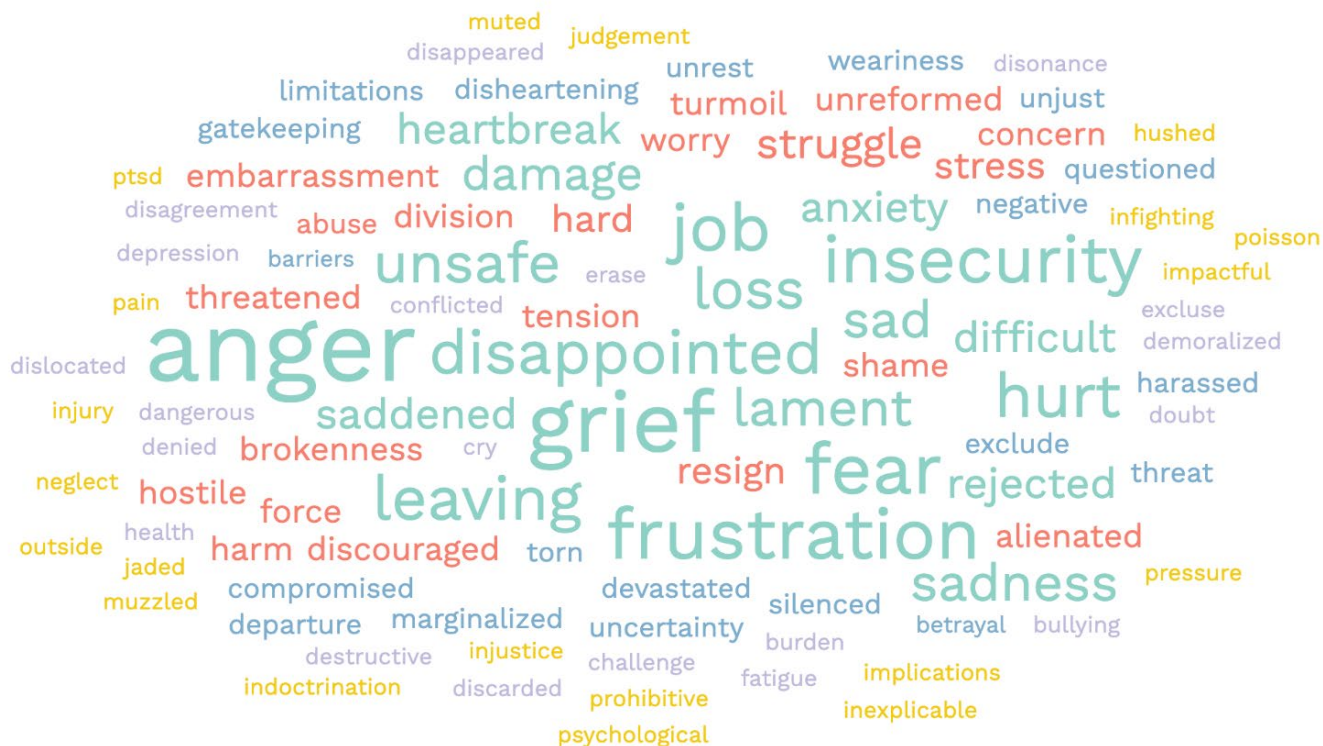


A litany of lament: The effect of Synod 2022's decisions about human sexuality



**By Hesed Project CRC
May 2023**

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Introduction

Feelings of heartbreak, loss, anger, grief, frustration, and sadness. Families being torn apart. Parents watching their children leave the church or leave Christianity altogether. Jobs being lost, and health being compromised. These are just a few of the effects experienced by members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) because of the actions of Synod 2022. Congregations are losing gifted leaders and finding it hard to replace them. The future of important ministries is at risk.

How do we know?

In March 2023, The Hesed Project CRC launched an online survey, inviting members of the CRC to share what they were seeing, thinking and feeling in response to the decisions of Synod 2022 (the annual ecclesiastical gathering of this binational denomination) with regard to the Human Sexuality Report.

Why? Soon after Synod 2022, we started hearing stories about the impacts of Synod's decisions – on individuals, local churches, and various areas of ministry. It became apparent that there was a significant gap between what was being said in official publications and communications of the CRC compared to what we were hearing from church members at ground level. In the absence of denominational leaders initiating a comprehensive survey of impacts and effects, Hesed Project CRC sought to provide a forum for the stories of church members to be heard.

This report is the result of our volunteer efforts to gather anecdotal evidence of the effects of Synod 2022 and our desire to inform ongoing decision-making with authentic, credible voices. Due to the need to offer confidentiality to respondents who feared reprisal, and the limited resources of a volunteer initiative, this survey is, of necessity, limited in reach and scope. Therefore, the results are not comprehensive, representative, or generalizable. Nevertheless, we offer this report as a sampling, with confidence that its authentic findings warrant more attention by all members who are concerned about the health and well-being of the Christian Reformed Church, its leaders, its members, and its future.

Method

A six-question survey focusing on impacts and effects was developed on Google forms. Respondents were asked to indicate their relationship to the CRC, the length of that relationship, and whether they were in Canada or the US. A series of possible effects was offered as prompts, but respondents could choose to describe their contributions as they saw fit. They were asked to indicate if the impact was on them, or on someone or something else. After describing the impact, respondents were invited to share their personal reactions, and to reflect on the effect on people or ministries. Respondents were then offered an opportunity to determine how much or how little anonymity they needed in order for their story to be told. See Appendix A for the questions as they were posed.

For verification and authentication purposes, respondents were asked to identify their congregation and city, and to provide their name and email address.

The survey link and invitation to participate were shared on the website of Hesed Project CRC, via social media (Facebook and Instagram), and via private Facebook groups. People were encouraged to share and to invite others to participate.

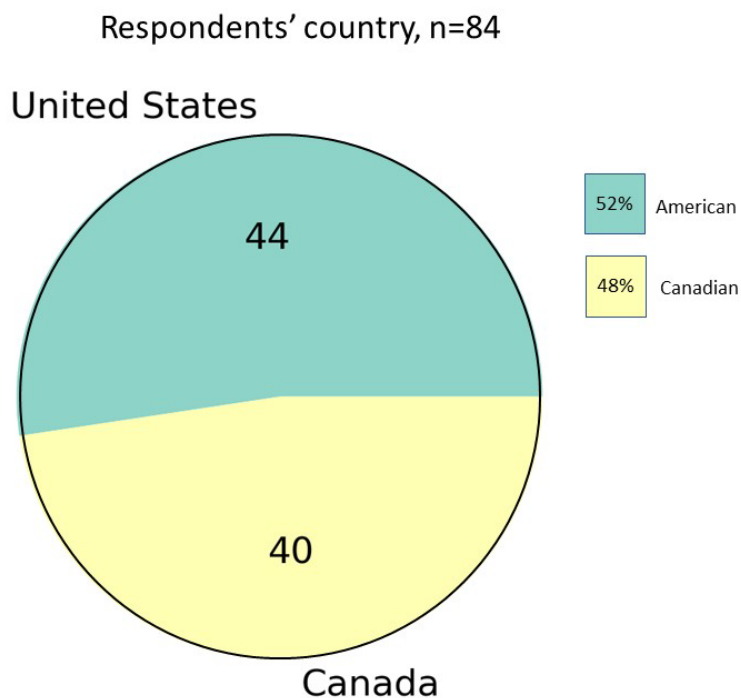
The survey was launched on March 5, 2023, and results being analyzed in this report were collected until March 27, 2023.

Results

In just over three weeks, the survey was completed 90 times by 84 respondents who shared a total of 127 impacts. (Some respondents provided multiple effects, or completed the survey more than once.) Nine of the respondents said they were pleased with the decisions of Synod 2022, while the remaining 118 effects reported were overwhelmingly negative.

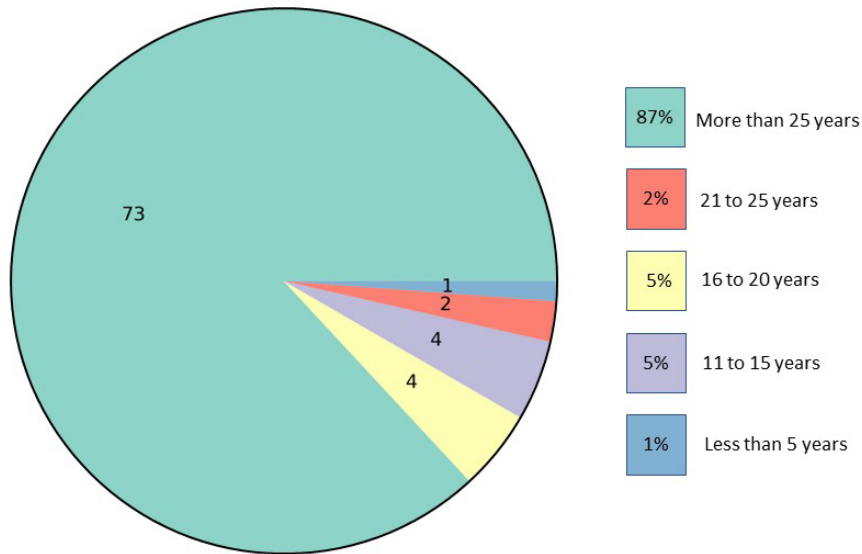
Of those 127 stories, roughly one quarter, or 33, were shared with permission to provide the author's name. Authors of eight of the stories asked to be consulted before their stories were shared, and the authors of the remainder, 86 stories, sought varying levels of anonymity. The fact that the authors of 94 of the stories being shared, nearly 75%, did not feel comfortable being identified is telling – this is the story of a denomination whose members are living in fear of reprisal.

