

5.4.1. Sonlight CRC

Draft Overture:

Overture to Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan from Sonlight CRC, Regina, SK

Re: Concerns About Acting on the Recommendations of the Human Sexuality Report

In 2016 Synod adopted the following overture from Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan:

That synod advise the classes and congregations to invite, as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA.

The Acts of Synod 2016, p. 929

Introduction

Sonlight Christian Reformed Church is a small but diverse congregation in the heart of the Canadian prairies with a strong desire for unity and inclusion. We do not agree on everything, and notably we do not claim to have one mind about the topics presented in the Human Sexuality Report, but we have committed to work and worship together peaceably and humbly to the glory of God. We are concerned about how the recommendations of the HSR will affect our ability to encourage ongoing discussion and engagement with difficult topics as we strive to promote unity and inclusion for all God's children.

In 2016, Sonlight Christian Reformed Church created an overture which was approved by Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan and adopted by Synod in the above form. The overture was part of the discussion surrounding the report on pastoral guidance re same sex marriage which was presented at Synod that year, and was therefore also one of the catalysts for commissioning the committee which created this Human Sexuality Report. Given our unique relationship with this report, we feel moved to respond to it and express our concerns about acting on its recommendations.

Background

In 1973 "Report 42" was adopted by the denomination and declared that each sexual minority Christian "*be wholeheartedly received by the church as a person for whom Christ died.*" It instructs us that "*churches should recognize that their homosexual members... are to be given opportunity to render within the offices and structures of the congregation the same service that is expected from heterosexuals.*" (Acts of Synod, 1973, pp. 609-633) There have long been hopes expressed for greater acceptance and integration of these children of God that would reflect the report's calls to action, but the denomination has repeatedly recognized that this has been lacking.

Over the past decade or so there has been an increasing desire to address the gap between what Report 42 hoped for and the situation that currently exists. This has revealed deep

disagreements between churches and members on questions about the acceptance and participation of sexual minority persons in the CRCNA. Some wish to find one final, incontrovertible answer and seem to feel that an end to the discussion will mean an end to the need to struggle with this issue. By adopting the recommendation from Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan, however, Synod 2016 strove to widen the discussion rather than limit it. In fact, they committed to inviting *as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex members*. They recognized that the offices and structures of the church have not afforded homosexuals or other sexual minority Christians an adequate avenue for being heard, and once again put the burden on churches to seek out engagement.

When Synod established the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, however, its criteria for who could be appointed effectively limited the discussion. As Nicholas Wolterstorff indicates in his white paper, “this present committee was destined to fail us when issuing moral counsel”, because its members were required to commit themselves in advance to a particular moral interpretation. As such, he points out, “the committee’s mandate ensured that it would engage in results-orientated interpretation.” Essentially, the conclusions were made before the work began because diverse interpretations were excluded. The single-perspective committee that Synod created does a great disservice to the CRCNA’s rich and fearlessly engaged scholarly tradition. Furthermore, it fails to live up to its commitment to involve the voices of those whose lives will be subject to the moral counsel delivered by the report. (Nicholas Wolterstorff; Response to the CRCNA Human Sexuality Report to Synod 2020, December 2020)

Guided by the moral interpretation required of them, the committee commissioned by Synod to author the HSR failed to invite the presence and involvement of diverse thinkers and theologians of our own and other Christian denominations through their choice of resources. For example, the report references as an authority the ‘Great Lakes Catechism of Marriage and Sexuality’ of the Reformed Church in America, which supports the committee’s conclusions, but which had not been accepted by the RCA at the time of writing. However, the report does not include similar documents accepted by other denominations, like the ‘Social Statement on Human Sexuality’ which was accepted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada in 2011 but which does not share the same conclusions. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a ‘denomination in dialogue’ with the CRCNA, but there is no evidence of engagement with them or their scholarship on this topic, though we are having many of the same discussions right now. In addition, the scholars whose work buttresses the findings of this report are given preference over those whose work does not. Experts who come to different conclusions are mainly referenced in one of two instances; when they share a point of agreement with others whose work is in alignment with this report’s conclusions, or when the committee wishes to rebut their conclusions.

The committee who authored this HSR also failed to adequately invite the presence and involvement of sexual minority Christian siblings through their presentation of the personal stories which are included throughout this report. Our best count indicates that there are 39 stories included. Of these, approximately (we use this word to allow for some slight difference of opinion on how certain stories are categorized) 35 reinforce the conclusions of this report, and 4 have no clear resolution but do not question the conclusions. In particular, the stories of homosexual and transgender Christians are misleading and disproportionately support what this report concludes about acceptable Christian norms. Our findings are as follows:

6 of 15 stories about homosexual people glorify someone who ended or will end a committed relationship, apparently as a result of spiritual growth. 4 others end with the subject either marrying or seeking to marry a heterosexual partner, also as a result of spiritual growth. The others highlight people living celibate lifestyles. 3 of 8 stories about persons suffering from gender dysphoria suggest that peer pressure caused their gender issues. 4 others imply that their gender dysphoria can or will be cured by the presence of sympathetic friends, while 2 demonstrate that a person's gender issues cause distress to the people around them. 1 indicates that we should be careful because sometimes transgender people are actually predators trying to fly under the radar. In every case, the subject of the story is broken, distressed, confused, and weak in faith.

There are no stories that represent healthy, committed, Christian same-sex relationships. There are no stories about transgender believers who are healthy and accepted and active members of their church families. There is no one who is affirmed in their same-sex relationship or their gender transformation as they grow spiritually. Their perspectives are missing; they have been excluded from this report. Although individuals may read certain of the stories in ways that slightly change our interpretations, and there are other stories not highlighted here, the narrative of this report was strongly biased toward one narrow portrayal of the experiences of sexual minority Christians. The committee failed to seek "*as much as possible*" other diverse voices that could have expanded our mutual understanding as the family of God.

The authors of the HSR acknowledge our shortcomings as a denomination in creating the inclusive and supportive community called for in Report 42, but the solution they recommend is to exclude and silence conversations about the complex components of human sexuality. Their recommendations, particularly advocating that their interpretations hold confessional status, require conformity rather than unity. Without prayerfully engaging and including a variety of voices from among our sexual minority siblings, not just once or twice but repeatedly and over a lengthy period of time, we are not ready to support such far-reaching conclusions as a denomination. Adopting the recommendations of the HSR at this time will only serve to hasten the division we all fear.

Overture

The Council of Sonlight Christian Reformed Church, Regina, Saskatchewan overtures Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan to overture Synod:

- a. to withhold action on the Human Sexuality Report.

Grounds

1. Synod can choose to receive a report as information, to recommend a report to the CRCNA, to act on recommendations, to adopt recommendations to reject recommendations. We are asking Synod to withhold action on this report, to not act on it at all.
2. The intention of the overture to Synod 2016 from Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan was to encourage the CRCNA to be in healthy and prolonged dialogue with the many voices engaged in a conversation around human sexuality. We deem this committee to have failed to achieve the expectation Synod set for our congregations and classes, that is, to “invite, *as much as possible*, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA.” (The Acts of Synod 2016, p. 929, emphasis added).
3. This committee did not interact fully or carefully with the work of denominations engaged in similar discussions about same-sex marriage. They prioritized works that agreed with their own conclusions and ignored those that differ.
4. This committee failed to meaningfully involve the voices of allies and affirming theologians. It grants significant weight to thinkers and theologians whose work buttresses the findings of this report and minimizes the significance of those thinkers and theologians that disagree with its findings.
5. This committee shared many stories, but only selected stories that either affirmed their conclusions or at minimum, did not contradict these conclusions. We know, however, that there are many God-fearing sexual minority people who faithfully live out their Christian calling and whose stories do not reinforce the conclusions of this report. The bias of this report mutes the very stories that help shape the challenging questions the church faces.
6. Adopting the recommendations of this report effectively curtails future dialogue on these topics and silences dissenting voices. Declaring a *status confessionis* is not only premature and poorly supported, but it also poses an immediate threat to the unity of the body of Christ.

5.4.2. Maranatha (Calgary)

Overture from Maranatha CRC, Calgary
To Classis Southern Alberta, Spring MTG 2021

Overture:

In response to the Human Sexuality report, the Council of Maranatha CRC, Calgary overture Classis to overture Synod to accept recommendation C of the report which encourages churches to take the time to gather in small groups to discuss aspects of the report which may be controversial (p. 148) while delaying any further action on the report for at least two years.

While appreciating the report's counsel on a variety of points, there have been some initial concerns with the report raised within our church, especially with the recommendation that the stance of this report is to have *confessional* status (Recommendation D, pg. 149), which have significant implications on our Maranatha church family. We were disappointed with the little time given to process and respond to this thoroughly, and therefore request that more time is given for engagement and feedback with our congregation before any further decisions are made on the sexuality report.

Grounds:

- The report itself recommends using the “Challenging Conversations Toolkit” curriculum prepared by the Pastor Church Resources. We need time as a church to respectfully engage with this recommended resource and with each other to hear the various perspectives held by members, including office-bearers, at our church. Having a clearer sense of where the Maranatha community is at will help us to respond more meaningfully to the report.
- The “Challenging Conversations Toolkit” curriculum has within it a way for the feedback about this report to be received by the local church council, and then for the council to consider what to do with this feedback as it engages with the larger assemblies of the church. To consider Recommendation C after already accepting the report (Recommendation B) puts the ‘cart before the horse.’
- The report is 176 pages of in-depth, academic reading requiring many people a significant amount of time and effort to be able to thoroughly read, understand, process and respond to this report.
- As noted above, the authors of the recommendations recognize the potential controversy in this report (“may be controversial”) and therefore sufficient time is required to reflect on it, and provide responses and overtures to it.
- A timeline of at least two years would give Maranatha a year to engage in small group conversations followed by time for Classis to engage in regional conversations about the report.

- The COVID pandemic limits our ability to gather in-person, the preferred means for having engaging conversation. More time is needed as we continue to develop and learn how to meaningfully engage with each other in new ways.
- While the report includes many stories and diverse voices it lacks the stories and voices of Christians who are in loving, faithful, same-sex relationships as well as trans-gender Christians. We need more time to better understand the perspectives of those who are most impacted by the implications of this report.
- The make-up of the report's authors were only individuals who agree with the 1973 report. There are many within the CRCNA who hold alternative perspectives and understandings to the conclusions of this report, including pastors, theologians, professors, elders, and others. Taking time to invite and hear alternate perspectives within the CRCNA to the report is important for Synod to consider before making any further decisions on the report.

Signed,

Council of Maranatha Christian Reformed Church, Calgary

5.4.3. Covenant CRC

Referred To Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan

Overture:

Covenant Christian Reformed Church thanks the authors of the report and the members of the Synodical Study Committee for their dedication, wisdom and compassion. We heartily overture Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan to overture and encourage all of Synod to accept the report by the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality with all of its recommendations.

Introduction:

We see Biblical sexual behaviour, in large part, as a “Lordship of Christ” matter, and, with this in mind, see this report as a validation of Christ’s Authority and Lordship over all aspects of sexual morality. It is a thoughtful, accurate and helpful report that, we pray, will keep our denomination, our members and our leadership faithful to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Grounds:

1. This report sensitively and Biblically handles matters of sexuality that we deal with on a regular basis. It gives great insights and useful suggestions. It is a fantastic call to action to reach lovingly and honestly into the lives of people we care about. It brings beneficial wisdom to members and leaders both inside and outside of our denomination as they seek guidance on the matters it addresses.
2. This report, together with all its recommendations is a means to hold one another accountable, as members and office bearers in the CRCNA, to the Word of God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, and to our confessional standards of unity as a faithful reflection of God’s Word.
3. If we fail to uphold these Biblical teachings, while keeping in step with the cultural morality of North America and tolerating such immorality and teaching within our local congregations, we as leaders and those in our churches will be held accountable to our Lord Jesus Christ (Rev 2:12-29).

Conclusion:

It is our fervent hope that our denomination does not follow the false prophets spoken of in Jeremiah 8:11, who said “Peace, peace” when there was no peace. We pray for deliverance and protection from the kind of false teachers referred to in Jude 4, who were “ungodly people, perverting the grace of our God into a license for immorality and denying Jesus Christ, our only Sovereign and Lord.” Instead, we rise as a body in covenant with God, hating what He hates and loving what He loves. Our God is a God of grace and truth, may we reflect His heart. God gave us His Word, every chapter and verse of it, because He truly loves us. May we, likewise truly love our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we love them according to the Word of God.

Reference: [Report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality](#)

5.4.4. Emmanuel, River Park, The Road, Lantern

Overture from 4 churches in Calgary Alberta

OVERTURE:

River Park CRC, Emmanuel CRC, The Lantern, and The Road Church overture Classis to overture Synod to not accede to recommendations D and E of The Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (“The Report”).

BACKGROUND:

Recommendations D and E read as follows:

D. That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.

E. That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c¹ is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report (p. 149).

What does “confessional status” mean? The CRC has three “confessions” (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort), which are “subordinate to the Scripture” but accepted as “true interpretations” of the Word of God. When a CRC member becomes an elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, or minister they are considered “office-bearers” and bound to agreement with the confessions.

What are the implications of these recommendations? If recommendation “D” is accepted, anyone who disagrees with The Report’s conclusions (in part or as a whole, whether “progressive” or “traditional”) could not be members in good standing in the CRC and would not be eligible to hold church office. If recommendation E is accepted, The Report’s conclusions on what constitutes a marriage (or remarriage) that is “in conflict with the Word of God” would be as authoritative as the Word of God itself.

¹ Article 69-c says, “Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God”

GROUND:

1. Declaring that the church's teaching on sexuality "already has confessional status" ignores previous synodical decisions and processes and sidesteps The Committee's mandate.

- a. By declaring the matter "already confessional" The Report subverts the normative and historic process for considering matters confessional.²
- b. Synod 1975 adopted recommendations specifically articulating the 'measure of agreement expected' regarding Synodical decisions. These recommendations make clear that report 42 from 1973 does not have confessional status, but rather was framed as 'pastoral advice.' And all following related reports (2002 and 2016) also were framed as 'pastoral advice,' not requiring confessional agreement. None of these decisions made by Synod 1975 which contradict this conclusion of The Report are addressed.³
- c. Synod 2016 mandated the committee to explore questions concerning confessional status and human sexuality for "future synods" with reference to a future "team" to draft a new confession. The Report disregards this prescribed process by declaring the matter "already confessional".⁴

² The Belhar Confession and Our World Belongs to God are two examples of statements which are celebrated as Contemporary Testimonies and yet were intentionally *not* adopted as having confessional status precisely because declaring something confessional would compel full agreement on *all* points from *all* officebearers in the CRCNA. Acts of Synod 2017 named the Belhar Confession "a dynamic statement of faith that serves the CRCNA... a statement that speaks to essential matters in a given time period... useful for study, faith formation, teaching, and worship" while intentionally refraining from compelling agreement on all points by office bearers. The Report suggests that their conclusions be deemed confessional which would, effectively, make The Report a fourth confession of the CRCNA by "the back door" (i.e. without due process or consideration).

³ Cf. Acts of Synod, 1975. Adoption of Report 47 is found pg. 44-45; the full Report 47 is found pg. 595-604. From the full report, under the heading "The Measure of Agreement Expected," we find this: "Full agreement with the confessions is expected from all members of the church and subscription to the confessions is required of all officebearers by signing the Form of Subscription. While synodical decisions are "settled and binding," subscription to synodical decisions is not required" (pg. 601-602). Reflecting on levels of expected agreement around synodical decisions in the *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (2010), Dr. Henry DeMoor writes, "It is significant, for example, that Synod 1973 twice framed all of its "statements" on homosexuality, including its "ethical stance," as "pastoral advice" (*Acts of Synod, 1973*, pg. 51). It intentionally avoided referring to them as an "interpretation" of the Heidelberg Catechism's use of the term "unchastity" in Lord's Day 41." (p. 168)

⁴ Acts of Synod 2016, page 916, sets forth a mandate for The Committee: "Reflection and evaluation of whether or not, with respect to same sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider a) changing the main text of Church Order Article 69 (see Overtures 18, 19, 20, 21, 31, 38). b) declaring a *status confessionis* (see Overture 16). c) appointing a team of individuals to draft a new confession, in the style of the Contemporary Testimony, on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the

2. The Report ignores, simplifies, or dismisses voices and perspectives which do not fit with its conclusions.

- a. The Report's presentation of real, personal testimonies surrounding sexuality is touching but not balanced and overlooks many marginalized voices that don't fit The Report's conclusions. For example, there are no testimonies of faithfully married same-sex couples in The Report.⁵
- b. The Report did not adequately engage views that differ from their conclusions in academia, the public square, or even among very significant constituents and stakeholders such as Calvin University.⁶
- c. The structure and process of the committee tasked with creating The Report inhibited the inclusion of marginalized voices. For the first time in CRCNA history a committee was formed requiring members to adhere to a singular view (Synod 1973) concerning the very topic they were tasked to study.

teachings and conclusions of the report (see Overture 28).” The Report’s recommendation effectually cuts off the process set forth by Synod 2016 with the declaration that their findings are “already confessional.”

