

Synod 2023 – Classis Alberta North report

Background

Synod 2023 met from June 9-15 and consisted of 186 delegates, about 12 youth and ethnic advisors, a number of faculty advisors and denominational staff, all meeting in the Calvin University Chapel. There are 49 classes in the CRC, 38 from the U.S and 11 from Canada. Each Classis sends four delegates: one pastor, one elder, one deacon and one “other” (usually a pastor). Prior to Synod, delegates were asked to read the Agenda (627 pages) and the Agenda supplement (263 pages) to be familiar with the reports, issues and overtures to be discussed.

Highlights

One of the highlights of this Synod, as it often has been in past years, is the time of worship with which each session begins and with which Synod ends. It invites delegates to focus on why we are there and to whom it is we ultimately belong. It also exposes how it is easier to be united when we focus in worship on God than when we try to sort out differences about God.

Synod approved, with strong heart and much joy, **30 candidates** for ministry in the CRC as Ministers of the Word and extended/renewed the candidacy of several others.

Synod recognized Thrive as a ‘new’ ministry agency of the CRCNA incorporating several agencies previously ‘on their own’. This reflects both the growing focus on coordination but also results from reductions in funding and staffing.

Denominational Decisions

Synod delegates were divided into 8 advisory committees to deal with the material on the agenda, which included reports (agency and study committees), overtures (requests for synod to do something), communications and appeals. The first two days of Synod are primarily spent in these committees. Committees generally come with a unified recommendation, however if the committee cannot agree, a majority and a minority report are presented to Synod.

Some of the decisions that came from these committees are:

Since 2007, Synod has read a ‘note’ submitted annually on the **credentials** (registration papers) of some Classes who object to female delegates based on a biblical view that prohibits the ordination of women. These notes of the past will be replaced with a shorter statement that identifies the pain of disagreement on both sides.

Denominational staff will review how **statements from (some) CRC agencies** are made and approved, especially when these statements appear to be representing the denomination but may not be in full alignment with political or social justice positions.

A task force will be appointed to formulate a **statement on assisted suicide** that would include guidance and pastoral advice on end-of-life matters. It was noted that the reality of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) in Canada gave this matter a different urgency than some in different U.S. states would experience.

Synod 2015 changed the make-up of the **delegation from each Classis**: each Classis now has to have one pastor, one elder, one deacon and one ‘other’ officebearer. This was intentional to ensure that all offices would be represented on the floor of Synod. However, several Classes indicated that it was proving difficult to find deacons with the result that a Classis which didn’t send a deacon would then have one less vote. Although there was some strong disagreement, Synod ratified last year’s decision to no longer require a deacon delegate but give some flexibility to the make-up of each Classis delegation.

There is a growing number of **bi-vocational pastors** within the denomination that reflects a growing number of small churches with different ethnicities. Synod made adjustments to the Church Order to enhance the work of bi-vocational ministers and to remove barriers against it.

The **Study Report on Ecclesiastical Marriage** was determined to not only be helpful reading but important advice cautioning against ‘Church weddings’ that would not also be registered with the state. It is notable that

Alberta law does not permit these types of marriages, all marriages solemnized by a Pastor must be registered with the province.

The **Code of Conduct** for Ministry Leaders, formulated in response to abuse of power concerns, was approved with minor changes. It will be referenced in the Church Order and ministry leaders, both ordained and unordained, will affirm the principles and their agreement with it when they sign the covenant of officebearers. Each church/agency will be able to determine how best to implement that in their context.

While Synod had strong hesitation over developing a top-down strategy to reverse the **trend in membership decline**, it did adopt a revised motion that gives priority to searching out reasons for decline and promotes development of strategies with (and not just for) the churches with a focus on discipleship. Synod was a little divided on what to do with **virtual church**, sometimes seeming to confuse virtual attendance (livestream) and possible membership of those who lived elsewhere, with discerning the legitimacy of a church that is entirely virtual. A task force will be appointed to investigate the potential and implications of a virtual church and report back to Synod.

Ministry Shares Reimagined have not helped the funding of denominational ministries. Several recommendations to allow greater flexibility in the pledge process, to annually suggest a reasonable base amount, and ongoing review by the Council of Delegates were approved.

Human Sexuality

While each committee dealt with important and necessary matters, it was no secret that eyes were especially on **committees 7 and 8** as they dealt with matters of human sexuality. These included questions raised about 2022's decision on the definition of unchastity, Neland Avenue's decision to ordain a deacon who is in a same sex marriage, and sorting through matters of discipline and guidance in and among churches/officebearers that disagree with synodical decisions. These 2 committees came up last in Synod's schedule as they had the most and weightiest material to deal with, and their committee work was not completed until Tuesday.