Roughly half of the respondents are from Canada and half from the US.



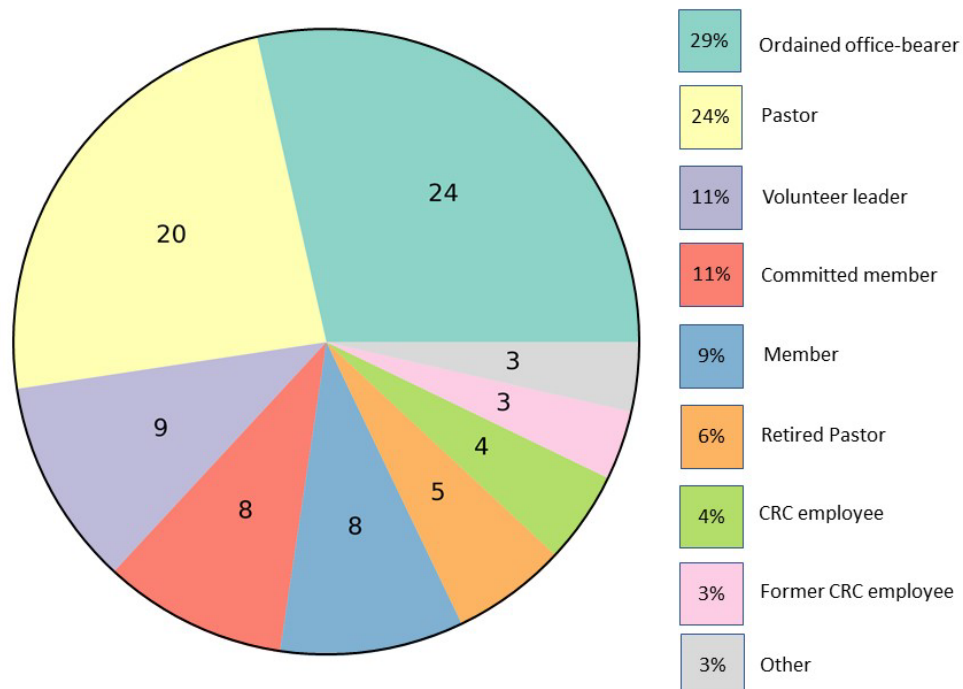
Most of the respondents have long commitments to the CRC.

Length of respondents' association with the CRC, n=84

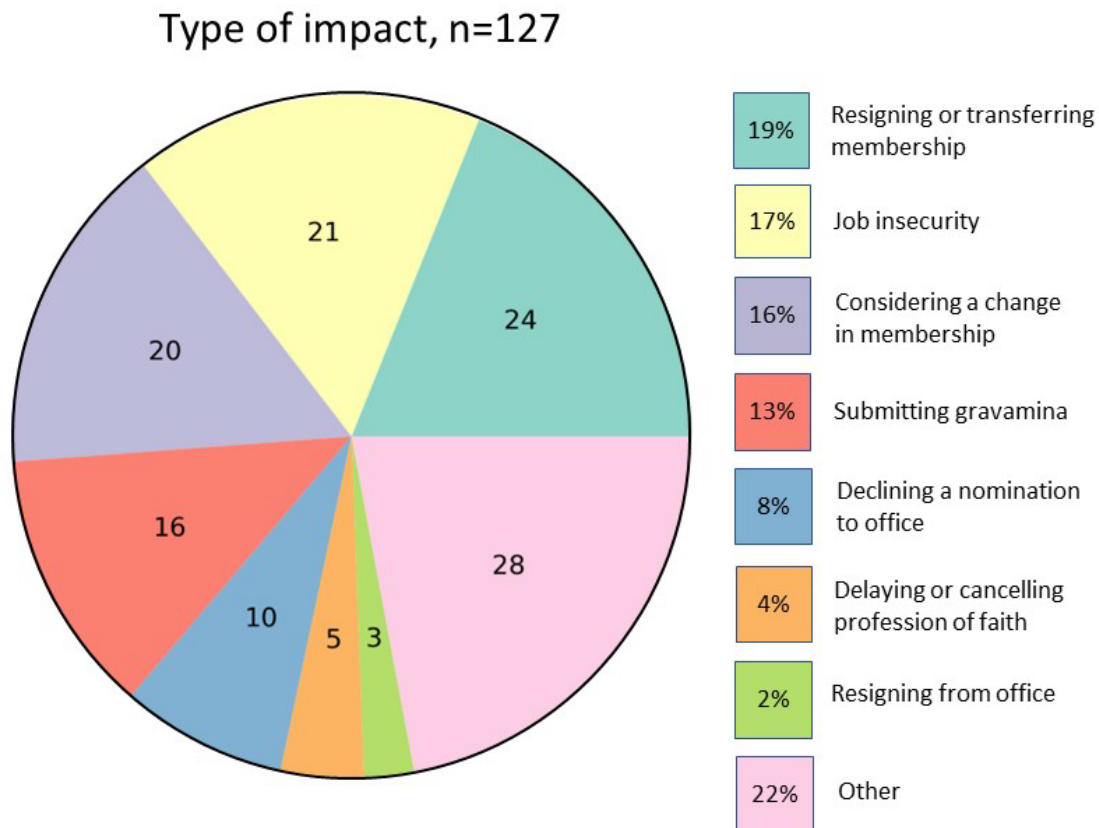


In addition to their long association with the CRC, the respondents are people who are committed: more than half (64%) are leaders – pastors, office-bearers, or volunteer ministry leaders. When retired pastors and current employees are added, the responses from people who are informed and invested in the life of our churches rises to 74%.

Respondents' association with the CRC, n=84



Some respondents chose to submit more than one impact. When they are sorted by the main type of impact, it is clear that the effects they reported are ones that will have deep repercussions for the survival of congregations, ministries, and the denomination. Even the personal impacts – delaying baptism or profession of faith – will have long-term implications on the viability of the denomination.



Of the 127 stories shared, 59 of them, or 46%, describe an impact experienced by the respondent, and the remaining 68 anecdotes, or 54%, are an impact being observed on another person, or on a congregation or ministry. This shows us that the decisions of Synod 2022 are having a ripple effect throughout the denomination – and respondents are concerned not only with how it affects them, but how it affects people and ministries with whom they are associated.

When the stories are considered in their entirety, the overwhelming effect is one of sadness, grief, and loss. Some respondents express anger and frustration, and some articulate hope, but the cumulative effect is one of lament.

In terms of the impacts being discussed, some of the respondents write about Synod's impact on their personal and spiritual well-being and their relationships with family members, friends,

and other church members. Others write about Synod's impact on their church's leadership, and on the well-being of pastors, councils, congregations, and ministries. There are stories of missional and financial risk to organizations and ministries, and of jobs threatened or lost. A few see the pursuit of clarity as a welcome relief – but many more see forced conformity as a weapon that harms the people and ministries they love.

We have grouped the 127 stories into eight broad categories:

- i. Personal well-being, families, and relationships
- ii. Participation and membership, including baptism and profession of faith
- iii. Leadership, including pastors
- iv. Mission and CRC ministries, including campus ministries
- v. Employment in churches and agencies
- vi. Financial sustainability
- vii. CRC-related Christian Schools
- viii. Clarity

The Stories

As you read these stories, you will notice that they are authentic, heartfelt articulations of what respondents are seeing and feeling. You will also notice that most of the respondents are not identified. The culture of fear, anxiety, reprisal, and division is another impact of the decisions of Synod 2022.

This report tells the real-life stories of real people in CRC churches, and we expect that many readers will find themselves and their congregations here. This report, despite its limitations, also serves as a wake-up call. It demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive assessment of real-life impacts and sharing that information, so all CRC members can engage in well-informed discernment about the church they love.

The stories are being shared verbatim, edited only for clarity. Respondents' names and any identifying details are withheld or shared at the respondents' request, or to protect individuals' privacy.

I. Impacts on personal well-being, families, and relationships

♦ “After lifelong membership, my husband and I are no longer worshipping in a CRC church. I feel grief and sadness over this decision. I cry almost every Sunday, but yet I can't worship in a place that views my gay daughter differently as any other person.”

The effect? “Any song or reference to ‘generations’ is a trigger for me. My CRC lineage goes back multiple generations.”

— Kim VanLoo

♦ “It is inexplicable to me how my denomination can so hard-heartedly erase, reject, and exclude life-long, committed family members and friends who recognize God has created them and affirmed them as LGBT+ identified image-bearers. It is more and more and more painful (and embarrassing) how the denomination is behaving.”

The effect? “I cannot even consider welcoming someone or witnessing to the love of God, nor participate in outreach, in a denomination which prioritizes these antics and exclusionary discussions.”

— Long-time member in Ontario

♦ “I’m a grandmother. I have a gay grandson. I would not want to see him barred from the church, or have judgment passed on him in the fashion of Synod 2022. I’m very disappointed in Synod’s decision. I think they took a very “fundamentalist” and very literal look at the scriptures related to sexuality. The CRC has not done that in Creation, age of earth issues, and many others.”

The effect? “Accepting Synod’s decision makes ministry in our community impossible.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I am thinking of leaving because I worry that my daughter might be queer. I’ve read that queer young adults are 30% more likely to kill themselves if they attend a non-affirming church. It’s heartbreaking to consider leaving a community that I grew up in and believe in. During a difficult time in my life the church community was so kind. But how can I receive that kindness and caring knowing it will be denied to anyone who is LGBTQ+? Knowing that my kid needs a supportive Christ-centered community and know that the CRC isn’t it?”

