

## Introduction

Synod 2022 knew there was significant opposition to the “confessional status” recommendation. Indeed, many classes, congregations and members had written overtures to synod asking synod not to adopt “confessional status.”<sup>1</sup> Yet by majority vote on June 15 2022, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 (HC 108) encompasses “homosexual sex” and named that interpretation explicitly as having “confessional status.”

While many congregations are already aligned with this decision, other communities are experiencing significant impacts.<sup>2</sup> Churches that have held space for diverse views on same sex marriage are feeling frustrated. Officebearers who had previously considered themselves fully in agreement with the confessions are now needing to write gravamina because of this adopted interpretation. The posture of some churches towards others have changed, impacting regional communities like classes.<sup>3</sup>

## Proposed actions for this turbulent time

This is a turbulent time. No matter what decisions Synod 2023 makes, the CRC is likely to change: churches may seek re-alignment; some may leave; membership may be impacted.

In order to navigate this change wisely and reduce the amount of harmful impacts, we believe it is time to listen. The following actions are intended to help us listen well.

### ***Action 1 – Permit those who disagree to articulate their position collaboratively***

The gravamen process was intended to equip individual officebearers to express their confessional difficulties as those difficulties arose. It was not created for a time when potentially hundreds of officebearers<sup>4</sup> found themselves with the same confessional difficulty all at the same time. Do we want all these officebearers to correspond with synod individually?

But officebearers who have submitted confessional-difficulty gravamina do not know if they can openly discuss their disagreement with one another as each one considers if they desire to write a confessional-revision gravamen. This could mean that future synods will need to process individual confessional-revision gravamina from officebearers for years to come. Given this unusual circumstance that so many officebearers are simultaneously challenged by the same confessional interpretation, we consider it wise to explicitly permit them to collaborate if they desire to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> This overture originated in River Park Church in Calgary, AB. River Park Church was one of those many churches who wrote an overture asking synod not to adopt “confessional status.” River Park Church has a diversity of views on human sexuality and has officebearers who have written confessional-difficulty gravamen since the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022.

<sup>2</sup> In Appendix 1, we have tried to articulate why this decision has been disruptive for many.

<sup>3</sup> In our own classis, numerous councils have formally barred ministers within classis from their pulpits and have ceased supporting shared classical ministry, including ceasing financial support to the point of explicitly redirecting their classical funds elsewhere. The first meeting of our own classis (Classis ABSS) after Synod 2022 was so painfully divided that River Park Church has sent an overture asking that Classis ABSS be dissolved so that re-alignments can be made.

<sup>4</sup> *Agenda for Synod 2016* details the 2014 survey of 700 ordained ministers in the CRCNA in which 98 of 700 ministers reported they would be in favour of same sex marriage in the church. If 15% of *ministers* were ok with same sex marriage in the church in 2014, there is potential that hundreds of *officebearers* are ok with same sex marriage in the church in 2023.

### ***Action 2 – Equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community***

Many churches have been shaped by the assumption that there was “room for respectful disagreement” around our CRC position on homosexuality,<sup>5</sup> and likely desire a covenant community that fits with this orientation. Other churches desire to be in a covenant community that all holds the same conviction around same sex marriage. In this turbulent time, it is wise for synod to invite the churches to discern and articulate their hopes for a covenant community.<sup>6</sup>

We imagine that Pastor-Church Resources could create a helpful toolkit to equip churches and councils to discern these hopes. This toolkit would support local congregations as they discern how to respond to the survey proposed in Action 3.

### ***Action 3 – Gather feedback from the churches and share feedback transparently***

It will be helpful for the CRCNA to know the hopes of its member churches. We imagine the Office of the General Secretary, in consultation with Pastor-Church Resources, could develop a set of questions that allows local churches to express what sort of covenant community they desire. The resulting survey data should be transparently shared, and could serve as the basis for future overtures, enabling a future synods to consider the most wise way to navigate our turbulent circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

While there may be many more aspects helpful to know from each church, we consider these three things to be of key importance as we consider covenant re-alignment.

