

Synod 2023 Report

What's a Synod? Synod 2023 convened on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 9-15. It is an annual event of church leaders (officebearers) who are delegated by their respective classes. The delegates come from 50 classes (singular: classis) from across North America. They are the men and women who serve in CRC churches as pastors, elders, deacons. Ideally, each classis sends 4 delegates – 2 pastors, one elder and one deacon. Synod 2023 hosted 200 delegates, youth advisors and ethnic advisors. Over 50% of those gathered were first time delegates. Synod's sessions are simultaneously translated into Korean, and Hispanic. (Koreans make up 17% of CRC churches; 200 churches are made up of non-white (Caucasian) members).

Those 200 delegates are then assigned to 8 pre-advice committees, approximately 25 per committee. The agenda for Synod (this year over 1000 pages!) is then divided, by the officers of the previous Synod, over these 8 committees. These advisory committees serve to make recommendations on agenda items which Synod, in full assembly, will consider and act on.

The agenda for 2023 had the standard annual reports from the agencies of the church – Resonate; ReFrame; Calvin University; Calvin Seminary; etc. There was an extensive report from the Council of Delegates – a synodical body that acts on behalf of Synod during the year. There were reports from Standing committees, Task Forces, and lastly, there were 78 overtures and 2 appeals, most of them regarding Synod 2022's decisions.

These 78 overtures concerned themselves with the new Code of Conduct for church leaders; the confessional status of Q&A 108 and its definition of unchastity; confessional difficulties gravamina; and disciplining Neland Avenue CRC, a church that had a deacon in a same-sex marriage.

Delegates know ahead of Synod's gathering which committee they will be assigned to, and what matters will be assigned to them for consideration. So, the expectation is that delegates come somewhat prepared, having studied, researched these matters.

Synod convenes on a Friday with a worship service, the committees are then sent off to do their work, meeting all day Friday and Saturday, sometimes late into the evening. The plenary sessions begin on Monday, meeting for long hours until 3:00 pm Thursday. Synod is bound by its own rule to adjourn then, which created difficulties this year, as its work was unfinished.

Synod is nestled in prayer and worship. Singing and prayers are interspersed with the business of the day. Our gathering this year was in the chapel of Calvin University, a visual reminder that we are "in the house of the Lord" who's church we steward. Our president of Synod pointedly reminded us daily that in spite of stresses, we are to "Rejoice in the Lord, and I'll say it again..." and the delegates would respond with an emphatic, "Rejoice!"

The plenary sessions of Synod began on Monday and continued through to Thursday afternoon. I offer the following highlights over these 4 days.

I. Synod and CRCNA staff: There has been a wholesale change in staffing for the CRCNA. The General Secretary, Zachary King, is new; the U.S. and Canadian Ministries directors are both new; the support staff in the General Secretary's office are new; a new Director for Resonate and two new directors for World Renew; plus, a new director for the new agency called Thrive. For many, if not all, this was their first Synod to be reporting to.

II. Celebrating God's Work: Zachary King's "state of the church" address highlighted how the church is growing in diversity. Three official languages and increasing number of non-Caucasian congregations, and new churches from Venezuela. ReFrame has 8000 prayer champions; use of modern technology helping us stay connected. Synod 2023 was very high tech! The Canadian National Gathering on reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours.

The increasing diversity of the student body at Calvin University – over 90 countries of the world are represented. However, the percentage of CRC students is dropping. Two new professors were interviewed for positions at Calvin Seminary. 30 candidates for the ministry were presented to Synod and were recommended to the churches for call.

III. Points for Prayer. Membership loss continues to be a concern; there are approximately 195,000 – 200,000 members in the CRCNA, down from 272,000 members 17 years ago. Synod tasked the General Secretary's office and the agencies of the church to help local congregations to actively engage in and do the work of evangelism. Many churches are aging, seniors are in the majority. The millennial generation doesn't have the denominational loyalty of their parents and grandparents. The synodical deputies report indicated many pastors and churches (20 cases) are separating under Art 17c of the CO. The newly designed and adopted Code of Conduct for church leaders was cause for some pushback from some churches/classes, as an over-reach to the already implemented Covenant of Officebearers. The church's public witness and address to current social justice and mercy issues was a concern, and henceforth all public official statements must use great discretion.

IV. Ethical Decisions. Synod mandated a task force to prepare an official statement of the issue of MAID (Medical Assistance in Dying), euthanasia and end of life issues, which should offer pastoral advice to parents, families, pastors, and chaplains. Synod said "No" to the "Ecclesiastical Marriage" practice that is occurring in churches (not only the CRC).

V. Pressure Points. The denominational covenant of congregations is under stress. Our increasing ethnic, racial diversity and local ministry contexts are creating situations where churches are not following traditional CRC Church Order guidelines. Church leaders/Councils increasingly make decisions based on desire for membership retention or

gain. Some of the younger generation of pastors and elders have not inherited a body of CRC thought and practice gained from listening to an older generation of church leaders. Social-cultural issues in society have impact on church leaders, both in the U.S. and Canada. Evangelical church leaders (e.g., Acts 29 network of churches) influence ministry goals and vision. An overture asking for the creation of a procedure to expel delinquent congregations was defeated.

Membership loss was spoken about at Synod, but concrete actions at the local level are the missing pieces of action. Church councils, members, and pastors need to have a fresh enthusiasm for evangelizing newcomers and the youth who are abandoning the CRC. Our congregations are aging. Many churches focus on survival. In 2019 (pre-COVID) 77% of congregation membership would worship in person; in 2023 (post-COVID) 66% attend. Our denominational new member gain is averaging 1 per church, when it used to be 4. We're so engrossed in our "own internal stuff"

The decision of Synod 2022 on Q&A 108 was affirmed and overtures requesting a revisiting of the question of "homosexual sex" as an act of unchastity were not acceded to. The confessional status of Q & A stands. This creates a dilemma for serving officebearers who disagree with Synod 2022's decision. The gravamina process was taken up and clarified. Officebearers who disagree with Synod 2022 decision on Q&A 108 may be suspended from office if they refuse to assent to this decision. This will create difficulties at the local level when new officebearers must be recruited, and new members make profession of faith.

Neland Ave CRC had appealed to Synod 2023 regarding the action that Synod 2022 took. That appeal was denied and Neland Ave was again instructed to comply with the decision of 2022. The second "in loco" committee that was recommended to force Neland Ave to comply did not pass. The situation has become a synodical/classis impasse. The officebearer who was the Neland Ave deacon under scrutiny had finished her term by the time Synod convened.

The Thursday adjournment time constraint caused a good deal of stress because of the weightiness of the matter under discussion – the gravamina matter. Several delegates walked out in protest. The matter was ruled deferred to Synod 2024 by the officers of Synod.

Rev. Paul De Vries was President for this year's Synod. He was a very capable and even-handed, a trusted voice, moderate, yet firm in his rulings.

It was a blessing to have been delegated to serve as a Classis Huron delegate, and I thank Classis with entrusting me with that responsibility.

Bernard De Jonge

