

CLASSIS HURON: OVERTURE COMMITTEE REPORT FEBRUARY 16, 2022

Introduction

The overture committee for the February 16, 2022 meeting of Classis Huron is composed of delegates from Trinity CRC, Goderich, and Orangeville CRC, Orangeville.

As a committee, we want to thank all of the churches who took time to engage with the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) and write an overture or communication. We recognize the time and effort that went into these. We appreciate having the opportunity to witness and participate in thoughtful engagement with this issue.

We found our task to be very challenging. There are five overtures / communications from vastly different perspectives. We spent a considerable amount of time reviewing the overtures and communications, consulting with denominational representatives and authors of the HSR, and meeting together in order to gain clarity and find a way forward.

As you'll see below, we have tried as much as possible to limit our response to the various overtures. A breadth of content has been written on these issues in the HSR and in the overtures, and were we to get into all the particulars, this report would have been much too long. So we recognize that our report might seem, at times, abrupt or general.

Our hope and prayer is that, whatever classis decides, we have an open, respectful and fruitful dialogue as fellow members and leaders in the body of Christ.

Procedural Considerations

Before engaging the overtures themselves, we think it is important to make a few procedural comments.

Overture vs. Communication

A number of churches are asking Classis Huron to send an overture to Synod, but one church is asking classis to send a communication. Some of you may be wondering: what's the difference? Here are the definitions according to the [Rules for Synodical Procedure](#):

A **communication** is a document presenting information, ideas, thoughts, opinions, complaints, or objections for consideration of the assemblies. A communication is distinguished from an overture in that an overture proposes specific action, and a communication does not. (*Rules for Synodical Procedure*, V.A.2)

An ***overture*** is a formal written proposal sent to an assembly requesting adoption or amendment of a policy or other legislative action by the assembly. (*Rules for Synodical Procedure*, V.A.3)

In consultation with denominational representatives, we have been advised that, as a general rule, when a classis merely expresses agreement or disagreement with an item that is already on the agenda of synod, it is best to send a communication rather than an overture.

What If An Overture Is Rejected?

Given the contradictory nature of the overtures that were submitted to classis, it is inevitable that some of them will be rejected. We want to remind everyone that if a council's overture is not adopted by classis, the council / individual has the option of submitting the overture directly to Synod (due by March 15).

Explanation and Commentary

As a committee, we recommend that Classis Huron adopt the communication submitted by Bethel CRC, Listowel. In what follows, we explain how we arrived at this recommendation.

Reasons to Adopt the Communication from Bethel CRC

General Considerations

The communication from Bethel CRC expresses clear appreciation for the work of the committee that authored the HSR. The HSR, in our estimation, fulfilled its mandate from synod. Some may have wished for certain topics to be covered more thoroughly, but that may be a concern about the scope of the mandate rather than the report itself (see Appendix A).

Biblical Reasons

When we sign the Covenant for Officebearers, we acknowledge “the authority of God’s Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.” The question of whether or not to affirm same-sex marriage is ultimately a question of what the Bible teaches.

We believe that the HSR provides clarity about God’s will for human sexuality as taught in Scripture. The report approaches Scripture seriously by using a Creation/Fall/Redemption framework, considering historical and cultural contexts, considering the grammatical and literary

contexts of the original languages, and emphasizing the importance and goodness of the human body as taught in Genesis through Revelation. It also engages with knowledge gained from science and general revelation.

Regarding Recommendation D

After reading the HSR and the overtures submitted to Classis Huron, it is clear that 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”) is a big concern for many. Appeals to delay a decision on the HSR are also centered on concerns for understanding just what this recommendation would mean for churches and officebearers who are not in full support of this report and its findings.