The effect? “I have gay and lesbian friends who tell me that they want a church community. I can’t invite them to my church.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My daughter is in a committed relationship with a woman. My daughter is a strong Christian who has made many significant contributions to the CRC. She says her longing is to be part of the CRC, but she feels that the CRC has rejected her. I am so broken by this. My daughter is a disciple of the Lord and a daughter of the CRC, but her mother has cast her out.”

The effect? “We are less because people like my daughter are being rejected by Synod and the powers.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I am the parent of a queer young adult. Ordination in CRC leadership and fully loving and accepting my child didn’t seem to fit in my brain at the same time. It also felt too close to the issue, which has been huge in our church.”

The effect? “It is a difficult time to be in leadership in the CRC and in our church. It would be nice to just get on with ministry and stop talking about who’s in and who’s out.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Our daughter is gay and, while she has not been interested in church the last while anyways, and, thankfully, she is uninterested in knowing what the CRC thinks of her and her relationship with her same-sex partner, her siblings will probably never come back to a church who does not love their sister. How can I not be sad? But I am also ready to give up on it all as well.”

The effect? “I’ve worked for a CRC all my adult life; I would think it would be impactful if I quit.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “A woman in my church contacted me because of my Safe Church role to discuss impacts for her. She is divorced because of severe emotional abuse, e.g. coercion and control, fear, inability to function because of constant demeaning pressures. She read the HSR and now worries she will be considered an “adulteress” because of the way it defines unchastity. She is experiencing anxiety, triggering past fears again, concerned she may not be fully accepted if she shares her history. She also worries about other women because she knows the reality of how much pressure there is to hide emotional abuse in church circles. I had to step outside of the decision of Synod 2022 in order to provide her with what I respectfully am convinced is Biblical support for her past decisions. Applying the label unchaste is an injustice. I will not add to her pain. I am faced with a choice to be “disloyal” to my church or to add injustice to injury. My moral responsibilities to God and other persons are now in conflict with my obligations as a representative of the CRC. I chose to be disloyal to my church and commit to naming the very real negative impacts that are not being considered by our leaders.”

The effect? “Synod 2019 finally included emotional abuse along with sexual and physical abuse as part of its definition of abuse. That is Biblical and consistent with Jesus’ teachings. Synod 2022’s decision is inconsistent and that is receiving no attention.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I am feeling grief, lament, and anger at the decisions made by the 2022 Synod. Deep disappointment about their interpretation of scripture and the application of God’s love. Deep sadness that my children and grandchildren have left the fellowship of their church because they don’t feel like they can be part of an institution that excludes LGBTQ+ members, friends, and family. I feel grief, lament, and sadness. I have fear and concern for friends and congregants who face difficult decisions about their jobs with the CRC or affiliated agencies or colleges or schools. Friends and congregants have been pushed aside because of their LGBTQ status and have been told they are sinners in an unredeemable way. I feel deep sorrow, lament, anger, and frustration.”

The effect? “I am learning all I can about LGBTQ, friends, congregants, theology, biblical interpretation, and ways to support and love LGBTQ members.”

— Marie Vander Linde

♦ “I am experiencing job harassment, and possible job loss for my spouse. I feel anger, sadness, depression, and anxiety, and frustration with abuse of power at Synod. How do I support a child in a same-sex relationship when Synod showed no grace or compassion?”

The effect? “I am struggling to attend church. Even though I know my congregation shows grace and compassion and inclusion, I can’t move past the decision.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I am no longer worshiping in the CRC, or anywhere, really. I rarely attend worship anymore, as each time I do attend I feel blue. I have been deeply saddened by what the CRC has done. For me it is akin to post-traumatic shock syndrome.”

The effect? “I am barely able to talk to people about faith and certain other issues on which CRC members took a strong stance. I tend to explode in anger at anyone discussing things such as the HSR, homosexuality, “wokism,” and yes COVID.

— A retired pastor in Canada

♦ “I went to Synod expecting to be a witness to a historical deliberation, believing that a deliberative assembly would result in an outcome that would bring honour to God. Synod 2022 was not that at all. My relationship with God is stronger than ever. My relationship with the church, not so much.”

The effect? “I am not an advocate for the CRC right now.”

— Ken Tigchelaar

♦ “It really just makes me sad. I don't have much to do with my home church anymore, but it is disheartening to me that the LGBTQ+ people in my life would not be fully welcome members. It makes me sad for people within the denomination that are no longer able to be who they are. I don't attend my CRC anymore and find the recent decisions just cement my previous disagreement with stances made by leaders of the denomination. To be honest, I have gone through a personal deconstruction in recent years and my commitment to the church in general has changed - this reinforces my disappointment in the direction things are going. I still consider myself spiritual and a believer, but I have no use for black and white stances made using the bible as a rule book. I struggle with my departure because I feel there is a need for more inclusive voices, and I love to engage in meaningful conversation about these events.”

The effect? “It makes the CRC more obsolete in the community and less able to show God's love to people who need it.”

— Kevin Bandringa

♦ “This entire thing causes nothing but hurt and makes it clear that the CRC is not for me or the people who know what Jesus truly wants from his people. I am excited to be part of an affirming church plant that will openly accept everyone the CRC is pushing away for whatever their reasons.”

The effect? “It changes my witness as it represents the CRC.”

— Kevin Dreyer

♦ “Synod making a revised definition of “unchastity” confessional has forced me to choose whether to violate my own conscientious and biblically-based objections by staying silent or to engage in protest and even ecclesiastical disobedience. I chose loyalty to God, Scripture, conscience, and ethical coherence over submission to denominational polity.”

The effect? “I have made my stance public and have participated in the effort to become a welcoming and affirming congregation.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Multiple members of the Council submitted gravamina. This divided our Council into those who did, and those who didn't. Before, there was some ambiguity about where various members stood on the issues involved. Synod's decision forced conscientious objectors to take a stand within the Council.”

The effect? “The impact on the Council was a sense of division; we are divided now into two camps. We've never before been forced to do this in the case of a Synodical decision.”

— Name Withheld

II. Impacts on participation and membership

♦ “As a direct result of Synod 2022 I resigned my membership from the CRC and began attending an affirming Presbyterian Church. It makes me sad. I was a member my entire life.”

The effect? “I was involved in church committees, volunteered with youth, donated money, and attended weekly. Now, I am no longer involved with my former congregation and would discourage others from going there.”

— Andrew Luth

♦ “Dear friends have left our church. Familiar faces have gradually disappeared from our church seats. Our church no longer feels whole. I grieve the losses of these relationships. I am angry that Synod decisions have harmed me in this way and have alienated dear people who are God's children.”

The effect? “Some people are alienated. Others struggle with whether they will continue to stay in the denomination. I struggle with staying in a denomination that has done this.”

— Long-time member in Michigan

♦ “My children have decided to find a different denomination that is more open and affirming. I am very sad not to have my children and grandchildren joining us in worship in the church where they were raised and baptized and made profession of faith.”

The effect? “It seems we are driving away the most thoughtful and compassionate members.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My son came out as transgender in 2018 and we have supported them throughout their journey and she is now our daughter. We have also been attending a local monthly Queer Spirit Church together as well as our own CRC church. At first, I considered leaving the CRC, but then our congregation held listening circles and gave everyone the opportunity to share their feelings toward the HSR. We have now created a new affirming mission statement for our congregation.”

The effect? “We are not sure how this might affect our congregation, as we are awaiting a response from Synod. We have lost a few members from both sides of the HSR: those who stand with the Synod's HSR and those who are against it. A positive result of the report is our daughter's desire to study the Bible.”

— A volunteer leader in a church in Eastern Canada

♦ “They [members leaving] no longer felt welcome, and it makes me sad.”

The effect? “People are leaving. We lost friends, volunteers, and really great people who made significant impacts in our church.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “A friend of mine who has been a member of the CRC for several years is bisexual. She is married to a man, but her bisexuality is part of her identity. She had already previously been traumatized by experiences at a different CRC church, and the Synod decision with the conversations that have come out of it have made it difficult for her to feel safe in our current church. She is considering leaving to become a member of a different denomination. Although I don't want to see my friend leave, I also want her to feel safe at church and, if it comes down to it, would encourage her to do what makes her feel safe.”

The effect? “Although my friend has been doing her best to be generous with others in the congregation, it's also difficult for her to fellowship with everyone else in our congregation.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Members of my church are resigning or transferring their memberships and I feel the sadness of separation. Grief.”

The effect? “I am trying to be more accepting of all opinions and lifestyles.”

— An ordained office holder in Ontario with many years of experience

♦ “I stopped watching the online stream of my home church service and I will not be attending in person regularly for the foreseeable future. I already felt distant from the church because of

COVID, online streaming, and the realization that many members were anti-vax. I felt less aligned with my church. The HSR decision confirmed I do not align with the CRC as a whole.”

The effect? My opinion of our denomination/doctrine has changed drastically since this decision to the point where I no longer want to participate in this church. I no longer provide funding to my home church. I have no desire to be aligned with an organization that openly discriminates based on sexual orientation or identity. I haven't given up my membership yet. Based on history, they will cancel my membership before reaching out to me to ask why I am no longer attending.”

— Name withheld

♦ “There are many families waiting to see what our congregation does, and willing to leave if we are non-affirming. I understand, but the brokenness hurts.”

The effect? “We will lose so many important people and their gifts in our community. The church will become more closed-minded in this topic because nobody will be challenging it.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Church leaders interpreted the decision and began to make life and worship for LGBTQ+ members unbearable. Sermons regularly mentioned that those who identified or supported or protected them were on their way to hell. They and their families did not feel safe or welcome.”

The effect? “Several families have left that church.”

