

Overture on the Covenant of Office-bearers, for submission to Classis Eastern Canada

Kanata Community Christian Reformed Church overtures Classis Eastern Canada to overture Synod to appoint a taskforce to review the Covenant for Office-bearers and the related Article 5 in the Church Order, and provide Synod 2025 with analysis and recommendations to address the following concerns:

- Greater clarity about the distinctions and relationship between confessions and interpretations of specific provisions in a confession as requirements for membership and/or serving in any positions of leadership, and greater clarity about implementation of the Covenant for Office-bearers at all levels of church assemblies.
- Greater clarity and respect for the role and authority of the local church to deliberate together and provide guidance in the application of specific provisions in the confessions in specific situations in local contexts.
- Greater respect for thoughtful conscientious-decision-making, when such decisions are made in prayerful, Spirit-lead sincerity before God and in dialogue with the church community.

Background:

Kanata Community Christian Reformed Church (KCCRC) is a community church that includes members who identify as, or who have family or close friends who identify as, LGBTQ+ persons. We recognize we have not always ministered well with these members and, in the last few years, synodical decisions have made it more challenging. We have engaged in learning, prayer-filled dialogue, and reflection on what God is calling us to do as partners in God's mission in our particular context. We have also actively engaged in the discernment processes within the CRCNA, including overtures asking for more time and prevention of harm that were supported and forwarded to Synod in both 2022 and 2023. This overture names other elements in a continuing process of prayerful discernment as committed members of both KCCRC and the CRCNA.

As part of this journey, especially after the decisions of Synod 2022 and 2023 regarding human sexuality, we have struggled with what it means to sign the Covenant for Office-bearers, the role of gravamina, and living up to our calling to be part of God's mission in our community, as we discern that. We are also alert to and engaged with members of other Christian Reformed churches who are struggling with similar tensions and anticipate the possible impacts of further decisions at Synod 2024 about enforcement through the Covenant of Office-bearers. It is timely to ask for greater clarity with regard to this Covenant and its role in CRC churches.

This matter is important for other issues that will create tensions in our covenantal relationships in the future, as well as this one. Beyond sexuality, the current moment is fostering high levels of confusion and anxiety about the way we make decisions together and work together in a community that takes covenantal relationships seriously, as well as recognition of differences in interpretations of specific Biblical passages and implications of some of our long-standing doctrines. It also highlights tensions between calls to unity and respect for diversity.

For this reason, we submit a plea to take time for careful consideration and more clear articulation of essential, relevant elements of Reformed polity, as they relate to implementation of the Covenant for Office-bearers and related articles in the Church Order, both in the current context and for the future health of our churches. Taking time to do this work now will contribute to restored confidence in the quality of our decision-making processes and it will help to foster and maintain unity within the denomination.

Grounds:

1. a. More clarity is needed to consistently apply the wise guidance from Synod 1975 that *“no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions”* (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 598). Specifically, decisions of Synod (pronouncements) are considered *“settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order”* (Church Order Article 29). However, *“While synodical decisions are “settled and binding,” subscription to synodical decisions is not required”* (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 601). In many ways, the declarations of Synod in 2022 and 2023 on human sexuality (specifically related to the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108) blur the lines between the two. This compromises the clear distinction that Synod 1975 described.
- b. CRCNA Church Order states that *“A signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions”* (Article 5, Supplement A2). The Church Order recognizes a healthy tension between the role of individuals, local churches, and larger assemblies in discernment of the implications of our confessions. Individuals, who may not decide for themselves what doctrines are covered by the confessions, are to seek decisions of the assemblies and acquiesce with them; those assemblies include councils and classes, as well as Synods (Article 26), who themselves are bound together in covenant relationships under God. In the wake of Synod 2022 and 2023, greater clarity is needed to manage this tension well to have a healthy church at all levels.
- c. *“The Covenant of Office-bearers shall encourage, not discourage theological discussion”* (Agenda for Synod 2011, p. 623, Agenda for Synod 2008 p. 247, Acts of Synod 2005, p. 735 and Acts of Synod 1976, pp. 67-70, 550-91). The way the Covenant of Office-bearers

is being used in the wake of Synod 2022 and 2023 is shutting down discussion instead of encouraging it. This is a consequence, intended or not intended, of giving one interpretation of one provision by one Synod “status confessionis.” Greater clarity is needed to fulfill the Covenant’s purpose to encourage theological discussion of challenging issues.

