

Synod 2023 FAQ Document

The Office of General Secretary exists to serve the councils, classes, and synods of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in their ministry callings. For this reason, the Office of General Secretary has gathered questions related to Synod 2023 and has tried to provide helpful answers to CRC members and churches. More information will be forthcoming as we publish the *Acts of Synod 2023* and send summaries to the classes.

We undertake this FAQ presentation with humility, recognizing that only the Holy Spirit can answer the most critical questions we face as congregations and classes and as a denomination. Further, we acknowledge that the concerns of many leaders and members may run deeper than we are able to reach here through our good-faith efforts to answer questions based on the facts as we understand them.

It is likely that some of these answers will be updated based on feedback we receive. It is also likely that new questions and answers will be added as we learn more about the implications of Synod 2023 together. For those who have other questions and would like to reach out, please contact us at communications@crcna.org.

May the God of grace fill you with every good gift for doing his will, and may he work in all of us what is pleasing to him.

Yours in Christ,

Zachary King
General Secretary

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Matters pertaining to synodical task force reports

1. What did Synod 2023 decide about ecclesiastical marriage? Should CRCNA pastors officiate “ecclesiastical marriages”—marriages that are not, or will not be, legalized through a civil procedure?

Synod 2023 strongly advised CRCNA pastors *not* to officiate marriages “whereby a couple is considered ‘married’ in the eyes of the church but not in the eyes of the state.” Nor should pastors act as legal experts or advisers regarding the issue of ecclesiastical marriage. Pastors should “advise couples to seek independent legal counsel as necessary.” In fact there could be legal ramifications of solemnizing an ecclesiastical marriage (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 961-62).

Synod also deemed it worthwhile to note that churches should “respect and honor the marriages of Indigenous peoples, as well as those of immigrants who did not obtain a civil marriage under the oversight of their sovereign nations or 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” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 969).

The full report on ecclesiastical marriage is found in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 251-84, and was adopted “as guidance regarding the issue of ecclesiastical marriage” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 961).

2. What did Synod 2023 decide about bivocational pastors?

Synod 2023 recommended Church Order changes favorable to bivocational pastors for adoption by Synod 2024. In doing so, synod agreed to “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” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 967).

The report of the *Study of Bivocationality Task Force* can be found in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314.

Matters pertaining to synod itself

3. What changes were enacted by Synod 2023 with regard to reading protests about the seating of women delegates?

In the 1990s, CRC synods debated women’s ordination. In 1995, synod recognized that “there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God.” This opened the offices of deacon, elder, minister of the word and commissioned pastor to women. Then, in 2007, synod allowed all duly elected officebearers, including women, to be delegated to synod.

The *Church Order Art. 45* supplement allows for synod delegates to submit a written protest stating their conscientious objection to seating female delegates (as all synod delegates are ordained officebearers). The names of those delegates are normally read and their protests are recorded in the minutes of synod. Classis Niagara submitted an overture to Synod 2023 (*Agenda of Synod 2023*, p. 351-353) proposing to end this practice. In response, Synod 2023 directed that if an individual or classis protests this matter, the names of those protesting and the following statement would be read:

“We, as delegates, acknowledge that there are a multitude of perspectives and opinions represented among us. We recognize ‘that there are two different perspectives and convictions on the issue of allowing women to serve in the offices of deacon, elder, minister or [commissioned pastor], both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God’ (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 731-732). Some object that there are women seated as delegates; others lament that there are not more women among us. We choose to work together despite these differences.”

4. What did Synod 2023 decide regarding classis delegations to future synods? Do CRC classes still need to send deacons?

At the proposal of Synod 2022, Synod 2023 adopted changes to Church Order Article 45 intended to help classes achieve a full delegation to synod. The Church Order now reads (with additions indicated by italics): “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*” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1030-32).

Classes must still work to find at least one minister, one elder, and one deacon to be delegates to synod. However, starting with delegations to Synod 2024, if a classis cannot find a delegate from any one of those church offices, they may send a second delegate from another office. (It should be noted that there is already a fourth delegate allowed to be from any office.) A classis will not be allowed to send more than two delegates bearing the same office. But it could now, for example, send two elders and two deacons if no ministers were willing or able to attend, or two deacons and two ministers if no elders were willing/able, or two elders and two ministers if no deacons were willing/able.

Though a concern was raised that this Church Order change might “reduce the numbers of deacon delegates to synod,” considering “the practical challenges of finding deacon delegates” (p. 1031), the opportunity for deacons to be delegated to synod remains the same.