— A pastor in Canada reporting on what happened at another church.

♦ “Members have left the denomination in anger. I am disappointed and frustrated.”

The effect? “It’s negative.”

— Experienced pastor in Western Canada

♦ “Members have left our church for another CRC church that remains more affirming and open to conversations around human sexuality. I am saddened to lose people who create and add diversity to our congregation.”

The effect? “It decreases our ability to hold space for conversations and questions.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Multiple persons leaving our church, unhappy with CRCNA Synod's controlling attitude that all must confess the same, when obviously, many opinions exist. I became very sad that so many in my congregation left, and I am angry at Synod's decision.”

The effect? “It took the wind out of the sails, and there's a depressive mood in church.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “There are many people in my church wondering if they can continue to associate with the CRC, given Synod's decision. Two members have resigned their membership.”

The effect? “Many people in my congregation are concerned that it affects the witness and reputation of our church.”

— A pastor in Indiana

♦ “I am now attending an affirming PC(USA) church.”

The effect? “I will no longer be able to serve in my classis.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “After 25+ years of family membership, where my wife and I served as elder, deacon, Sunday school teacher, Stephens leader, youth leader, GEMS coordinator, and in various other roles, we no longer attend “our church” and won’t attend a CRC church again. Our two grown, college-aged, baptized children want nothing to do with organized religion due to the damage this and other decisions have done.”

The effect? “My witness to my children and several friends and colleagues who identify as LGBTQ+ has, unfortunately, been strengthened by leaving the CRC. It was heartbreaking to leave “my church” but I cannot see the Jesus I know and love in the decisions the CRC has made, and I cannot continue to be affiliated with this denomination.”

— David Ames

♦ “My husband and I began looking for an affirming church soon after Synod 2022. We have a gay adult son. My husband is a retired CRC pastor, and I am a retired Christian school educator. Both communities, church and school, are struggling with having members from the LGBTQ community. After serving these institutions for a lifetime, we find ourselves on the ‘outside,’ dislocated, and looking for an affirming church. We found one and have been attending faithfully. It’s a difficult move, in your senior years, to find a new home, but we cannot, in good conscience, do otherwise.”

The effect? “I feel the Christian faith is getting a black eye for not accepting fellow Christians who identify as LGBTQ+.”

— Luann Westerhuis

♦ “The congregation I serve has experienced numerous membership resignations from both “sides” -- those who are affirming and cannot stay after the confessional status declaration around same-sex marriage, and those who are in line with Synod’s decision but are unhappy that our congregation is not wholeheartedly embracing and endorsing the decision of Synod. Many are vocal about their leave-taking and others simply ghost. This has severed families and friendships, along with church membership. There is so much damage and so much hurt. As a pastor, the three months after Synod were the worst. Almost all my pastoral care was with folks asking what it means and how they could possibly stay in good conscience. So much grief. And so much anger. At too many points I found myself with my head in my hands at my office desk just weeping. Hard days.”

The effect? “My congregation is deep into the Next Steps Discernment process, but almost all feel like this is taking away from the work of care and community and mission we should be about. I disagree, and encourage my people to see that this is indeed a moment and season of hard discipleship, but there is so much fatigue and weariness.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I have been worshiping virtually since the pandemic and now primarily worship virtually with an affirming congregation of another denomination. This is disappointing but is tempered by the fact that we returned to the CRC after 30 years in other denominations because we moved to the city where our kids and grandkids live and joined their CRC church.”

The effect? “I do not lead with which church I attend, and I am proactive in conveying my inclusive stance.”

— Kevin Bolkema

♦ “We have had very active members withdraw their membership from our congregation and from the denomination. This included a Council member departing from our fellowship. It has caused a great deal of discouragement. I understand why people leave, and it grieves my soul that the CRC has been hijacked by non-Reformed, unloving people.”

The effect? “It sets us back.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My husband and I have decided we can no longer be members of the CRC since the decision to accept the HSR in its entirety and to make it confessional. We believe this decision does not look and feel like Jesus.”

The effect? “We are embarrassed to be a part of a denomination which believes it can be a gatekeeper for who is in the kingdom of God and who is out.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Some members have voiced that they are looking elsewhere. When we lose people of an affirming view, we lose the ability to impact our community by including those who are marginalized by their LGBTQ status.”

The effect? “We increase barriers, erect a dividing wall of hostility, and turn the gracious invitation of Jesus into a religion of works righteousness.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “There is significant tension now in the congregation, and long-time friends are no longer willing to fellowship together.”

The effect? “This topic is now the focus at every meeting.”

— Experienced pastor in Colorado

♦ “The decision of Synod 2022 regarding the HSR caused me to leave the CRC. I have been a lifelong member, and Synod’s decision was a betrayal of the teachings of Jesus. I could no longer maintain my membership.”

The effect? “I consider myself freed from a toxic and destructive organization.”

— A member for more than 25 years in Michigan

♦ “My congregation has lost members in response to Synod on both ends of the spectrum: some because the CRC appears to take an anti-gay stance, and others because the Council is working on a document of full welcome for LGBTQ individuals.”

The effect? “We have lost members overall, and there is a marked increase in general anxiety.”

— retired pastor Leonard VanderZee

♦ “A family has resigned their membership with our congregation. I am frustrated, sad, and disappointed that the church I loved and have grown up in has taken such an unReformed view of scripture and Christian practices.”

The effect? “The witness of our denomination and its impact missionally is severely tarnished by the effects of Synod 2022.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My friend wants to leave the CRC after the Synod 2022 decision. This makes me sad.”

The effect? “This person is reluctant to attend church any longer.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I left the CRC about 10 years ago when asked to by a church plant leader. I didn’t fit the metric they were reaching out to. It started a deconstruction of my faith, one I’m just starting to emerge from. I don’t overtly identify as Christian, and my spiritual practices have ceased.”

The effect? “No one knows that I was asked to not come back, and the church plant missed an opportunity to develop an inclusive ministry to queer Christians. Queers know we don’t belong in the church.”

— A former member of the CRC

♦ “A number of congregation members and friends have strongly considered leaving the CRC and their home church. Their discussion and contemplation about leaving our church was so understandable however it felt like our body was being ripped apart and there was grief just in the possibility of them leaving our fellowship.”

The effect? “We are experiencing lament and grief at the potential loss of wonderful committed Christian brothers and sisters in the church.”

— Marie Vander Linde

Membership: impacts on baptism and profession of faith

♦ “My children are not willing to make profession of faith in Jesus within the current CRCNA context. This makes my heart ache. I get it – but I want my kids to belong to and be loved by a church as a way of embodying their belonging in life and death to Jesus.”

The effect? “Our church is less because these young adults are not willing to become members.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I have made a personal decision to delay profession of faith indefinitely, and a decision to lean more towards not identifying with the CRC denomination as a whole, but simply as a Christian.”

The effect? “It’s a bad sign if the youth of an organization are not willing or interested in becoming more involved with it because of ideological disagreements. Such a situation is poison to the long-term existence of any social group, including a church.”

— A baptized member in a church in Ontario

♦ “My child is reconsidering profession of faith. As a parent who knows the depth of my son’s faith, it breaks my heart that the church community is no longer the same home for my family as it was before Synod 2022.”

The effect? “The politicking of some in our denomination to force their beliefs on others has signaled to many youth that the CRC is not a safe place to live out their faith and honestly explore their questions.”

— A parent in Ontario with experience in youth ministry.

♦ “My daughter is no longer interested in being part of the CRC, and this seems to be driving her away from any church. I feel grief that synod has tried to usurp Jesus in deciding who is part of the kingdom.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I joined a CRC church for the first time in June 2022, shortly before the Synod decision. Even though I have been a dedicated attendee at the church, volunteer at the church on a weekly basis, and am very socially integrated into my church, since the Synod decision, I have been

extremely hesitant to become a member of the CRC. I don't plan to revisit the possibility of membership until the Synod decision has been revisited."

The effect? "I cannot be a voting member of my church, and I don't feel comfortable recommending the church to other or inviting others to come to church with me."

— Name Withheld

♦ "My daughter was born shortly before Synod 2022, and, as a direct result of Synod 2022, my wife and I decided not to baptize our daughter in the CRC. She is now about to turn one and we have found an affirming church community to baptize her. I was saddened and frustrated. The idea that the church would turn its back on its baptismal promises to my daughter should she be attracted to women was too much for me to take."

The effect? "The church is one member shorter than where it would have been."

— Andrew Luth

III. Impacts on leadership

♦ "We have fewer people accepting nominations to office because they are worried they might leave, or they don't want to be part of the decision-making at that level currently. This means there is less diversity of opinion at the council table."

The effect? "We are not a thriving church if we lack leaders."

— Name Withheld

♦ "A council member tried to figure out a way to remain in office, but quickly realized that the trauma of how her gay brother was treated years before didn't give her the emotional capacity to stay on as a deacon. Council wanted her to stay, but she could not do it. It made others angry that they were losing a good deacon and it caused resentment towards the denomination for causing unrest in a council room where there previously had not been unrest. It has cast a shadow on ministry."

The effect? "I was extremely disappointed to be losing a good deacon but, more importantly, in my personal conversations with the individual it broke my heart to hear her turmoil in the months after Synod 2022 as she wrestled with wanting to love her local church but not stand behind the decision of Synod in any way. She has pulled back from church attendance altogether. It had taken her years to find a church home and now feels conflicted as to whether she can even worship in a CRC church."

