: Commenting on Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 6:16: "In other words, sex is of profound significance because it establishes a one-flesh union. And that one-flesh union either is or is not consistent with the believer's bodily union with Christ. Thus sexual immorality is not simply a violation of the will of God. Much more, it is incompatible with union with Christ. To be sure, all sin is ultimately incompatible with our union with Christ, but Paul's point here is that sexual immorality is *especially* incompatible with that union. Why? Because, as he has argued from Genesis 2:24, it involves the body in a deeply intimate one-flesh union that is of profound significance for human beings" (HSR, p. 345, emphasis in original).

   - We note first that the notion of something's being "especially incompatible" with something else is incoherent; incompatibility does not admit of degrees. This is a minor issue.
   - Part of the context for Teaching #2 is the claim that, according to Paul, "the body is not just destined for resurrection and union with Christ" but is also a temple of the Holy Spirit (HSR, p. 346). The remark about our destiny is telling, however, because it indicates that the "union with Christ" that the authors are talking about is or includes postmortem union—namely, the union we have by way of *salvation*. (This is, of course, a perfectly standard understanding of what union with Christ involves.) But if this is right, and if it is also true that sexual immorality is "*especially* incompatible" with union with Christ, then it straightforwardly follows that *anyone* (believer or not) who commits sexual sin is thereby deprived of union with Christ, and hence of salvation. Against this, however, witness the Canons of Dort, First Point, Rejection VII, which says the Synod of Dort rejects the errors of those "who teach that in this life there is no fruit, no awareness, and no assurance of one's unchangeable election to glory, except as conditioned upon something changeable and contingent." Obviously whether a person is or is not someone who has committed sexual immorality is a "changeable and contingent" matter; thus, Teaching #2 straightforwardly contradicts this part of the Canons of Dort.

c. Teaching #3: The document says that "by the word 'unchastity' the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity" (HSR, p. 458), but it also says the following in its "word to church members who are attracted to the same sex": "know that your sexual attractions do not make you sinful any more than your temptations to pride, selfishness, or idolatry make you sinful" (HSR, p. 434).

   If "unchastity" includes gay and lesbian sexual acts, then Q&A 109 of the Heidelberg Catechism forbids gay and lesbian sexual attractions, as follows: "We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul,

and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why God forbids all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires." If it be objected that "attractions" do not include thoughts or desires, we reply that the Human Sexuality Report itself rebuts this objection. In talking about the world's view of sexuality, the document says, "In the world's eyes it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship . . ." (HSR, p. 425). In this remark, the term "those desires" refers back to sexual *attractions*; thus, sexual attractions include desires.

d. In sum: The HSR has managed to include remarks that violate the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, *and* the Heidelberg Catechism. This by itself is sufficient to disqualify the report as, on the whole, "useful information" to churches in the Reformed tradition.

2. The teachings on gender identity are so irresponsible as to be harmful rather than useful.

   a. In commenting on Genesis, the document says that "to be male is to possess male sexuality and to be female is to possess female sexuality" (HSR, p. 329). Importantly, the terms "male sexuality" and "female sexuality" are left undefined. *Gender* is defined as "categorization of humans as male and female based on culturally sanctioned roles, behaviors, expressions (sometimes also labeled as masculinity and femininity)" and *gender identity* is defined as "a person's internal sense of being male, female, or other" (HSR, p. 373). *Transgender* is defined as "a broad term that includes persons who define themselves as a gender other than their sex" (HSR, p. 374). This terminological scheme is both nonstandard and incoherent.

      Consider Sophie, a transwoman who was assigned the sex "male" at birth and has not transitioned (so, among other things, she has a penis). Standard usage would say that what it is for Sophie to be transgender is for her to identify with a gender (in this case, "woman") other than the one that corresponds with the sex she was assigned at birth. But the HSR can make no sense of this. On their terminological scheme, if Sophie is trans, it is because she identifies as *female*. But to be female is to possess female sexuality; so the Human Sexuality Report is committed to understanding Sophie as thinking of herself as possessing female sexuality. Sophie obviously recognizes that she has a penis (and, let us suppose, she has no other anatomical features that would mark her as female). So she cannot possibly think that she possesses *anatomical* female sexuality. What, then, could it possibly mean for her to think she possesses female sexuality? The terminological scheme suggests that in addition to anatomical female sexuality there is also "cultural" female sexuality—namely, femininity. But if femininity is a form of female sexuality, then to be female is *either* to be anatomi-

cally female or to be feminine, in which case either Sophie is mistaken in thinking she is feminine (an unlikely possibility) or she *really is female* and she is also *genuinely male* (by virtue of her male anatomical sexuality). This makes no sense by anyone's lights.

b. The document grants that the Bible doesn't really speak to issues of gender identity since the sex-gender distinction would have been alien to the writers of the biblical texts. Specifically, it says:

> Central to the discussion of sex and gender identity is the distinction between sex and gender. Yet, as we have seen, this distinction is a relatively recent one, and it is unknown to the Bible. For most of Western history, male and female would have included the biological realities of those terms as well as all of what is now included in the term gender.
>
> Needless to say, there is very little that the Bible explicitly says about these issues. (HSR, p. 387)

Since the primary goal of the document is "to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality" (HSR, p. 315), the best move at this point would have been to end the discussion of gender and move on to other topics. Instead, it speculatively notes that the discussion of eunuchs in Matthew 19:11-12 "may shed light on the topic of gender identity and DSD [Disorders of Sexual Development]" (HSR, p. 388) and proceeds to identify as the general upshot of that discussion the notion that for many Christians it is better not to marry, and this is a praiseworthy path that leads to great reward. The clear suggestion, then, in light of the claim that Matthew 19:11-12 may shed light on the topic at hand, is that it may well be better for trans people and intersex people simply not to marry. In a context like this one, where there are significant quality of life issues at stake and real people can be harmed (even to the point of being driven from the church) by false claims about what the Bible says about an entire class of people, it is exceedingly irresponsible to speculatively *suggest* that there are biblical grounds for depriving trans and intersex individuals of the great goods of marriage after previously acknowledging that, strictly speaking, the Bible does not speak to their condition.

c. In a similar vein, the document says "We do not help people to flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another" (HSR, p. 393). Quoting Kevin Vanhoozer approvingly, it goes on to say that "'in refusing one's biology, the creature refuses what is ultimately not merely a natural given but a gift of God,'" and "our true vocation is not to reject our physical bodies. It is 'to discern, deliberate on, and do those possibilities that are given to us with our biological sex'" (HSR, p. 393). But, again, with so much at stake and an open acknowledgment of the fact that the Bible does not speak to matters of gender, claims like this, wholly untethered

as they are from clear biblical guidance, are absolutely irresponsible.

d. In sum: Some of what the HSR has to say about gender identity is incoherent; some of it is objectionably speculative, untethered from biblical moorings. In consequence, it runs a grave risk of seriously harming the members of the transgender community within our midst. Such a document cannot be recommended to CRC churches as containing "useful information" on this subject.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC,
South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 40

Address Harm Done to LGBTQ+ Persons

I. Introduction

This overture emerges from deep grief about what has happened within the Christian Reformed Church since the 2020 release of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). It is a plea for the following:

- greater attention to ongoing harm within our midst.
- more respect for the moral agency and consciences of individuals.
- a pause in the implementation of some Synod 2022 decisions out of love and concern for the CRC as a whole.

Below are three significant matters that have not received enough attention to date. They are the rationale for an overture that proposes a way forward, with grounds for taking this direction.

A. Apology and follow-up

The Human Sexuality Report repeatedly named the harms done to members of the LGBTQ+ community and openly acknowledged that the CRC has failed them. As part of apologizing for wrongs done, the report spells out some helpful components for a wholesale change in the way CRC churches relate to persons struggling with their sexual identities or identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Synod 2022 repeated apologies made in 1973 and 2016, acknowledging that CRC churches have contributed to harm done in the past. Those harms continue to happen in our communities, and the outcomes of Synod 2022 have served to *increase rather than decrease* the harm and alienation of those to whom apologies were made.

Sincere apology requires listening with respect and compassion to those who are harmed, understanding and owning the impact of our own behaviors, and then making the required changes in the practices that harm them. Refusing to consider the harmful implications of decisions being made undermines synod's apology. Ignoring or deferring valid concerns about the implications of the "confessional status" decision is less-than-wise leadership. We need to apologize again *and act as if we mean it*.

B. Preventing harm is a biblical imperative

Preventing harm to others is a central focus of the Bible, beginning in Genesis, through the Old Testament, in the Jesus way, in early church life, and continuing into the shalom of the new creation. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. It does not bifurcate "life on earth" and "life in the world to come" in a way that might justify harm in order to point toward salvation.

Jesus led with full acceptance, love, and compassion; moreover, his harshest judgments were for those who put obstacles in the way of the vulnerable in this life, not primarily for eternity *but always*. In practice, using fear

of eternal damnation to save souls turns people away from Jesus more than to him.

The harmful impacts of some decisions made at Synod 2022 have become evident in one year, including the following bitter fruits: hurt and rejection experienced by LGBTQ+ members of the CRC, as stated in their own voices. Many are choosing to walk away despite their deep love for the CRC because it is too painful to stay; and there is more conflict within churches because many members recognize the harm being done and do not accept that this is the only path for the CRC to follow.

Gravamina—*more than for any other issue in the CRC*—are based on conscience claims. Failure to respect the moral agency and conscience of church members is, in itself, a form of unnecessary moral harm, as well as being inconsistent with other Reformed teachings about respect for conscience decisions.[1]

Research on preventing harm for LGBTQ+ persons provides clear direction about necessary conditions for mental health and well-being. In addition, there is a growing body of research on what churches can do to create safe, supportive, and loving spaces for struggling members or members who have identified themselves as LGBTQ+.[2] We know what is necessary for the mental health of LGBTQ+ members, but Synod 2022 added obstacles to doing it. Within the CRC, numerous pastors have testified that the "hate-the-sin, love-the-sinner" approach, endorsed by Synod 2022, is too simplistic and does harm instead of good for someone who is born gay and wonders why God made them that way. It does harm when we require them to live a life without committed, intimate relationships. Categorizing committed same-sex relationships as unchaste and adulterous is unfair, even if one thinks such relationships should not exist. Additionally, the *means and manner* of making decisions at Synod 2022 were inconsistent with the imperative to treat every person with respect and dignity, created in the image of God.

The fallout of Synod 2022 is making it more difficult to create safe spaces for young people who are forming their spiritual and sexual identities.

---

[1] See "Wise Words from Church Members" for a summary of themes in gravamina and letters of concern, available at hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/#a13lightbox-work-11968.

[2] Eric M. Rodriguez, Ph.D. (2009), "At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57:1, 5-38. Kirk A. Foster and Sharon Bowland, "All the Pain Along with All the Joy: Spiritual Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Christians," *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2015), 55:191-201. David M. Barnes and Ilan H. Meyer, "Religious Affiliation, Internalized Homophobia, and Mental Health in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (2012) 82:4, 505-515. Suzanne Lease, Sharon Horne, and Nicole Noffsinger-Frazier, "Affirming Faith Experiences and Psychological Health for Caucasian Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (2005) 52:3, 378-88. Edward F. Lomash, Tabria D. Brown, and M. Paz Galupo (2018), "'A Whole Bunch of Love the Sinner Hate the Sin': LGBTQ Microaggressions Experienced in Religious and Spiritual Context," *Journal of Homosexuality* (tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2018.1542204?journalCode=wjhm20).

Preventing emotional and spiritual harm to our young people is a covenant obligation under the baptismal vows we make. Those vows don't expire when young people disclose that they have a different sexual orientation or gender identity than expected at birth. It is not the case that "we don't know what to do." A decade of research informs good practice.[3] Synod 2022 did the opposite by creating obstacles to good practice.

C. Justice and compassion

Justice and compassion were not given adequate consideration in the final decisions of Synod 2022 and the way those decisions were made. Justice and compassion are central to biblical teachings and the way Jesus taught us to live—more central than any specific verses about sexual morality. The failure to give adequate consideration and weight to other relevant biblical teachings was named in many of the overtures to Synod 2021 and 2022 that called for more time and dialogue. Those calls were ignored by Synod 2022 without adequate response to the substantive issues raised in them. For reason of length, this overture cannot go into details about what justice and compassion mean with regard to this topic, so it calls for time to do so before we inflict *more harm* on *more people*.

As a community church, Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church needs to be a welcoming church and one that puts a high priority on compassion and justice in both its outreach and creating safe space for members, including and especially members of the LGBTQ+ community.

II. Overture

For these reasons, Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2023 to take the following steps:

A. Give highest priority to enabling every CRC church to become a space where members of the LGBTQ+ community will feel they are accepted, loved, and belong in the family of God, in keeping with our calling to act out of compassion and justice.

B. Put on hold implementation of the "confessional status" decision by Synod 2022 until such time as the majority of CRC churches are safe spaces, especially for young people.

---

[3] Matthew J.L. Page, Kristin Lindall, and Neena Malik, "The Role of Religion and Stress in Sexual Identity and Mental Health Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-sexual Youth," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2013), 23(4), 665- 77. Angie Dahl and Renee V. Galliher, "LGBTQ Adolescents and Young Adults Raised with a Christian Religious Context," *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (2012), 1611-18. Angie Dahl and Renee Galliher, Ph.D., "Sexual Minority Young Adult Religiosity, Sexual Orientation Conflict, Self-Esteem and Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health* (2010), 14:4, 271-90. Edward F. Lomash, Tabria D. Brown, and M. Paz Galupo (2018), "'A Whole Bunch of Love the Sinner Hate the Sin': LGBTQ Microaggressions Experienced in Religious and Spiritual Context," *Journal of Homosexuality* (tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2018.1542204?journalCode=wjhm20). Shelley L. Craig, Ashley Austin, Mariam Rashidi, and Marc Adams, "Fighting for survival: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students in religious colleges and universities," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* (2017), 29:1,1-24.

C. Develop a strategy for intentional, ongoing listening to Christ-serving members of the LGBTQ+ community, families, and allies to inform the way we express belonging, provide pastoral care, and create safe spaces in CRC churches, in keeping with the apology for past wrongs and failures.

D. Develop an action plan for serious implementation of the Synod 2022 decision that calls for more research, theological study and reflection, and open dialogue on human sexuality, including consideration of other Reformed approaches to interpreting Scripture.

Grounds:

1. Preventing harm to other people in this life is a central teaching throughout the Bible, as part of the commandment to love others as ourselves. "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' *Love does no harm to a neighbor.* Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:9-10).

2. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. The good news of the kingdom of God, based on dignity and respect for every person as created in the image of God, applies now and in the renewed creation.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Q&A 107, teaches that the sixth commandment includes protecting others from harm as much as possible. This was not considered when Synod 2022 based its "confessional status" decision on one specific, dated interpretation of the term "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Q&A 107 *is just as important* as Q&A 108. Both need to be considered in the larger context of how the Heidelberg Catechism understands the second table of the commandments as a guide for Christian living. Q&A 107, the third question on the sixth commandment, reads:

   Q. Is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way?

   A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, *to protect them from harm as much as we can*, and to do good even to our enemies.

4. Compassion and justice—two central teachings of Jesus and the good news we proclaim for our world—were not given enough consideration in the final decisions and the way those decisions were made at Synod 2022. Calling for a pause and taking time to ensure that those core teachings are given the weight they deserve is warranted by the bitter fruits evident in the first year. There are other Reformed interpretations of Scripture that do not lead to the injustice, harm, and conflict caused by the one particular approach to interpreting Scripture used to justify labelling all homosexual sex as "unchastity."

5. The failure to treat with respect members of the CRC community who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community has caused harm and reaped negative fruits in many churches during the first year. We know the harm done and how to prevent further harm. The growing, specific research on outcomes of different approaches by churches provides a clear, evidence-based consensus on what constitutes safe spaces within churches. Furthermore, members of the LGBTQ+ community who follow Jesus have gifts to contribute to our mission, fellowship, and worship.
6. Synod 2022 called for more research, study of the Bible and theology, and dialogue on the matters covered in the HSR report. It is logical to implement that decision before moving to aggressive implementation of a later, very specific decision that is known to have destructive consequences.

Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC,
St. Catharines, Ontario
Harry Van Tuyl, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Niagara but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 41

Hold Implementation of the "Confessional Status" Decision by Synod 2022 until Synod 2028

I. Introduction

This overture emerges from deep grief about what has happened within the Christian Reformed Church since the 2020 release of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). This is a plea for the following:

- greater attention to ongoing harm within our midst
- more respect for the moral agency and consciences of individuals
- a pause in the implementation of some Synod 2022 decisions out of love and concern for the CRC as a whole

Below are three significant matters that have not received enough attention to date. They are the rationale for an overture that proposes a way forward, with grounds for taking this direction.

A. Apology and follow-up

The Human Sexuality Report repeatedly named the harms done to members of the LGBTQ+ community and openly acknowledged that the CRC has failed them. As part of apologizing for wrongs done, the report spells out some helpful components for a wholesale change in the way CRC churches relate to persons struggling with their sexual identities or identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Synod 2022 repeated apologies made in 1973 and 2016, acknowledging that CRC churches have contributed to harm done in the past. Those harms continue to happen in our communities, and in many situations efforts to interpret and apply the decisions of Synod 2022 may and will serve to increase rather than decrease the harm and alienation of those to whom apologies were made.

Sincere apology requires listening with respect and compassion to those who are harmed, understanding and owning the impact of our own behaviors, and then making the required changes in the practices that harm them. Refusing to consider any possible harmful implications of decisions being made undermines synod's apology. There is a need to clarify the implications of the "confessional status" decision in order to address the valid concerns that have been raised.

B. Preventing harm is a biblical imperative

Preventing harm to others is a central focus of the Bible, beginning in Genesis, through the Old Testament, in the Jesus way, in early church life, and continuing into the shalom of the new creation. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. It does not bifurcate "life on earth" and "life in the world to come" in a way that might justify harm in order to point toward salvation.

Jesus led with full acceptance, love, and compassion; moreover, his harshest judgments were for those who put obstacles in the way of the vulnerable in this life, not primarily for eternity but always. In practice, using fear of eternal damnation to save souls turns people away from Jesus more than to him.

The harmful impacts of some decisions made at Synod 2022 have become evident in one year, including the following bitter fruits: hurt and rejection experienced by LGBTQ+ members of the CRC, as stated in their own voices, with many choosing to walk away despite their deep love for the CRC because it is too painful to stay; there is more conflict within churches because many members recognize the harm being done and do not accept that this is the only path for the CRC to follow.

Research on preventing harm for LGBTQ+ persons provides clear direction about necessary conditions for mental health and well-being. In addition, there is a growing body of research on what churches can do to create safe, supportive, and loving spaces for struggling members or members who have identified themselves as LGBTQ+.[1] We may know what is necessary for the mental health of LGBTQ+ members, but Synod 2022 added obstacles to doing it. Within the CRC, numerous pastors have testified that the "hate-the-sin, love-the-sinner" approach, endorsed by Synod 2022, is often applied in ways that are too simplistic and that do harm instead of good for someone who is born gay and wonders why God made them that way. Even for those who believe that the biblical teaching on homosexuality also prohibits committed, intimate same-sex relationships, there is a need to acknowledge and recognize the very real hurt and distress that this prohibition causes. And using terms such as "unchaste" and "adulterous" to label committed same-sex relationships is not necessarily accurate or fair, even if one thinks such relationships are not biblical. Additionally, the means and manner of making decisions at Synod 2022 were inconsistent with the imperative to treat every person with respect and dignity, created in the image of God.

The fallout of Synod 2022 in many cases is that it has become more difficult to create safe spaces for young people who are forming their spiritual and sexual identities. Preventing emotional and spiritual harm to our young people is a covenant obligation under the baptismal vows we

---

[1] Eric M. Rodriguez, Ph.D. (2009), "At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57:1, 5-38. Kirk A. Foster and Sharon Bowland, "All the Pain Along with All the Joy: Spiritual Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Christians," *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2015), 55:191-201. David M. Barnes and Ilan H. Meyer, "Religious Affiliation, Internalized Homophobia, and Mental Health in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (2012) 82:4, 505-515. Suzanne Lease, Sharon Horne, and Nicole Noffsinger-Frazier, "Affirming Faith Experiences and Psychological Health for Caucasian Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (2005) 52:3, 378-88. Edward F. Lomash, Tabria D. Brown, and M. Paz Galupo (2018): "'A Whole Bunch of Love the Sinner Hate the Sin': LGBTQ Microaggressions Experienced in Religious and Spiritual Context," *Journal of Homosexuality* (tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2018.1542204?journalCode=wjhm20).

make. Those vows don't expire when young people disclose that they have a different sexual orientation or gender-identity than expected at birth. It is not the case that "we don't know what to do." A decade of research informs good practice.[2] Without further discussion and clearer guidance, the reality is that in many situations efforts to apply the decisions of Synod 2022 will do the opposite by creating obstacles to good practice.

C. Justice and compassion

Justice and compassion were not given adequate consideration in the final decisions of Synod 2022 and the way those decisions were made. Justice and compassion are central to biblical teachings and the way Jesus taught us to live—more central than any specific verses about sexual morality. The failure to give adequate consideration and weight to other relevant biblical teachings was named in many of the overtures to Synod 2021 and 2022 that called for more time and dialogue. Those calls were ignored by Synod 2022 without adequate response to the substantive issues raised in them. For reason of length, this overture cannot go into details about what justice and compassion mean with regard to this topic, so it calls for time to do so before we inflict more harm on more people.

II. Overture

For these reasons, Classis Eastern Canada overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Put on hold implementation of the "confessional status" decision by Synod 2022 until Synod 2028, when the decision of Synod 2022 will be revisited.

B. Use this five-year time period to develop a strategy for intentional, ongoing listening to Christ-serving members of the LGBTQ+ community, families, and allies, to inform the way we express belonging, provide pastoral care, and create safe spaces in CRC churches, in keeping with the apology for past wrongs and failures.

C. Use this five-year time period to develop an action plan for serious implementation of the Synod 2022 decision that calls for more research,

---

[2] Matthew J.L. Page, Kristin Lindall, and Neena Malik, "The Role of Religion and Stress in Sexual Identity and Mental Health Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-sexual Youth," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2013), 23(4), 665- 77. Angie Dahl and Renee V. Galliher, "LGBTQ Adolescents and Young Adults Raised with a Christian Religious Context," *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (2012), 1611-18. Angie Dahl and Renee Galliher, Ph.D., "Sexual Minority Young Adult Religiosity, Sexual Orientation Conflict, Self-Esteem and Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health* (2010), 14:4, 271-90. Edward F. Lomash, Tabria D. Brown, and M. Paz Galupo (2018): "'A Whole Bunch of Love the Sinner Hate the Sin': LGBTQ Microaggressions Experienced in Religious and Spiritual Context," *Journal of Homosexuality* (tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2018.1542204?journalCode=wjhm20). Shelley L. Craig, Ashley Austin, Mariam Rashidi, and Marc Adams. "Fighting for survival: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students in religious colleges and universities," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* (2017), 29:1,1-24.

theological study and reflection, and open dialogue on human sexuality, including consideration that there may be other Reformed approaches to interpreting Scripture.

Grounds:

1. Time is needed to give intentional effort to enable every CRC church to become a space where members of the LGBTQ+ community will feel they are accepted, loved, and belong in the family of God, in keeping with our calling to act out of compassion and justice.
2. Preventing harm to other people in this life is a central teaching throughout the Bible, as part of the commandment to love others as ourselves. "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:9-10).
3. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. The good news of the kingdom of God, based on dignity and respect for every person as created in the image of God, applies now and in the renewed creation.
4. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Q&A 107, teaches that the sixth commandment includes protecting others from harm as much as possible. This was not considered when Synod 2022 based its "confessional status" decision on one, specific interpretation of the term "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Q&A 107 is just as important as Q&A 108. Both need to be considered in the larger context of how the Heidelberg Catechism understands the second table of the commandments as a guide for Christian living.

   Q. Is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way?

   A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.
5. Compassion and justice—two central teachings of Jesus and the good news we proclaim for our world—were not given enough consideration in the final decisions and the way those decisions were made at Synod 2022. Calling for a pause and taking time to ensure that those core teachings are given the weight they deserve is warranted by the bitter fruits evident in the first year. There are other possible Reformed interpretations of Scripture that do not lead to the injustice, harm, and conflict caused by the one particular approach to interpreting Scripture used to justify labeling all homosexual sex as "unchastity."

6. The failure to treat with respect members of the CRC community who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community has caused harm and reaped negative fruits in many churches during the first year. We know the harm done and how to prevent further harm. The growing, specific research on outcomes of different approaches by churches provides a clear, evidence-based consensus on what constitutes safe spaces within churches. Furthermore, members of the LGBTQ+ community who follow Jesus have gifts to contribute to our mission, fellowship, and worship.
7. Synod 2022 called for more research, study of the Bible and theology, and dialogue on the matters covered in the HSR report. It is logical to implement that decision (for more research, study, and dialogue) before moving to aggressive implementation of a later, very specific decision that has already been seen in many cases to have destructive consequences due to a lack of more specific guidance and heartfelt reflection.

Classis Eastern Canada
B. Bernard Bakker, stated clerk

OVERTURE 42

Reverse Synod 2022's Interpretation of "Unchastity" as Including "Homosexual Sex"

I. Background

The Human Sexuality Report (HSR) offers two pieces of evidence in support of the claim that "unchastity" in Q&A 108 includes gay and lesbian sexual acts: (a) in 2017 the Reformed Church in America offered the same interpretation; and (b) Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, states in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism that "unchastity" is to be understood in this way (see *Agenda for Synod 2022,* p. 458). Plausibly, the first piece of evidence here is derivative upon the second; but even if it isn't, the teachings of the Reformed Church in America are not normative for our synod, so that is further reason for treating the second piece of evidence as primary. But in this matter we should follow the "spirit" of Ursinus's commentary rather than the letter (as we shall argue below), and doing so would lead to the rescinding of Synod 2022's decision to interpret "unchastity" in the way that it did.

II. Overture

We overture Synod 2023 to rescind Synod 2022's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as including a list of specific behaviors, namely "homosexual sex."

Grounds:

1. There is tension between the following claims: (i) "unchastity" includes gay and lesbian sexual acts; (ii) Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 108 and 109 are equally normative for CRC churches; (iii) "homosexual desire/attraction" is not sinful. The tension arises out of the fact that Q&A 109 explains that unchaste *desire* is included in Q&A 108's condemnation of "all unchastity." Thus, *at least one of claims (i) - (iii) must be rejected*, otherwise the CRC position is incoherent.
2. Ursinus, in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (cited here as "Comm."), is deeply committed to both (i) and (ii). Commenting on Q&A's 108 and 109, he writes: "When one thing is specified, all those are understood which are closely allied or connected with it. Therefore, when adultery is prohibited, as the most shocking and debasing form of lust, we are to understand all other forms of lust as forbidden at the same time" (Comm., p. 590). He then goes on to identify among the various forms of lust "the corrupt inclinations to which good men give no indulgence, but which they resist, and from which they cut off all occasions, so that their consciences are not troubled . . ." (Comm., p. 591). Immediately following this sentence, he calls these sin: "Marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy against these sins" (Comm., p. 591). To be sure, this passage is not talking specifically about homosexual desire, but what it does make clear is that the Ursinian concept of *lust* encompasses not just the objectifying gaze that the HSR characterizes as lust, but *any* inclination or desire contrary to chastity, even those that otherwise "good men" have and do not indulge. Therefore, if Ursinus is treated as authoritative for the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is (iii) above that should be rejected, not (i) or (ii).
3. The view that both (ii) and (iii) above are true is affirmed in the 1973 synodical report on homosexuality and reaffirmed in the HSR. It has been the consistent position of the CRC for almost 50 years. In taking this position, *the CRC has effectively rejected the authority of Ursinus on the interpretation of Q&A's 108 and 109*. Moreover, they are right to do so. Ursinus is clearly a product of his time. In the quotation above, we see Ursinus saying that adultery is "the most shocking and debasing form of lust," which we expect is a claim that even—and maybe especially—the most conservative among us will find implausible at best. More strikingly, we find remarks like these:

   > Fornication takes place when those that are unmarried have connection with each other. Magistrates ought by virtue of their office to punish severely fornication and adultery. God appointed and required capital punishment to be inflicted upon adulterers. And although he did not appoint death as the punishment of fornicators;

> yet, when he frequently declared in his word that no whore should be found among his people, he signified that it should be punished according to its heinousness and aggravated nature.
>
> (Comm., p. 591)

This is perhaps standard fare for the 16th century (though it is worth noting that the Thomistic view on these matters is not nearly so severe); but, despite its reference to Old Testament law, this does not reflect what most of us nowadays would regard as a properly biblical way of dealing with sexual sin. Nor is it how the CRC has thought about sexual sin for at least the past 50 years.

4. There is an obvious resolution here in the quotation from Ursinus about marriage: "Marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy for these sins." Ursinus, of course, thought that marriage was, by definition, a "union between one man and one woman." Then again, Ursinus wasn't the most coherent thinker on the subject of marriage: just one page after saying that "marriage was instituted after the fall as a remedy for [various] sins," he says that marriage "was instituted by God himself in Paradise, before the fall of man" for a variety of purposes, only one of which was that "wanton and wandering lusts might in this way be avoided" (Comm., p. 592). But, in any case, it seems clear that the CRC might have some claim to following the spirit of Ursinus if they resolved the longstanding tension between their position on same-sex relationships and the Heidelberg Catechism by *rescinding* the 2022 interpretation of "unchastity" and recognizing gay marriage as a remedy parallel to heterosexual marriage for "wanton and wandering lusts."

Council of Church of the Savior CRC,
South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 43

Amend the Decision of Synod 2022 regarding the Definition of "Unchastity"

I. Overture

The council of Hope Christian Reformed Church (Oak Forest, Ill.) overtures Synod 2023 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America to amend the decision of Synod 2022 regarding the definition of "unchastity" in Question and Answer 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism. We move that "homosexual sex" be removed from that expanded understanding of "unchastity."

