



CLASSIS NIAGARA OF THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH



*To encourage, equip, and empower churches and ministries
to engage God's people in mission!*



Website: classisniagara.ca; e-mail: statedclerkniagara@gmail.com

116th meeting of Classis
Wednesday, February 24 2021 - held virtually via Zoom
9:00 am – 4:30 pm

Chair: Rev. Woodrow Dixon; **Vice-chair:** Rev. Jeff Klingenberg; **Stated Clerk:** Wendy de Jong

DELEGATES, PLEASE NOTE:

- Please email your completed Classical Credentials form - <https://classisniagara.ca/credentials-form/> by **February 19** to statedclerkniagara@gmail.com.
- The possibility of a virtual or hybrid Synod has been raised a few times lately. A final decision will not be made until the COD meeting of February 19, but should the decision to meet this June in some form be made, it would be helpful for churches to nominate elders and deacons who would be willing to let their name stand.
- You will receive a Zoom invite with meeting ID & password on February 23rd for the full Classis meeting. Note the day is structured with a significant break between the morning and afternoon session. The Zoom link will be opened by 8:30 for registration and checking sound, etc.
- Voting will be done via polling on Zoom. Not all devices support the poll option, so if this doesn't work on your device, **you will need to text your vote to - 289-687-8941.**

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

Section 5, Covenantal Relationships has been updated. The other sections of the agenda remain the same.

5. COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Encouraging God's people to engage in the various relationships and activities of the church with accountability so that our institutional and relational obligations are met.

5.1	<p>Guided Conversation – on the report of the Synodical Committee to Articulate a Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality – led by Dr. Syd Hielema and Rev. Lesli van Milligen</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>LUNCH BREAK – 12:00–2:00 pm</i></p>	11:00
5.2	<p>Chairing – Due to the overtures coming from the church of which the Chair is pastor, the Vice-Chair will assume leadership of the agenda items pertaining to the overtures.</p>	2:00
5.3	<p>Jubilee Fellowship CRC: Overture in response to the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality Overture with Appendix A – <i>(page 5)</i> Presentation & Discussion Advisory Committee Report Motion:</p>	
5.4	<p>Jubilee Fellowship CRC: Submission of cross-campus student response Overture – <i>(page 35)</i> Presentation & Discussion Advisory Committee Report Motion:</p>	2:30
5.5	<p>Tentative: Additional Overtures that may be submitted via the Credentials form</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AFTERNOON BREAK – If needed</p>	3:00
5.6	<p>Classis Ministry Council report <i>(page 57)</i> MOTION: To approve the work of the Classis Ministry Council</p>	3:30
5.7	<p>Stated Clerk report <i>(page 59)</i> MOTION: To approve the work of the Stated Clerk</p>	3:40
5.8	<p>Delegates for Synod 2020 – if needed <i>(page 61)</i></p>	3:45
5.9	<p>Council of Delegates report <i>(page 64)</i></p>	
5.10	<p>Canada Corp report – Q & A with Darren Roorda</p>	4:00
5.11	<p>Safe Church Team report: <i>(page 68)</i></p>	
5.12	<p>Regional Pastors report: <i>deferred to May 2021</i></p>	
5.13	<p>Closing Prayer & Adjournment – Rev. Jeff Klingenberg</p>	4:15

5.14	Printed Reports – Received for Information CRCNA Report to Classis - Canadian Ministries Director World Renew - Winter Letter and video Diaconal Ministries Canada Redeemer University College Calvin Theological Seminary Council of Delegates	
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Next meeting: *May 26, 2021, by Zoom*

Agenda Deadline: April 14, 2021

Chair: Rev. Jeff Klingenberg; *Vice-chair:* Steve deBoer

Overture Advisory: Trinity (chair) and Providence

Following meeting: Wednesday, October 27, 2021

AGENDA ITEM 5.3: OVERTURE FROM JUBILEE FELLOWSHIP CRC

The Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC overtures Classis to send the following overture to Synod.

Having read and reflected on the report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality to be submitted to Synod 2021, and while appreciating the report's counsel on a variety of points, the Council of Jubilee Fellowship CRC nevertheless overtures Classis Niagara to overture Synod to receive this report as information and not to approve it, for the following reasons.

GROUNDS:

1. This report describes issues surrounding human sexuality in contemporary society to be settled, and these interpretations binding in the CRC and in other traditions of Christianity, despite the serious and studied positions of many faithful Christians around the world that prove this not to be the case;
2. Unlike the compassionate, grace-filled 1980 Report on Divorce and Remarriage, this report instead uses the 1980 report and its recommendations as grounds to retreat from the healing power of forgiveness and restoration for divorced persons, and goes on to apply that same retreat to same-sex relationships;
3. This report has failed to present personal stories of any of our members or former members that would not confirm the conclusions of the committee's work (see Appendix A* for examples of such stories and the cost of this silence);
4. If accepted, has the potential to divide the CRC again by pitting our members against one another and undermining our witness as a body that accepts and works through disagreements with mutual love and support, all while maintaining our unity in Christ.

APPENDIX A

Overture from Jubilee Fellowship CRC, February 2021

These are the stories gathered from individuals connected with the Christian Reformed Church who want to be seen and heard. In most cases, they requested to be identified. In those instances where revealing their identity could cause harm to the individuals or to their relationships with others, their stories are included with pseudonyms and are identified as such.

Christopher Rynberk

My name is Christopher Rynberk, I am 72 years old, and I am a gay Christian. My husband and I were married in a church and we are active members of a loving church community. I love God, I experience joy every day, and I know that God loves me.

But it wasn't always this way. For 64 years I lived as a straight man, something that only changed when I was hospitalized and diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My marriage of 37 years was in tatters, and attending church (Mountainview Christian Reformed Church in Grimsby) made me physically ill. It wasn't until doctors said they could find no medical reason for the neurological effects I was experiencing that I finally admitted what I had actually known since I was four years old: I am gay, and I can't do this anymore.

I had to come to grips with the fact that I can't live that life anymore. I had to be truthful about who I am.

I grew up in a Christian family and I knew how my parents expected me to live. We never talked about it, but when I was a teenager, my parents took me to both a psychiatrist and to a form of conversion therapy. My dad would drive me once a week to see a faith healer and he would stroke my body and pray the gay away, or whatever it was. My parents never used that word and they never asked me or told me I was gay. I was just different enough that they said, "You have to change your ways." So, between that, and the psychiatrist, and the conversion therapy, and the elders coming to our house, it put me in the closet, and I stayed there for years.

Yet, I had known since the age of four that I was different. There was something about me. At first, I thought I should have been born a girl, but when I hit puberty that did change, and today I can say I am happy to be male, but it was a very confusing time. I had no idea why my parents were taking me to a faith healer, but I just went along with it. I had relatives who told me I was different, but over the years I had learned to carefully cover up all of the feminine ways that I had had since I was a child.

I became a schoolteacher.

In those days, you'd be fired for being gay, and, in the church, you would be ostracized, so I just stayed in the closet and decided I wasn't gay. From time to time, I used to tell myself that. "I'm not gay. I am married. I have two children." I was an elder in the church. I was the treasurer. I was a worship leader. I played the piano for years. All of these things just kept me in the closet, because I knew what the church taught and I did not question it.

It was about three years into my marriage with my ex-wife when she decided there was something emotionally missing in our marriage. I was in total denial. I said, "We have to work harder." She said we should have some counselling, but I said "no, no, no. We just have to work harder at it." That came up a couple of times in our marriage, but overall, it was a happy marriage. As I have discussed many times since then with my ex-wife, for the first 25 years, we managed quite well. But then my mind started to get affected, and the last 10 years were really quite dismal. We weren't communicating well and although we didn't know it, I was getting PTSD.

We were in counselling for three years – three years! – before I realized I was gay. My counsellor – a Christian counsellor – said: "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "Well I have to tell my wife." My counsellor referred me to Generous Space Ministries, and I had many sessions with Wendy Vanderwal Gritter, and I would be bawling my eyes out, asking "What am I going to do? What are we going to do now?"

I was becoming free, but I also felt a great sadness when I moved out of our marital home and lived alone in an apartment. It was a horrible year, because, while I felt freedom, I also felt guilt, and shame-based trauma, which is part of the PTSD. I was feeling guilty that I was gay. It wasn't until I could say to myself that is how God made me – and it took a couple of years – that I realized that I didn't have to be ashamed. There are still moments – I mean I am 72 years old and I lived in the closet for 64 years. But it gets better and better each year.

If you were to ask me if I am glad to be gay, if I would prefer to be gay, the answer is "absolutely not." I would have preferred to be a straight person. I wish I could have continued to live my life as a straight person, but health-wise, and truth-wise, and authenticity-wise, I am not a straight person. And I have learned to accept that.

My ex-wife is a wonderful person. We are still friends. But I lived my life in the closet and that affected her too. Although she is not angry at me, she is angry at the church. It is her belief that what the church has put me through psychologically – even though they may not have known it – is unforgivable for her.

I don't know if she is angry at God, but I'm not. I have never been angry at God, not ever. I was confused, but I never said, "God, damn you for doing this to me." I always prayed that each day would bring me joy, and I still do that. And I thank God for each day I have. And I still thank God, as a gay person – now that God has finally let me come out.

My journey is shaped by my religious upbringing. Other people come out when they are younger, but this was how I was expected to live. So it's distressing to me to hear that the Christian Reformed Church wants to make its position on homosexuality confessional. My husband and I attend another church, but we still have family in the CRC and I do love my roots, so I can't disconnect from that completely. I don't feel animosity toward the church but there are other people who also need to come out and why should they be excluded? I lived as a straight person for 64 years and now I am gay and I am not welcome in the church anymore? That does not seem to be the way we should be understanding and interpreting Scripture. The main thing about Scripture is God is love, and that is how the church should be looking at us. We are working out our lives within the context of God's love, and that is how we should be included – no questions asked. We should be allowed to be at the table, anytime.

I have always felt that God loves unequivocally. I love God, and I sense God's presence. I am married to my soulmate now and I share my life, my love, my prayers with Doug. I know that without God in my life, I would be nowhere. Thank goodness I had a faith because there were times when I had suicidal thoughts.

But I feel the most alive and thankful when we are in church and the choir is singing or there is Scripture being read. And the fact the people sitting around us are mostly straight, that doesn't matter. We're just part of everybody else. That is the place I feel most alive, because I know God loves us all.

Joya Vandermeulen

When I was sixteen, I knew who I was.

I had been baptised as an infant into the Christian Reformed Church, a sign of God saying "you are mine," to which I responded with "I am yours" in my profession of faith 16 years later. I had run around the building with a pack of kids during coffee time, attended Sunday school, joined the girls' club and then youth group, volunteered for every task I could, learned all of the kids' bible songs, participated in Christmas plays, memorized tons of scripture and catechism and the apostles' creed, and attended CRC elementary and high schools. It was home, family, and basically my entire social life, and I loved it. I knew Jesus loved me just like my church family loved me and I loved him back.

So, at 16, I was a good Christian. A good church girl. A pleaser and perfectionist. I knew that God was a white man with a beard sitting on a cloud, who fit nicely into a square box, and I knew the answers to all matters of faith as written in the catechism.

I, like the Magi, saw a star in the east.

So with much clarity, I built a five-year plan: finish high school, go to Calvin college for a BA and Calvin Seminary for an M.Div. The next five years would of course involve good employment, a husband, 2.5 kids, a house, and a pension. Like a respectable adult.

I wonder if those magi knew how long their journey would be, or what they would find at the end? It turns out that I never went to Calvin, I did get a BA but no M.Div. Instead of that good job, I had precarious employment, lived with my parents to save on rent, and there was definitely no pension. The spouse and kids things was on hold because of something I'd noticed but had hoped would go away: while my high school friends all had crushes on Mr. Cook, I just respected his good pedagogy, and when they discussed their first childhood crushes I laughed along, even though, shamefully, my first crush had been on a woman named Holly from the kids' show "under the umbrella tree."

But I couldn't be gay, right? I just "hadn't met the right guy yet."

Then one day, God showed up in a terrifyingly true and holy way that pushed me to explore my own truth. My sister, who had left in the usual boring grey men's clothes, came home looking amazing. Buskerfest had been good to her. Hair done, wild makeup, a cute little skirt and a fancy top. She sat the

family down and let us know that she is transgender and that we'd been misgendering her since she was born. And suddenly the neat square boxes that I'd grown up in were squashed flat. That is her story.

But where it fits into mine is that it pushed me into community with a lot of 2SLGBTQ+ people of faith who don't live in square boxes. These wonderful beings know a living God, one that can handle big feelings, and doubt, and creativity — one who certainly doesn't fit into a box. They told their stories of coming out, of familial rejection, of church rejection, of new life. They learned some Greek and Hebrew and dug through scripture as a theology of survival.

It was beautiful. And it was terrible. Because as hard as I was trying to be straight, I felt their stories resonate deep within me. "Me too. Me too. ME TOO!" my guts said until I couldn't hold the charade any longer. Bit by bit I told safe people of my queerness, and with each telling it felt more true and right. Through this personal crisis, I found myself in need of a safe and affirming place to fall... and the CRC church wasn't and wouldn't be and couldn't be it. In fact, it became exhausting and dangerous. So I left. It was excruciating. This community that I thought was — that was supposed to be — my home, my family, my safety net just wasn't. In the midst of crisis, I felt like I had nobody. For a year I couldn't bear to enter a church building. The Bible felt like a weapon. The sound of worship music was unbearable noise. Devotionals made me nauseous. God was an abstract concept.

Then, in November of 2015, I was invited to a new church by a friend, and I found a home there. It's an inclusive place where I can be myself: doubting and queer and curious. A gentle community where I feel seen and valued and safe.

