### **Summary of Recorder Notes (chatGPT)**

Classis Huron Listening Circle Night

January 8, 2025

### **How do you think being a part of the CRC helps your church fulfill her mission?**

Being part of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) is widely recognized as instrumental in helping churches fulfill their mission. The CRC provides a framework of resources, community, and accountability that strengthens local ministries.

1. Support and Resources:  
   The CRC offers a wealth of resources, such as disaster relief, small group leadership training, youth programs, and campus ministries. These resources enable churches to address local and global needs effectively, share ideas, and avoid duplicating efforts. Ministries like Hearts Exchanged and Diaconal Ministries Canada are highlighted as impactful.
2. Shared Mission and Accountability:  
   Churches benefit from being part of a structured denomination with shared theology, confessions, and governance (e.g., Synod and Classis). This structure provides clarity, continuity, and guidance, helping churches stay aligned with their mission to share God’s love.
3. Community and Belonging:  
   Being part of a broader denominational family fosters connection and belonging. Churches collaborate, learn from each other, and find inspiration through shared stories and ministries. The CRC's emphasis on grace, faith, and inclusivity enriches relationships within and beyond the church.
4. Heritage and Identity:  
   The CRC's rich heritage, confessions, and reformed theology provide a solid foundation for mission work. They offer stability, a sense of belonging, and a framework for faith formation, worship, and outreach.
5. Youth and Next-Generation Leadership:  
   The CRC places significant emphasis on nurturing youth through programs and retreats, equipping future leaders with faith and guidance.

While some express concerns about declining influence and challenges in being perceived positively by the broader world, the CRC remains a supportive and empowering network. Its shared ministries, resources, and accountability help local churches grow in community, fulfill their vision, and show God’s love to the world.

**How do you think being a part of the CRC may prevent you from fulfilling your church’s mission?**

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) faces significant challenges in fulfilling its mission, particularly due to recent synodical decisions that have shifted focus and created divisions. These decisions, particularly around human sexuality, have brought theological debates to the forefront, overshadowing the church's broader mission and creating distractions within congregations. This has led to resignation of pastors, reluctance among members to take on leadership roles, and a sense of distrust. For some, the CRC’s current stance feels restrictive, reducing its ability to minister effectively to marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals.

The CRC’s traditional structure and confessional standards, while foundational, can be perceived as exclusive and inflexible, particularly by younger generations and new members. The expectation to fully agree with all confessions poses a barrier for those from diverse backgrounds or differing theological perspectives. Additionally, the CRC’s heritage as a historically Dutch denomination can hinder efforts to become more inclusive and accessible to newcomers.

Ministries that emphasize community, curiosity, and inclusion—such as campus ministries—struggle with the restrictive atmosphere created by synodical decisions. The lack of openness to varied perspectives and the definitive nature of recent pronouncements limit dialogue and make the church appear judgmental rather than loving. This shift contradicts the core mission of being a welcoming and gracious community rooted in God’s love.

At the same time, there is a sense of disconnection between local congregations and denominational structures. Bureaucratic processes, perceived Americanization, and the prioritization of structure over flexibility can frustrate local ministry efforts. The church’s mission to serve its community is constrained as resources and energy are diverted to address denominational conflicts.

Despite these challenges, many members value the CRC’s theological foundation and its historic emphasis on wrestling with difficult issues. However, the current environment of rigidity and exclusion risks undermining this legacy. Moving forward, the church must find ways to balance accountability with grace, foster inclusivity, and refocus on its mission to love and serve all people in Christ’s name.

**What’s the hardest part of all of this for you and your church?**

The recurring theme across the circles is the deep pain caused by division within the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) due to decisions surrounding the Synod and the Human Sexuality Report (HSR). For many, the hardest part is witnessing the departure of longtime members, leaders, and even pastors—people with whom they have served and grown in faith. These departures are often driven by strong disagreements with the church's stance on sexuality, leaving many feeling disconnected, grieving, and questioning their place in the CRC.