Grounds:

1. Our communion includes a variety of interpretations about how best to love and serve same-sex-attracted people. We came to this diversity of interpretations by biblical study, theological reflection, and living and worshiping with our same-sex-attracted siblings, children, grandchildren, friends, and parents.

   We believe that our unity is found in Christ—not in singular interpretations of Scripture. There have long been interpretive differences within our tradition. We make space for those differences. We give time to unfold and enfold those differences. We come to new understandings of the implications of the gospel by living with those differences. In living with this diversity of interpretations, we trust the leading of the Spirit, the faithful preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments. Those practices make room for changes in practice—even as we grow in faith and grow in the gifts God gives. The decision to change the catechism runs counter to that tradition. By making our differences a matter of confession rather than a matter of interpretation and pastoral care, we effectively shut down ongoing discussion and threaten the unity of the Spirit. We forsake the very gifts that have served us well in the past.

2. In Romans 15, Paul instructs the early church concerning differences of interpretation and practice to refrain from passing judgment, constructing stumbling blocks, and destroying the work of God. He encourages the church to make every effort that leads to peace and mutual edification. He calls on those early believers to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (15:7).

   The elevation of our disagreements about human sexuality to that which "threatens a person's salvation" runs counter to Paul's admonition. The decision of Synod 2022 that this interpretation is embedded in the confessions in such a manner that to believe otherwise is to be "acting like the false church" is damning to our congregation and to those we love and serve. It strikes us as prudent and faithful to follow Paul's guidance on this matter. We try to remove barriers and nurture

a culture of acceptance so that all might know the grace of God expressed in Christ Jesus. Synod's action in 2022 cuts against the grain of those efforts.

3. There is ample evidence that other denominations have not been able to navigate this discussion without splintering into new organizations. Unity is sacrificed at the altar of confessional purity. And yet—even as a theological tradition with a robust commitment to creed and confession—we have long made space for discussion and disagreement and learning from the work of the Spirit in one another. We believe that those historical patterns can continue to serve us well by staying together rather than by separating.

   We recognize that such commitments require a measure of humility and a willingness to remain in communion. We bear witness that the CRCNA has wrestled with issues of race, the baptism of adopted children, divorce and remarriage, the role of women, etc. Those discussions did not lead to irreparable division. The decision of Synod 2022 regarding Q&A 108 mitigates against that tradition of unity and reflection. It is not clear to us why this matter requires such divisive action. Our strength is in belonging to Christ, being signed and sealed by the sacraments, and seeking to follow the way of Christ in this world—not by a singular standard of confessional rigor.

4. Thoughtful, faithful Christians—who study Scripture, seek the Lord's leading, and submit to the will and way of God—live out their faith in different ways. Within our congregation there are pastoral colleagues, lifelong friends, and spouses who have come to different understandings of Scripture's teaching regarding same-sex marriage. This reality is not the result of indifference, inactivity, or ignorance. This reality is not because of activism or following the whims of the world. This reality is not part of a secular scheme or the failure of biblical education. This diversity of interpretation is simply the reality of the long faithful lives of the saints. Therefore, it seems the height of hubris to claim one interpretive position above others.

   The request to amend the decision of Synod 2022 is not to advocate for or to impose another position but to leave the care of those in a same-sex committed relationship in the realm of pastoral care. It is, in fact, to leave Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as a matter of interpretation and not salvation. It is to recognize that we can be united in baptism, worship, mission, and communion without agreeing on all issues of interpretation.

   At Hope CRC, we hold our variety of views in tension, mutual respect, and, at our best, in conversation and prayer. We try to hold all of this in humility, love, and unity in Christ. Conferring "confessional status" on one particular interpretation has proven to be hurtful and divisive. We've lost church members who no longer want to be associated with the CRCNA. We've lost church members who are now emboldened to name the "biblical unfaithfulness" of fellow congregants. Rather than

strengthen congregational life and enhance our gospel witness, the decision of Synod 2022 has distracted and weakened our collective life and witness.

II. Conclusion

Therefore, it is the prayerful and considered request of the council of Hope Christian Reformed Church that the decision of Synod 2022 to include "homosexual sex" in the definition of "unchastity" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 108) be amended and that "homosexual sex" be removed from that definition.

May God bless and build his church.

Council of Hope Christian Reformed Church,
Oak Forest, Illinois
Val Bosscher, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Chicago South but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 44

Remove Definition of "Unchastity" as Part of the Confessional Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108

I. Preamble

On June 15, 2022, the synod of the CRCNA affirmed

> that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status. (Acts of Synod 2022, p. 922)

We, the undersigned, agree that "unchastity" does encompass most of the sexual activities listed, but we do not believe that homosexual sex belongs on the list.

Many of the undersigned have friends or family members that identify as LGBTQ+, and we are very concerned about synod's decision to pronounce this *interpretation* of Q&A 108 to be confessional.

This overture was submitted to Classis Alberta North and was discussed at their March meeting but was not approved to forward to synod from classis. Instead we were encouraged to submit our overture directly to synod.

II. Overture

The undersigned members of Woody Nook Christian Reformed Church overture Synod 2023 that the *definition* of unchastity, as defined in the Human Sexuality Report and affirmed by Synod 2022 to "encompass adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex" be removed as part of the confessional interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.

It is with prayerful consideration and faithful study that we submit this overture.

Grounds:

1. Synod's decision on confessional status is based on their interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which asks, "What does the seventh commandment teach us?" and answers, "That God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage." In the June 2022 decision synod defined "unchastity" to include a list of practices. Synod has not established the reason "unchastity" needed to be defined with a list of sexual practices. Living a chaste or unchaste life is about living a faithful or unfaithful life. Defining "unchastity" solely in terms of sexual practices fails to follow the true

meaning and brilliance behind the Heidelberg Catechism. The catechism focuses on how a grateful life is marked by faithfulness in relationships. Reducing "unchastity" to sexual practices fails to understand what the Heidelberg Catechism is really about and is an unhelpful reduction in exploring the dimensions of faithful relational practice that honors the person created in the image of God.

2. Q&A 108 is in the Gratitude section of the Heidelberg Catechism, in which the Ten Commandments are explained in the context of positive guidelines for living. By focusing on the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108, synod missed the opportunity to focus on the positive and constructive directive to "live decent and chaste lives" in keeping with a life characterized by gratitude.
3. The CRC Church Order, when explaining the Covenant for Officebearers that all pastors, elders, and deacons in the CRC must commit to and agree with, expressly states that "a signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and *is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks* that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines . . ." (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3, emphasis added). We believe that Synod 2022 has made "*references, allusions, and remarks"* about Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 when claiming that it refers to a specific list of sins. They have added their own bias to the definition of "unchastity" (in Q&A 108) and then declared their interpretation as confessional.
4. The process of creating the Human Sexuality Report, which was used to define "unchastity," is lacking the perspective and voices of many theologians and leaders in the Christian Reformed Church that understand human sexuality differently. Alternate interpretations of key texts were not given adequate attention, and conclusions made by the committee were not adequately explained. The Human Sexuality Report, which laid the foundations for synod's interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, is not a comprehensive summary of biblical teachings on human sexuality; therefore, the change to the understanding of "unchastity" should be removed as a confessional interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108.
5. Over time our understanding of how God is faithfully reflected in gender and marriage, and indeed in all relationships, has grown. The deepening of this understanding needs to continue as God reveals himself to us. The cultural context has also changed. Giving confessional status to such an interpretation hinders the willingness to explore biblical wisdom in cultural context.
6. Jesus makes it very clear that the most important part of faithfully reflecting God's grace is *love*. When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is he replies: "The most important one . . . is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and

with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31; cf. Matt. 22:35-40; Luke 10:27-28). Holding on to the confessional status of the interpretation of "unchastity" at this point will alienate many members. It will be very divisive for the denomination, and more importantly would hinder our church's witness of Christ in the world.

By this overture we ask the CRCNA to allow for unity within diversity.

Members of Woody Nook CRC, Lacombe, Alberta

Jarnick Bartels
Lotte Bartels
Hidde Born
Jackie Born
Connie deBoon
Ashley deBoon-Luymes
Klaaske deGroot-deKoning
Edith Dening
Jack Dening
Hans Doef
Jen Doef
Leah Doef
Miriam Doef
Paul Doef
Sid Doornbos
Heather Dreise
Jeremy Dreise
Ryan Drost
Kurt Hoogland
SherryAnn Hoogland
Ron Hulleman
Ed Kraay
Linda Kraay
Malia Kraay
Rachel deKoning Kraay
Reuben Kraay
Herman Laarman
Martha Laarman
Kate Luymes
Darrell Mulder
Karen Mulder
Karissa Prins
Keith Prins
Jack Siebenga
Linda Siebenga
Julie Ten Hove
Carlee Vandekraats
Justin Vandekraats
Erwin Van Haren
Judy Van Haren
Jason Veldhuisen
Melinda Veldhuisen
Kristin Westervelt

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 45

Confessional-Revision Gravamen: Revise Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 by Synod 2022

The council of Inglewood Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta (hereafter "Council"), by this gravamen, makes a specific recommendation for revision of the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 made by Synod 2022, declaring all homosexual sex as unchaste. Such an interpretation is too broad in that it would prohibit sexual relations between committed same-sex marriage partners and thereby exclude them from the blessings and fulfillment of holy matrimony, including its psychological, physical, social, and spiritual benefits. This gravamen requests that the words "homosexual sex" be removed from the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 declared as confessional by Synod 2022.

Grounds:

1. Inglewood Christian Reformed Church is a church within Classis Alberta North of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.
2. Synod 2022 adopted the following (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922):

   > That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

3. Council disagrees with the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as pronounced by Synod 2022, in that Council believes that committed same-sex relationships and marriages are neither inconsistent with the teachings of Scripture nor contemplated unchaste by the Heidelberg Catechism.
4. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession states that God makes himself known in two ways: by the Scriptures and through the study of the universe or creation. Synod's interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism and pronouncement of the confessional status of that interpretation is not well grounded in the divine gift of revelation as manifested in the social sciences. See critiques of the science used in the Human Sexuality Report by Dr. Emily Helder, Pediatric Clinical Neuropsychologist, Professor of Psychology, Calvin University, and by Dr. Linda Naranjo-Hebl, Professor of English, Calvin University at allonebody.org.
5. Furthermore, synod's interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism is grounded in a specific theological interpretation of Scripture as if it were the only possible interpretation of Scripture as pertains to same-sex committed relationships and disallows or discredits other Reformed interpretations of Scripture that would affirm committed same-

sex marriage. By its pronouncement of confessional status on one particular interpretation of Scripture, synod renders those other interpretations untruthful and heretical and condemns those who hold such interpretations. For alternate interpretations of Scripture by Reformed theologians, see "Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage," communicated to Synod 2016 at classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf; and "Response to the Human Sexuality Report to the Synod of 2021" by Dr. Nicholas Woltersdorff (Dec. 2020) at libguides.calvin.edu/ld.php?content_id=59367502.

6. Synod took the extraordinary step of declaring "confessional status" without regard to the consequences for the queer membership of the CRCNA, and particularly to the exclusion of queer confessing members from both full participation in, and the benefits of membership in, the CRCNA.
7. The exclusion of a whole category of Christ-followers has and will continue to cause grave and serious harm to the queer community both within and without the CRCNA and will impoverish the whole church, including the CRCNA.
8. The interpretation of and pronouncement regarding the Heidelberg Catechism puts officebearers who hold a contrary view from the referenced declarations of Synod 2022 outside the teachings of the church.
9. This gravamen does not foreclose different interpretations or viewpoints and is not meant to disrespect various perspectives.

Prayer: That synod adopt the foregoing gravamen.

Council of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
Albert Den Otter, clerk

Note: The foregoing confessional-revision gravamen was adopted by the council of Inglewood Christian Reformed Church, Edmonton, Alberta, on August 22, 2022. This confessional-revision gravamen was not adopted by the classis and therefore comes to synod as an *appeal* of the classis decision, per Church Order Supplement, Article 5, C, 5. Such gravamina will be processed according to Church Order Supplement, Article 30-a, B-C.

OVERTURE 46

Declare that the Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Does Not Have Confessional Status

Having read and reflected on the Human Sexuality Report accepted by Synod 2022, and while recognizing the work put into producing the report, the council of First Christian Reformed Church of Denver, Colorado, nevertheless overtures Synod 2023 to rule and declare that the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 adopted by Synod 2022 does not have confessional status.

Grounds:

1. Declaring the conclusions of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality as "confessional" is harming the unity of First Christian Reformed Church to live and serve together as outlined in our mission statement and stated on First CRC's website:

> We are a family of God, living our faith and growing by joyfully surrendering to Jesus, freely sharing our lives, and humbly embracing the hurting.
>
> **Jesus Lovers**
> As a Christian church, we believe that Jesus Christ is God's greatest gift to the world. We believe that Jesus came to bring abundant life to us and to all of creation, and that he is the only source of true hope and peace. We believe that Jesus redefines our relationships with God and with each other and that a relationship with Jesus is the only way to true meaning and fulfillment. And we believe that growing up to be like Jesus—as individuals and as a community—should be our greatest ambition.
>
> We want our community to be all about Jesus! Whether you already share in this passion for Jesus or would simply like to learn more about him, we welcome you!
>
> **Reformers**
> Like all Christian churches, we are a community that is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. But as a Christian Reformed Church, we have a unique way of speaking about our Christian faith—our own "theological accent."
>
> Our "accent" emphasizes that we serve a very BIG God who has very BIG plans for us and the world he made. Much of this accent is shaped by the work of the 16th-century "Reformers" from whom we take our name.
>
> Like the early Reformers, we proclaim that we belong, in life and in death, to the God who has made himself known to us in Jesus, and that our world belongs to him too. We take comfort in knowing that he continues to hold our lives in his hands and that he alone is

responsible for our salvation. We are also challenged by our belief that he puts his claim on every inch of our lives, and we rejoice because we believe he intends to renew and restore not just our "souls" but his entire Creation.

Family
We believe that Christians are called to live in relationship with other members of the body of Christ. First CRC is one expression of this family.

As a family, we desire to welcome people of all different ages and backgrounds so that we can worship God together, grow in faith together, and serve God and his world together.

2. The weight of confessional status does not allow us to be the loving and inclusive family that we as a congregation feel called to be in our church family and community. We understand that the Human Sexuality Report concludes one view among many concerning human sexuality. But it is not as simple as "the traditional position" versus "the progressive position," and many individuals in the denomination and in our congregation realize human sexuality is more nuanced. The weight of confessional status tells some that they are not welcome. The weight of confessional status has caused several individuals and families, those from both "traditional" and "progressive" positions that differ from the conclusions of the Human Sexuality Report, to leave First CRC. The weight of confessional status also disqualifies many of our current members from eligibility to bear office. The report's conclusions also undercut the efficacy of local conversations and the process of restorative circles by declaring that one point of view "already has confessional status."
3. Removing the confessional status will allow us to move forward in unity with our goal to understand that our primary identity is in Christ, and that being able to disagree in love and respect on issues like same-sex marriage can strengthen our witness for Christ and his kingdom.

Council of First CRC, Denver, Colorado
Karen Waanders, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Rocky Mountain but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 47

Create Local Option to Allow LGBTQ+ Christians to Participate Fully

I. Background

Committed to inclusivity, Fellowship Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, desires to "welcome all who seek to follow Christ to participate as full members in the life of our church. We strive to remain faithful to the promises made at baptism, welcoming and nurturing the faith of all God's children. We seek to build community in the midst of diversity and honour God's greatest commandment—to love one another as Christ loves us" (Fellowship CRC Statement of Inclusion, adopted 2015).

Our commitment to welcome God's children and to invite them to full participation in the life of the church extends to *all*, including "people of all ages, colours, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, ethnic origins, and economic circumstances" (Fellowship CRC Statement of Inclusion). Our church arrived at this statement after several years of common prayer, theological reflection, learning, and discernment, and we communicated the statement to the church visitors of Classis Alberta North in 2015. We have tried to live up to this statement of inclusion, recognizing that we are broken people on a journey of learning who need God's grace, Christ's teaching, and the empowerment of Christ's Spirit.

Our church is convinced that the deliberations over the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) at Synod 2022 and the decision to adopt the corresponding majority report, including the interpretive statement on Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, are at odds with our Christ-inspired commitment to welcome and love all of God's children.

II. Overture

The council of Fellowship Christian Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Create a local option for communities in the CRCNA who wish to allow all LGBTQ+ Christians—either celibate, single, or in committed same-sex relationships—to participate fully in the life of the church, including as officebearers.

B. Correspondingly, remove the phrase "and homosexual sex" from the Synod 2022 decision (copied in italics, below), as it is at odds with a local option.

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography *and homosexual sex*, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*,

p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.
(*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922)

C. Continue to critically and openly engage the Human Sexuality Report that provided the theological framework for synod's deliberations. This, at the very least, will require a more robust minority report written by a committee not bound by the 1973 synodical decision on homosexuality and open to a diversity of Reformed scholarship.

Grounds:

1. While Fellowship CRC is not asking that all churches interpret the Scriptures and Christian tradition as we do, we do ask that our church and others like ours be given the freedom to minister to our community from a foundation of biblical interpretation that does allow for same-sex intimacy within the covenant of marriage. The very existence of a variety of robust biblical and theological arguments for the inclusion of celibate *and* married LGBTQ+ Christians in the church signals that there is not theological or pastoral consensus on this topic. We are asking that the CRCNA recognize that the conclusions of the HSR are but one interpretation of Scripture, allowing for other interpretations. This would give local congregations, like Fellowship CRC, the freedom to be open and affirming of full participation by LGBTQ+ persons in the life and membership of our congregation while still belonging to the covenant community of the CRCNA.

2. Pastoral care and community building with those in the LGBTQ+ community, their families, and their allies, has been severely damaged by the decisions of Synod 2022. Those churches who wish to offer genuine care and welcome to LGBTQ+ Christians must have the local authority to do so with integrity. Though the pastoral care section of the HSR, and the synodical discussion of the majority report at Synod 2022 expressed a desire to be compassionate and welcoming, in the end, this desire seems by many to be incompatible with synod's conclusion that LGBTQ+ people who are not celibate may not participate fully in the life of the church.

3. The HSR did not engage robustly with theological understandings of same-sex relationships that differ from those articulated in the report. A number of prominent Reformed biblical scholars and theologians have provided compelling arguments for the full inclusion of same-sex relationships in the church. The *Classis Grand Rapids Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage* (January 2016) is a helpful summary of just some of these arguments. The HSR relied on a definition of Reformed theology indebted to the notion of "the order of creation," a construct that is not unanimously accepted among Reformed scholars and which is absent in the theology of John Calvin himself. The absence of careful engagement with these arguments and the apparent refusal to engage with differing voices in a spirit of generosity and listening hampered

the discussion of the HSR at Synod 2022 by withholding the full spectrum of Christian wisdom—Reformed and otherwise—on this vital topic.

Council of Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
Robert Bruinsma, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to Classis Alberta North at its winter meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 48

Reverse Synod 2022's Decision to Interpret "Unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism as Including "Homosexual Sex"

We, the council of Church of the Savior CRC, overture Synod 2023 to reverse Synod 2022's decision to interpret the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism as including "homosexual sex."[1]

Ground: This decision effectively makes the Christian Reformed Church's position on homosexuality internally incoherent. It places Report 42 from the Committee to Study Homosexuality[2] (hereafter "the 1973 report") in opposition to Synod 2022's interpretation of Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and Synod 2022's interpretation of Lord's Day 41 in opposition to the 1973 report.[3]

I. Background

The 1973 report makes a distinction between homosexuality (as an orientation) and homosexualism (homosexual activity, that is, engaging in "explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex"[4]).[5] According to the 1973 report, having a homosexual orientation (a condition often or always beyond one's control) is not a sin, while engaging in homosexual activity (i.e., by having homosexual sex) is a sin. This has been an important distinction for the CRC, as it seeks to support people who identify as LGBTQ while not condoning behaviors that Scripture seems to condemn.

The 1973 report acknowledges the difficulty of the same-sex oriented person, who has desires for sexual fulfillment with a person of the same sex but who is unable to have those desires fulfilled in a biblically justifiable way. A handful of quotations will illustrate this point:

> The direction of the homosexual's desires is not to be regarded as merely physical attraction. His desires cover the whole range of the rich interpersonal relations associated with the heterosexual form of sexuality, including love, understanding, friendship, the desire to belong to someone and to develop one's humanity in constant companionship with another human being. What is different for the homosexual is that these feelings are experienced with respect to a person of the same sex. (p. 612)

> The *homosexual*, as constitutionally predisposed to erotic attraction to members of the same sex, bears the disorder of our broken fallen world in his person. (p. 623)

---

[1] *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922.
[2] crcna.org/sites/default/files/1973_report_homosexuality.pdf
[3] In fact, since the decision of the most recent synod takes priority, Synod 2022 overturned Synod 1973 on this matter, all the while purporting to be in agreement with it.
[4] *Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 612.
[5] Ibid., p. 613.

> We must now consider the problem of the homosexual who is in the unhappy dilemma of not being able to marry because of his homosexuality, but at the same time experiences all the desires and drive for sexual fulfillment that brings the heterosexual to marriage. (p. 627)
>
> A homosexual, on the other hand, like almost all human beings, has a need for the fulfillment of sexual relationships. For him not to have sex relations is to be deprived of that which his body craves, a deprivation of which he is constantly aware. He therefore lives in a circle of frustration caused by unfulfilled physical desires and the unfulfilled need for interpersonal love and companionship. (p. 628)
>
> What then do we say to the homosexual who cannot relate to a member of the opposite sex but at the same time is "aflame with passion?" (p. 628)

These representational quotations come from disparate places in the 1973 report, but they all illustrate the same point: the same-sex oriented person has sexual desire for a person of the same sex which cannot be fulfilled. The mind and body desire and crave something that cannot (or at least should not) be had. What is repeatedly made clear in the report, however, is that *the desire is not the sin*.[6] The same-sex oriented person is not culpable for having the desires (a condition he or she may have been born with) but only for acting on them.

Synod 2022, however, has done away with this distinction and has contradicted this position set forth in the 1973 report. It did so by interpreting "unchastity" to include homosexual sex. Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What does the seventh commandment teach us?" Answer: "That God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage." Synod 2022 included "homosexual sex" among a list of things that fall under the description of "unchastity."

The problem enters in when we consider the next question and answer, Q&A 109, which asks, "Does God, in this commandment, forbid only such scandalous sins as adultery?" Answer: "We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. *That is why God forbids all unchaste* actions, looks, talk, *thoughts, or desires,* and whatever may incite someone to them" (emphasis added). If homosexual sex is considered unchaste (as Synod 2022 declared), then by the logic of the Heidelberg Catechism, thoughts about or desires for homosexual sex are also condemned and forbidden.[7] Thus, Synod 2022 has contradicted the

---

[6] Note the distinction between homosexuality as a "condition" (which is throughout the 1973 report associated with attractions and desires) and homosexualism as a "practice" (p. 613), and also the last paragraph on p. 613, which distinguishes between what one is and is not responsible for.

[7] Ursinus makes this point very explicitly: "CHASTITY, in general, is a virtue contributing to the purity of body and soul, agreeing with the will of God, and shunning all lusts prohibited by God, all unlawful intercourse and inordinate copulation in connection with all the desires, causes, effects, suspicions, occasions, &c., which may lead thereto, whether in holy wedlock or in a single life" (*Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*,

1973 report by making even the *desire* for homosexual sex (a necessary and obvious part of a homosexual orientation) forbidden by God.

On Synod 2022's interpretation of the catechism, God forbids and condemns not just homosexual sex (Q&A 108) but also homosexual desire (Q&A 109). In contradiction of the 1973 report, *the desire itself is now a sin*, forbidden by God and condemned along with "all unchastity," whether acted upon (Q&A 108) or desired (Q&A 109).[8] What the 1973 report gave with the right hand, Synod 2022 took away with the left.

The CRC position on homosexuality has become, as of Synod 2022, inconsistent and incoherent. The 1973 report contradicts the decision of Synod 2022, and the decision of Synod 2022 contradicts the 1973 report.[9] Logically speaking, one cannot *both* agree with the 1973 report *and* consider "unchastity" in Q&A 108 to include homosexual sex.[10] For this reason, synod should reverse Synod 2022's decision to interpret the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism to include "homosexual sex."

II. Potential objections

1. "Desire" in Q&A 109 indicates lustful or excessive desire, as opposed to a natural or "normal" desire, or the "cultivating" of desire, as opposed to involuntary desire.

   Answer: The German word in the original text does not carry the connotation of lustful or excessive desire. It means much the same as the English word *desire*, which can be used to indicate desire for positive things, or negative ones, depending on the context. No doubt there is a difference between desires felt involuntarily, and cultivating those desires, but such a distinction is foreign to the catechism, which does not limit or nuance "desire" in any way.

---

p. 921; see monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ursinus/Commentary%20on%20the%20Heidelberg%20Ca%20-%20Zacharias%20Ursinus.pdf). It is abundantly clear that Ursinus intends to condemn both homosexual desire and homosexual sex, over against the 1973 report.

[8] Note the church in California that in May 2022 disaffiliated from the CRC in part over the "sinfulness of desire," concluding that "the [same-sex] attraction (desire) itself is sinful, and not only behaviors arising from it." If they had remained in the CRC another month, they would have found their views very much at home—indeed, now confessional—in the CRC (see thebanner.org/news/2022/05/historic-california-congregation-disaffiliates-from-the-crc).

[9] Given that the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (whose conclusions led to Synod 2022's decision) was supposed to be in agreement with the 1973 report, this overture must of necessity call into question all the recommendations made by that committee. Not only did this committee show itself not to be in agreement with the 1973 report, it went so far as to directly contradict it (all the while claiming to uphold it), and succeeded in overturning the CRC's long-held position on homosexuality that the 1973 report laid out.

[10] At least, not without interpreting Q&A 109 against the grain of its plain meaning and its original intent (see n. 7). No doubt one can invent one's own nuanced reading of the catechism here to bring it into line with the 1973 report, but that is not an intellectually honest solution to the problem.

2. There is a distinction to be made between same-sex "attraction" and same-sex "desire," such that Q&A 109 treats "desire" but not the (mere) "attraction" that is by definition part of a same-sex orientation.

   Answer: Such distinctions fall apart upon scrutiny, based on common sense and common usage of the terms. See, for example, how these terms blur together in the Human Sexuality Report itself: "There is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions" (p. 405); "although Scripture condemns homosexual sex, it does not condemn people who are attracted to the same sex…In the world's eyes it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship" (p. 425). See also the definitions provided in the 1973 report: "Sexuality" is "the desire to give and receive in intimacy . . ." and "homosexuality" is "the condition in which an adult's sexuality is directed to his own sex" (p. 611); a "homosexual" is "an adult who is motivated by a definite preferential erotic attraction to members of the same sex" (p. 613). See also the quote in note 8, where desire and attraction are equated, and distinguished from behavior.

3. Synod 2022 and the HSR claim to uphold the 1973 position. They did not intend to forbid or condemn homosexual desire or attraction, only homosexual sex.

   Answer: Whether or not they intended it, that is in fact what they did. The context of Lord's Day 41 and the progression of Q&A 108 followed by Q&A 109 allow for no other reasonable conclusion.

III. Summary

In summary, the 1973 report laid out a groundbreaking and gracious position. Those who experienced same-sex attraction and desire were assured that they were not under God's condemnation simply for having those attractions and desires; nor was their "condition" somehow forbidden by God; it was only specific actions done by choice that were forbidden. Tragically, Synod 2022 has obliterated this distinction, condemning not only the actions done by choice (Q&A 108) but by logical consequence forbidding even the desires that lie behind them (Q&A 109). It is our heartfelt plea, as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, that we return to the gracious stance of the 1973 report and not be confessionally obligated to hold the position that God condemns and forbids same-sex desire.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC,
South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 49

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B

Classis Grandville overtures synod to adopt the following amendments to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B:

I. Background

The Christian Reformed Church has always held its officebearers to a high theological standard. As a condition for holding office, all CRC officebearers are required to take and abide by the terms of an oath called the Covenant for Officebearers (see Church Order Art. 5). By taking this oath, those elected to serve as officebearers affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). And they promise to "promote and defend [these] doctrines faithfully" (Supplement, Art. 5, Covenant for Officebearers).

The CRC has never allowed an officebearer to take exception to any of the doctrines contained in our creeds and confessions. Meeting less than four years after its founding, the CRC's broadest assembly unanimously adopted a resolution requiring all officebearers to "unconditionally sign" the Form of Subscription/Covenant for Officebearers (*Assembly Minutes*, April 5, 1861, Art. 13). In adopting this resolution, the CRC was doing nothing more than following in the footsteps of the great Synod of Dort (1618-19) and of the 1834 *Afscheiding* (see, Godfrey, W. Robert, "Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition" in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription,* ed. David W. Hall [Powder Springs, Ga.: The Covenant Foundation, 2018], pp. 93-104).

Unfortunately, following Synod 2022, the denominational offices published an online document undermining the CRC's official policy regarding confessional subscription. The document is titled "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report" (crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq, accessed Aug. 14, 2022), and it makes two claims that we find deeply problematic.

A. Confessional-difficulty gravamina

First, the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document claims that a council may grant an officebearer an exception to a doctrine contained in the confessions if that officebearer submits to their council a confessional-difficulty gravamen. According to the FAQ document, "A confessional-difficulty gravamen indicates that an officebearer personally has difficulty with something in the confessions or an interpretation of the confessions and wishes to go on record with his or her church council in that regard" (FAQ, Q/A 8). As both the history and text of the Church Order show, however, this understanding of a confessional-difficulty gravamen is incorrect.

As an official Church Order category, confessional-difficulty gravamina did not exist until Synod 1976. Prior to that synod, many churches simply

assumed that if an officebearer had some "difficulty" with a confession, the only way for that officebearer to express that "difficulty" was for them to submit a gravamen calling for a *revision* of the confessions. In its report to Synod 1976, however, the Committee to Study Revision of the Form of Subscription rightly challenged this assumption.

