

The *Hesed* Project

Wise Words from Church Members

Introduction

Hesed Project CRC has been in contact with leaders and members of various Christian Reformed Churches who are preparing letters, gravamina, and overtures to express their concerns about some of the decisions made by Synod 2022 with regard to human sexuality. We respect that each gravamen or letter is a personal and pastoral matter between an office bearer or member and their church council. They contain words of wisdom that are useful for others; sharing common themes, without identifying information and with permission, is consistent with one of Synod's decisions, which called for continued research and dialogue. Synod then went on to contradict the focus on dialogue by creating conditions of fear, exclusion, and punishment. The Hesed Project CRC will continue to promote open discussion and continuous learning. That's what Hesed – God's gracious and steadfast lovingkindness – looks like in our world.

The wise words are organized into six different themes. This document contains them all, but individual themes are also available as separate documents.

1. Chastity and Heidelberg Catechism Question & Answer 108
2. Interpretation of Scripture
 - Covenant, Belonging, and Unconditional Love
 - Image-bearing, Moral Agency, and Conscience
 - Creation Order and Creation Norms
3. Harm
4. Justice: An essential, missing piece
5. Local Church as Locus for Pastoral Care
6. Unity and How We Make Decisions

Interested in engaging with other church leaders on any of these topics or with other questions you may have? Send us a confidential email and let us know what avenues you're exploring or the assistance you may need. The Hesed Project CRC is happy to help. [Email us.](#)



1. Chastity and Heidelberg Catechism Question & Answer 108

A primary focus for responses to Synod 2022 was Synod's decision to interpret chastity as prohibiting a list of specific activities and then give that list confessional status, which makes it binding within the CRC. Below are reflections gleaned from letters and draft gravamina.

- Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 108 is about the 7th Commandment, which protects faithful, committed marriage relationships, grounded in equal respect for both partners as image-bearers of God. Synod's interpretation forbids sex within faithful, committed, same-sex marriages. Whether one approves of gay marriage or not, applying the seventh commandment to forbid married people from having sex is inconsistent with its original intent.
- A person who has sex only with one's marriage partner would never aptly be described as "unchaste," according to any plain and commonly understood definition of the term. The plain meaning of the word unchastity has to do with unfaithful expressions of sex: "sexual suggestiveness, transgression, or excess; lascivious; bawdy." The ironic consequence of Synod's decision is that a married gay couple who are faithful to each other for a lifetime are considered to be practicing adultery and unchastity.
- Synod's interpretation makes an unfair judgment on faithful relationships by categorizing them as unfaithful. Whether we believe they ought to exist or not, calling faithful relationships unfaithful fails to understand the nature and meaning of these relationships for both the persons involved and for the larger community.
- Calling faithful relationships unfaithful is demeaning to persons in them. It violates Question & Answer 105, in which the Heidelberg Catechism says demeaning behavior is murder. Questions & Answers 105 and 108 need to be taken together, in the context of the second half of the 10 Commandments and the gratitude theme of the final section of the Heidelberg Catechism.
- Monogamous and loving same-sex relationships did not exist at the time the Heidelberg Catechism was written. In these marriage relationships, two people enter into a lifelong commitment which demonstrates the same love, care, and mutual submission found in God-honouring heterosexual marriages. Many same-sex marriages exemplify characteristics of faithful life that are important for the individuals and for the community. Since they were not known at the time, they could not be included in the original intent of the Heidelberg Catechism.
- Basic Reformed sexual ethics has always respected and blessed consensual sexual relationships within committed marriage but held that sexual relationships outside of marriage are not acceptable. When the Heidelberg Catechism was written, all homosexual sex was by definition outside marriage, and most was exploitative instead of



consensual. We live in a moment when something new has emerged that was not envisioned: committed, legal same-sex marriages. Rather than giving this new situation careful consideration, Synod 2022 condemned it by a document written hundreds of years before there was even such a thing as married homosexual sex.

- This decision has a harmful impact on the covenant children of our denomination who identify as LGBTQ+, whether children, youth, or adults, adding to harm they already experience in our society.

2. Interpretation of Scripture

Thoughtful, God-honoring, Reformed Christians come to different conclusions after careful study of the whole Bible and specific texts relating to sexuality and its role in human relationships. A diversity of conclusions calls for continuing dialogue, rather than making a binding decision that causes further harm to members, family, and CRC ministries.