⁵ Perhaps those not involved in local ministry contexts don’t realize same sex married CRC Christians actually exist! Also absent from the Report are CRC members who are gay but celibate who nevertheless don’t believe celibacy to be their only option; members whose gender self-identification has changed; members who attribute the church’s positions and church’s culture as contributing to their gender dysphoria, confused sense of sexual identity, self-loathing, depression, etc.; suicide survivors and families of suicide victims who took their lives because of real or perceived rejection from their churches or families. Also absent from the Report are former members of the CRC, who have left the CRC because of positions around human sexuality. Also missing from the Report are the voices of friends, parents, and family members of LGBTQ persons whose perspectives on human sexuality have changed. These omissions further serve to render recommendations D and E “top down” and fail to appreciate the nuance, tension, and struggle of real people.

⁶ For example, four pages of signatures graced a public letter (see appendix) sent on December 10 to President Dr Michael LeRoy from staff and faculty of Calvin University arguing, “The report insufficiently engages with relevant scholarship from our disciplines, leading to a biased view of the theological, scriptural, and scientific basis for the report. The discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation lack the scientific and hermeneutic rigor and accuracy of prevailing peer-reviewed scholarship and thereby have the potential to compromise Calvin’s academic reputation.” Also, the Report tells us they “consulted” persons widely known and read by CRC constituents such as Wendy VanderWal-Gritter but the content of such consultations was not reported. The Report references well known speakers such as Matthew Vines and David Gushee but seems to engage on an “I watched the YouTube video but didn’t read the book” level. The Report is similarly non-thorough with respect to scientific engagement, most notably dismissing the biological basis for same sex attraction by quoting Melinda Mills in Science stating, “the claim that attraction to the same sex has a biological cause has been seriously challenged by recent research” while apparently unaware that Mills herself warns against this very conclusion in the study being cited (Mills, Melinda. “How Do Genes Affect Same-Sex Behavior?” Science, Vol. 365, Issue 6456 (Aug. 30, 2019), pp.869-870. Again, this is an example of differing voices being marginalized and misrepresented.

3. Declaring the conclusions of The Report as “confessional” would harm the unity of the Christian Reformed Church.

- a. The conclusions of The Report represent one view among many concerning human sexuality. It is not as simple as “the traditional position” vs. “the progressive position.” There are many articulations, for example, of a “traditional” view of marriage that differ from The Report’s particular analysis and conclusions. If recommendation D were adopted, both “traditional” AND “progressive” positions that differ from the conclusions of The Report would disqualify CRC members from eligibility to bear office.⁷
- b. The Report does not adequately address the implications for officebearers who are not in agreement with the conclusions of The Report.⁸
- c. The Report’s conclusions demonstrate little interest in moving forward in unity, undercutting the many local conversations led by local leaders advocating for respectful dialogue in an age of heightened polarity.⁹

4. Adopting recommendation E would essentially raise the Report to confessional status by binding all ministers to its conclusions in terms of which marriages they can officiate, erasing the personal discernment of which current church order and previous synods have afforded.

⁷ Agenda for Synod 2016 details the 2014 survey of 700 ordained ministers in the CRCNA in which 98 of 700 ministers reported they would be in favour of same sex marriage in the church, while 100 of the same 700 ministers think same sex attraction is sinful. Both these positions (and many more besides) would disqualify a person from holding office in the CRC (i.e. 28% of ordained ministers surveyed would not be eligible to hold office in the CRCNA).

⁸ For example, all four of the churches writing this overture would have officebearers that need to step down (or conceal their disagreement). As referenced above, professors at Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University are also required to be in agreement with anything named as ‘confessional’ in the CRCNA (and have grave concerns with The Report’s potential implications on Calvin University as expressed in the public letter (see appendix)).

⁹ The Report endorses the use of the Pastor Church Relations’ “Challenging Conversations Toolkit” which, like the Colossian Forum, encourages honesty and growth with brothers and sisters in Christ amidst deep differences in opinion. At the same time, The Report undercuts the efficacy of these local conversations and the process of restorative circles by declaring one point of view “already has confessional status” and employing language about the “true church” and “false church” (The Report, ages 146-148).

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: Introducing the Reader to our Congregations

In a season of mistrust and heightened polarity, we understand that it can be easy to dismiss one another quickly. This is harder to do face-to-face after years of connecting, which is one reason this overture is oriented to asking for local conversations. But given that most readers of this overture will not know who we are, it seemed good for us to provide brief introductions to each of our four congregations, and introduce ourselves in a way that shows why this conversation about human sexuality and same sex marriage matters to our local congregations as we live into the mission of God in our local contexts. We hope this small act of 'embodiment' will help the reader to hear us with generosity of spirit.

Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church - Calgary, AB, Canada

Established in 1956, Emmanuel is a long-established part of the CRC presence in Alberta. Emmanuel members have encouraged, initiated and invested in Christian day schools, Christian universities, Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), and heavily support denominational ministries, as well as local neighbourhood efforts seeking justice, mercy, and the knowledge of the love of God in Christ.

Our current membership consists of not only newer Christians and folks in the surrounding blocks, but is blessed with many families who have attended Emmanuel for generations; great-grandparent, grandparent, parent and child side by side in the same pew. That particular mix of new community and legacy has become an integral part of our identity, part of the strength of who we are and how we hope to model Christ's kingdom here on earth.

But this identity has not come without struggle or cost. Emmanuel, in its 64-year history, has journeyed together as a faith community through some difficult and potentially divisive issues. The changing worship landscape, women in ecclesiastical office (the fact that it's entirely expected and natural for women to preach, chair Council, indeed, serve on the very Synod committee that produced the current Report, should not blind us to a time when these issues split churches and families apart), the literal seven-day creation narrative, and the Pentecostal/charismatic movement were key issues that shaped the Emmanuel church community. We remember the painful conflict in our membership. We remember family and friends leaving for other communities or leaving the church permanently. Those scars and the legacy of that division remain with us.

Because of our identity and history, Emmanuel is dedicated to having the difficult conversations of the day with each other led by the Holy Spirit. Preaching, leadership training, congregational conversations, small group discussions, book studies, and two different Colossian Forums concerning Sexuality are only part of Emmanuel's continuing effort to grapple with having difficult conversations about this topic in a spirit of love and unity. Our goal is to understand that our primary identity is in Christ, and that being able to disagree in love and respect on issues like gay marriage, gender identity, and homosexuality can only strengthen our witness for Christ and his Kingdom. And it is not simply that our congregation, our membership,

our leadership, and our council have differing, strongly held views on sexuality, it is that we ourselves are sexually diverse. For Emmanuel it is anything but a theological or academic discussion alone.

A decision to adopt the recommendations of the committee, sweeping away as invalid any other position, would be devastating to Emmanuel - likely more so than any previous controversy. It would undermine the years of effort and growth spent trying to understand this issue and learning to disagree with compassion. It would undermine the notion that our unity and identity in Christ is primary and paramount by singling out sexual identity as having heightened importance within the CRC. There is no doubt that members of council would step down from office and perhaps leave Emmanuel, and some members and families would do the same. There is no doubt that many of our members could not or would not hold positions of leadership. It is possible this could even extend to our pastors. But most damaging, our church family would be put in opposition to itself, one side feeling wronged, rejected and ignored, the other feeling justified and emboldened. And this schism would reverberate throughout the community, the schools and institutions Emmanuel supports, the neighborhoods we live in, right down to our individual witness of Christ.

The Lantern Church - Calgary, AB, Canada

The Lantern got fuelled and lit in the Spring of 2002 with high hopes of reaching the communities of Inglewood and Ramsay in the heart of Calgary's heritage beginnings. From the beginning, the congregation regularly repeated the belief that anyone living in the community was a member of the Lantern whether they knew it or not.

The congregants encouraged each other to provide the whole kit-and-caboodle to its neighbours, from music and art schools to theatre shows, from concerts to worship services, from dance exhibitions, to gymnastics and special events. Genuine partnerships were built. Everyone was welcomed to be part of it, Monday to Monday. Everyone.

And so, trusting the Holy Spirit, the Lantern received and celebrated folks from all walks of life. Rich and poor . . . crazy and normal . . . weird and wonderful. Straight and not-so-straight.

Original congregants quickly had to admit that 'those' people were not so different from the very people starting the church. 'Those' people became friends.

The story of the Lantern and her long walk with the gay community isn't so much about legal statements of right and wrong, verses and rules. It's pretty much all about the heart. Those not cut of the same cloth as the heterosexual norm gave The Lantern many gifts.

They became us.

For many years now these folks are not 'those folks'. They are just 'simply folks'.

Through the years, The Lantern has learned to recognize the concerns of the heart and not judge the nature of attractions. That is, The Lantern realized that arguing about the traditional rules of sexuality played a secondary role to expressing the depths of one's genuine soul.

We learned to love those different from us as they learned to accept and forgive us.

They are us.

We are heart-broken that the denomination is considering segregating us and putting The Lantern in its correct theological place. We could no sooner abandon our friends in such a manner as we could sever parts of our arm or leg.

We pursue this not in an arrogant/confrontational manner but rely on the mercy of Christ.

The Road Church - Calgary, AB, Canada

The Road Church launched in October, 2015, as a merger between two 15-or-so year old Calgary church plants (Hillside Community and New Hope). Allowing for our shared identity in Christ to define us over and against the diversity we embody (on a myriad of registers) has been a huge part of our journey, joy, and struggle.

For the most part, our theological diversity, the diversity of thought around any number of issues, as well as the diversity of Christian traditions, experiences, and backgrounds has been incredibly life giving and strengthening. We have learned a great deal from one another, living into the Apostle Paul's metaphor of being members of Christ's one body whose attitude and posture toward one another should be that of curiosity, learning, and mutual encouragement.

Nevertheless, while our tolerance and acceptance of one another is a great thing, how we've lived it might also be a contributing factor to why our community has at some times refrained from engaging in really tough conversations (like politics, like human sexuality). Perhaps "fear of division" has kept us from *really getting into* the messiness of relationship and community founded on Christ's love that transcends disagreement - even emotional, theological, tough disagreements.

Both the interim report and, more recently, the final Report from this Human Sexuality Committee have been catalytic in moving The Road Church to delve into hard conversations around human sexuality. The report has prompted some of our staff and leadership to speak up and "own" their positions which differ from the conclusions of the Report. We have launched and finished a Colossian Way forum with more planned for 2021 and we are also launching "listening circles" on the topic of human sexuality in 2021.

Engaging in these conversations we have found: (a) we regret not having done so earlier, especially for the sake of those LGBTQ+ and allies among us, (b) we learned that we do, indeed, have a great diversity of opinions on this topic. So much that we cannot fairly articulate a "church position" that represents our whole community at this time, but (c) we've learned that BOTH the traditionalists and progressives in our community see our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ as far far far more important than where we land intellectually, theologically, and spiritually on the issues regarding human sexuality.

For this reason, the idea in the Report that office bearers (present and future) would be *compelled to agree* that the conclusions of the human sexuality Report *already have* confessional status if they wish to serve the church would constitute a huge denominational / synodical overreach concerning the authority and autonomy of the local church and council. In the same way, the suggestion that *not agreeing*

with the opinions argued for in the Report *can undermine a person's salvation* in Christ is contrary to the lived experiences of Christian unity amidst diversity of many churches including The Road.

River Park Church - Calgary, AB, Canada

Until recently, we were named First Christian Reformed Church of Calgary. By God's grace, we have been witnessing to the death and resurrection of Jesus since we were established in 1952 as a part of the post-WWII immigration boom in the Canadian CRC. If you've read Rev. Tymen E. Hofman's *The Canadian Story of the CRC: Its First Century*, then you've read a book by one of our earliest pastors. We are glad to be a part of the Canadian CRC he depicts, including the work to develop deeply Reformed Christian organizations in Canada, to bring our best gifts to the larger CRCNA and continue to work to embody our God-given unity within diversity.

Also in Hofman's book, you will hear about the charismatic movement within the CRC, noting specifically the work of Rev. Henry Wildeboer during his time as pastor at our church. If you've read Henry's book, *When GOD Shows Up: A pastor's journey*, then you've heard about a significant shaping part of our history as Henry spends five of his twelve chapters to tell the story of his ministry with us at First CRC in Calgary. That time imparted to us a strong commitment to remain open to the transformative power of the Spirit. Subsequently, under the leadership of Rev. Mike Reitsma, our church became increasingly outward focused and open to the broader community. This culminated in our church launching two church plants in the City of Calgary and being one of the key communities to catalyze with our classis the campus ministry at the University of Calgary.

This outward posture continued as our church created the annual Marda Loop Justice Film Festival, which has become a staple for good conversations about justice city-wide. But this outward posture was always bolstered by spiritual practices and faith formation. One notable example of this is the work of Rev. Phil Reinders, our pastor for many years, who published *Seeking God's Face*. His book points to another way that First CRC (which changed to River Park Church during his tenure) has been shaped by the Spirit - soaking in the richness of Scripture and prayer.

Like many of our individual church histories, we've had ups and downs, times of grieving and times of growth, jubilant celebrations and soul-wrenching laments. But at the centre of our story has always been the same thing: Jesus and his grace-filled invitation to join him in the mission of God by the power of the Spirit. Our current vision reminds us to continually be 'reaching out, drawing in, and creating community.' One senses in that language the centredness of it all - we reach out, draw in and create community all with Jesus at the centre.

One recent part of our history has been to move intentionally in the direction of being a multicultural church. While we have a long ways to go, we rejoice in who God has brought into our community. And once again, as the ethnic and cultural diversity in our community increases, we've renewed our commitment to ask the Spirit to centre us around Jesus, to sit at the foot of the cross, to be transformed by his death and resurrection.

But one of the pieces of work needed to retain a strong central focus is to identify what is not at the centre. Given our history, it is likely no surprise that our community is diverse in terms of experiencing the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. Our community holds deeply diverse cultural norms around things like deference to authority. Like many other churches, our community is diverse around political affiliation. And, to the point of this overture, our community is diverse around how it considers same sex marriage. But we have decided that all of this diversity is welcome, that Christians can disagree about these things, and we trust the Spirit to make us stronger because of our unity amidst this diversity. But none of these topics or conversations are what define our centre. What unifies us is our belief that all Christians confess with their mouths “Jesus is Lord” and wholeheartedly believe that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

We confess that Jesus is our centre. Please do not ask us to confess the conclusions of this committee; their conclusions are not central to the Gospel.

Appendix 2: Letter from members of faculty and staff at Calvin University

Calvin University

December 10, 2020

Dear President LeRoy and members of the Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom (CCAF) Committee,

We, the undersigned faculty and staff of Calvin University, write to you in response to the report that was recently released by the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. We have a number of grave concerns about the report, if ultimately adopted by Synod, and its potential impact on Calvin as a Christian liberal arts university as described by our Vision 2030.

Of primary concern are the report’s conclusions stating that prohibitions of “homosexual sex already have confessional status,” that homosexual sex “threaten[s] a person’s salvation,” and that the failure to call people in same-sex relationships “to repentance is ... acting like a false church” (p. 148). The report’s central claim appears to be at odds with Calvin’s own Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom document, according to which “it is problematic to assert that a topic like homosexuality is either confessional or not” (p. 21). The report insufficiently engages with relevant scholarship from our disciplines, leading to a biased view of the theological, scriptural, and scientific basis for the report. The discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation lack the scientific and hermeneutic rigor and accuracy of prevailing peer-reviewed scholarship and thereby have the potential to compromise Calvin’s academic reputation. In sum, the report and its potential adoption by Synod could undermine the academic freedom of faculty and our standing as a reputable academic institution in the Reformed tradition.

Also of significant concern is the matter of faculty compliance with the Covenant for Faculty Members. Faculty members who have assented to the Covenant have done so when there was no claim that views on same-sex marriage and gender identity were confessional in nature. We would not want our assent to the Covenant to suggest, retroactively, that we support such a claim. Adoption of the report's claims by Synod could place many of us in noncompliance with the Covenant for Faculty Members and the Handbook for Teaching Faculty.

Adoption of the report's claims regarding confessional status would cause harm to our Reformed community by severely impairing staff and faculty's ability to care for our LGBTQ+ students in the way that our conscience dictates and the scholarship supports. While staff are not required to sign the Covenant for Faculty Members, some would consider working for an institution for whom the report was afforded confessional status a violation of conscience. Thus, it would become harder to attract and retain faculty, staff, and students.

Finally, the report's adoption and its declaration that issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are confessional and matters of salvation would be playing into the narrow culture wars' conception of orthodoxy and detract from our larger Christian mission at a time when we want to lead, not just nationally, but globally as agents of renewal.