At this point, faith no longer feels nice and fluffy — it feels more like a constant cycle of death and resurrection, of certainty and doubt, of safety and danger. It feels essential and unreasonable. And that star that had pointed my teenage self toward seminary? I guess I miscalculated the angles or something, because it's taken me on a much more beautiful and complicated path than I expected. Now at the age of 32, I'll be starting a Master's of Theological Studies after all, with three questions to guide my learning goals: Who am I? Who is God? What work is mine to do? It's the theology of survival. I have no five-year plan. I don't know what I'll do, vocationally, when I'm done. I don't know if I'll even be employable — churches are kind of tricky for us non-heterosexual folks. But I do know that this is a right step.

So, like the Magi, I'll keep following that star.

Laura Eldon*

**A pseudonym. Laura is proud of who she is, but she does not want to be disrespectful to those people in her story who could be seen in a negative light.*

I grew up attending a Christian Reformed Church in British Columbia, and I went to Christian schools throughout my elementary and high school years. In my family, we were discouraged from interacting with non-Christians — we were taught that we live in the world but that we were not to live of this

world. For me, this created fear and an inability to connect with others outside of my faith-based community. I lived in a social bubble, which felt safe. Because I grew up with the same people in all spheres of my world, it was particularly difficult to connect with my peers when I switched schools in Grade 9. Rather than at school, I found belonging within my church. It was my home.

During this time, I participated in leading worship, I organized youth events, and I attended retreats. I also worked as a Sunday school teacher and youth leader, and at times worked to maintain the building itself. My work with the church was really important to me and gave me a sense of purpose and identity. My faith was strong and was my foundation for living. Due to traumatic childhood experiences and mental illness, there was a time that I wanted to take my own life. I was plagued by the feeling that I did not belong in this world and that heaven was my true home. I yearned for God. I wanted to feel safe in His arms. Thankfully, a man was brought into my life who helped me with these feelings — the youth pastor at our church at that time. He became my closest friend. He taught me to rely on God for my strength, and reminded me that God would not give me more than I could handle. The deepening of my faith and the support that I received from my youth pastor acted as a tether that helped me continue on living in this world. Without my faith and the church, I am not confident that I would still be alive today.

I wasn't always conscious of my sexuality, but looking back from an adult's perspective, I can see the signs. I understand now why I was so drawn to certain women, and why I felt resistance from them. Although it wasn't sexual at that point, the sense that I was somehow too involved left me with a feeling of "otherness." Now, I realize these were crushes.

What I *was* conscious of was that same-sex relationships were wrong, and not how God had created us. I remember clearly hearing my mom exclaim that gay couples were "disgusting" after seeing them on TV. Coupled with the messages that being gay was akin to murder, I clearly understood that I would be sent to hell if I acted on any urges. My youth pastor was the one person that I told early on. I explained that I thought I was gay and that I didn't know how to reconcile that with God. He was emotionally supportive and told me it wasn't wrong to have those thoughts. Rather, it was acting on them that would put me in opposition to God. It was obvious to me that he believed being both gay and faithful to God was impossible. I would have to make a choice, and it should be the "right" one.

When I was 20 I met a woman at work who made my stomach flutter. We were drawn to each other in a way that I had not experienced before. As our relationship grew, it became clear we wanted to be together as a couple. But this created an inner paroxysm for me — how was I to live a life in line with my God who I held so dear, and be true to my own individual identity?

This was not made any easier by my parents. They began to pick up on the romance between my girlfriend and I and made their disapproval apparent. They told me that if I decided to continue dating her, that I would not be allowed to live in their house. But by that time I had realized that my attraction towards other women was a part of who I am; it wasn't a choice. If I was to have any integrity, I could not deny that part of myself. So, I was left with little choice and had to leave.

I felt so much shame. When I spoke with my youth pastor about it, we decided that it would be best if I took some time away from church ministry while I figured things out. While I didn't feel kicked out, I was

very clear on the fact that there was not a path for me to continue leading worship and working with youth while also dating a woman.

My mom was so concerned for me that she brought the subject up with her church small group. However, as soon as she spoke the words, the fact that I was dating a woman spread like wildfire through the entire church family. My mom had outed me. She had already made me feel so much shame, and then all of a sudden, I was shamed by everyone. Hearing that my grandfather cried when he found out, and that people believed my attraction towards women was an effect of the trauma I experienced as a child was painful and invalidating. In the eyes of others, I was in the wrong for choosing this life, and if I didn't choose a heterosexual life then my soul was in peril. Although it wasn't an overt shunning, I felt the judgement surrounding me and no longer felt safe within my church family. I couldn't stay with the rumours and shaming comments. After I left, I didn't hear from a soul. The community that I had grown up with from birth just dropped me, and I was lost.

I went travelling through Europe for a few months soon after. During that time I wrestled. You would expect that travelling out on my own exploring new places and cultures would be exciting, but for me it was pervaded by sadness. However, there was an instant I remember clearly that brought me some peace. I was sitting on a riverbank in Germany and I was reminded of how Jesus would hang out with the rejects of society, and that God WAS love. I thought, well, if God is love, then He could not hate me. And, if Jesus spent his time with the outcasts then He certainly would spend time with me. At that moment, my perspective changed. I realized that I didn't have to subscribe to limitations placed on me by my home community and faith tradition.

When I returned home from Europe, I moved back into my parent's home. I was hoping that with time I would have been welcomed back. This wasn't the case, however. I was reminded that if I was going to be with a woman then I was no longer welcome to live in their home. So, when my girlfriend moved, I moved with her.

I didn't hear from any of my church friends or extended family after that and I only spoke with my parents occasionally. When we did talk, it was very difficult. My mom and dad were attending Christian conferences that were supposed to help them figure out how to change me, and they were given hope that this was only a phase and I would end up straight. The conversations we did have had an undercurrent of rejection — it felt as though they were consistently choosing their church and their relationship with God over their own daughter. It was profoundly painful. It didn't matter who I was, and it didn't matter what I said, I would always, always come second.

As time passed, my girlfriend and I were able to go to my parent's house occasionally. They realized they would have to make some accommodations or they would lose their daughter completely. However, when we did make it to their home, we were expected to act like friends. My brothers were allowed to be with their girlfriends at my parents' house comfortably and affectionately, but I wasn't allowed to be with mine. Although my girlfriend and I were together for nine years, my family never came to a place of comfort and acceptance.

Several years ago, I became very unwell, and it was clear that I could not live on my own during that time. Because I was no longer seeing anyone, I was welcomed to live and recover in my parent's home. It was extremely difficult for me to be there, but due to my illness I didn't have another option. Now that I look back on this period, I can see there was a reason for me to be living with my parents — our relationships have healed in a lot of ways. I think we began to appreciate one another for who we are and, although not on the same page, we look past our differences and are able to appreciate the love that we have for each other.

While I was living at home, my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During the months between his diagnosis and his passing, I had the privilege of taking care of him. I watched him struggle with his diagnosis and physical decline, but I also witnessed the strength of his faith. Words cannot express how incredibly thankful I am that we had the opportunity to heal and get to know each other again before he died. He became my favourite person and I now think of him with fondness every single day.

It's really only been since my dad died that I have had a relationship with any of my extended family. My dad's mom and I have become particularly close. However, there are times when I am brought back into the place of shame. Although not directed specifically at me, she makes comments about how same-sex relationships are not of God and that she has no understanding of how anyone could follow that path. Even though she knows that her words hurt me, she feels justified in speaking her opinions because her faith in Jesus is foundational. Because of my history with the church, and the lack of flexibility when it comes to opinions about sexuality, I don't speak about my experiences. It's not that I feel ashamed about who I am, it's just that I am afraid of the judgement, rejection, and backlash, and I simply don't want to feel that pain again. But, in some ways this means that I am denying myself all the time.

When it comes to my personal faith, I find it very painful to speak of. When I was young, the church was my home, my support, my lifeline. However, the experiences of shame, rejection, and judgement killed my trust in the church and my faith in Jesus along with it. Singing, which was a huge part of my life and brought me comfort, died too. To be honest, at this point I don't feel safe enough to seek out other Christian faith communities. I cannot go back to Christianity because I no longer see the world through that lens. When I was in Europe, God's message of love to me was outside the confines of religion. I was not loved because I was Christian, white, lesbian, or straight. I was loved simply for who I am and because that is what God is. Something my dad said to me in a letter he left was, "Laura, your faith still exists." When I first read that statement, I didn't quite believe him, but as I reflect on it now, I realize that he was right. My faith does still exist; it's just different now. And that's okay.

Christopher Godwalt

My first two years of university were some of the most gut-wrenchingly difficult years I've ever experienced. Back then I was deeply entrenched in the closet, knowing that I was definitely not straight, but also trusting no one with that secret.

It remained my secret until I came out to my now ex-wife just a couple years into our marriage. My years at Redeemer and especially those years when I lived on campus, were marked with guilt and fear! I felt guilty that I wasn't straight. I felt guilty that I developed crushes on my dorm-mates. I felt guilty when I engaged in any sort of interaction with members of the same gender, and guilty when I

interacted with members of the opposite gender. I felt guilty for “leading” females on whenever I expressed interest in their lives. I felt guilty when I accessed porn in my dorm room. I felt guilty when I sat in accountability groups and had to pretend that I had once again “failed” to maintain a healthy sexual ethic with regards to members of the opposite sex, fantasy, pornography, and masturbation. I felt guilty when I “played along,” laughing and sharing homophobic jokes.

And I lived daily in fear. I was afraid that someone would catch my eyes wandering. I was afraid that I would get caught crossing my legs the wrong way. I was afraid that someone would catch me aimlessly singing Abba. I was afraid that I would talk in my sleep and accidentally out myself. I was afraid that one of my dorm mates would walk in on me. I was afraid that I would have an erection at the most inopportune times which would lead others to suspect about my orientation. I was afraid that my faith wasn't strong enough because despite having prayed for years and years and years, I was still gay. I was afraid that I was going to hell, and that there was no way a sinner like me could make it to heaven. I felt afraid that I wasn't working hard enough, or doing enough spiritually and community-wise to save me from eternal damnation. I felt afraid that I wasn't worthy of grace because I was gay. I felt afraid that one of my dorm mates would discover my darkest shame, would out me, and I'd face public ridicule and eviction.

Every day, waking and sleeping, I exhausted myself trying to be the best damn straight Christian on campus so no one would ever know. And my true friendships suffered for it. My academic life suffered for it. And without a doubt, my development as a young, spiritually maturing Christian suffered for it. Instead of developing a true faith, I developed the perfect facade and learned how to live it day in and day out.

These days I live in the Netherlands with my husband. It took years and years and years of work to slowly chip away at the shame, guilt and fear, which had, in place of a solid foundation based on Christ, formed the foundation of my daily life. Thankfully there were others, especially several within the RCA and CRC, who walked with me, journeyed with me, and crawled through the deepest valleys with me to help me unpack what I had learned in years of Christian Sunday school, youth group, Christian high school and Christian university. They've helped me see a God of love instead of a God of condemnation. Through their joint work, I've learned to build a faith and a life that is healthier (no, I've not yet learned it all, and I've a long way to go), I'm learning to trust that God is good, that His grace is sufficient for even me, and that He chooses me — a gay, married, reform(ed)(ing) Christian — just as I am. He loves me, yes, even me!

Looking back, I remain grateful for much of my Christian school experience, but if I knew then what I know now, it would not have been my choice for schools. Back then I had no idea that there were Christians who didn't condemn every expression of LGBTQI+ reality. I had never met another gay or queer Christian, and I was convinced the two could never be married. I've now met so many Christians with deep, faith-based roots who are convinced that there is more than one possible way to journey through this life.

The church and Christian schools stand in a beautifully unique place to make a difference in the lives of many, and I pray that courage and wisdom lead to a holistic engagement of the reality of the beautifully

diverse Christian reality, thereby helping to create a safe and nurturing learning and faith development space even for those within the LGBTQI+ spectrum.

Mary Vogelzang

I have a pretty deep connection to the Christian Reformed Church. Both my parents were long-time members; my father was a CRC minister and missionary. Because of this, I moved every seven or eight years, and lived in Chicago; Sheldon, Iowa; Bellevue, Washington; and Newton, Iowa. I am the youngest of seven children, and we went to Christian schools wherever we lived.

After graduating from high school, I went to Calvin College in Michigan. After a few years there, my mom started getting sick and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so I moved home and finished my nursing degree in the Seattle area. At about the same time, my parents officially retired from the CRC. I lived at home to spend time with and take care of my mom until she had to go to a nursing home.

After leaving Calvin to take care of my Mom I went to a community college in Seattle and played basketball there. It was the first time I had ever been around people who were openly gay. This was around 1985 or so, so when I say they were "openly gay," I don't mean it was like it is today. But there were women on the team who talked about having girlfriends and so on. The community college wasn't Christian, and was unlike anywhere else I had been before. Previously I had only gone to Christian schools, so to have people who were talking like that about who they were dating was very surprising to me. During that time, I developed a crush on my coach, who soundly rejected me, but that experience forced me to look at myself and ask: "What is this feeling that I have?"

I started realizing that there had always been certain women in my life, typically older women, towards whom I had really strong feelings. I always just thought we were just really good friends, and I admired them for being such lovely people that I just really liked. However, after having that experience with my coach, I was able to look back and identify those relationships differently.

When my mom passed away, I wasn't really even "out" to myself, and at that point I was still dating men. I was certainly starting to ask myself what it meant that I was attracted to women, but I was still dating men because it was just what was comfortable. My mom died when I was 24, and around that time, I cut off contact with the church. Members of the local CRC attempted contact with me, but I had already stopped attending church when I went to Calvin. It was then that I realized that I wasn't going because I wanted to go; I was going because that was what was expected.