According to the study committee, if an officebearer were to come to a "*settled conviction*" that some confessional teaching was wrong, then, of course, that officebearer should submit a gravamen calling for a revision of the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1976,* p. 572). But suppose, the committee argued, an officebearer had not come to such a "settled conviction." Instead, suppose they had merely developed "*serious doubts* about a point of doctrine taught in the confessions" or suppose that they were "*unsure* as to whether or not [some personal belief was compatible] with the church's confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572, emphasis added). In those cases, the committee argued, what is called for is not a revision of the confessions, but rather for the officebearer to have "an open and frank" discussion with their council, "hopefully leading to the removal of [the officebearer's] doubts" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572).

The 1976 advisory committee tasked with helping synod respond to this study committee report agreed with the study committee that there was a significant difference between someone's having, on the one hand, a "settled conviction" or "objection" to the confessions and, on the other hand, their merely having "doubt" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 67). As a result, the advisory committee recommended that Synod 1976 create a new category of gravamina. In those cases when an officebearer has come to a "settled conviction" that the confessions are wrong, the officebearer should submit a "confessional-revision gravamen." However, when an officebearer merely has "doubts" about something in the confessions, the officebearer should submit a "confessional-difficulty gravamen." The aim of this new type of gravamen would be for the church to provide an officebearer with whatever "information and/or clarification of the confession" was needed to resolve their doubts (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

Not only did Synod 1976 adopt this new distinction between "confessional-revision gravamina" and "confessional-difficulty gravamina," they also applied the new distinction to a concrete case. In 1975, Dr. Harry Boer had sent a communication to synod asking synod "to inform him what 'the express testimony of Scripture' [was] for [the doctrine of reprobation]" (*Acts of Synod 1975,* p. 105). Dr. Boer had gone to his consistory and classis with this request, but they had denied his request. In keeping with the common assumption of that day, they believed that Dr. Boer should have submitted his "difficulty" as a request to revise the confession. But this is not what Dr. Boer thought was needed. In a personal interview with the study committee tasked with examining his communication, Dr. Boer explained that "it [was] not his purpose in his letter to deny or object to the doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons, but to seek only the express testimony of Scripture which the Canons assert is available" (*Acts of Synod 1976,* p. 623). In other words, Dr. Boer was not "objecting" to the

doctrine of reprobation as taught in the Canons; nor did he have a "settled conviction" that the Canons were wrong. He simply had doubts about a point of doctrine and wanted the church to help him to resolve them.

Synod 1976 responded to Dr. Boer's request in two ways. First, they decided to classify Dr. Boer's communication as a "confessional-difficulty gravamen." This made Dr. Boer's communication the first-ever confessional-difficulty gravamen in CRC history. Second, they established a special committee to meet with Dr. Boer to help him resolve his doubts. Unfortunately, before the committee had a chance to meet with him, Dr. Boer had come to the conclusion that the strength of his views required him to call for a confessional revision.

Synod 1976's handling of this first-ever confessional-difficulty gravamen shows that it did not understand the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a way for someone, like Dr. Boer, to take exception to a doctrine in our confessions. Instead, Synod 1976 understood confessional-difficulty gravamina as a personal request for help in resolving their doubts. And the way a council, classis, or synod was to do that was by providing the officebearer with the "information and/or clarification" of the confessions (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church's creeds and confessions.

Why, then, does the FAQ document claim that a council can grant an exception to the confessions? We have heard two arguments. The first argument is that this interpretation merely reflects how some churches have used confessional-difficulty gravamina in the past. Apparently, some officebearers have used this type of gravamen in order to avoid having to agree with infant baptism, limited atonement, and the doctrine of reprobation (among other doctrines). But let us be clear: this is an illegitimate use of the Church Order. And the fact that some councils have misused the Church Order in this way is no justification for the denominational offices to hold up that misuse as something for other councils and classes to copy.

Second, we have heard that this interpretation is implied by Supplement, Art. 5, B, 1. According to this regulation, when it comes to "the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen: . . . ministers . . . elders, or deacons shall submit their 'difficulties' to their councils for examination and judgment." According to the denominational offices, the word "judgment" in this regulation implies that the council must decide whether to "accept" an officebearer's difficulty (i.e., grant them an exception) or to place that officebearer under discipline.

The primary problem with this argument is that it assumes what needs to be proven. That is, the only way that the FAQ's interpretation of the word "judgment" can mean what they say it means is if we start with the assumption that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a way for an officebearer to take an exception to the confessions. But this assumption is precisely what the denominational offices need to prove!

Instead, given both the text and history of the Supplement, the word "judgment" in this regulation is best interpreted as merely referring to the fact that a council must judge how to handle an officebearer's proposed "difficulty." Perhaps the council may "judge" that the officebearer has misunderstood what subscription requires. Or perhaps the council may judge that the officebearer's "difficulty" is actually compatible with the confessions. Or perhaps the council may judge that there is a conflict between what the officebearer now thinks and what the confession says. Or perhaps they may judge that they need to send the gravamen to classis. In short, there are all kinds of "judgments" that a council might need to make in processing a confessional-difficulty gravamen.

The second problem with this argument is that it assumes that, short of granting an exception, the only other course of action a council can take is to put an officebearer under special discipline. But this is clearly false. As the Church Order says, "this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed" (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). In other words, having examined and judged the nature of the "difficulty" facing the officebearer, the council, classis, or synod is to deal with the officebearer "pastorally and personally," providing them with whatever "information and/or clarification" may be needed to resolve their doubts or uncertainties (Church Order Art. 5, B, 2; *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572). And even if the council, classis, or synod cannot provide what is needed to resolve those doubts, special discipline is still not the next natural course of action. In that case, the assembly should require the officebearer to submit a confessional-revision gravamen so that the entire denomination may examine and judge the issue.

In addition to the textual and historical problems facing the FAQ's interpretation of confessional-difficulty gravamina, we would also point out that the FAQ's interpretation would require councils to have authority to amend the Covenant for Officebearers. The Covenant for Officebearers requires subscribers to affirm all the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions as being doctrines that "fully agree with the Word of God." It also requires officebearers to declare that they "heartily believe" these doctrines and "will promote and defend [these] doctrines faithfully, conforming [their] preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them." Someone who takes an exception to the confessions cannot make those affirmations. Accordingly, in order for a council to grant an exception, they would need to amend the terms of the Covenant for Officebearers. That is, they would need to revise the covenant so that it read that the officebearer affirmed the doctrines in the confessions *in so far as* they agreed with the Word of God. Otherwise, by signing the Covenant for Officebearers, the officebearer would be committing perjury. But councils do not have authority to revise the Covenant for Officebearers. Therefore they do not have authority to grant exceptions to a doctrine contained in the creeds and confessions.

B. Delegating those with "exceptions" to classis and synod

The second problematic claim that the FAQ document makes is that an officebearer who objects to a doctrine in the confessions may be delegated to classis and synod provided that that officebearer's council has granted them an exception. According to the FAQ, "Those who have filed gravamina which have been accepted by their councils would be considered officebearers in good standing and therefore eligible to serve as delegates to the broader assemblies" (FAQ, Q/A 16).

The most pressing problem with this claim is that it encourages officebearers to violate the third and ninth commandments. When a person is delegated to classis or synod, they are required to retake their oath of office. At classis, this oath is the Covenant for Officebearers; at synod, it is the Public Declaration of Agreement. In both cases, the oaths require officebearers to "heartily believe" and affirm all the doctrines contained in the CRC's creeds and confessions as being doctrines that "fully agree with the Word of God." Obviously, an officebearer who has been granted an "exception" to the creeds and confessions cannot take those oaths. Accordingly, for a council or classis to delegate an officebearer to classis or synod whom they know cannot honestly take these oaths is for that council or classis to encourage that officebearer to blaspheme God's name and to commit perjury.

Furthermore, if allowed to stand, the FAQ's claim would undermine trust among CRC officebearers and churches. As a confessional church, the basic assumption of our assemblies is that "the doctrines contained in the confessions of [our] church fully agree with the Word of God" (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 1) and, therefore, that every delegate "affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). This is why, on their classical credentials form, synod requires every council to "testify that [their] council faithfully adheres to the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church . . ." (Supplement, Art. 41; see, *Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 55-63). And it is also why classes authorize their synodical delegates "to take part in all deliberations and transactions of synod" in so far as those transactions are "in agreement with the Word of God according to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church . . ." (Credentials for Synod Form; crcna.org/classis/stated-clerks/resources-stated-clerks/synod-delegates-overtures-communications). The FAQ's claim would undermine these basic confessional assumptions. And, consequently, delegates from one church or classes would now be justified in wondering whether their fellow delegates agree with them in doctrine and life.

Finally, if permitted to stand, the FAQ's claim would undermine the CRC's commitment to confessionalism. It would mean that an entire council could grant itself an exception to some doctrine or confessional interpretation and the council would never have to inform either its congregation or its classis. In fact, the Church Order *requires* that "in all instances of

confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church . . ." (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2). This means that entire councils and, possibly, an entire classis, could take exception to infant baptism, limited atonement, or the doctrine of reprobation, among other doctrines, and synod would not be permitted to discuss it!

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Grandville overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Amend the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B by adding the following regulations:

   3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber's "doubts" about a doctrine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber's "settled conviction" that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

      Grounds:

      a. Past synodical decisions, the Church Order, and the Covenant for Officebearers all assume and require unconditional subscription to our creeds and confessions (see Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1; C, 1).

      b. When it crafted the Supplement to Article 5, Synod 1976 did not understand confessional-difficulty gravamina as providing a way for officebearers to take exception to the doctrines contained in our confessions.

      c. To permit a council or classis to grant exceptions to the creeds and confessions would imply that councils and classes have authority to amend the Covenant for Officebearers. They do not have this authority.

   4. A subscriber who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen may not be delegated to classis or synod until they can reaffirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. This shall be done by requiring the subscriber to re-sign the Covenant for Officebearers.

      Grounds:

      a. Delegating officebearers to classis and synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for Officebearers is to encourage them to violate the third and ninth commandments.

      b. Delegating officebearers to classis or synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for

Officebearers undermines trust and unity among officebearers, churches, and classes.

c. Delegating officebearers to classis and synod who cannot honestly affirm their unreserved agreement with the Covenant for Officebearers undermines the CRC's confessional integrity.

d. "All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers" (Church Order Art. 5).

e. "The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1).

B. Instruct the general secretary to correct the guidance given on the denominational website regarding confessional-difficulty gravamina so that it accords with the decisions of Synod 2023.

Ground: The advice to the churches on the denominational website has resulted in confusion and errors within councils and classes on matters that are fundamental to the good order and values of the CRC.

C. Instruct the general secretary to send a letter to every council (a) explaining that a mistake was made in the original online advice given to churches and (b) informing them of the decisions of Synod 2023 with regard to confessional-difficulty gravamina.

Grounds:

1. The advice to the churches on the denominational website has resulted in confusion and errors within councils and classes on matters that are fundamental to the good order and values of the CRC.
2. Sending a letter to every council will better ensure that councils and classes are aware of Synod 2023's decisions regarding confessional-difficulty gravamina.

Classis Grandville
Daniel B. Mouw, stated clerk

OVERTURE 50

Establish a Time of Discipleship for Officebearers with a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Introduction

Classis North Cascades is concerned about the recent usage of the gravamen process among faculty at Calvin University and among members of the Council of Delegates. We are concerned that the gravamen process is being utilized to reject or seek a personal exemption from the declarations of Synod 2022 regarding human sexuality as taught and understood by the Reformed churches for five centuries. This is not the intent of the process. To rightly understand its intended use, some historical background is in order.

II. Background

In 1914 the Church Order clearly declared, "The ministers of the Word of God and likewise the professors of theology (which also behooves the other professors and school teachers) shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity—namely, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, and the ministers of the Word who refuse to do so shall *de facto* be suspended from their office by the Consistory or Classis until they shall have given a full statement, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office" (Art. 53). Article 80 then goes on to state that "false doctrine or heresy, public schism . . . adultery, fornication . . . would be considered worthy of excommunication."[1] Thus the foundation of the gravamen was to give a statement for a differing view, that if judged inconsistent with the Three Forms would lead to deposition.

In 1965, the synod adopted a new form of Church Order that is the basis of the order currently in use. Its version of Article 5 stated, "All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by consistorial, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Form of Subscription."[2] In adopting the new Church Order and a new Form of Subscription in 1965, for the first time synod made a way for officebearers to reveal

> . . . difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines . . . to the consistory, classis, and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal of being by that very fact suspended from our office.
>
> And further, if at any time the consistory, classis, or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity

[1] Schaver, J.L. "Christian Reformed Church Order" in *The Polity of the Churches*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1937, 1947 ed.), pp. 50-51, 55-56.
[2] Spaan, H. *Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1968), p. 12.

> of doctrine, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the National Synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition . . . and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed."[3]

It is noteworthy that the Church Order of 1965 also recognized that violations of the Form of Subscription, as well as deviations from sound doctrine, were worthy of special discipline (Art. 89).[4]

Synod 1976 was the first synod to adopt the two types of gravamina which exist in our modern Church Order—the *confessional-difficulty* and the *confessional-revision*.[5] That synod rightly understood that not all "difficulties and different sentiments" are a call to revise the church's confessions but that sometimes these are requests for discipleship and further instruction. But what must be remembered is that in the case of a confessional-revision gravamen, if a council approves it, then it becomes an overture to the classis, and if classis approves the overture, then it automatically becomes an overture to the synod.[6] Thus the synod clearly sought to ensure that doctrinal uniformity and consistency were maintained within the denomination, while also providing a way for continued discipleship of officebearers with significant questions.

In 1988, however, the synod made a subtle but important change to the Form of Subscription. Whereas in 1965 the Form called on officebearers to reveal their difficulties or different sentiments to "the consistory, classis, and synod," in 1988, these difficulties or differing views are to be disclosed "to the council, classis, or synod for examination." The change from "and synod" to "or synod" created a situation where gravamen could be adjudicated independently and did not require disclosure to all governing assemblies. The purpose of adjudicating gravamen appears to have been twofold. First, to grant officebearers an ability to seek genuine help in doctrinal understanding should such struggles arise. And second, to "maintain unity and purity in doctrine."[7] With this subtle change it appears the churches only envisioned *confessional-difficulty gravamina* being brought forth and therefore opened up a loophole in which a *confessional-revision gravamen* could be approved at one church assembly without automatically being presented to the next broader assembly. The synod forgot the wisdom of Synod 1976's instruction that if approved, the next broader assembly must then decide upon it. Thus, the unity and purity of the church's doctrine could be challenged locally without a proper check and balance. The seed of congregationalism and individualism was sown.

---

[3] Spaan, pp. 34-35.
[4] Spaan, p. 30.
[5] *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 66-70 (Art. 64).
[6] *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 69 (Art. 64, C, 3, c, 2-3. This is inferred from the explicit statement that if "the gravamen is *adopted* by the consistory and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies. . . ."
[7] Form of Subscription, *Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 530-31.

When the most recent form of subscription was ratified by Synod 2012, known as the Covenant for Officebearers, this entire provision was replaced with "We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. . . . Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority." This wording incorporates allusions to both gravamina. The confessional-difficulty gravamen seems to be addressed in the phraseology about presenting or receiving confessional difficulties. This is a call for discipleship and growth as iron sharpens iron. The confessional-revision gravamen appears to be discussed with reference to the Church Order. But underlying all of it is a call to submit to the broader body of Christ.

This brings one to the present version of the Church Order (2022). Church Order Article 5 and its supplements deal with subscription and gravamina. It is important to remember that "no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in."[8] Supplement, Article 5, B, 2 reminds the church that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is for "information and/or clarification," not as a way for individuals to take exception to the confessions or to synod's pronouncements related to them. Supplement, Article 5, C, 1 reminds the church that in a confessional-revision gravamen the "burden of proof . . . rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions." Simply saying "I disagree with synod's decision(s)" is not enough. Proof that the affirmation of the church is wrong and in violation of the Word of God is needed.

However, the supplement to Article 5 reclaimed the wisdom of Synod 1976 by causing the approval of a confessional-revision gravamen by one assembly to become an overture to the next broader assembly (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 3), and such approvals do not become binding until the synod adopts the gravamen revisions (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 6).

All of this background sets the stage for what follows: Gravamen are not new. But their usage appears to be on the increase. As Henry DeMoor noted in the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, "In our tradition the submission of formal gravamina is rare. Aside from Boer's challenge, the only other notable statement of difficulty with the creeds was that of Dr. Dietrich H. Kromminga."[9] These occurred in 1976 and 1947, respectively. However, following Synod 2022, *The Banner* reported on October

---

[8] Church Order 2022, Supplement, Article 5, A, 3.
[9] DeMoor, Henry. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2020), p. 48.

19, 2022, that eight requests for exception had been sought by members of the Council of Delegates.[10]

On November 1, 2022, the Calvin *Chimes* reported that the Calvin University Board of Trustees "retained all faculty in the 'pioneer cohort'—a group of faculty who were the first to file statements of confessional difficulty in response to decisions made at synod in June."[11] And later in the article it is reported that "about a dozen faculty filed gravamina." This makes for close to 20 gravamina in less than a year when the entire history of the denomination considers this rare and the manuals and commentaries account for only two instances.

In addition, following Synod 2022, the denominational staff published a listing of "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report."[12] In this resource, *gravamen* and its plural, *gravamina*, are mentioned 63 times discussing the two kinds of gravamina, who has the right to decide upon them, and numerous other things. It is important to realize that no other resource has been published following other synodical decisions that inform officebearers on how to get around a synodical decision. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the FAQ document explicitly tells officebearers that if a local congregation accepts their gravamen, then it need not be disclosed to broader assemblies.[13] While technically true for a *confessional-difficulty gravamen*, this is not true of a *confessional-revision gravamen*. The FAQ page distorted the Church Order instructions.

In summary, confessional-difficulty gravamina were never intended to be long-standing, perpetual ways for an individual to take exception to a doctrine or teaching of the church confessions. These were meant to clear up confusion and bring clarity to an individual concerning the teaching of the church. To persist with a confessional-difficulty gravamen is to deny the corporate nature of one's faith and to fail to submit to the church or to hide the real intent of one's gravamen, which is to seek confessional revision. If it is the former, then discipline is in order; if it is the latter, then clarity and instruction are needed so that the church can properly address the situation. Therefore, Classis North Cascades submits the following overture.

III. Overture

Classis North Cascades overtures synod to establish a one-year time frame for discipling officebearers, faculty, and staff members within our churches, institutions, and agencies who have filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen related to Synod 2022's decisions regarding the confessional nature of pronouncements in the Human Sexuality Report.

---

[10] thebanner.org/news/2022/10/requesting-an-exception-to-synod-2022s-human-sexuality-decisions

[11] calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/

[12] crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq

[13] See crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq, Question 16.

That this may be implemented in an orderly fashion, the following points should also be noted:

A. The assembly or board that receives the confessional-difficulty gravamen will establish proper mentoring and pastoral care for each officebearer's unique situation.

B. The one-year time frame will begin from the date of the gravamen's filing or the date of synod's approval of this overture, whichever is later.

C. If at the end of the one-year discipleship period, any officebearer continues to express difficulty with synod's decisions, either (1) the officebearer will file a confessional-revision gravamen, which will be heard by synod, or (2) the service, ministry, or job of said officebearer, faculty, or staff in the church, seminary, or university will be ended honorably based on an inability to affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1).

Grounds:

1. This is a compassionate way forward; it allows time for prayerful study and reflection but also places an end to any independent or congregational spirit that may be lurking in our midst.
2. This upholds the historic and recently reaffirmed understanding of human sexuality by Synod 2022.
3. This is consistent with what Church Order Article 29 clearly declares: "The decisions of the assemblies shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order."
4. This preserves the unity of the church and the church's doctrine and protects the church from independentism and congregationalism as David Engelhard and Leonard Hofman declared in the 2001 *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*: "The intent of Article 29 is clearly to protect the unity of the church and denominational integrity as over against independentism and congregationalism."[14]
5. This is a discipleship-based approach.
    a. If an officebearer, faculty, or staff member has difficulty with the decision of Synod 2022, then every assembly needs to engage in intentional prayer and discipleship of these officebearers to bring them back to a faithful and consistent confession.
    b. Simply approving a confessional-difficulty gravamen without any discipleship is a failure of the church to exercise her ministry and leads to independentism or congregationalism.

[14] Engelhard, David H., and Leonard J. Hofman, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 2001 revision (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 2001), p. 174.

6. This reiterates the binding nature of the confessions and the decisions of synod and will lead officebearers to clarify whether a confessional difficulty exists or if what was truly sought was a confessional revision, which the entire church must decide upon per the supplement to Church Order Article 5.

Classis North Cascades
J. Scott Roberts, stated clerk

OVERTURE 51

Hold Officebearers to Biblical and Confessional Standards

I. Preamble

Every day we struggle with the sin in our lives. We also struggle to humbly uphold the standard to which our King has called us. Our God and King hates sin, yet he has graciously set us free from a yoke of slavery to sin. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). As a denomination we have clearly recognized sin in the various forms that adultery and unchastity take (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922); yet we have many in our corner of the church who refuse to recognize this in their life and ministry. There are also those who seek to publicly teach according to the standard that we as a body have agreed upon while privately modeling and teaching a different standard. Just as all of Scripture is singular in its witness for Christ, our lives should seek to be uniform in proclaiming our fallenness and God's gracious work in Jesus Christ and his kingdom as witnessed by all of Scripture. We lie if we say we can teach one standard in one sphere of life and another standard in a different sphere of life.

There are many in our denomination and denominational bodies, agencies, and ministries who are seeking exception from the recognition of sin that we as a body have agreed upon in the synodical decision of 2022. They seek this exception by way of a confessional-difficulty gravamen, which is not designed as a route for exception but as a route for clarifying or being corrected in one's beliefs in line with Scripture and the church's confessions. Brothers and sisters, if we continue to allow this practice, we will surely become a hollow edifice that is the church in name only, as surely as if we wish one another food and shelter and do not provide it (James 2:14-17). If we do not call each other to seek after the standard Christ has set for us, then we have given up the race and have allowed each other to fall into sin rather than encouraging, refining, and building one another up. If we cease to fight the good fight, we no longer recognize God's sanctifying grace over every sin in our lives. It is a sad sign of the state of the practice of discipline in our denomination when we allow such clear standards of Scripture to be easily overlooked for so long, thus fostering great pain in those who need such large correction. It is better to

work the practice of discipline when the error is small and easily corrected.

Are we so bad at holding each other to the standard of our highest authority, Scripture, that we fear both giving and receiving discipline—no longer seeking it in our own lives and ministries and in the lives and ministries of others?

II. Background

The work of Synod 2022 maintained a faithful, biblical foundation in recognizing once again several areas of sexual sin that violate the seventh commandment and constitute lust. This work aids us in seeking the model Christ has set, building one another up in faithful discipleship of our Lord, and revealing and confronting one another in our sins. However, some in our denomination have set a stumbling block for many, not in a matter of Christian liberty but in a matter that clearly violates the Spirit of adoption that we have in Christ, our co-heir (Rom. 8:12-18).

After the decisions of Synod 2022, the denominational office provided some FAQ responses that contribute to this stumbling block. Specifically, Question 8 of the FAQ document accurately states that according to Church Order (Supplement, Art. 5), a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a "personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession.'" But the FAQ carries on, indicating that if a church council is "satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand." This is not faithful to the signing of the Covenant of Officebearers in that it allows officers to sign the covenant while holding beliefs in direct conflict with those laid out by our standards. Confessional-difficulty gravamina are not designed to stand as declarations of exception but are a means by which the officer can seek personal correction or personal clarification to match Scripture and our confessions. A gravamen is an action item, not a note to be recognized or let stand.

This kind of behavior allowed for in Question 8 of the FAQ has already occurred within our body. An online *Banner* article from October 19, 2022, explained that the Council of Delegates voted to allow its executive committee to grant exceptions to the Statement of Agreement. Also, an article from the Calvin University *Chimes* from November 1, 2022, explains that the Calvin University Board of Trustees voted to permit gravamina from faculty to stand on this matter. This practice violates the signing of the Covenant of Officebearers, or in the case of university faculty, the similar Covenant of Faculty, by undermining the commitment to uphold the standards of Scripture as witnessed to and explained by the confessions.

III. Goal

With this overture it is our goal that the church can maintain a consistent witness regarding the definition of sin in our lives and with this consistent standard pursue faithfully the sanctification in the Holy Spirit that God is so graciously giving us.

IV. Overture

Classis Northcentral Iowa overtures Synod 2023 to take the following actions:

A. Inform all councils, classes, agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities, that they are not to let stand gravamina from officebearers that register exceptions to the beliefs of our denomination.

B. Develop a concrete course of action for judging confessional-difficulty gravamina from officebearers, including a proposed timeline for the inclusion or rejection of the candidate or appointee into ministry on the basis of their conforming to confessional standards such that the issue addressed in the gravamen is settled.

C. Inform the classes and future synods of the CRCNA that nominees and appointees to the agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other bodies of the CRCNA must agree in full with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA and may not take exception to them and shall not currently have a confessional-difficulty gravamen under the discernment of their governing council, board, or supervisory body.

Grounds:

1. Members of the church should not use instruments of church polity as a workaround of the faithfully held beliefs of the church. Confessional-difficulty gravamina are designed not as a means of exception to doctrine but a means of discipleship for officebearers and of maintaining scripturally founded confessions.
2. Because gravamina are only part of a process, there needs to be a well-defined follow-up for the filing of a gravamen. At the local council level, this can be built up as part of the officer candidate training and approval process with any difficulties addressed before the individual is called into service. On the classical or synodical level, if the one bringing the gravamen is already an officebearer, a time limit and definite decision need to be defined so that the matter can be judged in a timely and concise manner rather than being let to stand indefinitely.
3. Appointing to offices, boards, committees, and councils only those who are able to agree with our doctrines and beliefs will aid in maintaining a consistent witness throughout our denomination. The officebearer who develops a difficulty while in office is wholeheartedly invited to submit a confessional-difficulty gravamen in order to develop discernment and judgment on any element of our beliefs which may be unscriptural or which the officebearer needs aid in understanding or living in submission to.

V. Conclusion

This difficulty our denomination is currently working through reflects the work of the prophet Nehemiah. While God used him mightily to contribute to the revitalization of Jerusalem, the place where God's name dwells

and his reign is represented, Nehemiah still had to work to reform God's people according to Scripture a second time. We as Christians are constantly forgetting the pleasant lines God has given us to live within and regularly need to seek correction and formation according to God's Word. We need to humbly seek to give and receive this correction throughout all of the life and body of the church.

Classis Northcentral Iowa
Steven J. Mulder, stated clerk

OVERTURE 52

Require the Council of Neland Avenue CRC to Comply with the Decision of Synod 2022 or Come Under Church Discipline

I. Background

Synod 2022 affirmed that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment"; in so doing, synod declared this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession," meaning "this interpretation has confessional status" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922).

In accordance with this affirmation, Synod 2022 instructed Neland Avenue CRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan, "to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying this deacon's current term" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 926).

Despite receiving this instruction, Neland Avenue CRC has chosen not to rescind its decision. Instead, the Neland Avenue CRC council "unanimously voted to appeal the synod's injunction to remove the deacon" (*The Banner*, "Neland Avenue CRC to Appeal Denomination's Order," June 30, 2022).

II. Overture

Since Neland Avenue CRC has not rescinded its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying that deacon's current term, and since synod has already decisively settled its biblical and theological commitments on this subject by way of adopting the Human Sexuality Report (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 919), Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Set a specific date before this particular deacon's term expires by which Neland Avenue CRC must comply with the aforementioned ruling of Synod 2022. Synod should do this *only if this deacon is still in office at the time Synod 2023 meets.*

B. Require a letter of repentance from the council of Neland Avenue CRC to the churches of the CRCNA, within which the council acknowledges

that it erred away from the shared standards which bind us together, particularly Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism, and pledges not to repeat this same error in the future. Synod should set a specific date by which Neland Avenue CRC's council must submit this letter.

C. Communicate to Neland Avenue CRC that if their council does not comply with these two instructions (or the second instruction only, if the deacon's term has already expired), synod, with the full cooperation of Classis Grand Rapids East, will set in motion an appropriate process of discipline for the officebearers of Neland Avenue CRC.

Grounds:

1. It is vital to maintain confessional unity in the CRCNA.
2. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to affirm that they will be "formed and governed" by the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort.
3. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to "promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority."
4. "Church discipline for correcting faults" is one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

Classis Georgetown
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

OVERTURE 53

Require Confessional-Revision Gravamina on the Occasion of Clear Disagreement with the Confessions

I. Background

Synod 2022 in its adoption of the Human Sexuality Report provided clear biblical leadership when it comes to matters of sexuality. Synod recognized as already having confessional status the understanding that answer 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism in the word "unchastity" condemns adultery, polyamory, premarital sex, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. There was intense debate and disagreement, however, on the floor of synod regarding homosexual sex, and this disagreement persists within the CRCNA.

In an effort to bring clarity and peace to the situation, the Office of General Secretary produced a document titled "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report." In this document, a Church Order device called a *gravamen* (plural *gravamina*) is brought forward as a way for people to serve in good conscience as officebearers in the CRCNA despite disagreement with a teaching from the confessions. While a confessional-revision gravamen has a public path toward resolution in the Church Order Supplement to Article 5 (either the denomination agrees

with the gravamen and changes the confession, or it does not), the confessional-difficulty gravamen is harder to figure out. In Supplement, Article 5, the confessional-difficulty gravamen is called "a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession," and thus the matter is kept quiet and confidential (Supplement, Art. 5, *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina*, B, 2). The general secretary's document treats the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a way for one to quietly disagree with the confessions on a point of doctrine indefinitely if one's council permits. In answer 8, the document says of the officebearer's council, "If they are satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand" (crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq).

