

Report from Church Visitors to Classis Huron regarding Waterloo CRC ‘Church in Protest’ communication and Bethel CRC Listowel’s motion to unseat Waterloo CRC delegates.

Leading up to the February 2024 meeting of Classis Huron, the Council of Waterloo CRC sent a “Church in Protest” communication to Classis Huron, asking the classis to adopt the communication as its own and to send it onto Synod. (Article 7b of Classis Huron May 2024 agenda)

In their communication, the Council of Waterloo CRC protests the confessional declaration of Synod 2022 “that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong and legal marriage.” Waterloo CRC believes this should not be a confessional matter. They expressed their desire to continue participating in the CRCNA while protesting Synod 2023’s decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”

Responding to this communication, the council of Bethel CRC in Listowel submitted a motion that “officebearers of Waterloo CRC not be seated as delegates at meetings of Classis Huron.” The reasoning was that Waterloo CRC violated the vows made when signing the Covenant for Officebearers. (Article 7a of Classis Huron May agenda)

Classis Huron voted against adopting Waterloo CRC’s protest communication as their own. The chair then ruled that Bethel CRC Listowel’s motion would be tabled until the May 2024 Classis meeting. Church Visitors were appointed to gather more information and provide advice to Classis Huron for the May meeting.

Since that February Classis meeting, Church Visitors met with both councils (Waterloo CRC and Bethel CRC Listowel). The following contains both reports on the church visits, as well as recommendations for moving forward as a classis.

Report on Church Visit with Waterloo CRC Council

On Wednesday, May 1, Church Visitors Rev. Ed den Haan and Rev. Victor Laarman convened with the Council of Waterloo CRC. The meeting included ten Council members, two Church Visitors, and six guests from the congregation who attended as observers. The purpose of this gathering was to listen and gain deeper insight into Waterloo CRC’s ‘Church in Protest’ statement. The goal was to assist Classis Huron in determining how to address the overture to unseat Waterloo CRC delegates from Classis Huron meetings. The Chair of Council, Rudy Eikelboom, opened with reading from John 17 and with prayer.

What we discovered is that Waterloo CRC fosters an environment where everyone is welcome to come, worship, and belong. Their approach to scripture involves what they term a ‘rich’ reading, which embraces multiple viewpoints on various topics where believers may disagree. Rather than seeing these differences as problems to be resolved, they view them as strengths.

Regarding the issue of same-sex marriage, the members of Waterloo CRC hold a range of positions. Most of the congregation would be considered ‘affirming’, with some holding strong convictions in this regard. Others maintain a traditional view of marriage, while some remain uncertain about the Bible’s teachings. This diversity of opinions extends to the Council as well. Over the past 25 years, Waterloo CRC has engaged in extensive discussions on this topic. At this juncture, the Council has decided to forego further debate on the topic of same-

sex marriage within the congregation. Open and respectful discussion is desired but is and has been very difficult. They choose to live with these differences. Waterloo CRC's Council values the freedom to hold pastorally diverse perspectives on matters related to same-sex marriage.

During the 2022 and 2023 Synods, the denomination affirmed that the definition of "unchastity" in *Heidelberg Catechism* answer #108 includes "homosexual sex". In response, the Council of Waterloo CRC felt compelled to express their disagreement. For Waterloo CRC, this was a matter of integrity. Remaining silent on the decisions made by these synods regarding human sexuality would imply acceptance of what they called a 'limited view of scripture' that would be offensive to some of their members—especially those in same-sex relationships.

The result of their conviction is the "Church in Protest" communication, which was presented to Classis Huron during the February 2024 meeting and subsequently sent to Synod 2024. However, it's important to note that this document does not declare Waterloo CRC as "open and affirming" (a label they have not adopted). Instead, it serves as a means of expressing their frustration with the confessional status granted to the definition of unchastity. Waterloo CRC's primary concern lies with the process by which "homosexual sex" was incorporated into the confessional framework. Their protest centres on this process and its implications. Notably, Waterloo CRC has never conducted a same-sex wedding, nor have they elected any members in same-sex relationships to their Council.