5. What are some of the significant matters that were deferred by Synod 2023 to Synod 2024? How will these get processed?

Twenty-one overtures (49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 73, 74, 75, 76 from the *Agenda for Synod 2023*) were deferred to Synod 2024. Along with these overtures, the majority and minority reports of the advisory committee that formed recommendations for Synod 2023 regarding these overtures will be sent as communications to Synod 2024.

Many of these overtures address the processes involved with confessional-difficulty gravamina that might be submitted by officebearers, board members, faculty, and staff. The other deferred overtures address questions about moving forward as a denomination in response to the decisions of Synod 2022 regarding human sexuality (which were confirmed by Synod 2023). One overture asks for clarification on the binding nature of pastoral advice from synod. Some ask about seating delegates at classis and synod meetings. Some raise questions concerning discipline of officebearers, councils, and classes unwilling to comply with synodical decisions. And a few ask whether we need to create new processes for discernment around church separations.

The ability for one synod to defer matters to a subsequent synod is relatively new, being added to the Rules for Synodical Procedure by Synod 2019. Synod 2022 had deferred two overtures and two reports by a study committee and a task force to Synod 2023. They did not include any advisory committee recommendations as communications. So, in many ways, we are in new territory here as well.

It is clear to the Office of General Secretary that the deferred overtures need to have adequate time devoted to them at Synod 2024 and that it would be to everyone's benefit to address these as early as possible. That said, these overtures, along with any closely related overtures received for Synod 2024, will have to be examined by a new advisory committee of Synod 2024. In making their ruling that Synod 2023 defer the above overtures and send the relevant advisory committee reports as a communication to Synod 2024, the officers hoped that these issues would receive the discussion they deserve at next year's synod.

Matters pertaining to human sexuality

6. Did Synod 2023 change the position of the CRC on same-sex sex? Does the position of the CRC on same-sex sex still have "confessional status"?

Synod 2023 upheld all aspects of the decisions of Synod 2022 with regard to human sexuality, including the confessional status of the interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108. For more information please see crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq.

Since the Synod of 1973, the Christian Reformed Church has held that same-sex attraction is not sinful. However, Synod 1973 also stated that "explicit homosexual practice" is "incompatible with . . . the will of God as revealed in Scripture" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 52). Synod 1973 served the churches with eleven statements of pastoral advice that advocated for a pastoral posture toward same-sex attracted people and the "employment of their gifts to the cause of the kingdom" (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 51-53).

Synod 2022 received a report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, which addressed a number of biblical and pastoral issues surrounding human sexuality, including same-sex sex. In fulfillment of its original mandate from Synod 2016, the report also recommended that synod declare its positions against “sexual immorality, including homosexual sex” as already having “confessional status” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 458). In response, Synod 2022 adopted the following position (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922): “That synod affirm that ‘unchastity’ in the 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.” For more information on this decision, please see “Frequently Asked Questions about Synod 2022 and the Human Sexuality Report” (crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq).

Synod 2023 received many overtures and gravamina (for a discussion of gravamina, see below) from churches, individuals, and classes addressing the subject of human sexuality, and specifically same-sex sex. A particular subject of debate was the relationship between Synod 2022’s decision on “confessional status” and Synod 1975’s discussion on the authority of synodical decisions and the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44-45).

7. According to the decisions of Synod 2023, what responsibilities do CRC congregations have to LGBTQ people?

As has been the practice at many synods, Synod 2023 acknowledged the shortcomings of our denomination and its congregations with regard to their pastoral posture toward LGBTQ+ people. Synod 2023 stated, “We acknowledge the immediacy of the call and mutual accountability of all members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America to follow through with the pastoral care outlined in the Human Sexuality Report for the sake of our witness to Jesus Christ. We do so in a spirit of lament for failing in our pastoral care to those who identify as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1008-9). Synod 2023 further instructed “all congregations of the CRCNA to show love to all people groups, including our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors, by condemning hateful or demeaning speech and violent or demeaning actions” (p. 1023).

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

8. What decisions did Synod 2023 make regarding Neland Avenue CRC's appeal of Synod 2022's instruction that Neland "immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage"?

Synod 2023 did not sustain Neland Avenue CRC's appeal of Synod 2022's instruction. In its grounds, Synod 2023 stated the following:

- "Neither the Church Order nor the *Acts of Synod 1980* [referenced in the appeal] provide the necessary grounds for Neland Avenue CRC's appeal."
- "While local congregations have the responsibility to elect their own officebearers, they do not have the right to elect anyone who does not meet the biblical requirements."
- "Synod has the authority to declare the biblical requirements for officebearers."
- "'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)."
- "Synod also has the authority to intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b)."

