

The *Hesed* Project

Keeping Covenant: Synod 2023 response to overtures on human sexuality

I. Introduction

Synod 2023 will be a continuation of Synod 2022 with regard to human sexuality. Confusion and anxiety exude from most of the 2023 overtures, more than clarity. The most compelling content is not doctrinal or church order arguments. It is stories of troubling impacts, calls for unity amid conflict, and pleas for more time for study and dialogue, all rooted in the real-life experience and ministry of local churches. These stand in sharp contrast to the calls for immediate discipline to remove those who disagree with the 2022 decision.

As an overview, 33 overtures raise concerns about last year's decision and propose some kind of change. Nine come from classes; the rest from individual churches or groups within churches. Overtures signed by groups of members within a CRC church illustrate the extent and depth of the impacts and concern about this matter. Three of the overtures are presented as confessional revision gravamina, which fall under Church Order Article 30; their content, however, is similar to other overtures. Twenty overtures focus on disciplinary measures to enforce compliance with the Synod 2022 decision. The overtures reflect deep divisions within the CRCNA.

Covenantal Relationship and Synod

As we approach Synod 2023 it is important to remember the covenantal nature of Synod's authority, in contrast to the majority rule of legislatures or parliaments. The core values of Synod, confirmed in 2018, include care for the well-being of the whole church, servanthood, and respect for the priesthood of all believers, as well as being a guardian of doctrinal purity. One of the shortest and least known Church Order articles, Article 85, may be key for Synod 2023. It says: *No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no office-bearer shall lord it over another office-bearer.*

Options for Synod 2023

The Hesed Project CRC asked four CRC pastors with expertise in the current issue, experience with Synod, and years of experience in local ministry to provide input for this analysis. The panel includes a member of the LGBTQ+ community and reflects both US and Canadian sensitivities. They were asked to reflect on the 2023 overtures and respond to the following

questions: What are three options you think Synod 2023 should consider? Why? Other observations? This year's analysis builds on the 2022 Hesus Overture Analysis, which was given to each panel member. Because of legitimate fear of reprisals, names will not be used. Their input was compiled and synthesized into a draft report, which was reviewed by each member before publication. Hesus Project CRC assumes responsibility for any errors.

What stood out in the options identified independently by each member were strong common elements, with some different priorities that complemented each other to fit into four priority actions for consideration by Synod 2023.

Synod 2023 will have to make critical decisions about a path forward. To help all members of the CRC be well-informed, Hesus Project CRC offers a summary analysis of the 2023 overtures, description of nine major themes, and four options for consideration by Synod 2023 that emerged from reflections by a panel of CRC leaders

II. Critical Choices for Synod 2023

Dialogue or Punishment

During the Synod 2022 deliberations on confessional status for one interpretation of chastity, leaders stated that this was the beginning of a long conversation. The fact there are 33 overtures of concern about that decision confirms the need for more dialogue. Some make substantive contributions on the issues involved; others make helpful process suggestions. Synod 2022 itself called for more research and dialogue, but then later decisions closed doors by insisting on punitive measures for dissenters, leading to a climate of fear among ordained and lay leaders. The punitive approach is pursued through the overtures about discipline and changes to the policies on gravamina as a means for voicing dissent.

Pleas for unity, a secondary theme in 2022, will be a dominant concern in 2023. The fruits of Synod 2022, reflected in the overtures for 2023, provide evidence for choosing a different path to serve the well-being of the whole CRC.

Unity with Diversity or Separation

There is no consensus. This is not a case of broad agreement with a few dissenters. The overtures reflect deep differences that will not be easily resolved. As one panel member concluded,

"the overtures present us with the reality that the CRC is deeply divided about same-sex marriage — so divided that denominational unity is threatened. The punitive approach will not work because the affirming churches have become affirming through years (sometimes decades) of careful biblical study, prayer, pastoral care, reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and discernment in community with other believers. These churches have come to a sincere and firmly held conclusion that the Christian church has historically misinterpreted Scripture and failed in its pastoral care of LGBTQ believers. They are not going to return to a belief and practice that they now see as unfaithful to Scripture,

harmful to LGBTQ believers and their families, and damaging to the witness to God.”

On the other hand, those who advocated for the 2022 decision hold deep convictions that there is no room for any other interpretation or flexibility in application. It has also become well-known that this is part of a larger agenda of systemic reform and a different trajectory for a CRCNA that would look very different in five years. Those matters are not on the agenda, but the stakes for this Synod are high.