This issue has caused frustration over time spent debating it at Classis meetings, strained relationships, and a sense of alienation for those who feel their voices have been dismissed. Some express concern that the CRC is shifting toward a more legalistic, rigid identity, losing its historical openness to questions and wrestling with faith. Others worry about the practical consequences, like finding office bearers who align with new requirements, or the burden placed on leadership to guide their congregations through these difficult times.

There is a strong sense of regret over broken relationships, both within congregations and across the denomination. Members mourn the loss of grace and unity, which has been replaced by polarization and judgment. For some, the hardest part is reconciling their faith with the broader cultural and social changes impacting the church. For others, it's navigating their personal convictions while seeing friends, family, or children leave the church due to its stance on LGBTQ+ issues.

Church leaders feel the weight of leading congregations through this division while maintaining compassion, love, and truth. The tension between extending grace and upholding biblical truth is a persistent challenge. Many also lament that broader aspects of the HSR—such as its teachings on discipleship—are being overshadowed by the focus on sexuality.

Despite these struggles, there is hope for healing and moving forward together. Some acknowledge that their churches may continue without significant disruption, but the collective loss of relationships, unity, and grace deeply impacts the CRC's identity and mission.

### **What questions do you have?**

The document contains a wide range of questions and concerns from various perspectives within the CRC, centered around issues of unity, division, and the future of the denomination. Key themes include:

#### Unity and Division

* Impact of Exclusion: Is it acceptable for a significant portion of the denomination to feel excluded or banned?
* Fear and Authority: Are we comfortable with the "get on board or get out" mandate? Does this approach reflect Christian values?
* Spirit of Generosity: How can we foster a spirit of generosity that allows space for disagreement within the denomination?

#### LGBTQ+ Issues and Synod Decisions

* Pastoral Care: Do Synod’s historical apologies for failing the LGBTQ+ community indicate a deeper misunderstanding of diversity and brokenness?
* Confessional Mandates: Does the decision to make the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) confessional align with biblical teaching, or is it reflective of broader cultural and political pressures?
* Hurt and Healing: How much hurt and loss would be necessary for the CRC to reconsider its decision?

#### Church Governance and Processes

* Timelines and Flexibility: Is the one-year timeframe for churches under suspension to comply realistic? Would a longer period (e.g., 2-3 years) allow for more thoughtful decisions?
* Local vs. Synod Authority: How can we navigate the balance of power between Synod and local churches?
* Canadian Context: Is there potential for Canadian churches to form their own Synod or for classis-level discretion in implementing decisions?

#### The Future of the CRC

* Survival and Growth: What does a vibrant and inclusive CRC look like? How can the denomination address polarization while maintaining unity?
* Membership and Diversity: How do we maintain biblical grounding while creating space for diverse voices, including marginalized groups like immigrants, refugees, and the LGBTQ+ community?
* Denominational Identity: Why are there so many denominations, and what does that mean for the CRC’s identity and purpose?

#### Broader Theological and Cultural Questions

* Open Doors: How can the church remain open and welcoming while holding to its theological convictions?
* Stakeholder Voices: How do we ensure that the voices of those directly impacted by decisions are heard and valued?
* Future Challenges: Are we prepared for future issues that may divide the denomination, and what lessons can be learned from the current situation?

The overarching concern is how the denomination can move forward in unity, balancing scriptural faithfulness with pastoral care, inclusivity, and flexibility.

