

The *Hesed* Project

A Way Forward: Analysis of Overtures on the Human Sexuality Report

Introduction

Overtures are a primary tool for discernment and expression of concern in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The Hesed Project CRC asked four people, three pastors with Synod experience and a long-serving lay leader, to independently read and reflect on the overtures relating to the HSR report. Their analyses highlighted different aspects and common ground on options for a way forward. Below is a synthesis of their findings.ⁱ

Overview of the Nature and Scope of Overtures and Communications

- Overtures on the HSR report reflect an unusually high level of thoughtful engagement by church members, church councils, and classes. CRC members across the continent put a lot of effort into learning, Bible study, discussion of the issues, and consideration of the impacts for our mission in God's world. This is far from a settled matter among us.
- Overtures of concern paint a picture of churches living out their mission with diversity and a rich depth of insight, commitment, and service to God; and they don't want Synod to create unnecessary obstacles for their work. Adopting the recommendations, says Chicago South, as one example, *"hinders, rather than helps, as we seek to be faithful to our missional calling."*ⁱⁱ
- Stories of lived experience within or attached to overtures testify to both the harm and pain of past approaches and the joy of full acceptance and service to God within local churches, e.g. the moving story appended to a thoughtful plea from Akron, Ohio CRC.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Over half of the overtures give voice to significant negative impacts if Synod adopts the report's recommendations, especially recommendation D on confessional status. Many propose other feasible options for a way forward. (Overtures 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 30 in the deferred agenda from 2021 and overtures 27, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 46, 51, 56 in the 2022 agenda)^{iv}

Classis experience illustrates complexity and diversity

- Several classes sent multiple overtures, reflecting the diversity of views within the CRC. Rocky Mountain, for example, supported one for and one against adoption of the report.^v Alberta North, after an intentional, facilitated meeting to reach consensus, ended up sending several thoughtful overtures supported by different groups of churches and groups within churches.^{vi}

- The mix of support, rejection, and variations in between convey anything but a clear, settled position on one side and a few dissenters. Many classes voted down proposed overtures of support for the report, especially recommendation D on confessional status. Some specifically rejected recommendations B and E as well.
No Canadian classis supports recommendation D. Some in the US do and some do not.

Multiple Overtures Identify Significant Concerns and Gaps

A common theme in overtures that support the HSR report is its grounding in the Bible. Common themes in the equal number of overtures of concern are major gaps and omissions in its interpretation of the Bible, knowledge of the issues, and pastoral care. Multiple overtures name the following concerns:

- **Fair consideration of different theological perspectives.** Multiple overtures point out that:
 - this is the first time that the composition of a major study committee was limited to those who agree with one previous position when there are different perspectives in the CRC;
 - alternative readings of the Bible and different Reformed theological perspectives were not adequately considered or fairly treated; and consequently,
 - the report falls short of being a high quality report that will stand the test of time.
 One overture recommends a new committee to study all perspectives and several overtures propose tabling the report for more study and dialogue.^{vii}
- **Pause and Listen:** Several overtures plead for serious engagement with CRC members who have different sexual orientations or gender identities before making decisions (Overtures 37,38,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,50,51,55, and 56 in 2022). Vignettes in the report are not authentic or representative, e.g. no example of well-adjusted, active same-sex couples in a CRC church. In 2021 CRC students from several colleges made an unprecedented submission to Synod, searching for a voice in this matter. Many overtures agree that the most affected members should be full participants in a process of discernment before making decisions that affect them.^{viii}
- **Harm:** Multiple overtures provide evidence of harm done by the report and its recommendations, especially for younger persons and more vulnerable persons.^{ix}
- **Accurate Science:** Well-informed overtures provide evidence of misrepresentations of scientific research, as well as major gaps in how the report presents what we know about human sexual development. They point out that what we know today, compared to when the Bible was written, needs more serious consideration, in keeping with a Reformed appreciation of creation knowledge as a God-given resource.^x
- **Meaning of Confessional Status:** Several overtures offer essential information about what confessional status means and how that is determined in the CRC, e.g. an overture from five ordained members, including a retired church order expert, which is unusual in CRC history. They and others point out that the HSR report ignores a 1975 Synod report on how to determine what has the status of a confession. Another overture provides insights into the Heidelberg Catechism and confessional status.^{xi}
- **Pastoral Care and Guidance:** Several overtures identify deep concerns with the approach to pastoral care and guidance for churches, including one that supports the report.^{xii}

A Way Forward

Together the overtures offer cautions and good options for a way forward for the CRC.