1. YOUR CHURCH – How would you identify your local church when it comes to perspectives on human sexuality?
  - a. When it comes to perspectives on same sex marriage, is your church strongly “traditional,” a mix of “traditional” and “affirming” members, or strongly “affirming”?
  - b. When it comes to who is allowed on council, does your church allow only those with a “traditional” perspective, both “traditional” and “affirming” perspectives, or only an “affirming” perspective, and does your church desire to welcome same sex married persons to be on council?
2. WHO TO COVENANT WITH – Of the various types of churches (mixing a. and b. above, there are likely at least five reasonable types that should be named explicitly), which ones are you willing to be in covenant community with?
3. LARGER ASSEMBLIES – If you chose to be with churches different than your own, what does “making room for respectful disagreement” look like when you are together (i.e. who can be delegated to classis)?

### ***Action 4 – Invite CRC institutions and ministries to articulate their challenges and hopes***

Undoubtedly, some of our CRC institutions are feeling caught in the middle of this current turbulence. Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University are both in covenant with the CRC and

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<sup>5</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for further details.

<sup>6</sup> This is similar to what each church of Classis ABSS has been asked to do after our challenging meeting in October 2022.

<sup>7</sup> We do not know what future suggestion makes the most sense, but already we have heard ideas around re-alignments with other denominations (i.e. RCA and CRC re-aligning), a “gracious separation” into two or more separate denominations; a move towards “affinity” classes; or shifting from a denominational model to a looser affiliation some have called a “network” model.

may be experiencing impacts from Synod 2022.<sup>9</sup> Our CRC ministries have also recently experienced variations in support. Synod should invite these (and other) institutions and ministries to create their own discernment process and, if they desire, communicate some of their results with synod.

### ***Action 5 – Leave discipline local for the present time***

While we articulate this last, it enables some of the other actions. If synod is going to invite officebearers to collaborate as they write confessional-revision gravamina (or one gravamen together), those officebearers need to be able to discern this action with their local council, and trust that speaking openly will not enact synodical-level discipline. If we are assuming that there will be some covenant re-alignments (perhaps a “gracious separation”), local councils will need to be able to have healthy, open dialogue about their hopes without synod pre-empting those re-alignments by way of synodical-level discipline. That does not mean that we turn our back on Belgic Confession Article 29 and abandon the third mark of the true church. It does mean that, for the present time, we keep discipline at the level of the local church in matters related to the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022.

### **Overture**

Therefore, we overture:

#### **A. That synod permit those who wish to write confessional-revision gravamina in response to the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 to collaborate.**

*Grounds:*

1. The “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 potentially put hundreds of officebearers into a place of disagreement with a confessional interpretation all at the same time. The gravamen process was not intended for such high numbers.
2. Permitting collaboration allows those who disagree to articulate their “best biblical and confessional case” together, rather than using time and resources to each write their own.
3. Without granting permission to collaborate, future synodical agendas may be filled with responding to confessional-revision gravamina from potentially hundreds of individual officebearers.
4. Explicit permission by synod is clarifying at a moment when we are unfamiliar with what amount of collaboration is allowed and when there is anxiousness about synod enacting discipline.

#### **B. That synod ask Pastor-Church Resources to create a toolkit intended to equip churches to discern their hopes for covenant community. This should be done as soon as possible.**

*Grounds:*

1. If we are approaching a time of covenant re-alignment, it is helpful for each church to discern what they hope for in a covenant community.
2. While no church would be required to use the toolkit, some churches may desire a process to help them discern how to respond to the survey (item C).