While we understand that the potential impact of the report, if adopted by Synod, will be discussed by the CCAF subcommittee of PSC, we urge you to also communicate with the Council of Delegates (COD) of the CRCNA that

1. adoption of this report by Synod has the potential to negatively impact Calvin University's status as an academic institution;
2. adoption of the report by Synod has the potential to harm Calvin University's Vision 2030 goals;
3. Calvin University plans to continue to support its LGBTQ+ students by fully including them in the life of the University, and plans to continue to support staff and faculty as they care for our LGBTQ+ students in the way that their conscience dictates;
4. Calvin plans to continue to protect its faculty and staff on these issues especially in their scholarship, teaching, and service.

Believing strongly in Calvin University and its mission, we offer our continued service and scholarly expertise as the discussion of this report progresses.

Sincerely,

[signed by 147 faculty and staff]

5.4.5. The Road Cross- campus Students

As The Road Church Council, we have received this overture from a group of post-secondary students. As the only avenue available to them to have their voices heard at Synod is to follow the flow from Congregation to Classis to Synod, The Road Church Council has adopted this overture to provide the means by which these student voices can be heard both at Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan and at Synod. The following content was written by these students in their own voice. Since at least one of the students involved in this overture are members of The Road we are presenting this overture on their behalf to Classis, asking Classis to adopt the overture and submit it to Synod. We believe it is important for their voice to be heard and we share their concerns.

Overture to:

- 1. Make amendments to the recommendations of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality**
- 2. Create a plan of action to continue careful deliberation of the complex issues around human sexuality (particularly gender identity, same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage) and engagement with people affected by these issues**
- 3. Prioritize the unity of the body of Christ in the CRCNA by delegating the issue of same-sex marriage as a decision of local conscience (while actively studying the fruit of this decision to inform further dialogue)**

I. Introduction to Student Authors

This overture is a collaborative effort by over 25 students across 10 post-secondary campuses. Our team includes student representatives from 6 post-secondary institutions who have ties with the CRCNA (Calvin University, The King's University, Redeemer University, Trinity Christian College, the Institute for Christian Studies, and Calvin Theological Seminary) as well as students from several other post-secondary institutions¹ who heard of our efforts and asked to join us. The school with the most representation was Calvin University with 7 students. Our passion for both the church and LGBTQIA+ concerns inspired us to collaborate, blessing us with new connections and an enriching experience. We are diverse in:

- Gender: Male, female and nonbinary people were represented
- Sexual identity: Both straight and queer sexual identities were represented
- Ethnicity: White American, White Canadian, Dutch American, Jewish, Chinese Canadian, Japanese American, Hispanic, Latino
- Geographical location: Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, South Dakota, Colorado, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia
- Age: 19 to 45 years with 20 of us under age 25 years

Several churches offered to bring our overture to their councils. In the end, this overture was adopted by several church councils and forwarded to the Classical level for consideration.

¹ Augustana University (Sioux Falls), Seattle Pacific University, University of Western Ontario, Wycliffe College (Toronto School of Theology, U of T), Knox College (Toronto School of Theology, U of T), University of Toronto

Why did we choose to write this collaborative overture in addition to involvement in our local congregations? We seek to follow the intended flow of church order from local congregation to Classis to Synod and therefore, many of us are also involved in overture efforts within our local congregations. However, it seemed important to also submit an overture entirely written and signed by post-secondary students because we have unique concerns, a unique voice and may be under-represented in these conversations. Although we were approached with requests from youth, alumni, chaplains and faculty members to join our efforts, we limited involvement in this overture to post-secondary students only. We advised these other contacts to engage via their own congregations. While assembling our team, we discovered three categories of post-secondary students who wanted to be involved.

1. Current and active CRCNA members who have serious concerns with the report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (19 students from 10 CRCNA classes who represent the majority of our team and primary authors of this overture²)
2. Students who were CRCNA members at one time but no longer consider themselves CRCNA members and no longer attend a CRCNA local congregation because of the pain and harm experienced around CRCNA's posture towards human sexuality issues (1 student)
3. Students who are not CRCNA members but are attending schools with ties to the CRCNA and/or care deeply about the flourishing of the denomination (7 students³)

As such, in the Personal Impact Statements section below, students are identified by name, post-secondary institution and CRCNA membership if applicable.

We write to you because we care deeply about the health and unity of the CRCNA. Some of us may even be future ministers or leaders (or current lay leaders) within the CRCNA. We take God's Word very seriously as well as the ongoing flourishing of the church now and into the future. First and foremost, our hearts cry out for unity, forbearance and a commitment to Christian communion. The mystery of God's will has been revealed to us in Christ and its goal is the unity of all things in Christ. "With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into

² CRCNA members who signed this overture: Andrews, Jessica (The Road CRC in Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan); Beck, Renya (Jubilee Fellowship CRC in Classis Niagara); Bouman, Abigail (Neland Ave. CRC in Classis Grand Rapids East); Bouma, Emily (River Park CRC in Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan); Bonsma, Ben (Jubilee Fellowship CRC in Classis Niagara); Bonsma-Fisher, Madeleine (First CRC Toronto in Classis Toronto); de Boer, Shyanne (Redeemer CRC in Classis Chatham); Clemens, Jonathan (First CRC Toronto in Classis Toronto); DeJager, Catherine (Washington DC CRC in Classis Hackensack); Elgersma, Kat (First CRC of Denver in Classis Rocky Mountain); Klompmaker, Kirsten (Jubilee Fellowship CRC in Classis Niagara); Krale, Lauren (CrossPoint CRC in Classis Toronto); Lise, Nathan (Holland Marsh CRC in Classis Toronto); Overbeek, Nicholas (Calvin CRC in Classis Grand Rapids East); Roseboom, Michelle (Terrace CRC in Classis B.C. North-West); Schat, Kyra (First Hamilton CRC in Classis Hamilton); Tuit, Samuel (Neland Ave. CRC in Classis Grand Rapids East); Jodi VanWingerden (Neland Ave. CRC in Classis Grand Rapids East); Tolsma, Theoren Fleetwood CRC in Classis B.C. South-East)

³ Non-CRCNA members (or no longer members) who signed this overture: De Martinez, Brandon (Calvin University); Ford, Maggie (Redeemer University); Murashima, Claire (Calvin University); Newton, Jo (Calvin University); Ross Barz (Trinity Christian College); Salamun, Sean (Calvin University); Van Arragon, Emma (The King's University); Young, Justus (Calvin University)

effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:8-10 NIV).

We acknowledge a charitable posture toward the committee and gratitude for their many efforts so far. We strongly agree with Synod 2016’s grounds for the human sexuality committee in that “the consideration of *status confessionis* is a **weighty matter** that requires **extended and careful deliberation**” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 926-27; *Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report 2020*, p. 3) We lament that from its very inception, both in committee makeup and Synod-assigned mandate, this committee fell short of the deep vulnerability and humility required of “careful deliberation” which, in our understanding of the term, would have required a posture of balanced openness to conflicting Biblical and theological viewpoints and extensive listening, particularly to harmed and marginalized voices among us. We are saddened that the restricted synodical mandate from the outset put the committee members in a tricky and contentious position and our hearts go out to them as our family members in the body of Christ. We experience this as a flawed process with the resulting report falling short of our Reformed heritage and values of fairness, perspicacity, and thorough Biblical scholarship as well as deeply hurtful for its exclusion of the Godly voices and perspectives of LGBTQIA+ family members and allies among us.

II. Background

In response to multiple overtures, Synod 2016 created the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality (henceforth referred to as the human sexuality committee) with a mandate to:

articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin...
(*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 919-20)

At the end of October 2020, the report of the human sexuality committee was published in preparation for deliberation at Synod 2021. We commend the committee for their five years of hard work in addressing a multitude of concepts related to human sexuality including pornography, gender identity, homosexuality, singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, divorce and sexual desire. The report highlights the challenges of our current contemporary cultural context around issues of human sexuality and it seems as though its recommendations are based on a genuine desire by its members to demonstrate loyalty and submission to the authority of Scripture (even though we disagree with some of their conclusions). However, the report is lacking in the following key areas:

- A. It insufficiently meets the goal of “extended and careful deliberation” of these “weighty matters” of human sexuality.
- B. It insufficiently reflects and represents the membership of the CRCNA.

- C. It lacks constructive suggestions or guidance for how our denomination might move forward in unity to continue to fulfill our Christian mission while respecting the lack of consensus on human sexuality issues.

A note regarding timing: We acknowledge that our response is limited by the timeline and will lack the level of in-depth study and analysis we would have preferred to include. As such, major areas of concern will be noted but analysis will be brief or absent. Although “prior opportunity” (according to Article 47 of CRCNA Church Order) was met since the final report was published Oct. 29, 2020, the report is much longer than typical committee reports and therefore the timeline provided between October 29, 2020 to March 15, 2021 was insufficient to thoughtfully and thoroughly engage with all aspects of the 175 pages. To meet the church order requirements for submitting an overture through both church council and classis, overtures needed to be completed by the turn of the year. After taking into account our student responsibilities with midterms and finals, this left very little time in November and December to organize ourselves and respond well to this report. We believe that the “how” of being God’s people is as important as “what” we believe and that we are not called to be frantic or rushed, especially in grappling with such important matters. It seems to us that we and many of our contacts within the CRCNA, out of polite respect and good faith in the human sexuality committee, have waited for the final outcome of this report only to be seriously disappointed in the lack of balance therein. We grieve that the result of this will likely be further delay in providing clear, ethical guidance or any prompt resolution to these issues.

*A. The human sexuality report insufficiently meets the goal of “extended and careful deliberation” of these “weighty matters” of human sexuality as referred to in the report’s mandate (Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 926-27; Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report 2020, p. 3). Article 29 in Church Order 2020 also states “decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be reached only upon **due consideration**” (p. 44). In light of the clearly lacking denominational consensus regarding credible, sincerely held Biblical interpretations around LGBTQIA+ issues, the human sexuality report does not meet an acceptable standard of careful deliberation or due consideration. The human sexuality report can be received as a hearty effort into exploring a traditional view of Biblical and theological scholarship but it remains a partial effort towards due diligence in adequately examining these issues-- certainly not meeting the standard of due consideration required for either *status confessionis*, confessional status or any change to church order. Additional study and listening to supplement the work of the current human sexuality committee is needed.*

- a. The report insufficiently presents vigorous discussion or exploration of Biblical and theological support in favour of same-sex marriage and full inclusion and celebration of LGBTQIA+ people.
- b. The report insufficiently engaged in robust listening. For example, only four LGBTQIA+ people were interviewed for this report (*Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report 2020*, p. 4). In the range of personal stories included in the report, there were no stories that depicted faithful, married same-sex

couples. Theoretical research was given precedence over listening to the voices of real people. In-depth local conversations have also not yet been fostered. There is work yet to do and we cannot consider these teachings settled and binding without generous, extensive listening to our CRCNA members.

- c. There is much contested about the report's claim that "the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status" (p. 149). According to CRCNA church order expert, the Rev. Dr. Henry DeMoor, the report claims confessional status around same-sex relationships where none exists.⁴ (There is also confusion around the use of the terms *status confessionis* and confessional status which seem to be used interchangeably but may have two different definitions.⁵)
- d. The report insufficiently addresses the potential for a new movement of the Holy Spirit or the abundant evidence of the fruit of the Spirit present in the lives of faithful LGBTQIA+ Christians.
- e. The report does not engage in the level of balanced study or formal listening that we have seen modelled by fellow Reformed denominations.
 - i. For example, the Presbyterian Church of Canada (PCC) is currently grappling with the issue of same-sex marriage. Part of its methodology was for its Committee on Church Doctrine to appoint two teams of learned and gifted people. One team thoroughly articulated the Biblical foundations and theological arguments for a traditional view of marriage as only between one man and one woman and the second team thoroughly articulated the Biblical foundations and theological arguments for a view affirming same-sex marriage. They also attended to the growing evidence of harm done to LGBTQIA+ people and its pastoral implications within Christian communities. In this way, they presented a balanced resource to their General Assembly (Synod) and membership for listening and learning regarding this issue. After this document was shared and widely considered within the PCC, the General Assembly decided to draw up legislation that allows for same-sex marriage and ordination of married LGBTQI clergy while it also allows for freedom of conscience on the matter. This legislation was voted on by each local Presbytery (Classis) and about 70% of these voted in favour of the new legislation. In 2021 this legislation is going back to the General Assembly for a final vote.^{6 7} In regards to listening to marginalized people, the 2019 General Assembly declared it "a matter of urgency...[to] provide a means for those affected by this decision to express their concerns, views and pain in a safe environment, and that these concerns be reported back to the

⁴ DeMoor, Henry. *Status Confessionis*, The Network, November 11, 2020. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from <https://network.crcna.org/church-order/status-confessionis>

⁵ Please refer to the overture from First CRC Toronto and its discussion of *status confessionis* and confessional status.

⁶ Email communication with Dr. Charles Fensham (Knox College professor), December 31, 2020.

⁷ Kendall, Stephen and Muir, Don. 2019 *General Assembly: Summary of decisions regarding human sexuality*, June 2019. The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from file:///media/fuse/drivefs-6d44a3bacf91b5e895d80cab61e3d569/root/PCC/2019-General-Assembly-Decisions-re-Sexuality.pdf

2020 General Assembly”⁴ and the 2017 General Assembly had already “established a listening committee, the Rainbow Communion, to create safe space for LGBTQ+ persons to tell of their experiences in the church.”⁸

- f. The report insufficiently engages with the potential that changing our minds to increased acceptance and celebration of LGBTQIA+ people may be a deeply devout response, particularly in relationship to the harm being caused by non-affirming theology.
- g. The matter of current and historical harm done towards LGBTQIA+ people at the hands of the church is insufficiently addressed in this report.
 - i. As we continue in careful deliberation around these human sexuality issues and a Christian pastoral response, it is essential that we highlight and grapple with the issue of harm towards LGBTQIA+ people at the hands of the church. Theology that does harm calls into question the validity of the theology and Biblical interpretation itself.
 - ii. The human sexuality report has the potential to do harm by assuming that those with developmental sexual disorders or those who identify as LGBTQIA+ have a “disordered sexuality” (p.19) and that this is a result of the fall. There is no clear teaching in Scripture on this. This is an exceedingly important distinction due to the close connection between one’s gender and sexual identity and one’s identity as God’s image bearer.
 - iii. Our students have several pastoral care concerns with the report. For example, in the gender identity section, it says that using correct names and pronouns decreases suicide risk, but immediately follows this by suggesting that congregations need not use correct names and pronouns if they do not want to (p.86).
 - iv. Length of process- Although delay is required for careful deliberation, we acknowledge that further delay in providing resolution to many of these issues of human sexuality is painful to individuals, families and congregations.

Continued careful deliberation of the complex issues around human sexuality (particularly gender identity, same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage) and engagement with people affected by these issues is still required. In the overture section below, we offer some practical suggestions to this end.

B. The human sexuality report insufficiently reflects and represents the membership of the CRCNA.

The report was written by a committee that was restricted in both its make-up and mandate. This restriction does not reflect the broad lack of consensus on these issues within the CRCNA and therefore provides imbalanced Biblical and theological interpretations and recommendations.

- a. In the 2014 survey by the Calvin College Center for Social Research 21% of church members, 31% of CRCNA students, and 14% of ministers agreed with same-sex

⁸ Currie, Amanda. Letter from the Moderator of the 2019 General Assembly, September 3, 2019. The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from file:///media/fuse/drivefs-6d44a3bacf91b5e895d80cab61e3d569/root/PCC/Pastoral-Letter-from-the-Moderator-2019.pdf

marriage.⁹ Furthermore, 17% of church members, 34% of CRCNA students and 16% of pastors surveyed said that gay Christians should celebrate the sexual identity God has given them.¹⁰ The human sexuality report misrepresents a singular Biblical interpretation as an already settled matter. There are clearly a spectrum of beliefs on this issue within the CRCNA, and therefore it is unwise and injurious to promote a one-sided report to confessional status in light of this reality.

- b. Committee make-up was restricted to adherence to 1973 teaching regarding homosexuality. Restricting the allowed viewpoints on a study committee is discriminatory, reflects poor governance, and is inconsistent with the CRCNA's historical methods and its ethos of valuing thoughtful, multi-faceted scholarship and engagement.
- c. Synod 2016 requested that a chaplain or campus minister be on this committee as a way to represent the diversity of pastoral vocations in the CRCNA. When the committee member that was a campus minister, and perhaps most closely in touch with students such as ourselves, had to resign in 2017 because of his move to Korea, he was not replaced even though there were still three years remaining before the due date for the report's publication (Nov 1 2020).
- d. Synod 2016 specifically articulated its desire that a person who identifies as 'gender dysphoric' serve on the committee. As far as we can tell, no one who identified as gender dysphoric was ever on the committee, and the committee consultation with one "FtM (female to male) transgender person and his father" (p. 4) was very late in their process (May 28, 2020). Given the clarity of this representation desired by Synod 2016, this minimal interaction from the committee is insufficient.
- e. Even if the compositional mandate of the committee as desired by Synod 2016 had been met, the representation of gender minorities and sexual minorities on the committee and in the consultative process is markedly insufficient, especially noting the perspectival requirement around adherence to 1973.
- f. Representation of young adults was missing on the human sexuality committee. Nobody who signed the report was under the age of 40 years. As post-secondary students, most of us young adults ourselves, we may navigate these questions differently than other age groups. In our experience, the younger generation is generally more accepting of unity amidst diversity and remaining in the tension of uncertainty. We tend to be more sensitive to power dynamics that exist due to the influences of patriarchy, colonization, and racism. These are valued parts of our worldview that we feel will serve us well as we faithfully navigate our present and future cultural contexts. We, as the younger generation, are deeply interested in the content of this report because we will carry the long term burden of its ramifications. We also lament the increasing loss of our age group among church membership. For example, in reaching out to post-secondary institutions, numerous students told us that they could not, with integrity, be involved with this overture because they had "already left the CRC far behind" because of its posture

⁹ *Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re: Same-sex Marriage (majority report) 2016*, Appendix A, p. 49. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/same-sex_marriage.pdf

¹⁰ *Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re: Same-sex Marriage (majority report) 2016*, Appendix A, p. 53. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/same-sex_marriage.pdf

towards LGBTQIA+ people. We ask you “listen to the voices of every generation”¹¹ as the CRCNA has made this a denominational priority in *Our Journey 2025*.

