

Overture from Kanata Community Christian Reformed Church to Classis Eastern Canada in response to the Decisions of Synod 2022 on the Human Sexuality Report

Introduction

This overture emerges from deep grief about what has happened within the Christian Reformed Church since the 2020 release of the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). It is a plea for:

- greater attention to on-going harm within our midst;
- more respect for the moral agency and consciences of individuals; and
- a pause in the implementation of some Synod 2022 decisions out of love and concern for the CRC as a whole.

Below are three significant matters that have not received enough attention to date. They are the rationale for an overture that proposes a way forward, with grounds for taking this direction.

i) Apology and Follow-up

The HSR report repeatedly named the harms done to members of the LGBTQ+ community and openly acknowledged that the CRC has failed them. As part of apologizing for wrongs done, the report spells out some helpful components for a wholesale change in the way CRC churches relate to persons struggling with their sexual identities or identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Synod 2022 repeated apologies made in 1973 and 2016, acknowledging that CRC churches have contributed to harm done in the past. Those harms continue to happen in our communities and the outcomes of Synod 2022 have served to *increase rather than decrease* the harm and alienation of those to whom apologies were made.

Sincere apology requires listening with respect and compassion to those who are harmed; understanding and owning the impact of our own behaviors; and then making the required changes in the practices that harm them. Refusing to consider the harmful implications of decisions being made undermines Synod's apology. Ignoring or deferring valid concerns about the implications of the 'confessional status' decision is less-than-wise leadership. We need to apologize again *and act as if we mean it*.

ii) Preventing Harm is a Biblical Imperative

Preventing harm to others is a central focus of the Bible, beginning in Genesis, through the Old Testament, in the Jesus way, in early church life, and continuing into the shalom of the New Creation. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. It does not bifurcate 'life on earth' and 'life in the world to come' in a way that might justify harm in order to point towards salvation.

Jesus led with full acceptance, love and compassion; moreover, his harshest judgements were for those who put obstacles in the way of the vulnerable in this life, not primarily for eternity *but always*. In practice, using fear of eternal damnation to save souls turns people away from Jesus more than to him.

The harmful impacts of some decisions made at Synod 2022 have become evident in one year, including the following bitter fruits: hurt and rejection experienced by LGBTQ+ members of the CRC, as stated in their own voices. Many are choosing to walk away despite their deep love for the CRC because it is too painful to stay; and there is more conflict within churches because many members recognize the harm being done and do not accept that this is the only path for the CRC to follow.

Gravamina – *more than for any other issue in the CRC* – are based on conscience claims. Failure to respect the moral agency and conscience of church members is, in itself, a form of unnecessary moral harm, as well as being inconsistent with other Reformed teachings about respect for conscience decisions.ⁱ

Research on preventing harm for LGBTQ+ persons provides clear direction about necessary conditions for mental health and well-being. In addition, there is a growing body of research on what churches can do to create safe, supportive, and loving spaces for struggling members or members who have identified themselves as LGBTQ+.ⁱⁱ We know what is necessary for the mental health of LGBTQ+ members, but Synod 2022 added obstacles to doing it. Within the CRC, numerous pastors have testified that the ‘hate-the-sin, love-the-sinner’ approach, endorsed by Synod 2022, is too simplistic and does harm instead of good for someone who is born gay and wonders why God made them that way. It does harm when we require them to live a life without committed, intimate relationships. Categorizing committed same-sex relationships as unchaste and adulterous is unfair, even if one thinks such relationships should not exist. Additionally, the *means and manner* of making decisions at Synod 2022 were inconsistent with the imperative to treat every person with respect and dignity, created in the image of God.

The fall-out of Synod 2022 is making it more difficult to create safe spaces for young people who are forming their spiritual and sexual identities. Preventing emotional and spiritual harm to our young people is a covenant obligation under the baptismal vows we make. Those vows don’t expire when young people disclose that they have a different sexual orientation or gender-identity than expected at birth. It is not the case that ‘we don’t know what to do.’ A decade of research informs good practice.ⁱⁱⁱ Synod 2022 did the opposite by creating obstacles to good practice.

iii) Justice and Compassion

Justice and compassion were not given adequate consideration in the final decisions of Synod 2022 and the way those decisions were made. Justice and compassion are central to Biblical teachings and the way Jesus taught us to live - more central than any specific verses about sexual morality. The failure to give adequate consideration and weight to other relevant Biblical teachings was named in many of the overtures to Synod 2021 and 2022 which called for more time and dialogue. Those calls were ignored by Synod 2022 without adequate response to the

substantive issues raised in them. For reason of length, this overture cannot go into details about what justice and compassion mean with regard to this topic, so it calls for time to do so before we inflict *more harm on more people*.