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<sup>9</sup> Both Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) and Calvin University (CU) have boards appointed by the CRC synod, and both boards have approved policies that leave room for respectful disagreement with perspectives on homosexuality. For instance, in 2021 the CTS Board of Trustees affirmed a handful of guidelines as the HSR was being discussed, including that “CTS should strive to model a community of people who hold diverging view and can discuss them honestly and civilly.” And at CU, a policy paper published in 2016 (*Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom: Principles and Practices at Calvin College*) articulates a similar posture.

- C. **That synod ask the Office of the General Secretary to create a survey that will gather feedback from the churches, and then share that feedback transparently. This should be done as soon as possible, with results shared transparently by Nov 1 2024, allowing overtures responding to the survey to come to Synod 2025.**

*Grounds:*

1. In order to discern potential covenant re-alignments, we need to listen to the local churches.
2. The transparency should be sufficient so that people can identify national and regional alignments
3. Sharing the results transparently will allow everyone to see the variety within the CRC and the potentially propose ways forward in this turbulent time.

- D. **That synod invite institutions and ministries connected to the CRC to articulate their challenges and hopes in this turbulent time.**

*Grounds:*

1. “Inviting” means that each institution and ministry can discern if they want to do this, and how to do so fittingly.
2. Listening to our institutions and ministries may help us to discern a way forward.

- E. **That synod refrain from enacting any synodical-level discipline if that discipline pertains to the decision of Synod 2022 regarding “confessional status.” This should stay in place until covenant re-alignment is discerned.**

*Grounds:*

1. Many churches and officebearers have “in good faith” operated under the belief that our CRC position on homosexuality did not have confessional status (see Appendix 1).
2. As we discern covenant re-alignments, it is better to leave any discipline to the discernment of the local church.
3. It is better to allow the local church to go through a process of discernment for re-alignments rather than synod forcing re-alignment by way of synodical-level discipline during the process.

## APPENDIX 1

### I. TWO DISTINCT VISIONS OF A COVENANT COMMUNITY

When it comes to perspectives on human sexuality in the CRC, and particularly homosexual sex within a same sex marriage, we not only disagree on the topic, but we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters.

**We disagree on the topic.** This overture will use the words “traditional” and “affirming” as we talk about two different perspectives with respect to homosexual sex within a same sex marriage. For the purposes of this overture, we will define these words in this way:

**“traditional”**<sup>10</sup> – a person holding a “traditional” perspective believes that “faithful sex” which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between one man and one woman, only between two persons of the opposite sex.

**“affirming”**<sup>11</sup> – a person holding an “affirming” perspective believes that “faithful sex” which God approves only happens within a covenant marriage between any two persons, including between persons of the same sex.

Thus, these two perspectives disagree on whether God views “homosexual sex” within a same sex marriage as a faithful Christian action.

But in the CRC, **we also disagree on how much that disagreement matters.** And this overture focuses more on the conflict arising from that second disagreement. It is becoming apparent that there are two distinctly different VISIONS<sup>12</sup> of how the covenant community of the CRC should be shaped.

**VISION 1** – There is **room for respectful disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Most of those who desire VISION 1 are deeply distressed by the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 as that decision removes room for respectful disagreement.

**VISION 2** – There is **NO room for any open disagreement** on the topic of homosexual sex. Some of those who desire VISION 2 were openly considering leaving the CRC if the “confessional status” recommendation to Synod 2022 had been voted down.

A majority of the current conflict in the CRC is not between the “traditional” and “affirming” persons. Indeed, many churches in the CRC are currently flourishing, and have both “traditional” and “affirming” officebearers and members in that same community. The conflict is occurring because some desire the CRC to be a VISION 1 covenant community and others desire the CRC to be a VISION 2 covenant community.

#### ***The CRC has a long history of saying that our CRC Position on Homosexuality was Not Confessional***

In 2010, Dr. Henry DeMoor’s *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* was published by the Christian Reformed Church. This commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Church Polity classes at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) since its publication.<sup>13</sup> As Dr. DeMoor discusses the “settled

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<sup>10</sup> This overture is aware that not all who identify as “traditional” fit this definition, but many do.