My parents could not have raised children in a more stringently CRC manner. We did all the catechism and grew up as children of CRC pastors and missionaries. But now none of us are in the CRC and all of us have chosen different churches for various reasons. My sister was the last of us to attend a CRC church. She married a man whose family was really involved in the North Seattle CRC church. But then her son came out as gay. People in the church basically said, "How hard for you, to have to choose your son or the church!" And she was like, "Uhhh, no." She realized that the church was really quite anti-gay and she just didn't feel like she could go anymore.

My spouse and I are both former-CRC members, and neither of us plan to return to that denomination. We are both nurses, and we met at work. We've been together since 2004. She and I have a daughter, who is such a blessing to us. We also fostered two little boys for a while, and they ended up being adopted by two dads. The amazing part is that we are now the boys' legal godparents. We see them a lot, and we enjoy spending time with the dads, so we vacation with the dads and the boys, and it's kind of this one big happy family of seven: two gay couples and three kids. Our daughter thinks of them as cousins.

I think it's sad when churches can't adapt and change. I do sometimes go to church now, occasionally. My wife and I wanted to renew that connection when we had a child, so we found a church close to us that we feel like we could be comfortable in ... but to be honest, it's sometimes still a struggle for both of us. It's the University Congregational United Church of Christ. At the time we joined, two of the three ministers or pastors were gay; it's an open and affirming church that practices what they preach when it comes to ministry.

I do sometimes feel sad that we are so far removed from the CRC now. It's a church with lots of history and heritage, and it's sad that my daughter won't know that part of it. But I am not sad enough that we would go back — since there is no CRC church that would actually accept us.

Reuben VanDam*

**A pseudonym.*

My name is Reuben. I am in my late 20s. I live and work in a small city a few hours away from the farm where I grew up. I attended university and graduated with a good job in a professional field. I am an uncle, brother, son. I am single and live with three other young professionals. I attend the local Christian Reformed Church, where I play piano during the services roughly once a month. I am blessed. I am happy.

Part 1 – A Child Born into Covenant and Brokenness

My connection to the CRC is generational. My grandparents were founding members. My parents met in the nursery as babies. My great grandmother passed on her faith to my grandmother, and her to my mother, and my mother shared her faith with me. My dad shared his faith with me too. He would pray with my siblings and I every night. They were, in more ways than not, good examples of Christian discipleship, and were both very involved in the church. Mom taught Sunday school, directed the choir, played piano, and was on the worship and education committees. Dad was on the building committee and served on council.

My parents had me baptized. The congregation promised to love, support, and encourage me. All this is not uncommon to the story of many who grew up in the CRC.

But my story is different (I assume) from many in the CRC. And it has been a deep-rooted sense of otherness that has defined so much of my life. I have limited the expression of my true self to be accepted, and I still do this. My earliest memories of this are when my brother showed his friends where

I played with Barbies, before I was even in kindergarten. I remember asking for more boy's toys after that, not because I wanted them, but because I knew I would be teased if I played with a girl's toy. As an older child and teenager, I remember hiding everything I liked, from clothes, to music, to movies, hobbies, even food. Can you imagine that food is gendered? Or I thought it was. I adjusted my behaviour to be accepted.

This was before I even knew I was gay. When I went through puberty, things got worse. I heard a lot of terrible things from the people who promised to love and encourage me when I was baptized. It wasn't always just people from my church, although a lot was. A lot of the horrible things I heard also came from people who went to other churches. But still, it all came from my spiritual siblings: the (broken) hands and feet of Jesus. I didn't think I knew anyone who thought that gay people could be good people or that they were worthy of love or kindness. Gay people, I was led to believe, were broken, rebellious people who hated God.

But I didn't hate God. So what I was experiencing was obviously a test, or a phase. I prayed every day that God would take that and exchange it for an attraction to girls. It wasn't that I wasn't attracted to girls. I was, just not in a sexual way. I wanted to be friends with lots of girls. And maybe I would have been friends with girls if I felt that was allowed. I didn't have many friends. It was difficult for me to make friends with boys because I wasn't very good at pretending to have common interests, and I felt I wasn't allowed to be friends with girls. So I just didn't have a lot of friends. I had my sister, though. She was younger, but she always looked out for me, and was kind to me. She included me. But I never trusted her with my secret. It was a secret between me and God. I never told anyone, partly I think because of shame, but also because I did fully trust that God would heal me. Why bother telling people if it was going to change?

Part 2 - Paper Flowers

But God didn't change me. I don't remember when I stopped believing He would. But sometime in high school I became okay with the fact that I would probably never be straight. But I wasn't okay with letting go of my imagined life, the life the church and society and everyone seemed to be telling me I would never be happy without. Having a girlfriend, a wife, a family, becoming a father. I called this my "paper flowers," which was from a song that I listened to a lot at that time. In it, the singer wishes she could live in her world of pretty (but fake) paper flowers and hide away from the real world of rampant chaos. I idolized this imagined heterosexual future.

What was worse, I came to believe that this fake future was not only critical to my own happiness, but also the happiness of many other people. I came to believe that my parents, my siblings, my uncles and aunts and cousins, my friends, grandparents, and people from church would be less happy if I did not someday marry a woman and have kids and a family of my own. My paper flowers would need to look real from the outside for the sake of everyone else. If God wouldn't heal me, I would just pretend.

Still in high school, I asked a girl to date me. We dated for six months, and I was very happy. She became my best friend. My family seemed to approve. It felt, finally, like I belonged in my world. This is what my whole world told me was supposed to be. And it was wonderful. Oh, so wonderful.

But it was also horrid. I knew I would have to tell her the truth at some point. But I thought that if we loved each other and trusted each other that it would just happen. And if we wanted to get married, we could make it work somehow. It would be our secret. Nobody else would need to know. But that feeling of trust never grew for me. The homophobia in my circles got worse. I hated myself more and more for lying to her. Guilt became shame.

When she broke it off, I was devastated that I lost her as a friend. But I also lost a piece of my identity that I was just beginning to hope would last and become real. In my journal in the months following, I wrote about overwhelming heartache and hopelessness. I'm sure this is common for teenagers after a breakup, but I believe I was starting to grieve something so much more. My Paper Flowers were on fire.

But when we stopped dating, I also felt a weight lifted; I didn't have to lie anymore. For the next years my journal entries would reflect this; and constant back and forth between expressions of longing to be with a woman and have a family, but also recognising more and more that I would never again subject myself to the shame and guilt of being a lie in that specific way. I never had another girlfriend. I never went on a date with another girl.

Part 3 – It Gets Better

When I went to college, I had vague ideas of meeting new friends, maybe a lover, coming out, and being disowned by my family. I couldn't imagine bringing a boyfriend around them. It would have to be one or the other. And I imagined what that would look like. It was miserable. And lonely. But I was working hard, and I went home every weekend to be with my family. I never made new friends, and never had a boyfriend. I preoccupied myself with other things.

But I did grow. I grew in faith. I grew to love myself again, and I grew to love my family more. I used to believe that I was gay because I was born a broken person into a broken world, and just like some people were born blind, I believed that I was born with a brain that did not allow my sexuality to develop correctly. I believed that, for whatever reason, my brain was not exposed to the right balance of prenatal hormones, and so my gender and sex and sexuality grew to be out of sync because of that. And maybe that is still part of my belief; or, maybe being gay or straight is just a variation in a good creation, like blue or brown eyes. Or – maybe God made me this way because he knew that my family would need me to be exactly as I am. I don't know for sure. But I've come to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by a God who's always loved me. As the lyrics of my favourite hymn state:

"I find, I walk, I love, but oh, the whole
of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee!
For thou wert long beforehand with my soul;
Always, always thou lovedst me."

And sometime, and some point, it seemed like it was okay to just be me, slowly. Oh, so slowly. And as it became more okay to be me, I became less sad. The more I loved myself, the more I found I could love other people. I finally did find friends who accepted me as I am, and I found my space where I could be 100% authentic with no fear of being rejected. Life, as they say, gets so much better. I live with my best friends, play piano in church (although my church doesn't know me fully yet), and I have a great job. I

am thrilled to be experiencing my family grow and change; siblings getting married and building their homes, becoming an Uncle, watching my parents' transition into grandparents, Thanksgiving and Christmas and birthday dinners, experiencing tears and joys and challenges together.

I am still single. Maybe I will stay single, or maybe I will find the right man to share my life with. I know I will most likely have to leave the CRC if that day comes. Maybe I will take a spiritual sojourn with my Anglican or United siblings. But the CRC will always be my home. I will always feel connected to this church; the church where my great grandmother was baptized, and her children, and so on. But wherever my life leads, I know now that my family will still love and accept me regardless, and I will love them too. And yes, life is messy and painful and frustrating. But it is also beautiful and warm and good, and I am happy to be living it.

Abigail Potsdam*

**A pseudonym.*

I was born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church. My family was deeply connected to the CRC, in the USA and in Canada. The way I see it now, looking back, is that our family has always been kind of like a family of servants to the CRC. My grandfather was a pastor, my dad was a pastor and a missionary, my ex-husband and I were a pastor and missionaries. But while we spent our lives serving the CRC, it wasn't a church that nourished us back.

Growing up, we moved around a bit. I was actually born in Nigeria, then we moved to Honduras. When I was seven, I moved back to Holland, Michigan, where my dad continued to work for the CRC. There was a lot of sexual abuse in my childhood, from my father and from my brother. I grew up hearing puritanical messages from my mother, about how sex was forbidden until marriage and any show of sexuality was very off-limits, but at the same time, sexual things were happening to me as a young child. This led to a lot of secrecy and confusion in my life. I'm not sure how much my mother knew about the abuse, but I believe that she knew.

At the time of the abuse, the church was what was most important — more important than family, more important than anything — so there was no one for me to turn to, no one to talk about what was happening to myself, either within the church or my family.

Of course, with this childhood experience, I naturally explored many different forms of sexuality during high school and college. It was complicated for me because of how the church talks about sexuality and because of how my parents raised me to believe that talking about sex is wrong, and then there was the added element of secrecy that come with sexual abuse. Thinking about these things, or even acknowledging that part of me, has only slowly started to come out now that I'm in my fifties. It was simply a lot to untangle. I now consider myself to be bisexual, as I've always been very attracted to both men and women.

My faith was always very strong despite all this; I completely felt connected to the Lord. After college, I taught English as a second language for two years, then I went to seminary. I was still kind of struggling

with who I was at that point. I honestly thought I was going to be single all my life because I knew I was struggling with these feelings of being more connected to women than to men. And then an unexpected thing happened: I fell in love with a man I met at seminary. We were married, and went together to work as missionaries in West Africa.

Our time as missionaries was marked both by great work and service for the church, and by traumatic events, including an armed robbery and a kidnapping. These events had an impact on our mental and emotional well-being. The trauma led to my husband going down another path, having affairs and other issues. It was only when our marriage was in trouble that support finally came from the church, and even then it was only for him and not for me or the rest of the family. When he decided to leave the CRC and started to attend a Catholic church — we were living in Michigan by then — I remained at the CRC. I didn't leave the CRC church myself, but it certainly felt like the church had left me. When my husband and I finally did separate, it was a shock to many people who knew us. We were missionaries, and missionaries aren't supposed to divorce.

It's only now that I'm divorced that I am struggling to decide what it actually means to be bisexual. When I was married, it wasn't really a factor. But now that I'm single, I have choices about who I'm going to date and how I'm going to live.

Part of being able to acknowledge my sexuality has come from my children. My children are much more open about who they are. I've left the CRC now, but I'm attending another church for my daughter. I purposely decided to join this church for my daughter because this is one she's willing to go to. It's a safe and affirming space for the LGBTQ community, and they're very open about it. And it's also a place where I feel like I can be a little bit more honest and where I can kind of explore who I am.

When it comes to the recent CRC human sexuality report, I've read it and found it very discouraging. The strictness and the black-and-whiteness of their thinking on sexuality reminds me so much of my mother. I see no grace in it, at all. Having come out of the CRC as this abused child, feeling neglected by the church I served for years, and then hearing the church self-righteously claim that they know that all these people can't be right or loved by God because of this inner part of them, it's tough to handle. As for myself, I don't know if I'm bisexual because of the abuse in my past, I don't know if this is because how God made me; I don't know why I'm this way! But this report claims that I'm supposed to say that I am sinful, and there's no grace, there is no love, there is no *Jesus* in that.

This is why I've had to leave the CRC. I thought perhaps that the CRC was becoming a more grace-filled church. I thought that grace was finally becoming a bandage that was wrapping over some of the puritanical tone and hyper-Calvinism of the past. I saw that process happening in my mom's life. Just before she died, I saw grace coming into her life, and it changed her. I thought that maybe the CRC was starting to undergo the same transformation. I started to feel a little bit of hope for people like my daughter, who is also bi, that she may be able to be part of the church and hear people say, "You're not damned; you're not gonna go to hell. You're loved. Christ loves you. We're all loved." But in this report, I don't see that at all

David Hall

I am 63 years old. I am a gay Christian. I am not an oxymoron. I am David Hall.

For the first 59 years of my life, I struggled to live a life contrary to who I was. It was a life lived based on the expectations and beliefs of my family, of my religious upbringing, and of society. I feared the rejection, condemnation, and erasure I learned would be the result of living as a gay man. I did not want God's judgement of burning in hell for eternity.

I married Grace with whom I had two daughters, Megan and Chelsey. I studied and worked as a minister of youth music, a career which ended when my same-sex attraction was known. I continued to serve in the church in various capacities as moderator, elder, worship leader, children and adult choir leader, and on several boards – from building administration to finance – while supporting my family working in the insurance and human resources industries.