III. Common themes in the overtures on human sexuality

Below is a summary of common themes presented in point form, with reference to example overtures by numbers in parentheses after related points.

A. Confessional status for one interpretation of chastity in Heidelberg Catechism Question 108 is a major barrier for dialogue, unity, and the commitment to improve ministry with LGBTQ+ persons and their families.

This is the most prevalent focus for requested changes in the overtures of concern. Suggestions for changes vary widely, and include the following:

- Consider decision “settled and binding” but not confessional status. (14)
- Consider decision “one reasonable interpretation” of confession. (29)
- Consider list of specific sins helpful, but not confessional. (21)
- Remove list of specific forms of unchastity. (44)
- Remove homosexual sex from the list. (45)
- Consider HSR and decisions as pastoral advice to churches. (30)
- Reverse confessional status without suggesting replacement. (37, 38, 43)
- Consider it a proposed change in confession and use full, due process for approval. (32)

B. Concerns about the process leading up to Synod 2022.

The persistence of process concerns raised in 2022 suggest there is not enough confidence in the decisions or enough consensus to simply move on to full implementation. For the health of the whole church, the ongoing concerns about the process cannot be ignored by Synod 2023. These concerns include:

- The 1975 Synod decision on the status of the confessions and the status of Synod decisions was misused in 2022 to give an interpretation the same status as the confession. (28, 32)
- The Synod 2022 decision should be considered a proposal for changing a confession, and therefore it should go through longer deliberation and due process. (32)
- Stacking the deck of the HSR committee and restricting its scope in advance continues to undermine the credibility of Synod's decision. It has not gone away and needs redress through a more deliberative process now for the health of the whole church. (30, 39)
- Failure to listen well to those most affected creates stumbling blocks to ministry. (38, 43)

C. **Concern for unity**, present in 2022, has grown to become a prevalent theme in the overtures for 2023. One panel member captured it this way:

“We are so divided, in fact, that our denominational unity is threatened. So, Synod 2022’s decisions and Synod 2023’s overtures face us with the question, ‘Do we want to stay together?’ More pointedly, ‘Are we willing to do the difficult work that this will require?’ If so, what might this work look like?”

Pleas for unity ask for:

- More flexibility, open dialogue and study, and respect for different interpretations. (70)
- Differentiation between matters on which everyone must agree and matters where there can be a diversity of views within the CRC. (37)
- More weight and priority to the central mission of the CRC than ethical issues. (38)
- Review of the nature of the covenant relationships between parts of the CRCNA to allow greater diversity on identified substantial matters. (69)
- A process to explore how CRCNA can balance tension between room for greater diversity, unity, mission, and need for a common basis to work together. (38)

D. **More time is needed for discernment** on issues of human sexuality and what it means that the CRC is a covenantal community.

The need for more time is a prevalent theme across overtures that make different proposals to address different aspects of the Synod 2022 decision, with the exception of the overtures advocating quick discipline to remove any leaders who disagree with that decision. Some call for a three-or-five-year delay in implementation to allow time; others propose a “pause” as part of other suggestions.

Proposals for use of the time vary and include a wide range of actions, including:

- focus on pastoral care, including new approaches. (36)
- focus on reducing harm done to others and creating safe spaces. (40, 41)
- listening, learning, and discernment about human sexuality. (38, 39)
- establish another committee on sexuality that includes all perspectives. (47)
- employ proper process to change confession. (32)
- allow different perspectives to articulate alternatives for better-informed deliberation. (69)
- allow articulation of different visions of covenantal community for the CRCNA. (69)

E. **Alerts about the harm being done** call for giving priority to harm reduction and prevention.

Accounts of two types of harm permeate many overtures and are the primary focus of three overtures:

- Harm to LGBTQ+ members inside churches and in society (40, 41, 71)
- Harm to church communities, mission of the church, and organizations (38, 40, 43)

Several overtures recall the long history of failures to minister well with LGBTQ+ members, apologies by repeated Synods, including Synod 2022, and now evidence of more harm as a result

of the Synod 2022 decision. They call for giving priority to this and taking the necessary steps, based on available research, to make CRC churches safe spaces for LGBTQ+ persons and their families. While Synod 2023 will be faced with disagreement about what constitutes safe space, it cannot ignore the increase in harm being done.