— Name withheld

♦ "I feel alienated in my church. At 29, I am the youngest pastoral deacon on council. I submitted a gravamen to my council, which they accepted. I speak up on this issue and find a lot of kindness and support interpersonally, but when it comes down to decisions, my church and Classis hold a very traditional view. Discussions on the topic of the HSR with our congregation are tense and at times feel unsafe. When my term is up in May, my husband and I will probably start looking for an affirming church. I feel hurt and alienated."

The effect? "My husband and I are very active in our church, which has a very elderly membership. Our move to a more affirming church would be a great loss for them."

— A deacon in Michigan

♦ "I have been an elder in our church for 1.5 years. Since the Synod 2022 decision I have had a lot of internal turmoil to process. In the end I made the decision to submit a gravamen to our council to inform them of my disagreements with the decision made last June. I was saddened and disappointed with the decision made. I fear that someone searching for a church or

someone already in our own church, who is among our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, will not feel accepted and loved in a way that Christ would have and does call us to do.”

The effect? “My heart is heavy, knowing that this decision will not bear good “fruit” and all will not be welcome at God’s table in our church.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I was not able to let my name stand for nomination as a Deacon. I did not want to be in a position where I was the example. More importantly I did not want others to be uncomfortable. I choose to step out of myself to ensure others are comfortable.”

The effect? “This doesn’t allow people to be involved. This can hurt our churches as not all are involved and not all gifts can be used to glorify God.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “A divorced woman who just finished her term as deacon in the spring of 2022 doubts she will want to be an office-bearer again, based on the “confessional” status that Synod passed. She also feels threatened as a divorced person, as the “gatekeeping” continues.”

The effect? “This person is a gifted deacon, and her decision to not ever be an office-bearer again affects the diaconal work of our congregation.”

— Ruth Ann Schuringa

♦ “Denominational employees are expressing fear and job insecurity. I feel anger and frustration.”

The effect? “It detracts from their witness.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My dad submitted a gravamen, and I feel closer to him knowing he was willing to stand up for his beliefs.”

The effect? “It makes it easier to say I belong to the church knowing they’ve accepted the gravamen.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I have been reluctant to serve as an elder or deacon for several years already, since I did not feel I could serve in a denomination that actively hurts and rejects some of our brothers and sisters. Synod 2022 solidified that feeling. I have been limiting how much I attend my CRC church even though it is more open and affirming than most.”

The effect? “Our congregation is struggling to find a balance between those who are strongly opposed to the Synod’s decisions and those who want to maintain unity with the CRC as a whole.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “My congregation is a publicly affirming church. The council decided that this meant that no office holder needed to submit a gravamen. This decision has been appealed to our classis by one of our members, resulting in much time and energy on congregational and classis leadership dealing with the appeal and responding to it.”

The effect? “Time and energy that could have been better used in ministry to our neighborhood has now been directed to lengthy correspondence and discussion of how to handle the appeal.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I submitted a gravamen. My council did not acknowledge it for a couple of months. When addressed, it was like my future on council was being decided while I sat there in the meeting. I know my pastor is not affirming. It was stressful and difficult. There are members of council who do not speak. I wonder if they are concerned with what the pastor will think if they speak. I speak up when I notice things. It is very difficult to be an elder. I want to encourage people to speak up about their desire for an affirming church. I question my actions. I stress and worry about whether I am being a good elder. It's hard.”

The effect? “I am a stronger and more committed witness in some ways. In other ways, I'm doubting, questioning, hurt, silenced, and frustrated. My own witness has changed. I'm embarrassed about the position of the CRC. I'm waiting to see what happens at Synod 2023.”

— Name Withheld

♦ There were multiple gravamina submitted to our council, including one from myself. The council accepted them, but decided to inform the church congregation the names of those who submitted gravamina. Now our congregation knows where we personally stand on the topic, so it puts us in a less approachable position for some of our congregants, but perhaps more approachable to others? It's a hard position to be put in because some people don't respect our position or think we should be there, even though our gravamina were accepted. I feel frustration.”

The effect? “It has created a unspoken hierarchy of “worthiness” around the council table.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I am no longer qualified for certain positions within Classis and the denomination because I've submitted a gravamen. I am disappointed and angry.”

The effect? “It limits my participation and causes me to lose confidence in the denomination.”

— A pastor in Alberta with years of varied service in the CRC

♦ “Leaders are experiencing increased anxiety, loss of confidence, emotional trauma.”

The effect? “Decreased stamina, loss of effectiveness in daily tasks.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Our entire council (Pastor, three elders and three deacons) submitted gravamina objecting to the position taken by Synod. A couple of outgoing council members did not submit gravamina.”

The effect? “We feel it puts our association with the CRCNA in question, not in the immediate future, but in the long term. It also has forced us to have a more explicit conversation and discernment process regarding LGBTQ issues which was long overdue. It has been positive, but such conversations are difficult and bring out differences that we simply lived with before but didn't fully acknowledge.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “We've had difficulty filling leadership positions in our lay-led congregation because members don't want to commit to our denomination, even though they are loyal to our inclusive congregation. It's frustrating, leaving fewer people to do the work of leadership. It also means I have to defend my ongoing commitment, despite my own misgivings.”

The effect? “People are jaded about the CRC, young people are jaded about Christian faith.”

— A retired church leader in Alberta with years of service in youth ministry

♦ “Soon after Synod's decision was made public, we received a letter of resignation from a member of the Council. We are saddened.”

The effect? “We were left shorthanded.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “An individual who was a key part of a vital ministry team left the team and church because it was not a safe or welcoming place. It hurt the ministry team when they heard this.”

The effect? “They have had to find and recruit new people to a specific and vital team that involves a narrow set of skills. They have struggled to find a replacement.”

— Richard Bodini

♦ “The confessional status of the report was one of many reasons I felt I couldn't agree to serve on council which would have required me to sign the Covenant for Office-bearers which would have restricted my ability to share my true feelings about affirming LGBTQ+ persons in the church. I'm not sure how long I will remain a member of the CRC.”

The effect? “I doubt I will ever serve on council again. If I resign my membership, I hope to remain a part of the community.”

— Rod Koelewyn

♦ “More than 50% of our council members have submitted gravamina.”

The effect? “It is a weight that the council unfortunately bears. It also fosters a culture of suspicion within the council room and between the council and congregation.”

— A pastor in Michigan

♦ “A close friend who was asked to let her name stand for nomination to Elder at our church was not at all comfortable becoming an elder and having to sign the forms of subscription as they are at present. I feel grief, lament, and anger, as this person could have provided mature wisdom and leadership for our church at this time.”

The effect? “It created a huge stumbling block to being a faithful elder in ministry at our church.”

— Marie Vander Linde

♦ “My sister belongs to a church that won't accept gravamina. She is so frustrated that her council won't even entertain the idea. She is on a search committee, a worship committee, and volunteers so much of her time. She feels rejected by a church that she gave so much love to. She wants to find a new church that is willing to accept theological differences as long as members are committed to love. I'm frustrated for her.”

The effect? “It weakens the witness of the church when someone who gave so much of their gifts to church is so easily discarded.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I submitted a confessional difficulty gravamen. It took a significant amount of time and energy!”

The effect? “On the one hand, I could be honest with my council. But I also have to agree to certain limitations around other activity.”

— A campus chaplain

♦ “When doing council interviews, I spoke with a member who is really torn up about the decisions of Synod 2022. So much so that not only were they unsure if they could bring

themselves to leave their name up for office, but also weren't positive they would be staying on as members. I was surprised to find solidarity in feelings with this person, and at the same time saddened neither of us felt safe in our current church environment."

The effect? "This person is quite involved and is one of the few remaining families with school-aged children in our congregation."

— Name Withheld

Leadership: impacts for related to pastors

♦ "Since the decision, I chose not to be ordained as a Minister of the Word or seek ministry in the CRC, as I hoped to after graduating seminary. I have to work more than two part time jobs in addition to church planting. I work 60-hour weeks and make less than I did in high school, which means my children's university options are limited. That said, without the pressures this disagreement has caused, I feel freer than ever to practice my faith and am doing the ministry I feel called to. LGBTQ people are desperately seeking Jesus and need people they can trust to share his stories with them and share their talents with other believers. While I hate being separated from a denomination I respect and love, I would choose to pastor queer believers of Jesus who don't feel welcomed in traditional church settings over the distractions of denominational infighting any day."

The effect? "We have no outside support for our new ministry and make sacrifices for what help we can offer to the community. Some of our community members experience hunger and housing insecurity and all we have to offer is the gospel in word. I wish we had a space we could fit everyone around the table with enough food for all."

— Lea Wilkening

♦ "As a commissioned Pastor who is affirming, I feel my ordination is in jeopardy. I've been a life-long member of the CRC. I have served the denomination as a youth pastor, as a missionary, and as a pastor, and I feel very strongly that a portion of the denomination (pastors, office bearers, members) are hell-bent on pushing people like me out of the denomination."

The effect? "Our congregation largely ignores the decision and proceeds to do ministry the same as it did before Synod 2022. Our position is that we are in the CRC till we are forced out."

— Name Withheld

♦ "Colleagues are fearful of losing their positions as CRC ministers because of this decision and their inability to be in alignment with it. My heart breaks for my colleagues who work tirelessly to hold congregations together, developing spiritually healthy places where differences can be held. The decision of Synod 2022 is devastating for many churches."

The effect? "It affects the witness of the CRC in aligning with the dominant cultural spirit of partisanship and delineating between right and left, conservative and progressive."

— Name Withheld

♦ "I am in an ultra-conservative Classis, studying to be a commissioned female pastor. I cannot sign saying I am in agreement with the decisions made at Synod 2022. I am angry at the CRC for how it has divided people, churches, and families."

The effect? "I am in limbo. Can I stay in the CRC if I disagree with the HSR? How do I proceed? My job is tied into all of this. I don't feel safe. With all these thoughts and feelings, we still need to continue forward ministering at our church."