I loved my family, church and community. I received pastoral and clinical counselling, including reparative and conversion therapy, in the hope I would no longer be a homosexual, same-sex attracted, gay. I prayed constantly, often prostrate on the living room floor in the middle of the night, sobbing uncontrollably at times, for God to take away the gay. God did not answer my prayer. I was angry, confused, traumatized. Even so, I did not turn my back on God.

In our 33rd year of marriage, my wife Grace died of breast cancer. The facade of a straight Christian life crumbled. I hated God for taking away the life for which I had worked so hard and for not taking the "gay" away. I turned to alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity and gambling. I lost everything. Life was no longer worth the effort. Within 10 – 15 minutes of being found by my sister and pastor, I was saved from succeeding with my third attempt at suicide.

With the love, prayers and support of family and friends, I received counselling. It was my daughters and close friends of my wife who told me that it had been Grace's hope for me to live who I was created to be. It felt like being hit by God with the proverbial 2 X 4. God had not abandoned me. God had always been there waiting for me to acknowledge who I was created to be, in God's image, God's child. Loved. Beloved.

On January 1, 2016, I was able to say without shame, guilt, or hesitation that I was a gay Christian.

Within weeks I no longer looked for solace in the alcohol, prescription drugs, promiscuity, and gambling. I went off all the medication I had been on for more than 15 years for back pain, migraines, and intestinal problems. I lost 65 pounds eating healthier and exercising. I found joy in life, in people. My relationship with God felt closer than ever. I began to experience the abundant and fulfilling life God promised: a resurrected life of purpose and hope. I released myself to God and although I was ready to live single for the rest of my life, God brought Jim unexpectedly into my life, and I knew it was right. I have a relationship I never thought possible – faithful, nourishing, enriching, honest, trusting, unconditional love.

Jim and I began to look for a church where we could worship and serve in the ministry and life of a welcoming and affirming Christian community. We attended Jubilee Fellowship Christian Reformed Church during our first year of being together. At the time we were only able to attend every other Sunday as Jim was living in Barrie. There was love, support, welcome, and affirmation among those we spoke with and who sought us out each time we attended. However, we realized there were glass ceilings limiting our involvement, as well as not being able to be married. There were also theological messages from the pulpit from guest speakers telling us indirectly that we didn't belong. We remain close friends with some Jubilee members and miss many others, but we simply could not continue to attend a church where there are conditions to Jesus' love — particularly for the LGBTQ+ community.

We have found a community of faith where diversity is welcomed and affirmed, where love is given unconditionally, where we can worship and serve in the life and ministry of the church, and where we can be married. No human can be denied these inalienable rights to communion for all who seek God with heart, soul, mind, and body. We are all created in God's image, God's children, God's beloved. All with equal access to unknown measure of God's love, mercy, and grace.

I did experience rejection, condemnation, and erasure by some of my family and by my church when I came out as a Christian in a gay relationship, but not fear. Instead, I have seen God's goodness and blessing in ways I have never experienced before, including a new family and friends to walk through life with.

Thanks for this opportunity to serve God.

Carol Vanderstoep

We need to be brave with our stories so other people can be brave with theirs.

– Catherine Center

My deep belief is that stories are sacred and have the power to cultivate empathy and justice.

– Brené Brown

I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and I was educated in the Christian school system for elementary, high school, and post-secondary, attending Redeemer College for two years before moving on to Calvin University from where I graduated. I spent my career as a teacher in several Christian Schools. My husband, John, has a similar story, graduating from Kuyper College then Calvin Seminary, now 20 years into a 2nd career calling as pastor, missionary and church planter. Our three daughters are also graduates of the Christian school system. We have been fully immersed in the CRC. We are your poster children.

As a young mom, I listened to Focus on the Family to be the best mom I could be to my three little girls. Focus on the Family said the "gays" were going to destroy the family as we've always known it. They talked about "Exodus Ministries International," saying it was a place where any Christian who suspected they might be gay should go for healing. I personally didn't know any gay people. I was told (so I was certain) that homosexuality was a choice, and a bad one at that.

A dear friend (then also CRC) had two gay friends and she would often talk to me about them. I was concerned about her when she started to question so many things that seemed so foundational to the faith. I assumed what I'd been taught: that her friends must have had negative relationships with their

fathers or had domineering mothers. I remember feeling so uncomfortable when she kept bringing it up. What I didn't know is that she was offering me a gift that started me on a journey that took way too long for me to understand.

We didn't talk about homosexuality when I was growing up. It wasn't really an issue. There weren't any gay people in any church or school I was part of, *or so I thought*.

During John's years as a pastor, he started learning about people in his care who identified as LGBTQ. John started to recognize the torment that some people go through when they identify as LGBTQ. We didn't talk about it a lot, and rarely with our school-aged children. We still believed that it was a sin even though we hadn't done any study on this issue. It's what we believed because that was what we were taught.

I remember the day that same-sex marriage was approved in Canada. I was not impressed that they were going to call it a marriage because we all *knew* that marriage is between one man and one woman. I was asked by "Focus on the Family Canada" to send a letter to all of my email recipients suggesting that they too send something to the government. Maybe they could call this a civil union, but certainly not a marriage. I remember receiving a gently worded letter from one of my recipients that maybe I should look at this from the other perspective, which sadly, I will admit, I did not do.

Several years later we were invited to a fundraising dinner for an organization that supports people who are both LGBTQ and Christian. Their guest speaker for the evening was Tony Campolo. The evening was eye-opening. Could this really be a thing? Not a choice? Created this way? Christian and gay? Tony Campolo and his wife agreed that people can be LGBTQ and Christian, but did not agree on whether or not they could marry. And Tony Campolo shared his humble posture: "Maybe I am wrong."

Against this backdrop, I will share a bit about my family.

John and I have been married for 32 years. We have been blessed with 5 children — three girls now in their twenties, Erin, Kristin and Meghan, and two teenaged boys, Nathan and Stephen. In the past three years our family has grown by three as we welcomed our son-in-law, Jordan, our daughter-in-law, Kimberley, and this past October our first grandchild, Avery.

Allow me to share about the journey we've been on with our second daughter. Kristin was born in August of 1994. She followed Erin, who was a calm, quiet, rule-abiding little girl who made us look like really good parents. We took on that mistaken identity! When Kristin entered the picture we were humbled as parents and realized that we actually didn't have a clue what we were doing! She was the kid who fell down the stairs while acting silly or found a way to jump out of a shopping cart when we turned our heads for a split second. She was the little kid who couldn't sit still long enough to snap a cute Christmas photo (which, by the way, are the most adorable pictures for me to look at now!). She was a vivacious, lively, animated and fun-loving little girl and there was never a dull moment with her around.

Kristin was also a girl with a huge heart, putting the needs of others before her own. When she was eight years old, she found an adoption agency flyer at church with pictures of kids who needed to find their "forever families." Kristin pleaded with us to adopt all of them or at least one or two. She knew all

their names and faces. She has always loved kids and is good with them. Already as a young girl, she started looking forward to the day that she could have her own children. She was a much loved babysitter and in high demand in the neighbourhood. She was twelve years old when my youngest son was born and she was my right-hand lady. I don't know how I would have managed without her. She has always been a "baby whisperer."

When Kristin was about twelve years old and entering puberty, she started to realize that something did not seem "right" about herself. She was attracted to girls rather than boys and confusion set in. She didn't understand what she was going through. We didn't talk about being gay at home but she did get the message through home, church and Christian school that homosexuality was a sin. She assumed she couldn't be gay because she didn't choose this and was told that being gay is something you choose. She begged and pleaded with God during those years to change her and she suffered in silence with all of her wondering and questioning.

She had decided that she would try dating guys to see if it worked out for her. It didn't. She dated three guys over the next few years — one guy at a time, of course. :) When she finally came to the conclusion that she must be gay, she decided that she would marry a man and keep her secret forever and tell her husband on her death bed.

She wondered what would happen if she ever shared her deep dark secret. Would she be rejected by her family and/or community? What should she do about her deep longing to get married and her longtime dream to be a mom someday? What should she do with her faith — her love for God? Did God still love her? So many questions and struggles ... ALONE. It still pains me deeply to share that part of the story knowing how much she was going through and not sharing it with anyone.

Part way between Grades 10 and 11, Kristin slipped into a depression. It made no sense to us. Kristin had always been a lively, fun-loving kid. We did everything we could think of to help her. We tried to support her in organizing and completing her school work, helped her change her diet as maybe the depression was food related, sent her to a therapist etc. We wondered if she was carrying the burden of all of her friends' problems as she was the friend with a huge heart who would help carry their burdens. She could listen, counsel and encourage her hurting friends for hours. We urged her to let some of that go and suggest her friends get help elsewhere. Supporting them was not helping her get better and yet, she was sinking deeper. One day I discovered that she was cutting herself to mask the pain that was really below the surface. I was devastated. Why was this happening to her?

Kristin took a year off after high school because she was not emotionally ready to tackle post secondary education. At the end of that year off, Kristin chose Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. While there, she discovered a group of LGBTQ Christians and was able to admit for the first time that she was a lesbian, and discovered that it was possible to be both gay and Christian. Prior to sharing this with us, she took time to learn and study and listen to the stories of other people who were both LGBTQ and Christian. She wrestled with coming to a point where she was at peace with being a Christian and gay while the church that she grew up in was telling her that this was not possible. She came to a place of accepting herself for who she was made to be. She had several months (years really) before telling us.

I will always remember the evening that Kristin came out to us. A few months earlier she had called us from Winnipeg and told us that she was looking forward to coming home so that she could share something with us that she had been going through. My mind went in all directions except the possibility that she could be a lesbian. It honestly did not even cross my mind. As we sat in the living room together that evening, she opened her computer and read a beautifully written letter to us. After the initial “I am gay,” she went on to say that it had nothing to do with us being “bad parents.” Her words were a shock to me. She didn’t seem gay (whatever that meant!). Although her words were initially jarring to me, her letter was so caring and thoughtful, truly emulating her beautiful personality. She has always been one who puts the other person first and she wanted to assure us through this letter that being gay was not our fault. We hugged her and told her that we love her no matter what and that we would figure this out. We told her that although in this moment everything changed, nothing changed. We would never stop loving or supporting her.

I recall the denial setting in the next day. I told her that maybe she should keep this quiet until she “really knew” whether or not she was gay. She was so gracious. She just hugged me and said “Mom, I’ve known since I hit puberty.” She went on to tell me that she remembered going to a basketball tournament when she was in Grade 7 when all of her friends were talking about the cute guys, but she was totally focussed on the girls.

The three months after Kristin came out were a blur. I was in the process of wrapping up my teaching year and John was wrapping up a 10 year pastor position just prior to our family moving to Haiti for a year to work for Christian Reformed World Missions (now Resonate Global Mission.) There was no time to process until we arrived in Haiti. The year in Haiti was a gift to me as I used as much of my spare time as possible to read, study, pray, journal and learn. I realized that identifying as LGBTQ is not a choice. If it was a choice, I doubt people would choose it since it usually involves so much heartache, pain, and loss. I immersed myself in stories and sadly heard the most horrific and painful stories of LGBTQ people and my heart broke. I found other people through social media who were further ahead of me on this journey and I began to learn from them.

While we lived in Haiti, many of our family members (also mostly Christian Reformed) came to visit us. On a number of occasions, we sat on our deck together with our visiting family and Kristin came out to them as gay. We were surprised and thankful by their responses. They too told Kristin that they would love and support her no matter what. I will never forget my dad’s response — my dad, a leader and elder in his church for years. He stood up to hug her and through tears said, “Kristin, I am so sorry that you had to go through this alone all those years.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the group. On boxing day of 2015, now back in Ontario, we met the person who is now our beautiful daughter-in-law, Kimberly. She had also spent a year at Canadian Mennonite University and, although they didn’t meet there, they had common friends who introduced them to each other. They were married on May 12, 2018. They are both so happy, thriving in their true identity instead of hiding who they are.

There have been many days over the past six years that I have felt guilty for not being able to “be there” for Kristin during her darkest days. Her response to me has been so gracious. “Mom — you did the best you could with what you knew at the time.” It is my passion to let other parents know my story so their kids will know that they are a safe place to come out, if necessary. I know that this journey will be harder for people who are faith-based.

I wonder where Kristin would be if we had rejected her that night? I thank God that he allowed us to express love instead of fear, and faith instead of judgment. Has this journey been hard? Yes! Do I feel the judgements of people who don't understand? Yes! Does this journey feel lonely sometimes? Yes! Would I change anything? NO.

Two key things I have discovered on this journey: 1) Having gay relatives and friends introduces me to learning I couldn't experience without them; and 2) How the church had interpreted the Bible saying about homosexuality — like our mistaken views on Jews, slaves, and women in the past — is at least worthy of being questioned so that we can accurately know God's heart for LGBTQ people. Because of this, over the past couple of years, my passion has grown for doing something to spread the word that people who identify as LGBTQ are loved by God and that LGBTQ followers of Jesus are part of his church and welcomed at his table. Like all of us, they need to be loved and supported. Three years ago, John and I along with four others started a Generous Space group in Centre Wellington, which offers support for people who identify as both Christian and LGBTQ and those who are supportive allies. We have been richly blessed to know and love LGBTQ people whose faith in Jesus has persisted despite their churches not being able to extend God's welcome to them.

When the CRC's 2020 Report on Human Sexuality was released on October 29, I was in a COVID-19 quarantine with Kristin for two weeks so that we could safely spend a week with my oldest daughter, husband, and new baby. I told her about the report and we talked briefly. She told me that she didn't really want to talk about the report. She was tired of hearing about how there are people arguing about whether or not she can fully belong in the church since true belonging is being accepted for who you really are. She is weary of listening to those who want her to change before she can be a full member of the church. She acknowledged her confidence in knowing that she is loved by Jesus. Although Kristin and her wife would love to find a Christian church capable of communicating God's love without fear they know it's a challenge and one that they don't always have the energy for.