Synod 2023 followed up this decision by adopting several recommendations of the *in loco* committee that worked with Neland Avenue CRC to try and implement the decisions of Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1027).

1. 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.
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 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.

Synod 2023 also declared this to be its response to Overtures 52, 65, 72, and 78, which addressed disciplinary measures toward Neland Avenue CRC or Classis Grand Rapids East (p. 1028).

9. What instructions did Synod 2023 give to CRCNA classes with regard to holding their officebearers accountable to the CRC's position on human sexuality?

Synod 2023 received several overtures related to the discipline of officebearers, councils, and classes regarding their implementation of Synod 2022's decisions about unchastity and same-sex sex. In response, synod instructed that all classes "guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1029).

Synod 2023 provided two grounds. First, Synod 2023 noted that Synod 2022 clarified the requirements regarding the CRC's position on human sexuality (see Question 6 above). Second, Synod 2023 based this direction on Church Order Art. 27. Art. 27-a states that "Each assembly exercises . . . the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated." Synod 2023 noted that Church Order Article 27-b "assigns the classis [delegated] authority over the councils of its constituent churches" (p. 1030).

What does "guide into compliance" mean, and how would that be done? First, let's consider what "compliance" and "noncompliance" mean for officebearers in this context. In the Covenant for Officebearers (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5) officebearers promise to "be formed and governed" by the confessions, stating, "We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them." Therefore, compliance for officebearers means encouraging believers "to live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108).

Synods have lamented the overall lack of discussion and teaching on healthy and God-honoring sexuality in the CRC. However, the 2022 Human Sexuality Report contains extensive sections on pastoral care and teaching for issues of sexuality (see *Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 362-70 on pornography; pp. 396-403 on gender identity; pp. 426-38 on homosexuality; and pp. 439-51 on other sexuality-related issues). It is important to note that demonstrating care, love, engagement, and concern for LGBTQ+ people is *in compliance* and *required* by the positions and declarations of the synods of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

The Church Order does address the possibility that officebearers might disagree with a confessional position (such as the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108). When officebearers present a confessional-difficulty gravamen to their councils, they must continue to "submit to the church's judgment and authority" in their ministry (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). Since the CRC's interpretation of "unchastity" in

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has confessional status, teaching, preaching, acting, and publicly advocating against this *particular position* (i.e., that “adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex . . . violate the seventh commandment”) would be considered noncompliance. Furthermore, solemnizing a same-sex marriage would be considered noncompliance (Church Order Art. 69-c and Supplement).

How would classes guide officebearers into compliance? Classes that face this issue will each develop their own process that will be informed by prayer. Here are some suggestions based on our Christian Reformed Church Order:

1. Scripture teaches that the first step of guidance happens between believers: “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you” (Matthew 18:15). If this first step fails, Synod 2023’s decision quoted above assumes that guidance will take the form of discipline (Church Order Art. 78-84).
2. The council and consistory must have the first opportunity to exercise guidance, since the normal path for the discipline of officebearers (Art. 82) is through the consistory (i.e., general discipline in Art. 79-80) and council (i.e., special discipline in Art. 82-84). The discipline of the council and consistory must be consistent with Church Order Articles 78-84 and their supplements.
3. Classes have a role in guiding into compliance if the efforts of the consistory and council are not successful. Quoting Synod 1980, Synod 2023 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).” Like the discipline of the council and consistory, so too must the discipline of classes be consistent with Church Order Articles 78-84 and their supplements.
4. Discipline conforming to Church Order Articles 78-84 has the following characteristics: It is restorative (Art. 78). It is based on investigation and not hearsay (Supplement, Art. 78-81). It is done in love and openness to the Spirit (Art. 79-c). It is confidential (Supplement, Art. 78-81). In short, discipline of officebearers is *pastoral*. Classes should be patient in their application of discipline, and extremely cautious about using the threat of deposition. The *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (rev. 2019) notes, “Synod 1991 reminded a classis that in matters of discipline great care should be taken to exhaust all other avenues to resolve the dispute prior to ordering the suspension of a council or officebearers. In such matters the assembly exercising the authority should err on the side of caution, permitting full opportunity for other pastoral efforts to take effect (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771)” (p. 271).
5. Church visitors should be involved. Synod 2023 reminded “all church visitors throughout the CRCNA of their authority and responsibility to, in a spirit of love and grace, guide officebearers into alignment with the biblical guidelines, including but not limited to all areas of human sexuality” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p.

