

OVERTURES AND COMMUNICATIONS

OVERTURE 1

Amend the Council of Delegates Governance Handbook to Clarify Their Role in the Nomination Process

I. Introduction

In March of 2023, the interim committee of Classis Quinte submitted the name of our nomination for the Council of Delegates with the intention of ratifying that nomination at the next classis meeting. Before classis could deliberate, a communication was sent from the Council of Delegates indicating that this nomination had been declined.

It is not the intention of this overture to litigate or appeal this decision. Our purpose is to deal with an underlying governance issue. It is material to note, however, that at the May meeting of Classis Quinte we heard the grounds for the denial and the response from the member involved, and we do not believe that the grounds cited were a barrier to service nor were they an issue of the member's life, faith, excellence in ability, or capacity to serve.

It is also important to note that the responses of the Council of Delegates created an impression that the issue lay with the nominee. It did not, and instead was caused by the Council of Delegates' lack of timely response and involved an interpretation of its handbook contrary to the spirit of our polity in order to define their grounds as an issue at all.

Classis Quinte responded with a letter to the Council of Delegates on June 28, 2023 (Appendix A) in order to express our disagreement and concerns. The Council of Delegates, through its executive, responded on June 30, 2023 (Appendix B). At the September meeting of Classis Quinte it was decided that an overture to synod would be our response to the actions of and justifications provided by the Council of Delegates.

We believe that the Council of Delegates has acted outside of its authority to deny a classis its right to decide its own representation. Further, the Council of Delegates did not provide Classis Quinte or the honourable member due process to speak to the issues at hand, instead acting unilaterally and in a way that violates the spirit of Reformed polity and the purpose of the Council of Delegates.

II. Background

The synod of 2015 acted to replace the CRCNA Board of Trustees structure with a new Council of Delegates structure. The purpose of this structure was to act as an interim committee of synod in order to carry out the needs

of the church in much the same way an interim committee of classis acts. This Council of Delegates operates with a “delegated” authority from synod that is established in Church Order Article 33-b:

Each classis shall appoint a classical interim committee, and synod shall appoint the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA, to act for them in matters which cannot await action by the assemblies themselves. Such committees shall be given well-defined mandates and shall submit all their actions to the next meeting of the assembly for approval.

In this structure it is the synod that rightly approves the membership of the Council of Delegates. What makes this structure different from the Board of Trustees model that it replaced is that the Council of Delegates was intended to model the representative nature of synod itself, with trustees being replaced with delegates nominated by each classis. While properly its authority is derived from synod, its delegation is derived from the classes. This was a significant principle of moving to this structure: that it become more directly connected with the classes, both in composition and in accountability, to address the concerns of the churches that had observed a centralization of the decision-making process under the Board of Trustees model. This concern was addressed in the rationale in 2015.

One consistent question that we have faced is whether this approach is “centralization” with the implication that centralization is a danger to avoid. This proposal eliminates dual authority, which is different than centralization. If the recommendation of the [Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture] is adopted, the result will be a broader and more classically based inclusion of those who will have “delegated” authority of synod.

(Agenda for Synod 2015, p. 361)

The spirit of the Council of Delegates, at its very formation, was to avoid a self-selecting ecosystem and to ensure that the classes were to be included in that delegation of authority.

While foundational, the Council of Delegates chose to stray from this principle in its interpretation of the COD Governance Handbook in section 2.13. In the matter of Classis Quinte and our nominee it was decided that “with the assistance of the COD’s nominating committee” implied the ability to unilaterally reject a nomination and that the phrase “through the COD to synod” implied a gatekeeping authority rather than an administrative function.

In addition to its violation of the spirit of its formation, the interpretation of the COD in this matter created a nonjudicial process where they acted without oversight or accountability to the detriment of both the member and the classis. It is right that an appeal of the decision could have been made to synod, but practically this would leave the classis without representation for at least a year if another nominee was not found and the member was

without the ability to serve for three to six years, though prayerfully and properly selected by classis for this time.

It is our belief that synod must clarify the letter and the spirit of our polity in this area to ensure that the Council of Delegates understands the limits to its authority, that the integrity of our delegated authority is maintained, and that our confidence in our mutual covenant is restored. It is also our belief that while what has been done cannot be undone, there is damage to the member and to Classis Quinte through the actions of the Council of Delegates that needs to be addressed.

We, Classis Quinte, overture synod as follows:

- A. That synod add the following footnote to the COD Governance Handbook section 2.13 concerning the parentheses “(with the assistance of the COD’s nominating committee)”: “¹This assistance shall be interpreted as administrative and advisory only. It is the domain of the classis to select its own nominee.
- B. That synod add the following footnote to the COD Governance Handbook concerning the phrase “provide in a manner selected by the classis a nominee through the COD to synod”: “²The phrase “through the COD” shall be interpreted as administrative in function. The role of the COD and its nominating committee with respect to classical delegates shall be to receive nominations and forward them to synod.
- C. That synod instruct the COD to apologize to Classis Quinte for its interpretation and application of the guidelines in this matter.
- D. That synod instruct the COD to apologize to the nominee for its interpretation and application of the guidelines in this matter.

Grounds

- a. The spirit of our polity and the formation of the Council of Delegates is founded on the principle of classical inclusion.
- b. While the authority of the Council of Delegates is delegated by the synod, there are limits to that authority, especially with regard to its membership.
- c. If the interpretation used in this matter is not corrected by synod, it will create a system in which the Council of Delegates becomes a self-selecting body rather than a representative body.
- d. It may be the case that at times weighty reasons might exist such that a member ought not serve. Such matters ought properly be brought before the classis to weigh and synod to adjudicate (if necessary). It is not in the interest of the churches in either order or appearance for the Council of Delegates to make such a decision unilaterally.
- e. Harm has been done to Classis Quinte in being excluded from the decision-making process and from not being allowed its own representation.

- f. Harm has been done to the nominee both in the loss of opportunity to joyfully serve and, while surely unintentional, in loss to their reputation through the inappropriate denial of their service.

Classis Quinte
Joanne Adema, stated clerk

Amendment to This Overture (submitted by Classis Quinte):

The original overture was written detailing the interaction with the COD while the previous handbook was utilized in the decision made. The new COD Handbook (2023) has adopted language that entrenches this misinterpretation of our polity as well as the history and purpose of the COD. Our additional overture to synod is that synod review the language found in Chapter 1 of the 2023 handbook under “Membership, 1. Classical Members” regarding membership, strike the language “approved by the COD,” and include the footnotes in the original overture regarding the “assistance of the COD Governance Committee,” thus reminding the COD of their place within our polity.

APPENDIX A

Classis Quinte Response to the Actions of the Council of Delegates

Classis Interim Committee (CIC)

Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, chair; Jennings Creek Christian Reformed Church

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, vice chair; Grace Christian Reformed Church

June 28, 2023

Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church

Andy DeRuyter, chair, and Michael Ten Haken, vice chair

Dear Council of Delegates,

We are writing in response to your letter of May 10, 2023, in which you communicated your decision to “decline the nomination of <redacted> to the Council of Delegates.”

Your letter was shared on the floor of the Classis Quinte meeting of May 30, 2023, and serious concerns were raised about the impropriety of your action.

First, it is the role of Classis to delegate people to the COD, and that should be honoured.

Secondly, it is not the COD but synod who appoints delegates to the COD. <The chair of COD's nominating services committee> email correspondence of February 13, 2023, with our Stated Clerk <redacted>, indicated that this was also his understanding.

Thirdly, while we submitted <redacted> name before Classis had approved <their> nomination, we were not seeking the COD's approval. Rather, we submitted the name at the request of <the chair of COD's nominating services committee>. Again, referencing his email to our Stated Clerk where he wrote, "our preference would be to have the name submitted as soon as possible so that it can make it into the Agenda for synod – who does the actual appointing."

It is our conviction that the COD has procedurally overstepped their authority in declining our proposed nomination. Although <redacted> has informed the CIC that <they have> withdrawn <their> name for our consideration as our COD delegate from Classis Quinte, we protest the COD's rejection of our appointee, and believe a response from the COD to Classis Quinte's concerns is in order.

On behalf of the Classis Interim Committee, Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, pastorbenvs@gmail.com

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, rita.kleingeltink@gmail.com

APPENDIX B

Response from the Council of Delegates to the Letter of June 28, 2023

June 30 2023

Classis Interim Committee (CIC), Classis Quinte

Rev. Ben vanStraten, chair

Rev. Rita Klein-Geltink, vice chair

Dear Classis Representatives,

Thank you for your letter of June 28, 2023. We wish to address your serious concerns about the propriety of our actions as they relate to Classis Quinte's nomination of <redacted> to the Council of Delegates. We will respond to the various points raised in your letter.

First, the COD Governance Handbook states that each classis of the CRCNA shall, with the assistance of the COD's nominating committee, provide in a manner selected by the classis a nominee through the COD to

synod. The Nominating Committee received your nomination and presented this nominee to the COD per our guidelines.

Secondly, you are correct that synod officially appoints the members of the COD, “relying upon the trust of nominating assemblies in their integrity, judgment, and courage,” as stated in the COD Governance Handbook. It became clear to the COD during executive session that <an issue arose> and therefore, by a clear majority vote, <they were> not recommended to synod as a delegate. In this manner the assemblies offered their integrity, judgment, and courage as required in the handbook.

Thirdly, <redacted, referring to the issue specifically>

As outlined in the grounds presented in our recent letter to Classis Quinte, <an issue> is present in this situation. For the sake of the well-being of the COD, the ministry it governs, and to provide time for <the issue to be resolved> the classis was asked for another nominee to be presented as soon as possible so that you are represented at the COD table. It was made clear in our communication to you that <redacted> would surely be considered as a COD delegate once the <issue> had been resolved.

As leaders of the COD, we want to do everything possible to make sure that a delegate from Classis Quinte can participate well.

Together with you in his service and on behalf of the CRCNA Council of Delegates,

Michael Ten Haken (chair) and Greta Luimes (vice chair)

OVERTURE 2

Grant Permission for Consejo Latino to Report on Its Work and Share Resources at Synod

I. Background

For many years the CRCNA has been involved with different ethnic ministries across the United States and Canada. And among these ministries are the Hispanic ministries. In 2012, Hispanic ministers came together to get to know each other and to look to the future of the CRC’s Hispanic ministries. At that time a catalyst group had been in the works. This group eventually became Consejo Latino in 2017. That year, Jose Rayas had shared some thoughts, including the following:

Another thing I appreciate about the CRC is the vision to be a multi-ethnic/diverse church. And I think this is where there is a great challenge, because for the vision to be a part of the DNA of the church, the CRC will have to discern how the cultural realities of the diverse

ethnic groups can build each other up and edify the denomination as a whole.

Today, this is the reality of Consejo Latino: discerning how the realities of the diverse ethnic groups can build each other up and edify the denomination as a whole. Over the past few decades the Hispanic Ministries have learned much that has ranged from navigating through the denomination to raising leaders from within. Granted, there is still much to be learned, and yet Consejo Latino has made great strides and inroads since 2017. There is more involvement of Hispanic pastors (ordained and commissioned) in denominational matters. The Luke 10 program for the preparation of leaders has been designed and implemented.

The Council of Delegates is only one step in that direction. Other steps may include working with existing ethnic regional ministries to build leadership momentum, rather than trying to provide leadership. The apostle Paul, in a powerful way, talks about the church as one body. We are all different, and yet we have the same Maker. We have different cultural traits, and yet we share one Savior. We minister in different contexts, yet it is one gospel of salvation that rules our lives.

It has been almost seven years since Consejo Latino was formalized as a working group within the CRCNA, with its own leadership group. And in this time Consejo Latino has continued to move forward in fulfilling its vision of growth for the church. However, there comes a time to recognize that the learning of Consejo Latino has matured and should be shared with the larger church for reasons of accountability and feedback. That time is now. Thus it seems appropriate that Consejo Latino have a place to report and inform the church leadership of the possibilities and strides made to strengthen the church.

II. Overture

Classes California South and Arizona overture synod to create room on the floor of synod for the leaders of Consejo Latino to report on their work and to share resources with the CRCNA.

Grounds:

1. Evangelism has global and ethnic implications.
2. The experience and knowledge of Consejo Latino can be shared across the denomination.
3. Consejo Latino was born from the urgency of the call to share the gospel.
4. It is the desire of Consejo Latino to share what it has learned for the growth and progress of the denomination.
5. Church planting is and has been a priority and one of the major foci of Consejo Latino and its relationship with Resonate Global Mission.

6. Missional leadership development is an area of growth within the denomination and is a major focus of Consejo Latino.

Classis California South
Mario Perez, stated clerk

Classis Arizona
Andy DeKorte, stated clerk

OVERTURE 3

Recommend that Ministers' Pension Trustees Increase the Final Average Salary Calculation to 100 Percent of the Average Ministers' Compensation

I. Introduction and background

Classis Niagara submits this overture to recommend that the trustees of the Ministers' Pension Plans increase the final average salary calculation from 75 percent to 100 percent of the average ministers' compensation.

One of the benefits that the CRCNA offers for ordained ministers of the Word serving in the United States and Canada is a defined-benefit pension. The Ministers' Pension Plan (MPP) benefits for participants are calculated by a formula. The current calculation for each participant is based on the multiplication of years of service, a factor of 1.3 percent, and what is reported as the "final average salary."

The "final average salary" (FAS) is country-specific for either Canada or the United States. To determine the FAS, compensation data is collected from all minister participants from each country. The compensation data includes both salary and housing benefit/housing allowance for all active ministers in the plan. That three-year running average compensation is then reduced by 25 percent to arrive at the FAS, which is used to determine pension benefits. (For instance, the FAS effective February 2024 for retiring ministers is \$62,310 for Canada and \$57,998 for the U.S. But these are only 75 percent of the actual three-year average compensation of all ministers in the respective countries.)

In many other defined-pension benefit plans, individual benefits are calculated based on the individual's final average salary of the participant's best three or five years of service. We note that this could result in an inequity of benefits for pastors who may have similar years of service but have served in ministries where compensation may have been vastly different. For that reason we are supportive of the logic of using an average of all ministers' compensation.

What we believe needs to change is that the FAS should reflect 100 percent of ministers' total compensation. We understand that the original MPP was

based on only the salary portion of compensation, exclusive of housing benefit/housing allowance. In both Canada and the United States, clergy may claim their housing benefit/housing allowance as nontaxable. This benefit allows churches and ministries to compensate ministers at a reduced level while the ministers' actual "take home" pay is more in line with the professional services they provide. It is our understanding that the 25 percent reduction of the actual minister average compensation is intended to be reflective of the housing benefit/housing allowance so that pension benefits continue to be calculated on only the salary portion of their compensation.

It is understood that ministers need to plan for retirement based on personal savings plans through such vehicles as RRSPs or 401(k)s, government benefits, and the MPP. In planning for that retirement we believe that the portion of retirement income from the MPP should be calculated based on 100 percent of the three-year average ministers' compensation.

II. Overture

Classis Niagara overtures Synod 2024 to recommend that the trustees of the Canadian and United States ministers' pension plans implement a sustainable plan to increase the final average salary calculation from 75 percent to 100 percent of the three-year average ministers' compensation.

Ground:

Using the full 100 percent of average ministers' compensation in its calculations honors the full contribution of ministers through their years of service.

Classis Niagara
Wendy de Jong, stated clerk

OVERTURE 4

Close the Pension Fund to New Members and Create a New Retirement Fund

I. History

Since 1881 the Christian Reformed Church has covenanted with its ministers to provide a pension plan. This plan has been modified and updated in order to provide secure funding and retirement benefits for pastors:

- In 1883 pensions were funded with two church offerings per year.
- In 1894 funding shifted to the classes through quotas.
- In the 1920s and 1930s expected shortfalls after World War I and the Great Depression forced additional revisions to the plan. During those decades, our churches pledged to mutually assist other churches and classes unable to pay their shares.

- In 1939 the plan changed to provide for spousal and dependent benefits.
- In 1980 synod approved the formation of a Canadian Pension Plan.
- In 2010 synod approved reductions to the pension multiplier and COLA adjustments to keep the plan solvent. Overall, the pension system has served us well.

The denomination has had a long history of adjusting and adapting to the needs of changing circumstances with this plan. We believe that the CRCNA is now in a time that warrants another change to secure the plan and funding and retirement benefits for pastors.

II. Present concerns

Currently retirees and survivors outnumber the plan's contributors. In 2023, 911 active ministers are contributing while 776 ministers and 242 survivors (1,008 total) are receiving benefits. Also, there are 131 withdrawn participants with vested benefits.

The annual reporting to synod further underlines concern for the plan's solvency. Synod 2023 reporting indicated that the **2022** reported market value of the combined Canadian and U.S. plans (\$191,912,000) was able to meet the **2019 reported** actuarial liability obligation (\$182,900,000). This three-year gap is concerning and offers no real assurance the projections end with solvency.

Additionally, for smaller churches, a fixed-pension commitment that is not adjustable within a salary package is burdensome when facing either bivocational or other salary packages. At the same time, as with ministry shares, there are churches not paying their assessments into the pension plan. With 60 percent of the congregations in the CRCNA worshiping at 100 members or less, these concerns will only continue to expand.

Finally, pension plans are designed to bring assurance to participants that in their retirement years there will be adequate income along with other investments and Social Security. Instead of bringing assurance for many pastors, there is growing anxiety about the reduction of benefits that pastors have seen over the past years. For example, a pastor entering ministry around 1995 has seen a reduction in projected benefits from the pension plan of 30-35 percent. This reduction doesn't bring assurance of longevity of the pension plan.

III. Future concerns

There are three challenges facing the Ministers' Pension Plan as it currently functions.

First, the challenge of keeping the pension solvent will only increase as average life expectancy increases. Add to that the challenge of congregations to remain participating (either because of size, closure, or departure from the CRCNA), and a perfect storm is created.

Second, the pension as a defined-benefit plan (DBP) presumes (even requires) that pastors be in full-time ministry for the plan to function. However, Synod 2023 acknowledged the importance of dual-career (bivocational) pastors. Synod made appropriate Church Order changes to support this recognition. However, synod has not yet offered considerations for the future retirements of dual-career (bivocational) pastors and their participation in the pension.

Third, the management of the pension is also in future jeopardy or uncertainty. John Bolt has served our denomination well for many years. He is one of the few people who understand the DBP pensions that the CRC has for its pastors. His knowledge base is so crucial that he had to return from retirement part-time to help with pension matters. While John is truly generous with his time, any person-dependent pension is troublesome.

It should also be noted that participants in the pension also carry the burden that because the CRCNA is an ecclesiastical organization, there is no coverage under the U.S. Pension Guarantee Benefit Corporation should the pension fail.

IV. Analysis

Over the past 25 years most denominations have shifted from DBP pensions to individual retirement account plans by utilizing a 403(b)9 employer-based plan. Rather than a fixed payout calculated according to years of service and a multiplier creating common but limited payout, a 403(b)9 plan requires a percentage of the pastor's compensation based on housing plus salary (usually between 8.5% and 11%) be contributed into a pastor's personal 403(b)9 account. This account is held within an employer-sponsored plan managed by a selected third-party financial management company. The denomination provides oversight to the investment portfolio by creating guidelines for the portfolio manager. The portfolio manager carries third-party insurance against mismanagement of funds.

This type of plan provides multiple benefits for pastors and congregations.

1. The 8.5-11 percent contribution is based on actual compensation (salary plus benefits) of a pastor's earnings regardless of their full-time or part-time position.
2. The contributions become an actual part of the pastor's investment portfolio along with any other retirement investments. As a result, the pastor can plan for his or her retirement based on actual investments rather than being forced to wait until three to four months before her or his retirement to be given the financial numbers for retirement.
3. The management of the portfolio is under an investment company with the guidance of a synodically appointed team.
4. If a pastor takes time off for parental leave or other reasons, his or her contributions continue to gain value within the investment portfolio

rather than losing benefits, as happens with the pension in its current form.

5. Since these investments belong to the pastor, the pastoral participant will also be encouraged to add to their account beyond their compensation contribution.

Moving to individual 403(b)9 accounts within an employer-sponsored portfolio provides the flexibility necessary for the way pastors are employed; provides churches with the certainty that they are supporting their pastor's long-term financial security; and places management of the plan on solid footing moving forward.

V. Overture

Classis Muskegon overtures Synod 2024 as follows:

A. That the current CRCNA Ministers' Pension Plan be closed for all new participants by the end of 2026.

Grounds:

1. As seen in the numbers presented above, there are real challenges to the vitality of the current pension plan. Pastors, who are recipients, and congregations, who support the plan, need to know the health and future vitality of the current pension plan.
2. Since the CRCNA's current pension plan is not fully funded, it is best for the CRCNA to close it, make sure it is fully funded, and move forward with new methods of providing a pension for all pastors of the CRCNA that will not be built on congregational or pastoral participation.

B. That synod form a team of pension experts and vested-plan members to investigate the health of the current CRCNA pension plan and propose a way forward that will provide for its future funding and guard the retirement benefits of those who are enrolled in the plan.

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA Ministers' Pension Plan (U.S. side) is currently underfunded, and it's unclear what it will take to fully fund it.
2. The denomination was in covenant with pastors and congregations when it received the contributions from churches to provide retirement benefits. In the past 10 years cost-of-living freezes and other realities have reduced the value of that pension significantly for pastors who are retired and for those about to retire.

C. That synod appoint a Retirement Plan Task Force to create a new, more flexible retirement plan that supports full-time, part-time, bivocational pastors, and pastors who take leave for a time from ministry. That this team establish a plan that reflects a 403(b)(9) plan as mentioned above and include the establishment of the recommended percentage for pastoral contribution. This team will report back to Synod 2025.

Grounds:

1. With the changes in investing models, personal investment understanding/reporting, and available expertise, pastors, like other individuals, need to and can plan most appropriately for their retirement using individual retirement accounts.
2. Currently it is difficult, if not impossible, for bivocational pastors to participate in the pension plan. With bivocational and part-time pastors' numbers increasing, it is important that they have a retirement plan.
3. Churches will be more motivated and more capable of meeting contribution requirements if that contribution is in direct support of the church's present pastor and tied directly to the compensation package, as is the case with other employers.
4. There are several denominations—RCA, Alliance of Reformed Churches, Evangelical Covenant Church—who already have done this and who can help to resource this team to build an effective plan and contribution percentage in an expedient manner.

D. That synod direct the director of ministry operations to work with the Retirement Plan Task Force to develop a new team to provide oversight of the new retirement plan. The team will provide ongoing supervision for the new retirement plan within the CRCNA structure.

E. That current staff of the CRCNA who are involved in the management of the Ministers' Pension Plan, who act as advisors to the plan, or who are in its supervision be limited in participation on either team to advisor status.

Grounds:

1. Many, if not all, who supervise and are advisors for the current pension plan are not members of the plan and therefore do not have a vested interest in the current plan.
2. Those whose jobs support the pension plan will already be asked to provide reports, etc., beyond their usual job duties.

F. That synod direct the Office of Pensions and Insurance to give a more detailed report to the participants in the Ministers' Pension Plan of the health and actuarial study of the plan performed by Merrill Lynch/Bank of America, the custodians of the Ministers' Pension Plan.

Ground:

A more detailed report of the health and future vitality of the Ministers' Pension Plan will reduce anxiety and help ministers as they prepare for their retirement.

Classis Muskegon
Rev. Drew Sweetman, stated clerk

OVERTURE 5**Allow Transfer of All Nations Church, Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles****Overture**

Classis Ko-Am, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles. The All Nations Church council originated this request, and it was approved by both classes.

Grounds:

- a. All Nation Church's new pastor, Rev. Amos Park, has connections in Classis Greater Los Angeles that will facilitate the training of All Nations Church leaders in the regional life of the church.
- b. Pastor Amos Park desires to network with the pastors in Classis Greater Los Angeles and feels he is able to contribute much in the multiethnic setting of Classis Greater Los Angeles. The congregation is at a point where connecting with an English-speaking classis is preferable to connecting with a Korean-speaking one.
- c. All Nations Church ministry would be more inspired to participate at the classis level and be more effectively counseled and held accountable by their colleagues in Classis Greater Los Angeles.

Classis Ko-Am
Edward Yoon, stated clerk

OVERTURE 6**Permit the Transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles****Overture**

Classis Greater Los Angeles, in accordance with Church Order Article 39, overtures synod to permit the transfer of All Nations Church of Bakersfield, California, from Classis Ko-Am to Classis Greater Los Angeles. The request originated from the All Nations Church council and was approved by both classes.

Grounds:

- a. All Nations Church's new pastor, Rev. Amos Park, has connections in Classis Greater Los Angeles that will facilitate the training of All Nations Church leaders in the regional life of the church.

- b. Pastor Amos Park desires to network with the pastors in Classis Greater Los Angeles and feels he is able to contribute much in the multiethnic setting of Classis Greater Los Angeles. The congregation is at a point where connecting with an English-speaking classis is preferable to connecting with a Korean-speaking one.
- c. All Nations Church’s ministry would be more inspired to participate at the classis level and be more effectively counseled and held accountable by their colleagues in Classis Greater Los Angeles.

Classis Greater Los Angeles
Sandi Ornee, stated clerk

OVERTURE 7

Appoint a Task Force on Multisite Churches

I. Background

In 2022, Classis Chicago South approved an overture wherein Plainfield Christian Reformed Church came under the authority of Orland Park CRC as an emerging church. This action was done to facilitate the beginning of a multisite arrangement between the two churches at the end of a multiyear process of discernment and understanding to bring about the union both legally and in a manner that fits with CRCNA Church Order.

The reality that Classis Chicago South observed is that while multisite congregations are increasingly on the rise within the North American Christian scene, the CRC Church Order doesn’t specifically envision a multisite congregation, and at present there are only two multisite congregations within the denomination of which we are aware.

As Orland Park CRC and Plainfield CRC have operated within this new framework, some matters have arisen that we believe could benefit from focused denominational attention—for example, matters such as appropriate reporting structures, delegations to classis, allowing both campuses to have a voice in decision making, and so on. Within our own classis our arrangement has caused some confusion that we would like to address to help foster and deepen trust.

There have also been joys of mutual accountability, fellowship across broader bounds, and a broad shared vision that we would love to see as a viable option for other Christian Reformed congregations.

We would also like to see a process developed to allow for churches to move forward without multiyear exploration processes.

Thus we have come to believe that it could be a benefit to our denomination as a whole to appoint a task force to study multisite churches in an effort to

update our Church Order supplements to explain how such an arrangement can function within the context of our Church Order and the Reformed confessions.

II. Overture

Classis Chicago South overtures synod to do the following:

A. Appoint a task force to study multisite churches with a mandate to research multisite churches and provide the following:

- direction, advice, and guidance on what models best fit Reformed theology and polity
- direction, advice, and guidance on what models shouldn't be employed in Reformed churches
- a roadmap for how churches might become a multisite campus or enfold a church as a campus
- recommended changes to Church Order supplements to facilitate such arrangements and provide clarity for how such churches should properly function in relation to each other, the classis, and synod
- provide a legal/structural framework for multisite churches.