One of Christianity's key teachings is that people are made in the image of God. Yet, that portion of image-bearers who identify as gay are finding themselves squeezed out of the church by heterosexual Christians insisting that LGBTQ people fit into a heterosexual image. May God forgive us for standing in his place and withholding welcome where he would extend his love. I'll end with part of a quote from Brené Brown. "True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are." My hope and prayer is that the church will rise with compassion, love and justice and do the right thing.

Brian Zonder*

**A pseudonym*

Born and bred in the Christian Reformed Church, Brian ticks all the boxes: baptised as an infant, participated in weekly worship, educated in Christian day schools, joined cadets as a boy, attended youth group as a teen, professed his faith as a young adult, and volunteered in his local CRC in various capacities for twenty years.

When asked what his favourite worship song was, Brian, a millennial, responded without missing a beat: “Anything in the grey hymn book.” A fan of organ music, “When Peace Like a River” tops his list. “I love getting dressed up on Sunday morning and going to church.”

But as young teen he began to struggle with whether or not he was gay--*and* with being both gay and Christian. Eventually he came out: first just to himself. “I came to a point where I was able to say, ‘This is who I am.’ I stopped hiding it from myself. I was still hiding it from family and friends, but I was opening up to it.”

At the same time, the church he’d grown up in began to feel less safe. Looking back now, he realizes that while the church itself was not affirming, there *were* many affirming people sitting in its pews. He just didn’t know who they were at the time.

He has since connected with many other members of the CRC who are LGBTQ or allies. He posits that you probably don’t have to look far in your congregation to find someone who is affirming. “It might be someone sitting beside you in the pew, only you don’t know it because you haven’t opened up the conversation.”

As a young adult Brian attended his first *Q Christian Fellowship Conference* in Chicago. (QCF is an ecumenical Christian ministry focussed on serving lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer, and straight ally Christians.) The conference is the largest such gathering in the world. Brian now volunteers his technical and organizational skills to help run the annual event.

Through both QCF and *Generous Space* (a Canadian Christian organization that supports LGBTQ+ people and their allies), Brian was exposed to a wide range of Christian traditions. It opened him up to new ways of thinking critically about the scriptures and his faith. “There are different ways of doing church. Different ways to do communion. Different ways of reading the Bible. We need to ask, what was going on in society when a particular passage was written. What was the context?”

To those who say, “But the Bible doesn’t change,” Brian responds that our *understanding* of scripture has indeed changed through the ages. Pastors continue to write new sermons every week, researching, re-thinking and re-interpreting familiar passages. “Christians once believed that women shouldn’t serve in church office, children shouldn’t come to the Lord’s table, and that slavery was just fine. If the church was able to change its mind about these things, maybe it can change its mind about LGBTQ people too.”

Brian left the CRC in 2015 when he couldn’t find a church where he felt safe and which was also within a reasonable, geographical striking distance. He now attends a United Church which he describes as having a good mix of affirming members and still feels very much like a CRC.

However, he continues to connect and work with many CRC members. A born organizer with an analytic mind, he remains involved because he believes change can be made to stem the steady flow of folks exiting the denomination. “There’s a lot of talk about declining membership in the CRC. Ok, so maybe we need to think about the things that are making it decline.” Despite everything, Brian continues to have hope for the denomination.

What are his hopes for the church that baptized him as an infant? Unity for one. “That it won’t split up over this issue. That it can find middle ground as it has on so many other issues.” He wonders if that could perhaps mean the generosity of allowing for a local option in which, as he puts it, “We’re not going to say if it’s good, bad, right, or wrong, but we recognize there is a variety of belief.”

He also hopes the CRC will be both cautious and humble in its pronouncements about the place of the queer folk in the church because, whether the church realizes it or not, they are already among us. “Remember, they could be sitting at your Thanksgiving table or in your pew. Many people don’t think that LGBTQ inclusion is their issue. Until it is. When that imaginary gay person is gone, and instead it is someone you know and love and trust and value.”

He hopes the CRC will be careful in its teachings. “Hearing the message that you’re condemned over and over again is a lie that can become your truth if you tell it to yourself often enough. I care about the future generation. The young people still sitting in the pews unsure of where they fit in and whether they have a safe space to come out.” Recalling his own childhood in the pew of the CRC church he loved and attended as a boy, he quotes Mary Griffith: “Before you echo amen in your home or place of worship, think and remember a child is listening.”

Sandi Morrison

I was not familiar with the Christian Reformed Church until middle school when I moved to Gallup, New Mexico. Before that, our family had been with a non-denominational mission organization in Ethiopia and other countries in Africa, and I had attended non-denominational churches. When we landed in Gallup, I started attending Middle School at Rehoboth Christian school, so that was my introduction to the CRC.

My parents continued to attend a Baptist church in town, but my sister and I soon chose to attend Rehoboth CRC instead. It seemed more liberal and community-focused than some of the other local denominations, and the sermons and music were more interesting and appealing to me. Of course, it also helped that my friends went there, too. After high school, I ended up at Calvin, so I did become quite involved in the CRC, despite not being from a CRC family.

I had a good group of supportive friends throughout high school, and we had fun together, but I don’t know what the response from my friends would have been if I had realized that I was attracted to women when I was a teenager. In retrospect, it’s pretty clear that I have been a lesbian my whole life — I definitely recall my friends all having crushes in elementary school and middle school and I was just not interested in guys. I would kind of look at the guys in my class and decide which one I was going to have a crush on so that I could fit in. I generally just convinced myself that I just wasn't into guys, and that was okay. In high school, I decided I needed to be dating, so I kind of found somebody and decided that we were going to be dating, and it turns out that most high school guys are kind of amenable to that. As soon as he kissed me, I thought it was absolutely horrendous and wanted nothing to do with him, but I still just thought it was him specifically that was the problem, not men in general. I think that your mind is great at convincing yourself what you want to rationalize, and that’s probably what I was doing.

When I was 25, after I had graduated from Calvin with a nursing degree and spent some time working back in Gallup, I spent a year in Ethiopia working at a hospital there, which was a really formative

experience. I met interesting people, and really started exploring a lot of religious and spiritual questions. I was still trying to date men, and while I made good friends and had great conversations with them, dating just did not work out well for me.

When I moved back to the US, I had a lot of free time on my hands because it took a while for all the paperwork to go through for me to start working again. It was at this point that I finally allowed myself to wonder about my sexuality. Through talking with a supportive friend, I kind of had an epiphany and finally came to the point where I could accept that I was attracted to women, and that maybe that was okay. I realized that the choice I faced was to either acknowledge it and move on, or to keep denying a huge part of myself. I really believe that I was simply in a place in my life where I could finally accept this reality.

Throughout this time back in Gallup, I was back to attending my CRC church because that's just what I did when I was in town. I went regularly, and even attended a small group, but there were definitely big religious questions happening for me in the back of my mind. It felt to me like church was not really a place where I could explore who I was. I don't know how explicit or implicit it was, but it was definitely there. I ended up wanting to move somewhere where I could go back to school if I chose to do that, and ultimately ended up in Albuquerque.

Once I moved to Albuquerque, I left behind the social obligation and habit of attending church every week. It was then that I started dating women, and it was such a huge difference from my previous dating experiences. It was quite an amazing time of self-discovery, and a very eye-opening thing for me. Up until this point, I still hadn't come out to any of my family members because I figured that if I had never dated a woman, I couldn't really say I was a lesbian. When I started seeing someone regularly, I decided I would tell the rest of my family.

My parents had split up when I was in high school, and I knew they would respond differently to this news. I told my mom, and I was kind of expecting that she would be fine with it, but it turned out to be rather hard for her. She pretended that she was fine with it, but it was definitely challenging. It took her time, I think, to accept that I wasn't going to marry the boy next door and have five kids and let her raise them. My dad's response was basically what I had expected: a long email about religion, saying things about how I'd chosen to stray from the Lord and that he hoped I'd choose to "forsake this life of sin." When it comes to churches, what I wish they would hear is that it always seemed to be the case to me that if your sexuality was different, it was met with a "let's just not talk about it" kind of attitude, and that definitely sends a message to people. I pretty firmly believe that your sexuality is something that you're born with, and you can try however hard you want to fit in or to deny it, but ultimately, you're just denying a part of yourself, and you can't live fully when you're in denial. So, if the church is welcoming, and acknowledges the fact that people have differences and that those differences are okay, I believe that's powerful.

One thing I've found too that is very helpful, in churches and other places, is if I see more diversity represented, and I can tell there's LGBTQ people and couples and families, then I do find it a lot more comfortable because I can believe that it's accepted.

These days, I think that meaningful human connection is probably one of the biggest ways I experience joy. I also find enjoyment in little things like the cat crawling up on my lap, or going out in the mountains, or taking a walk in the snow.

Lyle Clark and Fred Heerema

When Lyle Clark fell in love with a member of the Christian Reformed Church, he was introduced to a way of integrating his faith into his daily life that, as a Christian raised in the Roman Catholic Church, he hadn't experienced before. And, as a classically trained musician who had been involved in leading and participating in worship all his life, Lyle also appreciated the liturgy of the CRC and the sense of belonging in a congregation.

And for Fred Heerema, Lyle's partner for more than 30 years, the Christian Reformed Church was the place he was born and raised. The couple met while they were both attending another church, and even though that church was affirming, Fred, especially, missed "a depth of faith experience, the kinds of things the Reformed community stands for, it's social and cultural involvement." Fred longed to be back "within my own background and tradition."

For most of their time together, the couple have been active, participating members of First Christian Reformed Church of Toronto, a place where Lyle is involved in the worship committee and in leading worship, and Fred is currently on the finance committee. Some years ago, Lyle also officially joined the Christian Reformed Church after doing profession of faith. Most importantly, for Lyle and Fred, it's a place "where the people are caring and supportive."

Both Lyle and Fred are grateful for the opportunity to use their gifts to support their church, and they are glad to be in a community that sees their identity as Christians as more important than their sexual orientation. "In terms of my identity, first of all, I am a child of God, and the second is, I'm gay," Fred says, quoting a pastor he knows.

As an adolescent, growing up in the CRC, Fred struggled with his growing awareness of his sexual orientation as a gay person, but "there has not been a time in my life when I felt estranged from God. There have been times when I was in doubt whether I was okay with God, but I never felt that I was not accepted by God." That realization hit home for him when a wise and kind therapist asked him once, if he were standing in front of Christ right now, how do you think Christ would treat you?

"I said, 'I think Christ would love me.'"

As a youth and young man, Lyle felt less conflict between his faith and being gay because of what he calls the "the duality" experienced by many Roman Catholics: "you go to Sunday mass and you confess your sins, and then for the rest of the week, it's just your everyday life that really has nothing to do with the Christian faith."

Both say they are grateful for the love and stability that their committed relationship gives them and the ordinariness of their daily lives. Fred laments the situation of gay friends who don't enjoy the comfort and blessing of a committed relationship, while for Lyle, having the blessing of a Christian life partner has drawn him deeper into his Christian walk and into his sense of God's love and presence in his life.

Quoting Victor Hugo, Lyle says: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Corry van der Ende

I was born in Holland in 1948, the eighth child of nine. I have five brothers and three sisters. Ours was a traditional Dutch family with dad working to earn a living and my mother busy in the home caring for the children. Each lunch and dinner was preceded by prayer and finished with a bible passage and more prayer. On Sunday we went to church in the morning followed by an elaborate dinner and an afternoon of visiting family or friends. Then it was church again in the evenings. It was understood by all of us that organized sports activities were forbidden on Sundays. We were taught to say our bedtime prayers kneeling at our bedside.

By the time I was to start Grade 2 the Dutch immigrant population in the area had built a multipurpose building which would house the elementary school during the week and church on Sundays. I attended the Christian Reformed elementary school from grade 2 through 7 and then switched to the local public school from grade 8 through 12 because it was located across the street from our home so we no longer had to take the bus to school as in elementary school. Thereafter it was the local secular university for my Bachelors degree followed by a doctorate in Saskatchewan. I attended catechism classes in the evening once I turned 16 and did profession of faith in our Christian Reformed Church.

As an adolescent I was attracted to male classmates and later in my late teens and throughout my twenties there were several boyfriends. I fell in love and received marriage proposals but remained "single" waiting for "the right one to come along." The years passed as I built my career and business. I was happy and contented. I became a self-made professional woman. However as I entered my fifties I began to realize I did not want to get "old" alone. I prayed for a partner.

It was at the age of 55 on October 6th at 11:30 in the morning sitting in a small row boat out on a lake in B.C that God answered my prayer. The battery to the electric motor for my boat had been on the charger all night and was fully loaded. We had a female visitor from Holland with us at the cabin and I suggested the best way to experience the beauty of B.C.'s nature was in a small boat on the lake. Ninety minutes into our boat ride the motor stopped. It would be a long row back to the cabin As I assumed rowing position facing the bow, I asked our visitor who was sitting behind me if she could row a boat. "No" she stated. It was then when the emotion that I had always felt only for certain men hit me like a thunderbolt. I expressed my confusion and was immediately embraced. It felt like "the right one" as my mother had told me. There was no question about it; this is who I wanted to marry.