The Human Sexuality Report used one Reformed approach to hermeneutics: the Creation-Fall-Redemption framework. There are other equally valid hermeneutical frameworks that provide insight into the full meaning of the Bible. Some of these, such as covenantal, trinitarian, and christological lenses, raise important questions and cautions about conclusions reached through the exclusive use of one framework.

Below are three areas of Biblical interpretation being raised by CRC members as reasons for questioning the Synod decision to give one element of one interpretation a binding confessional status. Some of these were raised in overtures for 2022, but there was no evidence of careful consideration and clear response by Synod. Some are new or expanded considerations, adding richness to our theological reflections.

Sharing and further dialogue on these important points is essential to implement the first decision of Synod 2022.

Covenant, Belonging, and Unconditional Love

- Since the Torah is fundamentally a covenant story, some find covenant a more appropriate lens for understanding Genesis, including the accounts of creation. The focus of the creation story is the covenant relationship between God and God's creation. If it was primarily a story about creation order or transmission of creation norms, it would have taken a different form with different content. A covenant lens focuses on God's love for every human being as image-bearer, caring for the good creation, and not being alone.
- A covenant framework allows for the meristic poetry of Genesis, in which contrasts such as day and night, land and sea, earth and sky, and male and female, are understood as



inclusive terms, not binary categories. Day and night, for example, includes eventide; land and sea include marsh. Genesis celebrates the richness and diversity of creation, all of which is deeply loved by God. It is not necessary to assert a rigid, male-female binary to understand the meaning of Genesis. Imposing that onto the text is imposing an external paradigm.

- To some writers of gravamina, a narrow interpretation of Genesis 2 is a rejection of the full beauty of God’s creation – a violation of covenant with God. A more appropriate response is to celebrate diversity, including sexual diversity, as part of God’s created gifts. This finds expression in the lived experience with LGBTQ+ persons in our church communities, including committed Christians in same-sex relationships. They are at peace with God and contribute their gifts to God’s work in the world in ways that add to the richness of the church community and its witness to the love of God. Witness to the goodness of God’s love in such lived experiences is a strong theme running through gravamina that come from church communities with years of experience.
- Assigning gender diversity to the fall has no foundation in either science or biblical witness. Gender can be more diverse, and many observers note that creation in general is more diverse and interesting than we can imagine. It is not characterized by rigid, binary categories.
- For the Israelites living in Egypt, the Genesis story of female and male as equally image-bearers, working in covenant with God, presented an alternative to the slavery and disregard for some humans, especially women, that they were experiencing in Egypt. That is its Good News.
- In covenant theology, the primary focus of the Torah, including the Ten Commandments, is the love relationship with God and love for all our neighbors and all of God’s creation. God’s unconditional love is reflected by giving priority to the well-being of others and not causing harm. This is the spirit of many gravamina from members who cannot accept that the approach taken by Synod is consistent with their God-given mandate to follow Jesus’ example of living out God’s love.
- Covenant thinking drives many to a conviction that the baptismal vows of God’s unconditional love for children baptized in the church requires a response of acceptance and belonging for children who are LGBTQ+.
- God’s concern for “not being alone” or loneliness is another theme that flows from a covenant reading of Scripture. It is wrong to consign people to loneliness as a result of a sexual orientation they did not choose, by denying some the committed, intimate relationships that God created for the good of humankind. Fellowship in the family of God, while important, is not a substitute for a close, intimate, marriage relationship for those who desire that good thing. Any discussion of gay marriage needs to reflect the



testimony of those who find their relationship to be a source of fullness, partnership, and love they cannot find completely in the community of God's people.

Image-bearing, Moral Agency, and Conscience

Responses to Synod's decision suggest that further exploration of Biblical teachings about image-bearing is needed. Biblical teaching about image-bearing may provide useful guidance for ethical ways of living in changing historical circumstances. It also grounds more attention to the exercise of moral agency and conscience, which received no attention in the Human Sexuality Report.