- g. There is a lack of collective congregational leadership experience among the human sexuality committee members.¹² Pastors may become experts on fostering unity among non-unified congregations to continue worshipping together despite disagreement. We can imagine that the wisdom gained through navigating ‘worship wars’, differences of conviction regarding women in church office, and even the recent COVID19 crisis around worship in person versus worshipping online would be helpful wisdom to guide a denomination towards unity even when there is not a consensus around the issues of human sexuality (particularly gender identity, same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage). This type of wisdom does not seem to be accentuated in this report.

C. The human sexuality report lacks constructive suggestions and guidance for how our denomination might move forward in unity to continue to fulfill our Christian mission while respecting the lack of consensus on human sexuality issues.

- a. The human sexuality report implies that holding a view that affirms same-sex marriage is Biblically heretical, condemning such as false teaching with severe words of warning (p. 146-8). Yet there are faithful and respected individuals, leaders and scholars within the CRCNA who hold this view in their best conscience.¹³ We are concerned that some of the teaching in the report will increase divisiveness within the church by unduly burdening those with traditional Biblical perspectives with a fear to remain in communion with those acting upon affirming views (p. 146-8). Generally speaking, it seems that those with LGBTQIA+ affirming views are asking their more traditional church family members to be willing to remain in communion despite disagreement. However, the report encourages those with traditional/non-affirming views to require agreement with a singular Biblical interpretation at the risk of breaching unity.
- b. The report is inconsistent with precedent in CRCNA church history for addressing controversial issues. In previous cases of faithful disagreement around Biblical interpretation (ie. female ordination and divorce), the CRCNA has recognized that differing interpretations may “arise from credible and sincerely held interpretations of Scripture.”¹⁴ Historically, the CRCNA has favored the option of exception at the local level as a way to uphold church unity and allow congregations freedom for careful and deliberate discernment on complex issues. Local discernment can bear healthier fruit on

¹¹ <https://www.crcna.org/news-and-events/news/announcing-our-journey-2025>

¹² The best we could do to research this data was to use the CRCNA’s yearbook website (<https://www.crcna.org/yearbook>). These are the results we found for the 6 committee members who are ordained ministers or commissioned pastors in the CRCNA, noting only their years as pastors of congregations (not total years of ordained service): Jeff Weima-0 years; Mary Vanden Berg-0 years; Paula Seales-4, starting in 2016; Jose Rayas-6, starting in 2014; Charles Kim-20, starting in 2000; Mary Lee Bouma-23 starting in 1997). Adding Matt Tuininga, who supported the report’s creation until nearly the end, adds 0 years of congregational pastoring. Total congregational pastoring years by the report’s signers is 53 years (which includes 16 years from 2016-2020). This total would be close to the amount of years served by many of our retiring ministers all on their own.

¹³ To name a few: Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Dr. Duane Kelderman, and the Rev. Leonard VanderZee

¹⁴ *Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report 2019*, p. 82.

- some vulnerable, contentious matters because it is harmful to remove the “particulars” of an individual’s story to create a “universal rule” in our quest for the false idol of certainty.
- c. The practical ramifications of this report claiming confessional status and a singular “right” way of interpreting Scripture are numerous and devastating, yet they are not considered or discussed in this report. Taking a moment to consider the potential fruit of this report were it to be assigned confessional status demonstrates its own insufficiency. For example, would all current office bearers who agree with same-sex marriage be required to relinquish their positions? Would ordination candidates who consider gender diversity to be a reflection of God’s goodness in creation (and not a result of the fall) lose their candidacy status and be blocked from potential ordination? Would this proposed confessional status apply retroactively to remove church membership for those in disagreement with the report or only apply to new members? Would LGBTQIA+ members who do not feel called to celibacy have to leave the denomination? Would non-celibate LGBTQIA+ people or those who affirm same-sex marriage employed at organizations associated with the CRCNA lose their jobs?
 - d. Corpus linguistics analysis indicates room to grow in the human sexuality report.¹⁵
 - i. For example, more use of “we” in the sections on singleness and pornography indicates that the report writers identify more with these groups of people than the sections on gender identity or homosexuality. In particular, frequent use of “you” with less frequent use of “we” in the report’s section on homosexuality may indicate that people who are not heterosexual may be seen as outsiders.
 - ii. Only one case study in the report uses the first person “I” language (p.41). Direct quotations allow people to tell their story in their own words and prevent paraphrasing towards any particular (intended or unintended) bias.
 - iii. It was good to see the recommendation to listen in the sections on gender (7x) and homosexuality (4x) but vocabulary about listening was low in the report in general and absent in the remaining sections.
 - iv. Scriptural arguments made by negation are higher in the gender identity scripture section while absent in the pornography scripture section. Providing more positive arguments prevents straw man arguments.
 - v. The current human sexuality report uses a more passive voice than the 1973 report on homosexuality. This is concerning because it suggests to readers that the report content is from a neutral, objective source, rather than reflective of the views/interpretations of its authors.

In the introduction of the CRCNA’s *Church Order and Its Supplements 2020*, John Calvin is quoted, “Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our

¹⁵ Catherine DeJager is a 5th-year senior at Calvin University majoring in Computer Science and minoring in Mathematics, Data Science, and Linguistics. She learned Corpus Linguistics at Calvin in 2018 and has been using it ever since. As a lifelong CRC member and an advocate for LGBTQIA+ issues, Catherine decided to use her Corpus Linguistics skills to investigate and respond to this report. Her full analysis can be found here:

<https://gitlab.com/cmd16/crc-sexuality-reports/-/blob/master/results.ipynb>

guide, all will be safe” (Institutes, IV.X.30). Let us rebuild mutual trust and follow careful and due process while letting the Word, love and the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit be our guide as we continue to navigate these complex issues of human sexuality together.

Personal Impact Statements

We offer the following personal impact statements written by the students behind this overture as additional background information. We do not ever want policy decisions or scholarly discussions to be disconnected from the lived realities of our Christian family.

I have long been proud of the CRC for its commitment to love of neighbor, activism, and thorough, well-rounded biblical scholarship. This report flies in the face of all that. I am devastated. I want a church where I know people will love me and respect me as I am, and where I can love and respect other people in turn. I want a church where I can bring LGBT+ friends and know they will be loved and welcomed just like anyone else. I want a denomination where I don't have to caveat with “well, I agree with them except for the LGBT+ stuff”. I want to know that no matter what someone's sex, gender identity, gender expression, and interaction of all those factors is, that their chosen name and pronouns will be used by everyone in the congregation (or at the very least the leaders will set an example) because that's what it means to love our neighbor. I want full membership in a church that doesn't see me as sinful or broken just for who I love. I am bisexual, and I want a church that doesn't force me to choose between a man and celibacy. I look forward to when I move this summer and get to find a new church that is affirming, because I don't want to stay in the CRC given its treatment of LGBT+ issues.

Catherine DeJager, she/her pronouns, student at Calvin University, member of Washington DC CRC

I am a senior at Calvin University. Four and a half years ago, I spent countless hours searching for a college where I could live authentically as a nonbinary queer person and worship God inside the classroom as well as outside. Calvin was the only place I felt that met both requirements to my satisfaction, and I was amazed to find out it was the flagship institution of the CRC. While the CRC may hold an unaffirming stance, plenty of faculty and staff, and almost three-quarters of the students I've met are affirming. I love that Calvin is a space for diverse opinions and mutual respect, and I hope to see the CRC as a whole move in that direction. Yet this report has made me incredibly anxious, both for LGBTQIA+ members of the denomination and for myself. I fear that, if adopted, this report will force Calvin and the other CRC-affiliated institutions to reprimand their LGBTQIA+ students for living authentically as they feel called to. I'm afraid that, as I pursue transitioning (something I have discussed with two of the three chaplains at Calvin University, as well as my therapist, psychiatrist, and doctor), Calvin will be forced by the CRC to take action against me.

Jo Newton, student at Calvin University, they/them pronouns

Having grown up in a CRC church and being a current member, I find the CRC an almost impossible thing to talk about with my non-Christian friends. Since my faith is an important part of my identity I would like to be able to share why it is important to my many non-Christian friends. However, I find it impossible to tell others about a loving God when the Church I am part of is actively causing harm. When I do share with others it is full of caveats stating that the current church I attend, Jubilee CRC, is relatively accepting and that I myself am not, "one of those conservative Christians." Without these caveats my statement of faith would have little bearing with others who can see the harm the Church has done, and being kind and loving people themselves, want nothing to do with the CRC or Christianity as a whole. It is tragic that the part of me that most motivates me to love others, is the part of me that I have to both hide and caveat to actually show others that I love.

Ben Bonsma, he/him, student at Redeemer University, member of Jubilee Fellowship CRC

I am currently an MDiv student who is candidating for ordination within the CRCNA. I experienced a strong vocational call toward pastoral ministry later in life, when my three kids were grade school age. I love my church and the people that I am blessed to be in relationship with through the church. Supportive Christian community has and continues to be one of the most formative aspects of my lifelong faith journey. Three years ago I had an uninspected, inherited theology that was non-affirming. After two years of praying, studying and researching these issues, as well as listening to stories of faithful LGBTQIA+ Christians, I felt compelled by my faith in Jesus to change my theology to become fully affirming. The resulting peace of God around this issue in my life has brought my spirit much consolation. One of the biggest factors for me in this journey was hearing about the harm LGBTQIA+ people had experienced from the very body of Christ that had always been so supportive of me. This human sexuality report has hit me like a ton of bricks. I have felt incredulous, grieved, angry, suffered insomnia and shed many tears. My love of Jesus compels me to fully accept and celebrate my LGBTQIA+ family members and I know that the church's future is in God's hands. However, because I am in favour of same-sex marriage, I am scared that when I am examined for ordination, I will be rejected.

Jessica Andrews, she/her, student at Knox College (University of Toronto), member of The Road CRC

For several generations, my family has been involved with the CRC as active members, teachers at CRC affiliated schools, and preachers. I was raised in the church and attended Fellowship CRC in Edmonton for most of my life. However, I no longer feel at home in the CRC and cannot foresee a future where I return to the denomination. While there were many factors leading to this decision, the biggest one was that I could not be a part of a denomination that does not recognize LGBTQIA+ identities as biblically legitimate. This was not a doctrinal concern but a personal one, as I am a lesbian. Despite the support of many in my congregation, being a part of a denomination that views LGBTQIA+ identity as incompatible with Christianity made it impossible to stay. How can we say we want to emulate Christ while preaching an exclusive, conditional understanding of what it looks like to love our neighbor? How can we claim to represent the love of God when we fail to

adequately love each other? I attend a CRC affiliated university, where I have been working to establish support for LGBTQIA+ students. Despite significant progress, our connection to the CRC has caused many problems. The CRC's position on human sexuality limits the ability of LGBTQIA+ students to integrate within the community and limits the ability of the administration to support students without fear of repercussions. If there is a future for the CRC, it is embodied in the grace of LGBTQIA+ people who remain in a church that does not fully accept them. However, for myself and many other LGBTQIA+ people who were raised in the CRC, staying within the denomination is no longer possible.

Emma Van Arragon, she/her pronouns, student at The King's University, former/inactive member of Fellowship CRC

I personally do not identify as a member of the CRC church. Yet, I am a student at Calvin University, which predominantly consists of students who are of the CRC faith. I was raised in the Roman Catholic church my entire life. My own faith, like others in the CRC, is very important to my wellbeing and plays a vital role in my life everyday. Here at Calvin University, I am honored with the incredible opportunity to have an intimate look into many of the views and beliefs that CRC Christians follow. It allows me to use my own faith upbringing and filter it through this lens, while trying to better understand that even though we are of different faiths, we are still branches of the same Divine Tree.

At Calvin University, we follow the mission statement of "to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly." As Christians and non-Christians alike, we must believe that the LGBTQIA+ community is loved; they too are just as Christian and vital as any one of us, and they must be validated with that same Christian spirit as well. Many friends that I have made while attending Calvin University, who also identify as Christian and the LGBTQIA+ community are personally affected by this Report. Their voices and their views absolutely matter because they too are "Christ's agents of renewal in the world." So, I plead with the readers of this report that you carefully, thoughtfully, listen and follow the recommendations these important voices in this response have outlined. It's so imperative to make considerations and edits for a true, equal, and equitable future.

Sean Salamun, he/him, Student Senate Team Leader at Calvin University

I have attended a CRC church and CRC affiliated schools all my life and have been thoughtfully disciplined and cared for by these communities. As most of the institutions within which I have been disciplined have held what the report refers to as a "traditionalist" perspective on issues of gender and sexuality, I also held this perspective without a great deal of consideration for much of my life. However, in recent years, I have felt called upon to engage with a greater variety of perspectives in this conversation. As I have allowed space for tension, made note of areas of dissonance, and wrestled prayerfully with my theological convictions, my relationships, both with God and with my neighbours, have been enriched and deepened. I am grateful for the report insofar as it thoroughly and thoughtfully provides one perspective on issues of gender and sexuality held by members of the CRC and serves as a much-needed catalyst for dialogue within our denomination. That said, I lament the significant reality that my LGBTQIA+ family members and friends have experienced fear, anger, and grief in reading this report. I am concerned about its implications for myself and

others considering, pursuing, or participating in vocational ministry within the CRC who do not support all of its conclusions. While this report is helpful in some respects, I believe that it ultimately falls short of adequately including the voices of our denomination's LGBTQIA+ members, thoughtfully representing the variety of perspectives held by members of the CRC, and engaging fully with its pastoral and missional implications. Ultimately, I worry that the adoption of this report will further inhibit the fostering of unity (already so rare in the context of this conversation) and create a confessional barrier to full participation for many who currently call this denomination home.

Kyra Schat, she/her, student at Redeemer University, member of First Hamilton CRC

I have grown up in the CRC denomination and it has been something that I have found great comfort in. When I left for university, the CRC was something that I strongly identified with and was a community that I longed to extend in a new city. I especially connected with new friends over our shared CRC background. As I have developed more relationships with people who are not part of the CRC denomination or do not consider themselves Christian, I have become increasingly aware of how the CRC's statement demonstrates an exclusive stance. While the congregation that I grew up in nurtured my faith and encouraged my exploration of my faith – especially through my youth group – I felt an underlying tension about how the church viewed and (un)welcomed the LGBTQIA+ community and how we are called to be in relationship with others. Although I am blessed to have several CRC mentors, friends, and other perspectives who I can discuss LGBTQIA+ inclusion with, I am more hesitant to share my CRC affiliation with others because of its position on the LGBTQIA+ community. Despite personally identifying as a cisgender female, I cannot – and I believe that we as a church cannot – simply ignore, forget, or even worse, punish our fellow believers who identify differently than I do; I am not called to judge my neighbour but to love them. Being part of and growing up in the CRC is something that I treasure and am grateful for, but it is also something that brings discomfort in identifying with because I know the harm that the CRC has brought and will continue to bring until we amend our perspective to be inclusive of our LGBTQIA+ neighbours.

Emily Bouma, she/her, student at The King's University, member of River Park CRC

I have been a member of the CRC all my life and as a child I always thought that it was the best denomination of all. In recent years, and especially upon reading this report, that is no longer my opinion. Church is meant to be a community of people who love and care for each other no matter what. This report does not reflect that love. If I did not feel that I could safely bring my LGBTQIA+ friends into the church before, now I know that I could not. Many of my closest friends have already faced religious harm from other churches and I have always had hope that mine would be different. It hurts to know that my church is still stuck in a place that calls for judgment on LGBTQIA+ members of the community. I cannot comfortably say that I trust in the CRC and its decisions any longer. Our choice should be one of never failing love, like that of Christ, not judgment and harm that could last a lifetime.