But I was afraid as to how my family would react and my clients. What about the church? Was the bible really against this? As any scientist would do, I started to research the literature and discovered numerous books written by respected Christian authors who presented an alternative interpretation of the most commonly quoted bible verses on the topic of same sex attraction. Perhaps it is the Christian Reformed church that is misinterpreting the verses as they did with slavery, racism, women in office, etc. I moved to Holland where same sex relationships were accepted and not frowned upon. In 2003 we were married by the government official and an ordained minister in the Herformde kerk in the town in which we were living. The pastor officiating was my 80-year-old uncle. He started his sermon by

recognizing “the elephant in the room” stating that there were those present who approved, those who didn’t and those who were unsure. The theme of his sermon was love being the strongest emotion expressed in the bible in general and by Christ.

One year later we returned to B.C. Within the first week of my return, I met with the pastor of my church to inform him of my marriage and to ask if we would be welcome as a couple in the church. He stated that he estimated 50% of the congregation would be supportive but the official position of the church was not supportive of same sex unions. It was only then that I started to probe synod rulings on the issue. I was appalled by what I read. Shortly thereafter my spouse and I attended a weekend retreat put on by Generous Space. Again, we were shocked by the pain that the Christian Reformed Church had afflicted on LGBTQ members and their families who dared to be supportive. I was ready to quit the church but encouraged to stay by one of its pastors with the assurance not all Christian Reformed churches were judgemental.

Being of the generation I am and having the family background I do, I can understand the difficulty those of my generation have understanding same sex attraction, bisexuals, trans individuals and so on. I was there myself at one stage in my life. It is human nature to be frightened of the unknown and when our peers support our fears we feel justified being judgemental and even condemning. Add to this condemnation the support of synod, we feel justified in how we feel. It brings to mind historical events of the past such as racism, slavery, the holocaust, modern day ethnic cleansing and the death penalty for gays in 13 countries today. Imagine if it’s your son or daughter. I don’t believe this was ever biblically justifiable.

Steph Busuttil

My name is Steph. I was raised in the CRC. I am queer, non-binary and I believe in God. These are just parts of what make me wholly and authentically who I am. This is my story.

I was a couple months old when my parents adorned me in a perfect white dress, stood up in front of our congregation, family, and friends and had me baptized. That Sunday my parents, friends, and family promised to love, support, and encourage me in my life and in my faith. The congregation, with one voice, promised to do the same. I did not know at that time what all of this meant, but as I grew up in the Christian Reformed community, I came to learn and love what those promises and what my faith meant for my life. For 18 years I was a dedicated and God-loving Christian. I grew up learning children’s stories in Sunday school, earning badges in Calvinettes, earning trust and learning responsibility by babysitting kids in the church nursery, and at 17 years old, I stood up in front of the same church and congregation that baptized me and did my profession of faith.

During these same 18 years, I came to realize that I was different. By my mid-teens, I quietly realized that I was having feelings for girls. My first girl crush was a close friend of my brother. She was amazing and all I wanted to do was be around her and get to know her on a deeper level. These feelings went far beyond physical attraction. They were electric. It was the first time I finally felt what all my female friends said they felt about guys. Feelings that, up until this time, I had never related to. I had tried so hard to make myself like guys and be “normal” to no avail. My feelings for this girl were like a switch in my brain and body flipping on. These were the feelings I had hoped for years I would feel for guys, but

never did. As amazing as this revelation felt, with it came a gut-wrenching dread and anxiety. I was a Christian; how could I be gay? My life wasn't supposed to go like this. I knew what the Bible said about homosexuality, it was a sin and that God punished those who engaged in homosexuality by banishing them to hell. I spent more nights than I can count praying that these feelings would go away, even though I had never felt more complete. I prayed God would make me "normal" and make me like guys. No matter what I did, no matter how hard or long I prayed, my feelings didn't change. This wasn't a phase; this was who I am, and I knew I had a choice to make. I could hide who I was to be a "good" Christian, or embrace and love this part of myself and live my life the way God had made me. To say that I was terrified was an understatement. I spent more than a year hiding these feelings from my family. I knew that my parents loved me, but I also knew that they were church-going, God-fearing people, and that me being gay did not fit into that. Within me laid a strong fear that if people in the church found out that they had a gay child, my parents would be judged — possibly ostracized — and would lose the respect they had as serving members of our church. I was terrified that something I could not change would cause my family to lose one of the few constants we had in our lives. Despite the fear, I kept going to church while, outside the church, I was secretly living a life that felt more honest and real to who I was. Eventually I came out to my parents, and even though it was hard for them, they never, ever stopped loving me. I slowly came out to friends at school and, just like my family, no one left me or made me feel the shame I felt every time I stepped into church. After almost two years of living with shame, guilt, and fear every time I went to church, I decided that I could no longer live a double life, filled with such drastically different feelings. I knew that suppressing my truth and my identity would be harmful to my health.

I didn't know it at the time, but my relationship with the church was coming to an end. One Sunday morning, while sitting in church and listening to a sermon with my family, the pastor began preaching about homosexuality and the scriptures about homosexuality in the Bible. This was the second or third time in a short while that I had sat through a sermon about homosexuality. I felt so isolated and alone listening to those sermons. I knew on that Sunday that I couldn't take anymore. I knew in my heart that I had to choose to be me, all of me, without fear, without shame, and without guilt. So during that pastor's sermon, I got up and walked out. I left feeling sad, angry, and hurt. The same people and community that had promised to love and support me were causing the most hurt and harm. At the same time, I felt more free and powerful than I had ever felt. I trusted that I was making the right choice for me and for my family.

After leaving the church, I sought out a community like myself. In this community I found love, support, compassion, and an overwhelming sense of pride. Regardless of who I was or where I came from, my mere existence was one to be celebrated.

Over the last 20 years I have struggled to maintain a strong relationship with God. I knew God from the perspective of the Church, but I also knew God as the creator who made me in their image. I have attended churches over the years but none that felt like home, where I could be authentically open and feel like I was in a safe space. Despite the struggles in my relationship with God, I can feel God in my life, still watching over me and guiding me. I feel a pull back to God and to the church, even though it has been a source of shame and anger. Recently I came out as queer and non-binary. These personal revelations have brought me an ever deeper sense of understanding of self and I trust that that is also God working in my life. Throughout my entire faith journey there has been a passage that has been a

sense of comfort, inspiration, calm, and guidance. It is Jeremiah 29-11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” I hold on to this passage and trust that God has a life of love, pride, and faith set out for me.

Matthew Deroo*

**A pseudonym. Matthew wants his story shared publicly but attaching his name would negatively affect family members in the CRC.*

My story begins like so many others: a childhood being raised in a Christian family and attending the nearby Christian Reformed Church every week. My world seemed to revolve around the CRC community. Our family friends were mostly from within the CRC and my extended family – top to bottom – was Christian Reformed. Needless to say, nearly my entire life growing up was informed by the doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church. That is, until I came out as gay.

It took many years of pain and isolated struggle to come to grips with who I am. But when I finally did, it became clear to me that the CRC doctrine I had previously relied on for truth and stability no longer provided me that. To the contrary, it seemed to have abandoned me altogether – unable to love me for who I was or to recognize me as an equal brother in Christ. I came to realize that the Church and its teachings were largely responsible for why my journey had been so painful and so lonely. I was taught that I was inherently sinful – not in the same way that everyone else is sinful, but in a much worse and more shameful way. Through a culture of bigotry that ran just beneath the surface in the Christian community around me (conveniently hidden beneath smiles and pleasantries), it was clear to me that I would be cast out and condemned if anyone knew the truth. As a result, I knew even as a child that I had no choice but to suffer alone, drowning in self-hatred and shame. This was deeply traumatic and has left me with scars that still hurt to this day.

Fortunately, I grew up. I moved on from my Christian high school, attended Christian university, and ultimately attended a large secular university for postgraduate studies. Along the way I met so many amazing people – some Christian and some not. I learned a lot from these people. They each brought with them a worldview shaped by experiences that were different than my own. Honestly, it was a relief to learn that life existed outside of the CRC and that there was not just one way to follow God. The secret that the Church had tried to keep from me – that there were queer people like me everywhere authentically living their life for Jesus – was finally discovered. What’s more is that I also found Christians who were straight, white, and cisgendered who loved and affirmed me for exactly who I was. Coming from the church I grew up in, this was earth-shattering. For the first time I was seen, understood, and truly loved by my Christian community. It was then that I truly left the CRC behind. I saw that God had prepared a table for me and I went running. I have never looked back since.

It was in Christian spaces outside of the CRC that I first encountered other Christians like me. If I’m being honest, it was in these spaces that I first encountered Jesus. Well, at least a version of Jesus that finally made sense: one that loved radically, challenged religious authorities, and lived in the margins. This, I thought, is the Jesus of the Bible and the one I was always meant to meet. I have walked with him ever since.

But our path has not been without its obstacles. The deep-rooted trauma I experienced as a young, gay Christian has had its toll. There are times when I am so consumed with hurt and anger towards the Church and its people that I find it difficult to continue holding the hand of my Saviour. Like a child in a fit of rage I want to throw away my Father's hand and get as far away as possible. This has led to times of spiritual drought and distance from Christ that leave me feeling broken and alone again. Even now, years after leaving behind the churches that hurt me, I can still fall into self-inflicted isolation from Christ: a remnant of the loneliness I felt as a closeted Christian. As much as this reality pains me, it is a part of my story just as it is for so many others.

However, I am fortunate in ways that not everyone like me is. I have a loving, supportive, and faithful husband who can be my spiritual rock when I falter. Contrary to the belief that same-sex relationships are inherently sinful and separate people from God, my husband challenges me to be a better Christian when I feel like giving up. He picks me up off the floor and pushes me back into Christ's outstretched arms when I am struggling to do so myself. He does this for me like I did for him when we met and he had fallen away from his faith. When one is weak, the other is strong. When one becomes complacent, the other encourages them back into relationship with Christ. If you think it impossible for a same-sex marriage to lead people toward Christ, I can assure you that you are wrong. My husband has helped to heal so many of the wounds inflicted on me by the Church and that is one of the greatest gifts that the Lord has given to me. When we met, I had resigned myself to the reality that I would never see the deepest desires of my heart realized because I was taught that I could not follow Christ and have a family of my own. It was in this exact moment that God brought him into my life and told me He had other plans. We choose to follow Him, regardless of the rejection we face within the Christian community, because he brought us together when hope was nearly lost and has blessed us beyond measure. When fear and pain threatened to consume us entirely, he saved us. For this reason, and so many more, we strive to live by faith and to make Christ the centre of our marriage.

Leaving the CRC was not a decision I took lightly but it was a decision I made easily. Despite the hurt caused to me by the church, I did not leave because I thought the CRC was a lost cause. I left because I felt that the CRC saw *me* as a lost cause. I felt that if I could not either change or deny my true self, I was beyond salvation in their eyes. This message still rings loud and clear from the CRC despite recent attempts to right their previous wrongs. As a gay Christian, I feel it is important to let the CRC know that these attempts, although well-intentioned, have done very little to right these wrongs. Forming a committee made entirely of people with views that align with the traditional CRC beliefs, claiming to have given each side an equal voice, and then ultimately changing nothing does *not* make queer people feel any safer or any more welcome in the church. Acknowledging the pain and suffering that has been caused and listening to stories like mine, while a necessary step, can feel more like an inauthentic "checking of boxes" if nothing is then done to prevent that pain in the future. If I could ask one thing of the CRC it would be to genuinely examine the fruit that your tree is bearing. When it comes to the topic of LGBTQ+ Christians, that fruit looks a lot like hurt, condemnation, isolation from Christ, abandonment of faith, and, in some cases, death. We are suffering and we are dying because of these long-held beliefs and that cannot be changed simply by being "progressive" enough to finally acknowledge our pain. I am past the point of applauding churches for being willing to even say the word gay. More needs to be done. We deserve better.

I am writing my story not because I need to have my hurt acknowledged. I no longer seek apologies or retribution for the wrongs done to me. I write this for one reason and one reason only: for the kids in

church today who are struggling like I did. My only prayer is that my words can somehow, in some way, ease their suffering and maybe prevent that suffering in the first place. Luckily for people like us, there are places where this pain does not exist. Leaving the CRC allowed me to find a church and a community where real change is happening. I have finally been invited to join a table where there is a seat set aside just for me – exactly as I am. A church where my son will never be made to feel condemned, rejected, or alone like I did. I thank the Lord every day that I no longer have to hide myself or my family. Where there was once pain, there is now joy. He has replaced friends and family who rejected me with others who embrace me. He has shown me how to love myself as the person He created me to be. He has made me strong where I was once weak. Although there are many who would think me lost or spiritually misguided, I am not. I am right where God wants me to be. I can now say with joy in my heart that I am profoundly grateful that God gifted me with being gay. It has opened my heart, made me into the person I am today, and shown me what it truly means to love as Christ intends us to love.

AGENDA ITEM 5.4: Jubilee Fellowship CRC Overture – Cross Campus Student response

As Jubilee Fellowship 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, Jubilee Fellowship CRC Council has adopted this overture to provide the means by which these student voices can be heard both at Classis Niagara and at Synod. The following content was written by these students in their own voice. Since some of the students involved in this overture are Jubilee members we are presenting this overture on their behalf to Classis asking Classis to adopt this overture and submit it to Synod. We believe it is important for their voices 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 Jubilee Fellowship CRC.

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 congregations to classes 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

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, Shayanne (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); Klompaker, Kirsten (Jubilee Fellowship CRC in Classis Niagara); Krале, 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)

mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into 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

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

pain in a safe environment, and that these concerns be reported back to the 2020 General Assembly”⁴ and the 2017 General Assembly had already “established a listening committee, the Rainbow Communion, to create safe space for LGTBQ+ 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, Jubilee Fellowship CRC overture Classis to 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).