B. Appoint to the task force at least one attorney, at least two pastors from multisite congregations, at least one biblical or systematic Reformed theologian, and a Church Order expert.

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA Church Order does not envision such an arrangement at present.
2. Multisite arrangements are being increasingly employed within the North American church scene and may provide missional opportunities for CRCNA congregations.
3. A task force provides the time to ensure that a use of multisite congregations within the CRCNA would be done properly, in good order, and in accordance with Reformed theological principles.
4. A task force can provide direction on how such arrangements can be pursued with respect to the law and articles of incorporation.
5. A road map and changes to the Church Order can prevent confusion at both the congregational and classis levels and give clarity for congregations as they pursue such an arrangement.

IV. Conclusion

We pray that this work may bear fruit in fostering clarity among classes in which this structure is employed, as well as missional zeal throughout our denomination.

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

Reaffirm the Decision of 1996 regarding Racial Reconciliation**I. Background**

In the history of the Christian Reformed Church numerous statements about race and racism have been declared since 1957. And as recently as 2022 and 2023, statements have been made by synods about racism and biblical justice. In 1996 a synodical committee presented a report, which synod approved and which the CRC published under the title *God's Diverse and Unified Family* (see crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf). The report was produced in response to instructions from Synod 1992 for a "committee to engage in a comprehensive review and articulation of the biblical and theological principles regarding the development of a racially and ethnically diverse family of God" (*Acts of Synod 1992*, p. 720). This report did not obtain confessional status but has been referred to the churches, and for several years synodical delegates were expected to read the report prior to the convening of synod. What has been clear is that the report is solidly based on the truth of God's Word and is considered a valuable tool for the churches of the denomination.

On the basis of the principles articulated in the report, Synod 1996 declared "that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God's Word and the Reformed confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513). As a declaration of synod, this matter is settled and binding upon the congregations, office-bearers, and members of the CRCNA.

In addition, the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the cherished Reformed confessions, explains the sixth commandment from the Word of God very clearly. We quote the entirety of Lord's Day 40:

Q&A 105**Q. What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?**

A. I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge.

I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.

Q&A 106**Q. Does this commandment refer only to murder?**

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness.

In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder.

Q&A 107

Q. Is it enough then that we do not murder our neighbor in any such way?

A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

Given that content from the Heidelberg Catechism, it is clear that fighting against racism and fighting for racial justice is more than a social or cultural issue. It is a confessional matter.

During the history of the CRCNA in many locations in the United States and Canada, this confessional declaration has been violated with impunity. We have used thoughts, words, looks, and gestures in very disparaging ways toward people who are different from us. We have frequently stood by silently as others have given expression to what the catechism describes and so have become “party to this in others.” We have become angry with others and vindictive as we have seen neighborhoods change because others different from us have moved in. Some of us upon occasion have expressed outright hatred toward others whom we perceived as those who destroyed our neighborhoods and our job opportunities. We have treated First Nations people with scorn and have severely demeaned their culture. Some have tried to call us to confession, repentance, and changed behavior and attitudes, but this has often been ignored or had temporary effect. The repeated appearance of matters dealing with race and racism in the *Acts of Synod* indicates that we have not concluded efforts to become the reconciled community of racially and ethnically diverse people God desires.

II. Overture

Therefore Classis Chicago South overtures synod to reaffirm the declaration regarding the 1996 report (published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*) “that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God’s Word and the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513). Although it may not ordinarily be wise to reaffirm past synodical decisions, the ongoing gravity of this issue makes it reasonable to do so in this case.

Grounds:

- a. The truth of the statement from Synod 1996 has not changed, and we need to be reminded of the necessity for reconciliation.
- b. The report, published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family*, “demonstrates that the Bible declares this reconciled community to be God’s will” (ground from the adoption of this statement in 1996; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

- c. “The confessions declare that the catholicity of the church means that Christ ‘gathers, protects, and preserves’ the church ‘out of the whole human race’ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21)” (ground from the adoption of this statement in 1996; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 9

Encourage Observance of the 1996 Declaration on Racial Reconciliation

I. Background

Synod 1996 declared “that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God’s Word and the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 513).

II. Overture

Classis Chicago South overtures synod to urge all classes in the CRCNA to encourage observance of this declaration by officebearers of their constituent churches and by congregation members, repenting of past sins and diligently pursuing paths of reconciliation and obedience.

Grounds:

- a. Hebrews 12:14 says: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.”
- b. Church Order Article 79-a states, “The members of the church are accountable to one another in their doctrine and life and have the responsibility to encourage and admonish one another in love.”
- c. The requests of Synod 1996 to classes (*Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 514) were not fully and universally implemented by the classes of the CRCNA.

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, stated clerk

OVERTURE 10

Suspend the Work of the Dignity Team

I. Introduction

Our overture addresses the work of a group of people that until recently we had no idea existed: the Dignity Team. As the description of the Dignity Team reads from its page at crcna.org/dignityteam,

Established in 2022, the Dignity Team exists to respond to less tangible and less clearly defined abuses of power that occur within CRC

circles, but may fall between or outside the scopes of the systems addressed elsewhere in the CRCNA's system to prevent the abuse of power.

Our concern regarding the work of the Dignity Team is already referred to there, but it may be hard to see at first. Looking at the Dignity Team mandate makes our concern a bit more noticeable. The mandate reads,

The approved mandate of the Dignity Team is:

- **to prevent** abuse of power by being available to advise those within CRC arenas on how to promote the value and dignity of all persons;
- **to respond** to abuses of power that occur within CRC circles in nimble, less formal, pastoral ways in coordination with Safe Church Ministry, Pastor Church Resources, and Human Resources in ways that promote reconciliation, healing, and restoration; and
- **to report** trends of abuse and gaps related to response to abuse within the denomination.

Our great concern is that although this team is mandated to respond to "abuses of power that occur within CRC circles," there is no process identified through which those abuses of power are to be justly and objectively determined. The description of their work itself refers to abuses of power that are "less tangible and less clearly defined." There is already then acknowledgement that this team is working on the margins, so to speak, where whether there has been abuse of power or not is unclear. This, it seems to us, is all the more reason to require a formal and clearly defined process before the team concludes that genuine abuse of power has occurred. In fact, for this team to use the power that has been conferred upon it, without utilizing an objective and just process to determine if abuse of power has occurred in the situations it addresses, would be in itself, an abuse of power.

Our overture, then, is quite simple and straightforward:

II. Overture

The council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, overtures synod to immediately suspend the work of the Dignity Team until a just process for the determination of abuse can be developed and required as part of the Dignity Team's mandate prior to the Dignity Team becoming involved in cases of alleged abuse, bringing it into alignment with the explanation of the ninth commandment in Q&A 112 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Grounds:

1. Accusations of abuse are incredibly serious and should not be made without great care. Those who face such accusations, even when later found to be innocent, suffer long-term repercussions.

2. The Scriptures are very clear that the pursuit of justice must follow a just process. This includes specific guidelines to verify that accusations are proven true before being accepted as true (Deut. 19:15-21; Prov. 18:17; 1 Tim. 5:19-21).
3. Describing someone's actions as abusive, before those actions have been formally determined through a just and careful process to be abusive, is a breach of the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," as the Heidelberg Catechism explains in Q&A 112:

Q. What is the aim of the ninth commandment?

- A. That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.

Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are the very devices the devil uses, and they would call down on me God's intense wrath. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name.

4. The mandate of the Dignity Team includes no provision or requirement for a just hearing prior to its determining whether genuine abuse has taken place in situations where abuse has been alleged. (See the explanation of the work of the Dignity Team and its mandate at crcna.org/dignityteam.)

As such, this mandate fails to guard our neighbor's good name. Rather, it creates a likelihood that gossip, slander, and rash condemning will take place instead.

While abuse must be addressed wherever it exists in the church, seeking to do so without a just process to determine the presence of abuse in the first place leads us to committing the very abusive treatment of others that we are seeking to eliminate.

We ask that synod would bring the Dignity Team into alignment with the explanation of the ninth commandment in Q&A 112 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan
Ethan Pawelski, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

Appoint a Committee to Explore the Need for a CRCNA Licensing Board for CRCNA Pastors

I. Background on licensing boards

Licensing boards serve to protect the public from misconduct, maltreatment, and abuse by being accessible to persons harmed so that such persons may file a complaint or grievance against a licensed professional whom they believe has violated them. Medical and mental health professionals answer to their particular licensing boards (social worker licensing board, marriage and family licensing board, medical board, etc.) and attorneys answer to a bar board. Some of the services that a licensing board provides are licensure renewal, reporting of CEU hours for renewal, and forms to file complaints and grievances. Licensing boards meet throughout the year to review complaints and other concerns. When wrongs are determined, licensing boards have the power to implement disciplinary action, such as requiring the licensee to take a class, withdrawing or withholding his/her license, or suspending the license. Disciplinary action is reported to the contracted insurance companies of those charged.

II. Overture

I overture Synod 2024 to appoint a committee to explore and research the need to develop and implement a CRCNA licensing board for pastors of the CRCNA (licensed and commissioned pastors) who face allegations regarding misconduct, maltreatment, any form of abuse including abuse of power, and/or job performance. This would not include a pastor's theological commitments or position.

Additionally, this committee's exploration and research would do the following:

- determine how a licensing board would fit into the current structure of Church Order and/or what changes would need to be made to make it possible, especially regarding the council, classis, and licensing board relationship
- determine how a licensing board would work with
 - a victim presenting allegations of abuse of power, abuse of authority, or misconduct to the licensing board
 - the safe church team (if available), church councils, classis, and Church Order protocols
 - the safe church team and/or council when either or both of them present allegations of abuse to the licensing board
- explore what other churches and denominations are currently doing with regard to using a licensing board structure

- provide explanations about the amount of power the licensing board would or could have in connection with the authority of councils (and sometimes classis) over a pastor (Church Order)
- provide an explanation of what a licensing board could do for councils and classes, such as granting licenses, ensuring completion of required training prior to renewal of license, having authority to discipline (through license suspension, requiring a pastor to take a class, attend a workshop, undergo supervision, etc.)
- determine what jurisdiction the licensing board would have, such as certain classes, regions, or the entire denomination
- determine what kind of background the licensing board members could have (social workers, therapists, psychologists, medical doctors, or other licensed master-level professionals)
- compare and contrast how other professional licensing boards (marriage and family, social workers) execute their duties and responsibilities to understand how a CRCNA licensing board could do theirs
- address other issues or concerns that may arise from their exploration and research

Grounds:

1. The CRCNA denomination, since the opening of Safe Church Ministry in 1994, has pledged to members and victims of the Christian Reformed Church to do all it can as a denomination to provide a safe church environment. This was promised again in the approval of the Abuse Victims Task Force Report of 2010, the Abuse of Power Overture in 2018, the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders in 2023, and other decisions. A licensing board, where pastors answer to a board, would increase safety for all.
2. A licensing board for pastors would increase accountability, which would create a safer church for all.
3. A licensing board (consisting of social workers, therapists, psychologists, medical doctors) assures better outcomes because of a board's greater objectivity and greater expertise when reviewing complaints and situations that involve abuse issues by church leaders.
4. It has been shown that councils lack the ability to know how to do investigations of pastor/church leader wrongdoing, how to question the accused, how to write reports about their investigations, and how to conduct interviews.
5. A licensing board relieves some of the burden of councils and consistories when they are faced with how to handle a pastor's/church leader's misconduct, allegations of abuse, and other difficult situations
6. There has been a consistent lack of objectivity among councils and consistories when investigating abuse of power situations and cases be-

cause of the councils' and consistories' friendship with the pastor/church leader, their need for the pastor/church leader's approval, and their fear of retaliation and rebuttal should a council member stand up against a pastor/ church leader.

Member of Hancock (Minn.) CRC
Judy De Wit

Note: This overture was presented to the council of Hancock (Minn.) CRC but was not adopted. This overture was then presented to Classis Lake Superior at its March 2024 meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 12

Ensure that Advisory Committees Review and Present All Pertinent Information When Synod Receives Overtures or Appeals on Abuse

I. Background

The CRCNA, since 1994 (the opening of Abuse Prevention Office), has vowed that abuse by church leaders of the denomination will be addressed and dealt with. However, this assurance has failed many times. Whether it has been via church process (council, classis, synod) or by presenting, discussing, and approving overtures needed in order to bring change to our church system to ensure a better response to allegations, our church system has not done what it vowed to do.

II. Overture

I overture that when a synod receives overtures or appeals related to abuse, its advisory committee(s) shall review and present all pertinent information to synod so that delegates may make informed decisions.

Ground:

When every overture or appeal is presented on the synod floor, then . . .

- we follow the vows that we as a denomination have made to address abuse, abuse of power, and abuse in our churches, on all levels.
- the (council, classis, synod) appeal process of Church Order is being followed and ensures that victims' voices will be heard at synod; when an advisory committee declines to present an appeal or overture to synod, more victimization occurs.
- we are hearing a possible better way to respond to abuse. Usually overtures mean that a loophole in the appeal process has been found, meaning pastors have manipulated the appeal system to dodge and avoid charges of wrongdoing. Overtures need to be heard because then we are strengthening our response to abuse.

- the protection of pastors is reduced and the voice of the victim is increased. Lying, deceit, gaslighting, and “that didn’t really happen” are typical messages victims hear from church leaders in their situations.
- the victim is validated. Refusing to open and discuss overtures and appeals increases the pain and harm already done to victims. Messages of “we don’t want to hear about it” or “let’s call a technicality on this; then we don’t have to deal with it” or “he’s such a great man, we don’t want to upset him” are reduced when every overture and appeal is put on the floor of synod.

Member of Hancock (Minn.) CRC
Judy De Wit

Note: This overture was presented to the council of Hancock (Minn.) CRC but was not adopted. This overture was then presented to Classis Lake Superior at its March 2024 meeting but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 13

Do Not Adopt Proposed Addition of Church Order Article 23-d and Its Supplement

I. Background

The Study of Bivocationality Task Force has done significant work to consider the meaning and significance of “proper support” for ordained church leaders, both ministers of the Word in bivocational service and commissioned pastors (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314). Their work provides a great service to the denomination and offers an important opportunity for discussion about how we can do ministry faithfully in the changing contexts across North America, as well as how churches can encourage and facilitate the work of pastors by providing sufficient financial resources for the work of ministry as instructed in Scripture (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 2 Thess. 3:7-10). However, the proposals to define “proper support” for commissioned pastors, while well intentioned, could have unintended effects that diminish the distinctions existing between the offices and place undue burdens on churches in nontraditional settings within the CRCNA.

The proposal for “proper support” seems to assume that the offices of commissioned pastor and minister of the Word are, for all intents and purposes, equivalent in terms of the kinds of compensation expected for the value of the work done for church leadership (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Cor. 9:14). But this is not necessarily the case. The offices of the church may be equal in dignity and honor, but not in task or mandate (Church Order Art. 2). The work of commissioned pastors is “applicable to a variety of ministries,” which includes among them youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and

evangelism (Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-a). The variety of ministries covered by the office of commissioned pastor means that, while guidelines for compensation *may* at times be similar to that of a minister of the Word, there may also be substantial differences that require different treatment (for example, differences in education, professional training, responsibility to the local church or wider denomination, etc.). Furthermore, including commissioned pastors in the specific requirements for “proper support” begs the question, What about other, nonordained church staff? Is it only ordained staff who have a right to “proper support”?

Furthermore, with specific reference to the housing provision, the proposal obscures the historical development of this aspect of “proper support” in relation to the work of a minister of the Word. A parsonage was typically allowed to clergy as a benefit due to the more frequent moves expected of a minister of the Word, who served the ministry of the denomination as a whole. This idea stands in contrast to that of a commissioned pastor, whose work is limited to the local ministry to which he or she is commissioned. The housing provisions, in this regard, are particularly problematic at potentially blurring the distinctions between the two offices in the ways these offices serve the overall denomination.

Finally, the specificity of the forms of “proper support” prescribed by synod in the proposed Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-d give the impression that the specific factors named by the task force in its report (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 296-98 and pp. 302-3) can be easily overcome by simply instructing churches to include housing, sabbatical expenses, and so forth as compensation expectation without regard for the size of the church, income level of its members, educational level in the wider community, and similar considerations. While the report rightly challenges churches to consider whether it is fair for a full-time minister of the Word in a larger church to be offered a sabbatical while a bivocational commissioned pastor in an immigrant congregation has no such opportunity, it does not ask whether it is fair—or helpful for our collective witness as a denomination—to demand that all churches provide equal benefits. In particular, the instructions of the Supplement would benefit from additional conversation with leaders of nonmajority culture communities in the CRCNA to determine the effects of these requirements on different constituencies within our denomination.

Clearly, we are not arguing that churches should not provide “proper support” for commissioned pastors (nor ignoring this responsibility for any church staff). In many ways we would echo the sentiments of the Candidacy Committee that whatever differences exist in the requirements between ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors, those differences do not “justify the underpaying of commissioned pastors” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 857). But it would be wise for synod to consider carefully the implications of any Church Order changes in the ways the various offices are perceived throughout the wider CRC.

II. Overture

For this reason, we submit the following overture to Synod 2023:

That synod not adopt the proposed addition of Church Order Article 23-d and its Supplement (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 964-66).

Grounds:

- a. While well intentioned and aimed at developing a parity in terms of the ways churches support ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors, the proposal obscures the very real differences between these offices, particularly in the distinct ways in which these two offices serve the denomination.
- b. The proposal to require housing support in the compensation for commissioned pastors, in particular, overlooks the historical reasons for this aspect of the compensation for a minister of the Word, which might not apply to the more localized ordination of a commissioned pastor.
- c. Further conversation is needed to determine the impact of these requirements on the ministry and financial situations of smaller churches, particularly in immigrant and other nonmajority culture communities within the CRCNA.

Classis Atlantic Northeast
David D. Poolman, stated clerk

OVERTURE 14

Regarding Belgic Confession, Article 36

I. Introduction

Brothers and sisters, our society is in crisis, and we all feel it.

While there is always some degree of crisis in society, fallen as it is, and it goes up and down in waves, the current wave that we are experiencing seems increasingly like a kind of tsunami. There is something in the air, and that something is troubling.

From crime and punishment, racial tension, immigration, transgenderism, and the content of public education to inflation, mounting debt, and deficit spending, it seems as though every aspect of society is involved.

In addition to these and many other challenges, our society faces difficulties with a significant loss of faith in its institutions—including the church, which in times past would be relied upon to provide the steadying influence and direction to help process the challenges in a way that would be constructive and healing and lead to a better and more secure place.

Of the 16 institutions currently tracked by Gallup each year, regarding Americans' confidence in them, 11 notched their lowest score ever recorded in either 2022 or 2023.

The nine central institutions that Gallup has regularly tracked since 1979—the church, the military, the U.S. Supreme Court, banks, public schools, newspapers, Congress, organized labor, and big business—have seen their average confidence score plummet from 48 percent in 1979 to 26 percent last year.

The fall in confidence in the church (organized religion) has been even greater as a percentage, falling from a high of 68 percent in 1975 to just 31 percent in 2023—a drop of 37 points, or 54 percent.

The vast majority of people in our society do not trust these institutions, do not trust that they can help, do not trust that they have answers, do not trust what they say.

We believe that one significant reason the church is not believed to have any answers to these cultural challenges is that the church, and the Reformed churches specifically—which have genuine answers to many of these, as the history of Western civilization testifies—have chosen to remain silent, or worse yet, have begun suggesting answers contrary to the ones God has given us.

It is time for the church to once again begin to declare its answers and to call our society back to the stability and greater fullness of blessing for all people that they provide.

There are two main challenges to the church finding its voice in these matters:

First, there is within the church (and particularly our corner of the church) a great fear of “getting political.” Since all of the challenges of society are debated and often demagogued in the political sphere, it is believed that the church should stay silent on these things.

However, we here in the Christian Reformed Church need to remember that in a very significant way we are *confessionally* political. One of the three forms of unity, the Belgic Confession, specifically addresses itself to civil government, and it does so because civil government has been ordained by God to perform a certain function—a function that is defined within the Word of God. Article 36 of the Belgic Confession (as adopted by Synod 2011) reads as follows:

We believe that because of the depravity of the human race, our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. God wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings.

For that purpose God has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good.

And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject

to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.

They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them.

They should do it in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.

Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honor and respect, and obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God's Word, praying for them that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency.

[and then the paragraph that is the focus of this overture]

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

This reference to the moral order is a reference to the second table of the law, God's moral law, which establishes the moral order by establishing just conduct between people.

This is, as John Calvin rightly referred to it, the second use of the law—the restraining of evil in society. The second purpose, then, of God's law is that it be applied to society and that society be governed by it. Anything else is lawlessness. This is the role of civil government.

So, while we seek not to blend the two spheres of church and state, we recognize (1) the role of the church in declaring the truths of God that define the role of the state and (2) his moral law, which constructs the moral order in which society can flourish, and which the state has been given the sword to secure.

We are not only "allowed," then, to "get political"; we are confessionally bound to do it—not so much in the area of specific public policy but, rather, regarding foundational public, or cultural, principles.

The second significant barrier to the church finding its voice on these matters is the question of just what exactly the church should say. But, here again, we are given direction by the confession of faith, specifically included in that final paragraph that warns against the introduction of common ownership of goods, which, as the article reminds us, seeks to "subvert justice "and to corrupt "the moral order that God has established among human beings." This is the very thing that we have been experiencing, as

our overture seeks to make clear—the confusion, suffering, and injustice that always occur where the common ownership of goods is embraced.

As our overture explains, God’s moral law from beginning to end is founded on the principle of rightful ownership—in its various God ordained forms. Children belong to parents (fifth commandment), the life of each person belongs to that person (sixth commandment), spouses belong to each other (seventh commandment), material goods belong to those to whom God has given them (eighth commandment), one’s good name and reputation belong to that individual (ninth commandment)—and these unique rights are so ironclad that even the desire to dispossess someone from that which rightfully belongs to them is sin (tenth commandment).

These principles of morality—these principles of justice—must be defended where they are attacked and must be reestablished where they have been lost.

It is for the purpose of placing this paragraph back into the body of Article 36 that we present this overture, with the hope that doing so will rekindle in us the importance of these life-giving truths—truths that God has entrusted to us—and that we might begin again to bring his answers to a society that is in desperate need of them, pouring out the blessings of God upon all.

II. Overture

The council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan, overtures Synod 2024 to return the final paragraph of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession to the body of the text and adjust its language regarding Anabaptists and anarchists as follows:

And on this matter we oppose all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

Grounds:

1. When this paragraph was moved into a footnote in 1985, it was not because synod had determined the content of the paragraph to be unbiblical but because of the inability to come to agreement on how to deal with the controversial language regarding Anabaptists.
2. The biblical content of this paragraph is desperately needed in our day:
 - a. To exhort us regarding our ongoing need to honor the ordained role of civil government in society.
 - b. To remind those in civil government of what their God-ordained role is.
 - c. To awaken us to the destructive effects on society and justice where the “common ownership of goods” is introduced.

- d. To refresh us as to the biblical nature of true justice, grounded in the second table of the law, and its connection to the love of our neighbors.
 - e. To supply us with fresh eyes through which to biblically understand the growing challenges within our society.
 - f. To restore to us the life-giving message for a hurting world that God's common grace provides in societies that are built on his truth.
3. Relegating this paragraph to a footnote implies that we either do not believe its content to be biblical or that we do not believe its content to be essential. The church has made neither of these determinations.
 4. The difficulty of the language regarding Anabaptists should not create an insurmountable barrier to restoring this paragraph to the body of the text where it belongs.

III. Background

The text of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession has frequently been debated. There are two areas that have been of special focus. While this overture relates only to the second of these two areas, some background on both will be helpful.

The first area of concern related to the way the Belgic Confession originally described the proper role of the state, giving the state a role not simply in matters of the public domain but also in relation to the mission of the church. Specifically, it stated, "The government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to the upholding of the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist. . . ." Synods 1910, 1938, and 1958 all judged this statement to be unbiblical, and in 1958 this section was moved into a footnote and replaced with language judged to be more faithful to the biblical testimony on this question.

The second area of concern was last formally addressed at Synod 1985. That year, synod was being asked to approve a new translation of the Belgic Confession. During this process, the question of the objectionable language of Article 36 regarding the Anabaptists was again deliberated. For many years there had been calls for this language to be changed, but with little success. The need to approve a new translation of the confession forced a debate on this question once again. At that time the paragraph in question read,

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

Synod 1983 had already softened the language, substituting, “And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists . . .” for the earlier translation, “For that reason we detest the Anabaptists. . . .” But, as Synod 1985 revisited this phrasing as part of the approval process for a new translation of the confession, even this revision did not seem sufficient. The language of “denouncing” which carried with it a formal ecclesiastical connotation, seemed inappropriate and perhaps (depending on who you asked) not entirely historically accurate. Regardless, the decision was made to move the entire paragraph into a footnote and out of the body of the text.

Here it must be noted that the reasoning for moving this paragraph into a footnote was different from that for the first area of concern referenced above, relating to the relationship between church and state. Here, it was not because the content of the paragraph was judged to be unbiblical—the record, in fact, including overtures, committee reports, etc. on the Article 36 controversy reveals no debate whatsoever on this point—but rather solely because the language related to the Anabaptists seemed harsh, divisive, inaccurate, or inappropriate.

While this compromise may have been sufficient to bring the disputes at Synod 1985 to an end, it has removed from the body of our confession important content that the church is desperately in need of in the days in which we live. Specifically, it has removed content related to the subversion of justice through the introduction of common ownership of goods, and the way in which this serves to corrupt the moral order that God has established among human beings.

The cause of justice is one that the denomination has long made a focus of its energies, and the place of justice here in our confession is critical to our understanding of true justice and to our united voice in promoting it in society.

The phrase “common ownership of goods” refers to the belief that material goods belong not to individuals but, rather, to everyone, “in common.” No one, therefore, has any exclusive right to the possession of any specific thing. Variations on this concept have been practiced by various groups throughout history (some Anabaptists among them), who lived in small communities of common ownership, or as they have been called in more modern times, “communes.” While the injustice of this practice eventually presents itself to those living in these communities, those who live in them do so by choice and can leave whenever they like. As such, the level of injustice they create is limited. However, it is this very same philosophy, the common ownership of goods, that also lies at the heart of communism (and all other Marxist ideologies), which takes an authoritarian approach to forcibly establishing this principle on entire societies. Where this takes root,

the level of injustice that is created in society is extreme.¹ More recently, rather than being forcibly established in a society by armed revolution, the ideology is planted in culture through its institutions: the media, the schools, the churches, etc. This has come to be referred to as Cultural Marxism.²

While the ideology of communism had, of course, not yet been fully developed or articulated (as we know it today) in the days when the Belgic Confession was written, the author of the confession (Guido de Brès) and those who adopted it at numerous national synods of the late 16th century as well as at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19, were familiar with the concept of the common ownership of goods, and they rightly judged it to be immoral and unjust. Indeed, the extensive explanation of the role of civil government in chapter 20 of Calvin's *Institutes*, Book Four, lays out in painstaking detail that the magistrate is ordained by God to rule according to God's moral law, which includes the responsibility to ensure "that every man's property be kept secure . . . [and] that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other . . ." (IV, 20, 3). To embrace common ownership of goods is to deny to men what is due them according to the moral law of God, and to enforce it through civil government is to use civil government for a purpose directly contrary to the reason for which God ordained government.