Shayanne de Boer, she/her, student at University of Western Ontario, member of Redeemer CRC

The CRC, in unique fashion, has found a way that allows me (a woman) to serve in every possible leadership position. While the denomination's decision to make allowances for differing Scriptural interpretations on this matter has not been embraced by every single individual or congregation within the denomination, I firmly believe that gracious decision has been a witness to the unity of all believers that is possible in Christ—the unity that Jesus himself desired for us—"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you ... that they may be brought to complete unity [so that] the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:21-23). Jesus knew that the church would never have uniformity—but yet he tells us that unity is possible through him.

I have had so many opportunities to love and be loved by the church in ways I never would have imagined—Sunday school teacher, committee member, youth elder, classis delegate, chair of council, seminary student. Through those experiences I have received the love and the Word of God. I have learned about God, about grace and forgiveness extended and received, about the beautiful complexity of the body of believers. I have learned that a life of faith is a life of learning how to hold tension—light and darkness, justice and mercy, truth and human fallibility, strength in weakness, power in humility. These opportunities have been a means of grace.

It pains me that the church has become known more for excluding rather than embracing—particularly among younger generations. Who are we to deny these means of grace to others, especially when thoughtful, educated Christians have arrived at different interpretations with strong Scriptural support? In cases like this, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to extend more grace, rather than place more limits on it. And in so doing, we also have an opportunity and a responsibility to be a witness to the world that "in Christ, all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

Jodi VanWingerden, she/her, M.Div. student at Calvin Theological Seminary, member of Neland Avenue CRC (and previously Calvin CRC, Sheboygan, Wisconsin)

I have grown up within the CRC church and have attended CRC affiliated schools my entire life. Throughout my time at the King's University in Edmonton I have often connected with others who attend CRC churches and this has been a way for me to create many new friendships. However, I have also developed my beliefs and understandings in this time, and have met and formed relationships with many people who do not identify with Christianity or the CRC denomination. I have witnessed people in my life experience exclusion from the CRC due to the views of the CRC regarding LGBTQIA+. I have struggled with seeing this occur and have at times felt embarrassed that the church as a whole has been so exclusive. Upon reading the statement put out by the CRC I was shocked to see just how exclusive it was, and I see that a statement such as this one would be harmful for many people. I am concerned that the CRC is issuing a statement such as this which excludes many from the church and is not loving and accepting of all people equally.

Michelle Roseboom, she/her, student at The King's University, member of Terrace CRC, BC

Growing up in the church has had its impact on my day to day life. My faith growing

up always intersected with my race, ethnicity, sexuality and educational opportunities. Because of this, I have always felt that in some way the church has excluded me because of one of my identities. Although I did not grow up as CRC, I did grow up as Roman Catholic and Pentecostal. Because of this, I often did not have a specific church I could go to as my parents did not feel comfortable staying in one church or another because of their immigrant status or because of how they would discuss topics regarding homosexuality. I ultimately felt that there was no place for me in the church and because of this I decided to leave. With that being said, I felt that oftentimes my sexuality intersected with my cultural aspects growing up. Growing up in a Hispanic household, there was not much said on my sexuality. Because of the conservative culture at home on top of the culture outside of the home, I felt the double pressure of conforming to the societal structures of being "straight" or having to be "straight passing" in order to be loved. In other words, growing up in the United States while growing up within a Hispanic house has had its challenges of accepting my LGBTQ+ identity and because of that I felt pressured to leave the church as a result.

However, coming to Calvin University has opened up the possibility of being gay and also being religious. Although some aspects of Calvin are fairly conservative and although Calvin is progressing as a University there is still much work to be done for LGBTQ+ students on campus. Growing up as gay and first generation in the United States has presented its unique challenges within the education system as well. As a gay first generation college student, I grew up attending mostly private academies, Christian school, and public high school, and now I am attending Calvin, a private Christian liberal arts college. Being able to see several perspectives of higher education has given me the privilege to see how my sexuality has intersected with higher education. For example, at Calvin, I have noticed that in the classroom it is not very inclusive with LGBTQ+ acronyms or simply mentioning the existence of LGBTQ+ students. Because of my experiences at Calvin, I have often felt excluded within the classroom because of the religious component. Because of being at Calvin, I noticed the recent CRC report on Human Sexuality summarizing how being "homosexual" is not tolerated and is a sin. Because of the exclusive nature of this statement, it can affect the lives of LGBTQ+ students on campus whether that be socially, politically, or even in a feeling of safety in the classroom. As a first generation, Latinx/Hispanic, multiracial, gay person of color I felt the need to add my personal opinion on this as the LGBTQ+ community is so expansive and often times queer people of color are overlooked. That is why I see it as my duty to ensure that LGBTQ+ student voices are amplified when marginalized.

Brandon De Martinez, he/him/él, Student Senator at Calvin University

I spent the first 20 years of my life in the closet. When I came out publicly in a Calvin Chimes op-ed, I had to rely on my resilience, support systems and my already strong relationship with Jesus when I faced criticism. Every single piece of criticism was from someone who called themselves a Christian- and almost everyone who called themselves a Christian or used scripture did so in a way that made me feel excluded. Additionally, LGBTQIA+ people who aren't believers will not be motivated to join our churches if they see how poorly we treat LGBTQIA+ individuals who are already in our faith communities.

Upon reading this report, the first thing I noticed was how quick we were to judge LGBTQIA+ individuals. Right away, I felt excluded by the use of “we” to describe straight people in the church and “them” as queer individuals who may or may not be in the church. As I read it from the perspective of a bisexual woman, I noticed that it was lacking the nuance that queer voices would have provided.

However, I saw a glimmer of hope when Jess Andrews and I were able to mobilize a team of over 20 students from 10 different universities across the US and Canada to write and edit a 15-page overture in the course of a month. This is the type of inclusion that I love about the CRC and Calvin; there are people who are quick to volunteer their time and talents to pave a way for marginalized populations. I’m proud of my institutions and am sharing my opinion because I want us to see the negative impact that taking a confessional, non-affirming stance will have on already excluded people in our communities.

Claire Murashima, she/her, Student Body President at Calvin University

III. Overture

Given the background above as provided by students from across North America, we overture Synod 2021 to:

1. Make amendments to the recommendations of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality
2. Create a plan of action to continue careful deliberation of the complex issues around human sexuality (particularly LGBTQIA+ identity and same-sex marriage) and engagement with people affected by these issues
3. Prioritize the unity of the body of Christ in the CRCNA by delegating the issue of same-sex marriage as a decision of local conscience (while actively studying the fruit of this decision to inform further dialogue)

1. Make amendments to the recommendations of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

Recommendation B: We request an amendment to recommendation B that this report be received for information but note that it insufficiently addresses:

1. A careful, in-depth exploration of Biblical and theological foundations for alternate viewpoints that favour the celebration of gender/sexual minorities and same-sex marriage.
2. The diversity of credible and sincerely held interpretations of Scripture within the CRCNA denomination and that 21% of CRCNA church members, 31% of CRCNA students and 14% of pastors agreed with same-sex marriage in 2014, a number likely to be higher at present.¹⁶
3. Practical guidance for moving forward at the level of everyday ministry and for unity in the denomination as a whole.

¹⁶ Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re: Same-sex Marriage (majority report) 2016, Appendix A, p. 49. Retrieved December 31, 2020 from https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/same-sex_marriage.pdf

Grounds:

1. While some of the scholarship is sound in this report, some is contentious or requires additional analysis or supporting references while alternate credible Biblical and theological perspectives have been underemphasized or neglected.
2. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the close connection between one's gender and sexual identity and one's identity as God's image bearer, the teachings in this report may therefore be at risk for leading to harm in peoples' lives.

Recommendation C: We offer an amendment for recommendation C. While we believe this report may be worth considering at the local level as per recommendation C, we have offered a more robust suggestion for engagement in our second recommendation below (and particularly 2.a.iii) regarding a committee that would take this report into account as it curates or creates a collection of resources for engagement of human sexuality content from a balanced perspective, giving voice to both a traditional and fully affirming outlook.

Grounds:

1. We strongly support the use of listening circles and restorative practice theory (as per the Challenging Conversations toolkit) and heartily commend Pastor Church Resources for choosing a direction that fosters openness, vulnerability, humility and forbearance.
2. We recommend that this Challenging Conversations curriculum be seen as an insightful and helpful way to engage with parts of the needed dialogue but since a limited perspective is offered, we caution the risk of harm. People may mistakenly interpret this curriculum as addressing the full spectrum of Biblical and theological scholarship around human sexuality, and people may experience active exclusion because of its limitations.

Recommendation D: We strongly request that Synod not accede to recommendation D "that synod declare that the church's teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status."

Grounds:

1. Confessional status is a "weighty matter" and deeming this teaching as confessional status would cause widespread devastation in our denomination, including mandatory removal of many current office bearers and harm to LGBTQIA+ people and their loved ones.
2. Proposing that the teaching of this report already has confessional status is both erroneous and an overreach.

Recommendation E: We request that Synod not accede to recommendation E "that synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report" due to the aforementioned serious limitations of this report. We suggest that Church Order Article 69-c remain unchanged and not be bound by the teachings of this report.

Grounds: This report may be one of several useful resources to consult in challenging pastoral decisions, but it would be harmful and an overreach of this report to deem it as the primary lens for interpreting this church order article.

2. Create a plan of action to continue careful deliberation of the complex issues around human sexuality (particularly gender identity, same-sex orientation and same-sex marriage) and engagement with people affected by these issues

- a. We request that Synod 2021 create a second human sexuality committee to shepherd the CRCNA through continued careful deliberation and deep listening around these issues. This committee make-up should be devoted to Scriptural authority and pay careful attention to diversity in gender identity (including nonbinary gender identities), ethnicity, binationality, ministry location (including lay leaders and/or post-secondary students), age, and sexual identity and not be restricted to adherence to the 1973 Synod Report on homosexuality. It should contain people holding both traditional/non-affirming and fully affirming views. If possible, we also recommend that this committee have at minimum one member from the human sexuality committee reporting to Synod 2021 and one member that signed the majority report to Synod in 2016 to aid in continuity. We ask Synod 2021 to assign the following tasks to this committee¹⁷:
 - i. As an initial task, create a safe listening space for LGBTQIA+ people associated with the CRCNA to submit their concerns and stories of experiences in the church without fear of repercussion.
 - ii. As another initial task, survey the congregations and classes of the CRCNA to learn how they have (or have not) meaningfully included LGBTQIA+ people in response to the advice of Synod 2016, "That synod advise the classes and congregations to invite, as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p.929) Information gathered may inform best practices for listening to LGBTQIA+ people and for local engagement around LGBTQIA+ issues. It may also demonstrate the distance we have yet to go in terms of meaningfully including LGBTQIA+ people in our midst.
 - iii. As another initial task, curate or create a collection of resources (listening circle curricula, restorative practices, readings, podcasts, videos, etc.) for engagement with LGBTQIA+ issues as individuals, congregations, and classes, perhaps through a collaboration with Pastor Church Resources. This collection should include a balance of both traditional and affirming Biblical and theological articulations around gender identity, same-sex orientation, and same-sex marriage and engage a Reformed worldview. This collection should also include many first-person stories from LGBTQIA+ people without editing them to fit

¹⁷ If Synod 2021 does not decide to adopt our recommendation of creating a second human sexuality committee for ongoing deliberation, we request that these tasks still be adopted by Synod 2021 and delegated to appropriate channels.

conclusions, but intended to help our members hear the complexities of Christian discernment about how to faithfully follow Jesus as sexual beings. It should also include stories of how LGBTQIA+ people have been harmed by the church.

- iv. After i, ii and iii, ongoing shepherding of CRCNA communities will be needed to foster the faithful, ongoing work of listening well to both Scripture and stories, of promoting unity amidst diversity, and of continually gathering feedback for future equipping. These may be tasks for this committee or come under the proposed role described in 'b' below. (It may also be helpful to consider ways to foster conversations at the classical level, or even between congregations from different classes, so that we can experience the diversity of deep convictions within the CRCNA as we engage with this complex conversation.)
 - v. Commission a follow-up survey to the 2014 survey done by the Calvin College Centre for Social Research to gather updated denominational data regarding perspectives on human sexuality issues including same-sex orientation, same-sex marriage and gender identity. If possible, include those who have left the CRCNA because of our denomination's posture towards LGBTQIA+ concerns, especially those who seek to be reconciled with a denomination whose decisions brought them pain or harm.
 - vi. After reviewing previous applicable reports regarding human sexuality (ie. at least 1973, 2016, 2020), discern whether additional work is worthwhile regarding the articulation of an affirming Biblical theology of human sexuality to provide information alongside the traditional Biblical theology espoused in the 2020 human sexuality report.
 - vii. Consider if synod would be well served by a new group of gender/sexual minority synodical advisors (parallel to ethnic and women advisors and young adult representatives). Since a similar overture was submitted but not accepted at Synod 2016, this committee could review the grounds of the 2016 decision, discern if there are new grounds for this request, and clarify any specifics related to who might fit on this advisory group.
 - viii. For a final task, help the CRCNA discern what level of agreement is needed around beliefs related to human sexuality going forward (especially same-sex orientation, same-sex marriage and gender identity). We believe that this 'level of agreement' is at the heart of the questions around confessional status. After ongoing careful deliberation and a renewed posture of deep listening with mutual trust, we hope this committee will be prepared to make prayerful recommendations to clarify our denominational level of agreement related to beliefs around human sexuality. If it is foreseen that some congregations, office bearers and members will not be satisfied with the level of agreement recommended, it may also be wise for this committee to discern and recommend ways to kindly and generously part ways with those whose convictions mean they must depart from the communion of the CRCNA.
- b. We request that Synod 2021 recommend the creation of a new role at a senior denominational level (like the Senior Leader for anti-racism) for promoting church dialogue, education and listening around LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. The COD would be

responsible for further clarification of this role once Synod has recommended it, and it would seem wise for the one holding this role to serve *ex officio* on the committee named above. There is an acute need for raising awareness of the harm that we, the church, have caused to our LGBTQIA+ family in order to foster lament, repentance, restoration and reconciliation with LGBTQIA+ people and each other.

- c. We request that Synod 2021 task Pastor Church Resources with creating a curriculum resource and training for LGBTQIA+ support groups that can be hosted at the local level.

Grounds:

1. Issues around human sexuality and any dialogue around changing confessional status are a “weighty matter that requires extended and careful deliberation” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 926-27; *Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Report 2020*, p. 3). Additional study and listening to supplement the work of the current human sexuality committee is needed.
2. We suggest it is time for renewed listening and rebuilding of mutual trust within the denomination-- to recognize the sincerity of the CRCNA community of believers and the deep engagement with Scripture of so many, even when we end up with different conclusions and convictions.
3. As per the *Rules for Synodical Procedure 2017*, which indicate that for “young adult representatives, the pool of selection will, at least in part, depend on recommendations received from the churches and classes” (p.5; *Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 537; *2015*, p. 673). Our cross-campus student response team would be happy to assist synod in finding LGBTQIA+ young adult representatives who hold a variety of Biblical perspectives (traditional and affirming).
4. Our history since 1973 has shown our difficulty in loving our LGBTQIA+ family well. If we want to truly include them and actively listen to them, we need to take formal actions to support their voices while we continue to engage deeply with these issues. Pastoral guidance has not been enough.

3. Prioritize the unity of the body of Christ in the CRCNA by delegating the issue of same-sex marriage as a decision of local conscience (while actively studying the fruit of this decision to inform further dialogue).

Grounds:

1. In order to continue careful deliberation of the full breadth and complexity of the issues of human sexuality including the multiple Biblical perspectives, there will necessarily be a delay in providing ethical and clear pastoral, ecclesial and missional guidance. During this delay, local congregations should be trusted to make decisions around LGBTQIA+ participation and same-sex marriage. Individuals ought not to bear the brunt of institutional delay.
2. The option of local conscience is in keeping with historical CRCNA precedent in addressing issues in which more than one credible and sincere interpretation of Scripture is possible (as exemplified by female ordination).

3. Gathering additional information on the fruit of local interactions with the LGBTQIA+ community will aid our continued careful deliberation on human sexuality issues at the denominational level.

Signatories:

The following post-secondary students from across the USA and Canada are signatories for this overture.