1030). The Church Order requires the appointing of church visitors and their regular engagement with congregations. The task of church visitors is “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” (Art. 42-b). Church visitors are resources to all congregations, but especially to those who are facing “serious challenges” and could benefit from sound advice. More information about supporting church visitors can be found at crcna.org/classis/church-visitors.

10. At the end of Synod 2023, there was a discussion about gravamina, and the deliberation was deferred to Synod 2024. What are gravamina, and what is the current process? What will be discussed about gravamina at Synod 2024, and how can my church give feedback? What about those whose gravamina for confessional revision were not sustained by synod?

For a discussion of gravamina and the current process, see the 2022 [FAQ](#) document, questions 7-14.

With regard to the Synod 2024 discussion of gravamina: The overtures deferred to Synod 2024 that have proposed changes to the Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina in Church Order Supplement, Article 5 and related procedures (Overtures 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64) would restrict the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina by officebearers of the CRCNA. Churches and classes are free to respond to the deferred overtures about gravamina by submitting their own overtures to Synod 2024, following the normal process, indicating support for the deferred overtures or proposing alternative views.

Regarding those whose confessional-revision gravamina were not sustained by Synod 2023, the expectation of Church Order Supplement, Article 5 (in the Covenant for Officebearers) is that they would submit to the “church’s judgment and authority” and would align themselves with the confessional positions of the church in their preaching, teaching, and ministry. It would be up to them, their councils, and possibly their classes to discern any next steps, if necessary. See the 2022 [FAQ](#) document, questions 7-14.

11. May CRC congregations welcome persons into membership, or have persons continue in membership, if they have concerns and questions about the decisions of Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 in the area of human sexuality?

Confessing members of the church make “a commitment to the creeds and confessions of the Christian Reformed Church” when they publicly profess their faith before their churches. As part of the process, prospective members “give an appropriate testimony of their faith, life, and doctrine to the elders” (Church Order Art. 59-b). This testimony often takes the form of dialogue with the elders, who decide what questions about “faith, life, and doctrine” to ask. As a result of synod’s decisions affirming the interpretation of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 having confessional status, elders could inquire about prospective members’ views on same-sex sex as part of this dialogue. In the end, the elders determine admission into the membership of a Christian Reformed congregation.

Current confessing members who have already made a profession of faith could express any reservations they have to their elders, who would take such information under advisement as they disciple their members. It is a matter for the consistory (elders) to decide what, if any, steps should be taken.

12. What resources exist for churches exploring their denominational affiliation following the decisions of Synod 2023?

See the 2022 [FAQ](#) document, questions 28-29.

Other Matters

13. What did Synod 2023 say about churches that meet and worship exclusively online?

Synod 2023 instructed “the Office of General Secretary to oversee the creation of a report that gives thought to and a theological framework for the possibilities and parameters of a virtual church: ‘A church which, by design, meets only online.’ . . . This report will require input from (at least) a faculty or staff member of Calvin Theological Seminary, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive.” It will “address the marks of the true church articulated in the Belgic Confession” and “address similarities and differences between online ministry and a virtual church, exploring opportunities and pitfalls for each.” The report will be “presented to the COD for discernment.” One of the reasons given for this study was that “online ministry remains an emerging mission field, but the

possibility of virtual community and an entirely virtual church remain untested areas of exploration within the CRCNA” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 979-80).

14. What is the position of the CRCNA on assisted suicide?

In its position on abortion, the Christian Reformed Church condemns “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). In specifically addressing suicide, Synod 2000 pointed out that “Scripture clearly prohibits *all* wanton destruction of human life, and that includes the willful ending of one’s own life. The Heidelberg Catechism affirms this when it says, in its treatment of the Sixth Commandment, ‘. . . I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself, either’” (*Acts of Synod 2000*, p. 724). A report on end of life issues presented in 2000 (*Acts of Synod 2000*, pp. 706-9) provides guidance on thinking through a biblical position on euthanasia and end-of-life issues.

Synod 2023 decided to appoint a task force “to make a definitive and comprehensive report on the practice of assisted suicide in all its forms. This report will give guidance and pastoral advice on end-of-life matters” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 981). This task force will send a report in time to be included on the agenda for Synod 2025. In the meantime, a summary of the current position will be provided with the Position Statements posted on the CRCNA website (crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements).

