

The *Hesed* Project

Writing a gravamen

Office-bearers and ordained leaders in the CRC have the option of writing a gravamen – as a way to continue serving even if they have difficulty with our denomination’s position.

Yes, you can be an elder, deacon, or leader if you disagree with Synod’s decision.

To serve in one of the offices in the CRC, a member needs to sign a Covenant for Office-bearers. That includes agreement with the creeds and confessions of the CRC. If you have difficulty with any aspect of the creeds and confessions, you can submit your concern to the church council, and the church council makes a decision whether you can serve and under what conditions. Your letter is called a “gravamen” in Church Order Article 5, one of the rules of the CRC.

Hesed Project CRC encourages church members to use this tool at this time, for two reasons:

1. It is one way to show support for those most harmed by Synod’s decision and help to create some local safe, welcoming, open spaces.
2. Widespread use of this tool will show the extent of concern within CRC circles and contribute to processes for change within the CRC.

Q. What is a gravamen?

A “gravamen” is a conscience statement. It allows you to support and work for most of what the church teaches and practices, but clearly state your disagreement with one, specific element, as part of being true to your conscience and being transparent and accountable to others in the church family.

There are two types of gravamina. One is called a Personal Difficulty Gravamen. It is a declaration by an individual to a church council, leading to an agreement about whether one can serve in a leadership position and under what conditions. It stays at the local level.

The second is a Doctrinal Revision Gravamen. It asks for a change in the doctrine to which one objects. It starts a longer process that involves taking the matter to classis and Synod, similar to an overture.

Both types are valid responses to Synod 2022; they are complementary. The focus of a personal difficulty gravamen is local; it can help to create space in local churches for more open discussion and support for persons with different sexual identities and their families, while still being accountable. A doctrinal revision gravamen is one of several tools that can be used to seek a change in what the CRC teaches and practices as a denomination.

As a first step, Hesus Project CRC will provide information and support for persons who feel a need to submit a personal difficulty gravamen as a matter of individual conscience, in order to continue to serve in positions of leadership in the local church. Development of doctrinal revision gravamina and other avenues for seeking change in the position of the CRC will take more time.

Q. Am I being disloyal, divisive, or a troublemaker if I do this?

No, you are exercising your responsibility as a member of the CRC. We believe every member serves as prophet, priest, and king in communal discernment of what God calls us to do.

Second, the first HSR decision of Synod 2022 calls for reflection and dialogue that includes:

- Consideration of what it means to live a healthy Christian sexual life for both married and single persons
- Dialogue and research among scholars in a wide variety of fields from biblical studies to biology and social sciences.
- Listening and supporting conversations among diverse groups, including youth and voices not heard.

A pre-condition for meaningful implementation of this Synod direction is the kind of open exploration that Hesus Project CRC encourages. We trust God enough to not close doors on other viewpoints within the body of Christ.

Finally, as John Lewis famously said, Christians need to get into “good trouble” to be agents of God’s mercy and justice.

Q. If I write a gravamen, what are the key components?

A personal difficulty gravamen is a personal statement of conscience, so there is no cookie cutter mold. Below are three key components:

1. State your concern, as clearly as you can.

For many, a primary concern relates to the decision to define violation of the Seventh Commandment as a list of specific sins and give that list the same status as the core confessions of the CRC. The specific motion of Synod 2022 reads:

That synod affirm that ‘unchastity’ in the Heidelberg Catechism Q.&A. 108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital 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.”

In one specific application of this decision, Synod 2022 went on to rule that persons living in committed, same-sex relationships cannot serve as office-bearers in the CRC.

You may have other concerns about using the HSR report as an authoritative teaching tool about human sexuality, impacts of the whole report, or its impact on pastoral care. State the concerns as clearly as you can; use trusted resources; ask for help from those you trust or consult with the Hesed Project CRC team (advice@hesedprojectcrc.org) or others.

2. Make it personal

State why this is important for you as a member of the CRC. What are the impacts for you, your family, those you support, those to whom you minister, or in how you follow Jesus in your life?

3. Affirm your commitment to Jesus and to the CRC as a church

Include a re-affirmation of your faith and your calling to follow Jesus and contribute to God’s mission in God’s world through God’s church. Convey your willingness to engage with others in communal discernment, with humility, honesty, grace – taking seriously both personal and communal discipleship.

Additional guidance on gravamina can be found in the Supplement to Church Order Article 5 (see p. 13 and following on the CRCNA website https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/Church_Order.pdf) and in Questions and Answers about Synod 2022 (<https://www.crcna.org/synod/hsr-faq>).

Don't hesitate to reach out to us with questions or to share your gravamen-writing experiences. This is an important way to encourage each other and for your voice to be heard! Contact us at advice@hesedprojectcrc.org