The biblical basis for this assessment of the common ownership of goods begins with a reflection on the law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments. While the first table of the law governs our relationship to God, the second table governs our relationships with one another. The six commandments of the second table, then, summarize just and right conduct in the relationships between human beings. In each of these six commandments the principle of exclusive right to the possession of some specific thing ("ownership") is both assumed and enshrined, even though the specific type of "ownership" at issue can vary slightly from commandment to commandment. With regard to these things, then, each commandment articulates a God-given right of some type of exclusive possession or ownership to individual persons that must be respected by all others.

The fifth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of parents in the raising and care of their children. While this commandment also governs all other positions of rightful authority, that of parents over their children is primary (as confirmed by Eph. 6:1-3, et al.).

¹ For a comprehensive scholarly recounting of the injustices done through communism during the 20th century, see "The Black Book of Communism," 1999, Harvard College.

² For a helpful explanation of this, see "Cultural Marxism: Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, Emerging Worldviews 4" and "The Overarching Framework: Emerging Worldviews 5" by Glenn Sunshine at breakpoint.org/cultural-marxism-gramsci-and-the-frankfurt-school-emerging-worldviews-4/.

The sixth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of one's life to the individual who has that life. All human beings have the right to the life God has given them (as confirmed by Gen. 9:5-6, et al.).

The seventh commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of one spouse to the other. Each spouse, then, has the exclusive right to the physical intimacy of the other (as confirmed by 1 Cor. 7:1-5, et al.).

The eighth commandment recognizes and enshrines the exclusive right of possession of material goods to those who rightfully own them. Those who own them have the exclusive right to both possess them and determine how they are used (as confirmed by Acts 5:3-4, et al.).

The ninth commandment recognizes and enshrines the right of every individual to their own good name and reputation (as confirmed by Lev. 19:13-18, et al.).

The tenth commandment serves to underscore and reinforce the seriousness with which God takes the protection of these exclusive rights by declaring that even the *desire* to have what rightfully belongs to our neighbor is sin (as confirmed by Matt. 5:27-30, et al.).

In summary, this enduring foundation of just and moral relationships between human beings (commandments 5-10), from its beginning to its end, requires—even demands—a recognition of rightful, individual ownership of goods and other gifts of God that must not be infringed upon. Of course, there are times when these rights are forfeited by individuals because of their abuse of them, and we do have the responsibility to use these gifts in ways that glorify God. But the fact that these rights can be abused, or not used for the glory of God, does not nullify them or change this foundation of just conduct among men. To serve the cause of justice, we must seek to protect all these things that rightfully belong to us and our neighbors.

But this is far more than simply a quest for the establishment of true justice in society; it is also a quest for mechanisms through which we can most fundamentally love our neighbors as ourselves. When Christ summarizes the law, he does so by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (relating to the first table of the law). "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (relating to the second table of the law). "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40, ESV). In the eyes of God, then, securing true justice by honoring the rightful ownership of the things that belong to my neighbor, as articulated in the second table of the law, is the most basic foundation of loving my neighbor as myself. Said another way, it is impossible for me to love my neighbor if I am not first and foremost honoring and seeking to protect his exclusive right to the gifts God has given him.

Close examination of many of the challenges our society faces reveals that the moral order has, indeed, been corrupted. The fabric of society is being

torn apart. Moreover, as we go from issue to issue, we can see that this corruption of the moral order is being created by an embrace of the concept of common ownership of goods (in its various forms) and the corresponding denial of the exclusive right of ownership as expressed in the second table. Sometimes this is perpetrated by individuals or society itself because man in his sin turns away from God's law. At other times it is perpetrated by the state, or institutions overseen by the state, as the government increasingly adopts a collectivist or Marxist approach to governance.

An exhaustive list and explanation of these is not possible here, but we include three examples for greater understanding and clarity.

The most obvious and direct example of this is retail theft³ (eighth commandment). Retail theft is increasing dramatically in many areas of the country, due both to a diminished recognition on the part of many members of our society regarding the rightful ownership of the property of others, and by the government, in the growing number of states and municipalities that "have raised the threshold of what constitutes a felony, allowing criminals to steal more before being subject to stronger penalties than a misdemeanor."⁴ In many urban centers the proliferation of retail theft, and the violence that increasingly accompanies it, has led to a number of retail stores closing.⁵ This harms both the store owners and the communities they serve. It should be noted as well that the issue of retail theft is only one small aspect of an overall rise in crime that threatens the lives of citizens in many ways, all of which are in direct opposition to the unique principles of rightful ownership embedded in the sixth commandment.

The deterioration of an embrace of rightful ownership articulated in the second table of the law is also increasingly apparent in the various ways that the authority of parents is either denied or ignored by various government entities, including most notably public schools. This is most clearly manifested in the recent developments regarding school policies where a child's decision to transition from one gender to another is kept secret from their parents.⁶ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, which forced

³ The National Retail Federation (NRF) Retail Security Survey 2023 recounts in great detail the dramatic increase in retail theft and the negative effects it is having. As it states in its introduction, "Retail crime, violence, and theft continue to impact the retail industry at unprecedented levels. The effects of these criminal acts are not isolated to large national brands or large metropolitan cities. Daily media reports show that no business is immune, and these issues touch retailers of all segments, sizes, and locations across the United States."

⁴ As stated in a summary of the NRF report at poynter.org/reporting-editing/2022/why-has-shoplifting-been-out-of-control-since-the-pandemic-began/.

⁵ See the NRF Retail Security Survey 2023.

⁶ See "Gender transitions at school spur debate over when, or if, parents are told," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2022; [washingtonpost.com/education/2022/07/18/gender-transition-school-parent-notification/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/07/18/gender-transition-school-parent-notification/).

many children to attend school remotely, also gave parents a clearer understanding of what their children were being taught. Many parents voiced their opposition to things they were hearing. This touched off a nationwide debate regarding parents' rights, leading to the development of things such as the state of Indiana's "Parents Bill of Right" and serving as the central issue in the 2021 Virginia governor's election, among many others. This issue continues to be the focus of fierce debate across the nation, with many lawsuits currently in process.

A third example of the embrace of common ownership of goods is represented by the current crisis unfolding at the southern border of the United States. Inherent in the biblical teaching regarding rightful ownership is that of boundaries. Each commandment in the second table is defined by boundaries. There are boundaries around a parent's children. They have been entrusted to the parent by God, and others are not to seek to take the place of that parent in their lives. Others are not to breach or deny that boundary. There are boundaries around a person's material goods. They have been entrusted to the person by God, and others have no right to breach that boundary, taking any of those goods for themselves. There is a boundary around every marriage, a boundary that no one is to deny or ignore. What we are saying is that justice is inexorably linked to rightful ownership, and rightful ownership is marked by God-ordained boundaries.

Boundaries are necessary not simply to determine what belongs to whom, but also to allow for proper governance over the items that have been entrusted. Where boundaries are not recognized, there is no ability to govern these gifts of God properly, and they do not achieve their intended end. If the rightful ownership God has given me over my children should be denied me, or if others should seek to take my place, I would have no opportunity to properly steward that which God has given, and my children would likely suffer. Likewise, if the rightful ownership of my material goods should be denied me, or if others should seek to take it from me, I would have no opportunity to steward that which God has given me materially, and it would likely be squandered. Where boundaries are honored, those who have responsibility for that which lies within the boundary can properly govern it. More than that, the recognition of their unique ownership often inspires them to take this stewardship more seriously. However, where boundaries are not honored, there can be no proper governance. While many people react negatively to belief in the necessity of borders and their defense, it is the honoring of this boundary that permits the governing of the area within it to be as God would have it. Without honoring this boundary, no proper governance is possible, and much suffering results.

More and more, this is what we are seeing on the southern border of the United States. The boundary is not being honored, not by the millions who are illegally crossing it each year, nor by the government that is ordained to secure it but is failing to do so. This has led to a significant breakdown in

the governance of the places where this is going on. Rather than human flourishing, we see human trafficking.⁷ Rather than the protection of life, we see the increase of death, some from the dangers of the journey,⁸ many thousands of others from the fentanyl and other drugs that flow freely over the border.⁹

These are only three of many current issues our society faces that are created by the embrace of the idea of the common ownership of goods. In all of these situations, those who suffer the most are those who are the most vulnerable: the poor, the weak, the defenseless. The church cannot remain silent about these things. The church must once again speak with clarity into these issues, and the beginning of finding that clarity is to fully embrace that which is articulated so well in the final paragraph of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. Restoring this paragraph to the body of the text will serve as a powerful statement by the church in this regard.

In order to do this, of course, a fitting solution will need to be found regarding the language in the paragraph regarding the Anabaptists. While a number of options are available, and many have been proposed through the years, we recommend the following three-part solution:

1. Instead of the original “detest” or the current “denounce,” that synod avoid any inappropriate or questionable language by substituting the word “oppose.” This word is clear and accurate to the original intention of the paragraph.
2. That synod strike the words, “the Anabaptists, anarchists, and in general.” The truth being articulated in this paragraph is not dependent on the specific mention of the Anabaptists or anyone else. Indeed, in many respects, the historical record on this point is challenged. There is no reason of content that would keep us from removing these words, thus we are not changing the meaning of the text. The Anabaptists and other anarchists are being referenced as an example of the issue being addressed, but they are not the issue being addressed.

The paragraph would then read, “And on this matter we oppose all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.”

⁷ See the *New York Times*, “Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business”; [nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html).

⁸ See CBS News, “At least 853 migrants died crossing the US-Mexico border in past 12 months – a record high”; [cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-deaths-crossing-us-mexico-border-2022-record-high/).

⁹ See NBC News, “Fentanyl seizures at US southern border rise dramatically”; [nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/fentanyl-seizures-u-s-southern-border-rise-dramatically-n1272676](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/fentanyl-seizures-u-s-southern-border-rise-dramatically-n1272676).

3. That synod place the original language in a footnote with an explanation of having found the language regarding the Anabaptists to be objectionable and unnecessary to the biblical truth being confessed here.

We respectfully submit this overture for the good of the church, the good of society, and the glory of God.

Council of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan
Ethan Pawelski, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 15

Reexamine Ecumenical Relations with Reformed Church in America

I. Initial statement

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to reexamine the ecumenical relationship of the Christian Reformed Church in North America with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) to reflect recent large-scale changes in the RCA and in Christian solidarity with brothers and sisters in congregations who felt obligated to leave the RCA due to practices that do not align with stated positions.

II. Rationale

A. Historical

The CRCNA and RCA share a common heritage. Though after 1857 focus was often placed on the great differences and animosity between these two theological “cousins,” the more recent past has seen a closer working together. On paper, it seemed as if the reasons for any original split were becoming obsolete and irrelevant. This culminated in the so-called “Pella Accord,” a joint resolution made in Synod 2014 in which the RCA and CRC have agreed to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately” (*Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 504).

More recent years, however, have seen significant changes, particularly in the RCA. While the CRCNA has continued to affirm its historical theology and practice regarding human sexuality, inaction in the RCA to defend its stated positions has led a majority of congregations to disaffiliate from the denomination. While the RCA has officially stated positions that align with

those of the CRC, these churches have cited unaddressed *practices* by congregations and classes which do not align with the *positions* of the RCA General Synod that are shared by the CRC.

With the departure of these churches, some of whom had previous RCA-CRC joint affiliation, the RCA of 2024 is no longer the RCA of 2014. If churches leaving the RCA share the official CRCNA position reflected by our Human Sexuality Report approved by Synod 2022, we ought to have grave concern about the character of the RCA that remains.

Thus it is imperative to begin a dialogue about current RCA practices and whether we really are aligned in doctrine and practice.

B. Biblical and theological

The biblical priority of unity drove the CRCNA and RCA to explore greater partnership; however, what is the focus of Christian unity? The biblical focus on love is grounded in truth (Eph. 4:15). Though our churches share common heritage and geography, if the church represents the kingdom of Christ, unity can only be found in common faith.

Commands toward unity in the New Testament letters are balanced out by calls for the church to remain watchful, and perhaps even to separate. In 1 Corinthians 5 a church celebrates its tolerance of a sexually immoral man, only to be admonished by the apostle Paul, who calls for the man to be put out from the church for the sake of his salvation. Throughout 1 John, the apostle John warns the church of the spirit of the antichrist (2:18-27; 4:1-6), going so far in 2 John as to warn believers not to associate or partner with false teachers (vv. 10-11). When our Lord Jesus speaks to the seven churches through John in the book of Revelation, he praises those who reject certain practices (2:6) while he criticizes those who tolerate them (2:14-15).

The spirit of Matthew 18 calls us, then, to approach the RCA directly to ask about their current doctrine and practice as we evaluate whether we are as aligned as churches in communion ought to be. Though Christ's words here speak specifically to individuals, it seems applicable and wise for denominational relationships among the same theological family.

C. Ecclesiastical

Our Ecumenical Charter states, "Unity is intrinsic to the truth of the gospel and to our confession. . . . The unity of the church is a unity in truth, the truth that is Jesus Christ, as revealed in Holy Scripture." While we reach out to people striving for visible oneness in the church, "passion for the truth of Christ calls us to reject all forms of unity that compromise unequivocal witness to Jesus Christ." The present state of the RCA, and our present form of unity with them, may compromise unequivocal witness to Jesus Christ.

As a fellow Reformed denomination, the RCA affirms the Three Forms of Unity (the Reformed confessions). Our primary concern regards a potential

failure to promote and defend two primary areas of our common confession:

1. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 108 and 109—Though on paper the RCA has made several statements that align with the CRC, in practice there have been reports of the ordination of openly practicing homosexual clergy and of clergy solemnizing same-sex marriages without consequence.
2. Belgic Confession, Article 29—This inaction would thus reflect a lack of the “third mark” of the true church: “It practices church discipline for correcting faults.” While the CRCNA must surely examine itself in this area and repent for a lack of discipline correcting many varied sins, the third mark appears to be increasingly missing from the RCA.

D. Practical

In recent years the entire Dakota Classis of the RCA and many RCA congregations throughout Iowa have disaffiliated themselves from the RCA. In many of our communities, we enjoy solid working relationships with these congregations that share our Reformed convictions. Now, however, our Church Order and ecumenical relationships reflect our having a closer relationship to a distant denomination that we no longer recognize than to these church families.

In our area, as well as in others across the denomination, dialogue has been taking place to discern relationships with the Kingdom Network and the Alliance of Reformed Churches. Recent synods have begun the process of seeking greater unity with these brothers and sisters.

As our brothers and sisters in these churches acted out of a stand for biblical truth on matters of scriptural authority and anthropology, it is our obligation as a church in communion to question the current doctrine and practice of the RCA.

III. Overture

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Instruct the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee [EIRC] to communicate with the RCA General Secretary and Commission on Christian Unity on the following points and to report to Synod 2025 regarding responses received:
 1. A desire for shared commitment to our confessional Reformed heritage, doctrine, and practice.
 2. A concern regarding the nature of churches that have disaffiliated with the RCA as being in alignment with CRCNA positions.

3. A request for clarification on the RCA's ongoing commitment in faith and practice to Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 108 and 109, specifically as it relates to the forbidding of unchastity, which encompasses homosexual sex.
 4. A request for clarification on whether RCA clergy have been, or are being, permitted to solemnize same-sex marriages, or to themselves remain in same-sex marriages or romantic partnerships, while remaining ministers in good standing.
 5. A request for response before Synod 2025.
- B. Provisionally declare the following decisions of synod to be inoperative, until further review from Synod 2025 (upon receiving further response from the RCA to the above communication):
1. Article 36, B, 9-10 of Synod 2005, regarding the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America (*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 740):
 9. That synod approve the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church of America . . . subject to the additions or amendments to the Church Order (or supplements thereof) as recommended.
 10. That synod propose . . . changes in Church Order Article 8 and its Supplement. . . .
 2. Article 20 of Synod 2014 regarding the Resolution on the Relationship between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 503-4).

That synod adopt the joint resolution prepared for the CRC synod and the General Synod of the RCA.
- C. Provisionally declare Church Order Article 8-b, along with its Supplement, 8, D, to be inoperative until further review from Synod 2025.
- D. Request that Synod 2025 further review the ecumenical status of the Reformed Church in America as a church in communion.
- E. Prohibit CRCNA classes from delegating RCA-ordained ministers or commissioned pastors to future synod meetings until the above decisions and articles in concern again become operative.
- F. Instruct the General Secretary to work with Thrive on developing a plan for how to potentially shepherd pastors and congregations affected by these decisions (i.e., RCA ministers called to CRCNA churches, union churches) for proposal to Synod 2025, while advising them to continue any current arrangements until further notice.

Grounds:

1. With over half of its member congregations leaving, most of whom are in alignment with the CRCNA, the RCA is no longer the same denomination as the one with whom these bonds were formed.
2. Scripture calls for a unity based upon common faith in Jesus Christ, not upon ethnic heritage, historical relationships, or common geography, and for separation from those tolerant of sin—sexual sin in particular.
3. Faithfulness as a church in communion requires encouragement toward faithful statements and faithful practices related to our common Reformed confession, especially regarding RCA clergy, who are permitted to seek a call in CRCNA congregations.
4. The presence of delegates ordained in the RCA at synod meetings deliberating on the CRC's relationship to the RCA presents an obvious conflict of interest.
5. Since many congregations disaffiliating with the RCA align with the CRC position on human sexuality, we act out of solidarity with them and out of grave concern for the denomination they have left.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 16

Solicit Resources for LGBTQ Ministry from the Churches

I. Background

Synod 2023 reaffirmed the decision of Synod 2022 that “unchastity” includes “homosexual sex.” This effectively precludes the possibility of gay marriage and makes celibacy a requirement for lesbian and gay people (unless they decide to pursue a heterosexual marriage). Synod 2023 also urged congregations to be “places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023). Thus our congregations must find a way to be places of belonging for LGBTQ members and attendees while maintaining the CRC position on homosexuality.

Some congregations have chosen to become places of belonging for LGBTQ people while defying the CRC's position on homosexuality. We have had less opportunity to hear from congregations who have become places of belonging for LGBTQ people while maintaining the CRC's position on homosexuality. Given Synod 2023's reaffirmation of the decisions of Synod 2022, it is time for churches to have this opportunity.

II. Overture

- A. We overture synod to solicit resources and tools for LGBTQ ministry from Christian Reformed churches who are in agreement with the

CRC's position on homosexuality. We ask that an email go out from the Office of General Secretary to the stated clerks of every CRC classis requesting that any church that is *both* faithful to the CRC's position on homosexuality *and* has a thriving and successful ministry to LGBTQ people (or simply has a representational percentage of LGBTQ members who feel a sense of belonging in their congregation) share pertinent information about their ministry (or their strategies for inclusion). The resources shared should be collected in one place, easily accessible to all interested CRC congregations.

Grounds:

- a. CRC congregations are clearly in need of such information and resources.
 - b. Synod 2023 adopted the following recommendation: "That synod direct the Office of General Secretary to develop resources and tools, or endorse existing external resources and tools, that align with our Reformed doctrinal standards (as articulated in previous synodical decisions), to equip congregations for pastoral ministry with and to our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023). No recommendation was made, however, to endorse *internal* resources and tools that have proven successful.
 - c. Developing new resources and tools will take extended time and energy; endorsing external ones, although helpful, comes with no guarantee that they will fit the needs of CRC congregations. It makes sense to seek first resources that are already available and being employed in our churches. This overture does not intend to preclude the Office of General Secretary from taking any other course of action it deems fit in following the synodical recommendation, but merely offers a simple way to collect resources and tools that are in alignment with our standards and have already proven successful in our churches.
 - d. A top-down approach is unlikely to be as effective as a grassroots approach. Even if the precise nature of a particular ministry cannot be replicated from one congregation to another, specific ideas for ministry, when shared, can be adapted by leaders to different ministry contexts.
 - e. Such a strategy (emailing stated clerks to solicit information) would not be taxing for the Office of General Secretary but has the potential to elicit a significant return from those churches who are doing effective ministry with LGBTQ people within the bounds of CRC orthodoxy.
- B. If no such resources become available within a year, we ask that a report be made to that effect to Synod 2025. In such an eventuality, we further

ask that Synod 2025 recommend that the Office of General Secretary explore whether it is feasible to continue to ask CRC congregations to be places of belonging for LGBTQ members in the present context.

Grounds:

- a. Churches should be made aware of the follow-up and outcomes to synodical recommendations.
- b. Fifty years have passed since CRC synods began instructing congregations to welcome and care for LGBTQ members in response to the 1973 report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 609-33). If no resources or tools for doing so have arisen naturally or found success within CRC congregations in alignment with the denominational position during this time, it is likely that there are underlying reasons for this. It seems wise to consider and address those reasons before pushing ahead with top-down initiatives, lest we set congregations up to fail.
- c. A time-bound plan with built-in accountability and analysis will help to stop our historic pattern of doing harm to LGBTQ people even while repeated calls are made to be welcoming, and this will show consideration for our LGBTQ members who have already been waiting a long time for the recommendations of the 1973 report to be implemented.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the October 5, 2023, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 17

Articulate What Is Expected of Confessing Members When Agreeing with the Confessions

I. Background

At a profession of faith or infant baptism, the candidate(s) or parents are presented, in one form or another, statements and questions like these:

I ask you before God and Christ's church . . . to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church. . . .

- Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God revealing Christ and his redemption, and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation? . . .

- Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, accept its teaching, and participate in its worship, fellowship, and mission? . . .
- Do you promise to accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love. . . .

(Form for the Public Profession of Faith, 2016)

While a literal reading of the vow regarding the confessions of the church would suggest that the person has a personal conviction affirming each of the doctrines contained in the confessions, the vow to *accept* the teaching of the church and its spiritual guidance suggests there is more than one way to understand what it means for a subscriber to commit to the teachings of the church.

Synod 1975 noted that “Full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601). But Synod 2023 also heard through a communication from Classis Holland,

. . . in the CRCNA we have very high standards of confessional agreement for both officebearers and members, with the only real difference being differing degrees of responsibility for the teaching, defense, and promotion of our confessional standards. . . . While we believe that the church’s ordained offices should continue to be held to the high confessional standards spelled out in the Covenant for Officebearers, we suggest that perhaps it is time . . . to make some careful distinctions in our confessional expectations for members. We do not pretend to have charted a way forward here, but we urge synod to consider this. (Agenda for Synod 2023, p. 604)

Following Synod 2022’s clarification on the interpretation of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and that this interpretation has confessional status (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922), a practical question for councils and pastors is whether one needs to agree with this interpretation to make a public profession of faith, to present their child for baptism, or even to retain membership in their local congregation. While the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has raised this question, it is a question that ought to apply to every article of belief in our confessions.

II. Overture

I request that synod offer the following advice to churches regarding how the confessions and their interpretations apply to nonofficebearer confessing members in light of the vows made at a public profession of faith:

- A. When members vow to “accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love,” they are entrusting themselves to the congregation they are joining and the way in which it is led.

- B. On matters of doctrine that are contained in the creeds and confessions of the church, teaching them as accurately reflecting Christ and his revelation in the Bible is the desire and goal of the church's teaching and instruction.
- C. All who can "accept the spiritual guidance of the church in a spirit of Christian love" and accept the standards by which the church will teach them are encouraged to make public profession of faith, present their children for baptism, and exercise their right to vote at congregational meetings.

Grounds:

1. In distinction from officebearers, confessing members are not asked to renounce every teaching that disagrees with the church's confessions.
2. To expect "full agreement with the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601) exacerbates the issue experienced in the church that we have little-to-no expectation for further discipleship beyond one's profession of faith.
3. This clarifies what members promise when they vow to "accept the spiritual guidance of the church." The spiritual guidance of the church includes the positions and pastoral advice which are "settled and binding" on congregations and their officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).
4. There is a difference in what is expected of confessing members compared to what is expected of officebearers when affirming the confessions of the church as accurately reflecting the revelation of Scripture. As Synod 1976 heard in the report regarding Revision of the Form of Subscription, ". . . since the Form of Subscription is the instrument by which the church regulates the official conduct of the officebearers, it is not the instrument by which the church regulates the actions of the membership of the church in general" (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 578).

Pastor of Inglewood CRC, Edmonton, Alberta
Rev. Andrew Aukema

Note: This overture was submitted to the Council of Inglewood CRC but was not adopted. It was then submitted to the March 8-9, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

Appoint a Task Force to Review the Covenant for Officebearers

I. Introduction

Classis Eastern Canada overtures synod to appoint a task force to review the Covenant for Officebearers and the related Article 5 in the Church Order, and to provide Synod 2025 with analysis and recommendations to address the following concerns:

1. Greater clarity about the distinctions and relationship between confessions and interpretations of specific provisions in a confession as requirements for membership and/or serving in any positions of leadership, and greater clarity about implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers at all levels of church assemblies.
2. Greater clarity and respect for the role and authority of the local church to deliberate together and provide guidance in the application of specific provisions in the confessions in specific situations in local contexts.
3. Greater respect for thoughtful and conscientious decision-making when such decisions are made in prayerful, Spirit-led sincerity before God and in dialogue with the church community.

II. Background

Classis Eastern Canada has community churches that include members who identify as, or who have family members or close friends who identify as, LGBTQ+ persons. We recognize we have not always ministered well with these members and, in the past few years, synodical decisions have made it more challenging. We have engaged in learning, prayer-filled dialogue, and reflection on what God is calling us to do as partners in God's mission in our particular context. We have also actively engaged in the discernment processes within the CRCNA, including overtures asking for more time and prevention of harm that were supported and forwarded to synod in both 2022 and 2023. This overture names other elements in a continuing process of prayerful discernment as committed members of both Classes Eastern Canada and the CRCNA.

As part of this journey, especially after the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 regarding human sexuality, we have struggled with what it means to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, the role of gravamina, and living up to our calling to be part of God's mission in our community, as we discern that. We are also alert to and engaged with members of other Christian Reformed churches who are struggling with similar tensions and who anticipate the possible impacts of further decisions at Synod 2024 about enforcement through the Covenant for Officebearers. It is timely to ask for greater

clarity with regard to the Covenant for Officebearers and its role in CRC churches.

This matter is important for other issues as well as this one that will create tensions in our covenantal relationships in the future. Beyond sexuality, the current moment is fostering high levels of confusion and anxiety about the way we make decisions together and work together in a community that takes covenantal relationships seriously, as well as the recognition of differences in interpretations of specific biblical passages and the implications of some of our long-standing doctrines. It also highlights tensions between calls to unity and respect for diversity.

For this reason, we submit a plea to take time for careful consideration and more clear articulation of essential, relevant elements of Reformed polity as they relate to implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers and related articles in the Church Order, both in the current context and for the future health of our churches. Taking time to do this work now will contribute to restored confidence in the quality of our decision-making processes and will help to foster and maintain unity within the denomination.