— Name withheld

♦ “It’s hard for me to embrace my new congregation as fully as I’d like because I feel like I have to begin planning for my departure. Our family depends on my vocation, and should the denomination force me out, it has massive implications on my family. That’s a hard feeling to live with.”

The effect? Synod showed zero pastoral wisdom in considering how such a decision would land in churches for which there was no division. Churches like ours have lived with differences within the bounds of the confessions forever and making churches fit into narrow boxes makes little sense. The effect of the decision is that we’re talking about internal matters instead of thinking forward facing gospel witness.

— Name Withheld

♦ “The decision of Synod 2022 will be prohibitive of me being an ordained minister in the CRC. I feel extensive grief. The denomination I have known, loved, and served feels like it has been stolen from me.”

The effect? “The decision of Synod 2022 ensures that the CRC is not a safe place for people of differing opinions.”

— Name Withheld

IV. Impacts on mission and CRC ministries

♦ “The community-oriented church which I joined because of its outward focus is now facing the departure of several households that are critical for its mission, if it implements the Synod 2022 decision, and the loss of fewer but also significant members if we resist. The church community also includes families for whom Synod’s decision caused personal damage. Before this decision, there was recognition of differences but a healthy spirit of respect, co-operation, and focus on the community around our church. Now that is lost, and internal tensions eat up limited energy and time.”

The effect? “The impact of lost potential is difficult to quantify, but I know it often does more long-term damage than more obvious ones. If the direction does not change, this church is likely to suffer and may become unsustainable.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “We have felt deeply discouraged by the loss of confidence in our congregation because of the connection to the denomination. Some members are advocating for a vote to dissociate from the CRC. It’s been stressful and a significant addition to my workload to manage these damaged relationships.”

The effect? “Our witness has been damaged among those in the community who know of the decision of Synod.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “At present we are in a ‘waiting’ period in our church to see what Synod 2023 decides with the overtures that are coming forward. If the 2022 decision is upheld, numerous families will leave or else we as a church will make the regrettable decision to leave the denomination. Some members already are not attending because of the decision, others are withholding their ministry shares from their church offerings and are lobbying the council to make that offering possibility easier for all. This is a great sadness to me, and I am torn about how to show the love of Christ to all, even those who think differently than us.”

The effect? “It makes it an all-consuming issue when it shouldn’t be.”

— A council member in Alberta with many years of leadership in the CRC

♦ “In providing pastoral care to people, especially same-sex attracted people, when I say that I am a CRC pastor, I need to explain my relationship with the CRC and the action taken by Synod in order for people to decide whether to trust me as a pastor or seek care from someone else. This has become a barrier to communicating the grace of Jesus. I feel ashamed of my denomination. I know the deep reliance on grace in my denomination, so I feel torn between the best of my denomination's piety and the worst of my denomination's emphasis on cognitive theology detached from human experience and relationships. I now need to be honest about my denomination and not continue the harm the HSR causes same-sex attracted persons and their families and friends.”

The effect? “Many people will stay away from the CRC or avoid the CRC or protect themselves from the CRC unless they know loving people in the CRC or congregations that will accept them and their loved ones.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “A colleague was asked to not publicly display a Pride flag, and subsequently I was asked to not publicly display a rainbow sticker. I am sad and angry over not being allowed to visually identify as an ally.”

The effect? “Spiritual safety is important to folks in the LGBTQ community. Since removing my rainbow, sexual minorities have been less likely to open up with me, while more of the presumed sexual majority have been more open with me about their biases against the LGBTQ community.”

— A pastor in Michigan serving in pastoral care position

♦ “My young adult children, who've all grown up in the CRC, are not interested in being part of a church denomination that is making it clear that their sister and her partner (not to mention others they know in the LGBTQ community) are not welcome in the CRC. In the past, I would have been stressed by the response of my children. Now I know that God loves each of them they way he created them and that they don't need to be part of this denomination to be his children.”

The effect? “The denomination is losing some thoughtful young adults with gifts that could have served the Church.”

— Carol Vanderstoep

♦ “I have been sharing my faith with a seeking friend, a very smart, creative agnostic straight man, for several years. Our kids attended Grand Rapids Public School together. When he found he had a brain tumor, our church prayer group became very active on his behalf. He was healed, and we continued having conversations about faith. He was very open. When news of Synod 2022 happened locally, he was offended to the point of shutting down our conversations. He no longer wanted any part of potential church life.”

The effect? “I deal with artists, and our CRC has a gallery. We used to get a lot of love for seeming to cross cultures. The local artists I work with seem to be more guarded since Synod 2022. I believe our potential for outreach has been harmed.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I resigned my position at our church and asked that our family be removed from membership. It's impossible to love and care for people as I am called (as I believe we are all called) and to promote an agenda that our queer brothers and sisters are less than. My family left the church before I did – after our pastor said transgender people were “not of God.”

The effect? “It became impossible to follow God's call on my life.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Negative impacts on Safe Church ministry are happening at all levels. One church in my classis reported three people resigning from its Safe Church committee (and one from the CRC entirely) because churches cannot be safe spaces under this policy. Another church reported one person leaving and the HSR being named when persons declined requests to serve on committees. Concerns about the impacts of Synod’s decisions are shared informally among some Safe Church classis coordinators without clear avenues to address them. I am considering resignation from my role on a classis Safe Church committee if the direction of Synod 2022 is sustained because I cannot fulfill the principled obligations of this ministry under the current approach.”

The effect? “Abuse prevention is essential, also for legal liability reasons. It always has trouble finding volunteers, and is a difficult and thankless task. Reversing progress made in Safe Church will leave the CRC more vulnerable to abuse patterns that continue to damage the public witness of Christianity. All congregations and members of the CRC have an interest in safe churches.”

— A long-time volunteer leader in Safe Church ministries

♦ “I arrived at this church after Synod 2022. I could not, in good conscience, answer the questions at my installation without first submitting something official about my struggle with Synod’s decision. It led to a gravamen, about which I had mixed feelings. It was also an awful position for the council to be in, having to deal with something they’ve never dealt with before. It cast a shadow on the beginning of my ministry with the congregation. It did lead to another elder submitting a gravamen and others indicating that if they were asked to sign something today, they’re not sure that they would. I feel like my disagreement with the current HSR adoption puts a target on my back. As much as my congregation is happy to have me, I live with the feeling that some of my colleagues in ministry are working as hard as they can to get people like me out of the denomination.”

The effect? “The congregation is still trying to work its way out of Covid ministry. Having to deal with HSR matters is the most idiotic move Synod could have done to churches, especially churches in Canada. It showed zero pastoral wisdom in considering how such a decision would land in churches in which there was no division. Churches like ours have lived with differences within the bounds of the confessions forever; making churches fit into narrow boxes makes little sense. The effect of the decision is that we’re talking about internal matters instead of thinking about forward-facing gospel witness.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “We at Neland Avenue CRC have been experiencing a time of growth as we have been identified as a safe space and other like-minded Christians are joining us from hostile congregations. I’m devastated by Synod’s decision but grateful for our influx of new members as a result, and for being identified as a safe space.”

The effect? “We are business as usual at Neland. The Synod decision is never far from our minds but we have chosen not to dwell on it, but instead to forge ahead with being a church where all experience the deep welcome of Christ.”

— A member of Neland Avenue CRC

♦ “This has reduced our numbers as a congregation. It has also made it hard for us to engage with our youth who are in desperate need of support. This has destroyed my hope for the CRC denomination. Things are moving backwards and not forwards which is a horrible thing for a church. I’m honestly not surprised that this white, male-dominated Church continues to love its rules and regulations on who we are allowed to love or welcome into our congregations. They

continue to forget the one true commandment that Jesus told us: to love one another. What synod decided is not love.”

The effect? “We are losing all of our youth. As we are continuing to use these rules set up by Synod we are neglecting and excluding the people that Jesus was discipling in the New Testament.”

— Melanie Elzinga

♦ “The Synod 2022 decision appears to have placed our church on a collision course for being forced out of the CRC. It really saddens me that Synod 2022 seems to not care about anyone with a differing view and seems very comfortable removing anyone different than them with no regard for reconciliation.”

The effect? “The ministry will continue regardless of affiliation, but the Synod 2022 makes it very hard to feel cared for by the denomination.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “On June 15, 2022, synod decided that the position of the CRC on homosexual sex was an interpretation of a confession and had 'confessional status.' On that same day, I wrote my first gravamen to my supervising church council. I have desired to serve as a CRCNA pastor, with deep commitment to my promise as an office-bearer and also a deep integrity with my convictions around same-sex marriage. While writing a gravamen was a pathway forward, committing, as I did in the gravamen, not to share my own convictions about same-sex marriage in public spaces has hurt my heart and impacted my ministry. My public silence on this matter is also hurting some from the LGBTQ community who have seen (and some continue to see) me as an ally.”

The effect? “The ministry I serve is in the public space. I am now no longer able to share the CRCNA's position on homosexuality while ALSO sharing my own dissonance with that position. My gravamen (and my integrity in signing it) keeps me from doing so. I believe this has two impacts on the public witness of the CRCNA in that public space. First, no longer is the CRCNA known as a community that can have both an articulate majority position while also making room for divergence of conviction on that matter. Prior to June 2022, when I would present this reality in public spaces, many were amazed at how the CRCNA worked to hold unity amidst internal diversity with mutual respect. Those listening have told me they were positively impacted by how carefully I could articulate the traditional position with respect and care while also articulating why I disagreed – all while pointing to the revelation in Scripture and the Gospel. Second, those in my public space who cannot imagine being against same-sex marriage (our CRCNA traditional position) no longer get to hear how they could still hold that conviction and draw nearer to Jesus. This is a negative impact on our public witness and invitation to the Gospel of Christ.”