**Open Exchange: Are there any questions that anyone would like to respond to? Is there anything that you’d like someone to clarify?**

This discussion captures a deep sense of grief, frustration, and division within the denomination regarding Synod’s decisions on human sexuality. Key points raised include:

1. Pain of Separation:
   * A video by Zachary King likened the situation to separating wheat from chaff, which some found painful and alienating, wondering if they still belong to the denomination.
   * There is a sentiment that Synod and the denomination do not care if individuals or churches leave.
2. Accountability and Discipline:
   * Some noted that accountability and moral expectations have always been part of the church’s discipline, such as cadet counselors needing to live upright lives.
3. Loss of Unity:
   * The Spirit of Unity feels lost, and the divisiveness of this single issue is seen as deeply damaging.
   * Questions were raised about whether there is another way to work through this conflict without creating division.
4. Impact on Families and Individuals:
   * The decisions have deeply impacted conservative families with children or grandchildren who are LGBTQ+. These families face inner conflict and feel their loved ones’ worth is being devalued.
   * Concerns were raised about whether there is space in the church for same-sex couples, their marriages, and their children.
   * Exclusion from leadership or full participation for those who affirm same-sex relationships was highlighted as a significant pain point.
5. Call to Refocus:
   * Some expressed a desire to move past this debate and focus on the church’s mission: ministering to the lost and hurting.
   * A plea was made to work towards unity and healing rather than spinning wheels in division.

Overall, the open exchange time reflects a collective grief over the division, a concern for those hurt by the decisions, and a yearning to find a way forward that upholds unity and compassion.

### **If we follow Synod’s recommendations as you understand them, would you or your church feel the need to leave? Is there anything that could be said or done to help you or your church stay engaged and committed to our shared life and ministry in the classis and denomination?**

The discussions reflect a range of emotions and responses to the Synod’s recommendations, particularly around issues of human sexuality and the gravamen process. The central themes include commitment to the CRC, struggles with the decisions, and the potential for divisions or departures.

#### Churches Staying Committed to the CRC

Many participants expressed a strong commitment to remaining in the CRC. Reasons included:

* Deep Denominational Identity: Several churches and individuals identify closely with the CRC and see no viable alternative. Leaving, even over contentious issues, feels like a loss of the community they value.
* Mission and Ministry Focus: Some emphasized their desire to focus on being the hands and feet of Jesus rather than divisive debates. They see value in the CRC’s broader mission and feel their congregations are flourishing.
* Pragmatism: For some, leaving is not seen as feasible due to logistical challenges, denominational assets, or the unlikelihood of reaching the required votes for disaffiliation.

#### Concerns Over Synod’s Decisions

Despite many churches intending to stay, there is widespread concern about the decisions made at Synod:

* Impact on LGBTQ+ Individuals and Families: Participants raised the difficulty of reconciling the decisions with a desire to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals. There is a strong concern about how to minister to those who feel excluded or judged.
* Gravamen Process: The language and rigidity of the gravamen process caused discomfort. Some felt it creates barriers for those who disagree with Synod’s decisions, particularly regarding confessional alignment.
* Loss of Nuance and Grace: Many noted a loss of space for wrestling with difficult theological issues. They yearned for more grace-filled approaches, emphasizing the need for mutual love and understanding.

#### Churches Considering or Leaning Toward Leaving

A smaller number of churches are actively discerning whether to remain in the CRC:

* Schism and Voting: Some churches are engaging in listening circles and elder discernment to determine whether to stay. Votes on disaffiliation are planned in some congregations, though achieving the required majority remains uncertain.
* Cultural and Missional Challenges: For certain congregations, the Synod’s decisions are perceived as hampering their unique mission and vision. These churches struggle with how to reconcile their local ministry context with denominational expectations.

#### Individual Struggles and Disillusionment

* Personal Faith Journeys: Several individuals expressed personal uncertainty about their place in the denomination. While their churches may remain, they themselves are wrestling with whether to stay.
* Concerns About Leadership: Fears were expressed about the ability to attract and retain church leaders, especially given the divisive atmosphere and theological rigidity.

#### Hopes for Moving Forward

Participants expressed several ways to foster unity and engagement within the CRC:

* Room for Nuance: Many emphasized the need for open discussions and a willingness to wrestle with difficult topics without judgment or exclusion.
* Focus on Love and Mission: Calls were made to prioritize love and ministry over doctrinal enforcement, ensuring the church remains welcoming to all.
* Openness to Change: While there is skepticism about the possibility of revisiting Synod’s decisions, some see potential in ongoing dialogues or structural solutions like creating CRC Canada for differing views.