Grounds:

1. Regarding synodical decisions, interpretation of the confessions, and implementation of the Covenant for Officebearers
 - a. More clarity is needed to consistently apply the wise guidance from Synod 1975 that “no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598). Specifically, decisions of synod (pronouncements) are considered “settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Church Order Art. 29). However, “While synodical decisions are ‘settled and binding,’ subscription to synodical decisions is not required” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 601). In many ways, the declarations of synod in 2022 and 2023 on human sexuality (specifically related to the interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108) blur the lines between the two. This compromises the clear distinction that Synod 1975 described.
 - b. The Church Order states, “A signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions” (Supplement, Article 5, A, 3). The Church Order recognizes a healthy tension between the role of individuals, local churches, and larger assemblies in discernment of the implications of our confessions. Individuals, who may not decide for themselves what doctrines are covered by the confessions, are to seek decisions of the assemblies and acquiesce with

them; those assemblies include councils and classes as well as synods (Art. 26), who themselves are bound together in covenant relationships under God. In the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023, greater clarity is needed to manage this tension well to have a healthy church at all levels.

- c. The Covenant for Officebearers was designed to encourage, not discourage theological discussion (see *Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 623; *Agenda for Synod 2008*, p. 247; *Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 735; *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 67-70, 550-91). The way the Covenant for Officebearers is being used in the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023 is shutting down discussion instead of encouraging it. This is a consequence, intended or not intended, of giving one interpretation of one provision by one synod “*status confessionis*.” Greater clarity is needed to fulfill the purpose of the Covenant for Officebearers to encourage theological discussion of challenging issues.
- d. A covenant relationship, such as that espoused in the Covenant for Officebearers, requires greater attention to how decisions are made and the impacts for all parties in the covenant relationship. Covenant relationships, different from contracts or hierarchical control, include deep respect for the calling of each party before God and ensuring that decisions serve the well-being of the other party. Covenantal commitments made in baptism, for example, are relevant for how a local church council deals with persons who later identify as LGBTQ+. Walking in covenant relationship also has implications for relationships between local churches when one of them, as a result of careful discernment, feels called by God to follow a different Reformed interpretation than the one endorsed by a particular synod. More consideration of the implications of the important Reformed teachings on covenant for the management of tensions in particular areas would likely lead to more nuanced guidance to maintain relationships in spite of differences in interpretation.
- e. Greater clarity on the relationships between synodical decisions and the confessions is relevant for many issues, not just those in the Human Sexuality Report. The lack of clarity contributes to inconsistencies between the way different synodical decisions on interpretations of confessions are implemented in the life of individual churches and a significant erosion of trust in the quality of deliberations and decision-making processes within our denomination. Greater clarity is important for leaders at all levels of the church who are engaged in discussions and decision-making related to confessions. Leaders serve in the context of a growing range of ethical issues that engage church members and various interpretations of many individual provisions within the confessions that are consistent with Reformed approaches to exegesis and hermeneutics.

2. Regarding the role and authority of the local church
 - a. The local church plays a primary role in CRC church polity, especially in areas such as pastoral care, discipling, faith formation, and deciding who serves in ordained offices. Synod has also recognized that the local council is the most appropriate place for decision making in complex pastoral situations (e.g., Synod 1980's decisions in relation to marriage and divorce). The CRC has practiced a healthy tension that balances respect for the authority of the local church and the delegated and limited authority of synods to act in the best interests of all churches. The decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 gave very little consideration to the impacts of their decisions for local churches, and, in doing so, have created difficulties that could be avoided with greater clarity and respect for the traditional role of local churches in Reformed polity.
 - b. The Covenant for Officebearers should "enhance the faithful ministry of the local church" (*Agenda for Synod 2011*, p. 623). The way it is being used in the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023 is hindering the work of many local churches, including Kanata Community CRC in Ottawa, Ontario. Greater respect for the authority of local churches could also assist in maintaining unity within the CRCNA.
 - c. An important principle in covenant relationships is the concept of one church or officebearer not lording it over another, as expressed in Church Order Article 85. Requests to sign the Covenant for Officebearers should not be weaponized by one member against other members or by one church against the delegates of another church to one of the higher assemblies; nor should it be used by one church to diminish valuable pastoral work being carried out by another local church. While technically Article 85 may have more limited application, the general principle seems relevant for the current struggle. More careful articulation of it might assist in finding more healthy ways to maintain covenantal unity on core beliefs while respecting some diversity in the implementation of specific provisions in the confessions.
3. Regarding conscientious decisions made in prayerful, Spirit-led sincerity before God and in dialogue with the church
 - a. A valued feature of our Reformed approach to life is developing and exercising robust capacities for individual conscientious decision making, along with discernment in local community. In keeping with the strong focus on conscience and Christian freedom in John Calvin's teachings (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, chap. 19), Reformed branches of Christianity have paid a lot of attention to a core teaching that the church should not bind the consciences of its members any more than what is absolutely essential in Scripture.

- b. Recent decisions by synod raise questions about the level of respect for carefully considered conscientious decisions that people make before God, with prayer for the leading of the Holy Spirit and in community. In our congregation, for example, faithful members in every respect have given well-developed reasons why they cannot in good conscience act in accordance with the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023 relating to human sexuality. This includes members who have direct experience with the matters involved, persons who provide counseling services as Christians and professionals, and persons who are called and engaged in public witness about specific related matters (e.g., the just treatment of intersex children in Canada). We do not think it is necessary for such members to make a choice between participation in their church and integrity in work that clearly contributes to God's mission in our community.
- c. The gravamen process was not developed as a mechanism to show respect for conscientious decisions. It is a process for settling theological disputes (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 68-70). Its inadequacy to deal with the matter of conscientious decisions is reflected in the many questions being asked about it, including overtures held over from Synod 2023 for consideration at Synod 2024. Greater respect for conscientious decision-making might lead to consideration of a different mechanism or significant modification of the current processes for gravamina.
- d. Respect for conscientious decision making relates to many areas of Christian life. A review of CRC history reveals an uneven pattern on different issues, but it leans toward greater recognition for individual conscientious decisions. For example, dancing and card playing were prohibited at one time but were later treated as matters for conscientious decision making. In 2006 synod decided to recognize conscientious objections to a particular war, a modification of earlier just-war teaching that did not permit support for persons with conscientious objections to war and military service (see *Acts of Synod 2006*, pp. 670-75). In the area of human sexuality, decisions about marriage and divorce in 1980 showed strong respect for the need to allow conscientious decisions in individual cases, with the local church providing pastoral care and guidance (see *Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 484-85). Different conscientious decisions about financial stewardship within a congregation do not lead to removal from office or church membership, even though the Bible has much more to say about the use of wealth than it does about homosexuality.
- e. The contemporary context for Christians and churches requires nurturing the development of a robust capacity for the exercise of moral agency and conscientious living, especially in the Canadian context. Careful consideration and incorporation of guidance on this matter

for the way we make and enforce decisions on ethical issues would serve well for upcoming issues and the future of the church's witness in Canadian society.

Classis Eastern Canada
B. Bernard Bakker, stated clerk

OVERTURE 19

That Synod Delegates Re-Sign the Covenant for Officebearers

Throughout the years of its history the CRCNA has always been a confessional denomination that wholeheartedly embraces the Three Forms of Unity and its confessional declarations as fully agreeing with the Word of God.

Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 to require that every delegate of Synod 2024 and all future synods be required to re-sign the Covenant for Officebearers, understanding the following:

- In signing this covenant, all officers are vowing before God that they heartily believe and fully affirm, without reservation, the confessions and anything synod has deemed to have confessional status.
- Those who cannot fully affirm this statement will not be seated as delegates.

Grounds:

1. At this pivotal moment in the history of our denomination that will determine the trajectory of its future, we must ensure that we are fully unified around what we believe for the sake of the mission and gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. This rightly puts full subscription to the confessions onto the hearts and minds of officebearers as they carry out the important work of synod.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Disclose Confessional-Difficulty Gravamina During Roll Call; Seek Classis Nominations for Parliamentarian

Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to implement the following changes to its format:

1. Instruct all delegates to disclose any current confessional-difficulty gravamina during the roll call.

Grounds:

- a. The Church Order Supplement does not ordinarily compel officers to make their gravamina known beyond their own council, but neither does it grant the right of secrecy to those who submit gravamina—especially not to those who allow themselves to be delegated to synod.
 - b. The Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America specifies that delegates be “in full agreement with what the congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America confess.” In that a confessional-difficulty gravamen is an instrument “in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5), a delegate who has filed a gravamen is not in full agreement with what the church confesses.
 - c. Gravamina are considered matters legally before synod (Rules for Synodical Procedure, V, B, 1).
2. Instruct future Program Committees of synod to seek nominations from the classes for a synodical parliamentarian prior to making their appointment.

Ground:

The synodical rules only state that this position “*could be* filled by the faculty advisor for church polity,” not that it *must be* (Rules for Synodical Procedure, III, B, 2, h).

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 21

First Order of Business for Synod 2024

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to “lay directly before synod” Advisory Committee Reports 8D and 8E from Synod 2023 as the first order of business.

Grounds:

1. This arrangement is allowed by the Rules for Synodical Procedure, VI, A, 2, b.
2. These reports and their corresponding overtures have already been reviewed by a synodical advisory committee in 2023.
3. Synod 2023 ended in an unprecedented way, and synod did a great disservice to the delegates by not completing the work they were sent there to do at great personal cost. The officers of Synod 2024 should take this action, even if unprecedented, in order to honor the work of the Committee 8 majority by immediately taking up their recommendations.
4. The outcome of synod's decision on these reports will have significant bearing on both the long- and short-term trajectory of the CRCNA. In order to do their work well, the Synod 2024 advisory committees need to know this direction before convening.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 22

Clarify the Nature and Use of Gravamina, Building on Forwarded Report from Synod 2023

I. Background

In an unusual move, significant portions of the work done by Synod 2023's Advisory Committee 8 were forwarded to Synod 2024.¹ Only one minority report emerged from this committee, which was tasked with addressing many difficult topics. As noted in the introduction to their majority report, the entire advisory committee was even in agreement regarding many of the recommendations in that report.² This overture will build on their work as it pertains to the nature and use of a confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG), which divided Synod 2023's Advisory Committee 8, producing the majority and minority reports.

¹ *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1033-37 (Art. 80).

² *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033 (Art. 80).

There is no need to restate the background summaries articulated in the introduction to Advisory Committee 8's majority report as well as the unaddressed overtures deferred to Synod 2024, especially Overtures 49 and 50.³ The purpose of this overture assumes that background and is intended to build on the recommendations made in the forwarded majority report of Advisory Committee 8. The benefit of having more time to reflect on their work is that it allows us the opportunity to articulate their recommendations with greater clarity, address areas they may have overlooked, and even answer more potential objections. The following overture will reiterate many of the recommendations from Advisory Committee 8's majority report while hopefully clarifying and fortifying their efforts.

This overture seeks to make clear and explicit the timeline to resolve a CDG provided in Advisory Committee 8's majority report. Some believed their timeline to resolve a gravamen was *only* six months, when, in fact, it was much longer. Since the goals are to restore officebearers and reform our doctrine according to the Word of God, there must be enough time to achieve those goals while also maintaining those doctrinal boundaries that locate us within the larger body of Christ.

This overture also seeks to clarify that CDGs are for active officebearers only.

Church members and those training for the office of elder, deacon, or even to become ministers of the Word are not required to sign the Covenant for Officebearers. Prior to ordination a person possesses greater freedom to examine and struggle with doctrine. It is also much less consequential for them to do so.

God's Word also points to this truth in 1 Timothy 3:6, as it instructs that an "overseer" is not to be a "recent convert" but, rather, should possess a mature faith. So it is our officebearers who are called to "heartily believe . . . promote and defend [our] doctrines faithfully . . ." (Covenant for Officebearers; Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).

An officebearer who submits a CDG must continue to promote and defend the doctrines set forth in our standards. Therefore, this overture also seeks better to answer the question "What does it look like to not teach against our doctrines?" Consequently, that language has been adjusted, and a provision about being delegated to classis or synod with a current CDG has been added.

Finally, Advisory Committee 8's majority report was still unclear about what it means for an assembly to examine and judge a gravamen. Therefore, this overture seeks to clarify that definition as well.

³ *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 522-34 (Overtures 49-50).

II. Overture

Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2024 to accept recommendations 2-8 from Advisory Committee 8's forwarded majority report to Synod 2023 (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1034-36) with the following addenda and clarifications to recommendations 2-5 (presented as A-D below):

- A. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the proper use of a CDG and provide a timeline for its process (changes are underlined). (*Note: Additional changes by Classis Zeeland to the recommendations of Advisory Committee 8's majority report [*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1034-36] and/or to the Church Order Supplement are indicated by ~~strikethrough~~ and **bold underline**.)*
1. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1
 1. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a temporary gravamen in which ~~a subscriber~~ **an officebearer, subsequent to their ordination, develops and then** expresses a personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. **Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 2**
 2. A *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which ~~a subscriber~~ **an officebearer** makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
 3. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1
 1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers **for the first time, or who has signed it in the past**, affirms **and continues to affirm** without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. "Without reservation" means that the CRC does not allow gravamina as exceptions to the confessions themselves or to what synod has determined to have confessional status.
 4. **Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, by adding a new point 2 [the current point 2 would become point 3]:**
 2. **Examination and judgment of a confessional-difficulty gravamen includes determining the extent and nature of the gravamen in question and providing an officebearer the information and/or clarification being sought. Additionally, examination and judgment would include discerning whether an officebearer has a sincere difficulty or a settled conviction better served by resignation or by filing a confessional-revision gravamen.**
 5. Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, by adding a point ~~34~~:
 - ~~34~~. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen* is a personal request for help in resolving ~~a subscriber's~~ **an officebearer's** doubts about a doc-

trine contained in the confessions. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber'san officebearer's settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriberan officebearer from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.

Grounds:

- a. There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing a subscriberan officebearer to take an exception to the standards. **Officebearers are expected to hold to the standards without reservation upon becoming officebearers. The purpose of a CDG is to address a personal difficulty that may develop after becoming an officebearer, since one would need to violate the ninth commandment in order to sign the Covenant for Officebearers while harboring a confessional difficulty. One of the purposes of ministerial training is to struggle with doctrines in order to determine to which part of the larger body of Christ one belongs. Part of becoming qualified to hold an ecclesiastical office within the CRC is aligning oneself with the doctrines that locate us within the larger body of Christ. Therefore, it is expected and good for those training for office to struggle with the CRC's doctrines and to have resolved those struggles prior to ordination.**
 - b. **There is confusion as to what it means to examine and judge a confessional-difficulty gravamen.**
 - c. There is already a provision in place to revise the confessions if they are found to be in error.**If one believes a doctrine is in error, one may file a confessional-revision gravamen, making the case to the broader body. The purpose of a CDG is to express and then work through a difficulty. It is not to be used as a means of holding an unresolved difficulty in perpetuity.**
 - d. Although the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.
- B. That synod approve the following process for a CDG:
1. During the time the officebearer has a CDG, the individual must teach, act, **counsel**, promote, defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately while the gravamen is still unresolved, and the individual must diligently work toward resolving their confessional difficulty. **This may require recusing oneself from council and/or consistory discussions, or possibly even taking a leave of absence.**

2. An officebearer with an unresolved CDG may not be delegated to classis or synod.
3. Classis credentials shall include the line “Number of active confessional-difficulty gravamen/gravamina in council: _____”
4. ~~Based on the process laid out in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 1~~ stipulates that a gravamen is first filed with an officebearer's council for examination and judgment. If the council is not able to judge the matter, the council will submit the matter to classis and then to synod if necessary. The council and the classis shall have a minimum of six months each to judge the matter before submitting the gravamen to the next higher assembly. Therefore, a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, *whichever is greater* [added bold italics], to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the CDG is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, *whichever is greater* [added bold/italics], to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. **In most cases this process would provide approximately two years before a CDG would arrive at synod.** If the CDG appears before synod, synod’s decision will be binding and the ~~subscriber~~**officebearer** will have until the end of that calendar year to either (1) affirm the standards, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office.
5. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of the CDG process.

Grounds:

- a. It is necessary to have a delineated process that guides churches, classes, and synod according to the purposes of gravamina.
- b. This process provides time for an officebearer to resolve their difficulty while maintaining the doctrinal integrity that locates us within the larger body of Christ. The purpose of this process is to restore an officebearer to doctrinal unity or reveal where our standards may be in error. This process may also reveal that an officebearer is doctrinally located elsewhere in the larger body of Christ, or possibly outside of the body of Christ.**
- c. This process allows officebearers to work through a doctrinal difficulty that develops after ordination while not violating the third or the ninth commandments by preventing them from committing to the Covenant for Officebearers at higher assemblies.**
- d. Asking councils to divulge the number of active confessional-difficulty gravamen/gravamina maintains the pastoral and personal**

nature of a gravamen while allowing for transparency and accountability, since the nature of the gravamen and the person filing it need not be disclosed.

- C. Since synod has already ~~made a judgment regarding~~ **examined and judged** the definition of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, that synod instruct those who have submitted a CDG with respect to the definition of “unchastity” to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of ~~2023~~**2024**. This would also include, if applicable, their resigning from their position(s) in broader assemblies, boards, or committees, **including the COD.**

Grounds:

- ~~1. The process explained above has already happened in part during 2022-2023.~~
 12. The decision regarding the definition of “unchastity” has already been examined and judged by Synod 2022 **and Synod 2023**. Therefore, the above ~~amendment and CDG~~ timeline **do not apply** **has already taken place.**
 23. There is no need to file a confessional-revision gravamen unless new grounds are provided, since ~~s~~**Synod 2023** has **already reaffirmed the confessional** definition of “unchastity,” as **it is now** settled and binding.
- D. That synod instruct councils to begin special discipline of officebearers who are suspended from office at the end of ~~2023~~**2024** if they refuse to ~~adhere to~~**affirm** the definition of “unchastity” reflected in the standards.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements state the appropriateness and process for the special discipline of officebearers.
2. “Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct” (Church Order Art. 83).
3. ~~Not adhering to~~**affirming** the definition of “unchastity” reflected in the standards is a serious deviation from sound doctrine.

Classis Zeeland
Ronald Meyer, stated clerk

Limited Suspension

I. Background

Synod 1973 adopted a position on homosexuality stating, “Homosexuality— as explicit homosexual practice— must be condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 52).

Synod 2004 reviewed the case of First CRC of Toronto, Ontario, which had communicated its openness to ordaining practicing homosexuals as office-bearers in a letter to the entire classis. Synod 2004 instructed Classis Toronto “to investigate the allegations made in the appeal and the overtures . . . and . . . to urge First CRC to act in accordance with the guidelines of the [1973 and 2002] reports” (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 632). Synod 2005 appointed a committee *in loco* to investigate. The committee reported to Synod 2006 that First CRC, Toronto, had apologized for its earlier decision (*Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 455-62). Synod 2006 adopted a recommendation to “encourage Classis Toronto to continue to provide support to First Toronto CRC in their efforts ‘to tailor its ministry’ according to denominational guidelines for same-gender relationships and to provide accountability as they do so” (*Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 653).

In 2020, Neland Avenue CRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan, ordained a deacon living in a same-sex marriage.¹ Communications to Neland Avenue CRC urged them to reconsider (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 463ff) and communications to Classis Grand Rapids East urged accountability (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 468-74). Neland Avenue responded, “Scripture not only permits us, but calls us to the decision we have made” (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 467). Classis Grand Rapids East took no action.

Synod 2022 voted to “instruct Neland Avenue CRC to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage” and appointed a committee *in loco* to meet with Neland Avenue “to oversee its compliance to synod’s rulings” as well as to “meet with Classis Grand Rapids East to admonish them regarding their responsibility to uphold our shared denominational covenants and procedures” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 926, 941).

The *in loco* committee reported that keeping covenant is “essential” and that Neland Avenue CRC’s actions constituted “a breaking of covenant.” Neland Avenue had no “appreciation of how its decisions and actions might deeply affect the wider CRCNA” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 321-22). Meanwhile,

¹ calvinchimes.org/2020/09/10/local-crc-appoints-deacon-who-is-in-same-sex-marriage; thebanner.org/news/2020/09/woman-in-same-sex-marriage-installed-as-deacon/

the All One Body website announced 11 CRC congregations have official policies in violation with the CRC decisions about “unchastity.”²

Synod 2023 repeated its instruction to Neland Avenue CRC to rescind decisions about ordaining officebearers in violation of our shared denominational covenants. Additionally, synod voted to “instruct Classis Grand Rapids East to guide the Neland Avenue CRC congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1027). Synod 2023 also voted to “instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” through the work of their church visitors (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

The festering conflict over sexuality and unchastity must be resolved. The matter of unchastity is not optional but critical to the life of a believer and the life of believers together in Christ (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87; Eph. 5:3).

Having different standards of what constitutes unchastity among believers in covenant together is untenable at best (Amos 3:3) and sinful at worst (1 Cor. 5). On the one hand, those who reject instruction on sexual immorality do not reject mortals but God (1 Thess. 4:2-8). Likewise, those who do not love a fellow brother or sister do not know God (1 John 4:8), and to hate while professing to love God is to lie (1 John 4:20). When some in the same covenant of believers are considered to be rejecting God and others to be hating fellow believers, there can be no unity. From either side of this controversy, light and darkness cannot have fellowship (2 Cor. 6:14).

The list of denominations that have attempted to hold conflicting views together is long. The Episcopal Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Mennonite Church USA, Church of the Brethren, United Methodist Church, and Reformed Church in America have all attempted to keep everyone together despite differences on unchastity. Each one has faced a major split and tremendous upheaval of budgets, staff cuts, and structural reorganization.

Meanwhile, the LGBTQ community is being greatly harmed. This is the case regardless of where one stands. Whether by being told they are sinning when they ought to celebrate, or by being told to celebrate sin, the ongoing conflicts are being borne on the backs of those who need our care the most.

² PDF found on the home page of allonebody.org (allonebody.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Compilation_Affirming_Church_Model_Statements.pdf) as of 11/29/2023. Those congregations included Eastern Ave. CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Fellowship CRC, Edmonton, Alta.; First Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.; First Christian Reformed Church, Toronto, Ont.; Grace CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Loop CRC, Chicago, Ill.; Meadowvale CRC, Mississauga, Ont.; Neland Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Sherman Street CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; The Road Church, Calgary, Alta.; Washington, D.C., Christian Reformed Church.

The harm is inevitable unless we as a denomination can move forward from this conflict, coordinate our efforts, and not have congregations undermining one another.

This being the situation, the CRCNA has two options. We can do loving discipline with those who err and move forward, or we can walk the path of seven other denominations that has proved to be disastrous.

Moreover, if the CRCNA withholds action on flagrant violations of covenant, it will set precedent for other acts of defiance to undermine our shared life together. If synod refuses to discipline when congregations break covenant on sexuality, how will synod respond if a congregation breaks covenant by embracing kinism or white nationalism? When covenant is broken, disciplinary action is required, or our covenant will not have integrity.

II. Overture

Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Instruct all classes to place councils and officebearers that publicly refuse to comply with the CRC views on “unchastity” in word or life on limited suspension.
- B. That synod define conflicting views to include loss of all privileges at broader assemblies, on denominational boards, and on the Council of Delegates. Councils and officebearers that demonstrate repentance shall be welcomed back into full covenant fellowship.
- C. That synod instruct all classes to compile a list of councils and individual officebearers on involuntary leave and report to the Office of General Secretary. The list shall be made available to a classis or congregation within the CRCNA upon request, via the Office of General Secretary.

Grounds:

- 1. Councils and individuals who wish to remain in covenant with the CRCNA must follow the expectations of our shared covenant or lose privileges of the covenant.
- 2. The big-tent attempt to include conflicting views has failed in many denominations.
- 3. All CRCNA officebearers have signed the Covenant for Officebearers, which states, “If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views,” and “We promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.”
- 4. Synod has twice practiced admonishment and instruction for those who reject church teachings on “unchastity.”
- 5. Both Scripture and synod have been clear on “unchastity.”

Classis Zeeland
Rev. Ronald J. Meyer, stated clerk

Clarify Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84**Overture**

Classis Atlantic Northeast overtures Synod 2024 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America to add the following statement to the Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84:

Special Discipline by Broader Assemblies

While councils have the original authority to impose special discipline, broader assemblies may apply special discipline in extraordinary circumstances using the following procedures:

a. Appeals of Decisions Not to Apply Discipline to Individual Officebearers

When a member of a congregation appeals a council's decision to its classis, or a council appeals a classis' decision to synod, the broader assembly must follow the process for appeals according to Article 30.

b. Suspension of an Entire Council by a Broader Assembly

1) A broader assembly may suspend an entire council from office, with corresponding administrative leave, only when

a) the broader assembly has issued an instruction specific to that council regarding a violation of the Covenant for Officebearers, neglect or abuse of office, or a deviation from sound doctrine and godly conduct,

b) the council has neglected for at least one year to comply with the instruction from the assembly, and

c) the council is not proceeding through the process of disaffiliation according to Article 38-f.

2) Upon voting to suspend the council, the assembly shall revert the congregation to unorganized status and place that congregation under the care of a neighboring council, designated by the broader assembly that imposed the suspension.

3) In order that the congregation may be returned to organized status, when possible, in a timely manner, the neighboring council shall

a) investigate allegations and apply special discipline as necessary, and

b) assist the congregation in electing and calling new council members as necessary.

Grounds:

1. There is significant confusion about the process that classes should use when efforts fail to guide councils into compliance (see “Classes, Churches Taking Differing Actions on Human Sexuality Decisions within CRCNA,” *The Banner*, Dec. 29, 2023).
2. The right of broader assemblies to apply special discipline has long been recognized in CRC polity (Grand Rapids, 1861; Zeeland, 1864; Sioux Center, 1921; Grand Rapids, 1924; Classis Huron, 1980; Classis Lake Erie, 1991 — as cited in Henry De Moor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Faith Alive, 2020), p. 423). Since the procedures followed in those cases may not always have been consistent, a clarifying supplement to the Church Order would be valuable.
3. These procedures ensure that members in good standing of congregations with erring councils are properly cared for and are not effectively excommunicated by a broader assembly ejecting an entire congregation from the denomination for the errors of its officebearers.
4. These procedures ensure that a broader assembly’s suspension of an entire council cannot be used to thwart a congregation’s decision to disaffiliate from the denomination.
5. The contents of this supplement do not amount to substantial alterations to the Church Order and are, likewise, appropriately included in the Supplement for the following reasons:
 - a. Articles 82-84 do not specify which assemblies may or may not apply special discipline, and the history of special discipline applied by broader assemblies in the CRC indicates that such actions are neither novel nor inconsistent with the intent of the Church Order.
 - b. The procedures outlined ensure that special discipline applied by broader assemblies is consistent with other provisions of the Church Order (e.g., Art. 30, 38).

Classis Atlantic Northeast
David D. Poolman, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 25

Call Noncompliant Churches to Either Repent or Disaffiliate

Classis Iakota overtures Synod 2024 to call all CRC churches who publicly state they are no longer willing to call practicing same-sex relationships a sin, to choose one of the following options:

1. Publicly repent of their decision and bring themselves back into compliance with the Bible’s and our confessions’ position on human sexuality,

which has been acknowledged throughout all nations and generations of the church catholic for nearly 2,000 years, including the past 50 years of CRCNA synodical decisions. Public repentance will be indicated by the use of the attached form for the Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance.