— An experienced pastor in a public-serving ministry

♦ “Before 2022, there was a loud group who resisted my elder nomination because I am affirming and have an LGBTQ-identifying child. I was elected and served my term. This loud non-affirming group took up much of the council's agenda (most of council and our pastor were quite affirming). The loud group discouraged our pastor enough that he took a call elsewhere. He is the third pastor I've been on council with that this small group have driven away. Now all my adult children and spouse have left the CRC and I am following them away. It's been a very challenging journey over the past eight years. Our kids were involved in everything CRC from elementary, secondary, and post-secondary: music, drama, GEMS, Cadets, Facing Your Future – we lived being part of an active living faith. They all have rejected the CRC.

Being on council I saw the 'Abide' types in our classis working as church visitors to create a wedge between the non-affirming group, of 10-15 members, and church council leaders. It was so disheartening. Committed members lost energy to serve. It was hard to reach out into the growing community knowing that we looked really good, but had an ugly side. I know that affirming members will face many challenges. I decided to leave before I get disciplined out."

The effect? "The remnant of the congregation are trying to rebuild the community connection, but are tired, and many are leaving."

— An elder in Ontario

♦ "One young woman said to me, 'I'm a member of this church. But I don't consider myself a member of the CRC.' It's increasingly difficult to find people to go to Classis. We have had visitors leave after they've researched the CRC position on homosexuality. When we explain that we don't hold to that position they expressed a weariness and a lack of desire to keep struggling."

The effect? "I really don't know. It feels like repeatedly hitting one's head against a wall. I think the only way through this is to convince all of those people who remain silent to speak up because the 30% are so entrenched and invested that they've lost any desire to hold the denomination together. The only hope is to reveal all of the people and ministry and structures that will be lost if we maintain Synod's decision."

— A pastor in the US

♦ "I feel deep sadness that the denomination in which I was born 57 years ago is losing both its reformed distinctiveness and its serious approach to learning, and, in the process becoming a hostile place toward not just those who are LGBTQ2S+ and their allies but also towards any other person who self-identifies as being part of a minority culture (race, ethnicity, economics, gender, education, etc). I feel sadness that the CRC is being hijacked by a mostly-American evangelical wing focussed on legal black-and-white without a healthy wondering and appetite for the grace and character of a good loving God."

The effect? "For our church, we may need to leave, so that will affect my pension and health care, but practically for the church, we are going to be an affirming congregation with space for folks who are not affirming, but won't be able to abide the hostile theological climate the CRC has become."

— John Vanderstoep

♦ "The decision of Sunrise Community CRC to leave the CRC is a significant loss for the denomination. This is a church that has learned how to be a Christian presence and witness in its community in a way that reflects Reformed mission and witness. This loss is not reported or discussed.

The effect? I weep for the lost potential of significant Reformed witness at this point in the historical development of God's mission in God's world, because we are diverting energy to unnecessary, internal power struggles.

— Name Withheld

Mission: impacts on campus ministry

♦ "There is deep fear within the CRC campus ministry world; campus ministers have always been at the margins of the church, and in Canada, at the progressive edge of the church, so their life has always been precarious. The recent synod has pushed that closer to the edge of the cliff."

The effect? “I can't say for sure, but my former colleagues are a courageous group with a deep love for students, so it seems to me that they are pushing on. The collegiality with some US counterparts, however, is a little strained.”

— A retired campus minister in Canada

♦ “For many years, the CRCNA has had a campus ministry at our local university fully supported by our local classis. That ministry received kudos both from the classis and from the local university. It was a mutually beneficial ministry – the university loved the ministry and appreciated the CRC for providing the ministry; the churches of classis had something they could support together, talk about together, and they could hear stories from front-line ministry in an important cultural centre (university). Once the HSR was published, there was an almost immediate push to have the whole ministry put under investigation. Though the theological and biblical integrity of the ministry had never been questioned, as soon as the HSR came out, it became as a weapon against the ministry. One motion from the Classis following the HSR's publication suggested that the Classis should investigate the theological and biblical integrity of the entire ministry and its entire supervisory committee. Further degradation of the ministry was put forward by a few loud classical delegates before the motion was called out of order. But as one delegate said later, “the damage had been done.” The entire committee that supervised the ministry struggled to understand how something that had been so fully appreciated suddenly became the target of attacks by a very vocal few members of the Classis.”

The effect? “Currently, the public witness of the university campus ministry is mostly unscathed. But the witness to the Classis of the good and beautiful things the campus ministry has done has been tainted. It is now challenging to share any good news from the ministry with our Classis without the committee or the ministers feeling that someone from the floor will speak up against the ministry in scathing ways. So, stories of God at work are no longer shared as freely and openly.”

— Campus ministry leader in Canada

♦ “As an employee of a CRCNA ministry, I am unsure whether I will be able to continue serving in this ministry. Though I have been trying to be open about my disagreement with Synod 2022 in respectful ways, there have been a few pastors and churches in our classis who have directly and indirectly spoken ill of me personally and professionally. This has caused almost 2.5 years of excessive stress and anxiety for me, which according to my doctor, is likely to be the cause of multiple physical and psychological health impacts. My family and I have suffered from this – it totally sucks. Because I am directly associated with the ministry, the attacks on me affect the reputation of the ministry itself and make it challenging for me to keep leading with courage and wisdom.”

The effect? “I have been less able to serve as a campus minister with my full heart, soul, mind, and strength. My ministry capacity has diminished.”

— Campus ministry leader in Canada

V. Impacts on employment in churches and agencies

♦ “Employees of denominational institutions are being hushed from engaging in the conversation. In effect, this mutes the voices of some of our empowered and identified leadership. What a thing to lament. Our leaders cannot speak.”

The effect? “This limits the testimony of the church. It's fear based and terribly limiting.”

— A pastor in Michigan

♦ “I am affirming and work at a CRC church which stands with Synod’s decision. I figure I am going to get fired. That being said, I found out a lesbian couple attends our church, does communion and is in a care group but can’t be members. I can’t be affirming but the church can pretend to love a lesbian couple. What is the end game here? Does the church want to pray the gay away? Have the happily married couple get divorced and live celibate lives separate from each other? I don’t get it.”

The effect? “As one person put it this couple is loved but not talked about. It’s a dirty little secret of our church. It makes me question what is going on. We welcome the gays but they are still an abomination?”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I have heard anecdotes from many people in ministry, schools, or related institutions that are feeling a sense of uncertainty or even threat, as a result of what they believe. I feel a profound sense of shame at being associated with a denomination that believes it has the right (or perhaps responsibility) to decide on God’s behalf who’s in and who’s out. I continue to hold out hope that we will come to recognize the arrogance of that, humbly repent, and leave the judgement to God.”

The effect? “If I were personally in the position of having my livelihood threatened because of what I believed, I can imagine a very stressful conflict in my ministry. Many of the stories I have heard were from people who have served in their roles for decades and are now feeling threat to their livelihoods and their pensions.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Multiple people in our congregation have expressed significant vulnerability and concern regarding their job security with agencies that are connected to or are part of the CRC. This includes Calvin professors and staff people who are working at the denominational building in various agencies and leadership positions. This has also affected people who work in the Christian schools in the area and has brought them to the place of having to potentially resign because of their belief in LGBTQ inclusion and affirmation in the church and all offices. I feel grief, lament, anger, fear for peoples’ livelihoods, and their ability to support their families.”

The effect? “It creates grief and anger and fear for the whole congregation who loves these members and their families.”

— Marie Vander Linde

♦ “My congregation has a number of people whose jobs at Calvin University are threatened because they do not agree with Synod’s decisions. I feel grief and uncertainty.”

The effect? “Synod’s decision contradicts the foundational intellectual freedom of a university and substitutes indoctrination.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “Our congregation includes an employee with a denominational agency who is concerned the Synod decision will force her out of the CRC. Without agency support the good work she is doing will come to an end. I feel like a certain segment of the CRC desire to remove anyone that thinks different than them, regardless of the consequences to ministry. It’s all about some perceived doctrinal purity taking priority over how we live and love in the world.”

The effect? “Both the congregation and the organization connected to a CRC agency will try to practice ministry as they did before the decision.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I’ve heard testimony from multiple people of color and several women who cannot voice their opposition to the confessional status decision, due to the fact that they already bear an unjust burden as a minority presence within the CRCNA. While they firmly stand against confessional status, they cannot muster the strength to voice their position. We simply are not safe. What a tragedy.”

The effect? “We are too dangerous to one another to engage in this conversation honestly. This violent posture necessarily restricts our ability to converse or engage differently. It is a classic example of those in power maintaining power.”

— A pastor in Michigan

VI. Impacts related to financial sustainability

♦ “I am reluctant to contribute to the CRC as it no longer feels like my church – although I know this will hurt CRC agencies.”

The effect? “The reduced income for agencies will impact their ministry.”

— A long-time member in Michigan

♦ “My church has lost quite a number of members which affects the financial status of our church and also affects many of our great ministries.”

The effect? “Our church is now struggling financially.”