In summary, the conversations highlight both a strong commitment to the CRC and deep concerns about the impact of recent decisions. While many churches plan to stay, they seek greater room for grace, dialogue, and ministry to those affected by the decisions. Others are actively discerning their future, reflecting the complexity and gravity of the situation.

**Is there anything else you think we need to move forward?**

To move forward, key themes emerged from discussions across the circles:

1. Time and Patience: Many emphasized the need for more time to process Synod's decisions. A rushed timeline has caused distress, limiting opportunities for congregations to engage thoughtfully and respond faithfully. Allowing time to listen, reflect, and navigate differences was repeatedly called for, with suggestions to slow down decision-making and foster deeper discussions.
2. Space for Diversity: Several participants highlighted the importance of creating room for differing perspectives within the denomination. Some noted the value of theological diversity in fostering growth and love, while others suggested exploring structures (e.g., regional or Canadian CRCs) that might allow for varied practices while maintaining unity.
3. Focus on Love and Mission: Many expressed a desire to move beyond polarization and rediscover the church's mission to love and serve others. Concerns were raised about excluding or alienating people, particularly LGBTQ individuals, from the church's ministry. Practical resources and guidance on ministering to same-sex-attracted individuals were requested, alongside a broader focus on kingdom work rather than divisive issues.
4. Support for Congregations: Participants acknowledged the challenges faced by broken congregations and expressed a need for assistance, including how to handle the practical and emotional fallout of decisions. There were calls for compassion, respect, and humility to guide conversations and actions moving forward.
5. Openness to Dialogue: Continued dialogue was seen as essential. Participants valued safe environments where difficult topics could be discussed openly, with mutual respect and a willingness to understand differing perspectives. Listening sessions, events, and resources to foster these conversations were identified as critical for progress.
6. Prayer and Faithfulness: Many stressed the importance of prayer and reliance on the Spirit’s guidance to navigate this challenging time. There was a call for faithfulness to Christ and trust that God’s will would prevail, regardless of the outcomes.
7. Rethinking Processes and Structures: Concerns were raised about the current gravamen process and how the denomination's decisions have been communicated. Some suggested revisiting these processes to allow more room for contextual differences and grace.

Participants expressed a collective hope for a future marked by humility, grace, and a renewed focus on the church’s mission, with a willingness to engage meaningfully despite disagreements.

### **Is there anything you are willing to do to help move us forward?**

Across the circles, there was a consistent willingness to engage in dialogue, foster understanding, and focus on relationships rather than divisive theological stances. Below are the key themes:

1. Commitment to Unity and Dialogue:
   * Many participants expressed a desire to remain part of the CRC while acknowledging theological differences.
   * Emphasis was placed on listening to diverse perspectives, facilitating spaces for open dialogue, and working towards unity in essentials while allowing liberty in non-essentials.
   * Listening circles were widely appreciated as a platform to understand others’ views and build relationships.
2. Focus on Relationships and Ministry:
   * Participants highlighted the importance of relational ministry, meeting people where they are, and focusing on love and grace over doctrinal disagreements.
   * Efforts to reach out to marginalized individuals, grieve with those in pain, and create safe spaces for conversations were emphasized.
3. Prayer and Personal Action:
   * Many expressed their reliance on prayer for wisdom, discernment, and guidance in navigating these challenges.
   * Others committed to small, practical actions such as writing letters, supporting those struggling with faith, and facilitating educational programs.
4. Frustrations and Hopes:
   * Some participants expressed frustration with the CRC’s heavy-handed approach and the perceived shutting down of conversations.
   * Despite this, there was hope for continued dialogue, a shift in focus from specific issues (like human sexuality) to broader sin and salvation topics, and fostering a welcoming community.
5. Moving Forward with Grace:
   * A recurring theme was the need to embody grace, love, and humility while navigating these challenges. Participants expressed a desire to model Christ-like behavior, even amidst disagreements.
   * There was acknowledgment that forward movement requires patience, active listening, and a collective commitment to supporting one another.