2. Voluntarily disaffiliate from the Christian Reformed Church in North America by December 31, 2024.
3. If neither of these two things occur, Synod 2025 is to acknowledge that for the fellowship-breaking actions and inactions of these affirming churches, they shall be effectively removed from the fellowship of the Christian Reformed Church.
4. All churches and their governing classes who refuse to exercise church discipline over them will no longer have delegations recognized at synod; nor will they have representation on the Council of Delegates or any other denominational bodies and agencies.

Grounds:

- a. Synod 1926 asserted the right for ecclesiastical assemblies to take decisive disciplinary action even if the Church Order does not stipulate an exact process of action (*Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 329-30). It also made clear that a consistory worthy of discipline had “placed itself outside of the church relationship” (*Acts of Synod 1926*, p. 139).
- b. Classis Hudson in 1992 recognized that one of the churches in its classis had “broken the bonds of fellowship with the denomination and therefore [had] placed themselves outside the fellowship of the CRC” (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 610). Synod itself said that the church that was no longer in fellowship with the denomination would be allowed to participate in synod’s process of appeals if it would “bring itself into conformity with the standards from which it was declared to have deviated” (p. 610).
- c. Synods 2022 and 2023 have given enough time for churches and classes to discern their covenant fidelity to the fullness of God’s Word related to human sexuality and the desire to be affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church.
- d. Paul’s letter to Titus speaks to the need for the officebearers of the church of Jesus Christ to resist false teachers. In Titus 1:9 Paul states that an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” And then, more directly, in Titus 3:10: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.”
- e. This meets the burden of synod’s instruction to “err on the side of caution, permitting full opportunity for other pastoral efforts to take effect” (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771).

- f. Our Lord and Savior commands his church to permit what his Word permits and to forbid what it forbids (John 20:23; Matt. 16:19; 18:17-18, 20).
- g. Discipline with the end goal of restoration has been sought (Matt. 18:22; 1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 12:11).

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

ADDENDUM A

Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance for use by a council of the CRCNA

We, the council of _____ Christian Reformed Church:

- acknowledge before God and his people that we have sinned against God and his church by persistently going beyond the teaching of our Lord, by breaking the unity of the church, by refusing to submit to its instruction and discipline, and by refusing to bend our necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ.
- acknowledge before God and his people that we are truly sorry for our sin and believe that the Lord has forgiven us.
- reaffirm our union with Christ and desire to be readmitted to the covenant family of God.
- reaffirm, without reservation, that all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church are doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
- promise to do all we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority.
- promise to be formed and governed by the forms of unity of the CRCNA, heartily believing, promoting, and defending their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.
- promise to join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere.

Signed: _____
[clerk of council]

Date: _____

ADDENDUM B

Public Acknowledgment of Sin and Declaration of Repentance for use by a classis of the CRCNA

We, Classis _____ of the Christian Reformed Church North America:

- acknowledge before God and his people that we have sinned against God and his church by persistently abusing our God-given authority, by refusing to fulfill our responsibility to lovingly discipline the councils and officebearers entrusted to our care, and by breaking the unity of the church by refusing to heed its admonitions and warnings.
- acknowledge before God and his people that we are truly sorry for our sin and believe that the Lord has forgiven us.
- reaffirm our union with Christ and desire to be readmitted to the covenant family of God.
- reaffirm without reservation that all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church are doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
- promise to do all we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority.
- promise to be formed and governed by the forms of unity of the CRCNA, heartily believing, promoting, and defending their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.
- promise to faithfully use our God-given authority as Scripture demands in the admonition and discipline of the officebearers and councils entrusted to our care.
- promise to join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere.

Signed: _____
[stated clerk of classis]

Date: _____

OVERTURE 26

Require a Letter of Repentance from Consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC

Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2024 to require a letter of repentance from the consistory of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, for defying the decisions of Synods 2022 and 2023.

I. Background

Synod 2022 affirmed that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh command-

ment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). In so doing, Synod declared this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession,” meaning “this interpretation has confessional status” (p. 922). When challenged on this point, Synod 2023 restated that this interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 has confessional status (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1021).

Nevertheless, since Synod 2023 convened, Eastern Avenue CRC has treated a homosexual union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage in the church of Jesus Christ. On November 19, 2023, two women in a same-sex relationship presented their daughter for baptism during an Eastern Avenue CRC worship service. The sacrament of baptism was administered to this child without any qualms about the parents’ homosexual union. In fact, following the baptism, the pastor who administered the baptism invited the congregation to “extend a hand in a posture of blessing as we pray over this family.”¹ On November 19 it became clear that Eastern Avenue CRC will treat a same-sex union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage in the Christian church, even though synod has definitively stated that homosexual sex is a violation of the seventh commandment.

II. Overture

In order to avoid confusion about where the denomination stands on this issue, and in order to remain faithful to the Word of God and our confessional standards, Classis Georgetown overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Require a letter of repentance from the consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC to the churches of the CRCNA, within which the Eastern Avenue consistory repents for treating a homosexual union as if it were a legitimate and permissible marriage during the November 19 worship service. Synod should set a specific date by which the consistory must submit this letter. This letter should come from the consistory since it is the consistory’s responsibility to regulate worship services (Church Order Art. 52-a).
- B. Communicate to the consistory of Eastern Avenue CRC that if they do not comply with this aforementioned instruction, synod, with the full cooperation of Classis Grand Rapids East, will set in motion an appropriate process of discipline for consistory members who remain unwilling to comply with the rulings of Synods 2022 and 2023.

Grounds:

1. It is vital to maintain confessional unity in the CRCNA.
2. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to affirm that they will be “formed and governed” by the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort.

¹ [youtube.com/watch?v=e3__DKA2QgM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3__DKA2QgM); see 19:07 minute mark; accessed 12/12/2023.

3. The Covenant for Officebearers requires those who sign it to “promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.”
4. When sin emerges, the Bible prescribes a process of candid rebuke and repentance, followed by sincere forgiveness (Luke 17:3).
5. “Church discipline for correcting faults” is one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

Classis Georgetown
Glenda Tebben, stated clerk

OVERTURE 27

Maintain the Distinctive Authority of the Local Church in Matters of Discipleship, Discipline, and Pastoral Care

I. Background

A. Synod 2024 and real-life situations

How the church decides this overture and the issues around it has important, real-life consequences. These decisions take on flesh and blood in cases such as the following:

Grant is a 57-year-old African-American physician, widely respected in the community. He has been elected as an elder in his local multiethnic Christian Reformed church. To the surprise of the council, Grant has submitted a gravamen to his council stating that he privately struggles with the concept of infant baptism. (He grew up in a denomination that emphasized believer baptism.) Grant's current Christian Reformed congregation highly values his presence at the church and his willingness to serve as an elder. Grant is willing to remain completely silent about the infant baptism issue, except as his council asks him about it. How quickly, if ever, should synod require the local church council to expel Grant from office?

Megan is a 35-year-old history teacher in the local Christian high school. She is engaging and popular at church, particularly with the teens ministry. Both in church and at school, teens seek her out for counsel. She was recently elected as a deacon. She has submitted a gravamen acknowledging that she has private doubts about Belgic Confession Article 37's description of events surrounding Christ's return to earth. She grew up in a different denomination that taught a somewhat different understanding of eschatology. She is willing to remain completely silent about those doubts, except as her council might ask her about the topic. How quickly, if ever, should synod require the local church council to expel Megan from office as a deacon over this issue?

Alvin is a highly regarded university professor, renowned in his field for sterling academic writings about the reasonableness of Christian faith. He has

been elected elder in his university-town church. Alvin has submitted a gravamen to his council, stating that he privately struggles with some teachings in the Canons of Dort about reprobation. He questions whether the Bible teaches as clearly or as emphatically as the Canons of Dort imply that, before time, God chose particular named individuals from whom he would knowingly and willfully withhold the gift of salvation, instead condemning them to eternal punishment. Alvin is willing to remain completely silent about his private doubts, except as his council might ask him about the topic. Should synod force the local council to push Alvin out of office over this issue?

B. Church Order background

Through this overture we are asking synod to maintain the authority of the local council when it comes to deciding cases like these. Giving councils the authority to judge the length of time for examination and judgment of a confessional-difficulty gravamen fits with the Church Order. When talking about CDGs, Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 2 states that “this type of gravamen is a personal request.” While not explicitly stated, the language suggests that such a request is to be made in personal relationship with fellow officebearers. This sense of personal, pastoral connection aligns with the Church Order elsewhere when it states that elders and deacons complete their tasks within the context of a congregation. Church Order Article 25-b says, “The elders, with the minister(s), shall oversee the doctrine and life of the members of the congregation and fellow officebearers, shall provide counsel and discipline along with pastoral care in the congregation. . . .” Notice that the tasks of counsel, discipline, and pastoral care are designated for officebearers in the local context. These are also the tasks that need to be exercised when dealing with a confessional-difficulty gravamen. This is not to say that classis and synod do not provide care or discipline, but a lack of reference to these tasks being completed by broader assemblies does underscore that these tasks are best completed in personal relationship. Reformed ecclesiology has always leaned into these tasks being completed at the local level and involving the broader assembly in these tasks when there has been a failure to complete them. The Church Order recognizes this local/broader distinction in the very division of types of gravamina. A confessional-revision gravamen requests changes to the confessions that require the involvement of higher assemblies because confessional change affects the entire church. A CDG is concerned with “a personal request” and is therefore to be “dealt with pastorally and personally” at the local level. We could add, for clarity's sake, that pastoral and personal matters, by their very nature, do not concern churches in common, making the involvement of major assemblies unnecessary (Art. 28-b).

C. Historical background

Since its founding, the Christian Reformed Church has required its officebearers to subscribe to the creeds and confessions of the denomination. First, through the Form of Subscription, and now through the Covenant for Officebearers, elders, deacons, ministers, and professors have demonstrated their agreement with these confessions of faith by signing. The purpose of this process has always been to preserve the faith and to guard orthodoxy.

In 1976, in response to some questions from within the denomination, a study committee (Report 38) gave this summary of the Form of Subscription's purpose: "The focus of the form lies clearly on the church's regulation of the ministry of the Word and the government of the church in accord with the confessions. The form is the instrument by which the church seeks to assure itself that those called by the church to function officially do so in accord with the faith of the church. As such an instrument it has been well conceived; it is 'water-tight,' assuming that both those who subscribe and the church requiring subscription take it seriously" (*Agenda for Synod 1976*, p. 571).

Even as Report 38 made this observation, it did so recognizing that officebearers do sometimes have personal difficulties with some parts of the confessions and that sometimes those difficulties turn into settled differences. The committee wrestled with the question about how to handle those differences, and, at Synod 1976, the synodical advisory committee assigned to process the report used the report's findings to create our current categories of gravamina. A confessional-revision gravamen (CRG) was defined as a request for confessional change. A confessional-difficulty gravamen was defined as an expression of personal difficulty and a request for a conversation with the church about that difficulty. Both of these gravamina included a process of "examination and judgment." In the case of the confessional-revision gravamen, the examination and judgment focused on whether or not a confession needed to be changed. In the case of the confessional-difficulty gravamen, the examination and judgment focused on whether or not the person's personal views were in line with the confessions. What is not stated in either the advisory committee report, or in Report 38 itself, is whether or not a confessional-difficulty gravamen could be ongoing. If a council reviewed an officebearer's confessional-difficulty gravamen and judged that the officebearer's opinions were out of line with the confessions, could that officebearer continue to serve for an extended period of time even when their difficulty remained, so long as the difficulty was not too extreme and the officebearer kept the difficulty private?

That history has precipitated the question facing Synod 2024: What role do the broader assemblies have in relation to the authority of the local church in pastoral matters? That deeper question finds its application in the more specific question, Can a local church council allow a confessional-difficulty

gravamen to continue for an extended period based on pastoral considerations and local judgment, or must it be resolved within the bounds of a synodically prescribed time period?

D. Are ongoing CDGs a threat to orthodoxy?

A person might well ask, If we allow difficulties to continue, will that weaken our church? Will our commitment to being a confessional, orthodox denomination be essentially compromised? Not if the difficulties are handled in the right way. If the officebearer submits to the judgment of the church, promises not to contradict the confessions in their speaking and teaching and preaching, and promises to enthusiastically support the confessions and work of the church in every other respect, there is no danger to the church's confessional integrity. This is not just a guess; there is good evidence to support this assertion.

The Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are both orthodox, Reformed, confessional churches who have maintained their confessional identity for generations. Both the PCA and the OPC require subscription to the Westminster Catechism as part of holding office. But both the PCA and the OPC also allow for officebearers to register exceptions as part of their subscription. That process is outlined in chapter 21, section 4, of the PCA's Book of Church Order:

While our Constitution does not require the candidate's affirmation of every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, it is the right and responsibility of the Presbytery to determine if the candidate is out of accord with any of the fundamentals of these doctrinal standards and, as a consequence, may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.

Potential officebearers submit their exceptions (difficulties), and once these exceptions are submitted, individual presbyteries judge whether these exceptions are acceptable, or whether they are of such a magnitude that the officebearer should not serve. In effect, they examine and judge, and if the difficulty isn't too strong, they allow the exception to be ongoing. They've done this for years. Common exceptions granted by presbyteries include disagreement with the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the Sabbath, and with the Westminster Confession's teaching on magistrates. Given the experience of these two denominations, there's no reason why gravamina couldn't be ongoing within the Christian Reformed Church without endangering our confessional orthodoxy.

E. Doubt of the mind versus commitment of the will

As previously discussed, the Church Order Supplement says that those who sign on as officebearers must "heartily believe" the creeds and confessions of the church. That's appropriate. We should all aspire to hearty belief.

But what sort of standard is hearty belief? If, in asking for hearty belief, we require that every officebearer have 100 percent mental agreement and 100 percent mental certainty for every doctrine in the confessions, without any shade of doubt, we are asking too much. Asking for 100 percent commitment to the confessions in our actions and our words and our wills is reasonable, but on this side of the new creation all human beings wrestle with private mental doubts and reservations. Doubt and uncertainty are unpleasant. In the new creation, when we see Christ face to face, we will cease to see darkly through the glass, we will know even as we are fully known, and our mental doubts will mercifully vanish. But in this world, where we still squint through the dark glass, doubt is part of the not-yetness of our existence. Even John Calvin has admitted as much. Calvin says that we are partly unbelievers until we die. Commenting on Mark 9:24, the passage where the father of the young man whom Jesus heals says, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Calvin says this:

[The man] declares that he believes, and yet acknowledges himself to have unbelief. These two statements may appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself. As our faith is never perfect, it follows that we are partly unbelievers; but God forgives us, and exercises such forbearance towards us, as to reckon us believers on account of a small portion of faith. It is our duty, in the meantime, carefully to shake off the remains of infidelity which adhere to us, to strive against them, and to pray to God to correct them, and, as often as we are engaged in this conflict, to fly to him for aid. If we duly inquire what portion has been bestowed on each, it will evidently appear that there are very few who are eminent in faith, few who have a moderate portion, and very many who have but a small measure.

For Calvin, when it comes to the certainty of our mind, hearty belief is "but a small measure." It is reasonable for the church to expect an officebearer's outward statements and pronouncements to 100 percent align with the confessions. It's reasonable to expect a 100 percent commitment of the will. It's not reasonable to expect every officebearer to have 100 percent mental certainty about 100 percent of the things. That's why, when we make our vows, we say, "I do, God helping me."

F. Helping the church

In describing the confessional-difficulty gravamen, the Church Order Supplement says that they should be dealt with "personally and pastorally." If local churches want to act personally and pastorally, they will need to maintain the pastoral authority proper to the local council. People's lives are complex; all our beliefs are shaped by and intertwined with our relationships and life events. Pastoring one person may need a different approach and a different timeline from pastoring another person, even when

those two people express exactly the same difficulty. Furthermore, not all confessional difficulties are the same. An officebearer who has difficulty believing that Jesus rose from the dead has a very different kind of difficulty from an officebearer who has difficulties with the way the catechism handles the use of images in Lord's Day 35. Even the spirit of difficulties can vary widely from person to person. One officebearer may hold a difficulty in a spirit of proud defiance; another officebearer might hold the very same difficulty with tears and anguish. Local congregations are best positioned to judge these personal and pastoral situations. A synodically prescribed time period diminishes both the council's pastoral authority and its pastoral effectiveness. Finally, allowing local congregations to maintain primary authority in determining how long a confessional-difficulty gravamen can continue would allow many churches to stay united in ministry. Many congregations in our denomination have a wide variety of members with a broad range of opinions on all sorts of issues. Though those differences have long been known, only recently have they threatened the unity of these bodies. Lately, it's become harder and harder to live in a community of difference. In the political realm, people are moving to areas where everyone is politically like-minded. In the world of the church, there has been a similar migration. For churches who are trying to hold together a family of difference, we need to keep the pastoral freedom that allows us to live with our differences while still protecting orthodoxy. If synod takes this authority away, many churches will fracture. Because each church is a different kind of family facing different challenges, we urge synod to allow local churches to maintain pastoral authority when handling confessional-difficulty gravamina. If an individual church wants to make a CDG time-bound, if they feel that a CDG should last only six months, they should feel free to apply that limit. If another church needs to allow CDGs to continue longer than that in order to protect the critical good of congregational stability and long-term ministry, that decision should be considered part of their proper pastoral authority.

II. Overture

- A. Classis Grand Rapids South overtures Synod 2024 to maintain the distinctive authority of the local church with respect to matters of discipleship, discipline, and pastoral care and to clarify the process by acknowledging the local council's authority to judge the appropriate time length of confessional-difficulty gravamina.
- B. Decisions about the length of an individual confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) would be part of a council's "examination and judgment" proper to any CDG (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). In cases where a council is unable to make that judgment, the classis may/would decide. In cases where the classis is unable to make that judgment, synod may/would decide.

- C. We acknowledge that accepting the above overture may require that the following language be added to section B of Church Order Supplement, Article 5: “During the time an officebearer has a confessional-difficulty gravamen, the officebearer must teach, defend, and live in unity with the confessions in all areas. The individual may not contradict the confessions openly and deliberately.”

Grounds:

- a. The majority report of Advisory Committee 8, Synod 2023

Synod 2023 was scheduled to deal with this issue, but due to time constraints, the matter was pushed forward to Synod 2024. Nevertheless, Synod 2023 did receive advice about how to handle CDGs from the advisory committee assigned to the issue. The majority report of Advisory Committee 8 advised synod to allow a confessional-difficulty gravamen to continue for no more than six months. In effect, they asked synod to regulate the pastoral decisions of the local church. In their report they grounded this opinion on two statements. First, they suggested that “the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision whereby some terminal action takes place,” because, as the Supplement to Church Order Article 5 says, “No one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033).

While it is true that no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what the confessions say, that's not what a gravamen does. In a gravamen (especially a confessional-difficulty gravamen) a person is not deciding what the confessions say; they are admitting that they have a difference with the confessions. They are not determining what those standards say; they are acknowledging difficulty with the standards. The question to be examined and judged is whether their difficulty is in fact at odds with the confessions, and, if it is, whether or not that difference is disqualifying. In effect, when someone asks for a CDG to continue, they are saying, “I suspect that my opinions disagree with the confessions on this point. I submit to the council's judgment as to whether or not I'm in disagreement. But, regardless, in humility, despite this difference, I hope council will allow me to keep serving the church with my brothers and sisters.” That is not the same as deciding for oneself what the confessions say. The request doesn't contest the confession; it asks for pastoral permission.

For the second ground, the majority report quoted from the Covenant for Officebearers, noting that the person signing the covenant must “affirm that the doctrines in the standards ‘fully agree with the Word of God’” and that the subscriber promises “‘to be formed and governed by them’ and to ‘heartily believe and . . . promote and defend their

doctrines . . .” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033). The majority report says that because the officebearer must “heartily believe” and defend these doctrines, any objection must be resolved within six months. But why should that be true? We know that the Church Order allows officebearers to express exceptions to their hearty belief in the form of a gravamen. Why couldn’t a council examine and judge an individual officebearer’s difference and decide that in their unique case, with their particular difficulty, they could continue to serve, so long as they promised never to teach or preach or promote anything other than the church’s teaching?

The statements in both the Covenant for Officebearers and the Church Order Supplement are designed to protect our identity as a confessional church. Despite the claims of the majority report, what these documents don’t tell us is how long a person with a confessional difficulty should be allowed to serve. They don’t tell us, for example, whether or not an officebearer who humbly promises to submit to the judgment of the council by keeping their confessional differences to themselves could continue serve for an extended period of time.

b. Precedent for ongoing confessional-difficulty gravamina

In further support for limiting CDGs to six months, the majority report says this: “What Synod 1976 did not say and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church’s creeds and confessions.” That’s true, of course, but that’s also an argument from silence. It’s also true that what no synod, including 1976, has ever said is that a gravamen was *not* a way to take ongoing exception to the church’s creeds and confessions. No judgment has ever been made either way.

In fact, when you dig a little deeper, you find that, in practice if not in pronouncement, synod has allowed difficulties and differences to be ongoing. Harry Boer, whose case precipitated the 1976 report, and whose gravamen about reprobation and the Canons of Dort was arguably the best-known gravamen in the history of the Christian Reformed Church, was never forced to resign. He was never stripped of his ministerial credentials. This despite the fact that he never changed his opinion about reprobation and the Canons of Dort. In effect, his personal difficulty was allowed to continue even after the church examined and judged and found against his complaint.

When you read the 1976 report, there are a number of places that suggest that Dr. Boer was not the only one whose difficulties were allowed to continue even when judged to be out of line with the confessions. After discussing the difficulties of a Dr. Boersma, difficulties which came before synod between 1952 and 1961, the report makes reference to how lessons from the Boersma case were later applied in dealing with other

minor difficulties and uncertainties held by other candidates for the ministry: “the church’s assemblies have consistently been applying them [the lessons] in *accepting without prejudice* candidates for the ministry who have voiced difficulty with matters in the creeds, such as those raised by Dr. Boersma” (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 563; emphasis added).

So while there has never been an official judgment on whether or not CDGs are time-bound, there is evidence that the practice of allowing officebearers to continue serving even when they have differences is well-established, so long as those officebearers don’t preach and teach against the church’s confessional judgments.

Classis Grand Rapids South
Paul Sausser, stated clerk

OVERTURE 28

Declare as Heresy the Belief that Scripture Sanctions Homosexual Marriage

I. Background

Synod 2022 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America affirmed that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). Synod further clarified that this interpretation also has “confessional status.” However, while synod affirmed the confessional framework of our human sexuality, synod did not, at this time, define whether opposition to this confessional understanding is heretical.

Synod 2022 also adopted a study report first presented in the 2020 agenda that offered parameters for deciding when to use the term *heresy* (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 843-44). In this study report, the authors offer nine “tests” for when a doctrine in question might be heretical (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 168-69):

1. Heresy typically involves serious distortion or rejection of basic or core Christian doctrines, including core Christian teachings about God, creation, humanity, or God’s dealings with creatures.
2. Heresy typically contradicts doctrines that have been defined by an official church body (such as a creed or confession).
3. Heresy typically is embedded in an affirmation of Christianity, claiming to be Christian while at the same time distorting or twisting central teachings of Christianity.
4. Heresy typically involves not just an individual, but a group or a faction that threatens the unity of the church and the Christian

faith. Even if heretical teachings are initiated by an individual, those teachings typically do not reach the status of heresy until sufficient numbers of people are swayed by them.

5. Heresy typically leads its adherents away from genuine faith in the triune God. In contrast, other differences (even what we would regard as errors, such as not baptizing infants or holding a non-Reformed view of the roles of God and humanity in salvation) typically do not lead people away from faith in God.
6. Heresy typically causes inquirers and other believers to be confused about Christian teaching and thus led astray in their belief or discouraged from believing. In this way, heresy presents a special danger to the church that goes beyond its effect on its adherents.
7. Heresy typically ends up bringing disrepute on the truth of the gospel. Because it confuses people about what the gospel really is, heresy can lead those outside the Christian faith to mistakenly believe that heretical teaching is actually genuine Christianity.
8. Heresy typically involves a stubborn refusal to be corrected by patient and gracious engagement with the church. Even when the church thoughtfully shows biblical and theological problems with heresy, proponents of heresy refuse to change their views.
9. Heresy typically involves a moral failing as well as a theological or doctrinal one. Heresy misleads others about Christianity and threatens to introduce division into the body of Christ. In this way, heresy is a moral as well as a theological problem.

We believe that the belief by some members, officebearers, and churches in the CRCNA that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships; or that God permits or even desires homosexual marriage or relationships; or that homosexual marriage or relationships do not violate the eternal, moral law of God rightly ought to be called a heresy because such action is supported by the nine tests adopted by Synod 2022:

1. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture is a serious distortion of the historic and basic Christian doctrine and teaching that all sexual activity outside of the marriage of one man and one woman is unchaste and a violation of the seventh commandment.
2. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture contradicts the official interpretation of the CRCNA on what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in Q&A 108 regarding the doctrines of adultery and unchastity, as affirmed by Synods 2022 and 2023. Because this belief contradicts a confessional standard, it is properly a heresy instead of simply being a differing interpretation of Scripture.
3. Those within the CRCNA who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture claim to be true Christians while at the same

time they distort a central teaching of the Christian faith regarding God-honoring human sexual practice.

4. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture is held not just by a few individuals but by a group of CRCNA members, officebearers, and churches, indicating that many appear to have been swayed by these false teachings.
5. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture leads people away from genuine faith in the triune God because it rejects his eternal, moral law and the true, plain reading of God's Word.
6. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture causes confusion for both believers and unbelievers alike because both sides claim to represent truth. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that some people have declined to pursue faith in Christ in the CRCNA context because of our confusion regarding the issue of human sexuality.
7. The belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture has brought disrepute upon the gospel insofar as some outside the faith do mistakenly believe this belief to be the genuine teaching of Christianity.
8. Those who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture have exhibited a stubborn refusal to be corrected and have refused to change their views despite the CRCNA pointing out the error of this belief at the last two synods of the CRCNA.¹
9. Those who believe that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture have misled others about Christianity and have introduced division into our denomination and therefore have also committed a moral failing alongside a theological failing. Their work to divide the CRCNA over this heresy instead of seeking unity over the orthodox teaching of the Christian faith regarding human sexuality has damaged the witness and fellowship of the CRCNA.

Further, the authors of the 2020 study report on heresy write, "So when should the church say, 'Those who hold this view should be regarded as heretics'? When many or all of the characteristics identified in the previous section are present, then it seems reasonable for the church to consider declaring that people or movements are engaging in heresy" (*Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, p. 169).

¹ thebanner.org/news/2023/12/classes-churches-taking-differing-actions-on-human-sexuality-decisions-within-crcna; allonebody.org/ (see the list of churches and the mission and values statement); hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/ (see the various CRCNA churches and individuals who have published statements that align with the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships).