Cautions:

1. **Recommendation D on confessional status seems unwise and lacks a strong foundation.**
 - a. The reasons for not making a “confessional status” declaration are much stronger than those in support of it. Overtures also correct misunderstandings about church order in the HSR report. Any reasonable person reading both overtures for and against it would conclude that those against it have a much stronger basis.
 - b. The concerns about recommendation D come from a wide spectrum of churches and classes, geographically and demographically, with a high level of concern about impacts across both countries. Wisdom and pastoral concern require stepping back and taking more time, as a minimum.
 - c. The objective behind support of recommendation D cannot be met. The level of concern in many overtures shows that there is not the degree of clarity and certainty about Biblical interpretation that is used to argue for recommendation D or that is the hoped-for outcome of adopting it. It will not work to declare confessional status in this context.
 - d. This is not a path to unity, which is also highlighted in the separate Overture 13 on Unity.^{xiii}

2. **“Hate the Sin – Love the Sinner” approach lacks credibility to guide pastoral care, which is a high priority across the denomination.**
 - a. Several overtures indicate that this approach to pastoral care has not worked and cannot work. Many applaud the report’s recognition of the need for repentance.
 - b. The harm done by this approach is highlighted in several overtures, especially those that explicitly reference extensive congregational discussion as the genesis of the overture.^{xiv}
 - c. Stories from CRC members attached to overtures and gathered through other means require at least a pause before asserting this again. For example, stories from CRC members living in compliance with the 1973 decision, in the testimonies gathered by the Council of Delegates, are anonymous because their churches are not considered safe places, even for those living in compliance.^{xv}
 - d. Both overtures in support and opposed to the recommendations recognize the need for improvements in pastoral care; Overture 54 calls for the development of pastoral care guidelines. That needs to happen before adopting other recommendations, in order to have an integrated approach.

3. **The overtures show that the CRC has in practice already moved beyond the constrained approach to interpreting Scripture used in this report.**
 - a. Deep love and engagement with the Bible is shown throughout the overtures. But the 1972 Report on “*The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority*,” cited as the authority for the way this report interpreted Scripture, seems no longer adequate as a guide for interpreting Scripture. A fresh articulation of deep Biblical roots and richer approaches to interpreting Scripture could be one of the blessings to come from this process.^{xvi}
 - b. The need to revisit how we practice hermeneutics runs through several overtures and is recommended as one step forward.^{xvii}

Options for a Way Forward:

1. Pause and Listen First

One theme running through many overtures is the need to first listen more carefully to members of the CRC with direct experience of different sexual orientations and gender identities.

2. Drop the constraints of 1973 and allow more fresh reflection

- a. Credibility of Report: Several overtures present strong reasons why the constraints on this committee from the beginning were not in keeping with CRC polity and severely damaged the credibility of its findings.
- b. Theology: Some overtures, e.g. Overture 37, call for a new committee on the theology.
- c. Science: The misuse and misrepresentation of relevant findings in science, cited in some overtures, undermines the credibility of the HSR report and its ability to be a durable foundation for long-term effective ministry and public witness.

3. Allow local discernment as a path forward

- a. Allowing local churches space to practice local discernment and work out ways to welcome and provide pastoral care to affected persons is proposed in several overtures as a wise way to move forward.^{xviii}
- b. Some elements of the report find broad support as helpful guidance, e.g. the section on pornography, but making the most contentious elements binding on everyone in every context does not have broad-based support.

4. Maintain unity through dialogue

- a. A separate overture on unity, overture 13, recommends a taskforce to reinforce our common core mission, identify ways to continue together in spite of differences, and pursue an intentional dialogue with respect for diverse views.^{xix}

Specific recommendations that warrant more attention

1. Commit sections VIII – X on gender identity to a multi-disciplinary committee for focused attention, as recommended in Overture 20.^{xx}
 - a. The report itself says it did not have enough time or expertise on this topic
 - b. Overtures provide additional insights and the importance of taking it seriously.
 - c. Experience of CRC members shows both need for attention and wisdom.
2. Revisit “discipline” in the CRC.
 - a. This issue has raised questions about the precise meaning of Church Order provisions on discipline and their alignment with Biblical teachings.^{xxi}
 - b. Thinking about the role of individual conscience and the agency of every believer has matured in the CRC, especially in relation to ethical discernment in matters such as human sexuality.

ⁱ The Hesed Project CRC takes responsibility for the content of this analysis. The Hesed Project CRC, with regret, is withholding names of individuals because some contributors are at high risk for their employment or potential harm for relationships and people they value. For further information about Hesed Project CRC and/or the preparation of this analysis, contact hesedprojectcrc@gmail.com.

ⁱⁱ Overture 30, Agenda for Synod 2022, p. 557.

ⁱⁱⁱ Appendix to Overture 56, Agenda 2022, p. 683.

^{iv} There is an approximately equal number of overtures broadly for or against the HSR report, with significant variations within the overtures of concern. Some churches/classes made submissions to both Synods 2021 and 2022, making it impossible to assess precise numbers. Within overtures of support, some express concern about negative impacts. Overtures that are not specifically about the report, such as Overture 13 on Unity, also express concerns about the negative impacts of adopting the report's recommendations.