The overall sentiment was a mix of lament over divisions but also a hopeful resolve to work towards healing and unity through dialogue, prayer, and relational ministry.

### **How did you think we did at exhibiting those virtues and following those norms?**

Feedback from the circles generally reflected a positive experience, with key observations including:

1. General Positivity and Safety:
   * Participants felt the environment was comfortable and safe for sharing, even amidst difficult topics.
   * Appreciation was expressed for everyone's participation and respectful engagement.
2. Listening and Respect:
   * Conversations were described as civil, respectful, and characterized by good body language and active listening.
   * There was value placed on hearing diverse perspectives, including struggles and supports from both “sides.”
3. Challenges Acknowledged:
   * Some participants noted that following norms was harder when dealing with personal grief or brokenness over the issues discussed.
4. Constructive Engagement:
   * The process was viewed as helpful for building each other up and moving forward in unity.
   * Participants were thankful for the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue through the listening circles.

Overall, the listening circles were assessed as effective, fostering understanding and civility, despite the emotional and challenging nature of the conversations.

### **What happened here that we are thankful to God for?**

Participants across all circles expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to gather, listen, and share their hearts in a safe and respectful environment. Key themes of thankfulness include:

1. A Safe Space to Connect and Share:
   * Many were thankful for a space where they could share openly and feel heard without fear of judgment.
   * The discussions fostered honesty, respect, and heartfelt responses, providing comfort to those feeling isolated in their local congregations.
2. Unity in Diversity:
   * Participants appreciated the diversity of views, stories, and insights shared, emphasizing the value of hearing perspectives different from their own.
   * The opportunity to learn, grow in understanding, and disagree constructively while maintaining unity in Christ was highlighted.
3. Encouragement and Collective Purpose:
   * Gratitude was expressed for the shared passion for the gospel, the presence of dedicated servants of God, and the mutual desire to serve God’s kingdom.
   * Moments of worship, devotion, and acknowledgment of the collective mission reinforced a sense of belonging and unity.
4. Growth Through Listening:
   * The act of listening, rather than arguing, was seen as transformative, fostering wisdom, clarity, and better understanding of the broader CRC community.
   * Participants noted the importance of acknowledging uncertainty and emotional struggles, which contributed to a spirit of humility and grace.
5. Gratitude for the Event Itself:
   * The event was valued for providing a forum to connect, engage meaningfully, and avoid escalation. Participants were thankful for the respectful tone, the opportunity to learn from one another, and the collective oneness in God that was evident throughout.

Overall, the event was a source of gratitude as it strengthened connections, encouraged thoughtful dialogue, and reminded participants of their shared commitment to serve God and His people.

### **What are we sad about? Do we regret something that we said or left unsaid? Did we experience or do we anticipate a loss of something important?**

Across the different circles, participants expressed profound sorrow, regret, and concern over several issues related to the ongoing church discussions and the state of the denomination:

1. Loss and Division:
   * Many lamented the deep division within the church, particularly the impact it has had on relationships, faith communities, and individual members.
   * There was a widespread sense of loss, both in terms of unity and the church's ability to hear and embrace voices of struggle, especially those related to same-sex attraction.
   * The painful feeling of being uprooted or alienated due to these divisions was also voiced, alongside the regret that such conversations have taken too long and have not been more inclusive or honest.
2. Missed Opportunities for Dialogue:
   * Some participants regretted the lack of deeper, more open conversations about critical issues, feeling that important voices were left unheard, especially from those who feel marginalized by the church's stance on LGBTQ+ issues.
   * There was sadness about the rigid nature of decisions made at recent Synods, with a sense that they have not adequately addressed the needs of individuals struggling with various issues, leading to feelings of exclusion and hurt.
3. Impact on People and Faith:
   * Several expressed sadness about the toll these debates are taking on individuals, particularly those struggling with their faith or identity, as well as the loss of faith among younger members or those who feel alienated.
   * The emotional pain and difficulty faced by individuals—both inside and outside the church—were significant sources of lament. Some also noted the loss of trust in the church, particularly among young people who view it as punitive or hurtful.
4. Cultural and Structural Concerns:
   * Participants also expressed concern over the church’s shifting focus, noting that mission and kingdom work seem to have become secondary to internal disputes. The tendency for some to view the church as an "either align or resign" institution caused sadness, as it further alienates people rather than fostering a spirit of collaboration.
   * There were concerns about the exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals from the church community and the potential future harm this could cause, especially to younger generations who may feel abandoned or stigmatized.
5. Regret About the Process:
   * Some participants expressed disappointment with the Synod’s process, feeling that it was politically driven and lacked the love and inclusiveness that should guide such discussions. The sense that no new perspectives were being brought to the table contributed to frustration, with many feeling that the conversation had stagnated.
   * Additionally, there was concern over the loss of valuable leaders and members, particularly those who may leave due to the ongoing conflict or who feel unsupported by the current church environment.

Overall, there was a deep sense of grief over the pain caused by these issues, the failure to fully engage with and support all members, and the division that continues to grow within the church community. Many are uncertain how to move forward, but there is a collective desire for healing, reconciliation, and a renewed focus on love and inclusivity.

### **Looking to the future, what possibilities do you see? What do you hope for?**

As participants reflected on the future, they expressed a range of hopes and possibilities for the church, focusing on unity, renewal, and a deeper sense of community and mission:

1. Renewed Focus on Mission and Unity:
   * Many participants hoped for a renewed focus on the mission of the church, prioritizing outreach and service to others, including those who feel marginalized. They long for unity, where the church functions as one body despite differing views and experiences. There is a deep desire for greater empathy, where all members are valued and supported.
   * There was a strong hope that God would continue working within the church, bringing about transformation and renewal, even amidst challenges.
2. Inclusion and Safe Spaces:
   * Several expressed a desire for the church to become a more welcoming and inclusive space, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals, ensuring that they do not feel pushed out or unsafe. There was a shared hope for the creation of more safe places where differences can coexist without insecurity, allowing everyone to feel embraced regardless of their background or struggles.
3. Faith Growth and Strength:
   * Participants hoped that, regardless of the church’s divisions, everyone would grow in their faith, understanding that God’s love is not contingent on our goodness but on His. They wished for strength to come from lament, turning grief and sorrow into a source of hope and resilience. There was also hope for people to realize that unity is possible even with different convictions, as long as the focus remains on Christ and His work.
4. Mission and Ministry at the Forefront:
   * There was a shared vision for the church to move beyond internal conflicts and focus on reaching the lost, with mission and ministry becoming central again. Some hoped that the conversations and gatherings, like the current one, would serve as a turning point for the church, helping people grow in grace, humility, and understanding.
5. Discernment, Grace, and Transformation:
   * A desire for discernment in decision-making was voiced, with hopes for a grace-filled process that could offer an alternative to the current divisive trends. There was also a call to return to the core identity of being rooted in Christ alone, leading to greater love and acceptance for all, even those on the “borderline” of church beliefs.
6. Hope for the Church’s Future:
   * Overall, participants acknowledged that the church belongs to God, and they are open to seeing what God has in store. Some expressed hope that deconstruction might be necessary before rebuilding, with the belief that something beautiful could emerge from the church’s brokenness.
   * There was a call to realign with God’s purpose and to focus on ministering to those who are struggling, trusting that God is always at work, even when the path forward is unclear. The hope is that, through God’s presence, the church will be able to overcome its current challenges and continue its mission of love and service.

In conclusion, the future is filled with hopes for unity, inclusivity, and a stronger commitment to the mission of the church. While acknowledging the struggles and division, participants expressed confidence that God will guide the church toward renewal, growth, and deeper connection with each other and the world.