Therefore, having seen how the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage reasonably meets the criteria to be called heresy, as demonstrated by the nine tests, the council of Immanuel CRC urges the CRCNA to make proper use of the adopted tests to declare such beliefs heretical. We urge our brothers and sisters to go beyond merely adopting a confessional view of human sexuality to also rooting out all heretical views that oppose our confessions and Scripture itself and that would lead our brothers and sisters astray.

Let us stand fast in this moment against those who would question God's clear teaching on human sexuality. Let us not be deceived by "fine-sounding arguments" (Col. 2:4) that argue for a difference of opinion or a local option on human sexuality. Instead, let us guard those whom God has entrusted to our care—as did Paul, John, and Peter in their epistles—and clearly and without reservation point out the heresy that denies God's creational design for and moral law governing God-honoring human sexuality.

II. Overture

The council of Immanuel Christian Reformed Church of Burbank, Illinois, overtures synod to declare as heresy the belief that Scripture sanctions homosexual marriage or relationships; or that God permits or desires homosexual marriage or relationships; or that homosexual marriage or relationships do not violate the eternal, moral law of God.

Grounds:

- a. The CRCNA has adopted a series of tests that guide when a doctrine is to be labeled heresy.
- b. The nine characteristics of heresy each appear to be present in the belief that homosexual marriage is sanctioned by Scripture or permissible to God or otherwise does not violate his moral law.
- c. Our scriptural, apostolic, and confessional heritage gives us warrant for labeling as heresy certain beliefs.
- d. Our call as shepherds necessitates that we protect our sheep by clearly labeling and defending against heresy when it enters our midst.
- e. The CRCNA has a vested interest in promoting unity in our church by opposing divisive beliefs.

Council of Immanuel CRC, Burbank, Illinois
Jeremy Oosterhouse, stated clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 2, 2024, meeting of Classis Chicago South but was not adopted.

Declare that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 Addresses a Salvation Issue

I. Background

Leading up to and following Synods 2022 and 2023, a common argument has been made for maintaining “unity” with, and withholding discipline from, members who disagree with both synods’ affirmations that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Q&A 108 “encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922). That common argument is this: Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 does not address a “salvation issue” and should therefore be treated as some form of *adiaphora* (a matter judged to be not essential to the faith: a “questionable” or “disputable” issue about which Christians can disagree).

The argument that Q&A 108 does not address a “salvation issue” (and that sexual ethics, broadly speaking, are not a “salvation issue”) is made numerous times in the agendas for both Synods 2022 and 2023 and is used as the foundation of arguments for maintaining “unity” and refusing to discipline those who disagree with the position of the CRCNA. In the report of the Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee, for example, Neland Avenue CRC’s response to the decisions of Synod 2022 states: “But we do agree on paying attention to the call of the Holy Spirit and the fact that this issue is not a salvation matter that should shatter churches or denominations” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 328). In the same report, an elder from Neland Avenue offered the same line of argumentation for remaining a member and officebearer of that church: “I’m still at Neland because I don’t think this issue, though very important, is a salvation issue” (p. 330). The same line of argumentation was employed already in 2022 by classis Chicago South, who attacked the Human Sexuality Report, saying that it “works against its call to repentance and hospitality, erects barriers to open conversation, and continues to support a culture of shame by claiming the church’s teaching on sexuality already has confessional status, by arguing sexual ethics are a matter of salvation . . .” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 657).¹

The CRCNA’s own confessions, however, rule out the possibility of such arguments. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism itself explicitly states that unchastity is certainly a salvation issue. Q&A 87 says:

Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and unrepentant ways?

¹ Other examples from the agendas of both synods could be cited. This line of argumentation is also frequently found in the publications and public statements of individuals and organizations advocating for the classification of human sexuality as *adiaphora* and for “space for disagreement” within the CRCNA on the issue of human sexuality.

- A. By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like will inherit the kingdom of God.

In order to argue that unchastity and sexual ethics (along with idolatry, adultery, theft, covetousness, drunkenness, slander, robbery, or the like) are not “salvation issues,” we would be required to revise or remove Q&A 87 from the catechism. If we did not revise or remove Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87, the argument that sexual ethics is not a salvation issue would always be confessionally incoherent (and as we believe our confessions to be a faithful summary of Scripture’s teaching, also biblically incoherent).

II. Overture

Classis Iakota therefore overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Declare that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, along with all cases of unrepentant sin, addresses a salvation issue.

Ground:

The Scriptures and confessional standards (particularly Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87) make clear that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 does address a salvation issue and that unchastity and sexual ethics are salvation issues.

- B. Declare that it is a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church in any way to deny that either Heidelberg Q&A 87 or Q&A 108 addresses salvation issues or to deny that sexual ethics and unchastity are salvation issues.

Grounds:

1. Officebearers in the CRCNA are denying that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 (and implicitly Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87) and sexual ethics are salvation issues.
2. It is a serious deviation from the teachings of the CRCNA to reclassify that which is a matter of salvation as a disputable or questionable issue or some other classification; such serious deviations from the clear teachings of Scripture and our confessions endanger the eternal salvation of the sheep and the unity of the flock entrusted to the officebearers’ care.
3. This action is in keeping with the established guidance of Synod 2022 (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 897-98).

- C. Declare that any officebearer who denies that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87 or Q&A 108 addresses a salvation issue and/or denies that unchastity and sexual ethics are salvation issues is worthy of special discipline in accordance with Church Order Article 83.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Article 83 states, "Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct."
2. Tolerating such denials of these salvation issues puts the CRCNA in danger of transgressing its own boundaries for what a true church is, which includes the proper exercise of church discipline (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).
3. Officebearers in the CRCNA who deny that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 87 and Q&A 108 and sexual ethics address salvation issues, instead of faithfully fulfilling the responsibility of their office to confront brothers and sisters regarding their sin, are leaving them in their sin, thus denying them the opportunity for repentance and subsequent reconciliation with God and their neighbors.

D. Instruct all classes, councils, and officebearers in the CRCNA that it is our duty to uphold the clear teaching of the Scriptures and confessions on the nature of Heidelberg Q&A 87 and Q&A 108 and sexual ethics.

Grounds:

1. As Christians, we are called to be people of the truth, with integrity and honor, and failure to promote and defend the faith is to break the Covenant for Officebearers.
2. The church must make every effort to correct such a grievous error, that we might not continue to sin in the eyes of God.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 30

Guide Classes into Compliance or Discipline

I. Background

Our classis has spent several years discussing matters of human sexuality. Our synods have also spent much time in studying and deliberating this particular topic. Synod 2022 recognized that "unchastity" in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism included all of the grievous sins discussed in the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). Then at Synod 2023 it was adopted that classes should "guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

II. Overture

The council of Edson-Peers CRC of Edson, Alberta, overtures Synod 2024 to guide into compliance or discipline classes that are not guiding the officebearers of their constituent churches into compliance with the “guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029).

Grounds:

1. Our classis has not articulated either plan, timeline, or the will to guide erring councils or officebearers into compliance. Indeed, the Healthy Church Task Force of our classis has voiced that church visitors assess and do what they think is appropriate and that their present posture is only to “walk alongside.”
2. Synod itself has not given any guidance on how to do this; synod has only adopted a recommendation that classes should do this.
3. Our gospel and true discipleship requires repentance and obedience in all areas of our lives, including the area of human sexuality. The apostle Paul, when he gave his farewell to the elders in Ephesus, declared that he was “innocent of the blood of all men” because during his time there he made known “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:26-27, NIV [1984]). It is safe to say that his teaching included the area of sexuality, as most of his letters address sexual conduct at some point. Our sexual conduct is an important part of our living in covenant with our holy God (Ex. 20:14; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108). We, therefore, cannot afford to ignore what God’s Word so clearly teaches and does not shy away from teaching (1 Cor. 6:9-11, NIV [1984]):

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

In sum, if we are not calling people to repentance in all of these areas, we are failing to proclaim the gospel, failing to make true disciples, and robbing people of the joy of living according to God’s design and in true covenant with him. Synod needs to act so that the gospel in our denomination is not compromised.

4. It is simply time to move forward. Synod has recognized the clear teaching of Scripture, and it is time that our classes and councils do the same. Regarding our Covenant for Officebearers, the Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 3 states:

. . . no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.

This matter has been thoroughly considered so that no one is wondering about the content of our teachings. Now is the time for classes and officebearers to acquiesce.

5. The true church only exists where discipline also exists (Belgic Confession Art. 29). There is never perfect discipline, and we should never be eager in the area of discipline. That said, it is clear that some classes are demonstrating that they do not have the will or desire to discipline or guide into compliance erring officebearers. This is evidenced by the overtures seeking to overturn the HSR or the definition of "unchastity" in our confessions.

Council of Edson-Peers CRC, Edson, Alberta
Ryan Hoogerbrugge, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the March 8-9, 2024, meeting of Classis Alberta North but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 31

Ensure Accountability Regarding Synodical Decisions and Instructions

Classis Minnkota overtures synod to ensure accountability regarding synodical decisions and instructions by means of the following:

1. Instructing classes that have constituent churches which publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships to provide a written update of the efforts made to guide their officebearers into compliance, and provide time during the opening session of synod for these reports to be discussed by delegates.

Grounds:

- a. Synod 2023 instructed classes to do this (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1029).
 - b. Being informed of how the classes are approaching this task will greatly enhance the trust that has been eroded and will enable synod to fulfill the obligations given to it by Church Order Article 27-b.
2. Instructing Classis Grand Rapids East to provide a written update to Synod 2024 outlining the steps they've taken to discipline Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church. Time should be provided during the opening session of synod for these reports to be discussed by delegates.

Grounds:

- a. In Overture 78 to Synod 2023, Classis Grand Rapids East indicated that at its January 19, 2023, meeting it “Agreed to provide a season of mutual forbearance in the classis while the appeal by Neland Avenue CRC of its discipline by Synod 2022 is pending before Synod 2023” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 886).
- b. Neland Avenue’s appeal was not sustained by Synod 2023. Synod’s decision not to discipline Neland Avenue CRC does not relieve Classis Grand Rapids East of its responsibility to discipline Neland for sins and offenses outlined in the *In Loco* Committee Report. These sins have harmed the entire denomination, therefore Classis Grand Rapids East must report on the progress of its discipline to the entire denomination.
- c. Church Order Article 27-b assigns the classis authority over the councils of its constituent churches: therefore synod, which has authority over the classes, must monitor the efforts of classes to discipline when their churches promote blatant heterodoxy and must hold the classes accountable for exercising discipline. This report is necessary for synod to meet this obligation.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 32

Clarify Decisions Concerning “Unchastity” in Q&A 108 and How This Definition Functions in the Life of the CRC

I. Background

Synod 2022 declared the following (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922):

that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.

Synod 2023 upheld this decision and in so doing declared that this upholding of the decision of Synod 2022 was the answer to many overtures submitted to Synod 2023.

Classis Alberta North identified in Overture 32 to Synod 2023 a concern about how churches were to understand the implications of the 2022 decision. We noted that the 2022 decision, while clear in identifying a definition of “unchastity” and the status of that definition in the confessions, had at

the same time led to confusion, disagreement, and uncertainty about the scope of that decision. This was also evidenced on the floor of Synod 2023 when the reporter of the majority report of Advisory Committee 7 was unable to answer a question about whether a member of the CRC who was uncertain about the definition was able to remain a member; at the same time the chair of the committee thought the answer was clear.

Classis Alberta North has identified further questions and concerns that were brought to Synod 2023 and have been raised since then, which include the following:

1. May members who are *uncertain* about this interpretation . . .
 - make public profession of faith?
 - remain members within the CRC?
 - present their children for baptism?
 - serve as officebearers in the CRC while signing the Covenant for Officebearers, pledging to live within the bounds of that covenant?
2. May members who *disagree* with this interpretation . . .
 - make public profession of faith?
 - remain members within the CRC?
 - present their children for baptism?
 - serve as officebearers in the CRC while signing the Covenant for Officebearers, pledging to live within the bounds of that covenant?
3. May those who desire to candidate for minister of the Word and who are willing to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, but are unsure where they stand regarding this specific interpretation, pursue candidacy?
4. Synod 2024 will need to consider overtures and recommendations regarding the place and function of gravamina. Will decisions about gravamina apply equally to . . .
 - uncertainty about infant baptism?
 - uncertainty about the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacraments?
 - uncertainty about the declarations regarding election and predestination in the Canons of Dort?
5. Is it conceivable for someone who is uncertain or even disagreeing with an aspect of this interpretation to yet submit to the authority of the church and its teachings, be willing to live and work within the bounds of the confessions, and thus still be a member in good standing?
6. Is it conceivable to give a verbal affirmation to the confessions if in one's heart or mind one is uncertain, and still be a member in good standing?
7. Does lack of understanding or awareness of the confessions of the church and its interpretations disqualify someone from membership or serving as an officebearer? How much does one need to understand the details of a confession in order to be understood to be compliant with it?

8. How will the implications of (and answers to) the above be monitored and enforced, and who will do that? Will compliance be pursued and ensured equally for all the matters identified as “unchaste” (including premarital sex and pornography) and other areas of the confessions? How would this be achieved?
9. If, for example, I, as a parent, have pastorally wrestled with the matter of same-sex committed marriage for 20 years because I have a child who is gay, may I now no longer wrestle with understanding, even if I live in compliance?
10. The Human Sexuality Report (HSR), which Synod 2022 approved, noted: “Even if a teaching has confessional status, that does not mean there is no room for disagreement within the bounds of that teaching. In addition, the church sometimes allows for pastoral accommodations” (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 457). While we recognize that synod has yet to deal with overtures regarding gravamina, the committee recommendations at Synod 2023 were moving in a specific direction that would appear not to include the above. Given the history of pastoral accommodation and what the HSR says as per the above, how may councils understand this “room for disagreement”?
11. The shift from Synod 1973 (pastoral advice) to Synod 2022 (confessional status) is significant with all of the subsequent concerns, questions, unrest, and confusion noted above—and raises the question churches are wrestling with: What is the rationale for this significant change in function for an understanding of Scripture (1973) that has not changed?

We are concerned that synod, in its desire to come to conclusions and decisions about matters of human sexuality, has inadvertently shut the door to discussing and clarifying the implications of these decisions. When synod declares that a particular position is the answer to a whole group of overtures that contain significant nuances and serious concerns, many of those concerns and nuances go unaddressed. As a result, synod can be seen to be veering away from its historic tendency to respond pastorally and carefully in helping churches to understand and dialogue together. Without the clarity of what these decisions mean and what their implications are, it becomes too easy to simply react or draw lines or choose/vote for a side. Churches will interpret and act in a variety of ways that are inconsistent with each other, as we are presently already observing.

We are also concerned that in an effort to clarify and close the door on some decisions, synod has closed the door on our historic commitment to deliberate and wrestle together. Recognizing that God’s people from the time of Jacob have had the name *Israel*, which means “to contend with God,” and given our historic desire to wrestle with God and his Word, we need to work through these implications together so that even if we don’t all agree,

we will at least be on the same page of understanding what we agree or don't agree with.

Classis Alberta North believes that we need to ensure that in our engagement together within the denomination there is clarity about these decisions and their implications. This is important in order to avoid actions based on misunderstanding, and to avoid fostering simple votes of agreement or disagreement with a decision without proper awareness of what those decisions mean.

II. Overture

Classis Alberta North overtures Synod 2024 to review and clarify the implications of its decisions concerning the definition of “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and to clarify how this definition as an interpretation of the confession functions in the life of the churches, the agencies, and the institutions of the CRC.

Grounds:

1. The confusion, lack of direction, and conflict within our churches, agencies, and institutions in seeking to work out the implications of the Synod 2022 declaration demonstrate the need for clarification.
2. In a climate of conflict, it has become easier to simply vote on decisions and draw lines rather than to dialogue about the implications. While unity may not be achievable, it is better to have been clear about what the reasons for disunity are than to just draw more lines that vary from church to church.

Classis Alberta North
Gary Duthler, stated clerk

OVERTURE 33

Rescind Compliance-Requirement Decision of Synod 2023

I. Introduction

Synod 2023 adopted the following recommendation: “That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30). While some decisions of synod may not have grounds, a decision of this weight and with this impact should have solid reasons or grounds for action. The following three grounds that Synod 2023 used to support the recommendation it adopted are faulty, calling into question the decision itself.

Ground a:

“Church Order Article 3 states that officebearers must meet the biblical requirements, and Synod 2022 has clarified those requirements.”

After citing the Church Order, this ground equates the statement of Synod 2022 with the biblical requirements noted by the Church Order. Nowhere in the Bible is it declared that agreement with a decision of a CRC synod is a requirement for office. The conclusion the ground makes is an overreach and cannot be used as a ground.

Ground b:

“Regarding our confessions, the Covenant for Officebearers states that ‘we heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them’ (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).”

Synod 2022 defeated a recommendation to place a footnote *in* the confession (Heidelberg Catechism) with synod’s interpretation of the word “unchastity,” thus clearly deciding not to make that interpretation part of the confession. In addition, the complete failure of previous synods to make such a declaration with any other confessional explanations makes this an unprecedented and absurd ground. Therefore, the ground should not apply.

Ground c:

“Church Order Article 27-b assigns the classis authority over the councils of its constituent churches; therefore synod, which has authority over the classes, must instruct classes to discipline when their churches promote blatant heterodoxy, and hold the classes accountable for exercising discipline.”

This ground jumps to the conclusion that synod “*must* instruct classes to discipline.” The Church Order article does not require instruction to classes regarding discipline. Section IV of the Church Order, which deals with “The Admonition and Discipline of the Church,” does not mention the imposition of synod in the exercise of discipline; nor does it allow synod’s instructions to engage in discipline. The ground misstates the impact of the Church Order and therefore is not applicable to the recommendation.

II. Overture

Therefore Classis Chicago South overtures synod to rescind the following decision of Synod 2023: “That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1029-30).

Grounds:

- a. The grounds for the 2023 decision are flawed, making the decision itself faulty and groundless. If there are no grounds for such a weighty decision, the decision should not have been made and should be rescinded.
- b. The Church Order gives responsibility for discipline to the consistory, not to synod (*Church Order* Articles 78-84).

Classis Chicago South
Jeremy Oosterhouse, Stated Clerk

OVERTURE 34

Revise Decision of Synod 2023 and Carry Out Biblical Requirements

I. Introduction

When given the opportunity to call for accountability, repentance, and possible church discipline for Neland Avenue CRC and for Classis Grand Rapids East, Synod 2023 declined to do so (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28). By this inaction, the delegates to synod made a great mistake. Synod 2024 must declare this decision to be in conflict with the Word of God. Further, only after declaring that Synod 2023 acted in conflict with the Word of God, Synod 2024 is then obligated to carry out the biblical requirements Synod 2023 declined to pursue.

II. Overture

Therefore, Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. That Synod 2024 declare that Synod 2023 acted in conflict with the Word of God (Church Order Art. 29) by not calling Neland Avenue CRC to repentance for their decision to allow someone in a same-sex relationship to be a member in good standing at Neland and further, to serve as a deacon (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28).

Grounds:

1. Sin that is public in nature calls for repentance that is public as well (Gal. 2:11-14). The sin, public defiance, and dishonor to the name of the risen Lord Jesus that Neland Avenue CRC has demonstrated over the last several years warrants a call to repentance that is just as public as their sin has been.
2. Synod 2023, comprised of officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, is called to a high standard in their beliefs and behavior (James 3:1). Having signed the Covenant for Officebearers, these delegates acknowledged “the authority of God’s Word” and promised

to “submit to it in all matters of life and faith” (Covenant for Office-bearers). Synod 2023 failed to submit to God’s Word by not calling Neland Avenue CRC to repentance.

3. Synod 2023 was required to call for what Christ the King calls for, namely, that Neland Avenue CRC repent and turn from wickedness (James 5:19-20; Acts 3:26; Acts 14:15). Because Synod 2023 failed to call for repentance, Synod 2024 must do so instead.
 4. Synod 2023 stood in conflict with the Word of God (Church Order Art. 29) when they set aside the demands of the head of the church, the Lord Jesus. Christians have no authority to set aside the demands of Christ (Matt. 28:20). It is unacceptable for citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20) to tolerate what Christ the King forbids (Rev. 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:1-8).
 5. Neland Avenue CRC has disobeyed the Word of God by setting aside what the Lord commands regarding human sexuality. So too Synod 2023 set aside what the Lord commands regarding church discipline (1 Cor. 5:2; Rev. 2:20). As such, Synod 2023 stands in conflict with the Word of God for their decision to not call for repentance by way of a new *In Loco* Committee (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1027-28).
 6. Synod 2024 has the authority to revise the decision of Synod 2023 in this matter. This overture has been processed as far as possible already at the levels of the council and the classis. It is therefore within the authority of Synod 2024 to act (Church Order Art. 31 and its Supplement).
- B. That Synod 2024 carry out the biblical requirements that Synod 2023, in conflict with the Word of God, declined to pursue. Therefore, Synod 2024 must do all the following:
1. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call upon Neland Avenue CRC to publicly repent for their open, persistent rebellion against Christ the King. This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024.
 2. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call upon Classis Grand Rapids East to publicly repent for allowing the unbiblical positions and practices of Neland Avenue CRC to be tolerated. This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024.

3. That Synod 2024 require Classis Grand Rapids East, at their Fall 2024 classis meeting, if there is no public repentance from Neland Avenue CRC, to depose the council of Neland Avenue CRC for their serious deviation from sound doctrine, in accordance with Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84.
4. That Synod 2024 require Synod 2025, if there is no public repentance from Classis Grand Rapids East, to depose all the church councils of Grand Rapids East for their serious deviation from sound doctrine in accordance with Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84.
5. That Synod 2024 itself, prior to their adjournment on June 20, 2024, call for public repentance from all the churches of the CRC that have publicly made declarations on human sexuality that are contrary to the Word of God and our confessions. This list of churches shall include, but is not limited to, the list of churches posted on the website of the organization “All One Body” as those “Welcoming and Affirming CRC Churches.” This public repentance is to take the form of a written communication to the Office of General Secretary, to then be distributed to all the churches in the CRC. This communication is due to the Office of General Secretary no later than August 31, 2024. If there is no public repentance, the classes in which these particular churches are located must begin the process of special discipline in accordance with Church Order Articles 82-84 and the Supplement.
6. That Synod 2024 instruct Synod 2025 to hold a joyous celebration of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration if Neland Avenue CRC, Classis Grand Rapids East, and the other affirming CRC churches repent and turn from their wickedness. “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. [The] reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B**I. Background**

At every level of the Christian Reformed Church's ecclesiastical life (council, classis, and synod), officebearers are required to indicate their confessional covenant with one another around our forms of unity by either signing the Covenant for Officebearers or, in the case of synod, standing together to signify their confessional covenant with their fellow delegates. As signatories, officebearers "promise to be formed and governed by" the creeds and confession, and they profess, "We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them." As Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1 says, "The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God."

It is important to assure that councils and classes within the Christian Reformed Church in North America are not using the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a means of allowing those who cannot affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God" either to begin their service as officebearers or to continue in service as officebearers without any desire or effort to resolve the "difficulty" at the council level or to submit the matter to classis or synod for examination or judgment. Such use would render the integrity of our covenant as officebearers uncertain, particularly at the classical and synodical levels where, due to the confidential and pastoral nature of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process, delegates cannot know the nature or weight of any confessional difficulties that their fellow officebearers from other councils might have submitted. In short, delegates to classis and synod do not know (and cannot know) if their fellow delegates have "difficulties" with the confessions, what the nature and type of those difficulties might be, and if the delegates to the ecclesiastical body are in confessional covenant or not. This is clearly problematic and unsustainable.

To restore the integrity of the confessional covenant of classes and synod and to maintain the pastoral sensitivity of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process, those who have submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen should not be delegated to those ecclesiastical bodies that do not and cannot know the nature of their difficulties (i.e., classis and synod) until their difficulties are resolved with appropriate pastoral care and confidentiality and until they can affirm "without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God." To further preserve the integrity of the confessional covenant of the council and the mutual accountability of councils, classis, and synod, a reasonable timeline should be observed for providing help to officebearers

with difficulties and for classical and synodical examination and judgment of those difficulties.

II. Overture

Classis Iakota overtures synod to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B to read as follows (new material is underlined):

1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for examination and judgment. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b. These procedures shall follow the following timetable.
 - a. A council shall have six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the gravamen is forwarded to classis, classis shall have six months, or until agenda items for the next synod must be submitted, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought. If the gravamen appears before synod, synod’s decision is binding, and the subscriber will have until the end of that calendar year to either (1) affirm the standards without reservation, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office.
 - b. If applicable, ministers can be honorably released at the conclusion of this process.
2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.
3. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is a personal request for help in resolving a subscriber’s doubts about a doctrine contained in the confessions that arise after the officer has, in good faith, subscribed themselves to the Covenant for Officebearers. It is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber’s settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong. Therefore, in all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, no assembly may exempt a subscriber from having to affirm all of the doctrines contained in the standards of the church.
4. To honor the confidential and pastoral nature of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process and to maintain the integrity of the

church's confessional covenant, the local council of an officebearer who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen may not delegate that officebearer to a broader ecclesiastical assembly (classis or synod) until the difficulty has been resolved and the officebearer can affirm without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God. If the officebearer who has submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen is nominated as a delegate to a broader assembly by an officebearer outside of his or her own council, he or she must decline the nomination.

Grounds:

1. Confessional-difficulty gravamina were never intended as a permanent exception to our confessions. Therefore we cannot let their illegitimate use as a permanent exception to the confessions compromise the integrity of our confessional covenant.
2. Due to the confidential nature of confessional-difficulty gravamina, delegates to broader assemblies (classis, synod) have no confidence that their fellow delegates hold to the same beliefs and are deliberating from the same biblical and confessional foundation.
3. Adding a timetable to the guidelines and regulations will ensure that commitment to God's Word, commitment to the testimony of the creeds and confessions, and mutual trust among all officebearers of the CRCNA will be restored in a reasonable and prompt manner.

Classis Iakota
Bernard Haan, stated clerk

OVERTURE 36

Preservation of the Gravamen Process

We, Classis Red Mesa of the Christian Reformed Church, overture Synod 2024 not to accede to the deferred overtures from Synod 2023 that ask for changes in the gravamen process. Our desire is for the gravamen process to be preserved as is written in the Church Order in the Supplement to Article 5:

We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its

supplements. If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(Acts of Synod 2012, pp. 761-62)

As noted in the Church Order Supplement above, provision is made for officebearers to give expression to their conscientious objection to a variety of possible areas of difficulty with the confessions of the CRCNA. Submitting what is called a "gravamen" allows officebearers to express their difficulty or doubt while still signing the Covenant for Officebearers with integrity and remaining members in good standing in their churches. However, there is now a strong push to functionally eliminate this provision—a matter to be taken up at Synod 2024.

If adopted, the restrictions to the gravamen process proposed at Synod 2023 (but deferred to Synod 2024) would leave many local churches with very few people eligible to serve as officebearers and thereby seriously impede their ability to function. These sweeping changes would affect all potential officebearers who have difficulties or doubts about any of a number of doctrines, resulting in barring them from service as elder, deacon, minister of the Word, or commissioned pastor. It would leave local churches bewildered and confused to have saints and lifelong leaders suddenly disqualified from church leadership because of a decision made by those wholly unknown to their congregation or its leaders. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.