— A long-time member in Michigan

♦ “While finances are not a primary focus, the impact of Synod 2022’s decision for the financial sustainability of important ministries needs more attention. A dominant perception is that implementation of Synod 2022’s decision might mean the departure of a few “outlier” churches, leaving a strong and sustainable CRCNA. A limited, informal analysis of the sources of ministry shares and a more realistic analysis shows that, under most scenarios, financial sustainability is at risk. The reality is that the churches and groups of churches being pushed out are ones providing a significant portion of the ministry shares. Some who promote the punishment or exclusion of dissenting churches have been contributing less and some are not in a financial position to suddenly move from a low to high level of burden-sharing. A more likely scenario is weakened financial sustainability on all fronts and the likely diminishment or demise of several ministries that offer a Reformed contribution to God’s broader mission in North America. In my view, the administration of the CRCNA, which should be doing more analysis of impacts and various scenarios to allow members to engage in well-informed discernment, seems to be in a “wait and see” mode.

The effect? “We are all losing a lot. The administration of the CRCNA seems to be sleep-walking into a major structural crisis. A more robust Reformed approach is needed to fiduciary responsibility and stewardship of the collective resources God has entrusted to the CRCNA.”

— Name Withheld

VII. Impacts on CRC-related Christian schools

♦ “Three members of the congregation are leaders in a regional Christian high school that is supported by different denominations and independent churches (mostly conservative). In the last two years the board has imposed ever-narrower and more exclusionary policies regarding what staff may or may not discuss and membership has been restricted to those who comply with a traditional description of marriage. The principal, with 20 years of experience, is leaving and other staff are fearful, demoralized, and uncertain of their futures, although they experience

deep support within the congregation. I am sadder and sadder with every passing day, feeling powerless to effect any changes in this school's direction."

The effect? "Our congregation has been navigating very tricky waters. According to a recent survey about 75% of our congregation wishes to continue in the direction of "affirmation" and full inclusion of all persons. A significant number of members have contested this direction, along with other peripheral issues regarding worship and pastoral care. It is uncertain how this situation will develop or conclude; some families have stopped attending or are worshipping elsewhere. Tensions remain, but Council is doing its best to move by consensus, holding several congregational meetings of guided conversation.

— Name Withheld

♦ "There are many teachers and staff in our Christian schools who have been silenced in their opinions on this topic. Also staff in our churches. If they speak out, they are risking their jobs and sources of income. Those are high stakes. I am angry that they can't be open about their beliefs."

The effect? "Children who are queer feel unsafe at school sometimes, and don't realize how many adults and fellow students around them accept them fully, 100%. We need to create visible, safe spaces for these children."

— Name Withheld

♦ "The amount of unrest within our community due to Synod's decision is hard to put into words. People who have served Christian schools for decades (in some cases lifetimes) are being forced to resign; others have received threats of the same. Parents in the community are threatening to start new schools that are more conservative since leadership refuses to be bullied. I am heartbroken."

The effect? "It's been life altering, to say the least. Seasoned teachers and administrators are being harassed, questioned, threatened, and bullied and it's breaking down their confidence."

— An active volunteer leader in southern Ontario

♦ "A local Christian school has unfairly and unjustly disallowed membership for those who don't agree to strict adherence to heterosexual marriage as the only sexual norm. No other voices may speak or vote on matters pertaining to their children's school if they can't "sign" this one way of thinking – exactly like Synod. Shortly thereafter the principal was "let go" without discussion or just cause."

The effect? "This is damaging to our students, teens, and communities embroiled in the fight. Many of the folks connected with the school attend my church."

— Name Withheld

♦ "My husband has a 30+ year career with Christian schools. We are affirming. He is in leadership and is consistently asked the school's position on this. He is not sure how long he can stay in this job. I feel anger and disappointment. He loves Christian education (as do I), but there seems to be no good outcome for him here."

The effect? "There are many assumptions made when you identify as CRC and a Christian school employee. We both find ourselves qualifying our relationship in and to the CRC. We are welcoming and accepting even though our denomination is not."

— The spouse of a Christian school leader in the US

VII. Impacts related to clarity

While many respondents named the insistence on only one interpretation of the Bible as a deep cause of hurt and tensions within their circles, there were a few respondents who identified clarity as a positive result of Synod 2022.

♦ “Members are enthused again and willing to serve. People are believing that the CRC has the will to remain faithful. I am excited, enthused, and encouraged.”

The effect? “It allows me to minister with integrity.”

— Name Withheld

♦ I, along with myself are encouraged by the decisions of Synod 2022. People are now staying at our church rather than leaving, which they would have done if Synod did not make the decision it made. Our congregation is relieved by the decisions of Synod.”

The effect? “The decision of Synod allows us to call sinners to repentance and lead them to the wonderful mercy of Christ.”

— Darren Kornelis

♦ “My congregation is having healthier conversations about sexuality. Ironically enough, with clarity around sexuality and where we stand together, they actually seem less cagey about being welcoming to sexual minorities, counterintuitive as that sounds.”

The effect? “My church is thriving.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “We’ve gained a member since Synod 2022 because they were shown Synod is able to make a principled stand and that is a denomination they can in good conscience belong to. Synod 2022 has given us needed clarity when doing work in our community. It was time for Synod to make a concrete decision...thankfully Synod overwhelmingly did.”

The effect? “We don’t need to hang our head in shame about the name CRC on our church sign.”

— Tyler Wagenmaker

♦ “My congregation was encouraged by the results of Synod 2022, and has a more positive outlook moving forward. I was heartened and encouraged, and saw Synod 2022 as an answer to prayer!”

The effect? “We have a more credible witness in our community because of Synod 2022.”

— Lloyd Hemstreet

♦ “Members of my congregation have been very happy with Synod's decision, and membership has increased at our church. I have been heartened and encouraged that the CRC is standing faithfully on Scripture. I am very pleased.”

The effect? “We are able to encourage others to remain faithful to Scripture also.”

— Dan Winiarski

♦ “We are gaining members from churches/denominations that have deviated from biblical teachings. They are heartened to join a denomination that has taken a stand. I have had renewed hope in my denomination.”

The effect? “There is enthusiasm for the direction of the denomination.”

— Name Withheld

♦ “I was thinking that I might have to leave the CRC and look for another denomination if Synod decided that preaching repentance to LGBTQ people and preaching celebration were equally valid. Synod needed to simply make a decision and not throw LGBTQ people under the bus for the sake of getting along. Synod made a decision and I can remain in a CRC where love and hate are not confused.”

The effect? “The decision allows the CRC, myself and the congregation I serve to live and preach consistently with Scripture and the worldwide historical church.”

— Aaron Vriesman

♦ “Synod 2022 helped provide necessary clarity so that the denomination can be united on a common mission going forward.”

The effect? “It very much helps us to witness our community and world more effectively.”

— a pastor in the USA

Conclusions and Recommendations

This survey and report are just a first, small step in assessing the impact of the decisions made by Synod 2022 on the mission, vitality, and survival of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. In less than a month, and relying on only word of mouth through mostly private networks, over 100 stories of sadness, grief, loss, and estrangement were collected. We have grouped these stories into eight broad themes, in the hope that leaders in congregations and leaders in the denomination will be able to see the fruit of these decisions. Families and churches are being torn apart, ministries are being threatened, jobs are at risk, vocations are being questioned, and ministries with specific importance for children and youth – Christian schools and campus ministries – are in turmoil. The CRCNA's good work of addressing abuse and endeavouring to provide safe space is also being threatened.

The survey was done quickly, by volunteers, with no formal resources of time or money to devote to a task that is of great importance to our denomination. We believe these stories are the tip of an iceberg. We believe many readers will find themselves, their pastors, and their congregations in these stories.

Based on the evidence gathered and the seriousness of the impacts in this report, we make the following recommendations:

- 1) That the CRCNA do a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of Synod 2022 so that further decision-making can be well-informed and serve the mission and best interests of all the congregations across North America.
- 2) Given the high degree of damage and confusion caused by Synod 2022, Hesus Project CRC recommends that Synod 2023 pause implementation or remove the confessional status designation in its 2022 decision to allow the necessary time for a full assessment of its foundations and impacts.

- 3) That Synod 2023 pay particular attention to the level of anxiety and fear within CRC members and congregations, remove the threat of immediate punitive action, and take positive steps to create a healthy culture for spiritual discernment within CRC churches.
- 4) That highest priority be given to creating safe spaces in CRC churches and related agencies: for leaders, pastors, and members, but particularly for young persons.
- 5) That the leaders of campus ministries and supporters of those ministries work together on a specific plan that can ensure the safe and healthy continuation of these important initiatives for ministry and witness.
- 6) That the umbrella organizations for Christian education in the US and Canada be asked to hold a summit of leaders to reflect on what is now happening within the schools associated with the CRC and develop a plan that can ensure they remain safe places for young people, and for teachers and administrators.

Appendix A

In addition to requests to supply demographic and contact information, here are the six questions posed to survey respondents.

1. Here are some of the known impacts of the decisions of Synod 2022. Please pick the one that best describes the impact you are reporting. (If you have more than one, please report them separately. You will be given the option to select a new impact at the end.)

- A member or members resigning or transferring memberships
- A member or members indicating they are considering a change in membership
- A member or members resigning from church office
- A member or members refusing to accept a nomination to ordained office
- A member or members resigning from a Safe Church committee
- A member or members resigning from church committees or volunteer roles
- A member or members delaying or cancelling profession of faith
- A member or members delaying or cancelling baptism
- A member or members submitting gravamina
- A member or members experiencing job insecurity in churches or related institutions such as Christian schools, denominational offices, affiliated agencies.
- Other

2. Are you reporting an effect on you and your church or ministry, or on someone or something else?

3. Please share some details of this impact. (If the details result in sharing identifying information about someone or something other than yourself, we will not share any identifying details unless you have given your explicit permission.)

4. Should you wish, you may share your personal reaction to this impact.

5. How does this affect the witness or ministry of this congregation or ministry or person?

6. What do you think is the best way to share this impact?