In order to hold to the biblical view of marriage as articulated in the HSR, it is necessary for this to be a confessional belief. This is because a synodical report, in and of itself, has limited authority. In past decades, when the denomination addressed the issue of homosexuality, the synodical report that was adopted in 1973 was considered “settled and binding.” However, in recent years, this report and this position is no longer recognized as having any kind of binding authority; rather, this position is viewed by many as merely “pastoral guidance.” For example, Neland Avenue CRC recently ordained as an officebearer a person married to someone of the same sex. In a letter explaining their decision, the Council of Neland Avenue CRC pointed out that the CRC’s position on same-sex marriage is merely “pastoral advice.” If Synod adopts the HSR as a useful summary of biblical teaching but does not adopt Recommendation D, we can expect that many churches will follow Neland Avenue’s example. The CRC will, in effect, affirm same-sex marriage. This is not to say that all churches will be required to adopt same-sex marriage as a biblical practice. However, the CRC will be implicitly allowing same-sex marriage as an acceptable practice and a valid, biblical expression of God’s will for our lives.

It is important to note that Recommendation D *is not* suggesting that the *whole* report be accepted as a separate confession. Nor is it suggesting that *all* of its teachings be adopted as confessional. Recommendation D states that the church’s historical teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex is already covered by our current confessions. We noticed that some of the overtures we received were based on the assumption that the entire HSR is being considered as a fourth confession. This is not the case. Nor is the

teaching of this document regarding all the variety of issues it covers being considered for confessional status. Again, simply stated, Recommendation D is saying that, through our current confessions and the teaching of Scripture, the church already confesses premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex to be considered unchastity/sexual immorality, and, therefore, sinful.

Reasons to Reject the Overtures from New Life CRC & members of Community CRC

A Request to Delay

Both of these overtures request that Synod delay making a decision on the HSR.

We understand that COVID has made it difficult for some churches to have meaningful conversation about the HSR. We also regret that the February classis meeting is on Zoom, rather than in person. Most of us would much prefer to discuss these overtures in person. However, the synodical study committee presented a preliminary report to synod in 2019, and the final report was sent to the churches in 2020. We do not think that waiting an additional year will significantly increase dialogue and engagement.

New Life CRC is particularly concerned about the ramifications of adopting Recommendation D. Pages 145-147 of the HSR address some of these concerns, and the Church Order provides direction for officebearers who have concerns about one of the confessions. We do not think it is necessary to provide complete clarity on all of these questions before making a decision on Recommendation D.

Another Study Committee?

The private overture from members of Community CRC asks that synod form a second study committee to study certain topics omitted in the HSR. In our view, this is unnecessary. Several of these topics are in fact addressed by the report or have been addressed by previous study committees. Some of the tensions that are highlighted in the overture are also addressed in the HSR.

Furthermore, synod has commissioned two study committees in the past decade. It would be unhelpful to wait several more years for another committee to complete its work.

Reasons to Reject the Overtures from Community CRC and Waterloo CRC

General Considerations

These overtures request Synod not to adopt Recommendation D of the HSR.

We want to highlight the fact that these overtures focus on Recommendation D of the HSR but do not refer to Recommendation B (“That synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives”). We found this quite surprising, especially given that Waterloo CRC, in particular, has significant concerns about the content of the HSR. In our view, it would be problematic and, in fact, a failure of integrity, for synod, on the one hand, to adopt Recommendation B and commend the HSR as a faithful summary of biblical teaching, but on the other hand, to not adopt Recommendation D and thereby implicitly allow and endorse same-sex marriage as a valid biblical practice.

We also note that both overtures argue that the church’s historic teaching on same-sex behaviour should not be given confessional status because there are “sincere Christians” who disagree. While it is obviously true that there is sincere disagreement on this issue, that, in itself, is not a reason to refrain from affirming that a biblical teaching is confessional. There are many sincere Arminian Christians; this did not stop the Reformed church from adopting the Canons of Dort as a confession.

Of these two overtures, we consider the overture from Waterloo CRC to be the clearest and the best expression of the position. Much of the overture from Community CRC seems to be based on the assumption that the entire HSR is being considered as a fourth confession, which is not the case.

Biblical and Confessional Considerations

In this section, we will not address the overture from Community CRC, but we will focus on making a few brief comments in response to the overture from Waterloo CRC, for the reason stated above.