<sup>11</sup> This overture is aware that not all who identify as “affirming” fit this definition, but many do.

<sup>12</sup> The word “vision” will be capitalized throughout this appendix in order to remind the reader that the we are using this word to identify VISION 1 and VISION 2.

<sup>13</sup> As per an email exchange with current Church Order professor, Rev. Kathy Smith. In her reply of September 28 2022, she writes, “Henry’s Commentary has been a required textbook in all CRC Polity courses at CTS since it was published in 2010.”

and binding” nature of Synodical decisions (Article 29), he brings to the discussion the CRC’s position on homosexuality. Here is what Dr. DeMoor writes:

It is significant, for example, that Synod 1973 twice framed all of its “statements” on homosexuality, including its “ethical stance,” as “pastoral advice” (*Acts of Synod, 1975*, pg. 51). It intentionally avoided referring to them as an “interpretation” of the Heidelberg Catechism’s use of the term “unchastity” in Lord’s Day 41. The possibility that this creed meant to include what the synod referred to as “homosexualism” is not denied. It is just that the assembly chose not to be that resolute. It merely wanted to establish the “ground rules” for how all officebearers within the CRCNA ought to approach their pastoral responsibilities to those struggling /experiencing with same-sex orientation. It expected a “healthy respect” for its decisions, not creedal attachment. Officebearers would not be subject to dismissal from office based on unorthodox views, but only on disrespect for what the synod decided.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. DeMoor writes that Synod 1973 “intentionally avoided” giving confessional status to our CRC position on homosexuality. In other words, CTS has been teaching that Synod 1973 was leaving “room for respectful disagreement.”

And this was not just being taught in the Church Polity course at CTS, it was what CTS told to anyone who asked. If one sent an email to CTS asking, “How does our CRC position on homosexuality function for officebearers?”, CTS would reply that the CRC position is one of pastoral advice and does not have confessional status.<sup>15</sup>

It is hard to know how long this position has been taught. Did Dr. DeMoor teach his students that the CRC has room for respectful disagreement before 2010? Probably; we do not imagine he first thought that thought when he published his commentary. But we know for sure that CTS was teaching that the CRC’s position on homosexuality did not have confessional status from 2010 forward.

Thus, for the purposes of this overture, we will simply say what seems to be a verifiable fact: **“For over a decade, CTS has taught that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional both in the classroom and to anyone who asked.”**

### ***Synod 2022 directly contradicts what CTS has been teaching for over a decade***

So what happened next? CTS has been openly and widely teaching that the CRC’s position on “homosexual sex” did not have confessional status. Then by a majority vote, Synod 2022 decided to affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108 (HC 108) encompasses “homosexual sex.” It is now clear to all in the CRCNA that this interpretation of “unchastity” in HC 108 has confessional status in the CRCNA.

In other words, **Synod 2022 directly contradicted what CTS has been teaching for over a decade.**

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<sup>14</sup> DeMoor, Henry. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*, 2010. 168-169.

<sup>15</sup> In September 2018, the original author of this overture was made aware that a pastor in his classis (ABSS) had decided to perform a same-sex wedding. In preparation for our upcoming classis meeting in October, he asked faculty of CTS several questions to better understand how our CRC positions function, with a focus on our position on homosexuality. The thoughtful and thorough reply he received on September 30 2018 included attachments to the Agenda and Acts of Synod 1975, as well as this paragraph: “The matter of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, addressed by Synods 1973, 2002, and 2016, has been categorized each time by synod as pastoral advice, and has never been addressed in relation to the confessions. The minority report to Synod 2016 was in error when it implied that people who disagreed with synod’s decisions on same-sex marriage may be delinquent in doctrine. Synod has never addressed this as a matter of doctrine or an interpretation of the confessions. By Synod 1975’s standards, pastoral advice is the last category of decisions mentioned and likely the least amount of agreement is expected.”