CRCNA Members

NAME	CRCNA CONGREGATION	SCHOOL
Andrews, Jessica	The Road CRC, Calgary, AB (Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan)	Knox College, University of Toronto
Beck, Renya	Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, ON (Classis Niagara)	Redeemer University
Bouman, Abigail	Neland Ave. CRC, Grand Rapids, MI (Classis Grand Rapids East)	Seattle Pacific University
Bouma, Emily	River Park CRC, Calgary, AB (Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan)	The King's University
Bonsma, Ben	Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, ON (Classis Niagara)	Redeemer University
Bonsma-Fisher, Madeleine	First CRC Toronto, ON (Classis Toronto)	University of Toronto
de Boer, Shyanne	Redeemer CRC, Sarnia, ON (Classis Chatham)	University of Western Ontario
Clemens, Jonathan	First CRC Toronto, ON (Classis Toronto)	Wycliffe College, University of Toronto
DeJager, Catherine	Washington DC CRC (Classis Hackensack)	Calvin University
Elgersma, Kat	First CRC of Denver (Classis Rocky Mountain)	Augustana University (Sioux Falls, SD)
Klompmaker, Kirsten	Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, ON (Classis Niagara)	Redeemer University
Krale, Lauren	CrossPoint CRC, Brampton, ON (Classis Toronto)	Redeemer University
Lise, Nathan	Holland Marsh CRC, Newmarket,	Redeemer University

	ON (Classis Toronto)	
Overbeek, Nicholas	Calvin CRC, Grand Rapids, MI (Classis Grand Rapids East)	Grand Valley State University
Roseboom, Michelle	Terrace CRC, Terrace, BC (Classis B.C. North-West)	The King's University
Schat, Kyra	First Hamilton CRC, Hamilton, ON (Classis Hamilton)	Redeemer University
Tuit, Samuel	Neland Ave. CRC, Grand Rapids, MI (Classis Grand Rapids East)	Calvin University
Jodi VanWingerden	Neland Ave. CRC, Grand Rapids, MI (Classis Grand Rapids East)	Calvin Theological Seminary
Tolsma, Theoren	Fleetwood CRC, Surrey, BC (Classis B.C. South-East)	Institute for Christian Studies

Non-CRCNA Members

NAME	SCHOOL
De Martinez, Brandon	Calvin University
Ford, Maggie	Redeemer University
Murashima, Claire	Calvin University
Newton, Jo	Calvin University
Ross Barz	Trinity Christian College
Salamun, Sean	Calvin University
Van Arragon, Emma	The King's University
Young, Justus	Calvin University

5.4.6. Lantern

**Overture to Classis Alberta South & Saskatchewan (ABSS)
from the Lantern Community Christian Reformed Church, Calgary**

That Classis ABSS overture Synod 2021 (in whatever form) to empower a delegate (COD or other) to discern a process so that the CRCNA can follow, and fuse together whenever possible, two previous synodical decisions for all challenging conversations, including the report on the Biblical Foundations of Human Sexuality (HSR). As a good process is discerned, the COD/Synod 2021 should recommend this process or other 'best practices' to congregations and classes for local and regional use.

- 1) Synod 2016 Decision:** *That synod advise the classes and congregations to invite, as much as possible, the presence and involvement of same-sex attracted members when dealing with matters that affect the lives and discipleship of same-sex attracted members within the CRCNA (Acts of Synod 2016, p. 929).*
- 2) Synod 2019 Decision:** *That synod be intentional about providing opportunity for purposeful dialogue during synod, including the following considerations (Synodical Review Task Force Recommendation 17 or 'k' in the Acts of Synod 2019, p. 808-809):*
 - a) *Schedule time in plenary sessions and/or advisory committee meetings, and/or elsewhere in the schedule of synod to encourage space for dialogue.*
 - b) *Provide time for dialogue in connection with significant and challenging topics and/or recommendations to be voted on, to encourage learning and listening*
 - c) *Develop processes for learning from and listening to each other and the Holy Spirit.*
 - d) *Offer discussion guidelines for being genuinely curious and for learning from each other.*
 - e) *Use the process of a Native American talking circle (found to be effective by this task force) or other methods so that everyone has an opportunity to be heard in a group discussion.*
 - f) *In group discussions, account for diversity and different learning and discussion styles.*
 - g) *Provide tools for committee and group leaders to use.*

Grounds:

- a) *Difficult issues need deep, well-facilitated discussions that promote a deliberative process to help ensure listening and learning.*
- b) *The current model offers space for only a few speakers to voice opinions for or against motions.*
- c) *Shepherding committees have had significant success using listening and learning dialogue methods, as have other bodies such as the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches.*
- d) *Workshop/learning times scheduled in recent synods have provided some helpful examples of dialoguing.*
- e) *Agenda items related to study committee reports have helped determine when dialogue is needed.*

Grounds:

- 1) As we're processing the HSR in our Church, people are saying something like this: The 2016 and 2019 decisions above say that we want to include same-sex attracted members in this denominational conversation. Will we permit God to speak through same-sex people and couples who are doing their best to live as disciples of Jesus?
- 2) There is much good to discuss in the HSR, yet in relation to gay marriage, this report is exasperating some of the young people and adults connected to our Church, as well as surfacing some pain from our past.¹ Some want to leave, and others wonder if they are being pushed out, as they try to love God and the real LGBTQ+ people in their lives whose stories are not represented in the HSR. Specifically the report does not leave room to discuss any hermeneutic that tries to humbly leave room to follow Jesus within a lifelong, monogamous, same-sex marriage. Teaching that does not agree with the conclusions of this report are labelled as revisionist false teaching that does not reflect the true church. We are telling our people that this report does not represent all of who we are as a denomination, and that we have made these two good decisions that can be fused together and help enter some hard conversations that will help us all learn, grow, repent where needed, and try to humbly follow Jesus in our lives.
- 3) We recognize that Synod 2016 decided not to create a recurring panel of same-sex attracted advisers. But Synod 2016 did wisely advise congregations and classes to invite the meaningful involvement of same-sex attracted member when those gatherings are discussing matters that affect the lives of those members. It would seem reasonable that Synod, too, would follow its own advice in this matter. This meaningful involvement is made more possible as Synod discerns new ways for conversation (as per Synod 2019), ways where non-delegates could participate in meaningful ways. So we suggest there is wisdom in Synod inviting the meaningful involvement of same-sex attracted members to Synodical dialogues and deliberations that affect the lives of those members.
- 4) Synodical meetings have not yet utilized the wisdom of Synod 2019, recommendation k. As such, and given the significance of this deliberation around the Human Sexuality report, there is much discernment needed in how to shape a purposeful dialogical process. The COD is in the position, both in terms of representation and authority, to imagine how best to have this deliberation on how to help the CRCNA follow its own adopted recommendation, and to implement it with the appropriate partnerships as we approach this synodical deliberation. Having this process in place, in advance of synodical deliberation, will prepare the way for healthier spirit-led deliberation at Synod.
- 5) The decisions of 2016 and 2019, coupled with a thoughtful process of how to implement them, can be recommended to Churches and classes, also preparing the way for healthier spirit-led deliberation at Synod.

¹We are a small Church that has always welcomed LGBTQ+ people. Over the years, we have grieved over many who have left our Church: some people have found us too welcoming to the LGBTQ+ community, and some LGBTQ+ have left because we're not welcoming enough. To help process the HSR, one of our leaders recently participated in the Challenging Conversations Toolkit Facilitator Training recommended by Pastor-Church Relations - we love the CRC and are discerning next steps. It is also important to note that our Church is also very concerned about exasperated youth and young adults who love Jesus but are having a hard time accepting this report.

5.4.7. RPC Communication

This is a communication submitted by the Council of River Park Church. But it is not a communication of our collective agreements; rather, it is primarily a communication from one member of our congregation that we believe is important material to be included in the discussion on the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. RPC's Council asks that Classis ABSS submit this communication to Synod 2021.

If Adopted by Classis ABSS, we would suggest something like this preamble:

Preamble from Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan

Classis Alberta South and Saskatchewan received the following communication from River Park Church. At our meeting of classis on March 12 2021, classis agreed with the council of River Park Church that the attached communication is worthy of inclusion in the discussion around the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. And thus, as a Classis, we have adopted to send it to Synod. That is not to say that we as a classis agree with all of the conclusions in this communication; rather, we agree it is worthy of inclusion in the conversation and may be helpful in the process of faithful discernment.

Preamble from the Council of River Park Church in Calgary, Alberta

As the council of River Park Church (RPC), we received this communication from a member. That member, aware of the timelines and the procedures related to Synod 2021, had written a formal 'communication,' appropriately informed of us of its arrival, and asked us as RPC council to review it and decide whether or not to adopt this communication. RPC Council, at its meeting on January 21 2021, invited this member and reviewed this communication, and passed the following motion:

That RPC Council agrees that the information provided in this communication is important material to be included in the discussion on the Report to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality and asks Classis ABSS to forward the communication to Synod 2021.

Overview

This communication is intended to honour the process of discernment as a denomination. It seems to me that asking the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Theology of Human Sexuality ('the committee') to perform the significant work of assembling this Human Sexuality Report ('the report') is the first part of the process. Once the CRCNA has received the report, the expectation is on us as a denomination to wrestle with the report. This writing is intended to faithfully follow that expectation and participate in the process.

A handful of initial notes may be helpful. First, I want to express gratitude for the time and energy put into the report by the committee. It is a monumental task. Second, I want to express thanks for the denominational process, notably for the invitation to wrestle with the content of the report. Third, much of this communication is shaped around potential concerns raised by engaging with the report. While there is much in the report that is appreciated, this report necessitates faithful engagement, including hearing strong critiques when these critiques are made in good faith. Fourth, there was not significant enough time to engage the full report. So please consider this simply a highlighting of concerns that I had the time and capacity to address. And again, *please receive this communication in the spirit with which it is intended: as a part of the faithful work of the church to thoughtfully participate in the discernment around a foundation-laying theology of human sexuality.* I too anticipate concerns with what I have written. To me, this is the good discerning work we do as a community, iron sharpening iron.

This report deems its conclusions to have the highest significance: true vs false church

Throughout this Human Sexuality Report, choices are made: exegetical and hermeneutical choices, selection choices on what to include and what not to include, choices on how to summarize the science of the day and how much to trust its conclusions, choices on whom to consult along the way towards making conclusions. Making choices in these matters is common as researchers work toward and finally articulate their conclusions.

What is not common is the level of significance applied to the conclusions of this report. Our denomination has a long history with study committees, and with committees bringing their conclusions to be considered by the CRCNA. Rarely, though, do those study committees assert their conclusions in a way that *intends to speak for the universal church*, the church of all times and places.¹ It seems to me that this one does.

It is important to pause here for a moment. The committee writes about various ‘levels of authority of doctrinal and moral teaching,’ mentioning Scripture, creed, confession, Church Order, and synodical decision, among other things.² And in the recommendations, the committee clearly asserts their conclusions regarding confessional status. But does the committee request that their conclusions be understood to have *merely* the confessional level of authority? No, this committee believes their conclusions are more significant than merely confessional authority. This can be seen in how the committee speaks about our confessions. The committee writes that our ‘confessions are statements that identify who we are within the larger body of the universal church.’³ They mention that Baptists and Lutherans, though having significant doctrinal differences, are still sisters and brothers in the universal church. So if this was a report on infant baptism, with conclusions that match our Reformed Confessions, the CRCNA might acknowledge that believing the conclusions around infant baptism is important to being an officebearer in the CRCNA. But the CRCNA would not call the Baptist denomination a ‘false church.’ Our different beliefs around baptism give us our *distinct identities within the universal church*.

But the conclusions of this committee around human sexuality are held with a drastically higher significance. They do not see their conclusions as *merely* about confessional differences between one denomination and another denomination, all within the universal church. Rather, the committee assesses that teaching anything other than its own conclusions about human sexuality would be ‘false teaching’ by ‘false teachers’ acting like the ‘false church.’⁴

To be honest, I am not aware of any denomination that clearly and wholeheartedly affirms adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, or the use of pornography. But there are denominations that clearly and wholeheartedly affirm covenantal, lifelong, monogamous marriage between two persons of the same sex. There are denominations that would not ask a same-sex married couple to repent because these denominations do not believe that faithful same-sex marriage is a ‘[sin that threatens] a person’s salvation.’⁵ This report condemns those that affirm same-sex marriage, in essence saying that these denominations are ‘acting like the false church.’⁶ *This committee, it seems, asserts that their conclusions speak for the universal church, the true church – since to conclude anything different than this committee is to act like the false church.*

¹ Perhaps some recent examples of such significant conclusions are found in some recent declarations of heresy. Recently, the CRCNA Synod has declared both the Doctrine of Discovery and Kinism as heresies. It seems to us that declaring something a heresy is speaking on behalf of the universal church, and declaring something to be a heresy is declaring something to be false teaching.

² Human Sexuality Report (HSR), 145.

³ HSR, 145.

⁴ HSR, 147-148, where the phrase ‘false teaching,’ ‘false teacher,’ ‘false church’ are all used.

⁵ HSR, 148.

⁶ HSR, 148.

To accuse existing denominations to be acting like the false church is a very significant claim. And from that significant claim would follow a significant result. *If we as the CRCNA affirm this report, and this significant claim, then we should not be asking pastors and churches who affirm same-sex marriage to simply find a more suitable denomination, one that affirms same-sex marriage. Why? Because if we truly affirm this report, we would be encouraging them to join a denomination that acts like the false church.* If we affirm this report as written, we cannot faithfully ask for a reorganizing of denominations around theological conclusions regarding same-sex marriage.⁷ If we affirm this report wholeheartedly, we cannot head towards ‘a gracious separation.’⁸ If we agree with this report, we cannot critique an affirming theology primarily by articulating that it misuses the ‘Reformed hermeneutic.’⁹ All three of these regular talking points are moot if we accept this report. Rather, if we wholeheartedly affirm this report, it behooves us to head in the direction of what this report calls ‘the grace of church discipline.’¹⁰ If affirming same-sex marriage is so grievous as to be a ‘false teaching’ in the body of Christ (not merely a significantly different opinion), then we need to lean into the third mark of the true church and enact discipline on our churches, pastors, elders, deacons and members that hold to this false teaching.

To many of us, such a path feels significantly too radical. That in itself may need to give us pause. Are we that certain about this committee’s conclusions? Are we as certain about this committee’s conclusions as this committee is about their own conclusions? This committee sees their biblical evidence and conclusions as having the highest significance possible within the body of Christ. This committee asserts that perspectives on same-sex marriage separate true teaching from false teaching; they separate those acting as the true church from those acting as the false church. *If the CRCNA desires to adopt this report and affirm these exceptional conclusions, it behooves us to evaluate their biblical research carefully and meticulously. Their conclusions need to be indisputable. And as you will see, I do not find it to be so.*

Concerns Regarding Interpretations of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2

Due to both the length of the report and the short timeline, I am unable to evaluate all the sections of this report. Instead, I chose to take a closer look at what is some of the most significant exegetical work of the report, namely, its interpretation of Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and Matthew 19. The committee not only begins its section ‘A biblical theology of human sexuality’ with this exegetical work, but it also continues to refer to these three passages as foundational throughout their report. In many senses, the conclusions around these three passages underlie

⁷ For instance, there has been a fairly common proposal that one solution to our denominational disagreement around same-sex marriage is to realign churches with denominations that agree with their perspective on same-sex marriage. One clear articulation of this involves two CRC pastors and two RCA pastors interviewed by a third CRC pastor where they suggest that the RCA and CRC simply realign around these two different conclusions regarding same-sex marriage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkxeYktgVaM&t=5s>. We would suggest that adopting a proposal like this one would mean we would need to reject this report’s conclusions as being as clear and significant as the report itself sees them.

⁸ Here is an example of a CRC pastor asking for a ‘gracious separation’:
<https://www.thebanner.org/columns/2020/02/lgbtq-incompatible-means-gracious-separation-is-the-church-s-best-option>.

⁹ It seems to me that one of the central critiques of the 2016 communication from Classis Grand Rapids East (GRE) by Dr. John Cooper was that the GRE study on same-sex marriage did not properly use “Reformed hermeneutics.” Whether Dr. Cooper is correct is up for discussion, but our point here is that this current Human Sexuality Report is raising the significance far beyond hermeneutical rules within a particular denominational tradition.

¹⁰ HSR, 121.

their entire report. Since I did not have time to consider every section of the report, I have chosen to spend time to evaluate their exegetical work on these ‘foundation-laying’ passages.

1. Disagreement about interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 as ‘one interdependent unit’

The report begins its section articulating a biblical theology of human sexuality by interpreting Matthew 19, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. In that section, the committee sees Jesus’ use in Matthew 19 of quotes from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 as demonstrating that “Jesus explicitly treats [Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25] as one interdependent unit.”¹¹ Later, it says again that Jesus appeals to these two passages as one unit.¹² And then, throughout the report, it speaks of this section of Scripture as ‘Genesis 1-2,’ as if these two sections are actually one unit. I would suggest that using phrases from 2 separate units does not mean that Jesus is treating these two units as one; such an interpretation is overreaching eisegesis. This conclusion is not ‘read out’ of Matthew 19; rather, it is ‘read into’ Matthew 19.¹³ In addition, it is clear that these two units are separate units in the book of Genesis. To understand this critique, let us begin by looking at Genesis itself.

Astute readers of the book of Genesis have noted the division of the book through observing the ten uses of the Hebrew word *tōledōt*. Notably, the first occurrence of *tōledōt* is in Genesis 2:4, setting Genesis 1:1-2:3 apart from the rest of the book. In fact, one of those astute readers is Dr. Albert Wolters (a member of the committee that produced this report). In his book, *Creation Regained*, Dr. Wolters separates Genesis 1:1-2:3 off from the rest of Genesis. He speaks about this opening creation story as ‘setting the stage’ for what follows:

The drama itself begins in Genesis 2, opening with the words, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created” (KJV). This is the first of ten sections in Genesis introduced by the phrase “these are the generations of . . .” in which the term *generations* (Hebrew *tōledōt*, literally “begettings”) seems to mean something like “historical developments arising out of . . .”¹⁴

I would agree that seeing the distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 is deeply significant to a good reading of Genesis, and that a close observation of the text would suggest that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, though being connected, are far from being ‘one interdependent unit.’

