

Overture Committee for Classis Huron, February 26, 2025
Drayton CRC, Exeter CRC, Trinity CRC (Goderich)

Recommendation regarding overture from Community CRC, Kitchener

General Background:

We recognize that CCRC's overture addresses an important conflict between the authority of Synod and Classis. Church Order 27a states: "Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated." After conferring with Kathy Smith, adjunct professor of church polity at Calvin Seminary, and Synod parliamentarian, we believe that Synod has gone beyond its authority in working outside of Church Order enacting "limited suspension" and those enactments do not govern over our own legally binding classical bylaws, which dictate our member churches' status.

We also recognize that there may be situations where a church council has submitted a letter of protest, and so be considered by synod to be under "limited suspension," but still have members on that council who have signed the Covenant for Officebearers in good faith. This is especially true as the time elapsed is enough for new officebearers to have been elected to local councils. Our classical bylaws, which govern the participation of member churches, already require delegates to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, so denying an entire council the ability to have seated delegates seems to violate the member church's right to a vote unnecessarily. Article 8 of our Classis Bylaws defines those eligible for membership:

8. Eligibility. Membership in the Corporation shall consist:

a) of all those churches who:

- (i) are a member of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America;
- (ii) fall within the regional boundaries of Classis Huron as such boundaries may be determined by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America from time to time; and
- (iii) who maintain their Membership in accordance with the Articles, By-laws, Church Order and the Rules of Classis Huron as adopted from time to time.

Eligibility of delegates representing members is defined in the Bylaw under Article 18 and states that this eligibility is in accordance with Church Order and the "Rules of Huron Classis." The Rules of Classis Huron does not speak to eligibility of delegates representing members. However, Church Order article 5a states, "All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classis, or synod, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers." Further, regarding use of Church Order as a means of putting churches under "limited suspension", we note that discipline referenced in Church Order articles 82-84 is applied by local councils to individual officebearers, rather than by synod to entire councils.

It is our understanding that there has been communication between visiting church pastors and churches within our classis who submitted a letter of protest to prior synods. We also understand that our classical leadership has been working in good faith discerning to the best of their abilities how to move forward given the difficult decisions made by synod. Given our understanding that our classical bylaws govern how delegates are seated and that churches under protest would certainly have delegates that could meet those requirements, and, though Classis Huron sought to follow Church Order and synodical decisions in good faith, Waterloo CRC delegates ought to be seated as voting delegates at classis meetings. In light of all this, we believe that it is the duty of Classis Huron to request a revision to a synodical decision through Church Order Article 31, to alleviate this conflict, to restore right order, and to restore voting rights to a church that meets classis' requirements.

We suggest it would be prudent to continue to have ongoing communications with Waterloo CRC and any other churches that are under "limited suspension" or struggling with the division caused by synod's decisions. We recognize that the language from synod calling for church visitors to "guide or direct local councils into compliance" may unintentionally sound adversarial. It is important for lines of communication to remain open, and communication ought to be undertaken in a spirit of humility, respect, care, and love for our brothers and sisters in Christ with the goal of working towards unity and repairing any hurts caused by our actions. Finally, we note that any officebearers with pending gravamen are to recuse themselves from delegation to broader assemblies.

Given feedback and deliberation from others in our classis, our committee believes it would be in good order to send a *Request for Revision of a Decision* (Church Order Article 31) to Synod 2025. Church Order Article 30 outlines the process for presenting appeals, however according to the 2017 *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*,

"Article 30 deals only with appeals of decisions made by minor assemblies. Because synod is the broadest assembly, requests for a change or reversal of a synodical decision are not considered appeals, but, rather, requests for the revision of a previous synod. Such requests must be dealt with according to the provisions of Church Order Article 31."

It is important to remember, this recommendation is not about the specific issue at hand. It is our prayer that we all can keep this at the forefront of our mind. Instead the intention is to ensure that whatever decisions are made by synod and our classis are made, as Paul describes in 1 Cor. 14:40, "in a fitting and orderly way."