- 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, Shayanne	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)
Klompaker, 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

AGENDA ITEM 5.7: REPORT OF THE CLASSIS MINISTRY COUNCIL

Classis Ministry Council - January 14, 2020, via ZOOM

MINUTES

1	<p>Present: Wendy de Jong, Joanne Drenth-VanDyke, Karen Gerritsma, Janet Ryzebol, Colin Vander Ploeg, Mike Vandyk, Andy Wunderink.</p> <p>Opening Devotions/Prayer: Andy gave an update of recent developments at the Hub which has been transformed into a warming space in cooperation with Out of the Cold. They have been able to provide soup to households in the area as well as desperately needed coats, socks, etc to folks walking in from the community. Colin Vander Ploeg led devotions with a reading from Romans 12 with a call to unity and faithfulness, and led in prayer asking for a blessing on the upcoming meeting and pastoral concerns.</p>
2	<p>Motion to approve CMC Minutes of September 17, 2020 - Carried</p> <p>Classis Niagara Minutes of October 28, 2020 - Carried</p>
3	<p>Core Value Team Reports</p> <p>3a <u>Prayerful Dependence on God Team</u> – Planning any new events is on hold as the team waits for things to open up again.</p> <p>3b <u>Authentic Community Team</u> – We discussed the feasibility of aiming for a retreat in October and concluded that, given how the pandemic and vaccinations play out, to first aim for a regular in-person meeting in October. We will likely have a better idea by late summer if that’s feasible or meetings continue on Zoom the remainder of this year, and then perhaps determine whether a February in-person retreat might be a possibility.</p> <p>3c <u>Covenantal Relationships Team</u> - Colin raised the suggestion that we streamline the credentials process to disband assigning two churches to form the credentials committee. Given our practice has already changed significantly in the last two years with the Stated Clerk receiving all credentials forms electronically prior to the meeting and knowing in advance what items may need to be dealt with the credentials committee is rather redundant. After some discussion of practical details such as the need to read the roll call and in case there is a change in the delegates from those indicated on the actual form, the following motion was put forward:</p> <p>Motion: <i>That the practice of assigning a Credentials Committee be disbanded. All churches are to submit credentials to the Stated Clerk in advance of the meeting. The Stated Clerk will review the credentials, prepare a roll call as a record of those present, notify the Chair & Vice-Chair of any items that require action, overtures, nominations submitted, etc. As part of declaring Classis constituted, the Chair will ascertain with the Stated Clerk that all the credentials are in order. Carried</i></p> <p>3d <u>Leadership Development Team</u> – Karen Gerritsma agreed to become the new CMC liaison with this team now that Anna Bailey no longer attends CMC meetings. Karen will connect with Anna about chairing, expectations, etc. Thanks Karen for agreeing to step in!</p> <p>3e <u>Disciples Making New Disciples</u> Janet raised the matter of a miscommunication last summer, likely due to changeovers in the team, resulting in a budget amount for The Table of \$5,000 rather than the \$10,000 the DMD requested. Agreed that some of the surplus funds in the Missions Development portion of the budget be used to contribute the difference and to adjust the budget for the full amount in 2021. Terence’s ministry is having remarkable success in downtown Thorold, especially given the current conditions. Marian Lensink has been a resident consultant for this team for many years, but is giving up that position with Resonate, and will be missed.</p> <p><u>BUCT update</u> – Karen reported that Zack will be continuing much as he has been doing of late with online presence. The Open House went well. He has been appointed as the multi-faith coordinator at Brock, which</p>

	<p>makes him an official part of the Brock staff. The team isn't sure yet how much time this is going to take and whether or not there will be monetary implications. The team has received some excellent documentation from Mark Wallace of Resonate to help guide them through an evaluation process of the campus ministry.</p> <p><u>Draft Parental Leave policy</u> – This draft policy is currently being reviewed by the councils of the two champion churches. Anticipating their approval, the CMC endorses the policy as presented, which will be adopted by Classis when the work of the CMC is approved.</p>
4	<p>Follow up re Article 17-a release of Pastor Allen Kleine Deters: The oversight committee is maintaining contact with Allen. Mike will also get in touch with him soon in connection with the end of the two-year period this fall.</p>
5	<p>Stated Clerk report: Wendy reported that the credentials for Rev. Erick Schuringa have been received, signed and forwarded to Mountainview's counsellor and the denominational office. Erick begins his ministry at Mountainview on January 17. Mike will send a welcome note on behalf of Classis which could be read at the installation service, or other time should the installation already have occurred. Wendy has been in touch with Mike Collins regarding his credentials and status. He is overlapping with Erick for the next month.</p> <p>The safe church abuse prevention forms have been coming in steadily with only two churches outstanding, but Wendy hopes to have the entire package of documentation sent off to the insurance company next week at the latest.</p> <p>It was agreed not to set a standard procedure in terms of how pulpit supply can be filled since there are too many variables, but to have the pastors work out details with the church. Some churches may ask the pastor to preach in person for their own live streaming, but options such as having the church members tune into the online service of the designated pastor's church, or sending in a pre-recorded sermon from a previous service for their use in their own streaming, are all valid.</p>
6	<p>Treasurer's report: Joanne Drenth-VanDyke presented the draft financial statements.</p> <p>She noted an increase in the surplus of \$40,000 since no student loans were paid out last year. This is partly because of the CMLT operates on a school calendar year and since most of the students have finished their studies or taken a temporary leave. David Scholman's work at Covenant is being credited as part of his loan forgiveness plan.</p> <p>All the churches contributed 100% classical ministry shares. We were also the first Classis to get our Ministry Share pledges in to the denomination. Well done all!</p> <p>There is approximately \$8,000 in outstanding Resonate grant money available for the Brock Campus Ministry which funds are restricted for resonate expenditures. The team will raise this at their next meeting determining effective ways to use these funds. The unused amount of his professional development fund will be rolled forward as an expense into 2021 to be used for a retreat or similar event. It was agreed to keep such funds separate and not to add them as salary.</p> <p>The audited Financial Statements will be presented to Classis in May as part of the Annual General Meeting.</p> <p>The surplus funds and the needs of the Hub and Third Space Café were discussed at length. In order to maintain the charitable status and separation between the Bridge/the Hub and the Third Space Café, it was agreed that Andy Wunderink will present the need to both classis delegates and the church diaconates via videos introducing their work and the challenges they face. Churches will be encouraged to support this work through offerings, while classical financial support will continue to be given to The Bridge, whose leaders may then determine where and how to apply the funds to reimburse volunteers, etc. connected to the Hub warming space and Third Space Café. Andy is also encouraged to write something up to raise awareness that can be sent to the churches for their bulletins and offerings. The Bridge leadership team has been meeting with Mike Collins to get feedback and look at next steps but with COVID, being able to meet and make plans has been challenging.</p> <p>Stephanie Collins has decided not to resume the treasurer position following her maternity leave. Welcome Joanne as the new official treasurer! Stephanie has agreed to be the alternate treasurer. Mike will arrange</p>

	for a thank you bouquet and card for Stephanie.
7	Youth Ministry Champion report: Anna Bailey will report in person at the classis meetings and via the Leadership Development team for CMC meetings.
8	<p>Preliminary Preparation for February 24, 2021: The draft agenda was reviewed and approval given to the time frame as set out making this a full day Classis meeting. It was agreed to limit the meeting strictly to delegates and those denominational staff who will be leading the guided conversation and/or reporting at the end of the meeting. With a full agenda it was agreed not to have a sharing time on the core value of Disciples Making Disciples.</p> <p>Inclusion of a guided conversation led by Syd Hielema and Lesli van Millien introducing the Challenging Conversations toolkit was approved as a good way to make churches familiar with this toolkit which will be beneficial for any church council to use and which could be a very helpful process for Classis.</p> <p>The credentials form will encourage delegates to read the Synodical study report on human sexuality. One overture has been received, a second is anticipated. The agenda includes a potential third overture should anything come in from one of the churches in the next six weeks. Wendy will touch base with the delegates of Mountainview and Trinity who make up the Overture Committee well ahead of the meeting date. Mike & Wendy will meet with the Chair and Vice-Chair, pastors Woodrow Dixon and Jeff Klingenberg, a week prior in preparation of the meeting.</p> <p>Although very unlikely, should we need to vote for synodical delegates, those who were nominated last year will be asked first if they would still like to have their name stand, and voting will only be held if other delegates are needed.</p>
9	Safe Church Report: Wendy reported that she and Christina Pleizier are both stepping down as Co-coordinators of the Classis Safe Church Team. Christina's term is finished in May while Wendy is leaving a year early due to other time commitments. They will be seeking a new coordinator before they step down and as much as possible stay on as an ad hoc basis if needed this year.
10	Closing prayer & next meeting: Mike closed the meeting with prayer. The next meeting date was set for March 18 if there are items from the February meeting that need attention. If not the CMC will meet again on April 15 to prepare for the May 26 meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 5.8: REPORT OF STATED CLERK/CORRESPONDENCE

Since the October meeting, work on the Stated Clerk side has been rather quiet. Apart from the main work of preparing for the February 24th meeting, there have been a few Stated Clerk Zoom sessions, primarily focused on navigating Zoom better and identifying where there were hiccups and sharing advice on polling. I am taking advantage of this time to go through the online Church Polity course by Dr. Kathy Smith a second time to further solidify my grasp of the church order.

The task of obtaining abuse prevention insurance for classis is nearing the end. All the documentation from the churches has been sent on to Robertson Hall Insurance. As policies and best practices come down from the denominational staff, these will also be incorporated into the Brock campus ministry with the aim of including that ministry in the overall classical insurance coverage.

The pulpit supply list is included below and will be updated if there are changes. Thank you to those who submitted their thoughts on whether or not to hold an in-person Synod this June. Classis Niagara's submission indicated a desire to postpone Synod until 2022, to also postpone discussion of the synodical study report on human sexuality, and concurrence with allowing the COD to deal with any matters that cannot wait until June 2022. Voting for delegates will only take place should the COD decide to meet in June 2021 after all.

Finally it was a nice surprise to see this piece included in the January Connections "The Brief" – a 10-Minute* Monthly Encouragement for Those Who Serve Regions or Classes – and yes, I'm tooting my own horn 😊

MINISTRY ON THE FRONTLINES

This month we're going to highlight one story out of Classis Niagara that shows the power and trust-building capacity of the connections mindset.

Classis Niagara's stated clerk received an email from their CMLT (Classis Ministry Leadership Team) chairperson who was reaching out on behalf of an elder stepping into a pastoral care/visitation role at his own vacant congregation. She inquired with Al Postma about any resources that would help the elder in this new role. Al connected her to Sean Baker from Pastor Church Resources, Shawn Brix at Calvin Seminary, and their Regional Network Connector, Lesli Van Milligen. All three of these people were invited to come alongside this elder learning a new church leadership role. This was the clerk's reply: "Thank you so much for all these responses. When someone wonders about where Ministry Share dollars go, I'm tempted to show them an email chain like this one and say "If you have a question, send it to someone at the denomination, and if they don't know themselves, they will find someone who does, and within a day, you will have an answer!" All of your feedback put a smile on my face."

PULPIT SUPPLY LIST FOR CLASSIS NIAGARA – January – May 2021

	TRINITY CRC Currently only at 10:00 am	FRUITLAND CRC 9:30 am
January 10 January 24	Rev. Wes Collins Rev. Jeff Klingenberg	Rev. Bob Loerts Rev. Jack VanderVeer
February 14 February 28	Rev. Colin Vander Ploeg Rev. Jack VanderVeer	Rev. Wes Collins Rev. Peter Tuininga
March 14 March 28	Rev. Woodrow Dixon Rev. Mike Vandyk	Rev. Janet Ryzebol Rev. Steve deBoer
April 11 April 25	Rev. Colin Vander Ploeg Rev. Bob Loerts	Rev. Jeff Klingenberg Rev. Jack VanderVeer
May 9 May 23	Rev. Peter Tuininga Rev. Erick Schuringa	Rev. Woodrow Dixon Rev. Steve deBoer

AGENDA ITEM 5.10: Delegates to Synod in previous years

	PASTOR	ELDER	DEACON	4 TH	PASTOR ALT	ELDER ALT	DEACON ALT	4 TH ALT
2021								
2020 voting results	<i>Bob Loerts</i>	<i>Joan Kooger</i>	<i>Blair Schiebel</i>	<i>Mike Vandyk</i>	<i>Steve deBoer</i>	<i>Tena Dykxhoorn</i>	<i>Ingrid Beck</i>	<i>Mark DeVos</i>
2019	Sid Couperus	Dan Baarda		Tena Dykxhoorn	Bob Loerts	Frank Engelage		Steve DeBoer
2018	Mike Vandyk	Hilbert Bokma	Karen Vandyk	George Sportel	Sid Couperus			Kevin VanderVeen
2017	Woodrow Dixon	Archie Vermeer		Colin VanderPloeg	Fred VanderBerg	Dora Strooboscher		Brian Verheul
2016	Chris deWinter	Cora Vink		Fred VanderBerg	Steve deBoer			Allen Klein-Deters

The COD will make a decision at its February 17-19 meeting as to whether or not Synod will meet in person, virtually or as a hybrid in June 2021. If the decision is made to postpone Synod until 2022, voting for delegates will not take place.

What to Expect as a Delegate to Synod

The Christian Reformed Church in North America is a denomination made up of people and congregations across the United States and Canada. It is governed by an annual assembly that includes representatives from a classis—regional groupings of the congregations. This annual meeting is called *synod* and is a time of worship, prayerful discernment, discussion, and decision-making.

Each synod is made up of 192 delegates: one minister, one elder, one deacon, and one other officebearer from each classis. Sometimes, individuals have expressed apprehension toward allowing their name to be considered by their classis as a delegate to synod. We hope that what follows can answer questions you may have, alleviate worries, and provide you with a clear overview of what to expect at synod so that you can prayerfully consider this important opportunity!