15. What is the CRC Code of Conduct, to whom does it apply, and when does it go into effect?

A code of conduct provides clarity about attitudes, behavior, and accountability that can be expected of church leaders in the practice of a healthy and safe ministry.

The CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders resulted from the direction of Synod 2019. Synod 2018 had instructed the Council of Delegates to appoint a team to bring recommendations “regarding how the CRCNA can address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 523), and that team presented recommendations that were adopted by Synod 2019. One of those recommendations was to produce a code of conduct, and a draft copy of such a code was presented to Synod 2022 and was referred to the churches for feedback. A revised version of the code then came to Synod 2023, which adopted the document along with further revisions recommended by its advisory committee.

The final version of the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders adopted by Synod 2023 can be found at network.crcna.org/sites/default/files/code-of-conduct-june-2023.pdf.

When it approved the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, Synod 2023 also recommended that the code be included in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, and that a change be made to Church Order Article 5, requiring that “all officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.” In line with Church Order Article 47 and its Supplement, which states that proposed changes to the Church Order must be adopted by a following synod, the recommended changes are now proposed for adoption by Synod 2024.

Since the code of conduct has already been adopted by Synod 2023, however, churches may begin implementing it at any time.

Synod also encouraged councils and classes to implement the code of conduct for all staff (non-ordained as well as ordained) and for volunteers who provide leadership in the church or classis, and synod mandated the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient ministry leaders to the code of conduct.

16. Did Synod 2023 make changes to the Belgic Confession?

Synod 2023 received a confessional-revision gravamen as an overture (request) to make changes to the Belgic Confession’s references to Anabaptists, which identify errors that group of Christians made in connection with their beliefs about the incarnation (Art. 18) and baptism (Art. 34). The overture argued that those errors are not limited to Anabaptists today, and it proposed replacing the reference to Anabaptists with the word “those,” to refer to anyone who holds such beliefs.

Synod 2023 did not accede to the overture, on the grounds that historical documents, especially confessions, should not be changed lightly and should be understood in light of their historical context. Further, synod said, “acceding to this overture would have far-reaching repercussions with our relationships with other Christians,” and, due to “the widespread usage of our version of the Belgic Confession in other Christian denominations,” could “create undue complexity among them without engaging with them” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 991).

17. What did Synod 2023 decide about the ministries of the CRCNA speaking into social, economic, and political matters?

Denominational statements on matters of social justice and racism have come under scrutiny at synod, even while synods as recent as 2022 have directed denominational leaders to make such statements (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 952; *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 777-79). Synod 2018 engaged in a thorough review of the rationale for making such statements (*Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 524-26) and proposed a committee to “provide guidance and support” for making such statements (pp. 527-28). Classis Southeast U.S.

overtured Synod 2023 to curtail such pronouncements. While Synod 2023 did not adopt the overture, it did “urge the CRCNA organization to exercise discretion when responding to social, economic, and/or political matters” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 926). It further instructed the Office of General Secretary to “report directly back to Synod 2024 how the concerns noted in Overture 3 have been addressed—namely, specifying how and when the CRCNA organization comments and/or makes statements on social, economic, or political matters that synod has not previously specifically addressed” (p. 926).

18. What do we need to know about the new ministry, called Thrive, that will carry on the mandates of nine offices that served CRC congregations?

Over the course of several decades and in response to important issues regarding how churches are called to minister in today’s North American society, synods have created nine denominational ministries to support churches in those efforts. This includes: Chaplaincy and Care, Disability Concerns, Diversity, Faith Formation Ministries, the Office of Social Justice, Pastor Church Resources, Race Relations, Safe Church Ministry, and Worship Ministries. For several years these were somewhat loosely gathered together and referred to jointly as “congregational ministries,” but each ministry still operated separately from the others with their own staff.

Synod 2023 agreed with the findings of staff and the Council of Delegates that there would be many advantages for congregations (including communication, resource stewardship, and more) if these ministries were consolidated into one agency with a vision, mission, and mandate that incorporated the same needs for ministry expertise as the congregational ministries had individually (see *Agenda for Synod*, pp. 77-80, for a description of this reorganization; *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 956-57 for synod’s decisions.)

This new agency began on July 1. It is called Thrive and is designed to provide churches with one-stop access to support and resources that are fully integrated, and responsive to the changing needs of local congregations. Learn more at crcna.org/thrive

19. If synod is no longer going to recommend certain charitable organizations, how will we know which organizations to give to?