We treasure our denomination's colorful history of discussion, discernment, and disagreement about nonsalvific issues, always knowing that as we disagree in a variety of forums that we can stand in alignment and agreement in worship before our Creator. We grieve the potential loss of our ability to dialog and hold opposing opinions. We also see this as the creation of a systemic bias where none had previously existed. We declare that the only way we can remain part of the Christian Reformed Church with integrity, if Synod 2024 intends to significantly change or remove the gravamen process, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Classis Red Mesa
John Greydanus, stated clerk

Maintain Local Council Authority over Timelines for the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen Process

I. Background

Church Order Supplement, Article 5 lays out both the Covenant for Officebearers and the “Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina,” stating (in the Covenant) that if officebearers have difficulty with a teaching in the confessional documents, they “promise to present or receive [such] confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship . . . [as the church together seeks] a fuller understanding of the gospel.” Officebearers also commit to “submit to the church’s judgment and authority” as the church council receives any difficulties via gravamina. Neither the Church Order nor synod has provided a timeline for the use of such gravamina, entrusting this to the discernment and authority of local councils and entrusting that officebearers will submit to their councils in whatever said councils decide.

However, overtures submitted to Synod 2023 requested, among other things, that synod amend the Church Order and place timelines on this process, removing authority from local councils and compelling officebearers either to resolve their confessional difficulties, escalate their gravamen to a confessional-*revision* gravamen before synod, or be removed from their office.¹

We respect the desire of the writers of these overtures to “be of one mind” (Phil. 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8), and we understand their concerns that confessional-difficulty gravamina could threaten this unity. We also believe, with them, that officebearers should be held to a high standard. Further, we wish to maintain the option for them to choose such a time-bound process in their own churches *should their own local councils decide*. However, we do not believe such a time-bound process should be imposed by synod.

II. Overture

Classis B.C. North-West overtures Synod 2024 to maintain local council authority over timelines for the confessional-difficulty gravamen process.

Grounds:

1. The current gravamen process has served the church well since its inception, as it gives space for individuals to be open and honest about their positions and concerns while still allowing councils the authority to discern whether said positions and concerns have an impact on those individuals’ ability to serve in office.
2. Maintaining local council authority over timelines avoids synodical overreach. Gravamina are received at the local level, and decisions

¹ See, for example, Overture 50: Establish a Time of Discipleship for Officebearers with a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 529-34).

- around what to do with them should remain at the local level. Any escalation to classis or synod should be the decision of the local council, as is already laid out in the existing guidelines for gravamina.
3. While there are valid concerns about the potential abuse of gravamina, there are other ways (see point 4) to safeguard against this abuse rather than using synod-imposed timelines.
 4. Since the local council receives gravamina from officebearers with whom they are already in relationship, the local council is best equipped to discern how to support and engage these individuals in their journey of faith and growth, and on what timeline.
 5. The current gravamen process “[upholds] the confessions, the Church Order, and the Covenant for Officebearers”² while still maintaining space for respectful dialogue and discernment that allows for unity in mission and purpose, in the service of Christ and the church.

Classis B.C. North-West
Kathy N. Smith, stated clerk

OVERTURE 38

Do Not Implement Any New Acts of Discipline or Mandatory Timelines for Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

Overture

In response to Article 80 in the *Acts of Synod 2023* (pp. 1032-39), we call on Synod 2024 not to implement any new acts of discipline or mandatory timelines for officebearers who have offered a confessional-difficulty gravamen with regard to the confessional status of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR).

Grounds:

1. The Christian Reformed Church in North America is made up of a diverse community of churches and individuals seeking to understand God's teachings and God's will for our lives. Diversity enriches our faith and witness.
2. Decisions about the confessional status of the HSR have brought to light differences in perspective among individuals, congregations, and classes. Within some churches there are sizable communities of people, including current officebearers, holding differing views on this topic. It is important to seek to agree on foundational elements of our faith. And it is also important to seek to live in fellowship together within individual churches and as a broader denominational church.

² Smith, Dr. Kathy; “Gravamen: What It Is and How to Use It,” Jan. 18, 2023; cncna.org/news-and-events/news/gravamen-what-it-and-how-use-it.

3. Scripture encourages us to continue to grow and learn (2 Pet. 3:18; Phil. 1:9; Prov. 1:5). Similarly, our Reformational heritage encourages us to continually be Reformed by the Spirit of God through the Word. It is important to create space that allows for humble wondering and doctrinal wrestling within the accountability structures of council, classis, and synod. “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).
4. Applying a disciplinary approach with rigid timelines with respect to the HSR raises a serious risk of causing harm, of rushing action nonpastorally, and of causing damage to the body that may not be in alignment with God’s desire for how we proceed as a community. Poorly contemplated and rushed discipline is likely to hurt people, fracture communities, and impact the church’s ministry and witness in our communities and our families.
5. Romans 14:19 states, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” For our denomination, and for individual churches, it is our hope that this may be a season of pursuing harmony and walking in humility as we seek a path that leads to peace and mutual edification.

Classis Huron
Fred Vander Sterre, stated clerk

OVERTURE 39

Clarify the Use of a Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen

I. Introduction

The confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG) was created within Christian Reformed Church polity to allow officebearers the opportunity to faithfully question and wrestle with doctrines and theological matters contained within our Reformed confessions. We recognize that a CDG must be used in any instance where an officebearer has developed reservations after signing the Covenant for Officebearers. Additionally, we acknowledge the importance of the CDG in the ongoing discipleship of faithful Christ-followers under the guidance, accountability, and confidentiality of the local council.

As our churches, classes, and denomination seek to disciple its membership into alignment with the confessions, the CDG remains a vital tool which allows those new to Reformed theology, or wrestling with Reformed theology, to serve faithfully within their congregation. Their faithful service in Christ’s church is held in tandem with their engaging in continued discipleship toward alignment with the confessions of the CRC.

II. Overture

Therefore the council of Princeton CRC overtures Synod 2024 to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, section B by adding the following:

- A. "3. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the officebearer is expected to submit to the church's confessions and judgments and must not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against any doctrine for which they are filing a gravamen."
- B. "4. All gravamina will be revisited in closed session (ordinarily yearly), so that the officebearer may inform council about their progress in working toward full alignment with the confessions."
- C. "5. In all active instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the officebearer shall not be delegated to the higher assemblies."

Grounds:

1. This recommendation upholds the authority of the local council (Art. 27-a) to provide oversight and accountability over the life and doctrine of its officebearers.
2. This recommendation strengthens its commitment to the confessions through (1) requiring those filing a gravamen to set aside their difficulty for the larger body and (2) requiring that no officebearer with an active confessional-difficulty gravamen will be delegated to classis or synod.
3. This recommendation recognizes that the CDG is a discipleship tool that aids congregations who draw membership from a variety of theological traditions and backgrounds. This recommendation therefore allows for continued long-term discipleship while officebearers serve as their gifts allow.

Council of Princeton CRC, Kentwood, Michigan
Casey Jen, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the January 16, 2024, meeting of Classis Thornapple Valley but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 40

Leave Gravamen Process as It Stands

I. Background

Almost five decades ago, and in response to specific circumstances that warranted it, the CRC developed a process by which officebearers could express personal difficulty with our creeds and confessions or request a revision to them.¹ Officebearers could submit a gravamen (pl. gravamina) that stated their difficulty (confessional-difficulty gravamen) or requested a

¹ [crcna.org/news-and-events/news/summary-history-behind-guidelines-gravamina](https://www.crcna.org/news-and-events/news/summary-history-behind-guidelines-gravamina)

revision (confessional-revision gravamen), and they could expect a response from their council or from a broader assembly, depending on the nature of the gravamen.

This process was used to good effect and without much fanfare until 2022. At that time, synod, by majority vote, declared a particular interpretation of the word “unchastity” in Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and then declared that that interpretation had “confessional status.” Suddenly the many officebearers who disagreed with synod’s interpretation found themselves with a confessional difficulty that they had not previously had, newly created as it was by Synod 2022. Many of these officebearers, in compliance with the process laid out in the Church Order, submitted a gravamen to express that difficulty.

Synod 2023 formed a committee (Advisory Committee 8) to process the overtures it received related to the gravamen process. The committee produced a majority report and a minority report. The majority report (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1032-37; see also Communication 2, *Agenda for Synod 2024*) called for sweeping changes to the gravamen process, proposing a six-month time limit on working out one’s difficulty,² with three options at the end of it: affirm the interpretation they had difficulty with, file a confessional-revision gravamen,³ or resign from office. Before Synod 2023 could act on the recommendations of either report, the clock ran out and the work was put on hold. It will be taken up again at Synod 2024, with the majority and minority reports received as communications.

II. Overture

We overture synod to leave the gravamen process as it stands currently in the Church Order, and not to adopt the changes recommended by the majority report of Advisory Committee 8 at Synod 2023.

Grounds:

1. The gravamen process was formed out of the institutional wisdom of the past and has worked well for many decades. If changes are to be made, that should only be after serious consideration and not in reaction to, or in the midst of, a conflicted and controversial situation such as we are now in.
2. While the majority report is not coming before Synod 2024 as a report to be voted on, it is (against parliamentary advice and against precedent) coming as a “communication.” Thus, although the majority report ought not to have standing at Synod 2024, the reality is that it is likely to have a strong influence on proceedings. Thus we are compelled at this

² Depending on what one’s council and/or classis did with the gravamen, and the timing of meetings, this timeline could stretch out a little longer.

³ As Synod 2023 summarily dismissed all confessional-revision gravamina without engaging meaningfully with them, it is hard to see this as anything but an option given in bad faith.

critical moment to overture Synod 2024 not to adopt its recommendations.

3. It is transparent that the recommendations of the majority report target both in intent and effect those officebearers who have reservations about Synod 2022's definition of unchastity.⁴ Changes to the Church Order should not be made in this spirit.
4. The gravamen process was put into place to promote unity in the church and to encourage honesty and integrity on the part of those experiencing doubts and difficulties.⁵ The changes recommended by the majority report are likely to discourage open and honest communication and to lead to disunity that is hidden underground.
5. The compressed timeline recommended by the majority report is problematic on several fronts:
 - a. The Reformed tradition has always promoted thoughtful consideration of theological issues, which takes time, and to put a deadline on such Spirit-led, thoughtful discernment is foreign to our tradition.
 - b. It is destabilizing for local churches to have officebearers leave office in the middle of a term, for reasons imposed from the outside that have little or nothing to do with the life of the local church.
 - c. It puts pressure on officebearers to fall into line quickly, creating the temptation to be less than honest about their doubts and difficulties.
 - d. The majority report seems wholly insensitive to the choice their recommended timeline is imposing on hundreds of ministers: to lose a career within six months that they have perhaps spent decades building (see 6, a below), or to jeopardize their integrity so that they might continue to provide for their families (see 5, c above).
6. The majority report violates the spirit of the Covenant for Officebearers in at least two ways:
 - a. A rigid timeline and harsh consequences are not in keeping with the Covenant for Officebearers, which states, "We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel."

⁴ As evidenced by the fact that gravamina garnered no negative attention until they were used in response to Synod 2022's interpretation of Q&A 108. Additionally, the majority report names their targets explicitly and notes that in their case, the clock is already ticking: "Since synod has already made a judgment regarding the definition of 'unchastity' in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, that synod instruct those who have submitted a CDG with respect to the definition of 'unchastity' to resolve their difficulty by affirming the standards, resign, or be suspended from office by the end of 2023" (Recommendation 4, *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1035).

⁵ crcna.org/news-and-events/news/gravamen-what-it-and-how-use-it

- b. The Covenant for Officebearers calls those who disagree with a synodical decision regarding a creed or confession (or its interpretation) to “promise to submit to the church’s judgment and authority.” The majority report insists that those who disagree “affirm without reservation” (Recommendation 2, b; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1034) what synod decides about a creed or confession (or its interpretation). There is a vast difference between submitting to a decision one does not personally agree with and affirming that decision without reservation. Instead of promoting *unity*, as the Covenant for Officebearers does, the majority report insists on *uniformity*. Instead of requiring submission on the part of those who disagree, as the Covenant for Officebearers does, the majority report calls for their exclusion.
7. The majority report violates Scripture when it claims that what “truly unifies” the CRC is the “standards” (Recommendation 8, Ground a; *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1036). Scripture is clear that it is Jesus Christ who unifies the church (see Eph. 2:14-22; John 17:20-23; Col. 1:15-20).
8. The majority report does not recognize the fact that some doubts and difficulties never go away this side of heaven. Having them does not automatically disqualify someone from serving in office. This is why the Church Order calls for handling gravamina at the local church level; the council is in the best position to know how or whether the doubt or difficulty will affect the person’s ability to serve in their context.

Council of Church of the Savior CRC, South Bend, Indiana
Charis Schepers, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 41

Refrain from Making the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen (CDG) Time-Bound

I. Background

The Synod 2023 Advisory Committee 8 majority report argues that “the process initiated by a subscriber submitting a CDG should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1033; see also Communication 2). The report goes on to recommend that synod add the word “temporary” to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1 (p. 1034):

A confessional-difficulty gravamen: a temporary gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions.

The report then asks synod to mandate that “a council has six months, or until the next classis meeting, whichever is greater, to provide the necessary information and/or clarification being sought [by the gravamen]” (p. 1035).

II. Overture

Classis Grand Rapids South overtures Synod 2024 to refrain from making the confessional-difficulty gravamen time-bound.

Grounds:

1. The process proposed by Synod 2023’s Advisory Committee 8 regarding the confessional-difficulty gravamen fails to recognize that a gravamen may express different levels of difficulty with one of the doctrines of the church. Difficulty may range from “I struggle with how to hold to this doctrine in the light of these Scriptures” to “I don’t believe this doctrine anymore.”
2. The process outlined fails to recognize that gravamina may express difficulty with different doctrinal concerns. An officebearer who is not convinced that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews (Belgic Confession, Art. 4) is expressing a concern different from an officebearer who denies the deity of Christ. The proposed timeline would not allow a council to determine if the matter should be resolved in six months or three years or longer, even though the gravamina in question would be very different.
3. The setting of an arbitrary time limit on a gravamen fails to recognize that grappling with complex theological matters requires wisdom, integrity, support, and time. We believe that any time limit would make it very difficult for a council to deal with a gravamen in a pastoral and personal way. Without a practicable gravamen process, officebearers might simply avoid the risk of sharing their concerns.

III. Conclusion

We believe that the gravamen process as it is currently outlined in the Church Order has served the church well over the years. When undertaken with integrity, humility, and respect, the process allows the church to be a place of truth and grace. It is with this in mind that we humbly request that Synod 2024 not add an arbitrary timeline to this process. We ask that you preserve the flexibility that the local council currently maintains in the process.

Classis Grand Rapids South
Paul Sausser, stated clerk

Create a Category of “Confessional-Exception Gravamen”; Clarify Its Regulations and Process in Church Order Supplement, Article 5

I. Background

Synod 2023 closed with decisions related to the use of “confessional-difficulty gravamina” deferred to Synod 2024. As a part of this, the officers of synod also deferred all Synod 2023 overtures on this topic to Synod 2024, and they forwarded Advisory Committee Reports 8D and 8E (majority and minority) to Synod 2024 as well (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1039).

The clarity of Synod 2022 and Synod 2023’s decisions on human sexuality has precipitated a larger conversation in the CRCNA about what it means to be a confessional denomination. In particular, we are asking ourselves—in churches, classes, and in-person and online discussions—what we might reasonably expect of churches, officebearers, and members as it relates to fidelity to the confessions, along with what sort of latitude exists as we wrestle with the meaning of Scripture and the confessions for life and ministry in the present. We regard this conversation as good and necessary, and we have spoken into it elsewhere (see Communication 3, *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 601-11).¹ Here we wish to speak more specifically, via an overture, about our preferred path forward for how the CRCNA will use confessional gravamina as part of this overall picture. We do this self-consciously in dialogue with the respective positions of the majority and minority reports of Advisory Committee 8 and as part of the “confessional conversation” that the CRCNA is now having.

In this overture, which proposes a new category of gravamen called a “confessional-exception gravamen,” we seek to hold in tension a delicate balance—on the one side, recognizing the legitimate role that a confessional tradition has in guiding our reading of Scripture and guarding the unity of life and doctrine in its churches, while, on the other side, not *overvaluing* that confessional tradition in a way that places it functionally on par with Scripture. In order to hold this tension, we believe that, with good guidelines and a good process in place, confessional exceptions should be allowed in certain circumstances, under proper authority and oversight. If we do not allow for this, it seems to imply a belief that our confessions *cannot* be mistaken vis-à-vis Scripture—a claim none of us should wish to make.

¹ While we certainly wish to avoid a confessional *minimalism*, we wish also to avoid a confessional *absolutism*—or a tendency to appeal to our confessions before we appeal to Scripture, or to the clarity of our confessions’ doctrinal synthesis at the expense of Scripture’s ambiguity on some questions. As we said in our Communication 3, “Confessional commitment ought *never* be a means of avoiding the gaze of God’s Word” (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 604).

By way of background, and to recognize the challenges of and to head off potential concerns with this new category of gravamen, we observe the following:

1. There is precedent for “confessional exceptions” in the polity of other Reformed denominations. Both the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) allow for such exceptions in a careful and circumscribed way.² In the PCA, such exceptions are allowed only when an officebearer’s disagreement is considered “neither hostile to the system [of doctrine] nor strikes at the vitals of religion” (Book of Order, Art. 21-g). Similarly, in the EPC exceptions are allowed “that do not infringe upon the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession of Faith,”³ while no exceptions may be taken to “The Essentials of Our Faith,” a document clarifying core EPC beliefs (Book of Order, Art. 12-4). In other words, confessional exceptions are closely circumscribed, but they are allowed.
2. Yet we recognize that the above examples raise challenging questions: what sorts of exceptions would infringe too closely on our own system of doctrine, and what would not? What constitutes the “vitals of religion” in our confessions, and what does not? And who would decide? We admit that we can’t simply write policy to answer any and every possible question. In the overture below we can suggest guidelines, propose right lines of authority, and recommend obvious boundaries, but none of this can serve as a replacement for officebearers, councils, classes, and synods who act with character and integrity, and who choose to trust each other and to act in trustworthy ways. We cannot legislate our way to a wise use of Scripture, the confessions, and our Church Order.
3. We do not envision the creation of this category as opening a Pandora’s box. In fact, we expect that, if used appropriately, such confessional exceptions will be sought and approved in relatively rare circumstances.
 - a. Partly, this is a “what” question. Can officebearers take exception to core creedal doctrines? In our proposal, no. Can they disagree with a doctrine that is pervasive across the confessions, and thus closer to the heart of the system—say, the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement? In our proposal, almost certainly not. But might they quibble and take exception to the particularly strong language of the Heidelberg Catechism’s doctrine of divine providence in Q&A 27—a question on which Scripture itself is somewhat more ambiguous than the catechism? In our proposal, probably yes. As we would

² Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order*, Art. 21-f, -g; Evangelical Presbyterian Church, *Book of Order*, Art. 12-4.

³ See the “Explanatory Statement to ‘The Essentials of Our Faith’”; accessed at epc.org/about/beliefs/ on Nov. 30, 2023.

suggest it, the clearer and more pervasive a teaching is across Scripture and the more deeply connected it is to the gospel, the less likely it would be that an exception should be approved.

- b. But this is also a “who” and “why” question. Who is this officebearer who brings this exception, and why are they seeking it? Is it purely a matter of private disagreement, and born from a desire to take one’s vows seriously—in order to sign the Covenant for Officebearers in good conscience? Or is it an attempt to be *immune* from those commitments—to not submit to the judgment and authority of the church, to not accept its teaching, to not have to defend or promote its teaching, and to be free to do otherwise? In the latter case, approving an exception would be inappropriate, since even the officebearer serving with an exception is expected to be able to teach and defend the church’s position rather than their own private views.
 - c. In other words, an exception should only be granted by an assembly on an *issue* that it deems acceptable and to a *person* that it deems trustworthy. For all these “what,” “who,” and “why” reasons, then, we would expect that assemblies would be judicious and cautious in granting confessional exceptions—and generous where appropriate.
4. Having said all of that, we recognize that different assemblies will make different decisions and will have different levels of tolerance for “confessional-exception gravamina.” To our minds, this is an appropriate expression of diversity within a robust confessional system. Yes, it creates space for some types of thoughtful divergence that keeps the system honest, but it mitigates the excesses of such via the vows we take and make to one another in the Covenant for Officebearers—which, again, apply to all officebearers regardless of exceptions granted. In other words, it is a way of creating and allowing for some level of freedom and diversity while doing so within appropriate constraints and boundaries.
 5. And at this point, we are back to the question of trust. Will we trust each other and act in trustworthy ways, or will we not? Will we be people and assemblies of character, or will we not? Will we take our vows seriously, or will we not? No creation of a new category of gravamen and no change to the Church Order can serve as a substitute for the formation of the sort of Christian character and integrity that alone can make our covenantal commitments to one another work. In light of that, the overture below will *not* work—and it may even create *more* conflict—unless we learn to love, trust, and submit to one another (and our assemblies) out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).

None of the above places an individual’s views above those of the church’s confessions as it relates to a right reading of Scripture; nor does it inherently

water down confessional commitment. On the contrary, it makes confessional subscription more realistic and honest, and it has the potential to spur conversations that would renew the best aspects of Reformed confessionalism rather than settle for the diluted form we currently exhibit.

With the above as background, then, we offer the following overture.

II. Overture

The council of Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan, overtures Synod 2024 to revise the section titled “Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina” in Church Order Supplement, Article 5 to create a category of gravamen called a “confessional-exception gravamen” and to clarify the regulations for how such gravamina could be used, as well as the process to be followed in granting them. Specifically, we recommend the following revisions to Church Order Supplement, Article 5 in order to create this category and clarify its use (recommended changes are indicated by ~~striketrough~~ and underline):

Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina

Synod declares that gravamina fall into ~~at least three~~ three basic types:

1. *A confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with a point of doctrine/teaching contained in the confessions but does not take settled exception to nor call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. *A confessional-exception gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber takes settled exception to a point of doctrine/teaching contained in the confessions but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 3. *A confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
- A. Guidelines as to the meaning . . . [*stays the same*]
1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms ~~without reservation~~ all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
 2. [*Stays the same*]
 3. [*Stays the same*]
- B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:
1. [*Stays the same*]
 2. [*Stays the same*]
 3. If an officebearer’s confessional-difficulty gravamen (i.e., his or her “request for information” and the conversation that ensues)

results in either the resolution of the difficulty or agnosticism on the point of difficulty, the process may end at this stage. Only in the case of sustained and settled disagreement with a teaching in the confessions should an officebearer move to the next stage and submit a confessional-exception gravamen.

[The following new section C would be inserted; the next section would remain the same and become section D.]

C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-exception gravamen:

1. Candidates for ministry in the office of minister of the Word (including missionaries, professors, and others not serving congregations as pastors) or commissioned pastor shall provide a written statement of any exceptions to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort prior to a classical examination, and the classis shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.
2. Should a minister of the Word (including a missionary, a professor, and any other not serving a congregation as pastor) or commissioned pastor develop an exception to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort following ordination, he or she shall report those exceptions to his or her council and provide a written statement of those exceptions to the classis, and the classis shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.
3. Nominated and/or elected elders and deacons shall provide a written statement of any exceptions to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort prior to their ordination, and the council shall act to allow or disallow those exceptions. Should an elder or deacon develop an exception to the confessions following ordination, he or she shall report those exceptions to his or her council via a written statement, and the council shall act to allow or disallow the exceptions.
4. In the case of an elder or deacon, should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. In the case of a minister, elder, or deacon, if a classis judges, after examination, that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit the matter to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
5. In the event that a confessional-exception gravamen (whether of a minister, elder, or deacon) is accepted by a council and/or classis, that decision shall be filed with both the officebearer's clerk of

council and the clerk of classis,⁴ and shall be publicly available to council members and classis delegates as they make decisions about delegating officebearers to higher assemblies. A confessional-exception gravamen, in other words, unlike a confessional-difficulty gravamen, is not a private matter but a matter of public record at the level of congregation and classis. The information filed should take the following form: (a) officebearer's name and church; (b) office; (c) type of gravamen (i.e., exception); (d) point of exception.

6. An officebearer who serves with an approved exception is not, by virtue of having that exception, prohibited from being delegated to higher assemblies, nor from being nominated for classical or denominational positions. However, the council and/or classis may consider an officebearer's exception when choosing whether or not to delegate him or her to a higher assembly, or when nominating him or her for a classical or denominational position.
7. In the event that a confessional-exception gravamen (whether of a minister, elder, or deacon) is not accepted by a council and/or classis, the officebearer may seek, together with the council/classis, to pursue a process that resolves the exception so that it no longer exists, or the officebearer may choose not to serve or to resign from office.
8. While an approved exception allows for private disagreement and the preservation of conscience with respect to some point(s) of doctrine in the confessions, it does not allow an officebearer to "preach, teach, write, serve, or live" contrary to that point of doctrine while serving in office. All of the expectations of the Covenant for Officebearers remain for ministers, elders, and deacons serving with an exception.
9. No exceptions for any officebearer are to be approved that infringe upon or undermine essential points of doctrine as they are contained in the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed). Assemblies shall also recognize that not all doctrine contained in the confessions is of equal import; nor is Scripture equally clear with respect to every point of doctrine in the confessions. Assemblies, therefore, shall use great caution in approving any exceptions to the confessions in areas in which Scripture is deemed clear, as well as in areas that may be

⁴ In the case of a minister, it shall also be placed on the ministerial credentials. When a church and/or classis delegates any officebearer serving with an exception to a higher assembly, that officebearer's exception shall also be placed on the church's/classis's credentials to the higher assembly.

seen to infringe upon or undermine key tenets of a Reformed system of doctrine.

10. If, at any time, an officebearer's exception is resolved such that he or she no longer takes settled exception to a point of doctrine/teaching in the confessions, the officebearer shall report this to the assembly that approved the exception, and, upon examination, the assembly shall act to resolve or not resolve the exception. If the exception is resolved, it shall no longer be filed with the officebearer's clerk of council and clerk of classis.

DC. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:

[The rest of this section would be unchanged.]

Grounds:

1. The language "without reservation" is unnecessarily stringent an expectation and impossible to apply in practice.
2. The current language of Church Order Supplement, Article 5 on a confessional-difficulty gravamen makes clear that such a gravamen is largely a "personal request for information and/or clarification" which the officebearer hopes to resolve in consult with the "examination and judgment" of his or her council (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 1-2). Attempts to use a confessional-difficulty gravamen outside this purpose (e.g., as a settled exception) run afoul of a plain-sense reading of Church Order, and such attempts understandably raise questions about the motivations attached to such use.
3. Yet there is, in practice if not in theory, well-established precedent for using confessional-difficulty gravamina in just this way, as a sort of limited exception, whether the formal process is followed or not.⁵ For the sake of clarity, then, and so as not to further deepen the disconnect between theory and practice, we should allow confessional-difficulty gravamina to function simply as Church Order defines them and create a new category ("confessional-exception gravamen") which accords with our historic practice and builds guidelines and processes around it so as to safeguard it from abuse.
4. Church Order articulates a balance between local and supralocal authority and accountability (Art. 27). Differences in the ordination of ministers versus elders/deacons (transferability, length of time, where discernment and examination occur, etc.) suggest that a minister's exception is best adjudicated at the classical level, while an elder/deacon's exception is best dealt with at the local level (see proposed section

⁵ This accords with how Calvin University handles confessional-difficulty gravamina (see *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1036), but it is also, more informally, how churches have dealt with situations involving an officebearer who has a difficulty with, e.g., infant baptism.