Do gravamina get to "stand" indefinitely? We believe that they do not. Gravamina are to be judged (likely only to allow for information and/or clarification), withdrawn, or adopted as an overture on the way to revising an article in the confessions. The guidelines in Supplement, Article 5 present gravamina as processes that must have resolution. While it is true that the guidelines do not specify what happens if the officebearer continues to have difficulty with a doctrine, the guidelines do state that "the person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms <u>without reservation</u> all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God"; and furthermore "no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in" (*Guidelines,* A, 1, 3). The Covenant for Officebearers clearly aims for unity on the doctrines taught by our creeds and confessions. Gravamina exist to preserve unity in doctrine. The confessional-difficulty gravamen is "a personal request for information and/or clarification" to determine whether or not an officebearer fully understands a point of doctrine or discerns whether or not his or her own views are compatible with the church's teaching on that point. To use the confessional-difficulty gravamen to hide ongoing and determined disagreement as a quiet local option is dishonest and constitutes a violation of the Covenant for Officebearers.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2023 to direct officebearers who disagree with answer 108 in the Heidelberg Catechism (or any other teaching in our creeds and confessions) to employ the confessional-revision gravamen to seek resolution and not the confessional-difficulty gravamen. Also, instruct the Office of General Secretary to amend the "Frequently Asked Questions" document accordingly.

Grounds:

1. We are, and wish to remain, a confessional denomination.
2. The Covenant for Officebearers requires unity in doctrine, and gravamina must be used to achieve that unity, not resist it.

Classis Georgetown
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

OVERTURE 54

Prohibit Exceptions and Gravamina in All Agencies, Ministries, Boards, Broader Assemblies, and Other Entities of the CRCNA

I. Background

For many years there have been discussions and disagreements in the CRCNA over human sexuality, most of which have centered on the issue of homosexual activity. Nevertheless, the denomination's official stance on this issue has remained unchanged since Synod 1973 adopted the position that homosexual practice "is incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Scripture."

In 2016 the report from the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage was considered by synod. Synod 2016 received the majority and minority reports as information but recommended to the churches "the pastoral guidance of the minority report . . . in conversation and in keeping with the synodical decisions of 1973, 1999, and 2002" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 917-18).

Additionally, however, Synod 2016 appointed a new study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20). This committee's work, often referred to as the Human Sexuality Report (HSR), was published in November 2020 and included, among many other things, an affirmation of the CRCNA's long-held position on the matter of homosexual activity. But because of the cancellation of Synod 2021, the report was not addressed officially until Synod 2022.

Synod 2022 took several actions centered on the HSR. These actions included recommending the HSR to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality. In addition, Synod 2022 affirmed that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 "encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment"; in so doing, synod declared this affirmation "'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status" in the CRCNA (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 922).

Following this decision of synod, the Office of General Secretary published an FAQ[1] document addressing the decisions of Synod 2022 regarding human sexuality. In this FAQ, questions 6-11 appear to essentially allow for exceptions to be taken to Synod 2022's decisions through the process of submitting confessional-difficulty gravamina. But then question 12 goes on to say something that appears to contradict this. The FAQ document has resulted in a great deal of confusion, and there remains a lack of clarity in the denomination concerning Synod 2022's decisions and their ramifications.

[1] crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq

For example, the Council of Delegates (COD), at its October 2022 meeting, approved a "process for filing an exception to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA."[2] Similarly, Calvin University's board of trustees decided in October 2022 to retain faculty members who filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen in response to Synod 2022's decisions concerning human sexuality.[3] In addition, some councils and classes are considering confessional-difficulty gravamina as a way to grant exceptions to officers who do not agree with Synod 2022's decisions regarding human sexuality.

II. Overture

Classis Central Plains overtures Synod 2023 to take the following actions:

A. Inform all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA—including, but not limited to, all classes and future synods, the COD, and the boards of trustees, faculties, and staff members of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary—that members of these various bodies of the CRCNA may not register exceptions to the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA but must affirm, without reservation, all the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA; nor may these bodies grant such exceptions to their members.

B. Inform all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA—including, but not limited to, all classes and future synods, the COD, and the boards of trustees, faculties, and staff members of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary—of the following:

    1. Current members of these various bodies of the CRCNA who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina with their local councils must resolve the issue with their councils and/or classes by the end of calendar year 2023 or step down from the denominational body on which they serve.

    2. Future members of these various bodies of the CRCNA who submit confessional-difficulty gravamina with their local councils while already serving on one of these denominational bodies must resolve the issue with their councils and/or classes within six months of filing a gravamen or step down from the denominational body on which they serve.

---

[2] crcna.org/news-and-events/news/council-delegates-meets-0?fbclid=IwAR1PhkGAYuE1e-QH0KFUUqIWfjAUjBoFpb-0rfwBIMvP5M3YpHQ3FP4OzoU

[3] calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/?fbclid=IwAR0Gfwr5bLlzBLU7jGrvKRb2GY_ez_SIpM2ilON6uhCtECzCuDQ8eC5zzDM

3. In the above two situations *resolve* means that those who have filed confessional-difficulty gravamina no longer have the doctrinal difficulty and are able to affirm, without reservation, their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA.
4. No one having an active confessional-difficulty gravamen submitted to their local councils may be appointed to serve on these various bodies of the CRCNA.

C. Require all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA to remove any members of these bodies who cannot or will not affirm, without reservation, their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA in the time periods specified in B, 1 and B, 2 above, and who will not voluntarily remove themselves from the denominational bodies they serve.

D. Inform church councils that if an officer of the church has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen to the council and is serving on an agency, ministry, board, broader assembly, or other entity of the CRCNA, or is being considered for appointment to such a denominational body, the council is required to inform that denominational body of the officer's gravamen, regardless of where the council and the officer are in the process laid out in Church Order Supplement, Article 5.

E. Inform the classes and future synods of the CRCNA that nominees and appointees to all agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA must affirm their full agreement with the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA, may not take any exceptions to these doctrines and beliefs, and must not have a confessional-difficulty gravamen submitted to their local council; rather, they must affirm, without reservation, all the doctrines and beliefs of the CRCNA.

F. Instruct the Office of General Secretary to update the "Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report" to reflect items A-E above.

Grounds:

1. The tradition and polity of the CRCNA does not allow its officers to take exceptions to the doctrines and beliefs of the denomination. By extension, this should not be permitted in any agencies, ministries, boards, broader assemblies, and other entities of the CRCNA.
2. The opening paragraph of the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA reads as follows: "We promise to do this work in obedience to the revealed will of our Lord Jesus Christ *and in full agreement with what the congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America confess.*"[4]

[4] crcna.org/sites/default/files/cod_statement_of_agreement_with_beliefs_of_the_crcna_7-17.pdf (emphasis added)

3. All officers of the CRCNA sign the Covenant for Officebearers—a covenant in which we affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" (Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1).
4. "The decisions of the assemblies shall be considered *settled and binding*, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order" (Church Order, Art. 29, emphasis added).
5. These actions not only address the response of some in the CRCNA to Synod 2022's decisions regarding human sexuality; they also address the dangerous and harmful precedent that is being set by this response. Thus, they serve as a safeguard against similar actions being taken in the future, should there be disagreement with other decisions of the assemblies and/or the doctrines of the church.

Classis Central Plains
Jonathan Spronk, stated clerk

OVERTURE 55

Do Not Accept Confessional Difficulties That Would Allow What the Church Confesses to Be Sin; Officebearers Who Cannot Agree with Our Beliefs Are to Resign or Be Released

I. Background

Synod 2022 set a faithful, biblical foundation by stating that we uphold the confessional belief of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement, and that several areas of sexual sin violate the seventh commandment as well as our confessions. This foundation has helped to teach us to walk alongside of and care for those who struggle with matters of faithful living. The problem is that our work has been hindered by some in our denomination who have distracted us from this mission of concern.

The CRC denominational office has posted an FAQ document in the aftermath of synod's decisions.[1] Question 8 of the FAQ document states that according to Church Order (Supplement, Art. 5), a confessional-difficulty gravamen is a "personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession." However, the FAQ goes on to state that if a church council is "satisfied that the difficulty does not exclude the officebearer, then the gravamen would stand." This point of view is not stated in our Church Order. It means that any officebearer can continue to serve in good standing even though he or she holds personal convictions against what our confessions teach.

This inconsistency between private and public confessional beliefs has occurred in other areas of the CRC as well. For example, the Council of Delegates has voted to allow the council's executive committee to grant exceptions to the Council of Delegates Statement of Agreement.[2] And the Calvin University board has voted to allow gravamina from faculty to stand on this matter.[3]

The acceptance of gravamina in these areas has effectively undermined the commitments made by Synod 2022 and by the Covenant for Officebearers. As a matter of integrity, officebearers make an oath before God and the church that the confessions "fully agree with the Word of God" and that "we heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them."

[1] crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq
[2] thebanner.org/news/2022/10/requesting-an-exception-to-synod-2022s-human-sexuality-decisions
[3] calvinchimes.org/2022/11/01/board-of-trustees-retains-faculty-who-disagree-with-crcna-on-lgbtq-relationships/

II. Overture

To help our denomination carry out the critical ministry of bringing the gospel to those struggling with sin, Classis Illiana overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Inform all assemblies (councils, classes, and future synods) that they are not allowed, under any circumstances, to accept any confessional-difficulty gravamen from officebearers that would allow what the church clearly knows to be sin, or the promotion of sin. This would include the list of sins that Synod 2022 recognized as violations of the seventh commandment. We request that synod make the following clarifying changes to Church Order Supplement, Article 5:

   1. Revise point 1 under "A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers" (italics added):

      1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. *"Without reservation" means that the CRC does not allow any exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.*

   2. Revise point 2 under "B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional difficulty-gravamen" (italics added):

      2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and\or clarification of the confession. *A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not to be used when one has settled convictions or objections to our confessions.* Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.

   Grounds:

   a. The CRC has never allowed exceptions to our confessions but affirms in the Covenant for Officebearers that all the doctrines confessed fully agree with the Word of God.

   b. A gravamen was never meant to allow the acceptance or practice of beliefs contrary to what the church clearly knows to be sin.

   c. A 1976 study committee report that led to these supplemental guidelines said that if an officebearer has "settled convictions" about the confessions, that is a different matter than if one has serious doubts about a point of doctrine. In that case, it "does not call for a gravamen; it calls rather for an open and frank disclosure of his difficulties by an officebearer to his consistory, hopefully leading to the removal of his doubts" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 572).

B. Declare that no confessional difficulties will be accepted in the following instances where Synod 2022's confessional decisions on human sexuality and penal substitutionary atonement may be objected to:

- by synod when delegates agree to the Public Declaration of Agreement
- by the Calvin University board of trustees when faculty have confessional difficulties with the Covenant for Faculty Members
- by the Council of Delegates executive committee when COD members have confessional difficulties with the Statement of Agreement
- in instances where other iterations of the Covenant for Officebearers are to be signed and/or agreed to, such as denominational staff and denominational boards

Ground: The personal beliefs of delegates, COD members, faculty, and staff should remain consistent with their public declaration and teaching on these matters.

C. Declare that if those making these agreements (an officebearer, faculty member, COD member, staff member, or board member) cannot personally agree with our confessional beliefs, including those of penal substitutionary atonement and human sexuality, they are to either request a release from ministry or position from the appropriate body (council, classis, or supervising body), or they are to be suspended and released from their office or position by December 31, 2023.

Ground: In the past synod has upheld the authority over councils or classes with regard to eligibility for office (see Church Order Articles 27-b and 83, *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 323-24; *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 28; *Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771; *Acts of Synod 1994*, p. 520).

D. Request of classes that all ministers who submit their request for release from ministry because of confessional difficulties be released under the status of one honorably released. Synod also encourages churches to follow the guidelines from Pastor-Church Resources for provisions of severance.

Ground: Ministers requesting release should be recognized as acting with honor and integrity.

Classis Illiana
Laryn G. Zoerhof, stated clerk

OVERTURE 56

Call Churches to Repent of Affirming Same-Sex Relationships

I. Background

The Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality concluded that "the church's teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, *already* has confessional status. According to our confessions, the church may never approve or even tolerate any form of sexual immorality, including pornography, polyamory, premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, or homosexual sex. On the contrary, the church must warn its members that those who refuse to repent of these sins—as well as of idolatry, greed, and other such sins—will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11). It must discipline those who refuse to repent of such sins for the sake of their souls (1 Cor. 5-6)."[1]

Synod 2022 affirmed the committee's findings. Synod 2022 adopted this recommendation from the majority report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality: "That synod affirm that 'unchastity' in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In doing so, synod declares this affirmation 'an interpretation of [a] confession' (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status."[2]

All CRC officebearers promise to defend and teach the beliefs articulated in our three Reformed confessions. The Covenant for Officebearers states that "these confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ. Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them."[3]

Multiple CRC congregations have publicly departed from the teaching of our confessions regarding human sexuality. They have signed their names to a list of "affirming" CRC congregations, meaning that they affirm same-sex relationships. They have also provided position statements on human sexuality. A list of these churches and their position statements can be found at allonebody.org.

Seven of these churches explicitly endorse same-sex relationships in their statements. The other four implicitly endorse same-sex relationships by allowing their names on this public list of "affirming" churches.

CRC congregations cannot endorse same-sex relationships in light of the CRC's confessional position that homosexual sex constitutes unchastity.

---

[1] *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 458.
[2] *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922.
[3] Church Order Supplement, Art. 5.

Rather than celebrating, affirming, or welcoming same-sex sexual activity, CRC congregations must call people to repent and embrace Christ for forgiveness and renewal. These churches are not calling members who practice a homosexual lifestyle to repent of their sin and run to Christ for forgiveness and renewal. Instead, they are affirming this sexually immoral lifestyle. They are shepherding members the wrong way on the path of discipleship.

The officebearers at these eleven churches cannot sign the Covenant for Officebearers in good faith. They are not promoting or defending the teaching of the CRCNA's confessions concerning sexual immorality. They are not conforming their preaching, teaching, writing, or serving to the teaching of the confessions concerning sexual immorality. On the contrary, they are publicly affirming what God condemns according to our confessions.

These churches must repent of teaching against sound biblical doctrine. Synod must call them to rescind their public stance affirming same-sex relationships. If they fail to repent, disciplinary action must be taken.

II. Overture

The council of Trinity CRC of Fremont, Michigan, overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Call these eleven churches to repent of and rescind their public affirmations of same-sex relationships: Eastern Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alberta; First CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; First CRC, Toronto, Ontario; Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Loop CRC, Chicago, Illinois; Meadowvale CRC, Mississauga, Ontario; Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Sherman Street CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; The Road Church, Calgary, Alberta; Washington D.C. CRC.

B. Appoint committees *in loco* to meet with these churches in a six-month timeframe to oversee compliance with synod's ruling by rescinding their public affirmations of same-sex relationships. Synod will choose the members of each committee *in loco*. Each committee *in loco* will consist of four pastors from at least two neighboring classes. The committees will enforce synod's ruling and call these churches to repent and return to teaching sound doctrine regarding sexual immorality. If a church fails to rescind their public affirmation of same-sex relationships within six months, the committee *in loco* will recommend that they begin the disaffiliation process. If the church refuses to disaffiliate, the committee *in loco* will bring a recommendation to synod to disaffiliate the church from the CRCNA.

Grounds:

1. These churches are endangering the souls of their members by affirming same-sex relationships and not calling members to repentance.

2. These churches are openly rebelling against the teaching of the confessions on sexual immorality.
3. The officebearers at these churches cannot sign the Covenant for Officebearers in good faith unless they rescind these affirmations of same-sex relationships.

Council of Trinity CRC, Fremont, Michigan
Ron Folkema, clerk

Note: This overture was presented to Classis Muskegon at its February meeting and was tabled.

OVERTURE 57

Require Council of Delegates to Reverse the Process of Members' Taking Exception to the Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA

I. Background

The Council of Delegates (COD) is an ecclesiastical body that provides governance in the interim of synod. The membership of the COD includes one delegate from each of the 49 classes, as well as seven at-large members.

The COD met October 12-14, 2022, and approved a process for delegates to request an exception to the confessions of the CRCNA.[1] When a delegate requests an exception, the council's executive committee will decide whether to grant it, based on the centrality of the belief for which the exception is sought and the member's agreement not to publicly contradict or teach against the synodical position.

The executive committee's decision would be final and be documented in executive session minutes. Public minutes note only the number of exceptions requested and how many were granted or denied. Subsequently, the petitioner would enter their name in the Statement of Agreement signature book with an asterisk next to their name. The written exception would be kept in a confidential file until the member concludes service on the Council of Delegates.

This decision creates a process for exemptions first described in the COD Governance Handbook in February 2019, where individual members of the COD are granted "the privilege of indicating any personal exemptions from specific points contained within the Creeds, Confessions, and Contemporary Testimonies."[2]

Is the intent of this policy to allow a disunity of belief within the COD? It would be illogical to create an exception policy, only to then deny the applicants.

II. Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to require the Council of Delegates to immediately reverse the approval of a process for members of the COD to take exception to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA and call its members to uphold and heartily affirm the CRCNA's confessions by amending the COD Governance Handbook, bringing its exceptions policy into alignment with the CRCNA Church Order, which requires resolution of gravamen issues.

---

[1] Appendix B: Process for Submitting and Addressing Exceptions to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA; COD Minutes, Oct. 12-14, 2022.
[2] COD Governance Handbook, p. 98.

Grounds:

1. The COD executive committee is nowhere in our Church Order granted the authority to allow gravamen or confessional-difficulty exceptions. That power is granted only to councils, classes, and, ultimately, synod.[3]
2. The exceptions process that was laid out is not at all transparent. Classes will not even know if the delegate that represents them in the COD has an exception on file unless the delegate chooses to inform them.
3. This decision is bad for covenantal unity. We are a denomination united not around ethnicity or politics or culture but around a common set of beliefs. Now this would allow for a secret list of representative delegates who do not agree with our common set of beliefs. Of what use then is a covenant? What will then unite our church, if not our beliefs?
4. Granting exceptions to delegates who disagree with the confessions is an illegitimate and incorrect use of Church Order when it comes to gravamen. Synod (our broadest assembly) has made a decision that is binding on all members of the CRCNA. Exceptions (or gravamina) are designed to allow for a process to play out where an individual can express concern regarding a teaching that the CRC holds. But this process must result in one of the following conclusions:
   a. Clarification is provided, resolving the difficulty in the heart of the delegate.
   b. The confession is revised.
   c. The gravamen is denied.

   Notice how in each case there is a resolution to the matter. Our Church Order does not give the possibility for someone to simply "opt out" of believing in certain parts of the confessions. Rather, it lays out a process for handling a difficulty of belief, with a resolution being the result, not a secret list of people who don't believe the same thing as everyone else. This would be completely destructive to covenantal unity, which is a unity of belief.
5. The COD serves synod by providing "governance by means of the authority delegated to it by synod."[4] How can the COD serve synod when it is granting for its own members immunity to the decisions of synod, from which it derives its delegated authority?
6. The COD itself has recognized in the past a lack of authority to act of its own accord. During the COVID-19 pandemic years when synod could not meet, the COD refused to make decisions regarding confessional and disciplinary matters, correctly understanding themselves not to have the proper authority to do so. To quote Paul De Vries, the first chair of the COD, when he addressed Synod 2018: "We have no

[3] CRCNA Church Order, Art. 5.
[4] crcna.org/welcome/governance/council-delegates

authority other than the authority you [synod] give us. . . . The important distinction is that ultimately the authority resides with you. . . . We follow your instruction. When we don't, call us."[5]

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

[5] "Council of Delegates' Authority Comes from Synod," *The Banner*, June 11, 2018.

OVERTURE 58

Clarify the Usage of Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to clarify the usage of confessional-difficulty gravamina by amending the *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina* in Church Order Supplement, Article 5 (as described below), and by declaring that these revisions and clarifications also apply to all previously granted gravamina.

Grounds:

1. In the wake of Synod 2022's decision regarding Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, many CRCNA officebearers, denominational agency employees, and Calvin University professors and board members have utilized the confessional-difficulty gravamen to effectively exempt themselves from the denomination's position on the confessional status of human sexuality.
2. The use of confessional-difficulty gravamina to secretly shield settled personal convictions that are contrary to our confessions eviscerates the *quia* confessional subscription[1] that previous synods have consistently affirmed and shatters any sense of unity within our diverse denomination.
3. Confessional-difficulty gravamina should be a rarely utilized mechanism designed for short-term periods of guided discernment. A confessional-difficulty gravamen should always result in either a resolution of the difficulty, an upgrade to a confessional-revision gravamen, or the resignation of the subscriber from ordained office. If confessional-difficulty gravamina are allowed to remain unresolved, the result is threefold: First, officebearers are allowed to remain in confusion or error of belief; Second, the public witness and oath of the officebearer is a false witness; and Third, the presumed and practiced unity of the church is seriously undermined, on this topic and potentially a host of other beliefs.

Classis Minnkota specifically overtures Synod 2023 to adopt the following changes to the *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina* section of the Church Order supplement (pp. 14-16 of the *Church Order and Its Supplements 2022*) and immediately to implement them in the 2023 session.

The proposed additions to the text of the Supplement are indicated by <u>underlining</u>:

> *Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina*
>
> Synod declares that gravamina fall into at least two basic types:

[1] A *quia* confessional subscription is one that stipulates that the doctrines of our confessions fully agree with the Word of God.

1. A confessional-difficulty gravamen: a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not yet call for a revision of the confessions, and
2. A confessional-revision gravamen: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.

A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers:

   1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
   2. The signatory does not by affirming the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the signatory declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them.
   3. A signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions. However, no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.

B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:

   1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their "difficulties" to their councils for examination and judgment. A confessional-difficulty gravamen may be granted by the council for up to six months in order to give the subscriber the time and resources to resolve the difficulty.

      a. During this discernment period

         1) the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.

         2) both the subscriber and the council have responsibilities:

a) The council shall provide

i. reasonable time and resources for the subscriber to resolve the difficulty.

ii. pastoral support and care to the subscriber.

b) The subscriber

i. will submit a study plan to the council for resolving the confessional difficulty.

ii. will diligently seek to resolve the difficulty, obtaining competent biblical-theological counsel if necessary.

iii. will provide regular updates to the granting council.

iv. shall not accept any ecclesiastical delegations or appointments.

v. shall remain under the supervision of the granting council.

b. If the subscriber resolves the confessional difficulty within the discernment period and is able to affirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God, the gravamen will expire.

c. If the subscriber has not resolved the confessional difficulty within the six-month discernment period, the subscriber may either

1) file for a confessional-revision gravamen as described in section C, or

2) submit to church discipline, as described in Articles 78-81, or

3) resign from office.

2. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.

C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:

1. The basic assumption of the church in requiring affirmation of the Covenant for Officebearers is that the doctrines contained in the confessions of the church fully agree with the Word of God. The burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions.

2. Ministers (including missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their gravamina calling for revision of the confessions to their councils for examination and judgment. Should the council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, classis may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
3. If the gravamen is adopted by the council and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies, and therefore it is open for discussion in the whole church.
4. If the gravamen is rejected by the classis, it may be appealed to synod; and when the constituted synod declares the matter to be legally before it for action, all the signers of the Covenant for Officebearers shall be free to discuss it together with the whole church until adjudicated by synod.
5. Since the subscriber has the right of appeal from the judgment of a council to classis and from classis to synod, the mere fact that the matter is being appealed shall not be a reason for suspending or otherwise disciplining an officebearer, provided other provisions of the Church Order are observed.
6. A revision of the confessions shall not be adopted by synod until the whole church membership has had adequate opportunity to consider it.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 59

Instruct Classes to Begin the Process of Special Discipline

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to instruct Classes Grand Rapids East, Alberta North, Toronto, Northern Illinois, Alberta South/Saskatchewan, and Hackensack to begin the process of special discipline pursuant to Church Order Articles 82 and 83 upon its constituent churches that publicly and proudly proclaim their acceptance of blatant heterodoxy and their willingness to appoint officers (pastors, elders, and deacons) who do not meet the biblical requirements articulated in Church Order Articles 3 and 5.

Grounds:

1. In early February 2023, the All One Body organization (A1B) prominently posted a list of "eleven churches of the CRCNA [that] are on record as welcoming and affirming those who identify as LGBTQIA+." A1B published this list in the hope "that these exemplars will encourage your congregation and provide useful language and supporting rationale for your own affirming stance."[1] By their own admission, A1B applauds the rebellion of these churches and proudly presents them as a model for other churches to sow disunity and disregard for what synod overwhelmingly declared to be sinful (ironically the very next headline on their homepage declares, "The CRC declares same-sex marriage sinful").
2. The statements made by the churches in this document are an egregious and public violation of Church Order Articles 5 (Covenant for Officebearers) and 86 (Church Order must be observed). Their statements are *blatant* in that they are not only published openly and unashamedly but done in such a way as to garner attention to their insubordinate and schismatic stances. Their statements are *heterodox* in that they significantly deviate from the biblical truth our denomination recently labored to determine that our confessions have always articulated.
3. The church is obligated to practice "church discipline for correcting faults" (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). If synod abdicates this role by ignoring this sort of disregard for biblical orthodoxy and confessional fidelity, it will signal that the Christian Reformed Church in North America no longer meets the requirements to be considered a true church.
4. Church Order Article 83 states, "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from

[1] allonebody.org (accessed Feb. 9, 2023).

sound doctrine and godly conduct." The blatant heterodoxy demonstrated by these churches meets all three of the listed requirements for special discipline.

5. Church Order Article 27-b assigns the classis authority over the councils of its constituent churches; therefore synod, which has authority over the classes, must instruct classes to discipline when their churches promote blatant heterodoxy, and hold the classes accountable for exercising discipline.

6. The blatant heterodoxy these churches promote is not the *welcoming* of LGBTQIA+ sinners, for the primary mission of the church is to welcome sinners to repentance and grace. Rather, it is these churches' *affirming* message that people need not repent from unchastity that requires corrective discipline. In addition to our confessional and Church Order obligations, Christ's command to love our neighbors necessitates discipline for churches that continue to mislead hurting imagebearers of God by affirming behaviors and lifestyles deemed sinful by Scripture and our confessions. Such proclamations put people at risk of losing their eternal inheritance (Eph. 5:3-5). It would be the antithesis of loving for synod to turn a blind eye to such teaching and counsel coming from congregations that identify as Christian Reformed.

   The apostle Paul commands us, both individually and corporately as the church, to "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Rom. 16:17-18).

7. As of February 9, A1B's compilation of "LGBTQ+ Affirming Churches in the CRC" includes the following churches:[2]

   Classis Alberta North
   Fellowship CRC

   Classis Alberta South/ Saskatchewan
   The Road Church

   Classis Grand Rapids East
   Eastern Avenue CRC
   First CRC
   Grace CRC
   Neland Avenue CRC
   Sherman Street CRC

   Classis Hackensack
   Washington D.C. CRC

   Classis Northern Illinois
   Loop Church

   Classis Toronto
   First CRC
   Community CRC of Meadowvale

[2] "LGBTQ+ Affirming Churches in the CRC," 20828366-554462298364268771.preview.editmysite.com/uploads/2/0/8/2/20828366/compilation_affirming_church_model_statements__rev.02.08.2023.pdf

It must be noted that the published list was compiled by A1B using information posted on each church's website. Not all of the churches may appreciate being included on this list, and not all of the quotations attributed to these churches contain explicitly sinful affirmations, but rather vague insinuations. Further clarification would be required from each church. To be clear, Classis Minnkota is not requesting that synod discipline these particular congregations, rather we are reminding synod that it has a responsibility to instruct these classes to *begin* the process of special discipline, which would necessarily include proper due diligence and investigation, and to hold the classes accountable for fulfilling this duty.

Classis Minnkota requests that other classes whose constituent churches publicly announce their sinful insubordination subsequent to the filing of this overture be included in synod's instruction.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 60

Amend Church Order to Define Gravamina

I. Purpose of overture

The purpose of this overture is to amend the Church Order to define *gravamina* so that they may not be misused. This misuse will cause serious division. A proper definition will provide unity.

II. Background

In the CRC, gravamina were never intended to be used as a means to disagree with our unified confessional documents. They are merely a means to call "upon the church to justify or revise its confessions" (Supplement, Art. 5, C, 1). They are not a means to disagree with the confessions. This is obvious, since "the person signing the Covenant of Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church" (Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). It is impossible to affirm our confessions without reservation while disagreeing with them (by means of a gravamen or otherwise). Affirming without reservation and disagreeing are contradictory. However, some in the CRCNA are seeking to use gravamina in a way that would be detrimental to the unity of the faith—namely, allowing persons of same-sex activity to become members and officebearers in the CRCNA, though this is not the only way one might use gravamina to undercut unity.

III. Overture

Classis Greater Los Angeles respectfully overtures Synod 2023 to amend the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section B, by adding the following:

3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen (or a confessional-revision gravamen) does not exempt anyone from affirming all of the doctrines contained in the confessions without reservation. Rather, it is an expression to the local governing body of "personal difficulty," not disagreement. As such, the difficulty should attempt to be resolved. If the signatory cannot resolve this difficulty and his or her conscience bars him or her from signing the CRCNA confessional documents without reservation, he or she may not serve as an officebearer in the CRCNA.

Grounds:

1. Gravamina were never intended to allow members or officebearers to disagree with the CRCNA confessional documents.
2. Using gravamina in this way will cause a schism in the CRCNA.
3. Using gravamina in this way will unnecessarily burden the conscience of CRCNA churches who hold to the traditional view on human sexuality.
4. Using gravamina in this way will prevent CRCNA churches from reaching those in the community who expect biblical teaching that presents the traditional view on human sexuality, which was confirmed at Synod 2022.

Classis Greater Los Angeles
Sandi Ornee, stated clerk

OVERTURE 61

Withhold Denominational Funding from Calvin University until Faculty and Staff Adhere to CRCNA Covenantal Standards

I. Background

On October 28, 2022, Calvin University's board of trustees voted to allow faculty members with confessional difficulties on human sexuality to remain in good standing within the institution. The board decision was characterized as "respectful of the university's covenantal partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, consistent with confessional commitment, congruent with existing policies and procedures, supportive of academic freedom, and reflective of constructive engagement."[1]

This has allowed faculty who have filed a gravamen the continued ability to teach, work for, and minister to students, while at the same time allowing those same faculty to hold positions in opposition to our confessions. Furthermore, the board's decision is, in fact, contrary to confessional commitment and negates the authority structure set in place for how a gravamen is to be handled by the institution.