- Being an image-bearer of God is fundamental to our identity in Christ and how we live in the world. All humans are called to image-bearing as partners with God in care for God's creation. Denying someone a full range of ways to be an image-bearer, because of sexual orientation or gender, is a violation of that person's core relationship with God. Some call it playing God in the lives of other people. Same-sex marriage is a way for gay persons to be image-bearers. Denying them that gift and way to witness in their world shows lack of respect for their status as equal image-bearers.
- For the Israelites in Egypt, the Genesis teaching that all women and all men are image-bearers of God was protest against the slavery and dehumanization they experienced in Egypt. Image-bearing affirms the value of enslaved people and invites them to a new partnership with God for the redemption of the world. It restores dignity and moral agency. The Human Sexuality Report erodes dignity and respect for the moral agency of some persons within our community, based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. These are people often marginalized in our society. Members who see Christian witness as restoring dignity and moral agency find themselves unable to comply with some of the decisions of Synod 2022.
- In the New Testament image-bearing is pictured as being a new creation. "Putting on Christ" is to love as Jesus loved, living in community and expressing care for others and the world, without discrimination. Image-bearing is embodied, and it includes our sexuality. Sexuality is not merely biological, nor is there a Biblical basis to say the biological aspect is determinative, as the Human Sexuality Report does.
- The importance of human agency, as co-creators with God, raises ethical questions about who should make which decisions, including the exercise of consent in intimate relationships. A Reformed witness on current questions about consent could be an important contribution to our culture. It is an important missing piece in the Human Sexuality Report.
- The Reformed tradition places a high value on not binding the conscience of any person more than the Bible absolutely requires, out of respect for every person as equally called to image-bearing and full exercise of moral agency. Every member exercises the roles of



prophet, priest, and king within Reformed theology. Members are saying that their conscience requires non-compliance with some elements of Synod’s decision. In the context of ethical issues relating to peace and war, the CRC has moved toward greater recognition of individual conscience. Exercise of conscience also applies to this matter. Squelching the exercise of conscience and moral agency is a serious matter that violates other provisions in the Reformed confessions. It warrants more attention.

Creation Order and Creation Norms

Responses to the decision of Synod suggest a need for more reflection on teachings about creation norms, which were used to justify giving the prohibition of homosexual sex binding, confessional status.

- Genesis is a covenant story about the relationship of God to humans and creation. If its primary purpose was conveying creation norms, it would be much different. God’s providential care for creation and the role of humans as image-bearers and co-creators are reinforced throughout Scripture, but asserting that very specific provisions are creation norms is reading into texts what may not have been there in their original context and is not necessary for salvation. This is also true for matters of gender. Questions about the possible diversity of male and female biology and the complexity of gender are not part of what is presented in the Bible as “necessary to know for salvation.”
- The Human Sexuality Report’s claim that Matthew 19 is about creation order is not the only possible interpretation, say responders to Synod 2022. The context is a debate about the Torah, the book of the covenant. Jesus’ reference to “male and female he created them” does not necessarily lead to asserting binary sexuality as an absolute creation order. Jesus is telling his followers that women and men are equally image-bearers of God, to be respected, not discarded as property or less than fully human. The question comes in a cultural context that treated women as possessions, easily discarded through divorce. The reference to “one flesh” is a reference to the covenantal nature of marriage, which was not being respected by Jesus’ questioners. Living a covenantal life was something Jesus’ listeners would understand. Adultery breaks covenant: it is not first of all about sex. Covenant also prevents “being alone” or loneliness. Some responses see the final decision of Synod as contrary to an obvious reading of this key passage. Applying it in a rigid manner as a creation norm is not the only possible approach and taking it has impacts that contradict its obvious meaning. Members who take following Jesus very seriously cannot accept harmful consequences of one reading when another has good fruits that are consistent with other teachings of Jesus.
- The claim that the male and female binary is the creation norm is not exegetically necessary. It may be a dominant pattern that is consistent with the way God created but there may be more to creation, just as the sun rising in the east is not all there is to say



about how earth and sun relate. This problem is even greater when it comes to gender diversity, which did not receive adequate attention by Synod. The consequences and harms of the current direction for trans-gender and intersex persons suggest more time instead of closing doors. Ignoring voices from those communities was harmful in itself, say some, and a violation of covenantal love.

3. Harm

The most passionate elements of letters and gravamina call out the harm being done. Most of these are based on real-life experiences. We cannot share these for privacy reasons; but their existence reinforces the importance of more genuine listening than occurred before Synod 2022.

- Real people are being harmed by Synod 2022’s interpretation of scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism. The damage done by the church to those who identify as LGBTQ+ is well documented: depression, suicide, leaving the church and the Christian faith entirely. This “fruit” of our continuing approach must not be ignored. This reason is highlighted by many writing gravamina or letters of dissent.
- Responders include people who are LGBTQ+. They express how they have been deeply hurt by the church, and are harmed again and deeper by this decision. The Synod decision confirms their experiences of rejection and condemnation rather than conveying love; it adds to previous harm rather than a change in direction that should accompany a lament.
- The harm being done leaves the expressions of lament sounding hollow. Rather than learning from sinful shortcoming, Synod’s decision appears to double down on our painful history. Rather than healing, it creates conditions that make it impossible to undo the damage done by the church in the lives of members, children, and neighbors.

