

# The *Hesed* Project

## **Is the HSR Report trustworthy? *The role of the “Promotor Fidei”***

Synod decisions on the HSR Report in June will affect all members of the Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA) and its public witness. Delegates and members need confidence that the report is the result of rigorous study and theological reflection in order to trust its recommendations. That confidence is shaken by serious questions about the role of the “promotor fidei” and the resulting credibility of the report.

The Hesed Project CRC is sharing two open letters on this matter because they reveal significant flaws in the process of preparing this report and its findings. Delegates to Synod and CRC members need to be aware of these flaws before they consider and act on its recommendations.

Synod 2016 added the position of “promotor fidei” (or devil’s advocate) to the committee in response to legitimate concerns that the committee was being stacked and the report would be biased, due to the requirement that all members adhere in advance to the denomination’s 1973 position on homosexuality. The explicit mandate of the “promotor fidei,” according to the motion that proposed it, was to “*raise difficulties and doubts regarding the biblical, scientific, and Reformed validity of all arguments presented during the study committee’s work.*” (“Synod Appoints a Committee to Study Human Sexuality.” *The Banner*, July/August, 2016, p. 19.)

In recent months, Dr. Jeff Weima, one of the co-chairs of the HSR committee, has used the signature of the “promotor fidei” on the report as evidence of the report’s credibility. Meanwhile, half of the overtures to Synod on this matter find the report deeply flawed in its analysis. This raises questions: What does that signature actually mean? Did the “promotor fidei” agree with all of the report and its recommendations? To answer these questions, the Hesed Project CRC asked Dr. Mary Stewart VanLeeuwen, who performed the role of “promotor fidei,” to explain how the role was implemented in the committee’s work.

Dr. Stewart VanLeeuwen’s explanation, attached as an open letter, raises at least three significant factors for Synod’s consideration of the report:

- a. The role was not implemented as Synod 2016 intended. The “promotor fidei” essentially became the social science researcher for the committee. Instead of probing the committee’s research and analysis to determine its validity, Dr. Stewart VanLeeuwen did

- the social science research herself, and the committee decided which aspects of her work to publish and which to reject.
- b. The promotor fidei did not play a role in questioning the theological work of the committee, which was a key element of the mandate. This means the Biblical and Reformed validity of the arguments was not subjected to a high level of independent scrutiny for accuracy and thoroughness, nor were other Biblical and theological interpretations given rigorous consideration.
  - c. The signature of the “promotor fidei” on the report does not mean endorsement of the full report and its recommendations. The promotor fidei did not participate in any deliberations or votes on the recommendations. To obscure this fact and use that signature to say that the CRC should trust this report is a serious misrepresentation of both the role and the final result.

The Hesed Project reviewed the Synodical debate on the “promotor fidei” in 2016 and contacted Pastor Dan Zylstra who made the original motion. In response to Dr. Stewart VanLeeuwen’s explanation of what happened, Pastor Zylstra sent to Hesed Project an open letter to explain what the intent was and why the failure to implement it properly is important. Pastor Zylstra’s letter also raises important considerations for Synod 2022:

- a. The process and the report do not meet acceptable standards for the CRCNA to make binding decisions based on its recommendations. Nor do they adequately fulfill the intent of Synod 2016 when it explicitly added the role of the “promotor fidei.”
- b. The report’s claims about the rigour of its theological study and scientific research are over-stated and it is likely this report will not hold up to more rigorous review over time. The reputation of the CRCNA will not be well-served by adopting this report without more scrutiny.
- c. The lack of transparency violates the basic principles of good governance in the CRC. Members of the CRC should have been informed in the interim report two years ago that the “promotor fidei” was not scrutinizing the theological reflection. Moreover, the final report did not state clearly that, rather than independently scrutinizing the work of the committee, the “promotor fidei” did the social science research, some of which the committee rejected. A course correction, such as a separate report by the “promotor fidei,” could have been made to ensure that the final product would be trustworthy.

In conclusion, the letters, which can be found below, reveal that the process and result of the Human Sexuality Report lacks sufficient credibility to be the basis of a hasty decision that will have far-reaching impact on the witness and ministry of the Christian Reformed Church.