Rather than seeing Genesis 1 and 2 as one interdependent unit, a much better interpretation of their connection is precisely as Dr. Wolters notes. Genesis 1 sets the stage with a grand introduction which includes the introduction of humanity (in general) as being made in the image of God, male and female, followed by Genesis 2 as an ‘on the ground’ moment in history where a specific man (Adam) encounters his specific partner (Eve). Notably, Adam and Eve are not mentioned in Genesis 1. This ‘one flesh’ connection between Adam and Eve begins the drama of humanity’s “development of the created earth....In a single word, the task ahead is *civilization*.”¹⁵ Thus, the movement is *from* Genesis 1 as a broad introduction with a creation mandate given generally to all humanity *to* Genesis 2 as a particular *working out* of the creation mandate in a particular couple. Indeed, rather than connecting Genesis 1 to Genesis 2, the author of Genesis interconnects Genesis 2, 3 and 4. These three chapters are all in the first *tōledōt* section (the second use of *tōledōt* is in Genesis 5:1). The first ‘historical development’ of the creation shows the

¹¹ HSR, 16.

¹² HSR, 17.

¹³ ‘Reading out’ is one way to talk about ‘exegesis’ while ‘reading into’ is one way to talk about ‘eisegesis.’ A faithful interpreter’s job is never to ‘read into’ a text more than what it intends; rather, we are called to discern what is in the text itself, and ‘read it out’ of the text.

¹⁴ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1985), 37.

¹⁵ *Creation Regained*, 36.

reader an entire movement: Adam and Eve are put in the garden of Eden, together they fall and receive the curses from God, and then Adam and Eve begin to 'multiply' by giving birth to Cain and Abel and sin begins to 'multiply' as seen in Cain's murder of Abel and Lamech's desire to 'one up' Cain. Indeed, that first *tōledōt* section gives the reader an initial glimpse into the development of civilization. In one interconnected section defined by the use of *tōledōt* (Genesis 2-4), we move from the perfect garden into a devastating avalanche of sin so quickly that the reader echoes the people at the end of that interconnected section who 'call on the name of the Lord' (Genesis 4:26), and the narrator quickly moves us to the second *tōledōt* focusing on Adam and Eve's third son, Seth, and the historical development of that genetic line.

If Genesis itself makes it clear that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are not 'one interdependent unit,' then what are we to make of Jesus' use of quotes from both chapters so quickly in succession? To me, it seems that there is no need to 'make anything' out of Jesus' use of these two quotes from Scripture. Jesus is responding to a specific situation. He is asked about divorce, and he responds to that specific question, referencing both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, and in this particular occasion, connecting those two quotes together. Indeed, the movement even follows the natural movement of Genesis – from a general introduction (Genesis 1) to the specific situation of Adam and Eve's 'one fleshness' (Genesis 2) as a response to this specific question about the divorce of a man from a woman. What a beautiful and articulate response! But why should that response of Jesus in Matthew 19 force us as readers to ignore what is clear about the unit division in Genesis?

Jesus often quotes Scripture. Later in this same chapter, Jesus quotes five of the ten commandments (Matthew 19:18-19). But Jesus quotes them in a different order than either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5. What should we 'make of' Jesus' re-ordering the commandments, when he puts honouring father and mother at the end? Maybe an astute reader of Matthew 19 sees a reason for this reordering, and would bring that out in a sermon on Matthew 19. But even if we can discern a reason for Jesus reordering as he responds in this particular situation, does that mean we should rearrange the order of the commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 because of the way Jesus quotes them in Matthew 19? I hope not. The committee's decision to ignore the natural divisions of Genesis because of the way Jesus quotes from Genesis 1 and 2 seems just as overreaching.

Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are clearly distinct units in the book of Genesis. Indeed, many astute readers of Genesis see Genesis 2-4 as a literary section, and Genesis 1 as an introduction to the whole book, drawing an even stronger line between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. For this committee to continually treat Genesis 1 and 2 as 'one unit' is a concern.

2. More carefully listening to the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28

One may ask, "Why does it matter if Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are seen as separate units?" It seems to us that understanding the shape of Genesis, and specifically the way in which Genesis 1 functions, is important in understanding the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28.

Genesis 1 has a distinct quality from the rest of the book of Genesis. As seen above, Dr. Wolters frames it as 'setting the stage.' Some might say that Genesis 1 offers us the 30,000 foot view. This contrasts with the whole rest of the book of Genesis which offers us an 'on the ground' perspective. Genesis 1 functions as a general introduction; the rest of Genesis follows as it works out the historical developments.

So how are we to hear Genesis 1:28? First of all, we need to hear it as part of the introduction. It is not a mandate given to specific individuals. Adam and Eve have not yet entered the stage. It is part of the introduction, given generally to 'all humanity.' And this matters, because we North Americans have a habit: individualism. We tend to hear things as individuals. So it is not surprising that we hear the creation mandate as asking each and

every individual one of us to 'be fruitful and multiply.' But that's not the best way to understand it. We fulfill this mandate, not just *I*. So is it permissible for a married couple to decide not to have children? Yes, because together we fulfill this mandate as a community, and each individual married couple does not need to fulfill it on their own. This makes sense given the 'collective' mindset of the ancient Near East. Here we have a general introduction given from 30,000 feet that comes with a corporate mandate. We cannot even yet see every individual 'on the ground'; we have not even met any named individuals yet.

Second, our Reformed tradition has a long history of seeing in this creation mandate so much more than simple biological reproduction. We have a habit of calling Genesis 1:28 not only the 'creation mandate,' but also the 'cultural mandate.'¹⁶ We call it that because we are fruitful *in many ways*. Hear again the phrase, 'the fruits of your labour.' That old phrase has a double meaning. It has a connection not only to a woman's labour in giving birth, but is more commonly used about any human labouring in our vocational fields. Like God, we too create. We build. We grow things. As Dr. Wolters discusses, the creation mandate itself is just as much about forming creation, 'filling the earth' not simply with humans, but with human-created culture and cultural artifacts.¹⁷ And once again, there are many ways to collectively fulfill this corporate mandate as each of us see our particular life and work connected corporately to the whole.

Once we see that Genesis 1 is a general introduction, that the creation mandate is a corporate mandate, and that cultural formation is also a part of the mandate, we are able to recognize that it is not essential for every single human to use their biological capacity for reproduction in order to be faithful to God's mandate in Genesis 1:28. It is easier to see that, already from the beginning, singleness easily fits within a corporate understanding of the creation mandate. Historically, our Reformed community has also recognized that, given this corporate mandate, contraceptives also become a possible choice. And people participate in the mandate not only through biological reproduction, but also through many other forms of human creativity.

Given all of this, it is a challenge to understand or agree with the committee's statement that to exercise our male or female sexuality through procreation 'is essential to fulfilling God's creation mandate.'¹⁸ This statement seems potentially at odds with a careful reading of the creation mandate as seen above. If we want to affirm such a statement, it becomes very important that we do so by *noticing the collective nature of the creation mandate*. Applying this statement from the committee to each and every individual would be a misinterpretation and a misapplication of the creation mandate. But applying this statement to the church as a community, as a corporate reality, is appropriate to how Genesis situates it. I wish the report was more careful to attend to this important distinction, as noting this distinction has significant impact on how we are called to embody our human sexuality.

Concerns Regarding the Overreaching Use of the Creation-Fall-Redemption Framework

What follows is a whole set of thoughts, including concerns, about how the committee uses the creation-fall-redemption framework as they lay the foundations of their report. Indeed, the very first paragraph of the section entitled 'A biblical theology of human sexuality' begins like this:

¹⁶ See, for example, the writings of both Richard Mouw and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 16. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 32.

¹⁷ *Creation Regained*, 35-41.

¹⁸ HSR, 17.

Reformed theology reminds us that a good biblical theology follows the outline of the great moments of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Our Lord himself took this approach when the Pharisees asked him about what in their day was one of the divisive questions of sexual ethics.

With such a beginning, we are quickly alerted not only that the committee sees this creation-fall-redemption-consummation approach in Jesus' response to the Pharisees, but also that this committee holds this approach or framework up as an example of good process for good theology. As you will see below, there are many good ways in which the CRCNA has enjoyed and been blessed by this framework, but this framework has also created some problems.

1. Enjoying the creation-fall-redemption framework in the CRCNA

The CRCNA has long utilized the frame of 'creation-fall-redemption' (and consummation or 'new creation') in two ways. We have often used the creation-fall-redemption framework as a way to provide a glimpse of the narrative movement of Scripture itself. And we also have used this creation-fall-redemption framework as a way to see all of life as people in God's great story. That second way, our 'Reformed worldview,' helps us to understand much about the created world around us, our sense of vocation, and how the gospel calls us into a whole-life response. For a moment, let's enjoy these two particular ways that the creation-fall-redemption framework has supported the CRCNA.

Seeing the movement of Scripture through the frame of creation-fall-redemption is so clear to many of us it sometimes goes without mentioning. Though we are not alone in this, the Reformed community has long noticed that the large narrative arc of Scripture begins with a good creation. We soon hear about the original sin of Adam and Eve, followed by the curses brought on this good creation by their fall into sin. And then, already seeded in God's response to that sin, in the midst of articulating the curses, we hear hints of God's intervention in a redemptive way ('he will crush your head'). The majority of the pages of Scripture articulate the large movement of God's redemptive work, finding its centre in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But even in that centre in Jesus, we find the first fruit of the end, the 'new creation,' as Jesus resurrection is the 'new creation' breaking in, guaranteeing that all things will be made new. The whole story of Scripture concludes by painting for us a picture of that new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. Indeed, our Reformed tradition has long enjoyed this grand narrative arc as a way to see the biblical revelation of God.

But the Reformed tradition does not only use this creation-fall-redemption framework to help us see the narrative arc of Scripture. We also use that same framework as a lens to help us see our own lives, indeed our whole world. As such, we have called it a 'Reformed world-and-life view' or 'Reformed worldview.' While many church communities use may use this creation-fall-redemption framework for Scripture, its application as a lens to see all things, as a worldview, is a bit more distinctive to our Reformed tradition. So we will pause a little longer to enjoy the way we have been served by this gift.

We have been shaped by this creation-fall-redemption worldview in our liturgical and confessional life. Consider this document we have called *A Contemporary Testimony: Our World Belongs to God*. This Reformed expression of the Christian faith originated within the CRCNA and continues to be used in our worship life and as a guide for our faith. After a preamble, it notably begins with three separate sections entitled 'creation,' 'fall' and 'redemption.' After including other sections, it concludes with 'new creation.' And while this testimony covers the narrative arc of Scripture, it is not simply or only a summary of Scripture. It is also an extension of this framework into aspects of our life together as the people of God: education and community, rest and leisure, science and technology, government and public justice.

Indeed, we have enjoyed letting this Reformed worldview shape our vision of vocation. This creation-fall-redemption framework has become a staple in many of our Christian day schools, and notably in the universities shaped by the Reformed tradition. Assigned readings in those universities include books like the one mentioned above, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, by Dr. Albert M. Wolters. In this book, Wolters helpfully translates the work of someone earlier in our Reformed tradition, Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd. With chapter titles of ‘creation,’ ‘fall’ and ‘redemption’ (among others), Wolters treads out for us a worldview that refuses to accept any division between sacred and secular. A second book commonly used in our Reformed universities is *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* by Dr. Cornelius J. Plantinga. In both of these books, we hear clearly that all of life, in all of its created variety, falls under the Lordship and leadership of our God, and so all of our life is part of our vocation of responding to God.

Together, through these three resources and many more, the CRCNA has made certain that we recognize how education, politics, science, family, church and more all fall under our human vocation to follow Christ (again, with this in mind, some have referenced Genesis 1:28 as the ‘cultural mandate’¹⁹). All of these cultural domains are already embedded in creation, awaiting the unfolding work of humanity. All of this is already a part of the good creation. But then again, all of these cultural domains are also affected by the fall and in deep need of redemption. As Wolters writes, “Nothing is ‘neutral’ in the sense that sin fails to affect it or that redemption fails to hold out the promise of deliverance.”²⁰

2. How ‘significant’ should we find Jesus’ use of this framework?

While I want to acknowledge the goodness of this creation-fall-redemption framework in the history of CRCNA, I was struck by what felt like *an inappropriate weightiness with which the committee spoke about this framework*.

Let us first notice the significance this committee gives to the shape of Jesus’ response in Matthew 19. The committee notes that, in responding to the Pharisees’ question about divorce, Jesus does not point first to humanity in its fallen state. “Rather, he grounds the ethic of marriage in the purposes of God from creation. It is just as significant that Jesus does not immediately point his hearers to the nature of human sexuality in the new creation. He understands sexuality in creational terms.”²¹

We would agree that this is what Jesus does, and we appreciate the fact that the committee puts on display for us the movement of Jesus from *creation* through the *fall* and into *redemption*. This is a good observation and true of this particular response from Jesus.

The trouble comes, in my opinion, when this choice of Jesus for this one particular situation seems to be given a bit of an exalted or enshrined status by the committee. You will notice above that the committee seems to find it significant that Jesus, when he is responding to a question about marriage, does not start with the fall. And that it is ‘just as significant’ that Jesus does not start with the new creation. Again, I am not sure why this committee seems intent to give this *weightiness* to Jesus’ choice, but it seems fully inappropriate once we look at a couple other passages.

First, in another question about marriage, Jesus seems to start with the new creation in his response (Matthew 22:23-33). The opening line of this unit says, “That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to [Jesus] with a question” and they go on to ask a question about a woman who marries seven brothers who die in succession and

¹⁹ Though it is notable that while Wolters acknowledges this, he prefers ‘creation mandate.’ *Creation Regained*, 36.

²⁰ *Creation Regained*, 67.

²¹ HSR, 15.

then she herself dies. Jesus responds by saying, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.” We would suggest Jesus moves quite directly to “the nature of human sexuality in the new creation,” the very thing the committee says it is ‘significant’ that Jesus does not do in Matthew 19.

Second, it seems that Mark 10 tells the same story about Jesus that Matthew tells in chapter 19. In Mark 10, the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask him the same question. How does Mark record Jesus’ response? In Mark, does Jesus start with creation, move through the fall, and then say, ‘I tell you’ as a way to assert his messianic authority as the Lord of redemption? In short, does Jesus follow the ‘significant’ order the committee sees in Matthew 19? Not at all. In fact, a brief glimpse at Mark 10:1-10 with this report in mind would suggest that Jesus *starts with the fall, moves to creation, and never gets to redemption*.

Does the shape of Jesus’ response in Matthew 19 carry ‘significance’, but not the shape of his response in either Matthew 22 or Mark 10? It seems to me an exceptionally arbitrary choice to ascribe significance to one while not even mentioning the others. I feel this committee ‘reads into’ this particular passage more than it is intended to articulate, giving it more methodological weight than it was meant to bear.

For me as a reader, the rhetorical effect of statements like ‘it is just as significant...’ is powerful. Phrases like that may give the reader the (false) impression that Jesus’ was consistent in using this creation-fall-redemption framework, that recognizing this framework in Matthew 19 is undoubtedly important, and therefore that if we want to follow Jesus, we also should use this creation-fall-redemption framework. This would be a dangerous conclusion.

Further, in talking about the ‘significance’ of this creation-fall-redemption movement of Jesus’ response, it feels to us that the committee (intentionally or unintentionally) translates that ‘significance’ to their own choice to shape their theological response using the creation-fall-redemption.

3. Concerns when the framework is used to discern ‘creational order’ or ‘norms’

Again, we may be asking, “Why does all of this actually matter?” Let me try to point in a few directions where I have concerns, places where I think it actually does matter whether we are holding out methodologies with humility or with certainty.

As I noted above, the Reformed community has been enriched by and has deeply enjoyed the creation-fall-redemption framework, both as a way to see Scripture and as a lens through which we view our life and our world. Included in that Reformed worldview is that we have a strong sense of the goodness of creation. And we have a sense that, already at creation, God embedded ways in which to understand and unfold these aspects of creation faithfully. This is part of why the Reformed tradition has cherished chapters like Psalm 19 and 119.²² We trust that there are faithful ways to do education, good ways to shape a family, redemptive ways to shape our political life and such a thing as normative aesthetics. We often talk about discerning those faithful ways as trying to understand ‘creational norms’ or the ‘creation order.’