II. Overture

Classis Heartland overtures Synod 2023 to withhold all denominational funding from Calvin University beginning on September 1, 2024, with the provision that the university will be funded after this date upon the full adherence, without exception, to our covenantal standards by all faculty and staff members of Calvin University.

Grounds:

1. Synod 2022 affirmed the Christian Reformed Church's traditional understanding of unchastity as found in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and this understanding has confessional status.[2] This decision was made by the majority of classes at synod, and it is considered "settled and binding."[3] As this is the position of the Christian Reformed Church, the decision made by Calvin University's board of trustees, as outlined above, directly opposes the understanding of the Christian Reformed Church. Therefore, Calvin University can no longer be funded by the Christian Reformed Church because the covenantal relationship shared between the institutions has been severely damaged.
2. The decision by Calvin University's board of trustees is contrary to the position taken by 74 percent of the delegates to synod that represented

[1] crcna.org/news-and-events/news/calvin-board-responds-synod-2022

[2] *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922.

[3] Church Order, Article 29.

much of the denomination.[4] As the action by the board of trustees is incompatible with the Christian Reformed Church, Calvin University and the values and beliefs it holds are no longer representative of the denomination.

3. The Calvin Faculty Handbook states, "Under the authority of Synod, the Church assigns authority for the life of the University to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees, in turn, assigns authority within the University's governance system, in which decisions about personnel and confessional interpretation are assigned to the Professional Status Committee (PSC)."[5] Thus, authority for the registering of a gravamen falls ultimately under the authority of synod. As neither synod nor the Council of Delegates has received or reviewed any gravamen of either the confessional-difficulty nature or the confessional-revision nature, Calvin University has not adhered to the necessary policies and procedures, thereby further illustrating Calvin University's desire to no longer be overseen by the denomination.
4. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is intended to be "a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession."[6] In the case of a confessional-revision gravamen, "the burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions."[7] In both cases, gravamina are intended to bring clarity and/or change our confessions. Calvin University faculty and staff have not used gravamina in this manner but have utilized them merely as a way of showing disagreement with the covenantal standards to which they must subscribe. Calvin University's board of trustees' decision to allow gravamina to be used in this manner further shows Calvin University's opposition to adhere to the Christian Reformed Church's confessional standards.

Classis Heartland
Phillip T. Westra, stated clerk

---

[4] thebanner.org/news/2022/06/synod-2022-upholds-traditional-stance-on-same-sex-relationships

[5] Calvin Faculty Handbook, p. 44, Article 3.5.1.1.

[6] Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 2.

[7] Church Order Supplement, Article 5, C, 1.

OVERTURE 62

Restrict Delegates Who Have Not Signed the Covenant for Officebearers without Exception or Reservation

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to restrict any delegate who has not signed the Covenant for Officebearers without exception or reservation in their local church or classis from being seated or recognized as a delegate at synod.

Grounds:

1. It is impossible to do the work of Christ Jesus as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church if officebearers are not willing to submit their life and doctrine to the clear teaching of God's Word and its summary in our creeds and confessions as agreed on in covenant with one another.
2. It is this covenantal foundation that gives us the wisdom and clarity of the Holy Spirit for any subsequent discussions and decisions made in and for the faithful unity of the body of the church before the face of Christ Jesus, our living head and Savior.
3. This is in accordance with a reasonable interpretation of Church Order Article 5.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 63

Prohibit Officebearers Who Have Submitted Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina from Being Delegated to Higher Governing Bodies

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to prohibit officebearers who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina to their local councils from being delegated to higher governing bodies—namely, classis and synod.

Grounds:

1. A gravamen is always a stated question asking for a clarifying response. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not a declaration of permitted dissent toward the rest of the local body or the broader classical and denominational bodies.
2. For the sake of the integrity of the covenant between officebearers at the classical and synodical levels, those seated at those delegations need to have full assurance that their fellow delegates do not harbor

reservations about the confessions that would threaten their confessional covenant. Likewise, the confessing members of the denomination should have the assurance that those leading and making decisions on behalf of synod (in denominational offices) are fully, and without reservation, committed to the doctrinal standards that form the covenant bond of unity in the denomination.

3. Without confessional covenantal integrity it is impossible to do the work of Christ Jesus as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 64

Remind and Instruct Churches and Institutions about Rules for Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Background

Synod 2022 met, debated, and affirmed most of the recommendations of the Human Sexuality Report. This report provided clear ethical guidance for what constitutes holy and healthy Christian sexual expression. It also gave clear missional guidance and explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those questioning their sexuality or living in sin.

Synod 2022 also reaffirmed the 1973 synodical ruling on homosexualism. Since 1973 the CRC's position has been that homosexualism (homosexual sex) is sinful. Synod also added clarity to the definition of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which asks, "What is God's will for us in the seventh commandment?" ("You shall not commit adultery"—Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). The catechism answers the question by saying, in part, "God condemns all unchastity." Synod 2022 clarified that "unchastity" has always included "adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex"—and that, therefore, this interpretation has always had confessional status.

Since this ruling of synod, some pastors, professors, teachers, and officebearers have filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a dissent or a personal disagreement in an area of the confessions which is submitted to their church's council, or other governing authority for teachers and professors. Our church guidelines do not permit that a council or governing authority simply "accept" these and continue to allow that person to continue to serve at the local level, even if

that person agrees not to publicly teach or advocate against the confessional position. Regardless, there is a concern that this may be happening, and, if this is the case, it is critical to correct this misuse of our guidelines.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Southeast U.S. overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Remind church councils that the filing and acceptance of a confessional-difficulty gravamen does not allow a person to teach or advocate against the confessional position to which they dissent or with which they have a personal disagreement. Any officebearers who do so should be disciplined.

B. Instruct the boards and presidents of both Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary to remove from their position any teacher or professor who files a confessional-difficulty gravamen pertaining to the CRC's position regarding the sin of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, if such teacher of professor, upon receiving information and clarification, does not heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position. Further, any teachers or professors who do not promote and defend this position in their preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living should be removed from their position.

C. Declare that anyone who has filed a confessional-difficulty gravamen shall not be delegated to a broader assembly, including classis and synod until such time as they are able to heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position.

D. Instruct the church councils to remove from their position any minister of the Word or commissioned pastor (together, "ministers") who files a confessional-difficulty gravamen pertaining to the CRC's position regarding the sin of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, if such ministers, upon receiving information and clarification, do not heartily believe, defend, and promote the CRC's position. Further, any ministers who do not promote and defend this position in their preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living should be removed from their position.

Grounds:

1. There is currently a large potential for the misuse of the confessional-difficulty gravamen within our denomination. In a January 18, 2023, *Banner* article, Kathy Smith indicates that "the process of submitting a confessional-difficulty gravamen does not offer a 'local option' . . . There is an expectation that the officebearer will continue to uphold the confession of the church and the interpretations of the confessions." Therefore, the gravamen is not allowed to be used as a method for continuing in a position while holding a disagreement with a confession.

Rather, as Kathy Smith goes on to state, "The guidelines say that a confessional-difficulty gravamen 'is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession.'"

2. The original intention of a gravamen was never meant to be widespread. A July 1, 2022, *Banner* article stated that a gravamen is "exceedingly rare" and indicated that Henry DeMoor noted that the church is not set up to handle large numbers of gravamina, going on to state that it would likely “lead to significant chaos."
3. To not hold our pastors, teachers, and professors firm on our confessional teaching can degrade the upbringing of our covenant children and harm future generations. Therefore, we cannot allow anyone a pulpit or classroom who cannot, in good conscience and in an honest manner, fully defend and promote all of our creeds and confessions. Furthermore, it is not sufficient for any pastor, teacher, or professor to abstain from teaching on certain topics or sections of our creeds or confessions, since our congregations and students need to be instructed on all that is necessary for the edification of the body of Christ.
4. Delegates to classis and synod are required to reaffirm their commitment to the confessions of the church. It is disingenuous for them to publicly affirm their commitments to the confessions at a broader assembly without revealing their reservations. And it is inappropriate that people who harbor significant confessional reservations be granted the right to debate and rule on the very matters about which they harbor reservations, unless they choose to file a confessional-revision gravamen laying out their reservations and asking that the confessions be changed.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

OVERTURE 65

Redistrict the Churches of and Complete the Work of Classis Grand Rapids East

I. Introduction

Synod 2022 received over a dozen overtures and communications related to the covenant-breaking activities of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East (GRE). In response to these many overtures, the advisory committee assigned to digest them came to the floor of synod with a unified report, which was subsequently adopted by more than a two-thirds majority of synod. Synod instructed Neland Avenue CRC to terminate the term of the deacon in question. Synod also formed an *in loco* committee to oversee Neland's compliance and to admonish and bring correction to Classis GRE.

In response to these actions, the Council of Neland Avenue CRC voted to appeal the decision of synod,[1] for which our Church Order gives no right or mechanism. The *in loco* committee has been meeting faithfully and pleading with Neland Ave. CRC and Classis GRE. So far, those efforts have not been met with any public repentance or reform. Instead, some churches in Classis GRE seem to have amplified their defiance, with four congregations now declaring themselves fully "welcoming and affirming."[2] It is stated that they can do so because Classis GRE is a "safe classis" for such positions to be taken in.[3]

At the time of this overture's original adoption, the *in loco* committee's final report is still forthcoming. However, due to the agenda deadlines of both Classis Zeeland and synod, this overture had to proceed before those findings were publicized. We continue to pray for Neland Avenue CRC and Classis GRE, and we long to hear word of their public repentance and restoration, making this whole overture unnecessary. Yet, short of that work of God, we would ask Synod 2023 to consider this overture, as another possible option, alongside that coming report, in response to the actions of Classis GRE.

II. Biblical and confessional foundation

In Galatians 6:1-2, God's Word gives us guidance on how we are to rescue those caught in sin: "If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the

---

[1] religionnews.com/2022/06/29/grand-rapids-church-wont-remove-gay-deacon-votes-to-appeal-denominations-order/

[2] As stated by retired Classis GRE minister Rev. Thea Leunk (currently serving as regional pastor for GRE), in the All One Body video *Responding to Synod 2022—How Can Churches Respond?* on YouTube, Oct. 7, 2022 (youtube.com/watch?v=E0B11mDBVL0), time stamp 17:35ff. See Eastern Avenue CRC's declaration of affirmation at eacrc.org/our-affirmations-nuestras-afirmaciones or Sherman Street CRC's statement of inclusion at shermanstreetchurch.org.

[3] Leunk, time stamp 18:40ff.

law of Christ" (ESV). From this text we see the mutual accountability and responsibility we hold toward one another within the body of Christ. Yet God's Word also warns of the infectious nature of sin. It warns that those who bring correction must watch themselves, that they not be tempted to either fall into the same trap or the trap of pride, thinking they are any better than the one entrapped by sin. As the faithful saying warns, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Similarly, Article 28 of the Belgic Confession states that all are duty-bound to join the church, and "unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body." Christians are accountable to one another! Just as believers should be united and submit, as members of one body, so also churches, in covenant with one another, should remain submissive and united.

The Christian Reformed Church has been and continues to be a confessional church from its founding, as expressed by our current Covenant for Officebearers. When we make these vows to God and one another, we are declaring and affirming that our confessions fully agree with the Word of God. When the issue of homosexual sex and relationships came to Synod 2016, synod commissioned a committee (the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality) and charged that committee with determining if our teachings on human sexuality were "*status confessionis*." Following their five-year exploration of the topic, the committee recommended—and the *Acts of Synod 2022* declared—that homosexual sex is included in what Answer 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism summarizes as "unchastity." Therefore, openly living in or promoting unchaste behavior has never been permitted in our denominational fellowship. There is no way for a CRC church to either declare itself or act in an "open and affirming" manner and remain in covenant with this denomination.

III. Historical precedent

Our ecumenical partner, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), has experienced firsthand the results of withholding accountability on matters of sexuality and marriage. Long story short, the RCA general synod was unable or unwilling to hold its classes and congregations to the RCA's teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman. Defections accelerated in 2021 after the general synod voted to develop a future restructuring plan and provided a streamlined process for dissenting churches to leave the denomination. Two new denominations have since organized from RCA defections: the Kingdom Network, USA, and the Alliance of Reformed Churches. Our neighboring RCA classis has seen massive defections. In 2015 the Zeeland Classis RCA had 23 organized and emerging congregations. Today nine established and one emerging congregations remain, and four of these are also in the process of leaving the RCA. The RCA split over marriage and sexuality is a familiar one. The Episcopal

Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Mennonite Church USA, Church of the Brethren, and United Methodist Church all have similar stories of massive defections after the highest body of authority took the "agree-to-disagree" route.

In the CRCNA, Article 39 of our Church Order governs the classes of our denomination and speaks of their function within this body of believers. Article 39, in line with Galatians 6 and Belgic Confession Article 28, states that the churches within a classis are to "offer one another mutual support and accountability" and "sustained connection to the wider denomination." The challenge comes when a classis is not living out the responsibility of holding its churches accountable to our shared understanding of God's Word. Rather, when acting in a rebellious and divisive manner within the denomination, such a classis is not aligned with our Church Order or serving its purpose.

While the situation at Neland Avenue CRC and Classis GRE presents our denomination with a distressing example of covenant breaking, both by sins of commission first and then of omission in response, our Church Order is not without recourse here. Article 39 says, "The organization of a new classis and the redistricting of classes require the approval of synod." The supplement to Church Order Article 39 explains: "Any request for transfer to another classis may include grounds that go beyond the sole matter of geographic proximity; synod is at liberty to consider such grounds in its disposition of the request." While the historic geographical alignment of the churches of Classis GRE was logical, for the health and unity of the church it is now incumbent to alter this configuration. As our Church Order makes clear, synod has the authority to redistrict classes when petitioned to do so. As evidenced by the overtures and communications submitted to synod over the past three years, there is a problem with Classis GRE's recent behavior. For the health of both the congregations of Classis GRE and the broader body, these issues must be addressed. We must take seriously the vows we have made before God and to one another.

IV. Overture

Therefore Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Redistrict churches currently in Classis Grand Rapids East, moving them immediately to new (and geographically approximate) classes and giving these churches dual classical affiliation from the close of this synod until March 15, 2024.

   Ground: For these congregations to be better united to the Christian Reformed Church and to experience the loving accountability that we owe them, they shall immediately become members of their new classes.

B. Redistrict the current churches of Classis Grand Rapids East in this manner:

1. First CRC, Grace CRC, and Madison Square CRC (with all of her campuses) to Classis Grand Rapids North.
2. Plymouth Heights CRC, Shawnee Park CRC, Seymour CRC, Woodlawn CRC, and the emerging congregation of Living Water to Classis Grand Rapids South.
3. Calvin CRC, Celebration Fellowship CRC, Church of the Servant CRC, Eastern Avenue CRC, and Sherman Street CRC to Classis Thornapple Valley.
4. Boston Square CRC, Fuller Avenue CRC, Neland Avenue CRC, and Oakdale Park CRC to Classis Grandville.

Grounds:

a. If this denomination is to effectively shepherd these congregations going forward, it will be critical for the churches that are out of line to be split up and for new relationships and opportunities for accountability and mutual discipleship to be forged.
b. These five classes are part of the same region (Great Lakes – Grand Rapids – Metro), and have the same Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University board members (CTS Region 11, CU Region 4).

C. Declare that Classis Grand Rapids East will complete its work on March 15, 2024, and be dissolved.

Ground: By failing to lovingly correct Neland Avenue CRC, and now permitting at least four different congregations to declare themselves "affirming," defying the long-held teachings of our denomination, it is clear that this classis is no longer effectively serving the body. As such, its ministries and good work should be completed or transitioned to the new classes, as GRE deems best.

D. Remind the four receiving classes that should a council of an incoming church remain obstinate and refuse to bring their teaching and practices in line with our denomination, after what the receiving classis believes is sufficient time, under Articles 27-b and 83 of the Church Order, the classis does have the power to remove the entire sitting council of a congregation in rebellion and to assist that congregation in electing a new slate of officebearers.

Ground: A study committee at Synod 1926 found that when a majority of a consistory is worthy of special discipline (Supplement, Arts. 82-84), "there is no remaining consistory to invite a neighboring consistory. . . . Naturally only the classis, under which such an unfaithful consistory resorts, can, as the next broadest assembly, exercise the necessary discipline" (*Acts of Synod 1926* [English], p. 325).

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 66

Require All Delegates to Synod 2023 to Sign the Covenant for Officebearers

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2023 to require that all officebearers delegated to Synod 2023 sign the Covenant for Officebearers without reservation with the clear understanding of the decisions of Synod 2022 in view.

Grounds:

1. All leaders of the church sent to synod are required to be of one mind and heart in faith and covenant revealed in God's Word, taught by our Lord Jesus Christ and directed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2).
2. Synod 2022 gave clarity to the doctrines of penal substitutionary atonement and human sexuality that should be affirmed by all signers of the Covenant for Officebearers.
3. The goal of this re-signing is to highlight the covenant that we make with one another regarding our unity in fidelity to the full revelation of God's Word and our denominational confessions.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 67

Amend Rules for Synodical Procedure to Suspend Delegates Whose Classes Have Not Adequately Implemented Discipline

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2023 to add and immediately enact a provision to the Rules for Synodical Procedure stipulating that delegates from classes that have not adequately implemented discipline ordered by previous synods be suspended from full delegate privileges, including, but not limited to, voting, advisory committee assignments, and speaking from the floor. Overtures from suspended classes shall not be considered. These restrictions shall also apply to the classis' delegates to the Council of Delegates and all other denominational standing and study committees until such time that full privileges are restored to the classis by synod.

Grounds:

1. The synod, and the Council of Delegates that acts on synod's behalf when it is not in session, is a deliberative body representing the churches of all the classes (Church Order, Art. 45).

2. A primary function of the classis is to hold constituent churches accountable to the Word of God as interpreted by the Three Forms of Unity (Church Order, Art. 39; Belgic Confession, Art. 29).
3. Delegates from classes that have not implemented synodical instructions to discipline constituent churches have abdicated their responsibilities set forth in the Covenant for Officebearers and the Credentials for Synod form. When this disregard is not the product of ignorance or omission, it constitutes insubordination and disintegrates unity and trust among the classes.
4. Delegates from insubordinate classes should not be given the opportunity to vote on decisions, policies, or positions that obligate other congregations and classes when they do not submit to synodical decisions, policies, or positions themselves. These classes are in effect attempting to "lord it over" other churches and classes by forcing their own will rather than submitting to deliberated decisions (Church Order, Art. 85).
5. Church Order Article 27-b provides synod the authority to discipline classes. Suspending the privileges of delegates from an insubordinate classis is a reasonable act of discipline.
6. According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section VIII, N, the "Rules for Synodical Procedure may be suspended, amended, revised, or abrogated by a majority vote of synod." In other words, synod may amend or change its rules at any time while it is constituted and in any way the majority sees fit.
7. The apostle Paul does not mince words as to how Christians ought to relate to those who refuse to repent from sinful behavior, warning us to "not be partners with them" (Eph. 5:7).

Classis Minnkota requests the following:

A. That synod add the following paragraph to the duties of the president *pro tem* in the Rules for Synodical Procedure (section I, D), immediately after declaring the synodical assembly to have opened (paragraph 2) and before synod selects officers (paragraph 3):

> The president *pro tem* shall read discipline instructions given to particular classes by the previous synod and request that a delegate(s) from these classes present a brief response as to how the disciplinary instructions have been implemented. As its first order of business, synod shall vote to determine the adequacy of the classis' implementation of disciplinary instructions. Delegates from classes deemed to have inadequately responded to disciplinary instructions shall be suspended from advisory committee participation, as well as voting and speaking privileges. Such suspension will also carry over to the classis' delegates to the Council of Delegates and all standing denominational committees. This suspension shall remain in effect until such time that synod declares that its disciplinary instructions have been adequately implemented.

B. That synod declare these provisions immediately effective upon synodical approval and applicable to Synod 2023.

C. Due to the concern that disciplinary instructions given by Synod 2022 have not been adequately implemented, that this overture bypass the advisory committee process and be considered by the full body as the first order of business for Synod 2023.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 68

Shepherd Congregations into Another Denomination

I. Background

The issue of human sexuality has been a matter of contention throughout all of human history, and now in our own day it has become very much entangled with national laws, ordinances, and public pronouncements by individuals of all stripes. Culturally our Western society has seen a dramatic shift in terms of how it understands how the sexes are to relate, in terms of intimacy, sexuality, and legality. This broader cultural shift has made inroads into the Christian church here in the West, including the CRCNA, particularly with regard to persons who identify as LGBTQ+. This has created increased tensions and divisions that all other well-established denominations have been unable to navigate. We have fundamental disagreements about what is and isn't sin, about the role of special revelation in relation to general revelation, and about what God-honoring human sexuality looks like.

Humility teaches us that the CRCNA is not made up of a different sort of church member but that we as churches here in Canada and the United States are also affected by this growing rift and division. Our recent synods and Council of Delegate meetings have been the occasion of these tensions and divisions, to the point where an individual congregation and classis have recently been publicly admonished for their position on the issue of human sexuality. This is not a tension or a division evidenced in only one small locale of West Michigan; it is in fact evidenced throughout many of our churches and classes in both nations. And this division is only increasing as churches diverting from the CRC's confessional position on sexuality are now making it public that they wish to be identified as "open and affirming" congregations.

We truly believe that these congregations have come to these positions after much discussion and wrestling together regarding the direction they believe they (in good conscience) must go when it comes to ministering to our LGBTQ+ neighbors and fellow members. We take them at their word that they firmly believe they are most honoring God and loving their neighbor by moving in this new direction. And all attempts by our synod

or their classis to force them to back away from these matters of conscience would do a disservice to them as congregations at this point.

II. Overture

Therefore, in acknowledging that some Christian Reformed Church officebearers, along with a majority of their congregations, are no longer able to in good conscience subscribe to the Covenant for Officebearers with the CRC's confessional position on human sexuality, and not wishing to see acrimonious rancor and God-dishonoring hostilities grow in our beloved denomination and our communities of faith, and not wishing to see a public fight ensue over church assets, the council of Moline Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Create two parallel ad hoc committees (one in Canada and one in the United States), made up of knowledgeable members of the CRC holding to diverse viewpoints on human sexuality, to help shepherd into another existing denomination in a grace-filled way those congregations who can no longer in good conscience remain a part of the CRC because of matters of human sexuality.
    1. These two parallel committees would be knowledgeable of national church bodies that are available and might be a "good fit" in their own national contexts.
    2. These committees would be knowledgeable about matters of tax laws and legalities related to Articles of Incorporation and church separations.
    3. These committees are to be created and are to be in place by September 2023, with special offerings requested of the churches of our denomination (above and beyond existing ministry shares) to help finance the travels and stays of these committee members while they meet with these churches.
    4. These committees would develop a working relationship with the leadership teams of existing classes in their national contexts, working with these classes to help them facilitate a "bless and release" with those congregations in these classes who now need to look for another denominational home.

B. These ad hoc committees are empowered to engage in conversation with congregations or classes they are contacted by or officially made aware of, without prejudice and in good faith, who might benefit from this counsel and assistance.

C. These ad hoc committees will be in place until a future synod deems their necessary work having come to a conclusion, at which time they will be disbanded.

Council of Moline (Mich.) CRC
Bruce Jager, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 9, 2023, meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 69

Enable Listening to Facilitate Discernment

I. Introduction

Synod 2022 knew there was significant opposition to the "confessional status" recommendation in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). Indeed, many classes, congregations, and members had written overtures asking synod not to adopt that recommendation.[1] Yet by a majority vote on June 15, 2022, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 encompasses "homosexual sex" and named that interpretation explicitly as having "confessional status."

While many congregations are already aligned with this decision, other communities are experiencing significant impacts.[2] Churches that have held space for diverse views on same-sex marriage are feeling frustrated. Officebearers who had previously considered themselves fully in agreement with the confessions are now needing to write gravamina because of this adopted interpretation. The postures of some churches towards others have changed, affecting regional communities like classes.[3]

II. Proposed actions for this turbulent time

This is a turbulent time. No matter what decisions Synod 2023 makes, the CRC is likely to change: churches may seek realignment; some may leave; membership may be impacted.

In order to navigate this change wisely and reduce the amount of harmful impacts, we believe it is time to listen. ***The following actions are intended to help us listen well.***

A. Action 1: Permit those who disagree to articulate their position collaboratively

The gravamen process was intended to equip individual officebearers to express their confessional difficulties as those difficulties arose. It was not created for a time when potentially hundreds of officebearers[4] found

---

[1] This overture originated in River Park Church in Calgary, Alberta. River Park Church was one of those many churches who wrote an overture asking synod not to adopt the recommendation on "confessional status." River Park Church has a diversity of views on human sexuality and has officebearers who have written confessional-difficulty gravamina since the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022.

[2] In Appendix 1 we have tried to articulate why this decision has been disruptive for many.

[3] In River Park Church's own classis, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan (ABSS), numerous councils have formally barred ministers within classis from their pulpits and have ceased supporting shared classical ministry, including ceasing financial support to the point of explicitly redirecting their classical funds elsewhere. The first meeting of Classis ABSS after Synod 2022 was so painfully divided that River Park Church sent an overture asking that Classis ABSS be dissolved so that healthier and fruitful realignments can be made.

[4] The *Agenda for Synod 2016* details the 2014 survey of 700 ordained ministers in the CRCNA in which 98 of 700 ministers reported they would be in favor of same-sex marriage in the church. If 15 percent of *ministers* were okay with same-sex marriage in the

themselves with the same confessional difficulty all at the same time. Do we want all these officebearers to correspond with synod individually?

But officebearers who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina do not know if they can openly discuss their disagreement with one another as each one considers if they desire to write a confessional-revision gravamen. This could mean that future synods will need to process individual confessional-revision gravamina from officebearers for years to come. Given this unusual circumstance that so many officebearers are simultaneously challenged by the same confessional interpretation, we consider it wise to explicitly permit them to collaborate if they desire to do so.

B. Action 2: Equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community

Many churches have been shaped by the assumption that there was "room for respectful disagreement" around our CRC position on homosexuality,[5] and they likely desire a covenant community that fits with this orientation. Other churches desire to be in a covenant community that holds the same conviction around same-sex marriage. In this turbulent time, it is wise for synod to invite the churches to discern and articulate their hopes for a covenant community.[6]

We imagine that Pastor Church Resources could create a helpful toolkit to equip churches and councils to discern these hopes. This toolkit would support local congregations as they discern how to respond to the survey proposed in Action 3.

C. Action 3: Gather feedback from the churches and share feedback transparently

It will be helpful for the CRCNA to know the hopes of its member churches. We imagine the Office of General Secretary, in consultation with Pastor Church Resources, could develop a set of questions that allows local churches to express what sort of covenant community they desire. The resulting survey data should be transparently shared, and it could serve as the basis for future overtures, enabling a future synod to consider the most wise way to navigate our turbulent circumstances.[7]

While there may be many more aspects helpful to know from each church, River Park Church considers these three things to be of key importance as we consider covenant realignment.

---

church in 2014, there is the potential that hundreds of *officebearers* are okay with same-sex marriage in the church in 2023.

[5] Please see Appendix 1 for further details.

[6] This is similar to what each church of Classis ABSS was asked to do after our challenging meeting in October 2022.

[7] River Park Church does not know what future suggestion makes the most sense, but already we have heard multiple ideas: realignments with other denominations (i.e., RCA and CRC realigning); a "gracious separation" into two or more separate denominations; a move toward "affinity" classes; or shifting from a denominational model to a looser affiliation that some have called a "network" model.

1. *Your church*—How would you identify your local church when it comes to perspectives on human sexuality?
    a. When it comes to perspectives on same-sex marriage, is your church strongly "traditional," a mix of "traditional" and "affirming" members, or strongly "affirming"?
    b. When it comes to who is allowed on council, does your church allow only those with a "traditional" perspective, both "traditional" and "affirming" perspectives, or only an "affirming" perspective, and does your church desire to welcome same-sex married persons to be on council?
2. *Whom to covenant with*—Of the various types of churches (mixing 1, a-b above, there are likely at least five reasonable types that should be named explicitly), which ones are you willing to be in covenant community with?
3. *Larger assemblies*—If you choose to be with churches different from your own, what does "making room for respectful disagreement" look like when you are together (i.e., who can be delegated to classis)?

D. Action 4: Invite CRC institutions and ministries to articulate their challenges and hopes

Undoubtedly, some of our CRC institutions are feeling caught in the middle of this current turbulence. Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University are both in covenant with the CRC and may be experiencing impacts from Synod 2022.[8] Our CRC ministries have also recently experienced variations in support. Synod should invite these (and other) institutions and ministries to create their own discernment process and, if they desire, communicate some of their results with synod.

E. Action 5: Leave discipline local for the present time

While we are naming this as the final action, this action enables some of the other actions. If synod is going to invite officebearers to collaborate as they write confessional-revision gravamina (or one gravamen together), those officebearers need to be able to discern this action with their local council and trust that speaking openly will not enact synodical-level discipline. If we are assuming that there will be some covenant realignments (perhaps a "gracious separation"), local councils will need to be able to have healthy, open dialogue about their hopes without synod preempting those realignments by way of synodical-level discipline. That does not

[8] Both Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) and Calvin University have boards appointed by the CRC synod, and both boards have approved policies that leave room for respectful disagreement with perspectives on homosexuality. For instance, in 2021 the CTS board of trustees affirmed a handful of guidelines as the HSR was being discussed, including that "CTS should strive to model a community of people who hold diverging views and can discuss them honestly and civilly." And at Calvin University, a policy paper published in 2016 (*Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom: Principles and Practices at Calvin College*) articulates a similar posture.

mean that we turn our back on Belgic Confession Article 29 and abandon the third mark of the true church. It does mean that, for the present time, we keep discipline at the level of the local church in matters related to the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022.

III. Overture

Therefore, River Park Church overtures Synod to consider the following actions designed to help us listen well:

A. That synod explicitly permit those who wish to write confessional-revision gravamina in response to the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022 to collaborate.