## Letter from Dr. Mary Stewart VanLeeuwen

May 6, 2022

**To:** Hesed Project CRC

**From:** Dr. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Promotor Fidei* to the CRC Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (2016-2021)

**Re:** Clarification of my role on this committee and its report to Synod 2021/2022 (hereinafter abbreviated as the Human Sexuality Report, or HSR)

I was asked to join the HSR committee in June of 2016, just after its formation was approved by the CRC Synod of 2016. This was something of a surprise to me, as I had not been a member of the CRC since 2007. (My formal church membership since then has been with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.).

It was explained to me, in phone calls and follow-up emails from a CRC administrator, that Synod 2016 had authorized a unique role for inclusion on this committee -- namely, that of *Promotor Fidei*, a person with expertise in issues of human sexuality, but one who need not necessarily be a current member of the CRC. The *Promotor Fidei*'s role was envisaged as a kind of 'devil's advocate,' who could remind the committee of the range of positions that exist on the topics the HSR committee was mandated to consider, namely: premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, homosexual sex, and transgenderism. This was apparently seen as a potential check against undue bias on the part of the other committee members, especially since -- *per* Synod 2016 -- prior agreement with the conclusions of the 1973 Synodical Report on Homosexuality was a condition of their appointment to the committee.

My prior experience in the 1980s and early 1990s as a tenured professor at Calvin College (teaching in both the psychology and philosophy departments); my longtime research foci as a social and cross-cultural psychologist and a psychologist of gender; and my prior service (as a then-CRC member) on the 1992 Synodical Committee to Study Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse were cited as reasons for asking me to be the *Promotor Fidei* to this committee. After some consideration, and after reading the committee's mandate from Synod 2016, I agreed to this request -- but with two qualifiers, which I presented at the committee's first meeting in the fall of 2016, and which were entered into minutes of that meeting.

The first qualifier was that I saw my most useful role -- as a trained social scientist, and not a biblical theologian -- to be someone who could supply background research information on topics that were included in the HSR mandate. The second qualifier was that I would not be a *voting* member of the committee, since I was no longer a member of the CRC, and regarded my main role on the committee as that of an outside academic -- not theological -- consultant (though one who was familiar with the CRC as a previous member for over thirty years).

The implementation of the first qualifier (putting most of my energy into doing background research as a social scientist) can be seen in the two Appendices to the Human Sexuality Report: Appendix A: 'What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?' (pp. 149-166), and Appendix B: 'Disorders of Sexual Development and their Implications' (pp. 166-175). These documents are entirely my own, and were chosen by the CRC members of the committee for inclusion as helpful 'background information' to the report itself. (My understanding is that appendices to all synodical reports are treated this way, and their contents are not part of what is debated on the floor of synod.) However, I should add, regarding Appendix A, that the committee chose *not* to include the final part -- about one quarter of the original document I had written -- which included another twelve pages on 'Asexuality and Transgenderism.' They also chose not to include a document that I wrote on 'Pornography: A Brief Look at Its History and Social Consequences.' All of these original documents were

submitted to, and discussed at, meetings throughout the five-year life of the committee, and amounted, in their original form, to over 125 double-spaced pages of typescript.

With regard to my second qualifier for being on the committee (not being a voting member, and having that condition recorded in the minutes of the first meeting), it is the case that in no subsequent meeting when a motion was moved, seconded, and voted on did I register a vote. So, although I allowed my name to appear at the end of the HSR (with the qualifier *Promotor Fidei* added), this should not be taken -- as at least one member of the committee has apparently proclaimed -- to indicate my agreement with the full report. (How could that be so, since I voted on none of the recommendations?) I do, of course, affirm the research material that I provided and which was provided in Appendix 1 and 2 of the report. Anything beyond that is an inappropriate exaggeration.

I regard my only other responsibility in this matter to remain in prayerful hope for wisdom and charity to prevail at Synod 2022.