As Church Visitors, we appreciate Waterloo CRC's commitment to welcoming inclusivity and their dedication to kingdom ministry within their community. Their desire to remain an integral part of the Christian Reformed denomination is commendable—especially in how they have refrained from performing same-sex weddings or to elect people in same-sex relationships into Council.

However, during our interactions, several concerns have come to light:

- **Neglect of the Covenant for Officebearers implementation.** When asked about the willingness of current officebearers to sign the Covenant for Officebearers, the response was evasive. The Council neither confirmed nor denied their willingness to adhere to this Covenant at the present. Strangely, the comment was made that this matter is irrelevant to their relationship with Classis, which raises questions about transparency and accountability.
- **Unconventional approach to gravamen.** Traditionally, when Council members encounter a point of disagreement within the Three Forms of Unity, they are expected to submit a gravamen to the local Council. However, Waterloo CRC Council decided that Council members need not submit a gravamen regarding the issue of same-sex marriage. Consequently, no gravamen has been filed, which is rather unconventional.
- **Divergence from CRC's Teaching on Marriage.** Since Waterloo CRC council supports a diversity of opinions regarding the biblical understanding of marriage, it is clear that Council members do not actively promote and defend the CRC's teaching on this matter, namely, that marriage can only be between one man and one woman. This raises questions about Waterloo CRC's alignment with denominational teachings.

Overall, our meeting with Waterloo CRC Council was good-natured, and informative. We learned much about the inclusive heartbeat of this congregation. Yet, we also see some aspects of their ministry that put Waterloo CRC out-of-sync with our denominations official understanding of scripture.

Report on Church Visit with the Council of Bethel CRC in Listowel

On Monday, May 6, Church Visitors Rev. Ed den Haan and Rev. Darrel Bierman convened with the Council of Bethel CRC Listowel. The meeting included 15 Council members and two Church Visitors.

The mandate by Classis Huron for this visit was to gain knowledge and understanding of Bethel's request to Classis Huron on Bethel's credentials of the February 2024 Classis meeting.

Context

Bethel asked Classis to unseat the Waterloo delegates from participating in the decisions of Classis Huron. Bethel alleged that Waterloo's request to be a protesting congregation illustrates a break with Classis. In particular Bethel alleges that Waterloo has stated it could and would not support Synod's 2023 decision.

Visit Report

Our visit began at 7:30 pm. Rev. Henry Meinen opened with a reading of Ephesians 1.

Rev. Den Haan then opened the meeting and thanked Council for inviting us. He informed Council that we came to listen and learn from Council what its request of Classis meant and entailed. He then asked each attending office bearer to give his or her name and state their concerns.

A thoughtful, open and meaningful presentation by all members took place.

Bethel CRC is deeply concerned about what it sees as erosion of CRCNA structure and standards of faith. Bethel seeks to counteract this erosion by upholding and enforcing our traditional standards as it understands them. Bethel wants Classis Huron to uphold CRCNA standards and application of our Covenant for Office Bearers. Bethel believes that our denominational integrity and future will erode should we not do as they request. Bethel's petition came on its credentials for a particular reason. Bethel understands that Classis must uphold CRCNA standards. Bethel's urgency in their request was to prevent Waterloo damaging itself as well as Classis in their action at Classis.

Bethel Council has not approached Waterloo directly and some wondered if this was possible. We advised that not only was this possible but essential. Professional support for such conversations is available from our denominational Thrive Ministry.

Various members voiced:

- We love Bethel
- We love the CRCNA.
- CRCNA standards must be applied
- We do not want any congregation to leave the CRCNA, rather we want them to conform to and uphold what Synod has decided. That said, there are other denominations that would be happy to include congregations that will not conform in the CRCNA.
- Not to inform someone of their sin as sin is wrong and may cause loss of salvation.
- We wish to understand and know Waterloo more completely.
- It is possible to work through this with Waterloo.
- Let's not cause division.