   Grounds:

   1. The "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022 potentially put hundreds of officebearers into a place of disagreement with a confessional interpretation—all at the same time. The gravamen process was not intended for such high numbers.
   2. Permitting collaboration allows those who disagree to articulate their "best biblical and confessional case" together, rather than using time and resources to each write their own.
   3. Without granting permission to collaborate, future synodical agendas may be filled with responding to confessional-revision gravamina from potentially hundreds of individual officebearers.
   4. Explicit permission by synod is clarifying at a moment when we are unfamiliar with what amount of collaboration is allowed and when there is anxiousness about synod enacting discipline.

B. That synod ask Pastor Church Resources to create a toolkit intended to equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community. This should be done as soon as possible.

   Grounds:

   1. If the CRCNA is approaching a time of covenant realignment, it is helpful for each church to discern what they hope for in a covenant community.
   2. While no church would be required to use the toolkit, some churches may desire a process to help them discern how to respond to the survey (item C).

C. That synod ask the Office of General Secretary to create a survey that will gather feedback from the churches, and then share that feedback transparently. This should be done as soon as possible, with results shared transparently by November 1, 2024, allowing overtures responding to the survey to come to Synod 2025.

Grounds:

1. In order to discern potential covenant realignments, we need to listen to the local churches.
2. The transparency should be sufficient so that people can identify national and regional alignments.
3. Sharing the results transparently will allow everyone to see the variety within the CRCNA and then potentially propose ways forward in this turbulent time.

D. That synod invite institutions and ministries connected to the CRCNA to articulate their challenges and hopes in this turbulent time.

Grounds:

1. "Inviting" means that each institution and ministry can discern if they want to do this, and how to do so fittingly.
2. Listening to our institutions and ministries may help us to discern a way forward.

E. That synod refrain from enacting any synodical-level discipline if that discipline pertains to the decision of Synod 2022 regarding "confessional status." This should stay in place until covenant realignment is discerned.

Grounds:

1. Many churches and officebearers have "in good faith" operated under the belief that our CRCNA position on homosexuality did not have confessional status (see Appendix 1).
2. As the CRCNA discerns covenant realignments, it is better to leave any discipline to the discernment of the local church.
3. It is better to allow the local church to go through a process of discernment for realignments rather than synod forcing realignment by way of synodical-level discipline during this process.

Council of River Park CRC, Calgary, Alberta
Joanne Spronk, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the winter meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan but was not adopted.

APPENDIX

I. Two distinct visions of a covenant community

When it comes to perspectives on human sexuality in the CRC, and particularly homosexual sex within a same-sex marriage, we in the CRCNA not only disagree on the topic but we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters.

We disagree on the topic. This overture will use the words "traditional" and "affirming" as we talk about two different perspectives with respect to homosexual sex within a same-sex marriage. For the purposes of this overture, we will define these words in this way:

> "traditional"[9]—a person holding a "traditional" perspective believes that "faithful sex" which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between one man and one woman, only between two persons of the opposite sex.
>
> "affirming"[10]—a person holding an "affirming" perspective believes that "faithful sex" which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between any two persons, including between persons of the same sex.

Thus, these two perspectives disagree on whether God views "homosexual sex" within a same-sex marriage as a faithful Christian action.

But in the CRCNA **we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters**. And this overture focuses more on the conflict arising from that second disagreement. It is becoming apparent that there are two distinctly different Visions[11] of how the covenant community of the CRC should be shaped.

> Vision 1—There is **room for respectful disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Most of those who desire Vision 1 are deeply distressed by the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022 because that decision removes room for respectful disagreement.
>
> Vision 2—There is **no room for any open disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Some of those who desire Vision 2 were openly considering leaving the CRC if the "confessional status" recommendation to Synod 2022 were voted down.

A majority of the current conflict in the CRC is not between the "traditional" and "affirming" persons. Indeed, many churches in the CRC are currently flourishing and have both "traditional" and "affirming" officebearers and members in that same community. The conflict is occurring

---

[9] This overture is aware that not all who identify as "traditional" fit this definition, but many do.
[10] This overture is aware that not all who identify as "affirming" fit this definition, but many do.
[11] The word *Vision* will be capitalized throughout this appendix in order to remind the reader that we are using this word to identify Vision 1 and Vision 2.

because some desire the CRC to be a Vision 1 covenant community and others desire the CRC to be a Vision 2 covenant community.

The CRC has a long history of saying that our CRC position on homosexuality has not been confessional

In 2010, Dr. Henry DeMoor's *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* was published by the Christian Reformed Church. This commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Church Polity classes at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) since its publication.[12] As Dr. DeMoor discusses the "settled and binding" nature of synodical decisions (Church Order, Art. 29), he brings to the discussion the CRC's position on homosexuality. Here is what Dr. DeMoor writes:

> It is significant, for example, that Synod 1973 twice framed all of its "statements" on homosexuality, including its "ethical stance," as "pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 51). It intentionally avoided referring to them as an "interpretation" of the Heidelberg Catechism's use of the term "unchastity" in Lord's Day 41. The possibility that this creed meant to include what the synod referred to as "homosexualism" is not denied. . . . It is just that the assembly chose not to be that resolute. It merely wanted to establish the "ground rules" for how all officebearers within the CRCNA ought to approach their pastoral responsibilities to those struggling with same-sex orientation. It expected a "healthy respect" for its decisions, not creedal attachment. Officebearers would not be subject to dismissal from office based on unorthodox views, but only on disrespect for what the synod decided.[13]

Dr. DeMoor writes that Synod 1973 "intentionally avoided" giving confessional status to our CRC position on homosexuality. In other words, CTS has been teaching that Synod 1973 was leaving "room for respectful disagreement."

And this was not just being taught in the Church Polity course at CTS, it was what CTS told to anyone who asked. If one sent an email to CTS asking, "How does our CRC position on homosexuality function for officebearers?" CTS would reply that the CRC position is one of pastoral advice and does not have confessional status.[14]

---

[12] As per an email exchange with current Church Order professor, Rev. Kathy Smith. In her reply of September 28, 2022, she writes, "Henry's commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Polity courses at CTS since it was published in 2010."

[13] Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary,* 2nd. ed. (CRCNA, 2020), pp. 168-69.

[14] In September 2018 the original author of this overture was made aware that a pastor in his classis (ABSS) had decided to perform a same-sex wedding. In preparation for our upcoming classis meeting in October, he asked faculty of CTS several questions to better understand how our CRC positions function, with a focus on our position on homosexuality. The thoughtful and thorough reply he received on September 30, 2018, included attachments to the *Acts of Synod 1975*, as well as this paragraph: "The matter of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, addressed by Synods 1973, 2002, and 2016, has been categorized each time by synod as pastoral advice and has never been addressed in relation to

It is hard to know how long this position has been taught. Did Dr. DeMoor teach his students that the CRC has room for respectful disagreement before 2010? Probably; we do not imagine he first thought that thought when he published his commentary. But we know for sure that CTS was teaching that the CRC's position on homosexuality did not have confessional status from 2010 forward.

Thus, for the purposes of this overture, we will simply say what seems to be a verifiable fact: "For over a decade CTS has taught that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional both in the classroom and to anyone who asked."

Synod 2022 directly contradicts what CTS has been teaching for over a decade

So what happened next? CTS has been openly and widely teaching that the CRC's position on "homosexual sex" did not have confessional status. Then by a majority vote, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 encompasses "homosexual sex." It is now clear to all in the CRCNA that this interpretation of "unchastity" in Q&A 108 has confessional status in the CRCNA.

In other words, Synod 2022 directly contradicted what CTS has been teaching for over a decade.

Two distinct Visions of what shapes our covenant community

Again, our experience is that the major conflict in the CRC is not around the different perspectives: "affirming" or "traditional." The major conflict in the CRC at present is around Visions of how a covenant community deals with that difference in perspectives. It may help to see the conflict by drawing out the opposing implications of these Visions.

II. Opposing implications of Vision 1 and Vision 2

Many of our churches and institutions—even our members and office-bearers—have been living with an assumption of how the CRC is shaped, an assumption based on either Vision 1 or Vision 2. As a denominational community, we have not been openly articulate about which Vision shapes the CRC until the decision of Synod 2022. For many, living with an assumption of Vision 2, there was no surprise when the HSR recommended that synod declare that the church's teaching on homosexual sex "already" has confessional status. For others, this recommendation was not only a surprise; it was deeply concerning—because adopting that recommendation would disrupt their Vision 1 community.

Paralleling the following five implications might help us to see the vast difference between how Vision 1 and Vision 2 play out.

---

the confessions. The minority report to Synod 2016 was in error when it implied that people who disagreed with synod's decisions on same-sex marriage may be delinquent in doctrine. Synod has never addressed this as a matter of doctrine or an interpretation of the confessions. By Synod 1975's standards, pastoral advice is the last category of decisions mentioned and likely the least amount of agreement is expected."

Reasonable implications from believing that the CRC position is not confessional

Let us ask, "What might be some common-sense implications of believing that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional?" Here are five implications that some have believed are reasonable:[15]

> Implication 1—There is room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC's position.
>
> Implication 2—An openly "affirming" officebearer can be fully "confessional."[16]
>
> Implication 3—An openly "affirming" pastor can accept a call into the CRC "in good faith."
>
> Implication 4—An openly "affirming" CRC member could be an officebearer "in good standing."
>
> Implication 5—An "affirming" officebearer would not need to submit a gravamen.

Reasonable Implications that follow from Synod 2022's "confessional status" decision

While Synod 2022 did not provide insight into what consequence would follow from their "confessional status" decision, certainly some who are speaking out since Synod 2022 would say the following are reasonable implications of that decision[17] (the following implications are exactly the same as the ones listed above except for the changes that we have signified **in bold**):

> Implication 1—There is **not** room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC's position.
>
> Implication 2—An openly "affirming" officebearer can **not** be fully "confessional."
>
> Implication 3—An openly "affirming" pastor can **not** accept a call into the CRC "in good faith."
>
> Implication 4—An openly "affirming" CRC member could **not** be an officebearer "in good standing."
>
> Implication 5—An "affirming" officebearer would ~~**not**~~ need to submit a gravamen.

---

[15] To be clear, we have not seen or heard that CTS taught these implications directly or openly. We are simply saying that these implications are reasonable *if one honestly believes that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional.*

[16] If one believes that same-sex marriage is an acceptable Christian action, then sex within that same-sex marriage would not be considered "adultery" (sex against your marriage covenant), and one does not consider "homosexual sex" to be "unchaste."

[17] For instance, we believe these five implications align with the material published on the Abide Project website (abideproject.org). These also seem to be assumptions behind some of the actions (i.e., registered negative votes; attending "in protest"; extended concern listed in credentials) that occurred at the October 28-29, 2022, meeting of Classis ABSS (see minutes).

Are we at an impasse?

For those who were living out Vision 1 in their local church community, the "confessional status" decision of Synod 2022 is a stunning reversal of what it means to be in the CRC covenant community. The change of implications is immensely impactful for their local church—and that impact hurts them.

At the same time, it has also become apparent that many in the CRC desire Vision 2 and strongly affirm the implications listed above. To many, the decision to make this "confessional" is a necessary decision to keep the church on the right path.

To some, being a Vision 1 community is a central conviction to what it means to be a faithful church. To others, being a Vision 2 community is just as central a conviction.

OVERTURE 70

Commit to Love, Charity, and Grace in Disagreement; Equip Congregations to Minister Pastorally with LGBTQ+ People

Classis Huron, at its February 15, 2023, session, accepted the motion to send the following overture to Synod 2023:

Classis Huron overtures Synod 2023 to direct the appropriate agency or office of the CRCNA to do the following:

A. To affirm our commitments to manage disagreements within our congregations, and among churches, with love, charity, and grace, and to ensure that all who seek to follow Christ are afforded a respectful place to honestly share their views and listen to those of others.

B. To develop resources and tools, or endorse existing resources and tools, to equip congregations to minister pastorally with and to LGBTQ+ people.

Grounds:

1. Congregations in Classis Huron (and likely in other classes) have a considerable number of members who have expressed disappointment with Synod 2022's deliberations and decisions regarding the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). As a result, there is a measure of division which has the potential to increase.

2. The Christian Reformed Church has failed in the way it relates to LGBTQ+ people. This is articulated in the discussion on homosexuality found in the HSR, which states: "It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex, making it very difficult for them to live a life of holiness" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 407).

Classis Huron
Fred Vander Sterre, stated clerk

OVERTURE 71

Prevent and Reduce Harm to LGBTQ+ Persons

I. Background

A. LGBTQ people experience four times more interpersonal violence than non-LGBTQ people, according to UCLA's Williams Institute.[1]

B. 2022 has been marked by an increase in threatening and intimidating language by white nationalist groups such as the Patriot Front and Proud Boys.[2]

C. Children's hospitals in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Ohio have faced a barrage of harassment, including bomb threats, after coordinated attacks by anti-trans groups.[3]

D. Anti-LGBT+ mobilization—including demonstrations, political violence, and offline propaganda activity like flyering—increased by over four times from 2020 to 2021. ACLED data indicate that 2022 is on track to be worse than last year. For example:

   1. Incidents of political violence targeting the LGBT+ community this year have already exceeded the total number of attacks reported last year.
   2. Nine times as many anti-LGBT+ demonstrations were reported in 2021 relative to 2020. At least 15 percent of these demonstrations turned violent or destructive last year.
   3. Far-right militias and militant social movements increased their engagement in anti-LGBT+ demonstrations sevenfold last year, from two events in 2020 to 14 in 2021.
   4. Their engagement in anti-LGBT+ events in 2022 is on track to either match or outpace their activity in 2021.[4]

E. On November 19, 2022, a mass shooting took place at Club Q, an LGBTQ-friendly nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Five people were killed, and nineteen were injured.

F. The HSR report of 2022 itself named facts about the harms done to the LGBTQ+ community, acknowledged that the CRC has failed them, apologized for wrongs done, and called for wholesale change in the way the church relates to persons struggling with their sexual identity or identifying as members of that community. "Tragically, the church's response to the confusion, questions, and sexual turbulence of a des-

[1] npr.org/2022/11/22/1138555795/how-political-rhetoric-factors-into-violence-against-the-lgbtq-community
[2] npr.org/2022/06/20/1106112160/patriot-front-extremists-lbgtq-pride
[3] bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-21/colorado-club-shooting-follows-rise-in-anti-lgbtq-rhetoric-violence?leadSource=uverify%20wall
[4] acleddata.com/2022/06/16/fact-sheet-anti-lgbt-mobilization-is-on-the-rise-in-the-united-states

perate world, and even of its hurting members, has often been *silence*" (Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, *Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 320; *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 906, emphasis added). Synod 2022 apologized again, repeating apologies made in 1973 and 2016, based on the recognition that CRC churches have contributed to the harms that have been done in the past.

II. Overture

Classis Grand Rapids East overtures Synod 2023 to prevent and reduce the harming of LGBTQ+ persons by our churches in particular and society in general by such ways and means as the following:

A. Call all churches of the CRCNA to love their LGBTQ+ members and neighbors by protecting them from unloving and hateful speech as well as violent actions.

B. Provide all churches of the CRCNA with a list of resources and partner organizations that will equip them to answer the call stated above.

C. Issue a public condemnation of all violence in word and deed against LGBTQ+ persons in our families, churches, and communities.

Grounds:

1. All expressions of harm to our LGBTQ+ neighbors are a sinful denigration of the image of God in which all people are created (Gen. 9:6).
2. "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).
3. James 3:10 reminds us that we cannot, with the same mouth, bless our Lord and Father while also cursing those who are made in his likeness.
4. "**Q. What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?**

   "**A.** I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—*and I am not to be party to this in others*; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 105, emphasis added).
5. "**Q. Does this commandment refer only to murder?**

   "**A.** By forbidding murder God teachers us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness. In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 106).
6. "**Q. Is it enough then that we do not murder our neighbor in any such way?**

   "**A.** No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, *to protect them from harm as much as we*

can, and to do good even to our enemies" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 107, emphasis added).

7. The decision of Synod 2022 to elevate the interpretation on "unchastity" to confessional status, depending on application, also could cause harm to LGBTQ+ persons.

Classis Grand Rapids East
Robert A. Arbogast, stated clerk

OVERTURE 72

Depose Council of Neland Avenue CRC; Instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to Oversee the Process

I. Background

For the past three and a half years, Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has refused to discipline an officebearer living in public sin (as affirmed by Synods 1973, 1980, 2002, 2004, 2016, and 2022). The council of Neland Avenue CRC has chosen to ignore numerous communications from individuals, churches, classes, and even the Council of Delegates. What is more, Larry Louters, then president of Neland Avenue CRC, made a speech at the end of Synod 2022 stating that the council in good conscience would likely not remove this officebearer who is currently living in sin. Classis Grand Rapids East (GRE) has likewise known of this public matter, received numerous communications, and refused to act by bringing the loving discipline that is needed. This behavior by our sister church/churches is largely unprecedented in our denomination's history and is an attack upon the covenant bonds that unite us. This church and classis have broken covenant with the body of churches within the Christian Reformed denomination who have willingly submitted to the governance of synod and one another.

There are several places within the Bible and within our confessions that talk about discipline. Familiar texts like Matthew 18:15-20 clearly outline the critical nature of discipline. These very steps outlined in this passage have been taken with Neland Avenue CRC. In 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, it is clear that when a brother was caught in sexual sin, the apostle Paul said to cast the sinful brother out of fellowship in order for two things to happen. The first was to give the sinful individual an opportunity to repent, and the second was for the protection of the others within the body. Discipline is not optional for the Christian church.

In Lord's Day 31, Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 85 lays out its teaching on the necessity of discipline, as one of only two "keys of the kingdom." As critical as the preaching of the holy gospel is, the catechism argues that the

regular, faithful, and loving exercise of church discipline, toward repentance, is equally needed. The Belgic Confession in Article 29 talks about the three marks of the true church, which include the preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the necessity of discipline.

Since the Council of Neland Avenue CRC and Classis GRE have refused to exercise discipline, it falls to synod to initiate disciplinary action in order to protect the integrity of God's Word, the creeds and confessions, and the Christian Reformed Church.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Southeast U.S. overtures Synod 2023 to do the following:

A. Depose the council of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church and place the church under the supervision of a neighboring council.

   Grounds:

   1. The officebearers of Neland Avenue CRC have failed to keep the vows they made in the Covenant for Officebearers and have not taught and acted in accordance with our confessions, as they promised.
   2. The officebearers of Neland Avenue CRC have ignored the decision of Synod 2022 and have explicitly stated that they will not admonish the deacon who is in sin.
   3. The officebearers of Neland Avenue CRC refuse to discipline a deacon who continues to live in sin and admits openly of their sinful lifestyle which goes against the very confessions they signed as an officebearer.
   4. Neland Avenue CRC had the option to overture their classis and synod before installing this deacon involved in the sinful lifestyle. They refused to follow church polity and are now continuing to refuse to follow church polity.
   5. We are compelled to protect the integrity of the denomination, the creeds and confessions, and God's Word stated in Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

B. Instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to oversee this process, and, if it is not completed by year-end 2023, disallow Classis Grand Rapids East from seating any delegates at synod until this declaration is carried out.

   Grounds:

   1. Classis Grand Rapids East has refused to initiate discipline against Neland Avenue CRC even though it has acted outside our creeds and confessions and God's Word.
   2. Classis Grand Rapids East has created confusion among its own classis, causing division, since they have chosen to allow one of

their own churches to operate outside the bounds of Scripture and the creeds and confessions.

3. Classis Grand Rapids East has taken a position of support for Neland Avenue CRC although they are clearly holding to a stance different from that of the denomination on the topic of homosexuality. The CRC cannot allow a classis that will not support the ruling of synod to be seated at that same ruling body to which they do not submit.

Classis Southeast U.S.
Viviana Cassis, stated clerk

OVERTURE 73

Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Decisions *(Deferred from 2021)*

I. Background

The November 2020 *Banner* article titled "Woman in Same-Sex Marriage Installed as Deacon" noted that the council of Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, does not believe it has "crossed any line of orthodoxy, only pastoral advice" and "that all synodical reports and decisions related to homosexuality have been *pastoral advice* given to the churches." It is not clear to us that this distinction is a valid one—and if it is not, the decision of Neland CRC to break covenant is based on an incorrect understanding of the nature of synodical reports.

There is some history of a discussion. Synod 1973 appointed a committee "to study the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 595). That committee reported to Synod 1975, and its report states, "Guidelines for study, pastoral advice, and other decisions of this nature allow for varying measures of agreement. Officebearers are expected to 'abide by' certain specified deliverances of synod as well as to synodical decisions in general" (p. 602). The report seems to suggest that, although we may not all agree on the pastoral advice offered in synodical reports, as officebearers we are expected to abide by them—and so they are binding in some respect.

Further, the second recommendation of that report states, "Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions and 'shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order' (Church Order, Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances" (p. 603).

Noting that the report to Synod 1975 still lacked clarity, Synod 1995 addressed the issue of clarifying what "settled and binding" means. A majority and minority report were presented, but both were defeated.

As a denomination, we are in need of such clarity.

II. Overture

Classis Chatham overtures Synod 2021 to clarify the distinctions in categories of synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice and the extent to which they bind the churches.

Grounds:

1. We are concerned that other churches may also make decisions based on an incomplete knowledge of which synodical decisions are binding and which are not.
2. This needs to be addressed separately from reports on the floor of synod because this is a matter of some urgency as other congregations wrestle with different issues.
3. As churches have conversations, they need to have strong, biblically supported guidance from the denomination.
4. Churches need to understand the clear boundaries of our synodical decisions as we move forward in covenant with one another.
5. Synod has not clearly articulated what it means that synodical decisions are considered settled and binding.

Classis Chatham
Ron Middel, stated clerk

OVERTURE 74

Adopt an Additional Supplement to Church Order Articles 82-84 *(Deferred from 2020)*

I. Observations

The Reformed churches in continental Europe determined that mutual support and accountability were an important part of being Christ's church, so in the mid-16th century the idea of church officebearers signing a "Form of Subscription" began to take root. The Synod of Dordrecht 1574 determined that its officebearers must "attest" to the Reformed confessions, but it took the great Synod of Dort of 1618-19 to formally require all officebearers in the Dutch Reformed Churches to subscribe to a "Form of Subscription." In signing this form, officebearers were vowing before God and his people, in part, to hold one another accountable for their faith and doctrine, both lived out and taught. The Christian Reformed Church, at its

inception as a denomination, also included the requirement that its officebearers sign a Form of Subscription. We took those promises seriously, including the pledge that "we are prepared moreover to submit to the judgment of the council, classis, or synod, realizing that the consequences of refusal to do so is suspension from office." Synod 2012 adopted an updated Form of Subscription, referred to as the Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, by which all officebearers serving the church likewise vow: "We promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority. We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Church Order Article 82 states, "All officebearers, in addition to being subject to general discipline, are subject to special discipline, which consists of suspension and deposition from office." Article 83 states, "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct." But what does this look like, when officebearers in one congregation or even in one classis might be lax in or refuse to hold its officebearers accountable to the confessional decisions of synods? There appears to be sufficient ambiguity in the Church Order to cause a paralysis of action in officebearers being able to hold one another accountable to the vow each made when signing the Covenant for Officebearers upon their ordination. What role does another council or classis have in helping to encourage or move forward special discipline when made aware of a failure in another council or classis to uphold our covenant together? Greater clarity is necessary.

We do have some guidance from past actions of synods. A brief study of the history of synodical decisions shows us that classes and synods have intervened in the decisions of local congregations, even when those decisions did not originate in the council itself. Synods in the past have decided that it is permissible for a broader assembly to step in and impose special discipline on a narrower assembly, even if no one in a narrower assembly of the offending party has requested such intervention. Many of these decisions were highlighted by the Judicial Code Committee back in 1993, based on an appeal it received and then passed on to synod, about the ability of other assemblies to enforce the Form of Subscription's covenanted responsibilities (see *Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 523ff.).

1. Classis Muskegon deposed the minister and entire consistory of one of its churches in 1919 (with synod's later approval of the synodical deputies' work) when the consistory refused to depose its minister (see *Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 526).
2. Synod 1926 upheld Classis Grand Rapids West in its actions deposing a minister and the majority of his consistory. Synod stated that "Article 36 of the Church Order [currently Article 27-b] gives the classis jurisdiction over the consistory" (*Acts of Synod 1926*, p. 142).
3. Synod 1980 considered an appeal from elders of a church in Classis Huron who had been deposed by the classis. They found that the

broader assembly of the classis was not guilty of abusing their God-given authority over the narrower assembly of the consistory by lording it over them based on the following grounds:

a. Classis did not exceed its authority when it engaged itself with the situation at Goderich CRC. Christ gave authority to the church as a whole and thereby entrusted authority to the occasions of its exercise in classis and synod as gatherings of the churches to maintain the unity of the congregations in both doctrine and discipline.

b. The gathering of churches and their representatives in Jerusalem set a pattern of authoritative decisions, which pattern is followed in principle in the deliberations and decisions of the major assemblies.

c. To contend that Classis Huron had no proper jurisdiction over the Goderich Consistory proceeds on a mistaken conception of the relation of the minor assembly to the major assembly. The same authority, constituting the same standards and the same goals, is applied by the several assemblies. Classis Huron adhered to the correct use of the authority delegated to them by Christ.

d. In the application of Article 17 (re the release of a minister) to the Goderich situation, it is in order that a classis act when a consistory fails to do so (Art. 27). Classis Huron's action was within the range of the delegated authority."

(*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 28-30)

4. Synod 1982 concurred with Synod 1980's ability to have authority over a consistory (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 55, 628-629).

5. Synod 1991 upheld the action of Classis Lake Erie in suspending the entire council of a church, and instructed the classis to immediately complete the discipline proceedings and deposition of an elder and a deacon (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771).

6. Synod 1993 heard an appeal from a church in Classis Hudson when the classis suspended and deposed its minister. Synod did not sustain the appeal. Some of the grounds included the following:

   a. The Church Order does not specify that the local council is the only body that may initiate and impose special discipline.

   b. Synodical precedents establish the authority of a classis to suspend and depose a minister without request or appeal from a member of the council or congregation of the church involved under circumstances such as those present in this matter.

(*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 529)

7. Synod 2004 instructed Classis Toronto to urge one of its churches to act in accordance with the guidelines of the reports on homosexuality of 1973 and 2002 (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 632). Synod 2005 appointed an *in*

> *loco* committee, and Classis Toronto passed their recommendation, stating that the biblical/ethical guidelines of Synod 1973 and Synod 2002 are considered settled and binding, and that the actions of First CRC of Toronto constituted a breaking of the denominational covenant (*Agenda for Synod 2006*, p. 459). Synod 2006 approved the work of the *In Loco* Committee after the church agreed to conform to the denomination's position (*Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 653).

More recently, Synod 2019 showed us the need for greater clarity in this manner, as it was confronted with a situation in which a minister was teaching Kinism and was not being disciplined for that false teaching by his council. Such teaching was doing great damage not only to that local congregation but also to our entire denomination. The classis had slowly begun a process of investigation, after this pastor had been publicly advocating this position for years, though it was contrary to what he had vowed to uphold when he signed the Covenant for Officebearers. But the question was raised, asking, What if a majority of this classis' delegates were also sympathetic to Kinism? What options would be available to another classis in the CRCNA to hold that officebearer accountable to the Covenant for Officebearers if his own council and classis refused to do so? This pastor's teaching was damaging the witness and reputation of our entire denomination. Synod 2019, beginning to acknowledge that, adopted the following guidance for the churches:

> That synod, given the recent history of Kinist teaching in a particular church of the CRCNA, admonish councils and classes to promote confessional fidelity *and mutually to pursue special discipline of an officebearer* [emphasis added] who is found to hold views contrary to our standard. (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 818)

Synod 2019 was presented with many recommendations for how we as a denomination might go about protecting our members and churches from abuse of power. In the process of wrestling with this, we were reminded how we are stronger together than apart, particularly when dealing with the matter of abuse. We need mutual accountability, and we need fellow brothers and sisters in other classes to hold one another accountable to the vows made in the Covenant for Officebearers when it comes to matters of abuse.

Synod 2019 saw a greater need, both with Kinism and the abuse of power, to broaden the contact that we have with one another, both on a congregational and a classical level. The need is great and pressing in this current age. We see the importance of clarifying this in our Church Order, detailing what it means to continue to covenant together as fellow officebearers in our respective classes when there is a failure to abide by the vows we have made in signing the Covenant for Officebearers.

There is clear scriptural instruction, Church Order mandate, and historical precedent that we should hold one another accountable to these mutual vows to Christ and his church, so that the honor of Jesus would be upheld

and that the witness of his church, as represented in the Christian Reformed Church, would not be tarnished. The Church Order foundation, in Article 1, is that we are in "complete subjection to the Word of God." The Church Order has always been intended as a means to that end and must never be allowed to be used as an excuse for permitting such gross recent affronts as Kinism or abuse of power to continue on technicalities. Let us hold ourselves to high standards and ensure that our Church Order not only allows but also encourages and enables us to live up to our covenant responsibilities.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2020 to adopt the following addition to Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84:

> *To carry out our mutual, covenanted responsibility, any narrower assembly may make a formal appeal to a broader assembly regarding the action or inaction of another assembly when an officebearer is deemed to be in violation of the Covenant for Officebearers. Such an appeal may proceed only after the perceived violation has been communicated to the council and classis of the officebearer. Synod shall be the final body of appeal in all matters.*

Grounds:

1. There is consistent historical precedent in the CRCNA for broader assemblies to hold narrower assemblies accountable to the Form of Subscription/Covenant for Officebearers as an expression of our vows to covenant together as a Reformed denomination.
2. There is a pressing need for clarity to define the ability of one classis to hold another classis accountable to the enforcement of the Covenant for Officebearers, which all officebearers in all classes have signed, for the sake of our common witness and testimony in this world.
3. Synod is the final body to appeal to and is the proper avenue to appeal to, in carrying out our covenanted responsibilities.
4. Synod is the appropriate authoritative body that determines whether it will instruct a classis to a certain point of action regarding the imposition of special discipline on an officebearer within that classis, so synod has the ultimate authority to enforce that (Church Order Art. 27-b).
5. The appointment of synodical deputies (Art. 48) recognizes the vital importance and value of other classes, with synodical approval and authority, to speak into certain decisions of another classis, and has been deemed by synods past not to be an instance of one body "lording it over" another body (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 28).