F. Concerns about use of gravamina and the way dissent is handled in CRC

While there are no firm numbers, it seems clear that more gravamina have been filed in 2022 than on any other matter in the history of the CRC. Concerns about the process for dealing with gravamina also surface in overtures that address other aspects of the Synod 2022 decision.

The overtures that focus on gravamina suggest a wide range of revisions:

- Clarify use of gravamina. (58)
- Prohibit use of gravamina for confessional statements on certain sins. (55)
- Prohibit those who file gravamina from serving as delegates to higher assemblies. (62)
- Prohibit use of gravamina in agencies, boards, schools. (54)

G. Calls for greater clarity about discipline within the CRC

The need to revisit how discipline is exercised within CRC churches is named in overtures on other matters, as well as overtures that focus specifically on discipline. There are questions about discipline at all levels:

- respect for local church authority for discipline of individuals within the CRC. (47, 70)
- discipline of “lower” assemblies by more senior assemblies, e.g., churches, classes, and Synod. (74, 75)
- appeal processes for decisions made by one body to another level (75, 76)

On a deeper level, overtures calling for the immediate removal of leaders and churches who disagree with Synod 2022 decisions reflect a deeper loss of trust in other members of the CRC and little respect for the exercise of individual conscience. Removing churches and leaders because of disagreement over an interpretation of one article in a confession is substantively different than people voluntarily choosing to leave after a time for thoughtful, conscientious reflection. The punitive approach, proposed in several overtures, includes measures never used before in the CRC:

- suspend delegates from classes that have not moved quickly to punish dissent. (67)
- divide up Classis Grand Rapids East to punish dissenting churches in other classes. (66)
- withholding funding from Calvin University until all fully comply. (61)
- shepherd dissenting churches out of the CRC in a “grace-filled way.” (68)

H. Local or regional options as the locus of decision-making

Some overtures suggest what has become known as the local option, giving local churches room and authority to make decisions about pastoral ministry and discipline in the area of human sexuality. (47) This would allow more flexibility.

One overture proposes allowing classes to declare the Synod 2022 decision inoperative. (27)
This draws on CRC experience with the issue of women in office.

The local or classis option, in this matter, give rise to questions about implications for delegations from local churches to higher assemblies. Synod would need to address that.

I. Recognition that the current issue is a symptom of larger issues is evident in many overtures.

As well as addressing the current issue, Synod 2023 will need to consider ways to review and refresh CRC approaches to the larger issues, including:

- Reformed hermeneutics and different approaches to interpreting Scripture;
- integrating teachings about sin, creational norms, grace, God's love for all and obedience to laws given by God and interpreted by humans;
- "salvific" and "non-salvific" matters and the implications of making that distinction; and
- different visions of "covenantal community" and denomination.

IV. Suggested Covenant-keeping options for Synod 2023

Common themes and different emphases in the independent reflections of four panel members add up to four complementary areas of action by Synod 2023. These are equally important and can be pursued at the same time, through different means. They intersect with each other, which makes regular reporting and high levels of transparency and engagement with local churches important for the well-being of all parts of the CRC community.

1. Keep Covenant: Choose a path of continuing discernment

The first and strongest common suggestion is replacing the current approach based on confessional status and punishing leaders who do not comply with a process of discernment that better reflects our Reformed heritage, gives high priority to our covenantal commitments, and gives careful consideration to unity and the well-being of the whole denomination.

Step one on this path is clarifying that the Synod 2022 decision is an interpretation of the word "chastity" in the Heidelberg Confession with two essential additional components:

1a. A clear statement that this change in no way means Synod is endorsing a licentious, sexualized culture or weakening the biblical call to faithful relationships. Synod does not condone any practices that denigrate the image of God in one another, undermine faithful covenant relationships, or divert our focus from union with Christ that transforms our human relationships and can transform and redeem our culture.

1b. Establish an intentional process to move forward together with the following critical features:

- Honor and respect those holding different perspectives on human sexuality.

- Commit ourselves to trust the sincerity of faith, devotion to God, and dedication to Scripture of those who differ from us, and acknowledge that all our interpretations of Scripture are limited, tainted by sin, and subject to continuing reformation.
- Trust that persons with different perspectives have done extensive biblical study, research, and theological reflection.
- Agree to allow scholars with differing conclusions to present the results of their study without fear of losing their jobs or reputations. This includes biblical and theological scholars, scholars in areas such as human biology and psychology, and scholars in missions, church life, and church polity.
- Embark on a discernment process in which church members meet, study, pray, and listen with others who hold different views — all seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit with humility and open hearts.