Why should I serve as a delegate?

Synod is the church—when synod delegates come together, the church comes together. Delegates hear and experience the joys and the excitement of ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. The work of synod impacts the future of the church—our denomination. The decisions that you make, the things that you bring to the table, the ideas that you share all have an impact on the future of our church.

What is the time commitment and cost involved?

Delegates receive a printed *Agenda for Synod* in late April and are asked to complete their registration so we can plan for your arrival. Because delegates are assigned to an advisory committee that is responsible to review a particular portion of synod’s agenda, delegates should focus on reading materials for their advisory committee work prior to arrival at synod. This may take several hours. Synod meets for a full week (Friday through the following Thursday). The Synodical Services Office covers the cost of travel, lodging, and meals during synod.

What is a typical synod schedule?

First-time delegates, especially, are encouraged to attend an orientation session before synod begins on Friday morning with opening worship and election of officers. The remainder of Friday and most of the day Saturday are spent in your assigned advisory committee. Sunday is a “no business” day, reserved for the

Synodical Worship Service and learning opportunity through workshops offered. Synod meets in plenary session (all delegates and advisers) all day Monday and the following days until adjournment on Thursday afternoon. During these plenary sessions, delegates hear the reports of advisory committees and CRC ministries and deliberate on the recommendations presented to the assembly.

What is a synod advisory committee?

The officers of the previous year's synod (Program Committee) appoint each of the delegates to an advisory committee (approx. 20-25 members) to address a specific section of synod's agenda. The officers also appoint a chair and reporter (normally experienced delegates) to the advisory committees, who lead the meeting and record the recommendations of the committee. These recommendations are later presented to the full assembly for consideration. Examples of advisory committees include Synodical Services, Education and Candidacy, Congregational Services, Financial Matters, Interdenominational Matters, and Study Committees.

What are "rules of order?"

Synod conducts itself using an agreed upon set of rules of order to help ensure a smooth flow to the discussions of the business at hand. The "Rules for Synodical Procedure" (found at crcna.org/SynodResources) provide definition and explanation of rules of order such as main motion, motion to amend, motion to defer, calling the question, and so forth. While it is helpful to review these rules before you attend synod, please know that there are many other first-time delegates. You will find many gracious people in your committees and at or around your plenary table who can answer questions and assist you throughout the week.

Do I need to be computer savvy?

Have no fear . . . our tech staff is near! Not only do we have well qualified staff to assist you well before your arrival at synod, we offer "loaner" devices during synod—you don't need to have your own device to be delegated to synod. Upon arrival, our IT staff will take the time to sit with you and teach you how to start up the device, save quick links for easy use, and ensure your comfort with the device before synod convenes. Every synod attendee participates in the "Synod Site" orientation, including practice voting and use of the speaker queue.

What if I am new on council or don't have a lot of experience attending classis meetings?

If you have a love for the Christian Reformed Church and its ministry, you'll be in excellent company! Attending synod will further awaken your passion for the church. There is business to attend to during synod—addressed first within advisory committees (each delegate participates on a committee), then presented to the full body of synod for consideration and many times decision. Synod and its officers are guided by the "Rules for Synodical Procedure" (described above in "rules of order"), providing means for order in how it conducts its meetings. Your delegate orientation will provide explanation of the various rules prior to synod.

What advice would former synod delegates give to first-time delegates?

Don't be afraid to ask questions about what's going on. Synod is very procedural and runs by a specific set of rules, so if you're feeling confused, there's a 100% chance that someone else is also confused and is afraid to ask for clarification. Speak up for their sake! *John. M.*



Pray a lot!

The place to help shape what is done is in your committee meeting and those start on Day 1. Come

prepared to offer.

It's a deliberative body, not a political contest. Come with an open mind, a listening ear, and an understanding heart.

At meal times, eat with strangers.

If you are reticent to offer an idea, just blurt it out. If you can't wait to share your idea, keep it to yourself. Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

Pack a large towel!

Have a cool ringtone for those embarrassing moments when you forget to silence your phone. *Rod H.*

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Ask your church to pray for you. Come to Synod ready to listen. Pray. *Sheri B*

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Read. Watch. Listen. Think.

Pray. Speak.

Read as much as you can from the agenda and other denominational material to learn about present and past decisions.

Watch as much as you can. Body language. Movement within the body of delegates. It speaks volumes about what they are feeling.

Listen to words and emotions. To arguments and hopes. Passions and desires.

Think about what is said and acted.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to move powerfully. For God's will to be done. For love to flow. For unity.

Only after all this should you speak. *Richard B.*

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Read the whole agenda and speak up/ask questions during advisory committee sessions. That is where you will have the greatest impact. *Roger S.*

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Prepare! As much as you can, familiarize yourself with much of the Agenda before synod. *Doug M. and Scott G.*

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Read the Agenda, celebrate what God is doing among us, and as you encounter things among us that you're less thankful for: pray for God's grace to love His church--your church--our church--deeply and well. Then, take a deep breath and squint harder to see how God might just be moving among us anyway (as well as how the Spirit might be lovingly calling us to change)! But do remember: your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (including agency staff, "the denomination," and people you deeply disagree with) are not the enemy. By God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, we're all in this thing together! *Anthony E.*

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Read ahead of time - do your homework and ask lots of questions before you arrive - and watch the orientation videos - they are really helpful! And pray . . . for wisdom, humility and surrender. *Elizabeth V.*

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In our fast changing world and in dedicating your self to Jesus, try to have fewer fixed expectations and be truly open minded and hearted to listen not just for views and perspectives that you are comfortable with, but for promptings of Holy Spirit, Scriptures, sisters and brothers that could be calling you to change your mind, your thinking and your previous devotions. *John T.*

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Read the materials carefully, including the orientation materials and Rules for Synod **before** you arrive at Synod. *George M.*

AGENDA ITEM 5.11: Council of Delegates Report, January 22, 2021

This report has been shared with the COD reps of each classis for distribution.

Canadian members of the COD (12 who represent the classes in Canada and three at-large members) make up the CRCNA Canadian Corporation. In addition to participating as full Council of Delegates members, we also have separate CRCNA Canada Corporation meetings where we hear from, support, and advise senior staff in the Canadian context of the CRCNA

A few highlights of what the COD is working on right now:

- The COD plans to meet (again via Zoom) February 17-19, 2021. The various committees of the Council of Delegates will meet ahead of these dates.
- The purpose of the Council of Delegates (COD) is to govern entities and activities of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). We act as the intermediary between Synod and the denomination. As a result, we will be deciding in February how, or even if, Synod will be meeting in June 2021. Last year, Synod did not meet (due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Instead, a special meeting of the COD was held to deal with all matters that could not be postponed. The decision about whether or not to convene Synod 2021, and whether or not to hold it virtually or in person, will be a weightier one. In addition to dealing with all of the matters that were postponed from Synod 2020, Synod 2021 is expected to deal with three significant synodical taskforce reports: Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, Ecclesiastical Marriage, and Bivocationality.
- Several key leaders will be retiring in 2021, including Colin Watson (Executive Director), John Bolt (Finance and Operations), and David Koll (Director of Candidacy). There is also a vacant position of Director of Ministries and Administration that had formerly been held by Colin Watson and is now filled in an interim way by Lis Van Harten (U.S.) and Peter Elgersma (Canada). Most of these positions have been binational in scope in the past, and these retirements allow us to consider the best way to fill them given the new realities of allowing more direction and control in both the United States and Canada.
- A big focus of the COD at this time is the need for restructuring the denomination in order to comply with Canada Revenue Agency regulations. As you know, the CRCNA within Canada sought expert legal advice, and took initial steps as a result, in order to bring us into greater compliance with the CRA. A main objective of compliance is establishing comprehensive Joint Ministry Agreements with the US side of the denomination so that we in Canada can maintain direction and control of all personnel in Canada and funds received from Canadian churches and individuals. Our efforts in this matter have been endorsed by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Christian Charities. Failure to comply could have resulted in the CRCNA losing its charitable status, not being able to issue

tax receipts, paying considerable penalty taxes, and the directors of the CRCNA within Canada (namely the Canada Corp) being prevented from serving on nonprofit boards for a number of years.

Efforts to create this direction and control have been made in the past, but have not been sufficient to satisfy necessary legal requirements. This time, the current members of the Canadian Corporation are determined to see this issue through, with intentionality and conviction, for the sake of the CRCNA in Canada, the twelve Classes, and local CRC churches that it serves. We also see this as an opportunity to restructure so that Canadian ministries can be contextualized to reflect the culture and unique needs of Canadian CRCs.

It is important to emphasize, however, that these changes do not impact our shared theology or Reformed faith with U.S. congregations and members. We will continue to share our denominational vision and mission statement, our five-fold calling, and our understanding of our place in God's world. We remain one denomination. We also recognize that we are made up of separate legal organizations that function as independent legal charities in each country. If done well—and we are working hard to do this well—we can collaborate even better with our U.S. counterparts and re-examine how we contextualize our ministries on each side of the border to better serve and equip our churches.

This restructuring has and is involving CRCNA leaders from the U.S. as well. Task force committees have been set up to recommend structural revisions and new senior positions such as a Synodical Ecclesiastical Officer, an Executive Director for Canada, and an Executive Director for the U.S. Extra meetings have been conducted to find a common wayforward. Again, as has been strongly stated before, it is not the intention of the CRCNA Canada Corporation to break away from the CRCNA. Instead, our goal is to set up a Joint Ministry Agreement and structure that recognizes the uniqueness of Canadian ministry within the CRCNA, while still complying with Canadian Revenue Agency regulations.

In order to tackle all of these issues of restructuring, a Canadian Restructuring Team was formed, led by Chris Bosch of Chisel Consulting, whose mandate is to investigate and recommend how best to structure CRCNA ministry in Canada to ensure operational independence, while preserving the desire for bi-national collaboration and optimal ministry effectiveness. It is **not** our intention in this restructuring to increase our administrative footprint in Canada, but to better develop our ministries and local church governance to better reflect our Canadian context.

This is a critical time in our denomination with this restructuring, coping within a pandemic,

significant retirements, and a weighty Synod coming up. Please pray for the leadership of the denomination, for the Council of Delegates, and for Biblically grounded governance and wisdom so that this manifestation of Christ's Church can flourish

Key resources and announcements

Annual Ministry Report:

https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/38641%20Annual%20Ministry%20Report%202020_sm.pdf

Update on Ministry Shares Reimagined:

<https://www.crcna.org/news-and-events/news/new-pledge-process-shows-mixed-results>

December 2020 Update from Calvin Theological Seminary: CTS has a number of new hires

- Denise Posie - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Discipleship Coaches
- David Beelen - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Discipleship Coaches
- Samantha DeJong McCarron - Vocational Assessment and Discernment Specialist
- Shari Garcia - Assistant Director of Latino Programs
- Annie Mas-Smith, Director of Communications

Amanda Benckhuysen has announced her intention to leave her position as professor of Old Testament in order to take up a new role as director of Safe Church Ministry for the CRCNA.

In January, Back to God Ministries International officially changed its name to ReFrame Ministries.

The latest *Living the Call* newsletter focuses on Servant Leadership:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nutKcH1PxAEXaqIkjWIBTGaaqbpJT1hA/view>

Ministry Shares Reimagined:

https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/ministry_share_timeline.pdf

On restructuring in the CRCNA within Canada:

This video will clearly explain to church councils why the need for restructuring:

CRCNA Canada Corporation Presentation #1 on CRA compliancy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaZNZUT2Xj0&feature=youtu.be>

CRCNA Canada Corporation Presentation #2 on the Canadian Restructuring Process

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wi8FizFQpIo&feature=youtu.be>

AGENDA ITEM 5.10: Safe Church Report

This report provide a brief update on several matters related to safe church ministry:

- Last November the Classis Niagara Safe Church Team was able to meet safely in person. Many of the churches resumed their children's programs online last fall and had either adapted their policies for online usage or were looking for resources to help them do so. One of the best resources available for training help is Dove's Nest, an organization based in the Mennonite tradition but which has strong links to the CRCNA Safe Church Ministry. www.dovenest.net. They offer a number of sample policies and a 38 minute training video.
- At the end of October a meeting was held with campus chaplains, campus ministry chairpersons and the classical safe church coordinators, in order to build bridges, make each other aware of policies and best practices being used, and discerning where there were gaps and improvements needed. The CRCNA Resonate and Safe Church staff are now developing a manual of policies for campus ministry use with an anticipated release date of the draft sometime this winter and a final resource of policies by summer.
- The matter of acquiring full abuse prevention insurance for classis continues. Many thanks to all the churches who responded so quickly to the request for a current abuse prevention checklist. The gathered material and forms have now been sent off to Robertson Hall Insurance and we await word as to whether this is sufficient for them to extend this insurance to Classis in addition to their coverage of individual churches.
- Later this spring both Christina Pleizier and Wendy de Jong are stepping down from their roles as co-coordinators and classis champions. Christina will be moving to Hamilton and Wendy is leaving the co-coordinator position a year early due to time commitments on the COD. We hope to have a new coordinator in place this spring, and echo our earlier request that there be a pastor delegate on this committee. The ideal is to have a designated Safe Church Champion who would be reimbursed the annual \$1500 stipend who could give this vital work the time and attention it deserves. We are planning a Zoom meeting of the Safe Church Team liaisons from each church in March.
- Bonnie Nicholas retired in November and as you will have seen elsewhere, Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen has been hired as the new director of Safe Church Ministries.

Christina Pleizier (Mountainview), Clarence Houwer, (Bethel), Karen Vandyk (Covenant), Jason Witteveen (Riverside), Wendy de Jong (Jubilee)