Several recommendations recognizing current disagreement over matters of human sexuality and the **hurt/harm they have caused to LGBTQ+ members** were passed, strikingly agreeing "to ensure that all who seek to follow Christ are afforded a respectful place to honestly share their views and listen to those of others. Given the language of the recommendations it is not entirely clear how they fit with some of the other discussion and decisions of Synod. The recommendations include the development/endorsement of resources and tools "to equip congregations for pastoral ministry with and to our LGBTQ+ members and neighbours."

Committee 7, advising on **matters of human sexuality** and the status of Synodical decisions regarding these, had an incredibly weighty task. They carefully categorized the numerous overtures that they were given to review. It is best to read the actual decisions that were passed as there is no way to summarize all of them. But a few highlights follow:

- **Classis Alberta North's overture** asking to withhold implementation of the confessional status of the definition of unchaste, was not successful. We asked for 5 minutes to address the committee, which was granted, and the committee further engaged us for another 20 minutes. We believe we were heard, even though in the end the committee did not agree. There were several other overtures asking for a delay none of which were successful.
- A key decision over which there was a majority and minority report was the actual **status (confessional or not confessional) of the definition of 'unchaste'**. The minority report suggested that declaring the CRC's definition of unchastity as 'settled and binding' should be enough and making the definition confessional would be more restrictive than necessary. The majority said there was not sufficient reason to overturn the decision of status in 2022, turning down several overtures that argued that proper church order was not followed in 2022. The implication is that those who do not agree to or are unsure of 2022's decisions cannot be members in good standing in the CRCNA. After significant and emotional debate, the majority recommendation passed.

The decision that maintained confessional status for the definition of 'unchaste' meant that the recommendations of Committee 8 regarding **discipline, gravamen et al** were 'on the table.' Committee 8 also had the appeal of Neland Avenue and the report/recommendations of the In Loco committee that Synod had

established in 2022 to oversee the implementation of Synod 2022 decisions re Neland and Classis Grand Rapids East. In short:

- The **appeal of Neland Avenue** was not sustained, which means that the decisions of Synod 2022 remain.
- Synod further adopted several recommendations that reiterated 2022's decisions "to **immediately rescind** any and all decisions to ordain officebearers who are in a same-sex, sexual marriage/relationship, thus nullifying any current or future terms of such officebearers." Synod also instructed Classis Grand Rapids East to guide Neland into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022.
- A second recommendation for a **new In Loco committee** to oversee this, including a detailed method of compliance for both Neland and Classis Grand Rapids East was defeated after significant and emotional discussion.

Synod instructed all Classes, and reminded all church visitors, to **work with officebearers who publicly reject or are not aligned** with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships. This motion, on the heels of the Neland CRC recommendations and before the very significant discussion looming about the understanding and role of gravamen, did not receive much discussion. Although the committee revised an earlier edition of their recommendation naming Classis Alberta North as one Classis that needed this instruction, it is not clear why the Committee and then Synod gave this instruction to the Classes rather than the Councils that hold first responsibility for officebearers.

From there the discussion went to majority and minority reports regarding **the understanding and function of gravamen**. This was seen by some to be equally or even more significant than other decisions regarding the HSR and decisions made by Synod. This would impact how an officebearer might deal with uncertainty or disagreement with Synod's HSR decision but would also go beyond as gravamen can be filed for any theological difficulty. The **majority report** in short asked that Synod clarify the Church Order regarding Confessional Difficulty Gravamen (CDG) to be clear that these are only temporary and cannot be used to hold beliefs contrary to the confessions and still be an officebearer. A CDG would need to be resolved within a limited time period. The **minority report** asked that a CDG be reviewed annually to assure that it is still in process, but with no time limit and with the ability for the officebearer who filed the CDG to fully function in her/his office.

- Following a defeated motion to set aside the majority recommendation to deal with the minority recommendation, the **chair moved to cease debate** which passed. When this motion is moved by a chair and approved by Synod it cuts off all further discussion. At this point, the discussion had been short, and Synod still had significant work to do in very limited time but perception that the debate had been inappropriately cut short led to 8-12 delegates leaving in protest. Some strong statements were made from the floor about how such a move to curtail even the voice of the minority would erode and damage trust. In the end, the **officers of Synod**, having previously considered options in light of time and the weight of this specific matter, ruled that the overtures addressing these matters would be forwarded to Synod 2024 and the majority and minority reports forwarded as a communication. This means that there is no further clarification on the use of gravamen which gives the churches some 'space' to consider the implications of what Synod 2023 decided and reaffirmed in matters of human sexuality and how the church functions with rules and with each other.

Given the disruptive and troubled end to the work of Synod 2023, Synod did not close as it usually does in **worship and communion**. This was the 'right' decision, but only highlighted the division and fear/mistrust that is functioning among us. We as Classis Alberta North delegates lament that and our experience of it. At the same time, even though ending on a negative note with uncertainty ahead, there is much good that happened on the floor of Synod and that was reported on and celebrated. We do not want to miss 'seeing' where the Spirit was at work. We continue to pray for our denomination, our Classis, our churches, and each other.

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