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 75

Evaluate Polity to Clarify Relationship of Assemblies

Classis Zeeland overtures synod to appoint a study committee to evaluate our church polity in light of the Scriptures, our theology, and our history, with the goal of clarifying the relationship between the council, classis, and synod. This should take particular note of the authority of the church and its various assemblies in light of the issue of discipline and excommunication on the local level, and church discipline and disaffiliation at the classical and synodical levels. The biblical and theological underpinnings should be analyzed first, turning then to recommendations for a proper polity that is biblically faithful and historically informed and addresses the issues the church is facing today. Based upon those conclusions, recommendations for structural changes should follow, including recommendations for changes to Church Order that reflect the biblical and theological and polity conclusions.

Grounds:

1. There is considerable confusion over the nature and authority of church assemblies today. This is causing chaos in the church and must be addressed.
2. These difficulties are deep and serious and can only be appropriately addressed by agreement at the biblical and theological level first, and then applied to our polity, Church Order, and practice.
3. Local churches and classes lack the time and resources to handle such an extensive biblical, theological, and historical task. It involves all our churches, so it must be addressed at the synodical level.
4. The task is significant in both weight, content, and impact, and it requires a full study committee to do it justice.

Classis Zeeland
Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

OVERTURE 76

Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly *(Deferred from 2022)*

I. Overture

Classis Hackensack overtures Synod 2022 to appoint a task force to develop Church Order procedures to discipline officebearers, including disaffiliation of a consistory or classis initiated by a major assembly.

Grounds:

1. The church is enjoined with the responsibility to bring those who wander away back to the truth of God (James 5:19-20)—and when gentle appeals are ignored, to exclude them and pray for them (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1-10; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:19-21).
2. We lack a published mechanism for major assemblies to use in responding to gross theological error.
3. Past practice and appeals confirm that major assemblies have authority to depose officebearers in local churches.
4. Clarifying our discipline would bring consistency to our Church Order in how we discipline erring consistories and classes.

II. Background

Our present Church Order does not accurately reflect the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Reformed confessions with respect to ecclesiastical discipline. We confess that discipline is one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). Our polity has provisions for accountability at the congregational level: members are accountable to elders (Church Order Art. 81), officebearers are accountable to one another (Art. 82-84). These are faithful elaborations of the principles of discipline provided in Matthew 18 and other passages. Principles of good, restrained discipline are spelled out at the congregational level. Local consistories are able respond to correct erring members and officebearers. They can call members to repentance and, as a last resort, exclude them.

However, these principles are opaque for a consistory and classis. Our polity includes appointment of classis counselors and visitors (Art. 42), and synod appoints deputies (Art. 48) to maintain sound doctrine. These roles help our churches abide by good order. Those appointed as counselors, visitors, and deputies have advisory roles to classis or synod. Where a local consistory can exclude confessing members (Art. 81), comparable provisions are not delineated for classis and synod. The authority of broader assemblies is recognized (Art. 27), and the principles of mutual submission and restraint are also expressed (Art. 85).

Christian Reformed churches agree that ecclesiastical authority is original to the local church council, and the authority of major assemblies is delegated (Art. 27). By joining a broader assembly, officebearers of a local church relinquish some authority. What appears absent in the delegation of this authority is a clear process for discipline by a major assembly.

Our Church Order provides little guidance of what to do when those who err ignore admonition and discipline of broader accountability. However, past classical and synodical actions reveal an established practice:

- In 1924 Classis Grand Rapids West deposed the consistories of First CRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Hope CRC in Grandville, Michigan; Synod 1926 upheld the decision of classis.
- In 1980 Classis Huron deposed Rev. Wiebo Ludwig and four other consistory members of Trinity CRC in Goderich, Ontario; Synod 1982 upheld the decision of classis.
- In 1991 Classis Lake Erie deposed officebearers of Washington (Pa.) CRC; Synod 1991 ruled that classis acted within its authority.

Synods have repeatedly affirmed the principle that a classis has authority to depose a consistory (additional cases are noted in Henry De Moor's 1986 *Equipping the Saints* doctoral dissertation). Although precedents exist, our Church Order does not regulate the practice.

Further, there is no precedent for the disaffiliation of a classis by synod. The silence of our Church Order on this important aspect of discipline affects both local congregations and broader assemblies. Local consistories and officebearers may be denied due process because no discernible process exists. Without a uniform standard, broader assemblies are open to charges of inconsistency and injustice. Developing a clear standard for the disaffiliation of a consistory or classis initiated by a major assembly would ensure such separations are handled fairly.

Specifying the disciplinary procedures available to a major assembly would equip delegates of classes. The most recent synod passed a motion to "admonish councils and classes to promote confessional fidelity and mutually to pursue special discipline of an officebearer who is found to hold views contrary to our standard" (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 818-19). This was synod's response to years of heresy being taught in a local church and of the classis failing to act. Delegated officebearers rely on the Church Order as part of the discernment process. Our Church Order needs to adequately guide our officebearers in critical situations of how church discipline functions at the classis and synodical levels.

Classis Hackensack
Sheila E. Holmes, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 1

Classis Minnkota

The churches of Classis Minnkota affirm that men and women are created by God with equality in essence and dignity but with distinction in some roles. We praise God for the beautiful diversity he created when he made us male and female. These distinct roles are taught in Scripture, derive from God's creative will, and are to be manifest in complementary roles in the family and church. This belief is reflected in an accurate translation of the Belgic Confession, Article 30, which reads, "when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy." (See the original French wording, which refers to persons using the masculine gender.) This belief is therefore not rooted in chauvinism or patriarchy but in Scripture and in our historic confession of faith. It is our hope and prayer that this communication will provide a clear and respectful understanding of our convictions in this matter.

We believe that men and women are created equal as imagebearers of God and as heirs of salvation. We also believe that men and women complement each other in mutually enriching ways and that God has given each gender specific callings in the church and home. We seek to honor and glorify God by celebrating and using the gifts and abilities he has given to us within the roles he has established for us.

A. *As a classis we affirm the following convictions:*

1. That men and women equally bear the image of God and are called to serve him throughout their lives (Gen. 1:27-28).
2. That we are to follow Christ's example when he honored and respected women during his earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42) and as he continues to equip them for service in his church today (1 Cor. 12:4-7).
3. That the roles for men and women in the church must be defined solely by the Word of God and not by human ideologies such as feminism, male chauvinism, patriarchy, or sexist oppression (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
4. That from the beginning of creation God assigned headship to males in the family and in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:12-13; 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).

5. That the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" and then grounded this argument in the good created order (1 Tim. 2:12-13). The church, therefore, should not ordain women to its authoritative offices.
6. That the purpose of spiritual gifts is not self-fulfillment but service to God and others, to the end that God receives all the glory (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26).
7. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women is contrary to Scripture.

B. *We also offer the following observations:*

1. That even though Synod 1995 declared that both complementarian and egalitarian views are faithful interpretations of the Word of God, synodical practice since that time has become markedly egalitarian, making it difficult for complementarians to participate in good conscience.
2. That the complementarian position is held by many male and female members and by other officebearers, churches, and classes in the CRCNA.
3. That the CRCNA's 1995 decision to open all offices to women has resulted in offense, division, strife, loss of members, and our expulsion from NAPARC in 1997.
4. That celebration of the egalitarian position and practice through video and song (as done at Synod 2018) causes offense and pricks the consciences of those who hold to the historic complementarian position regarding women in church office.

As members of the body of Christ in the CRCNA, Classis Minnkota does not present this communication in order to offend our brothers and sisters who hold to the egalitarian view; rather we wish to explain that our convictions are rooted in the Word of God. Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 2

Classis Northcentral Iowa

The Abuse of Power committee of the Council of Delegates has proposed the adoption of the Code of Conduct along with the practice of requiring officebearers to sign this code upon entry into office. While misconduct

and abuse, sexual and otherwise, are a plague on the church and the gospel, additional forms and subscriptions only provide redundancy on a standard that is not being held, as currently in our behavior with the Form of Subscription.

As the officebearers of the church submit to Scripture and covenant with one another in the Covenant of Officebearers, we join together under the calling of "Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) and "An overseer must be above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). As such, we are called to flee from abuse and to chastise our brothers and sisters for their abuses in a spirit of humility. Our common understanding of Scripture that we agree to in the Three Forms of Unity already condemns sin and calls for justice. We do not need additional rules; we need follow-through of discipline and reconciliation to become the regular practice of the church. In practicing what we already affirm, the Code of Conduct becomes unnecessary.

Classis Northcentral Iowa
Rev. Steve Mulder, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 3

Classis Holland

We, Classis Holland, wish to submit the following communication to Synod 2023, offering our reflections to our fellow officebearers and sister churches after a year of difficult and challenging ministry trying to navigate differences of conviction on matters related to human sexuality.

We wish to speak in four ways: (1) heeding the call of Synod 2022; (2) words to those who agree with Synod 2022; (3) words to those who disagree with Synod 2022; and (4) an appeal for listening, reform, and unity.

I. Heeding the call of Synod 2022

A. We desire to express our gratitude for the work of Synod 2022 specifically, and for the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) more generally. In our present moment, the challenges in the area of human sexuality are immense and confusing. The church's past and present are littered with failure to offer a distinctive life and voice in this arena. The decisions before Synod 2022 were significant, and its tasks daunting. While we have come to believe that some of its decisions were imperfect (see the Classis Holland overture "In Pursuit of Scriptural and Confessional Unity"), we also believe it did its work faithfully, generously, and well guided by Word and Spirit. As Synod 2022 recognized, the HSR presents a robust challenge to *all* of us about what it means to live a "holy and healthy Christian sexual life" for both married and single persons (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 315) and to be the sort of community that makes a Christian sexual ethic feel not only beautiful but livable. In its

decisions and in its spirit Synod 2022 followed the HSR in calling us to a much larger work than a myopic focus on a single issue (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 316-27)—nothing short of the reformation and renewal of our congregations around the Word, sacrament, and discipleship (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 906). We yearn for the churches of the CRCNA to heed this call and to begin and continue this work—for the good of struggling marriages, for the good of people addicted to pornography, for the good of cohabiting couples, for the good of people living celibate lives, and for the good of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.

B. In the CRCNA at present, we have very different visions at play in how to bring this about, which were on display at synod itself. In one, we have a clear vision of what we might call *confessional return* as the way forward. At its best, such a vision rightly emphasizes the importance of doctrinal continuity, of maintaining identity and coherence across time, and of fidelity to Scripture through the lens of our Reformed confessions. In the other, we have an equally clear vision of what we might call *liberative progress* as the way forward. At its best, such a vision sees real problems that require the church to adapt and develop; forces the church to ask new, hard, pressing questions; and seeks answers via an approach to Scripture that remains open to the Spirit's leading the church into new insight, albeit in ways faithful to Scripture. Each of these visions, of course, has its own danger as well. Confessional return, in its zealous defense of the true gospel and historic orthodoxy, can easily degenerate into a sort of comfortable traditional*ism*—a way of "moving forward" that doesn't move at all but is rather wedded to the past and unwilling to engage the present for the sake of the future, a way of "tying up heavy loads" without "lifting a finger to move them" (Matt. 23:4). Liberative progress, on the other hand, in its zealous pursuit of the causes of liberation, progress, and inclusion (and of change itself), can easily be "tossed to and fro, carried here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14) and therefore run headlong into falsehood and error—a way of "moving forward" in which "forward" takes its keynotes not from Scripture but elsewhere. What are we to do with these seemingly conflicting visions, with all of their accompanying strengths and weaknesses?

C. Speaking of these as separate "visions," however, and as if such visions are hermetically sealed in separate groups, masks a deeper reality: most of us identify with aspects of both, and we toggle back and forth, depending on the issue. Moreover, at any given time, we may find ourselves in general agreement on a position first with certain people and then with others (confessional return here, liberative progress there), but sometimes for very different reasons from those motivating those certain people. What all of this means is that generalization is nearly impossible—and dangerous. We are *all* individually (and as individual churches) prone to the strengths and weaknesses (or sins and virtues) described above. We may each have our tendencies, but we are not immune from any of them—not immune from justifying

ourselves by appeal to the obvious falsehood or immorality of the position we oppose.[1] Each of these visions, and so each of *us*, can be deeply culturally assimilated in ways that we can't see. Each of us, first here and then there, can baptize ways of being in the world that are at odds with Scripture and our Reformed confessions. Each of us can operate from deeply rooted pride, the desire to stand in God's place, the desire to *be* God—that original human sin (Gen. 3:1-7). Until we recognize this, and learn to respond in repentance and humility, we will not and cannot be one.

What does all of this mean, then? How might we try, quite practically, to live together with scriptural and confessional integrity, along with a healthy realism about some of the challenges of confessional identity today? How shall we (all of us) humble ourselves, so as to be eager "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3)—a unity that is so precious to Jesus (John 17:20-23)?

II. To those who agree with Synod 2022

We wish to speak first to those who agree with Synod 2022's decisions. First, a simple observation: we believe this moment calls for deep patience, a fruit of the Spirit that Scripture repeatedly enjoins on us (Gal. 5:22; Col. 3:12). In any difficult period of discernment, patience is a prerequisite.[2] The past fifty years—not just in the CRCNA, but in every religious tradition of the Western world—have been nothing if not a difficult period of theological and moral discernment on the question of same-sex marriage. Patience does not require one to act as if this is a completely novel or open question, nor that this will be a perennially open question. It simply requires an acknowledgment, easily made by simple observation of the church all over the West, that whatever our theological pronouncements may declare, at a functional level, the matter is clearly not settled yet.[3] There is more work to do—deep work of teaching, catechesis, discipleship, and discernment—and if those who agree with Synod 2022 are asking for humble submission from those who disagree (see section III below), then a similar humble patience is required of those who are asking for it, as together we seek to "bear with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2). What will such patience practically look like? We wish to say four things

---

[1] One is reminded of Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in which the Pharisee cries out, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" (Luke 18:11). Pharisaism runs in multiple directions today; no "vision" or its adherents is immune to it. The proper prayer belongs to the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (v. 13)!

[2] Even if we believe our brothers and sisters err in the midst of this discernment, it remains the case that any correction is to be done with "complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).

[3] As Ephraim Radner writes, "Confusion, disagreement, and political hostilities over sexuality reflect deep cultural issues that may one day be resolved—but not in the short term, and probably not without the intervention of catastrophic social changes driven by factors other than theological discussion" ("The Last Lambeth Conference," *First Things*, Oct. 2022, 10). Or, we might add prayerfully and hopefully, through the "catastrophic" intervention of the Holy Spirit.

to Synod 2023 by way of recommendation, trusting synod to discern specific ways forward with respect to each.

A. First, some members in our church bodies will feel they cannot stay, or will go through a long period wondering if they *can* stay. Throughout this process, and if it ends in departure, we urge churches to treat those who leave with compassion, love, dignity, and respect. If we do have to separate, let us grieve this, and pray that it is temporary. Insofar as it depends on us, let us "live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18).

B. Second, we simply note that in the CRCNA we have very high standards of confessional agreement for both officebearers *and* members, with the only real difference being differing degrees of responsibility for the teaching, defense, and promotion of our confessional standards.[4] This is very challenging, not least in a time when new members are regularly joining our churches from outside the Reformed tradition, but also when *all* of our members are increasingly shaped (online and personally) by a wide array of Christian traditions, and where much of this (not all) is to our benefit and to be celebrated. Yes, we do not wish to empty our confessional identity, and yes, it is our joy and responsibility to catechize young and old, new and longtime members in the riches of the Reformed tradition. But it is also our joy and responsibility to learn from other traditions and to have our own scriptural blind-spots corrected, as we desire chiefly to subject ourselves to the Word of God and be reformed according to it. Confessional commitment ought *never* be a means of avoiding the gaze of God's Word. Insofar as that reformation may come from unexpected places, through voices outside us, we would like to find ways to make space for it—for vital questions, vital dialogue, even vital disagreement of certain kinds—within a robust confessionalism. To this end, while we believe that the church's ordained offices should continue to be held to the high confessional standards spelled out in the Covenant for Officebearers, we suggest that perhaps it is time, both out of openness to scriptural reform and in accommodation to present reality, to make some careful distinctions in our confessional expectations for members. We do not pretend to have charted a way forward here, but we urge synod to consider this.

C. Third, we wish to urge a generous posture toward the use of *confessional-difficulty gravamina* (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5), provided the officebearer commits to serving with integrity in light of the promises made in the Covenant for Officebearers.[5] To be sure, we recognize

---

[4] As Synod 1975 said, "Full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all officebearers by signing the Form of Subscription" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601).

[5] As well as in light of our expectations relative to the "settled and binding" character of synodical deliverances spelled out in Report 47 in the *Acts of Synod 1975* (pp. 595-604).

the possibility for the *abuse* of such gravamina,[6] but we also see a similar possibility of abuse in *rejecting* all such gravamina on this topic, or in foreclosing their possible use on this doctrinal/moral topic from the outset. The Covenant for Officebearers asks two things of someone with a confessional difficulty: (1) to present it "in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel," and (2) to "promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority." Notice what it does *not* ask—namely, to *agree* with the church's judgment, but rather to *submit* to it. As we read it, this should allow someone with a private disagreement to serve, so long as (1) they will not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against the church's teaching, and (2) if called upon in private or public, they will teach the church's doctrine and not their own private belief. If churches will *not* allow this—that is, if they refuse *a priori* to grant a confessional-difficulty gravamen in this area of doctrine and teaching, *even if the officebearer submits to the church's judgment and authority, as expected in the Covenant for Officebearers*—then this seems to us abusive in its own right, and an abject failure to humbly and patiently "bear with one another in love" (Eph. 4:3) and to "pursue what makes for peace" (Rom. 14:19). If a provision exists in the Church Order for a confessional difficulty, then that provision should be available regardless of the difficulty, at the judgment and discretion of the local church in consultation with the officebearer.

D. Fourth, we come to the matter of discipline. As will soon be clear, we believe in the church's right authority to engage in godly, humble, and patient discipline (see section III, B) as an exercise in love for those who err and as an act of faithful discipleship, calling all members ever more deeply into Christ's body (Church Order, Arts. 78-81). Such discipline is a mark of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The church should not be cavalier about sin or error. But we would also like to urge great caution on the church in this area. When it comes to matters of sexuality, marriage, family, and the body, the errors of life and doctrine that pervade the church are legion. Insofar as we have idolized marriage, sex, and the nuclear family at the expense of the ecclesial family; insofar as we have failed to articulate a robust theology of celibacy and the beauty of chastity; insofar as we have looked past other areas of overt sexual sin (pornography, cohabiting heterosexual couples, sexual violence and abuse, no-fault divorce, etc.), or not questioned the sexual practices of the heterosexual mainstream (contraception, any and all sexual acts within marriage, etc.); and insofar as we have tolerated any number of other areas of nonsexual sin, we have failed to engage in *all of these areas* in a program of faithful discipline

[6] We can certainly envision it being used as a means of giving officebearers, churches, and entire classes a way "in the door" to serve, after which they might carry on teaching and discipling in a way contrary to Scripture and the confessions. But that would be an *abuse*, and so it would (and should) invite a process of discipline—processes we may well need to create in order to give higher assemblies a way (in limited instances) of initiating discipline on a minor assembly.

that calls Christ's straying children back into the body. All of the above are, or may well be, errors of life and doctrine that need correction. To *begin* a program of discipline with sexually active or married LGBTQ+ members, or with those who err in doctrine in this area, after all we have tolerated and overlooked, would be hypocrisy of the worst kind. Again, the first step here is repentance. Let us "foster a spirit of love and openness within [our] fellowship[s]" so that *all of us* "erring members may be led to repentance and reconciliation" (Church Order, Art. 79) and so that *all of us* may be called back to Christ's body from which we have strayed. Perhaps then, with the log pulled from our own eye, we will be in a position to see more clearly the speck in our brother's or sister's eye (Matt. 7:3-5), at which point we will be invited to remove it and restore them, but with a "spirit of gentleness" (Gal. 6:1).

E. In sum, if those who agree with Synod 2022's decisions will not be patient with those who do not, if we will foreclose even the possibility of confessional-difficulty gravamina, and if we will engage in discipline on this topic where we do not elsewhere, we will rightly deserve the label *hypocrites*. More seriously still, it will be very hard to avoid the conclusion that sex has become so theologically defining an issue for us that it constitutes a new de facto "mark" of the church—an idol worth breaking Christ's body over.

III. To those who disagree with Synod 2022

Having spoken to those of us who agree with Synod 2022's decisions, what would we say to those of us who disagree? Again, four things:

A. First, a word about interpreting Synod 2022. A great deal has been suggested about synod's motivations, much of it uncharitable. While no human gathering of any kind is perfect, we wish to say the following. We believe that Christ speaks to and governs his church by Word and Spirit. In our polity, this comes through our ordained offices and so through our assemblies (council, classis, synod). But the idea goes right back to Scripture (Matt. 16:18-19; John 20:19-23; Eph. 4:11-14; 1 Tim. 4:6-16; 2 Tim. 1:13-14). In Synod 2022's decisions, we believe Christ spoke to and governed his church by Word and Spirit. When it comes to sexual ethics, synod sought to safeguard our denomination from error by calling us away from a sort of reform that, at the end of the day, would have been false, easy, and all-too common: a simple reaffirmation of our cultural idols of marriage, sex, and family, now simply applied to same-sex relationships. This would not have involved a radical reimagination of our life together but a quite common one—one that imagines marriage and sex as the greatest gifts we could offer our LGBTQ+ members. Synod thus clarified the scriptural and confessional boundaries for true reform,[7] and so also the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" grounds on which we will seek to reimagine and order our

[7] Even as it did not *over*prescribe answers to vital conversations we will need to have about creative ministry *within* those boundaries.

life together. With the authority we delegate to this highest of our assemblies, the church spoke at synod and called our churches and her members to *this* newly reimagined path and away from others.[8] It is this path that we desire to follow together.

B. Second, a word about authority. While not the only role, this is *a* responsibility we expect our synod (and other assemblies) to exercise in our polity—to guard our life and teaching (1 Tim. 4:16) and to care for the church through discipline (Church Order, Arts. 78-84). This is not *inherently* judgmental, punitive, or "Pharisaism" by another name. If there are things that threaten the church and her members—be they schism, immorality, falsehood, or apathy—we should protect each other from such things. Moreover, in a special way, the ordained leaders of the church are called to protect Christ's church and her members from such things and to build her up in her unity (Eph. 4:11-13), holiness (1 Cor. 5:1-13), catholicity (2 Tim. 1:13-14; 4:1-5), and apostolicity (Matt. 28:18-20). If ordained leaders do *not* do this, they will be held accountable (James 3:1). The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and does not flee when danger threatens the sheep (John 10:11-15). Those who are shepherds of the flock under the good shepherd must follow his pattern (1 Pet. 5:1-11). Functioning at its best, this is what authority in the church is for—to protect, care for, and build up the body in the above ways until we attain "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13). When done with humility and love, such discipline calls churches and members back to that body wherein alone we can grow together in the church's marks.[9] This is what Synod 2022 tried to do—to clarify right teaching, correct error, and restore erring churches and members to faithful obedience and full fellowship (Church Order, Art. 78). Such is the way enjoined on us by Jesus himself (Matt. 16:13-20; 17:15-19), and practiced by the apostles.

C. Third, a question, rooted in a fragile hope. All of the above leaves a major question open before those of us who disagree with Synod 2022's decisions: will we stay and heed the voice of the church? Or stay and simply disregard or object to the church's teaching? Or, in the name of love, justice, and/or conscience, will we leave? For our part, we urge those who disagree to stay and heed the voice of Christ through the church. It is no secret that the church, not least the CRCNA, has failed her LGBTQ+ children. If we have learned anything

---

[8] Quoting Jeremiah, the HSR invites us to walk in the "ancient paths, where the good way lies" (6:16), and calls this a "new-old way" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 322)—perhaps a "new path" that is, in fact, a very old path, which hasn't been trod in centuries and which will surely challenge us all as we seek to walk on it together.

[9] Such authority, of course, given by Christ, must reflect the servant character of Christ (Matt. 20:26-28). Where this has not been the case, where authority and discipline have been misused, abused, and born from punitive motives—a desire to "lord it over" the other (1 Pet. 5:3)—this itself is an egregious error, a wrong done, unbefitting of servants of Christ, with no place in the church. But authority and discipline are not *inherently* that way. They cannot inherently be that way, for these things find their origin in God, and God is not that way. Authority and discipline can (must) be an expression of love, for "the Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb. 12:6).

since 1973, surely it is that the church is painfully slow in reforming itself into the sort of community where God's LGBTQ+ children can know themselves as God's beloved, leading lives that are "transparent to Jesus."[10] Without the whole body, and the gifts, passions, and insight we all bring to the table, it is difficult to see how reform—*any* reform—ever takes place in the CRCNA. To the degree that this comes at the expense of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, it will be one more immense theological and moral failure. We are not asking, then, for those of us who disagree to give up our love, commitment, and unceasing commitment to see our LGBTQ+ neighbors, friends, and family flourish in Christ—far from it![11] We all (should) desire the same. What we are asking those who disagree to give up is the belief that *same-sex marriage* and *sex* are the means of that flourishing. In fact, what we are asking *all of us* to give up is the mistaken belief, so prevalent in Christian circles, that marriage and sex generally are the means to Christian flourishing—to a full and complete life. In other words, what we are asking for is humility, from all of us—first toward God and his Word, then toward one another. Rather than settling for culturally acceptable norms as the solution to our shared failures, we need each other so that together we might "reimagine our life together" for the good of all of God's children.

D. Finally, a word of challenge. We recognize that, for those who disagree with Synod 2022, these convictions are deeply rooted and touch on things that feel essential. In section II above we tried to offer suggestions as to how the CRCNA could navigate our deep differences of conviction in an effort to preserve and maintain what unity we can, even if this will not in the end involve the church endorsing alternative teaching in this area. Now, however, we wish simply to offer a challenge to those of us who disagree with Synod 2022, and to suggest what it might look like for *us* to earnestly seek and prioritize unity, given our disagreement. We say this: liberalism (the freedom and rights of the individual) and pluralism (the coexistence of groups of varying and conflicting belief), which we are steeped in as Westerners, simply cannot ground ecclesial unity. There is authority in the church beyond the individual and (we say in our polity) beyond the local church. This authority, which we give to our assemblies (council, classis, synod), helps ground our unity—to keep us of "one soul and one mind" (Belhar Confession, Art. 2; cf. 1 Cor. 1:10). As countercultural as this may be, then, our unity cannot be located in the freedom of our individual consciences, judgments, or interpretations but in our "complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true

---

[10] The language is that of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

[11] Of course, if you *are* "our LGBTQ+ neighbors, friends, and family" (and so *are* "us"), we are also not asking *you* to give up your unceasing pursuit of flourishing as God's beloved either. In fact, if we are honest, it is many of you who are most responsible for teaching us that Christians today have for too long overidentified this flourishing with such "earthly goods" as marriage and sex, rather than with the "heavenly goods" of Christ and his church.

interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church" (Church Order, Art. 1). Christ is our head and the *source* of our unity. Complete subjection to God's Word, viewed through the prism of our confessions, as read and interpreted by our rightly ordained assemblies (council, classis, synod) and wrestled with all together—this is how we grow up in Christ, and so grow together in unity (Eph. 4:11-16). In light of this, we do not want to settle for celebrating theological diversity for diversity's sake, nor for simply coexisting amidst difference.[12] We want something better, deeper, and truer—to be of "one soul and one mind," *together*. Perhaps that feels impossible right now; perhaps some of us feel we cannot, in good conscience, give up our belief to the contrary. In that case, what we are asking is that those who disagree with Synod 2022 agree to submit to and live within the church's teaching, and not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against it, as we promise in the Covenant for Officebearers.[13] May we ask that? And if we may not—if some of us must leave over this, or openly disregard this teaching, thus knowingly causing dissension—then it will be hard to avoid the conclusion that for some of us, the goodness and rightness of same-sex marriage and homosexual sex is of such central importance that it exceeds our belief in the unity of the church. If this is the case, then *sex* (or perhaps "sexual liberation") will once again have become a new de facto "mark" of the church—an idol over which to break the church's unity.

We have tried in the paragraphs above to speak directly to those of us who agree and those of us who disagree with the HSR and Synod

---

[12] As we said above, we should always be open to reform according to the Word of God, and we are open to areas of vital dialogue, diversity, and disagreement. But such diversity is not an end in itself but a means to greater faithfulness to Scripture—and ultimately of greater faithfulness to Christ. Not all theological diversity is tolerable. Some such diversity *contributes* and some *detracts* from the faithfulness which we seek. This, of course, is a question of discernment.

[13] Such a requirement raises all sorts of questions, which we acknowledge. One thing it does *not* mean is that we cannot talk about these things—from the pulpit, in adult education hours, in small groups, with our youth groups, in council rooms, and in pastoral care and counsel. To the contrary, we *must* talk about these things, although the way in which we do so will be shaped by what context we are in (pulpit, adult education, etc.) and who is present (only leaders, all members, youth, etc.). A list of rules to govern this is impossible and not desirable, but a few principles can guide us, along with mature, humble, submissive character from those involved. First, we would be negligent if we did not engage any and all intellectual and social trends that shape the world in which we live. Insofar as these trends shape our churches and members (and they do), we must engage them. Second, we should do so charitably and in their most thoughtful form(s), with an openness to learning new things, a willingness to engage in critical self-reflection, and a humility to admit blind spots. This is basic Christian responsibility—part of "loving our neighbor." But third, we will do all of this by allowing Scripture and our Reformed tradition to guide and lead this engagement—that is, to shape our approach to, and ultimately to have the authority to call into question, such intellectual and social trends, in part or in whole. Fourth, then, as we engage these matters, what will not be acceptable, in a public or private forum of any kind with members, is to teach, disciple, care, or counsel so as to *affirm or recommend* a view that is in conflict with the church's explicit teaching, as the church reads and interprets Scripture on a given subject.