### ***Two distinct VISIONS of what shapes our covenant community***

Again, our experience is that the major conflict in the CRC is not around the different perspectives: “affirming” or “traditional.” The major conflict in the CRC present moment is around VISIONS of how a covenant community deals with that difference in perspectives. It may help to see the conflict by drawing out the opposing implications of these VISIONS.

### **III. OPPOSING IMPLICATIONS OF VISION 1 AND VISION 2**

Many of our churches, institutions – even our members and officebearers – have been living with an assumption of how the CRC is shaped, an assumption based on either VISION 1 or VISION 2. As a denominational community, we have not been openly articulate about which VISION shapes the CRC until the decision of Synod 2022. For many, living with an assumption of VISION 2, there was no surprise when the HSR recommended that synod declare that the church's teaching on homosexual sex “already” has confessional status. For others, this recommendation was not only a surprise, it was deeply concerning – because adopting that recommendation would disrupt their VISION 1 community.

Paralleling the following five implications might help us to see the vast difference between how VISION 1 and VISION 2 play out.

#### ***Reasonable implications from believing that the CRC position is Not Confessional***

Let us ask, “What might be some common sense implications of believing that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional?” Here are five implications that some have believed are reasonable:<sup>16</sup>

*Implication 1 – There is room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC’s position.*

*Implication 2 – An openly “affirming” officebearer can be fully “confessional.”<sup>17</sup>*

*Implication 3 – An openly “affirming” pastor can accept a call into the CRC “in good faith.”*

*Implication 4 – An openly “affirming” CRC member could be an officebearer “in good standing.”*

*Implication 5 – An “affirming” officebearer would not need to submit a gravamen.*

#### ***Reasonable Implications that follow from Synod 2022’s “confessional status” decision***

While Synod 2022 did not provide insight into what consequence would follow from their “confessional status” decision, certainly some who are speaking out since Synod 2022 would say the following are reasonable implications of that decision<sup>18</sup> (the following implications are exactly the same as the ones listed above except for the changes that we have signified **in bold**):

*Implication 1 – There is **NOT** room for open, respectful disagreement with the CRC’s position.*

*Implication 2 – An openly “affirming” officebearer can **NOT** be fully “confessional.”*

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<sup>16</sup> To be clear, we have not seen or heard that CTS taught these implications directly or openly. We are simply saying that these implications are reasonable *if one honestly believes that the CRC position on homosexuality is not confessional*.

<sup>17</sup> If one believes that same sex marriage is an acceptable Christian action, then sex within that same sex marriage would not be considered “adultery” (sex against your marriage covenant), and one does not consider “homosexual sex” to be “unchaste.”

<sup>18</sup> For instance, we believe these five implications align with the material published on the “Abide Project” website: <https://www.abideproject.org/>. These also seem to be assumptions behind some of the actions (i.e. registered negative votes; attending “in protest”; extended concern listed in credentials) that occurred at the October 28-29 2022 meeting of Classis ABSS (see minutes).

*Implication 3 – An openly “affirming” pastor can **NOT** accept a call into the CRC “in good faith.”*

*Implication 4 – An openly “affirming” CRC member could **NOT** be an officebearer “in good standing.”*

*Implication 5 – An “affirming” officebearer would ~~NOT~~ need to submit a gravamen.*

***Are we at an impasse?***

For those who were living out VISION 1 in their local church community, the “confessional status” decision of Synod 2022 is a stunning reversal of what it means to be in the CRC covenant community. The change of implications is immensely impactful for their local church – and that impact hurts them.

At the same time, it has also become apparent that many in the CRC desire VISION 2 and strongly affirm the implications listed above. To many, the decision to make this “confessional” is a necessary decision to keep the church on the right path.

**To some, being a VISION 1 community is a central conviction to what it means to be a faithful church. To others, being a VISION 2 community is just as central a conviction.**