^v Overture 16, Agenda 2022, p.527, supports report; Overture 41, Agenda 2022, p. 628, recommends non-acceptance; and Communication 9, Agenda 2022, p. 699, from Immanuel CRC, Fort Collin, processed through Classis Rocky Mountain captures deep reflection and concern, but no consensus.

^{vi} The Introduction to Overture 27, Synod 2022, p. 548-549, explains the outcome of a deliberative process taken by Classis Alberta North; Overture 27, from 5 ordained members of 1 church and the council of another church, opposes Recommendation D; Overture 35, p. 571, from 3 churches, opposes Recommendation B; Overture 37, from 4 churches recommends a new study committee on all perspectives; Overture 49, from 4 churches, asks to clarify recommendation D; and Overture 51, from 1 council and 23 members of another church, recommends receiving the report for information. Each of these reflect extensive, thoughtful reflection.

^{vii} Overture 37, Agenda 2022, p. 578, proposes a new committee to study all perspectives; other suggestions include inviting groups with different theological approaches to each articulate their perspective and then discuss the outcomes; inviting local churches engaged in related ministries to provide an articulation of their theological reflections as a basis for dialogue; and delay with a carefully developed process for theological discernment.

^{viii} In 2021, Overture 20 tried to give voice to more than 25 CRC students from various colleges, Deferred Agenda 2020-2021, p. 492. Overtures in 2022 that call for more listening to the voices of the LGBTQ members and their families include 37,38,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,50,51,55, and 56. The appendix to Overture 38, Agenda 2022, p.583, includes several first-person testimonies. Other overtures include reflections on experiences within their church families.

^{ix} An example of discussion of harm is Overture 40, Agenda 2022, p. 624; other overtures also name harm as one of several grounds.

^x Overture 39, Agenda 2022, p.616, focuses specifically on the use of science in the report; Overture 33, p.563, also provides more detailed commentary on the treatment of scientific research in the HSR report.

^{xi} Overture 27, Agenda 2022, p. 548, from 5 ordained leaders, includes analysis by Dr. Henry De Moor, a retired expert on Church Order and Pastor Bob DeMoor, who served in several senior CRCNA positions. Overture 34, Agenda 2022, p. 568, provides insights into the relevant sections of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the Deferred Agenda from Synod 2020-21, Overture 3, p. 453, asks Synod to clarify the distinctions between the types of decisions Synod makes, questioning the assumption in the HSR report that it is self-evident.

^{xii} Overture 54, Agenda 2022, p. 662, proposes a committee to develop pastoral guidelines because the pastoral advice in the report is inadequate. Overture 20, p. 537, which supports the report, calls for practical guidelines on areas such as marriage and cohabitation, as well as homosexuality.

^{xiii} Overture 13, Agenda 2022, p. 520, proposes a taskforce on unity and process to discuss differences.

^{xiv} Overture 30, p 557, contributes learnings from a congregation with experience in related ministry. Overture 40, Agenda 2022, p. 624, contributes findings from congregational deliberations. Overture 56, p 681, reflects on the experience of a diverse congregation.

^{xv} *"Listening to the Voices of our LGBTQ+ Members,"* Appendix A to Council of Delegates Report, Agenda for Synod 2022, p. 57. This report was prepared in 2021, under the direction of the Council of Delegates, to fulfill a motion adopted by Synod in 2016 with regard to Synod having input from LGBTQ+ members before adopting the HSR report.

^{xvi} *"The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority"* was adopted by Synod in 1972 as a guide for hermeneutics in the CRC. The report is available as Supplement Report 44 in the Acts of Synod 1972, p. 493.

^{xvii} Overture 55, Agenda 2022, p. 663, includes a detailed discussion of hermeneutics in an appendix. Overture 50, Agenda 2022, recommends a review of the report on *The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority* as one of four steps in place of adopting the HSR report.

^{xviii} In 2021, Overtures 20 and 29 proposed respect for local conscience in these matters, Deferred Agenda 2020-2021, pages 492 and 555. Overture 55, agenda 2022, proposes allowing space for local discernment on matters in the HSR report. Communication 5, p. 691, provides an account of how and why one church, First Toronto, has dealt with these matters at the level of the local church.

^{xix} Overture 13, Agenda 2022, p. 520.

^{xx} Overture 20, Agenda 2022, p. 630, provides a detailed analysis of matters relating to gender identity, a critique of those sections in the HSR report, and recommends a multi-disciplinary committee with related expertise and persons with direct experience.

^{xxi} Overture 11, Agenda 2022, p. 516, requests that Synod review the Church Order provisions on discipline, while other overtures propose discipline for specific churches in relation to matters in the HSR report.