Overall, we found that the overture regularly emphasizes peripheral issues. For example, the overture devotes a lengthy paragraph to the studies done by Daphne Joel and her associates on gender identity. However, gender identity is *not* an issue that is addressed in

Recommendation D. The reference to these scientific studies is therefore irrelevant to the stated purpose of the overture, which is to reject Recommendation D. At the same time, the overture fails to address the three key texts in which the Apostle Paul speaks explicitly about homosexual sex; the overture simply bypasses these texts without a supported explanation.

We find that the overture makes a number of questionable assertions. For example, it states: “As Reformed Christians, we confess that we are made right with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and his work for us. Synod must not add or subtract from that confession.” It is true, of course, that we are made right by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. However, as a denomination, we also confess that those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent ways cannot be saved: “Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like is going to inherit the kingdom of God” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q& A 87). In addition, Scripture’s teaching that salvation is by grace through faith has not prevented the CRC (or Jesus or Paul, for that matter) from declaring that certain moral actions are against God’s will.

The overture from Waterloo CRC claims that the “the theology and hermeneutics employed are not faithfully Reformed...” The overture argues that “[Scripture] must be read as a whole, verses must not be taken out of context, and study of Scripture must include study of grammar, historical context, and literary genre in order to understand, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what a text is teaching for all time.” While the Council of Waterloo CRC might disagree with the conclusions of the HSR, we find it unfair at best to claim that the hermeneutics employed are not faithfully Reformed. The authors of the report go to great lengths to address grammatical, literary, historical, and contextual considerations.

Finally, the overture emphasizes that, “while the HSR relies heavily on the writer’s claim that ‘unchastity’ in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 108 refers to homosexuality, no Synod has affirmed this reading.” While that is technically true, such an affirmation has not been necessary because the Catechism, as our denomination has adopted it, makes that interpretation for itself by citing Leviticus 18:30: “Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the Lord your God.” Those ‘detestable customs’ are all the sexual sins listed in Leviticus 18, which includes homosexual sex in verse 22.

Recommendations

Motion: That Classis Huron accede to the overture presented by Bethel CRC, Listowel to send the following communication to Synod, 2022:

Classis Huron wishes to express to synod its appreciation for the work of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality. It is clear to the reader that a great deal of effort has been made by the members of the Committee to faithfully reflect the truth about human sexuality, which is presented to us in God's Word.

It is our desire that the recommendations made by the committee would be accepted by Synod, and that all members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America would be encouraged to study the report and to accept the positions toward human sexuality that the report articulates.

Grounds:

1. Synod and our denomination have been discussing these issues for many years and it is important that we contribute to the conversation as a classis.
2. The Human Sexuality Report provides guidance and clarity on a Biblical approach to many sexual issues, including same-sex marriage. The report and its recommendations will help the church and its members to live in faithful obedience to God's will.

Should Classis Huron decide not to accede to our recommendation to adopt the communication from Bethel CRC, we recommend that classis discuss either the overture from New Life CRC, Guelph (to delay making any decision on this report in order to gain clarity on the ramifications of accepting Recommendation D) or the overture from Waterloo CRC (to not adopt Recommendation D of the report). We believe that these overtures make the strongest case for their stated positions, which align with the remaining overtures and communications.

We also want to point out that classis can choose to reject all of the overtures / communications.

Respectfully submitted by:

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APPENDIX A

Mandate for Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

That synod appoint a new study committee 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.

- a. In addition to these broad outlines, the study will include the following three components:
 - i. Discussion outlining how a Reformed hermeneutic does or does not comport with readings of Scripture being employed to endorse what are, for the historic church, ground-breaking conclusions regarding human sexual behavior and identification.
 - ii. Dialogue with, and potential critique of, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies.
 - iii. Reflection and evaluation of whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider
 1. changing the main text of Church Order Article 69 (see Overtures 18,19, 20, 21, 31, 38).
 2. declaring a status confessionis (see Overture 16).
 3. appointing a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith, perhaps in the style of the Contemporary Testimony, on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the teachings and conclusions of the report (see Overture 28).