4. Justice: An essential, missing piece

Justice is a central theme of Scripture missing at Synod 2022. It is now a reason why some cannot, in good conscience, comply with some parts of the decision.

- Passages in which God condemns practices that are unjust require more attention. These include Jesus’ way of showing that justice is an essential element of love. Welcome, belonging, and non-discrimination are essential elements for just relations with LGBTQ+ persons in our community.
- Equating unfaithful sexual relationships and faithful same-sex relationships in the same category is a serious injustice. Assuming that all same-sex relationships fall under the category of “licentiousness” is an injustice to members who live in committed, God-honouring relationships. Persons living in same-sex marriages within our community are



seeking to “worship God alone” and engage in faithful – not licentious – relationships. Failure to make those distinctions is unjust treatment.

- Requiring a selectively enforced celibacy on a minority group who are equally committed to faithful marriage relationships as others in a congregation is a discriminatory practice that is not adequately justified. The Synod decision functions as an exclusionary boundary, whether intended or not. It contradicts the early prayers of lament in the Human Sexuality Report and the report’s stated recognition of failures in the way such persons have been treated in the past. Just relations are an essential element of Biblical love.
- Another case of equating faithful and unfaithful relationships occurs in relation to premarital sex. Defining premarital as before legal affirmation of a marriage fails to consider that there may be faithful marriage relationships without a legal certificate of marriage. In Canada, and particularly in Quebec, many marriage relationships are common-law marriages, which have all the responsibilities and privileges of marriages without a legal certificate. Lumping them with infidelity or one-night stands not only shows a lack of careful attention to massive changes in cultural understandings of marriage from Biblical times. It is not just, and it does a disservice for ministry to persons in various relationships.
- Justifying Synod’s decision by appeal to the majority of the global Christian church without any consideration of significant minorities within the global church lacks concern for just treatment of minority voices, something for which Jesus gave high priority. It also violates the Belhar Confession, which adds to our heritage on the meaning of love of neighbor, an essential belief that receives less attention in earlier confessions. The Belhar Confession was totally ignored by Synod 2022. Although it has a different status than the Heidelberg Catechism, previous Synods committed to take it seriously in future deliberations. It came to us from the African church community with relevant experience of the harms done when the Bible is misinterpreted to permit unjust treatment of others.

5. Local Church as Locus for Pastoral Care

Some responses to Synod 2022 express concern about erosion of respect for the role of the local church as the locus for pastoral care.

- While Synod 2022 claimed to give top priority to pastoral care, the effect of its decisions is to undermine it. It also removed pastoral care from the domain of the local church, which is an important feature of Reformed polity. It did this in spite of the powerful testimony of one church, Neland Avenue CRC, about its long, prayerful process to discern God’s guidance together.



- Synod’s decision ties the hands of ministers and congregations trying to show love and grace amid complex individual circumstances and deep pain. It creates conditions that leave local church leaders open to legitimate charges of hypocrisy, being un-Christ-like, or acting like a false church.

6. Unity and How We Make Decisions

- Synod 2022’s decisions harm the unity of the Christian Reformed Church and are causing deep divisions within local congregations. Pastors of local congregations state that issues of human sexuality are not settled within their congregations. They say the best way to move forward is to continue the conversation in reliance on both Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit, rather than forcing some out.
- This interpretation of our confessions chose a harsh course rather than recognizing there is more work to do before we have clarity as a denomination. The need for more time was evidenced by the number and substance of overtures calling for caution in 2022, and now by the sudden increase in use of gravamina as many office bearers and members wonder if they can remain in the CRC.
- Decisions of such consequence should be part of a slow-moving process, involving considerable debate and multiple Synods. The post-COVID timing of this conversation, the reports of what happened within the committee, the desire to go from pastoral advice to confessional status so quickly, the dismissive manner in which those who disagreed were treated, and the limited way members of the LGBTQ+ community were engaged did not allow for the robust discernment process that such a decision requires for the sake of clarity, our witness to Christ, and unity of the church. This was reinforced immediately after Synod when many delegates who voted in favour of confessional status called for on-going conversations and many delegates who disagreed said they were not heard. It seems the process used was designed more for division and forced compliance than for wisdom and unity.