- d. A covenant relationship, such as that espoused in the Covenant for Office-Bearers, requires greater attention to how decisions are made and the impacts for all parties in the covenant relationship. Covenant relationships, different from contracts or hierarchical control, include deep respect for the calling of each party before God and ensuring that decisions serve the well-being of the other party. Covenantal commitments made in baptism, for example, are relevant for how a local church council deals with persons who later identify as LGBTQ+. Walking in covenant relationship also has implications for relationships between local churches when one of them, as a result of careful discernment, feels called by God to follow a different Reformed interpretation than the one endorsed by a particular Synod. More consideration of the implications of the important Reformed teachings on covenant for the management of tensions in particular areas would likely lead to more nuanced guidance to maintain relationships in spite of differences in interpretation.
 - e. Greater clarity on the relationships between synodical decisions and the confessions is relevant for many issues, not just HSR. The lack of clarity contributes to inconsistencies between the way different Synodical decisions on interpretations of confessions are implemented in the life of individual churches and a significant erosion of trust in the quality of deliberations and decision-making processes within our denomination. Greater clarity is important for leaders at all levels of the church who are engaged in discussions and decision-making related to confessions. Leaders serve in the context of a growing range of ethical issues that engage church members and various interpretations of many individual provisions within the confessions that are consistent with Reformed approaches to exegesis and hermeneutics,
2. a. The local church plays a primary role in CRC church polity, especially in areas such as pastoral care, discipling, faith formation, and deciding who serves in ordained offices. Synod has also recognized that the local council is the most appropriate place for decision-making in complex pastoral situations, e.g., Synod 1980’s decisions in relation to marriage and divorce. The CRC has practiced a healthy tension that balances respect for the authority of the local church and delegated and limited authority of Synods to act in the best interests of all churches. The decisions of Synod 2022 and 2023 gave very little consideration to the impacts of their decisions for local churches, and, in doing so, have created difficulties that could be avoided with greater clarity and respect for the traditional role of local churches in Reformed polity.

- b. The Covenant of Office-bearers shall “*enhance the faithful ministry of the local church*” (Agenda for Synod 2011, p. 623). The way it is being used in the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023 is hindering the work of many local churches, including KCCRC. Greater respect for the authority of local churches could also assist in maintaining unity within the CRCNA.
 - c. An important principle in covenant relationships is the concept of one church or office-bearer “not lording it over another”, expressed in Church Order Article 85. Requests to sign the Covenant of Office-bearers should not be weaponized by one member against other members or by one church against the delegates of another church to one of the higher assemblies, nor should it be used by one church to diminish valuable pastoral work being carried out by another local church. While technically Article 85 may have more limited application, the general principle seems relevant for the current struggle. More careful articulation of it might assist in finding more healthy ways to maintain covenantal unity on core beliefs while respecting some diversity in the implementation of specific provisions in the confessions.
- 3.
- a. A valued feature of our Reformed approach to life is developing and exercising robust capacities for individual conscientious decision-making, along with discernment in local community. In keeping with the strong focus on conscience and Christian freedom in John Calvin’s teachings (Calvin, John. “Christian Freedom,” Chapter XIX, Institutes of the Christian Religion), Reformed branches of Christianity have paid a lot of attention to a core teaching that the church should not bind the consciences of its members any more than what is absolutely essential in Scripture.
 - b. Recent decisions by Synod raise questions about the level of respect for carefully considered conscientious decisions that people make before God, with prayer for the leading of the Holy Spirit and in community. In our congregation, for example, faithful members in every respect have given well-developed reasons why they cannot in good conscience act in accordance with the decisions of Synod 2022 and 2023 relating to human sexuality. This includes members who have direct experience with the matters involved, persons who provide counselling services as Christians and professionals, and persons who are called and engaged in public witness about specific related matters, e.g., the just treatment of inter-sex children in Canada. We do not think it is necessary for such members to make a choice between participation in their church and integrity in work that clearly contributes to God’s mission in our community.
 - c. The gravamen process was not developed as a mechanism to show respect for conscientious decisions. It is a process for settling theological disputes (Acts of Synod 1976 pp. 68-70). Its inadequacy to deal with the matter of conscientious decisions is reflected in the many questions being asked about it, including overtures held over from Synod 2023 for consideration at Synod 2024. Greater respect for conscientious decision-

making might lead to consideration of a different mechanism or significant modification of the current processes for gravamen.

- d. Respect for conscientious decision-making relates to many areas of Christian life. A review of CRC history reveals a uneven pattern on different issues, but it leans toward greater recognition for individual conscientious decisions. At one time dancing and card-playing were prohibited and later treated as matters for conscientious decision-making. In 2006 Synod decided to recognize conscientious objections to a particular war, a modification of earlier just war teaching that did not permit support for persons with conscientious objections to war and military service (see Acts of Synod 2006 pp 670-675). In the area of human sexuality, decisions about marriage and divorce in 1980 showed strong respect for the need to allow conscientious decisions in individual cases, with the local church providing pastoral care and guidance (see Acts of Synod 1980 pp 484-485). Different conscientious decisions about financial stewardship within a congregation do not lead to removal from office or church membership, even though the Bible has much more to say about the use of wealth than it does about homosexuality.

- e. The contemporary context for Christians and churches requires nurturing the development of a robust capacity for the exercise of moral agency and conscientious living, especially in the Canadian context. Careful consideration and incorporation of guidance on this matter for the way we make and enforce decisions on ethical issues would serve well for upcoming issues and the future of the church's witness in Canadian society.