The importance of open dialogue within churches and classes was highlighted by all panel members. As one panel member stated:

"To truly understand the differences, we need time to discern what the issues are, hear the stories of how we got to our understandings of the concerns, ask what are the critical bias/imaginings/worldviews that influence our judgments, and ask why we have confidence that these are good judgments. We can only discover the doors toward deeper unity through more dialogue. This will require a particular ministry/committee within congregational support ministries to lead the effort."

2. Keep Covenant: Clarify CRC approach to confessions, discipline, and conscientious dissent

A second area for attention is the need to review and freshen up how the CRC deals with questions about ancient confessions, discipline in cases of disagreement, and respect for conscientious dissent, including the use of gravamina. Given the nature and extent of the diversity of deeply held views, a punitive approach would not be consistent with the teachings from early church history in Acts and the Biblical goals of discipline. As one panel member stated,

"It is clear that when a significant portion has disagreements on a particular point and insists on enforcing that view through the current means of discipline, the outcome is more likely to be division of the church than the Biblical goals of discipleship. Before any such division occurs, it is incumbent on the church to seek ways to live out our oneness in Christ."

Central to this review process will be mutual respect and the lifting up of Reformed teachings on the priesthood of all believers. Church Order Article 85 provides direction for updated policies on mutual accountability in a covenantal approach to ecclesiology. It states: *No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no office-bearer shall lord it over another office-bearer.* How we live that out in 2023 could provide a new basis for richer, covenant relationships.

As a path forward, Synod 2023 could establish a committee to lead relevant discussions on these matters and present a report to Synod in a few years.

3. Keep Covenant: Give high priority to reduce harm and strengthen pastoral care

The third priority responds to the common theme of harm being done to the LGBTQ+ community, and harm to the health of local congregations. More important in the overtures than doctrinal debate are the laments over harm being done and recognition that we have moved backward more than forward in our ministry with LGBTQ+ persons and families.

The focus for this work will be more local, also recognizing the diverse contexts in which CRC churches work. The USA is not Canada and rural communities are not downtowns. Key components in local pastoral care are helping all members feel seen, soothed, safe, and secure and living out the justice principle of “no decisions about us without us.” Safe churches go beyond technical police checks, etc. to find ways to recognize everyone as image-bearers of God and allow them to experience faithful covenant communities in which they are nurtured in faith, loved without qualification, and given opportunities to risk giving themselves in service.

As stated by one panel member:

Everyone wants to see the inclusion of LGBTQ+ within the church and the inclusion of single members within the life of the church. If this is our intention, we need to establish a ministry within congregational resources which focuses on such intentions. This needs to be led by a leader and committee that includes a majority of members from such communities.

4. Keep Covenant: Address deeper issues

A fourth area is recognition that the focus on same-sex marriage is part of larger questions about how the CRC engages with a changing culture. One panel member expressed what we need to address in this way:

“We feel there is something deeply wrong about our experience within the church and the culture in which it exists. The pornification of our culture, the profound loneliness that many experience, the lack of faithfulness we observe around us, the unfairness we experience in our bones, and the individualism of our culture has profoundly influenced the state of our relationships.”

While the larger issues cannot be resolved by any one decision of Synod 2023, a process might start with identifying points of potential agreement, such as:

- The sexualization of our culture is contrary to a biblical way of life that is characterized by honouring the image of God in every person and covenant faithfulness in all our relationships.
- The idolatry of our culture – which includes locating what is good as an individual choice, the pursuit of happiness that embraces individual desires (consumer culture) and

the pursuit of pleasure – has undermined our relational culture and sense of collective Godly good.

- Pornification of marriage puts strain on marriage relationships and idolatry of the family significantly harms the singles within the culture of the church.
- Loneliness is a significant concern within and outside the church, in and outside of marriage.
- Sexual minorities (LGBTQ+) have experienced and do experience discrimination and harassment within and outside the church. They are often not seen, nurtured, or safe within the life of the church community or the larger community.

V. Conclusion

These are large and significant matters for members, churches, the CRCNA, and our witness to God's work in God's world. Wisdom will be more important than rules of order for Synod 2023, in order to chart a positive path forward for the CRCNA.