Synod 2023 decided that, beginning in 2024, future synods will no longer adopt a list of charitable organizations to recommend to the churches for support (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 986-7). The process of annually reviewing these ministries required a significant amount of staff time and effort. Meanwhile, the relevant information about charitable organizations has become readily available online. It was also noted that there has been

minimal anecdotal evidence that the list of organizations recommended for offerings is still used by many churches.

However, in order that churches, who might still utilize this list, will not be left completely without a way to determine good organizations to give to, Synod also instructed the Office of General Secretary to provide the criteria currently used by CRCNA staff to the churches to assist in their vetting process of charitable organizations being considered for offerings. These criteria are now posted on [the Network](#).

20. How did synod decide to address membership decline in the CRCNA?

Overture 12 was brought to Synod 2023 to address the declining membership in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Synod acknowledged this “troubling trend” as being “of grave importance”. The CRCNA has a “ deep need to prioritize discipleship and evangelism by addressing individuals and communities holistically,” synod said.

Simultaneously, Synod 2023 recognized and celebrated the work that Resonate Global Ministries and Thrive (formerly various congregational ministries) are already doing with churches. They encouraged further collaboration with churches on the part of Resonate and Thrive, “ so that congregations can better grow in discipleship and evangelism in their contexts.” They also urged the churches “to make use of Resonate and Thrive resources, coaching opportunities, and personnel.” They gave special significance to the six calls to commitment from CRCNA congregations that were listed in a response from Resonate to Overture 12 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 767-68).

Synod celebrated “the work of church renewal and planting already underway”, calling attention to “significant growth in ethnic-minority congregations.” Synod also instructed the general secretary “to work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, as well as the churches and classes to develop a comprehensive and unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend-line of membership growth in our denomination.” More information about this strategy will be coming to Synod 2024.

(See *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 973-74)

21. Has anything new happened in regards to ministry shares?

Yes. Synod 2019 approved in principle (and this was approved by the Council of Delegates in lieu of synod in 2020) that the ministry shares covenant giving program should be “reimagined.” Instead of a mandatory, per-member assessment being given to

each church, the proposal suggested that each congregation be asked to pledge the amount that they felt they could contribute towards the shared ministry of the denomination.

Two years into this new system, the Council of Delegates requested that staff review how “ministry shares reimagined” was going and offer suggestions for improvement.

During the year leading up to Synod 2023 staff met with church and classis leaders from across the CRC to conduct a review of the ministry shares system of funding denominational ministries. Out of this review, three recommendations came from the Council of Delegates and were adopted by synod:

1. Provide greater flexibility in the pledge process cycle, allowing churches to determine their pledge cycle based on their own fiscal year rather than the one used by denominational ministries.
2. Suggest to the churches what would be a reasonable amount for each church to contribute in order to cover basic/core denominational operational costs as part of their pledge.
3. Provide to the churches and classes more information on pledges and giving results, including what comprises the basic/core denominational costs.

This information about core costs and a base amount will be shared with congregations in the fall of 2023. It is hoped that these changes will reduce some struggles that congregations currently faced with the ministry shares system, and will lead to greater involvement and increased giving..

Synod 2023 also directed the Council of Delegates to continue the review of our ministry shares system through a survey of churches not currently participating and through a study of similar denominations. This is expected to result in recommendations for further changes to the ministry-share program.

(Acts of Synod 2023, p. 987-8)

22. How is the CRC working with RCA churches that joined the Alliance of Reformed Churches?

The Alliance of Reformed Churches is a body that originates primarily from congregations that have recently departed the Reformed Church of America (RCA) through a plan approved by the RCA’s General Synod that provided for “gracious separation.” Synod 2022 recognized the Alliance of Reformed Churches as “a church in cooperation for the purpose of continued pursuit toward designation as a church in communion.” That means that, while we don’t yet have the same relationship with the Alliance of Reformed Church as we do with the Reformed Church in America, we are working toward that end.

Because of the uniqueness of this situation, by way of exception, Synod 2023 also said, “that while designated as a church in cooperation, congregations or officebearers with previous CRCNA/RCA dual-affiliation credentials maintain their affiliation with the CRCNA.”

Synod also directed the Office of General Secretary “to appoint a team of staff and subject-matter experts to work with the Alliance of Reformed Churches to address various 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.”

If a former RCA congregation or network requests it in the next year, this team is also authorized to address the same matters with them.

(*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 990)