- C, 1-3). Further, given the settled (long-term) nature of these exceptions, it is wise for such exceptions to be a matter of the “public” (i.e., council and classical) record, rather than a private matter between officebearer and council, so that assemblies can make informed decisions about delegating and nominating officebearers (proposed section C, 5). This increases transparency and trust.
5. Given that the vows made in the Covenant for Officebearers still apply to any officebearer serving with a “confessional-exception gravamen,” there is no reason for this type of gravamen to involve a time-bound process that must end in resolution of the exception,⁶ nor should it automatically disqualify an officebearer from being delegated to a higher assembly or serving in a classical/denominational position (proposed section C, 6). This does not threaten confessional identity or the faithfulness of our assemblies. It simply allows for certain types of exception to be taken when an assembly judges that space may be given to private conscience—while placing significant expectations on the officebearer who requests such an exception as well as acknowledging certain nonnegotiable matters on which an assembly must *not* grant an exception (proposed section C, 9).
 6. All of this is not at all dissimilar to how the Presbyterian Church in America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church handle matters of confessional commitment in their Books of Order,⁷ applied to the particulars of our own polity. Such provisions seem to work well in these contexts and have not watered down confessional commitment.
 7. The above policy—keeping confessional-difficulty gravamina narrowly construed and private while creating a category of “confessional-exception gravamina” carefully circumscribed and public—has a greater chance of enhancing transparency and trust among churches and officebearers than do either of the alternatives in Advisory Committee Report 8E: on the one hand, the functional eradication of confessional-difficulty gravamina in the way that they have been historically used (majority report), and, on the other, the ongoing confusing, inconsistent, and somewhat suspicious use of confessional-difficulty gravamina in ways that are at odds with Church Order (minority report).

Council of Fourteenth Street CRC, Holland, Michigan
Paul Katerberg, clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 1, 2024, meeting of Classis Holland but was not adopted.

⁶ In this respect, we oppose the majority report when it proposes a time-bound process for the resolution of (in its case) a confessional-difficulty gravamen (*Acts of Synod 2023*, Art. 80, C, 3, pp. 1034-35).

⁷ See footnote 2 above.

Amend the Church Order Supplement to Reflect Grace and Truth in the Confessional-Difficulty Gravamen Process

I. Background

As the body of Christ, we have a fundamental commitment to reflecting Christ's fullness of grace and truth (John 1:14) in all our endeavors, including the confessional-difficulty gravamen (CDG). The Covenant for Officebearers echoes this sentiment, calling officebearers "to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). Our covenant emphasizes a pastoral approach in handling CDGs (Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

Synod 2022's decision to recognize the Human Sexuality Report's interpretation of "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 as confessional highlighted the need for a pastoral approach in the CDG process. Synod 2023 was tasked to address this need, and it received majority and minority reports (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1032-39), which it sent to Synod 2024. The Council of Brookfield (Wis.) CRC hopes that Synod 2024 continues the work begun in 2023 and that this overture will contribute to the ongoing discourse.

Some of the proposed recommendations impose a stringent timeline for the CDG process, potentially limiting the process to two years. At the close of the process, officebearers with confessional difficulties would choose to either "(1) affirm the standards, (2) file a confessional-revision gravamen, or (3) resign from office" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1035). A strict time limit puts unnecessary pressure on officebearers to rush a decision or end their service to their churches. This kind of strict limit deviates from the personalized and amenable approach that marks pastoral care.

There is also consideration of a mandate that officebearers with confessional difficulties "teach, act, promote, [and] defend" even the parts of the confessions with which they are wrestling (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1034). This is a heavy burden to place on our brothers and sisters who are already dealing with the weight of a confessional difficulty. Followers of Christ are called to give compassion and understanding even to our enemies, how much more to fellow children of our Father? As church leaders, no less than others, we need appropriate forums for expressing our doubts, our failings, and our difficulties. Following Christ's call, we can be examples to the flock of how to be gracious when experiencing and responding to conflicts (1 Tim. 4:11-16). Those going through the CDG process should not teach contrary to our confessions or disparage them but should not be compelled to feign agreement while they struggle internally. Our churches can endure this tension and must be willing to have real dialogue around areas of disagreement.

In conclusion, imposing strict timelines and unnecessary burdens will move us away from Christ's call: grace and truth. These changes threaten the nurturing

spaces that are vital for providing pastoral care to those wrestling with confessional difficulties. They run contrary to the spirit of our Covenant for Officebearers and of our faith, which demand no less than all humility, gentleness, patience, and love as we bear with one another (Col. 3:13).

This overture is presented with the hope of guiding Synod 2024 toward a path that wholeheartedly embraces the embodiment of grace and truth as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. It aims to encourage our church bodies to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual love, fellowship, and nurturing spaces for all, particularly for those grappling with confessional difficulties.

II. Overture

Brookfield (Wis.) Christian Reformed Church overtures Synod 2024 to amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B as follows (with deletions indicated by ~~strike through~~ and additions indicated by underline).

B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:

1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for counsel, examination, and judgment. *[Note: The rest of subpoint 1 becomes subpoint 5 below.]* Upon receiving a confessional-difficulty gravamen, the assembly addressed shall begin a process of discipleship and discernment, in conjunction with two deputies from the immediately larger assembly. Together, they are responsible for providing time, encouragement, and counsel toward the officebearer’s full alignment with the confessions. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the officebearer and the assembly are presenting, receiving, and resolving confessional difficulties in a spirit of love, humility, and fellowship as together they seek a fuller understanding of the gospel.
2. As part of this process, the officebearer, the assembly addressed, and the deputies shall set a reasonable timeline for the resolution of the confessional difficulty. The timeline may be modified if all three parties agree that such a modification would be profitable and lead to the resolution of the confessional difficulty. The deputies shall report to the immediately larger assembly on the nature and timelines of ongoing processes. These reports shall be given annually and at any such time as the deputies believe that the process will not result in aligning the officebearer with the confessions in life and faith.
3. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information

and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not an exception to the confessions themselves or anything that holds confessional status. Therefore, an assembly may not merely acknowledge an officebearer's reservation regarding a confession—it must work toward resolving it. Likewise, this process may not be used as a means to coerce conformity or resignation—the assembly must provide due pastoral care. This care includes, but is not limited to, offering instruction and clarification regarding the confession in question.

4. While her or his confessional-difficulty gravamen process is ongoing, an officebearer must (1) submit their life and actions to the standards set by the church's confessions and judgments, (2) refrain from teaching contrary to or disparaging these confessions and judgments when they instruct, disciple, care for, and counsel others, (3) work actively in good faith toward full alignment with the confessions even after the term of their service is over, and (4) continue to serve the church faithfully, which may include participating in larger assemblies, provided they abstain from decisions and advocacy directly related to their area of confessional difficulty.
5. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge/resolve the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide/resolve the matter, it may submit ~~it~~the matter to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
6. All assemblies are encouraged to initiate a periodic review of the confessions. This review is designed to encourage the officebearers' continuous spiritual growth and to energize life-long discipleship. As part of this review, the assemblies should engage those who have completed the above process, inquiring about their alignment with their previous area of difficulty. This review and inquiry shall be pastoral—a chance to edify and better understand each other. As part of this inquiry, the assemblies shall consider how they can disciple, correct, instruct, and admonish in a way that increasingly glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grounds:

1. This amendment clarifies the confessional-difficulty gravamen process to prevent potential misuse and to ensure it serves its intended purpose effectively.

2. This amendment ensures a more pastoral approach to resolving confessional difficulties, allowing sufficient time for thoughtful discernment and fostering a nurturing space that prioritizes pastoral care and mutual understanding.
3. This provision fosters accountability by involving deputies from a larger assembly, ensuring that the resolution process adheres to the church's confessional standards while embracing a spirit of love and fellowship, in line with the church's forms of unity.
4. The amendment acknowledges that experiencing confessional difficulties may be part of one's lifelong discipleship and spiritual growth that requires nurturing spaces for honest wrestling.
5. This amendment enables officebearers to maintain their active role in the church community while honoring the church's current understanding of its confessions.

Council of Brookfield (Wis.) CRC
Craig Du Mez, council clerk

Note: This overture was submitted to the February 17, 2024, meeting of Classis Wisconsin but was not adopted.

OVERTURE 44

Do Not Allow Calvin University Faculty to Take Exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty Members

I. Overture

Classis Minnkota overtures Synod 2024 not to allow faculty of Calvin University to take exceptions to the Covenant for Faculty Members in the particular area of our confessional definition of “unchastity.”

Ground:

Calvin's own documents, in consultation with past synods, gives synod the right to speak into the confessional implications of the university:

1. The Covenant for Faculty Members uses the same language as that of the Covenant for Officebearers in the following key paragraphs:

We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and

defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

(Faculty Handbook, 3.5.1.1, p. 42)

To “heartily believe,” “promote,” and “defend” the doctrines and at the same time be given the space not to believe them is disingenuous and is a violation of the ninth commandment.

2. The Faculty Handbook aligns faculty with our Church Order regulations:

For the work of the university, the meaning of affirming the confessions shall be determined according to the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church (e.g., Church Order, Article 5, and its Supplement), which currently reads:

The person signing the Covenant for Faculty Members affirms without reservation the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being taught in the Word of God.

(3.5.1.1, p. 43)

This language of affirming “without reservation” does not allow for differing opinions in this matter. If Synod 2024 were to make the gravamina regulations clearer and tighter, Calvin’s adherence to our Church Order should follow.

3. The Faculty Handbook says, “When the synod of the Christian Reformed Church has issued a formal interpretation of the confessions, that interpretation shall be binding for Calvin University,” and, “Any judgment of the Board of Trustees is in turn subject to the judgment of the synod of the Christian Reformed Church” (3.5.1.1., p. 44).
4. Calvin University's paper on Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom says, “While CRC synodical decisions are ‘settled and binding’ with respect to pertinent aspects of institutional policy, they do not automatically limit academic freedom unless they are offered as ‘interpretations of the confessions’” (p. 7). Since synod has interpreted a confession and recognized it as having confessional status, especially with regard to a sin issue, this should mean that no exceptions are allowed in this particular area.
5. Calvin University’s paper on Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom says that “authority to make binding judgments about the meaning and implications of the confessions is assigned to synod” (p. 41).
 - a. The longstanding exceptions policy for faculty was often over issues such as disagreeing with the language of detesting the Anabaptists in our confessions, infant baptism, or teachings on reprobation. We should not allow exceptions for matters of sin that would endanger someone's salvation (1 Cor. 6:9-10), whether that is a private or publicly held belief.

- b. Other institutions such as Dordt University and Reformed Theological Seminary do not allow exceptions to the confessions for their faculty, and both institutions are thriving.

Classis Minnkota
LeRoy G. Christoffels, stated clerk

OVERTURE 45

Task Force to Shape a Gentle Pathway for Those Departing the CRCNA

I. Background

In our current tumult, many of those connected to the CRCNA are discerning that it is time to leave: members, officebearers, and whole congregations. This overture is born out of lament that our unity in Christ is breaking, and out of a desire to love well those who have discerned it is time to leave. Not only are many discerning it is time to leave; they are being forced out of the CRCNA. Written and verbal communication in many circumstances is summarized as “If you don’t like it, leave.” This overture, inspired by some ideas from Rev. Cedric Parcels, asks that Synod 2024 appoint a task force to provide support especially for the pastors and the congregations who depart the CRCNA.

II. Overture

The council of River Park Church of Calgary, Alberta, overtures synod to appoint a Gentle Pathway Task Force for the purpose of providing support for those departing the CRCNA, with the focus primarily on supporting congregations and pastors who have discerned a need to leave the CRCNA. This task force would consider how, if at all possible, to do such things as the following:

- equipping the CRCNA to pray for one another with both conviction and kindness
- allowing ministers departing the CRCNA to remain in the CRCNA Pension Plan
- supporting CRCNA staff if they discern a need to leave their employment without having a new position to enter
- inviting CRCNA ministries, agencies, and institutions to engage in discernment with their own stakeholder groups regarding how best to reshape their formal relationship with the CRCNA so as best to flourish in their mission
- providing support with the help of Thrive (Pastor and Church Support) for congregations and ministers in their discernment about departure from the CRCNA

- establishing ways for congregations and ministers departing the CRCNA to collaborate as they determine if they could remain connected after departing
- providing support for any collective group of congregations working to establish a new, independent denominational structure
- considering how, if possible, to support the CRCNA community experiencing a sense of loss by way of professional counseling opportunities
- discerning if other tasks are helpful or doable as they may come up in the discernment of the task force or in feedback from congregations or individuals
- by doing all of these things in order to shape a Gentle Pathway toward separation, hopefully minimizing any discerned need for litigation for property or funds in the body of Christ

Grounds:

1. We are seeing multiple signs that congregations and ministers are discerning the need to leave the CRCNA. We desire not to coerce unity, and we desire to love those who are departing the CRCNA, whatever their reasons.
2. The tasks named above, and others to be discerned by the task force, are complex enough to require a focused team to work through the challenges.
3. A task force with diverse denominational connections and support from the Office of General Secretary is best equipped to shape this gentle pathway for those discerning the need to leave.

Council of River Park Church, Calgary, Alberta
Joanne Spronk, clerk

Note: This overture was adopted by the council of River Park Church on January 29, 2024. This overture was presented to Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan on March 8, 2024, but was not adopted.

APPENDIX

A. Who is finding the CRCNA to be a challenging denomination?

Here follow the examples of two congregations:

1. **First CRC of Byron Center, Michigan:** First Byron CRC is a vibrant congregation with a membership of 1,398 persons. In December 2023, the elders of First Byron CRC sent a letter to their congregation informing the congregation that they have established a “Denominational Discernment Committee.” For rationale, the elders wrote, “First Byron CRC and the CRC denomination have been misaligned on critical issues for many years.” They speak about fundamental disagreements around women in

office, social justice, and the sinfulness of homosexual desire, among other topics.

The elders of First Byron CRC lament that the PCA and OPC have ended their fraternal relations with the CRCNA. In addition, they name that the CRCNA's membership in NAPARC (the largest gathering of conservative Reformed denominations in the United States) was terminated in 2001 as a result of the CRCNA opening the offices of elder and minister to women.

2. **Emmanuel CRC of Calgary, Alberta:** Emmanuel CRC is also a vibrant congregation with a membership of 527 persons. In April 2023, the council of Emmanuel CRC sent a letter to their congregation providing an update on their local process with respect to the topic decisions of synod "related to homosexuality as addressed in the Human Sexuality Report and 'confessional status' of Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism." The council focuses on discerning a local path forward for Emmanuel CRC, a congregation that has diverse views on the topic of same-sex marriage.

Equipped with feedback from listening circles and book groups, from surveys and congregational meetings, the council of Emmanuel CRC gathered to discern a pathway forward that seemed best to them and the Spirit as they guided the congregation. They prioritized the unity of their local congregation, respecting the leadership of those who hold office. In the end, the motions adopted by the council of Emmanuel CRC put them in direct tension with the challenging decisions of Synod 2022.

B. Are others finding the CRCNA to be a challenging denomination?¹

A brief readthrough of various CRC-related social media spaces provides a glimpse of the many others who are currently struggling with whether or not they want to stay connected to the CRCNA. Those who are wrestling with this question cover the whole range of theological perspectives on a whole range of theological and ethical topics (same-sex marriage, women in office, critical race theory, political alignment, gun ownership, binationality, and more). For those interested in listening in to a wider CRCNA conversation, here is a sampling of the social media and web-based locations where members of the CRCNA talk (not always civilly) across lines of difference:

- CRC Voices Group (groups.io/g/crc-voices)
- Toward CRC Canada (on Facebook)

¹ Throughout this section, we do not provide further links or quotes to "prove" our statements that many are struggling with remaining in the CRCNA. To do so feels like "airing dirty laundry" in public. And we trust this is fairly common knowledge. For this section, a curious person is invited to simply read through the various social media spaces listed. If that is not sufficient to verify our current reality, we would suggest putting a question out to the CRC Voices Group and on the Toward CRC Canada Facebook page, as these two places have a responsive audience.

- The Network (network.crcna.org/; in many cases, the comment section reveals tension)
- The Banner Magazine (on Facebook; in many cases, the comment section reveals tension)
- The Christian Courier (christiancourier.com/)

C. Do we know who will leave?

Many of our CRCNA churches have lost members. It is hard to know who will leave and how to love and support members who discern the need to leave the CRCNA. Some who are leaving are lifelong CRCNA individuals and families. The experience for some is traumatic. Some have been—or maybe currently are—officebearers. Their departure may be challenging for the local congregation. Some are ministers, entering into ministry expecting to serve in the CRCNA for their entire life, but discerning an inability to stay. And, as noted above, some who are leaving are entire congregations—both on the conservative end and the progressive end. Even some moderate churches wonder if they simply need to depart what feels like a tumultuous denomination, unable in the current moment to collaborate around a common mission.

D. Shaping a more gentle path for those who discern they must leave

On the other hand, there are many in the CRCNA who wish we could remain united despite the many differences. A phrase often used has been “unity without the need for uniformity.” Indeed, the original author of this overture wishes we would all slow the process down and take time to listen more carefully to one another, asking the Spirit to help us discern a way to live into our God-given unity in Jesus.

But a coerced unity is not a healthy unity.

And the evidence suggests that some—perhaps many—are discerning a need to leave the CRCNA. Why is this happening now? We may each list very different reasons for this situation. We may place blame on different communities for our current turmoil. Listening in to our social media spaces, it might even be the case that we consider others within the CRCNA as enemies, battling over the CRCNA.

But Jesus calls us to love even our enemies. How much more should we love those in our own covenant community?

When we put these two pieces together—a desire not to coerce unity and a desire to love those who are leaving—it is the wisdom of this overture that synod should form a task force to give shape to a gentle path for those who discern they must depart from the CRCNA.

E. Potential aspects of a gentle path for those discerning to leave

In February 2020, Rev. Aaron Vriesman published an article in *The Banner* titled “LGBTQ-Incompatible Means Gracious Separation Is the Church’s

Best Option.”² In social media conversation that followed on what was at the time a public Facebook page, Rev. Paul Verhoef asked the online community, “What do you imagine that separation to look like?” While there were many clarifying responses, we would like to focus on the response of Rev. Cedric Parsels.³ In his response, Rev. Parsels named seven things:

1. “not to act out of hostility or animosity”
2. “agreeing that we will no longer fight for the levers of power in the denomination”
3. “agreeing that we will not enter into litigation for church property and funds”
4. “praying for one another”
5. “safeguarding ministers’ pensions”
6. “helping each other to organize independent denominational structures”
7. “making professional counseling resources available to those who need help processing or adjusting this loss”

This overture considers this response of Rev. Parsels to be a good start to naming some of the ways to shape a gentle path for those who are discerning it is time to leave the CRCNA.

While it would be the work of the task force to shape this path with more detail, it may be helpful even in this overture to consider further some of the suggestions above.

F. How to pray for one another in a helpful way

Some participants in Synod 2022 and Synod 2023 expressed afterward that worshipping together was quite a complicated spiritual, emotional, and social dynamic. How can I sing songs of praise together with others when I just listened to thirty minutes of people arguing that our church should be under discipline? How can I pray about unity when someone just stood at the microphone and professed to believing something that I consider fully unbiblical?

Another example of the complication of praying together and for one another can be seen in the prayer initiative leading up to Synod 2022. Classes were invited to join Colin Watson in prayer together, but not everyone felt able to pray with one another. When Classis Minnkota and Classis Grand Rapids East were put in the same prayer group, Classis “Minnkota declined to be part of a small prayer group that also included members of Classis Grand Rapids East.”⁴

² thebanner.org/columns/2020/02/lgbtq-incompatible-means-gracious-separation-is-the-church-s-best-option

³ Response of Rev. Cedric Parsels to an article posted by Carla Morris on Mar. 2, 2020.

⁴ thebanner.org/news/2022/02/prayer-meeting-challenge-ahead-of-synod-2022

Given this situation, it is not a simple question to ask, “How can we equip one another to pray in ways that are both integrous to our own convictions and kind to one another?” And yet, throughout the New Testament, we are commanded to pray continually—including (but not limited to) praying for one another (James 5:16), praying for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44), and praying for those who are committing sin (1 John 5:16).

It would be helpful for a task force to equip us to pray well, both with conviction and kindness.

G. Safeguarding ministers’ pensions—and providing for gentle pathways for CRCNA staff

As mentioned above, most ministers in the CRCNA imagined themselves serving in this denomination until their retirement.

But what if their congregation has discerned a need to leave the CRCNA? What does that minister do? That minister may so love their congregation—and vice versa—that the two desire to remain together. But if the congregation desires to shift to a new denomination not in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRCNA, the minister is forced to choose between leaving the congregation or leaving the CRCNA pension plan. This makes their decision more difficult.

Or what if a minister in their final years of ministry discerns they must leave the CRCNA in this current moment? Maybe they simply want to join a denomination that aligns more closely with their theological convictions (i.e., women in office or gay marriage). But if they leave, they lose the CRCNA pension plan’s support for a post-retirement final move—and they had plans to move to the city where their grandkids live. This makes their decision more difficult.

Could a task force find a way for ministers who depart the CRCNA to opt into remaining with the CRCNA pension plan? That would be a gentle and kind gift in these current times.

But we would also ask that the task force consider how to support CRCNA staff (ministry staff, agency staff, institutional staff) who may be discerning it is time to leave their employment with the CRCNA. Is it possible to provide loving support for CRCNA staff who are discerning it is time to leave their employment? Some may find other positions and simply shift from one to the other. But what about those who simply need to leave in this complex time—could we provide a few months of financial support?

H. No longer fighting for the levers of power in the denomination⁵

If one pays attention to the conversations over the past years about the CRCNA, the word “power” comes up often. Indeed, we have worked to

⁵ Again, in this section, we do not provide further links or quotes to “prove” our statements that there are many accusations of abuse of power currently being leveled. And we trust this is fairly common knowledge. If the reader has need to verify this claim, we

shape a new policy around abuse of power. And accusations of “abuse of power” are on the rise. Some believe that denominational staff or leadership have misused their power. Others believe the synod and synodical delegates have misused their power. As one gets down to more local conversations at a classical level or local church level, the concerns about use of power only multiply. On the above-mentioned social media spaces—and particularly in the “like-minded” spaces—accusations of misuse or abuse of power are incredibly common.

So what are the “levers of power” in the denomination?

Are we talking about positional leadership and the related power found in CRCNA staff positions or Council of Delegate members? Are we talking about the power of synod to enforce discipline at a local level or make “unprecedented”⁶ decisions? Are we talking about the relationship of Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University to the denomination? How about who gets to be delegated to synod? If there are CRCNA ministries, agencies, or institutions who desire a greater independence from the CRCNA, is the synod-appointed board seen as a “lever of power”?

We would trust—and pray—that a task force composed of a wide variety of well-connected CRCNA members would be able to identify the vast concerns around the “levers of power,” and, with the Spirit’s guidance, determine how to diminish the battle of these levers.

At a minimum, we imagine ministries, agencies, and institutions need to be given freedom for discernment. This discernment should not simply be the work of the COD or a particular board of governors but should include a wider list of stakeholders, especially those who do the work of the ministry, agency, or institution.

I. Not entering into litigation for church property or church funds

It may be complicated to ask congregations or the denomination to not enter into litigation. If there is real and destructive “abuse of power” in the local congregation, litigation may be the only way for those without power to be heard.

But, related to the above, there are “levers of power” that a task force could minimize.

would again suggest putting a question out to the CRC Voices Group and on the Toward CRC Canada Facebook page, as these two places have a responsive audience. In addition, writing current and former members of the classical ministry committee in Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan would help to provide ample evidence.

⁶ “Unprecedented” is used here because this is the word used by Rev. Paul De Vries when he chaired Synod 2023. At one point, he simply conceded to a delegate asking a question from the floor, saying something like “We have already acknowledged that the decisions of Synod 2022 were unprecedented.” The curious reader is welcome to watch the last few days of Synod 2023 to find the exact quote.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when churches discerned it was time to leave the CRCNA because of decisions around women in church office, the CRCNA discovered the complications of some of our historical precedents and local church bylaws. We discovered that some church bylaws give full power to those who are staying connected to the CRCNA. If 90 percent of a local congregation wants to leave the CRCNA, should the 10 percent who desire to remain in the CRCNA get everything? Some bylaws—and some Church Order precedents—gave this impression. And thus . . . litigation happened in what felt like unfair situations.

A task force could be helpful here as well. Could the task force make recommendations that would allow for a more gentle pathway to separation?

Here is an example. What if a church is not all on the same page, and 90 percent want to leave but 10 percent want to remain. And what if that local church has a bylaw saying that the classis gets to decide which group gets all the assets (or, alternatively, that whichever group aligns with decisions of the CRCNA gets to keep all the assets). In this case, a motion adopted by synod could simply state that the group with the largest percentage has priority in receiving the church assets, but should also provide reasonable support to the smaller group if they decide to set up a new congregation.

These are very complicated matters. If we do not consider them carefully, we may end up with multiple appeals to synod and massive amounts of litigation, harming the church's witness to the world. A task force is the right tool to consider ways to provide a more gentle, wise, and kind pathway for those who have discerned they need to separate from the CRCNA.

J. Support for organizing independent denominational structures

As Rev. Parsels noted, departing churches may wish to collaborate. Could those remaining in the CRCNA provide support for new independent denominational structures that might take shape? We also imagine that there may be a benefit for departing ministers to collaborate. Some may want to “depart together” into a new denomination.

In both of these cases, the task force, perhaps with support from Thrive (Pastor and Church Support), may be able to equip congregations and pastors for this discernment—but also help those congregations or churches stay in contact with those in a similar situation.

- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to shift to the PCA.
- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to shift to the RCA.
- There may be a whole group of congregations that want to collaborate nationally.

The task force may be able to support healthy communication between congregations ready to depart—so that they do not need to navigate such challenging decisions alone.

K. Professional counseling resources for working through a sense of loss
Churches, pastors, officebearers, and members may all be considering leaving the CRCNA. Some of these have been CRC their whole lives. Others perhaps found the CRC, joined, and discovered that this particular theological community felt more like “home” than ever before. Departing a community that they love is painful.

What about providing professional counseling for those who are experiencing a strong sense of loss? Could group counseling be made available? Could Thrive (Pastor and Church Support) help shape services of lament? While there are surely questions of cost and scope, finding a way to mourn with those who mourn is an act of Christian love. We wonder if the task force might be able to consider these things.