We talk about it this way because of our deep trust in the original goodness of creation. But one question always arises: “How can we discern God’s original intent embedded in the goodness of creation?” It gets complicated both because we and the rest of creation are affected by our fall into sin, and exhibit not only goodness, but also brokenness. So, as Paul says, “we see through a glass darkly.” I would not be surprised if the Reformed tradition, perhaps especially in some philosophical wing, has a whole history of discussion and

²² For instance, see “The Good News of psalm 19”, the introduction to Calvin G. Seerveld’s *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980).

debate around this question, attempting to answer *how* we discern God's creational norms. I myself catch a glimpse of those conversations through the writings of Dr. Calvin Seerveld for aesthetics, through my former engineering professor, Dr. Charles Adams, as it came to technology, and from Dr. David Smith in terms of education, just to name a few.

It seems to me that all of these people have gently and deliberately held together God's revelation in Scripture and God's revelation in creation (including culture and our experiences of it), listened carefully and in community, and humbly offered their conclusions as part of a hermeneutical spiral, hoping to come closer to embodying God's *shalom* in these cultural domains. When I moved to Canada, there seemed a whole network of organizations humbly working in various cultural domains, for example, the Christian Labour Association of Canada, as they discern God's 'norms' for labour relations.

But it is important that while we note some of our successes, we should also note deep failures in discerning creation norms. It was the Reformed church that interpreted God's revelation in Scripture and creation and, out of their interpretation of that dual revelation, *shaped apartheid believing it to be a faithful political response*. And it is not just the Reformed church that has gone too far in 'reading into' Scripture and creation. Christians over much of history have read Scripture and creation in tandem *to support slavery and to minimize the participation of women in society*.

In this context, let me wonder aloud about this creation-fall-redemption framework. As said above, we love how that framework helps us to see the narrative arc of Scripture. And we have used that framework as a lens to shape a Reformed worldview. But I wonder if sometimes we hold that framework as a philosophical lens through which we examine Scripture. It is this third way that, in my mind, has at times overlapped with the deep problems noted above. Rather than listening to Scripture speak as we normally would, using a Reformed hermeneutic that clearly asks how the original audience would have heard the text, it feels to me that we have sometimes 'mined' passages of Scripture for 'hidden gems' which the original audience may not have heard and the original author may not have intended. This is notably a concern when we are seeking out 'creational norms' by 'mining' the creation passages of Genesis. Indeed, to me, this philosophical overlay is an underlying reason why the committee needs to improperly connect Genesis 1 with Genesis 2. This connection, as shown above, is most definitely not 'read out of' the text and form of Genesis. Instead, it is 'read into' Genesis, imposed from above, not at all sensitive to the text itself.

I imagine there is a history of conversation around this of which I am simply not fully aware. I have heard some CRCNA pastors say things like, "But if God is the author, he can have intended things that the original audience would not have known." I believe this is true. And for me, the place where we lean into that the most is when we preach Christ in the Old Testament. We see the story more clearly now that we have seen Christ and Christ crucified. I am not so certain that we are called to 'more clearly see' creational norms. And as noted above, one thing is clear: we have a history of mistakes when we have tried.

This history should serve as a clear caution about reading too much when we are discerning God's revelation in Scripture and creation together, seeking to discern 'creational norms.' In some very painful ways, it seems that we as Christians, indeed Reformed Christians, have a habit of looking around us, deciding on what is 'normal' and then looking for Scripture passages that might affirm what we already want to see as 'normal,' and then we call it a 'creational norm.' The choice made by this committee to rely on creational norms raises questions and potential concerns, especially given the places in our past that have brought painful lament and repentance (apartheid, slavery, mistreatment of women).

4. Concerns when the framework mutes the messiness of Scripture and our stories

If 'over-interpreting' creational norms is one potential concern, there is a second concern as well. The second concern is that sometimes, given the tandem application of a more

philosophical overlay of the creation-fall-redemption hermeneutic and the desire to discern creation norms, we simply miss telling 'the whole story.' With these two powerful forces operating together, we have the strong potential of wrongly sanitizing the story of Scripture and sanitizing the story of our lives. We easily 'read over' pieces that do not fit our decided narrative and our discerned normative conclusions. The creation-fall-redemption framework and the application of creational norms can wrongly 'erase' parts of reality. In other words, the complexity we encounter in Scripture and in our lives sometimes gets simplified in ways that may stretch the evidence to fit the predetermined conclusions.

Take, for example, this report's lack of engagement with the story of Tamar (Genesis 38). While the report engages with much of the polygamy in Scripture (and even that engagement sometimes looks too 'neat' to us²³), the story of Tamar is an exceptionally messy story. Tamar plans to have sex with her father-in-law, Judah. She dresses up, picks a location, and conceals herself enough that he will not know who she is. Judah and Tamar have sex, and Tamar gets pregnant. This sexual act is clearly 'out of bounds.' And yet, does Scripture show Tamar to be repentant? Not at all. Judah commands that she be brought before him to be burned to death. Before she arrives, she sends a message, "I am pregnant by the man who owns these" and she sends along Judah's seal, cord and staff. What is the response? The community does not ask both Judah and Tamar to repent. Instead, Judah says, "She is more righteous than I." How does this story fit in the neat delineations of this report? I would note that this messy story, and others like it, simply are not mentioned in this report. But where does this story come up again in Scripture? It shows up when Tamar is mentioned in the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:3). Scripture did not mute the messiness.

This story of Tamar is a Scriptural example, and perhaps there are all sorts of sensible reasons for not including it, although honestly, I wonder how it would fit in the tidiness of the report. But how about stories from today? Are there stories from today that a report hoping to make a very clear decision might avoid? Are there stories in our communities that a report like this one before us simply ignores or 'erases'? Did you notice, in reading the report, that it tells more than 30 stories? Did you notice, in reading the report, that there is one very significant, and fairly common, story that is simply never told? I wonder why the report simply never includes any stories of a couple in a same-sex marriage that seems by all accounts to be flourishing in faith, in marriage and in their community. It is precisely the multitude of these stories that is bringing about the very questions this report is intended to address. And yet never once, in all of its over 30 stories, does this report wrestle with the reality that many of us are confronted with: a seemingly faithful, flourishing same-sex marriage. Is such a story missing because it does not fit the normed narrative that this report desires to present?

It seems to me that this committee has overlooked some stories that would add a messiness to their conclusions, both stories in Scripture and stories in our churches. To me, these omissions weaken any conclusions of the report.

²³ For instance, on page 135-136, the report makes sure to distinguish between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' ways of talking about things that Scripture records. They are clear that all the occasions of polygamy in the Old Testament (it mentions 'over forty key individuals in the Old Testament were married to more than one woman,' including Abraham, David and Solomon) are 'descriptive.' The report then goes on to say, "In fact, in the case of many Old Testament figures the Bible describes the pain, division, and strife that emerged within these polygamous relationships, thereby implying significant disapproval." While we fully agree that monogamy is the faithful path of following Christ, this back-to-back interpretation seems deeply biased. Why is it that telling stories about polygamy without noting the pain and strife is considered 'descriptive,' but then when telling stories including the pain, division and strife the narrator is implying significant disapproval. Why is one story of polygamy 'descriptive' and the next 'prescriptive'? It seems to us that the only answer is that this committee is coming to these texts, not to listen to their messiness, but to 'read out' of these texts what they wish these texts were saying. HSR, 135-136.

Concerns regarding oversimplifying and bracketing out complexity

In this section, I will highlight what feels like *oversimplified engagement*. This comes as a disappointment to me because I have usually experienced the CRCNA study committees to faithfully wrestle with what are sometimes very complex situations, and articulate conclusions in a way that is careful and nuanced, while still firm in conviction. In the couple examples below, I was disappointed with what felt like overstated conclusions made without careful nuance.

1. Oversimplified reporting of the Reformed Church of America decision

As this committee considers whether their conclusions on human sexuality should have confessional status, they look at a particular decision of the Reformed Church of America (RCA). They share this:

By the word “unchastity” the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity. The Reformed Church in America acknowledged this in 2017, affirming that in the catechism “God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity.”²⁴

This certainly happened, and the committee uses this decision to strongly assert that their conclusions are *already confessional*. But pointing to the RCA’s decision raises more questions than it answers.

A first set of questions might simply wonder if there was overwhelming agreement on this conclusion: Was this motion deeply contested? Did the vote barely pass? If so, what does that mean about how we should hear it?

A second set of questions might wonder how the CRC and RCA differ in how they hold the confessions: What significance did this vote have in the RCA? Does the RCA adhere to their confessions in the same way the CRC does? Does an officebearer in the RCA now need to wholeheartedly believe this statement or step down from office? If the RCA holds their confessions with a different degree of significance, what might that mean for how this decision should be imported into the CRCNA?

Finally, a third set of questions around the very fact that the RCA had to vote to decide on this conclusion, so they why would the CRC ‘already’ be at the RCA’s conclusion: If the RCA had to vote on this decision, doesn’t that mean that up until this point, it had not officially affirmed this conclusion? Wouldn’t that mean that the parallel may be true in the CRCNA – that until we vote to affirm the same, it likely is not affirmed in the CRCNA? And, since the RCA had to vote to affirm this, would that mean that since the CRCNA has not yet voted to affirm this, this teaching does *not already* have confessional status?

To us, these questions come quickly when just reading the report’s statement. In addition, the use of this one quote feels highly selective – as if this one quote was used *only because it affirmed the committee’s conclusions*. One might ask if the committee more deeply engaged with the RCA as they too are having similar conversations about human sexuality. In a quick search, it seemed to me that there are other decisions made by the RCA that this committee would find complicating for their conclusions, but did not quote.²⁵ But thinking further, if the RCA’s decision about an interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism is deemed so significant, did the committee research other denominations about

²⁴ HSR, 146.

²⁵ In a search for other notable decisions by the RCA that would seemingly relate to this report, we found the work of the RCA’s Commission on Theology to be notable. In 2018, the Commission was asked to evaluate the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality. In 2019, they came back with their brief report which did not recommend the catechism for acceptance in the RCA. Notably, one of their concerns was the catechism’s reference to ‘creation order.’

<http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/2019Workbook.pdf#page=283>, page 284.

their interpretation of the word 'unchastity'? Did the committee ask for a collective response from the World Communion of Reformed Churches? If they did, what was the collective response? If not, why did the committee just look for this decision from one denomination?

2. Oversimplified statement about the global church

Near the end of the report, the committee states "The global church finds the Western church's challenges to biblical teaching on human sexuality incomprehensible and offensive."²⁶ This is a bold statement. I thought it wise to research it a bit further. As there was no clear link to follow in the report, I decided to assume that one of the teachings found offensive by the global church is an affirmation of same-sex marriage. So I will focus on that.

First, I followed the footnote of the committee. While there is no direct link, the footnote mentions 'various statements by non-Western bishops in the United Methodist Church at their 2019 General Assembly.'²⁷ Here are the regional titles used by the United Methodist Church (UMC) that I imagine would be considered non-Western: Africa Central, Congo, Philippines, West Africa. I wondered about same-sex marriage in those countries represented at the UMC gathering: is same-sex marriage even legal in these countries? I looked up the legality of same-sex marriage in the Congo, the Philippines, and several of the countries in the regions of Africa noted. In none of the ones I investigated was same-sex marriage legal. This begs the question: is it possible that these communities have no experiences with what seem to be happily married, faithful and flourishing Christian same-sex couples? Indeed, this is likely the case since same-sex marriage is illegal. So perhaps there has been no reason to engage Scripture more deeply on these matters, as these non-Western Christians have not experienced the dissonance encountered by many of us in the West – a dissonance between our traditional interpretation of Scripture regarding same-sex marriage and our experience within God's community of same-sex married couples.

Second, I spent just a little bit of time looking elsewhere in the global church. What I found surprised me. For instance, the National Council of Churches in India has a very affirming statement and a published book around same-sex marriage, transgender identities, and much more. This is not the work of a single denomination, but multiple ones all connected in this national network, and together, they agreed to a posture of inclusion that seems well beyond what was proposed at the UMC gathering.²⁸ So clearly, the global church does not all speak with the same voice.

Third, I wondered if the committee had reached out to any of our CRCNA agencies that have global connections. In December, I happened to be on a Zoom call with several CRCNA global missional leaders. I asked them if they were consulted; they said they had not been consulted directly. Second, I asked what they thought of this statement by the committee about the global church. Their response was mixed. Generally, their response was that a traditional view of marriage was held by most global church bodies of which they were aware. But *they also noted* that in very many of the places to which they were connected, there is unrest about that traditional position and it felt like conversation was starting to bubble up.

Fourth, it seems to me that one of the assumptions that often comes alongside this conversation is that the Western church has been deeply impacted by its culture. The connected conclusion is often that, because Western culture affirms same-sex marriage, the church is simply parroting its culture and not following Scripture. But a quick review of

²⁶ HSR, 148.

²⁷ HSR, 148.

²⁸ R. Christopher Rajkumar, ed., *Family and Human Sexuality: A Theological Reader* (Nagpur India: National Council of Churches In India, 2016). Also, "An Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality", National Council of Churches In India, Nagpur India: Inside Creation, 2012).

perspectives on same-sex marriage around the globe seems to suggest that *almost every church feels the same way as their culture*.²⁹ What does this mean about our assumption that the Western church, because it parallels its culture, is not following Scripture? Would this also mean that the non-Western church, because it parallels its culture, is *also* not following Scripture? It seems wrong to conclude the first, but not the second.

Fifth, as I noted above, the committee seems to select one decision of the RCA that matches their conclusions, but does not reference other decisions of the RCA that are more complicated for their conclusions. In this global church quote, I wondered if the committee has done the same thing. Is it possible that the concern raised by Soong-Chan Rah fits our situation in the CRCNA as seen in this report? He says:

To make a blanket statement that we should follow the Global South only on one particular matter actually dishonors them,” Rah says. “If we’re picking and choosing when to listen, we’re not actually listening. We’re just using them to suit our purposes.³⁰

Further, given the history of colonialism and the power imbalances in our global history, we may fail to notice that “the ‘perspectives of the Global South’ are often the imposed perspectives of the Global North. Sometimes when we think we are listening to ‘them,’ we may only be hearing the echoes of our own voices.”³¹

For me, some of the questions surrounding the committee’s quote around the voice of the global church raises many questions. But it also highlights the unique situation of North America and the CRCNA. Perhaps it is worth wondering: does our experience of legalized same-sex marriage in Canada (and more recently, in the USA) give us the capacity to witness something not yet available to be seen in many other countries? Do we have the opportunity, because of the legalization of same-sex marriage, to listen more carefully, more kindly, more generously to same-sex married couples than Christians in other countries? If God has given us access to stories of same-sex married Christians in such abundance, what is our responsibility to steward these stories in a way that serves and equips the global church for a conversation that is, in some places, just beginning? And what if we turned around our inquiry to the global body of Christ, and sought out those places that have listened to LGBTQ Christians better than we have, that have a history of a flourishing connection with LGBTQ Christians? What might we find if we intentionally sought out LGBTQ Christians around the world and asked them ‘What’s working in your Christian community?’

Summary

While there has not been sufficient time to consider the whole of this Human Sexuality report, I submit my work here as a part of the discernment process. It seems to me that this

²⁹ Consider these two pages from the PEW research website. One this page, you will find a chart entitled “Acceptance of homosexuality varies across the globe” with more than 30 countries listed:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>. On this second page, you will find a graphic depicting the acceptance of gay marriage by Catholics and a second graph depicting the Catholic perspective on homosexuality again divided by country:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/02/how-catholics-around-the-world-see-same-sex-marriage-homosexuality/>. It seems to us that at least in this brief comparison, almost all countries found on both pages demonstrate that the church-specific and the public perspective on homosexuality is very similar.

³⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/evangelicals-want-to-follow-the-global-south-on-gays-they-should-be-careful-what-they-ask-for-commentary/2015/05/08/8bb45344-f5c9-11e4-bca5-21b51bbdf93e_story.html

³¹ See previous footnote.

committee holds its conclusions with a level of certainty that few study committees in our CRCNA history have asserted.

In this communication, I have expressed some significant concerns around a portion of the theological work of this report by evaluating a few interpretive decisions made. Given more time, more concerns may arise. But I would consider the committee's work on Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 to be central to their argument, and it is the work specifically on these passages that I investigated, concluding that *at least* there are other viable, and perhaps better, interpretive options.

Secondly, I have spent some time considering how the creation-fall-redemption framework is adopted for this report. The CRCNA has benefited deeply from the use of this framework as a way to summarize the movement of Scripture and to shape our wholistic Reformed worldview. But there are ways in which this framework has also caused pain and muted complexity, and I have articulated some concerns that this report might lean into those more problematic pathways.

Finally, I delved into two situations where it seems to me that this committee oversimplifies the situation. Why and how would a decision made in the RCA impinge upon us? We do not know, but the committee asserts that this one decision matters. And how should we understand the voice of the global church, and notably, which voice of the global church should we listen to? Again, this committee makes an exceptionally strong assertion that, to me, looks at least worth nuancing if we want to listen well.

To me, the concerns raised give us no choice but to at least consider whether the certainty with which the committee holds their conclusions is appropriate. I feel it is not.

I trust that other overtures and communications will delve into other places of concern and places where this report is helpful. But for now, this is all I could do, and I pray that it is helpful in the deliberations of Synod regarding this Human Sexuality report.