Recommendations:

- A. Send the following *Request for Revision of a Decision* to Synod 2025 expressing the conflict between Church Order, Synod 2024's declaration of a new category of "limited suspension", and local classis' bylaws:

Background:

In light of churches within the denomination who had either made public statements in conflict with the denomination's stance on unchastity or submitted letters of protest to synod, Synod 2024 created and enacted a form of discipline called "limited suspension." A part of that discipline included the mandate that those church councils not be seated as voting delegates at classis meetings. Classis Huron recognizes an important conflict between the authority of synod and the authority of a local classis and their bylaws. By initiating "limited suspension," synod has overstepped its authority and unnecessarily enacted a form of discipline that is out of order.

Grounds:

1. Church Order Article 27-a states:

"Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ; the authority of councils being original, that of major assemblies being delegated."

Following the logic of Church Order Article 27-b, just as the classis may not go outside of Church Order to dictate specifically how local councils select officebearers, neither may synod operate outside of Church Order to dictate how classes select and seat officebearers as classical delegates.

2. Church Order Article 40-a states:

"The council of each church shall delegate a minister, an elder, and a deacon to the classis."

The clear indication is that authority to delegate to classis resides with the local council.

3. Each classis is its own legal, non-profit entity responsible to its member churches and governed by its own bylaws, which provide for *both* voice and vote of member church delegates at classis meetings. Enacting "limited suspension" may put classes' in legal conflict with their members, because their legal right to voice and vote (provided by their bylaws) is taken away.
4. Church Order contains no provision for "limited suspension" and creating a new category of discipline should be considered a substantial alteration, which, according to Church Order Article 47 and Supplements a-d, requires adoption by a following synod.
5. There may be situations where a church council has submitted a letter of protest, and so be considered by synod to be under "limited suspension," but that council may still have members who have signed the Covenant for Officebearers in good faith. This is especially true as the time elapsed is enough for new officebearers to have been elected to local councils.
6. Classis delegates are already required to sign the Covenant for Officebearers and any officebearers with pending gravamen are to recuse themselves from delegation to broader assemblies. Denying an entire council the ability to have seated delegates seems to violate the member church's right to vote unnecessarily. Church Order Article 5-a states,

“All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classis, or synod, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers.”

7. Discipline referenced in Church Order articles 82-84 is applied by local councils to individual officebearers, rather than by synod to entire councils.

Request for a Revision of a Decision:

Classis Huron requests Synod 2025 to revisit and revise the decision made by Synod 2024 regarding “limited suspension” by withdrawing restrictions on seating classis delegates unless and until necessary revisions are made to Church Order.

- B. Recommend that AdCom research/explore the potential legal implications for unseating classis delegates and report back to classis at a future meeting.

Recommendation regarding overture from First CRC, Owen Sound

Background:

As we reviewed this Overture, we were unsure of the intentions. If the intention, by way of HC Q&A 108 (Lord’s Day 41) discussions on detesting the sin, is to allow those who have “weighty doubts/concerns about the creeds and confessions” or “settled convictions against a doctrine taught in them” to sign the covenant for office bearers, this would seem to go against the decisions of Synods 2022, 2023, and 2024. And, in our view, there is no new substantive material to warrant this overture to synod, to this end.

However, as clarifying pastoral information, for those with “wonderings and questions”, it may be of value to be aware that, though Q&A 108 does call us to detest the sin of unchastity, referencing Jude 22-23, which speaks to detesting all sin. It is helpful to remember that HC Q&A 114 reminds us that those converted to God cannot obey these commands perfectly. “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments.” We recognize that part of our “wonderings and questions” might be a struggle to detest certain sins fully. This is a reality of our fallen nature.

That said, it is also prudent to be clear that any detestation we have as Christians towards any and all sins, are to be most clearly focused on our own sin as Christ commands us (Mt. 7:1-5). Given the history of the church with same-sex attraction, we would do well to remember that detestation of sin is not in any way directed towards the people themselves. And we are in fact just a few lines earlier in the book of Jude called to “be merciful to those who doubt.”

We recommend that Classis Huron:

- A. Vote on this overture as it stands.