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Ph.D  
Professor and Department Chair, Emerita  
Eastern University  
St. Davids, Pennsylvania

## Letter from Rev. Daniel Zylstra

**To:** Whom It May Concern  
**From:** Rev. Daniel Zylstra  
**Re:** HSR Report and Promotor Fidei

In June 2016 I was attending Synod as a delegate for the second time when I made a mistake that I regret to this day. When Synod was discussing the idea of establishing a study committee to offer a "Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality" (HSR) it became clear that the unprecedented move to require members of this new committee to "adhere" to our denomination's 1973 position would pose a problem. I feared that the new HSR committee would become worse than useless, because it would, by the very nature of its makeup, be unable to even truly consider anything outside of a strictly Western, evangelical, "traditional" interpretation of scripture. This seemed to me to be a waste of everyone's time. If the new committee was to truly articulate this "foundation laying biblical theology," then it needed to be able to honestly wrestle with theologies outside of our traditional stance.

In order to help mitigate this (to me) worse-than-useless bias in the makeup of the committee I made a motion that we add a "promotor fidei" or "Devil's Advocate" role to the committee. This person's role was to have been similar to that of the "promotor fidei" used by the Roman Catholic Church in its process of considering whether a person should be elevated to the category of "Saint." In this capacity the Devil's Advocate seeks to thoroughly examine the life of the potential saint and the arguments that those promoting their canonization are making, and they purposefully seek to poke holes in those things. This, Biblically, is exemplified when the Devil

and God are discussing Job, and Satan points out that, in his opinion, Job only serves God because God blesses Job so richly (Job 1:1-12). Notice how Satan "publicly" (v. 6), "pokes holes" in the "righteousness" of all people, and specifically challenges the idea that Job is righteous. In a similar manner, the "Devil's Advocate" in the canonization process attempts to "poke holes" in the idea that a particular person should be declared a "saint".

Despite the disturbing name, "the Devil's Advocate" is a good thing, seeking to ensure that there is integrity in the process and in the final result. If, like Job, the person the church is considering canonizing is tested and comes out of the refiner's fire intact and still righteous, then the church has done a good job considering their candidate.

This is where I intended the promotor fidei role to go. The Banner even quotes part of my original motion in the July/August 2016 issue. "The committee will also include a promotor fidei...that...would be assigned to 'raise difficulties and doubts regarding the biblical, scientific, and Reformed validity of all arguments presented during the study committee's work.' This person will suggest other explanations and alternative perspectives to those being presented by the study committee." (p. 19).

The mistake I regret was not that I made that motion, but rather, how it was made.

First, I allowed the motion to become a "friendly amendment" to the proposal to create the HSR committee. This meant that the purpose of the promotor fidei, though reported in the Banner, was never recorded in the Acts of Synod. Instead, it simply notes that a promotor fidei will be a member of the committee (see Acts of Synod, 2016., p. 920). As you can see from Dr. Mary Stewart VanLeeuwen's letter, the intended purpose of the Devil's Advocate role was seemingly never properly communicated to her. In fact, though no fault of hers, the officers of synod, who were delegated the task of assembling the new committee (Acts of Synod, 2016., p. 932), should not have made her part of the HSR team, given the conditions she wisely put upon herself. Furthermore, neither Synod, nor the larger denomination were ever informed of Mary's self-imposed conditions. In conclusion, the first part of my mistake was allowing my motion to become a friendly amendment, thus causing the grounds for the role of Devil's Advocate to be absent from the public record of the Acts of Synod.

Second, I failed to insist that the promotor fidei make some kind of explicit final report, which, I believe, has always been a key component of the role. As a result, not only was the role not adequately explained to Dr. Stewart VanLeeuwen, but she ended up doing research for the committee, as opposed to poking holes in their work – see her letter for more on that. Furthermore, the committee selectively chose which of her research to include and which to exclude, and the denomination, never got to hear any counterpoint(s) to the HSR! In my opinion: what a travesty! What a waste of everyone's time! The very nature of the make-up of the committee made sure that a minority report was essentially not possible, and the fact that the promotor fidei's work was not properly implemented and not made public means that this report is not the rigorous, well-tested report that I was shooting for – and that the denomination deserves.