

Reflections on Synod 2023 (Report to Classis Huron)

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Last February, Arnold Bosman and I were selected to represent Classis Huron at Synod 2023, as Elder and Pastor delegates respectively. Having never previously attended a meeting of Synod, both Arnold and I were feeling very honoured to have been selected and excited for the experience. However, we were also, admittedly, both feeling a little nervous and somewhat intimidated. There are, after all, roughly 200 delegates that attend Synod each year, many of whom have far more experience at Synod than either of us. What's more, we were also handed an Agenda for Synod and a Supplementary Agenda which pushed the required reading to around 1000 pages, with many significant reports and weighty overtures and communications included. It was easy to feel a little intimidated.

However, when we arrived at Calvin College we were warmly welcomed and other delegates were quite friendly and helpful. In fact, the fellowship experienced at Synod was definitely one of the wonderful blessings of the week. Whether meeting new people or catching up with old acquaintances, there were always many wonderful people to talk with. And there was always plenty of good food to eat while taking part in these conversations, too. We ate like kings!

Synod commenced with a wonderful time of worship and prayer. In fact, throughout our time at Synod we were blessed with many such moments. This was another one of the things we cherish about our experience at Synod.

Another highlight was when the Ministerial Candidates were approved and declared eligible to receive a call from churches. This was especially exciting for us, since Cameron Oegema, who has been serving our church as a part-time pastor, was among the Candidates. We were able to rejoice along with Cam and the 29 other candidates, fully trusting that Christ will bless his church through these new leaders.

We were also greatly encouraged by the good work done by the leaders of our denominational ministries. In the face of challenges (finances being a big one), these leaders have made the decision to consolidate 9 different ministries under the name "Thrive". Their tone is quite hopefully through this new change, confident that this reorganization will offer a "one-stop" point of access for churches, making it easier for churches to get help they need from various leaders, while at the same time increasing efficiency and reducing overall costs.

We were also encouraged by the conversations surrounding membership in our denomination. It's no great secret that our numbers are in decline, so it was encouraging that, in the end, Synod instructed denominational leaders to develop a strategy to stop and reverse membership declines and work towards growth. While we can admit that the best strategy might not actually lead to numerical growth in our denomination, we are greatly encouraged to know that this matter is going to get the attention it deserves.

We were also blessed to see some of the ethnic diversity within our denomination on the floor of Synod and in our subcommittees. Some of us might not always see much diversity in our churches, especially within rural settings, so to hear and learn from wise Korean, Latino, and Navajo Christians, for example, was a great gift and something to be celebrated.

But there's no denying that the experience at this year's Synod was difficult, as well. We dealt with many challenging topics, particularly those surrounding Synod 2022's declaration surrounding "unchastity" in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, and the decision that its interpretation has confessional status. Many of our conversations, particularly within the last two days of Synod, were connected to this matter. For example, we discussed whether Synod 2022 had overstepped its authority in ruling its interpretation "confessional" (this Synod decided the previous Synod had not). We discussed Neland Avenue CRC and how to interact with this congregation that had ordained an office bearer who was married to a member of the same sex. We also began conversations surrounding the matter of gravamina, which some hope would provide an exception to office bearers who struggle with Synod 2022's declaration, allowing them to continue to serve within the CRCNA.

If anyone was of the opinion that this year's Synod might be easier than last year's, those illusions were quickly dispelled. The conversations surrounding these matters were, at points, contentious, as many delegates felt strongly on both sides of the discussion. However, I was fairly pleased to see that while delegates strove to show love towards God and his Word, they also tried to show love towards one another, as well.

And yet, the ending of Synod was still tough. Many left feeling rather unsatisfied and some quite frustrated. Traditionally, Synod is wrapped up with a time of worship, but this year, we ended simply with prayer...which was quite fitting. Prayer is what our denomination needs.

Thank you for giving Arnold and me the opportunity to attend Synod this year, and please continue to pray along with us for our denomination. Let's together pray for God's good guidance, for His Church to be faithful to His leading, and for love to be continually expressed to all in the name of Christ.