2022's decisions. We can speak this way because *we are those people*. These disagreements exist in our churches, on our councils, between our pastors, and among our members. We are seeking earnestly to be the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" that Christ has made us, but it is painful and hard. At times it feels hopeless. We close, then, with a few paragraphs that speak to all of us together.

IV. An appeal for listening, reform, and unity

A. One of the questions before us, it seems, is this: will we listen to each other? Will we listen to those who disagree with Synod 2022—voices that cry in the ecclesial wilderness that we have harmed our LGBTQ+ members for too long? And will we listen to those who agree with Synod 2022—voices that cry in the cultural wilderness that same-sex marriage and sex are not the answer to who God's LGBTQ+ children are, but Christ and church are? Both "visions" with which we began, in their most dangerous form, have made an idol of sex, and we are currently bashing the church upon the rock of this idol.[14] The possibility for true reform, in other words, depends on our ability—our willingness—to allow our idols to be smashed, to repent, to humble ourselves, and to patiently listen to one another, bear with one another, and submit to one another, and finally to God, together. Forsaking all others, it depends on an ecclesiology far more robust than we currently employ—an ecclesiology present in our confessions and Church Order and absent in our practice. If we were to recover such an ecclesiology, then, and only then, God willing, as we speak and listen to each other, might we "reimagine our life together around the Word, sacrament, and discipleship." Then, and only then, if the Spirit wills, might we see true reform of the sort that would be good news for all God's children.

B. The paragraph above is only partially correct. As Reformed Christians, what we should have said is that the possibility for true reform depends firstly and always on *God*—and God's willingness—to smash our idols, soften our hearts, unstop our ears, and open our eyes. Then, and only then, will it also depend on our Spirit-empowered capacity to surrender ourselves to a word from outside of us—the Word of God, in all its beauty and challenge. When God's people dwell together in unity across previously unconquerable divides—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, all now "one in Christ Jesus" through baptism and the Spirit (Gal. 3:27-28)—that is a sign that God's new age has arrived, a sign that the folly of the cross has conquered the "wisdom" of the world, a sign of the manifold wisdom of God that reveals all earthly "wisdom" as folly. But when God's people divide, and in dividing give themselves over to "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, and divisions" (Gal. 5:20)—when God's people give themselves over to the "works of the flesh"—that is a sign that God's people are living in the old age; it empties the cross of its power,

[14] See Jessica Martin's prescient critique along these lines in her *Holiness and Desire* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2020), pp. 98-103.

and it's a sign to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"—those hostile powers that seek to deceive, divide, and destroy—that they do, in fact, still have power (on all of the above, see 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16 and Eph. 3:1-13). This is the Word of God—a word that speaks to us, from outside of us. Thanks be to God. In Christ, by the Spirit, we know to which age we belong, and we know the way there. But we need help. The gate is narrow, and the way is hard, but it leads to life (Matt. 7:14). Lord, have mercy upon us.

Classis Holland
Calvin Hoogstra, stated clerk

COMMUNICATION 4

Council of Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, Toronto, Ontario

The majority of Fellowship CRC's members are troubled by portions of the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (HSR), specifically over the implications for individuals in covenantal same-sex unions. Synod's decision to interpret confessional status on this matter is a step too far. We therefore feel strongly that an official communication from our church to Synod 2023 is necessary.

The history of this document is that Fellowship submitted an overture to Classis Toronto. Our overture was taken up by a pre-advice committee, which wrote the following: "The pre-advice committee consisting of delegates from Alliston CRC and Holland Marsh CRC advise Classis Toronto to not accede to the overture from Fellowship CRC. Instead, we recommend that the council of Fellowship CRC reformulate their overture into a communication so that they can share with synod how synod's decisions have impacted their congregation." At their meeting on February 22, 2023, Classis Toronto accepted the advice of this committee, did not accede to our overture, and recommended that we send a communication to synod. Therefore, we have reformulated our overture into a communication, as follows.

We would like to communicate the following:

- We lament the damage this interpretation has done, is doing, and will do to the CRCNA. This is particularly lamentable because (1) the disunity was predictable, (2) the disunifying action seems to have been intentional, and (3) unity is so easily achievable (i.e., by removing confessional status and respecting congregational autonomy on this question).
- We lament that requiring everyone to affirm their agreement with this interpretation of the HSR and the Heidelberg Catechism is

causing great difficulty, is precluding further discussion, and is making the entire discussion that much more intractable. We have already lost members to synod's decision, and we know we will lose more. We are a small church, and losing members over this issue is painful. This also presents a major stumbling block for some of our lifelong members, who had lived and served well under the terms and spirit of Synod 1973's decisions.

- We want you to know that our outreach to our neighborhood is based on offering a place of welcome, belonging, and unconditional acceptance, both in Sunday worship and in our relationships throughout the week. It should not include prejudging people based on their personal behavior or beliefs—but that is what Synod 2022's decision is asking us to do. This confessional interpretation will serve as an effective barrier to entry. This is not only true for LGBTQ+ individuals; straight individuals whom we encounter here in the city of Toronto are long past judging others on their sexual orientation and are typically put off by institutions (especially churches) which make this a requirement of entry.
- We lament that one marginalized group is excluded from the CRC's advocacy efforts, a fact which greatly weakens our overall advocacy for all peoples. We are proud supporters of a denomination which says that it advocates actively for the rights of all marginalized people, yet is in fact further marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals. This discrepancy will cause our LGBTQ+ members, especially the youth, to experience further rejection, isolation, and harm by the church.
- Because of the points above, we fear that we will be unable to constitute a council after Synod 2023, if synod does not reverse the confessional interpretation. This is based on the fact that several existing council members have stated they can no longer serve as an officebearer if Synod 2022's decision on confessional status is not reversed, and on the number of other members who have stated that they will not serve.

We respectfully submit this communication to Synod 2023, and we thank you for your consideration of it.

Council of Fellowship CRC, Toronto, Ontario
Patricia de Bruyn, clerk

Note: This communication was presented as an overture to the meeting of Classis Toronto on February 22, 2023, but was not adopted.

UNPROCESSED COMMUNICATION

Council of New Hope CRC, Lansing, Illinois

This is a statement regarding overtures that are before Synod 2023 requesting the removal and limitation of pastors, officebearers, leaders, and employees who have requested exceptions or filed gravamina with their churches, institutions, or agencies.

Our institutions, including the Council of Delegates (COD), have comprehensive processes in place to review gravamina and exceptions, particularly in the case of confessional-difficulty gravamina.[1] Within the COD, these standards hold individuals to a high standard of accountability. That standard does not allow for any activity that disregards our confessional standards. On the contrary, these standards place an extra-heavy burden on members to act, teach, and minister in accordance with our confessions. COD leaders hold comprehensive conversations with those who seek exceptions. These conversations give individuals an open and honest forum to state the nature of their difficulties with synodical decisions and allow us, as COD leaders, to agree on how those difficulties can or cannot be expressed. This process frees us to serve alongside each other in "God's big mission"[2] from a place of unity, not division and disunity.

Overtures passed by classis assemblies in recent months to remove the participation of individuals who have filed for exceptions and gravamina will profoundly damage our unity and remove gifted pastors, leaders, and laborers from the work of the CRCNA.

These overtures set the stage to justify a comprehensive "house cleaning" of the denomination. These overtures close doors, enforce silence, and force leaders to move against each other, not toward each other. They do not allow us to do the hard work of finding a common unity in open and honest dialogue. All of our CRCNA agencies, governing bodies, and institutions including our mission agencies, Resonate and ReFrame, will suffer from the implementation of overtures that work against the present exception process. This will unnecessarily limit our hiring practices, diminish

[1] Council of Delegates Minutes 2-23, COD 6273, Appendix, p. 17-18.
[2] Dr. Zachary King, general secretary of the CRCNA, in "A Pastoral Letter to the CRC," Dec. 13, 2022.

employee morale and retention, and hinder the implementation of the CRCNA's Ministry Plan and our overall kingdom witness.

These overtures do not bear good fruit, but instead they come with a deep cost. Classes that have enacted these overtures are banning gifted pastors, officebearers, employees, and leaders from the work of the church. These overtures require us to forcibly remove individuals from their God-given ministry callings, service, and employment in the CRCNA. By doing so, classes and churches are closing the door on any and all conversation on this topic. This is not a messy reformation but a posture that feeds discord, division, suspicion, and distrust and negatively limits our reach and profoundly deadens our mission and witness in the world.

Let us heed the recent words of our general secretary, Dr. Zachary King, in his letter to the denomination of December 13, 2022, to seek unity through the bonds of peace. Instead of looking for quick fixes that sow anger, discord, dismissal, division, and disunity, let us do the hard work that seeks unity through the bonds we do share: a rich and deep Reformed theology, life, and witness.

For the advancement of the church, synod should not accede to these overtures. Instead, synod should seek unity through methods that define how pastors, officebearers, agency leaders, and employees may fully participate in our institutions so that the work of the church may be blessed. The implementation of any measure that forcibly removes individuals from our denomination on the basis of their having filed exceptions or gravamina will inflict deep, irreparable wounds on the church.

Our general secretary is pastorally guiding us in postures of humility, mutual submission, and unity. Let's listen and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and do that instead.

In humility and service to the church of Jesus Christ,

Council of New Hope CRC, Lansing, Illinois
Jill Feikema, clerk

Note: This communication was submitted in response to a decision made at Classis Illiana's winter meeting in 2023 and thus could not be processed through the classis before the March 15 deadline for submitting communications to synod. It is therefore an unprocessed communication submitted to Synod 2023 as information according to the Rules for Synodical Procedure (V, B, 7).

APPENDIX

Council of Delegates

February 2023 - COD 6273 – Appendix, pp. 17-18

Process for Submitting and Addressing Exceptions to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA

Note: The following are guidelines adopted by the COD for the COD Executive Committee and not intended to be an official COD policy.

The COD in October 2022 adopted the following steps to help guide COD members and the Executive Committee in processing exceptions to the Statement of Agreement going forward:

1. Like other denominational boards, the COD has established its own policy (Appendix P of the COD Governance Handbook) to indicate and process the concerns and difficulties of its members regarding confessional statements and their interpretations. Because not all COD members are officebearers (ministers of the Word, commissioned pastors, elders, and/or deacons), the process for COD members to file exceptions to the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA is independent from the Church Order gravamen process (filed with the local council by officebearers; cf. Supplement, Article 5). In fact, the Statement of Agreement is similar but not identical to the Covenant for Officebearers. Similar to other denominational boards, the COD has established its own process; and so if a member has filed a personal gravamen with the local council, they should also consider filing an exception with the COD.
2. COD members send a personal, written notice of their exception to the Statement of Agreement to the General Secretary.
3. The General Secretary seeks any clarification that might be needed and places the correspondence on the agenda of the next COD Executive Committee meeting. Such submissions are considered to be confidential documents and are not open to discussion beyond the COD Executive Committee, the deciding body.
4. A COD Executive Committee member has a private conversation with the petitioner to hear concerns and affirm the bullet points that follow in the approved process.
5. If still a valid submission, the COD Executive Committee makes a decision regarding the submitted exception (to accept or not accept) and communicates its decision to the COD member. Criteria to guide the review and decision include the following:
    - The centrality of the belief for which the exception is sought to the core teachings of the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions.
    - The petitioner's willingness to "present" confessional difficulties "in a spirit of love, fellowship, and submission" (Church Order Art. 5 and its Supplement).

- The petitioner's recognition of the binding nature of the matter for which he/she is seeking an exception, and their willingness to not publicly contradict, teach, or act against the matter for which they are seeking an exception.

6. Any decision by the Executive Committee regarding an exception filed is to be minuted in *executive session* minutes with grounds. Public minutes will give the number of exceptions requested, how many of the requests were granted and/or denied, and the specific confessional reference the exception addressed (e.g., Canons of Dort, First Main Point of Doctrine, Art. 3)
7. If the submitted exception is accepted by the Executive Committee, the petitioner enters their name in the Statement of Agreement signature book with an asterisk. The written exception is kept in a confidential file in the Office of General Secretary until the COD member concludes service on the COD.
8. If the COD Executive Committee does not accept the request for an exception filed by a COD member, the decision is communicated with the COD member, who may withdraw the exception, may resign from the COD, or may be removed from membership on the COD.
9. COD members are exhorted that sharing the presence of an asterisk next to a signature with anyone outside of the membership of the COD contravenes the Code of Conduct.

Note: COD members who have had exceptions accepted by the COD Executive Committee may choose to share that fact with the classis that nominated them, but are not obligated to. The decision of the COD Executive Committee is final and follows adopted procedures in the COD Governance Handbook for delegates who are appointed by synod, and is not open to review by classes.

Adopted by the Council of Delegates
October 2022

Councils of High River (Alta.) CRC; Covenant CRC, Calgary, Alberta; Nobleford (Alta.) CRC; and Granum (Alta.) CRC

I. Introduction

At its June 2022 meeting the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the following resolutions:

> That synod affirm that "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation "an interpretation of [a] confession" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). **Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status**.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922; emphasis added)

> That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c[1] is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.
>
> (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 924)

Despite synod adopting these conclusions from the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, it is apparent that there are officebearers within the denomination, and also within Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, who do not agree and thus are currently functioning in contravention of the CRCNA's Covenant for Officebearers. This has been made clear through comments on the floor of the October 2022 and March 2023 meetings of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, the public writings of certain individuals, the website of at least one congregation within our classis,[2] and the website of All One Body, which, at the time of this writing, lists eleven congregations in the CRCNA who desire to be known as "affirming."[3]

II. Biblical background

While addressing the subject of marriage and divorce, the Lord Jesus Christ summarized the teaching of Scripture, saying, "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'" (Mark 10:6–8). This clear teaching of Jesus was based on God's Word in Genesis:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And

[1] "Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God."
[2] The Road Church, "2SLGBTQIA+ Inclusion," theroadchurch.ca/lgbtq-inclusion: "When we say 'fully affirming,' we mean that people of all gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations are valued and welcomed into full participation in the life, discipleship, and leadership of the church, including baptism, communion, and marriage."
[3] allonebody.org

> God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. . . ."
> (Gen. 1:27–28)

> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:24)

In giving the additional command "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9), Jesus further clarified that God's purpose in creating people as male and female was to provide, as we read in the CRCNA Form for the Solemnization of Marriage, "a setting within which we may give loving and tender expression to the desires God gave us," and "a secure environment within which children may be born and taught to know and serve the Lord."[4] This is consistent with God's Word in Malachi 2:15:

> Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. . . .

Further, we believe that God's Word teaches that there are only two sexes, male and female (Gen. 1:27; Mark 10:6; Matt. 19:4), which were specifically designed and created by God to biologically complement one another so that by his blessing and grace they might fulfill his plan for them to "be fruitful and multiply" through the bearing of children within the covenant of marriage (Ps. 127:3; Mal. 2:15). To speak of more than two sexes (or "genders"[5]) contradicts and distorts the clear teaching of Scripture about God's purpose for creating people as male and female.

We also believe that, according to the Scriptures, marriage is a covenant before God in which a man and a woman promise to remain united together and faithful to one another until death (Mark 10:6-9; Mal. 2:13-14). Sexual relations are to be enjoyed only between male and female, and only within the context of this lifelong covenant of marriage (Mal. 2:15; Mark 10:7-9; Heb. 13:4). Any and all expressions of sexuality outside of this lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman[6] are sins against the clear commands of God, which, together with all other sinful acts, must be repented of if those who engage in them would not be regarded as excluded from the kingdom of God (Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Thess. 1:5-10).

---

[4] CRCNA Form for the Solemnization of Marriage (1979), crcna.org/resources/church-resources/liturgical-forms/marriage/form-solemnization-marriage-1979

[5] Using the word "gender" in the sense that it may be defined as "the state of being male or female chiefly in cultural or social contexts," see Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[6] Such sins include, but are not limited to, adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex. All these were acknowledged by the 2022 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America as being encompassed in the Heidelberg Catechism's use of the word "unchastity" in Q. and A. 108, and this understanding was deemed to have confessional status.

III. Communication

Therefore, the councils of High River, Covenant, Nobleford, and Granum Christian Reformed churches communicate their desire for Synod 2023 to not seat, or allow to remain seated, any delegate or adviser who will not affirm or reaffirm the Covenant for Officebearers in keeping with the decisions of Synod 2022 on human sexuality, to the current and all subsequent meetings of synod, together with the meetings of all denominational and classical assemblies, agencies, boards, and committees, regardless of whether any such officebearer has submitted a gravamen or exception to his or her local council or board.

Grounds:

1. The Covenant for Officebearers states: "We . . . affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ. Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. **We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them**" (emphasis added).

2. Given that according to Church Order Article 26 the authority of councils is original and the authority of the major assemblies is delegated, and also that Church Order Article 5 does not specify a process for addressing a confessional-difficulty gravamen to a broader assembly, it is unacceptable to expect local councils to delegate any of the original authority entrusted to them by Christ by endorsing delegates to a broader assembly who, far from believing, promoting, and defending the doctrines of God's Word, have signed the Covenant for Officebearers with personal reservations and exceptions which may remain unknown to the delegating assembly.

3. Christ commands faithful officebearers in his church to love and encourage those who struggle with sin by the preaching of the gospel so that by the grace of God they may turn from sin, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation, and find forgiveness and life in his name (Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 2:24-26).

4. Those who excuse and openly teach as acceptable and blessed that which God's Word clearly defines as sin, including (but not limited to) all forms of sexual immorality, are not promoting and defending the teachings of God's Word and therefore have broken faith with the Lord and with his church and cannot by the simple expedient of submitting a confessional-difficulty gravamen or exception to a local council or board, be deemed to be keeping covenant with the Lord and with his church. Rather, such officebearers are worthy of church discipline

and should not be delegated to the major assemblies of the church (Isa. 5:20; Jer. 6:13-15; Matt. 18:6; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; Jude 1-16; Rev. 2:14-16, 20-23).

Council of High River (Alta.) CRC
Martha de Klerk, clerk

Council of Covenant CRC, Calgary, Alberta
Debra McIntosh, clerk

Council of Nobleford (Alta.) CRC
Clarence Slomp, clerk

Council of Granum (Alta.) CRC
Tjapko Detmers, clerk

Note: This unprocessed overture is submitted as a communication for information to Synod 2023 according to the Rules for Synodical Procedure (V, B, 7).

APPEAL 1

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan

The council of Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, appeals to synod the decision of Classis Holland during its meeting of October 6, 2022, where it found that suspended members do, in fact, have standing to file overtures, even though the local consistory had judged otherwise.

Grounds:

1. No Church Order grounds were given for this decision.
   a. Rather, the opinion of Kathy Smith (adjunct professor of church polity at Calvin Theological Seminary) was verbally shared with the delegates (it was not given in writing nor with reference to any Church Order article or previous decisions of synod to substantiate it) that suspended members do have standing from which to submit overtures.
   b. We respect Kathy Smith's opinion, but it is simply an opinion, and it does not align with the clear implication of the Church Order.
2. The clear implication of the Church Order was ignored.
   a. The Church Order Supplement to Articles 78-81 states,

      > A person who persistently rejects the admonition of the consistory shall be suspended from the privileges of membership. The privileges of confessing membership include but are not limited to presentation of children for holy baptism, the right to vote at congregational meetings, and eligibility to hold office.

   b. The phrase, "The privileges of confessing membership *include but are not limited to*" (emphasis added) plainly states that not all privileges of membership that can be suspended are listed here. As an example, the privilege of taking communion is not listed here but is often a privilege of membership that is suspended in many such situations.
   c. The question then becomes "Who decides which privileges are suspended and which are not?" This the Church Order gives clearly to the local consistory (Art. 81-a).
   d. The local consistory had already determined that the suspended members did not currently have this privilege.

3. The confidentiality of the parties involved was breached on the floor of classis during the discussion period by a member of the Classis Executive Team (CET) itself.
    a. The CET had stated that no names would be used so that a clean decision on the question at hand, "Does a suspended member have standing to submit an overture?" could be decided on its own merits.
    b. However, a pastor and member of the CET, during discussion, read to the delegates a portion of a letter purportedly from Kathy Smith to the members in question where the name of the church was mentioned repeatedly. While he was warned by the chair, "be careful," more than once, the pastor persisted, and the identity of the church was known to all.

We ask the following:

A. That synod reverse the decision of Classis Holland in this matter.

B. That synod affirm the authority of the local consistory in making this decision.

C. That synod instruct Classis Holland to admonish the member of the CET for his behavior in this matter.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan
Keith Lubbers, chair of council

APPEAL 2

Council of Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

I. Background

The council of Neland Avenue CRC has received the instruction from Synod 2022 "to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying this deacon's current term." The council expresses its sorrow that its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage has caused consternation and pain for many in the CRC. The council also assures synod that the decision to ordain this person was made only after a great deal of prayer, of listening to Scripture and to the Spirit and each other, and of giving careful attention and respect to the polity of the Christian Reformed Church. (The years-long conversation that preceded the council's decision is explained extensively in Communication 6 [*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 594-616] and in Overture 55 [*Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 663-80]. Rather than repeat that information here, the council asks that readers of this appeal also read those documents as important background material.)

Because Neland has spent significant time reflecting on its commitment to the denomination, to the Spirit's leading, and to caring for one another, the council testifies to three certainties: Neland feels a strong covenantal relationship to and with the Christian Reformed Church; the council does not agree that Neland's decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage constitutes breaking covenant with the denomination we love; and the council "believes that in the call of the congregation God himself is calling this deacon to this holy office" (CRC Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons).

Church Order Article 30-a states, "Assemblies and church members may appeal to the assembly next in order if they believe that injustice has been done or that a decision conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order. Appellants shall observe all ecclesiastical regulations regarding the manner and time of appeal." Henry DeMoor's *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* notes that for a decision of synod, the next assembly in order is a subsequent synod (p. 176). Hence, the council of Neland Avenue CRC appeals the decision of Synod 2022 quoted above to Synod 2023.

II. Neland Church's response to synod

After prayerful consideration of Synod 2022's instruction to Neland Avenue CRC to rescind this ordination, the council has decided it must appeal this decision of synod for the following reasons. These demonstrate that synod's decision conflicts with the Church Order and with ecclesiastical regulations contained in previous synodical decisions.

A. Reason 1

Articles 3 and 4 of the Church Order give local church councils the right to nominate those who are presented to the congregation as ministers, elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors. Supplement, Article 3-a (item 3) elaborates upon this right when, in the context of differing convictions about women in office, it declares, "Every classis shall respect the prerogative of its constituent churches to call and ordain officebearers according to their own biblical convictions." While synodical positions certainly enter into councils' consideration of who is best qualified to serve in office, the final judgment as to who is qualified to serve is the local council's alone. At the time of this deacon's nomination, election, and ordination, the denomination had only a synodical position, not a confessionally binding interpretation of the word "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

B. Reason 2

Synod has identified the local council or consistory as the appropriate body for decision making in complex pastoral situations. In its "Report on Divorce and Remarriage," Synod 1980 shifted the burden to the local consistory for discerning appropriate actions in complex pastoral situations, "for it has the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the situation" (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 484). For years before that 1980 decision, synod had

attempted to draw straight lines of application from synodical positions to individual pastoral situations in local churches. Synod 1980 acknowledged that individual pastoral situations are too complex for synod to knowledgeably address from the distance of synod. Instead, local councils or consistories must be trusted to apply synodical positions in their ministry context.

Just one aspect of the local complexity in Neland's situation is the fact that this particular deacon had already successfully served three previous terms as deacon. Her prior service had confirmed her spiritual gifts and Christian maturity. While synod's only knowledge about this person was that she is in a same-sex marriage, Neland Church experienced this deacon's full life and leadership long before her marriage. In the words of Synod 1980, Neland Church had "the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the situation" from which to make its pastoral judgment.

C. Reason 3

While synod's instruction to Neland Avenue CRC to rescind its decision to ordain this deacon makes no explicit mention of discipline, such an action really amounts to a process of discipline against this deacon. Church Order Article 80 clearly gives this responsibility to the local consistory for general discipline of members, and to the council for special discipline of officebearers (Supplement, Articles 82-84). According to CRC polity, synod (as a broader assembly) cannot instruct a classis or a council to exercise discipline, except upon appeal.

This limitation upon synodical jurisdiction has been tested several times, most recently in 2015, when Classis Minnkota overtured synod "(1) to instruct the consistories of Eastern Avenue CRC (Grand Rapids) and Calvin CRC (Grand Rapids) to exercise discipline with respect to those in their congregations who are publicly advocating homosexual practice through their membership in All One Body, in accordance with the provisions of Church Order Article 81-a; and (2) to admonish the consistories of Eastern Avenue CRC and Calvin CRC for hosting meetings of a group whose goals and purpose promote behavior that synod has declared to be sinful" (*Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 427).

Synod 2015 did not accede to the overture for the very reasons stated above: that "synod cannot instruct a classis or a council to exercise discipline, except upon appeal" and that "the discipline of church members is the responsibility of the local council" (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 674). Synod 2015 cited the *Acts of Synod 1988* (p. 613, also quoted in the *Manual of CRC Government* on p. 277) in saying that if a council is concerned about the views of an officebearer in another church or classis, it can communicate its concerns to that officebearer's council—but if that officebearer's council does not take any action regarding those concerns, the matter ends. (The exact quote from Synod 1988 reads as follows [*note:* in 1988, the term "consistory" was used for what we refer to as the "council" today]: "b. When a *consistory* judges that it has sufficient grounds of suspicion against an of-

ficebearer not under its supervision, it may communicate such to that officebearer's consistory or the synodical board under which the officebearer serves. If the officebearer's consistory and/or synodical board then judges that the grounds of suspicion are insufficient to require further explanation, the procedure ends. If the suspicions are judged to be sufficient, the consistory must follow the regulations of the Church Order.")

In the absence of an appeal to the next assembly in order (per Church Order Article 30), classis and synod do not have the right to reach into the local church to impose or instruct discipline.

This limitation and precedent were pointed out and ignored during the plenary session of Synod 2022. In that same plenary session, synod was informed that the advisory committee was also made aware of this limitation but ignored it.

D. Reason 4

The three grounds above—the right of the local church to select officebearers, the synodically recognized priority of the local church in assessing pastoral complexities, and the responsibility of the local church for church discipline—are all part of the important tension in Reformed church polity between the original authority of the council and the delegated authority of broader assemblies. This tension between synodicalism and congregationalism, a tension that asserts restraints upon synodical authority as well as restraints on the autonomy of the local church, is not, in Reformed polity, a problem to be solved but a tension to be embraced.

Church Order Article 27-a frames this tension and the resulting restraints upon respective assemblies: "Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated."

Synod 2022's instruction to Neland CRC seriously affects this necessary balance between the original authority of the local council and the delegated authority of major assemblies by ascribing a policing function to synod that it does not, and should not, have. To ascribe such a role to synod could cause much harm to the appropriate relationship between the churches and our major assemblies. Previous synods could foresee the chaos that would result in the denomination if any local church could overture synod to instruct any other local church in its internal affairs, including whom it elects to office, how to adjudicate pastoral complexities, and/or how to administer church discipline. Synod 2022's decision could lead to many questionable and unnecessary disputes that would not serve our churches or our denomination well. Will synod now accede to an overture from a church or classis that demands synod reach into another church that, in their estimation,

- failed to discipline someone according to their interpretation of the CRC's position on divorce and remarriage (Synod 1980 Divorce and Remarriage report)?

- failed to require infant baptism of its church members (Church Order, Art. 56)?
- fails to instruct its youth in the Heidelberg Catechism (Church Order, Art. 63)?
- failed to adequately warn a couple about the moral hazards of in-vitro fertilization (Synod 2003 report on Life Issues)?
- is not pledging enough of its budget to contribute to denominational ministries (Church Order Supplement, Art. 35-a; Synod 2019 Reimagining Ministry Shares report)?

The CRC's Church Order currently respects the relative autonomy of the local church as it struggles with matters like these and protects the local church from undue interference from others in the denomination. Indeed, the Church Order's concluding article emphasizes the important principle that "no church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no officebearer shall lord it over another officebearer" (Art. 85). Neland Avenue CRC believes these protections are extremely important for the orderly function of the church and appeals Synod 2022's instruction to Neland not just because of its impact upon Neland but also because of the precedent it sets for synod overreaching into the affairs of the local church.

III. Appeal

Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church appeals to Synod 2023 the following decision made by Synod 2022: "That synod instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage, thus nullifying this deacon's current term" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 926).

Grounds:

1. Articles 3 and 4 of the Church Order give councils the right to nominate those who are presented to the congregation as ministers, elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors. While synodical positions certainly enter into councils' consideration of who is best qualified to serve in office, the final judgment as to who is qualified to serve is the local council's alone.
2. Synod has identified the local council or consistory as the appropriate body for decision making in complex pastoral situations, "for it [council or consistory] has the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the situation" (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 484).
3. While synod's instruction to Neland Avenue CRC to rescind its decision to ordain this deacon makes no explicit mention of discipline, such an action really amounts to a process of discipline against this deacon. But Church Order Article 80 clearly gives this responsibility to the local consistory for general discipline and to the council for special discipline (Supplement, Articles 82-84); in addition, according to CRC polity, synod (as a broader assembly) cannot instruct a classis or a

council to exercise discipline, except upon appeal (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 674).

4. The polity of the Christian Reformed Church has always valued a theological tension between synodicalism and congregationalism, a polity that asserts restraints upon synodical authority as well as restraints on the autonomy of the local church. Our Church Order is a finely tuned document that carefully balances *limited synodical authority* and *relative local autonomy*. Church Order Article 27-a identifies this balance and the resulting restraints upon respective assemblies: "Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated."

IV. Action requested

Neland Avenue CRC requests that Synod 2023 sustain this appeal. Sustaining it will rightly recognize the Church Order's provisions for the local church to select officebearers, to address complex pastoral situations, and to administer church discipline; and it will protect the balance in our Church Order between appropriate synodical authority and relative local autonomy.

Council of Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Laurel VandenBerg, clerk