As a community church, Kanata Community Christian Reformed Church needs to be a welcoming church and one that puts a high priority on compassion and justice in both its outreach and creating safe space for members, including and especially members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Overture

For these reasons, Kanata Christian Reformed Church overtures Classis Eastern Canada to overture Synod 2023 to take the following steps:

1. Give highest priority to enabling every CRC church to become a space where members of the LGBTQ+ community will feel they are accepted, loved, and belong in the family of God, in keeping with our calling to act out of compassion and justice.
2. Put on hold implementation of the confessional status decision by Synod 2022 until such time as the majority of CRC churches are safe spaces, especially for young people.
3. Develop a strategy for intentional, on-going listening to Christ-serving members of the LGBTQ+ community, families, and allies, to inform the way we express belonging, provide pastoral care, and create safe spaces in CRC churches, in keeping with the apology for past wrongs and failures.
4. Develop an action plan for serious implementation of the Synod 2022 decision that calls for more research, theological study and reflection, and open dialogue on human sexuality, including consideration of other Reformed approaches to interpreting Scripture.

Grounds:

1. Preventing harm to other people in this life is a central teaching throughout the Bible, as part of the commandment to love others as ourselves. *“The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”* Romans 13: 9-10.
2. The Bible does not justify doing harm in this life in order to save a soul for eternity. The Good News of the Kingdom of God, based on dignity and respect for every person as created in the image of God, applies now and in the renewed creation.
3. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Question and Answer (Q/A) 107, teaches that the Sixth Commandment includes protecting others from harm as much as possible. This was not considered when Synod 2022 based its ‘confessional status’ decision on one, specific, dated interpretation of the term “unchastity” in Q/A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Q/A 107 is just as important as Q/A 108. Both need to be considered in the larger context of how the Heidelberg Catechism understands the second table of the Commandments as

a guide for Christian living. Q/A 107, *the second question on the Sixth Commandment*, reads:

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

A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God tells us

To love our neighbor as ourselves,

To be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to him (neighbor)

To protect him from harm as much as we can

And to do good even to our enemies.

4. Compassion and justice – two central teachings of Jesus and the Good News we proclaim for our world – were not given enough consideration in the final decisions and the way those decisions were made at Synod 2022. Calling for a pause and taking time to ensure those core teachings are given the weight they deserve is warranted by the bitter fruits evident in the first year. There are other Reformed interpretations of Scripture that do not lead to the injustice, harm, and conflict caused by the one particular approach to interpreting Scripture used to justify labelling all homosexual sex as ‘unchastity.’
5. The failure to treat with respect members of the CRC community who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community has caused harm and reaped negative fruits in many churches during the first year. We know the harm done and how to prevent further harm. The growing, specific research on outcomes of different approaches by churches provides a clear, evidence-based consensus on what constitutes safe spaces within churches. Furthermore, members of the LGBTQ+ community who follow Jesus have gifts to contribute to our mission, fellowship, and worship.
6. Synod 2022 called for more research, study of the Bible and theology, and dialogue on the matters covered in the HSR report. It is logical to implement that decision before moving to aggressive implementation of a later, very specific decision that is known to have destructive consequences.

ⁱ See *Wise Words from Church Members* for summary of themes in gravamina and letters of concern. Available at https://www.hesedprojectcrc.org/work_genre/learn/#a13lightbox-work-11968

ⁱⁱ Eric M. Rodriguez PhD (2009). *At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57:1,5-38. Foster, Kirk A, and Bowland, Sharon. *All the Pain Along with All the Joy: Spiritual Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Christians*, *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2015) 55:191-201. Barnes, David M, Meyer, Ilan H. *Religious Affiliation, Internalized Homophobia, and Mental Health in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals*. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (2012) 82:4, 505-515.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Page, Matthew J.L., Lindall, Kristin, and Malik, Neena. *The Role of Religion and Stress in Sexual Identity and Mental Health Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-sexual Youth.* *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2013) 23(4),665-677.

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