Concluding Thoughts & Observations

As Church Visitors would like to thank the councils of both Waterloo CRC and Bethel CRC for their willingness to meet with us, and their hospitality in hosting us. We observe two congregations who both love the church as the body of Christ and seek its welfare. Both desire to know and live God's truth. Both seek to faithfully minister in their unique context. Both desire the good of the other, although there is a level of mistrust and suspicion.

We commend both councils in their efforts to preserve our unity in Christ. We commend Waterloo CRC for working towards unity by not performing same-sex weddings, or electing people in same-sex relationships to the office of elder or deacon. We commend Bethel CRC for reminding us of our unity in our confessions, and our commitment to them.

As we move towards our recommendations, we make a few observations.

- This is a difficult context we live in. We live in a post-Christian society with shifting moral and sexual norms. As the church, we are all grappling with how to minister faithfully in this changing context.
- Some of our congregations have had to grapple with questions related to sexuality more frequently, especially congregations in our urban centres. Waterloo CRC, for instance, has been addressing these questions for nearly 25 years, often with limited denominational guidance.
- We acknowledge we all still have a lot to learn about faithfully ministering to LGBTQ+ individuals. Both Synod 2022 and 2023 recognized this.
- As a denomination, we have discerned that faithfulness to Christ and faithfulness in ministry necessitates upholding the biblical view of sexuality. Sexual intimacy is reserved for the context of marriage, which is a one-man-one-woman covenant union. This was clarified by Synod 2022 and 2023.
- We lament that our relational unity as a denomination and classis is stressed because of this decision.
- And yet, we acknowledge that our unity in Christ—which goes beyond our subscription to the Three Forms of Unity—is not *less than* our subscription to those confessions. Therefore, we have an obligation to each other to, in the grace and love of Christ, hold each other accountable by God's grace to our communal covenant.
- We also have an obligation “to manage disagreements within our congregations, and among churches, with love, charity, and grace, and to ensure that all who seek to follow Christ are afforded a respectful place to honestly share their view and listen to those of others” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p.1023).
- Finally, we recognize that Synod 2024 will be a deciding factor in how we move forward as a denomination. We have yet to see how Synod will handle the communications of protest and what it will decide handles gravamen, and perhaps more

Recommendations

- 1. That Classis Huron encourage the churches of Classis Huron to be committed to loving and offering places of belonging for all people, including our LGBTQ+ neighbours, who seek to follow Christ.**

Ground:

- a. Synod 2022 and 2023 both acknowledged our need to more intentionally provide places of belonging within our congregations.

- 2. That Classis Huron remind all officebearers in the classis of their duty to uphold and defend the biblical teaching regarding marriage, as confirmed by Synod 2022 and 2023.**

Grounds:

- a. The council of Waterloo CRC supports a diversity of opinions with regard to biblical views of human sexuality. While this may create a more welcoming space, this approach oversteps the boundaries of human sexuality as laid out by synod and our Covenant for Officebearers.
- b. The officebearers of Waterloo CRC may not be the only ones in Classis that need this reminder.

- 3. That Classis Huron review and update our use of the signing of the Covenant for Officebearers so that it can be more appropriately incorporated in the meetings of Classis Huron.**

Grounds:

- a. Currently we do not use this covenant as required in our regulations. (see article 2.4 of the 'Handbook of Classis Huron').
- b. The Covenant for Office bearers is essential for our unity as a denomination and classis.
- c. The Covenant for Officebearers' purpose is to serve "the well-being of the church and the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (from the "Covenant for Officebearers").

- 4. That Classis Huron defer the decision to unseat the delegates of Waterloo CRC until September 2024.**

Grounds:

- a. Synod 2024 will likely further clarify how we as a classis and councils should handle protests, disagreements, and gravamen. We are wise to wait to see how Synod 2024 develops.
- b. It is clear from the visit with the Council of Waterloo CRC that the "Church in Protest" statement is not a disagreement with the CRCNA's views on human sexuality, rather, it is disagreement that the matter is confessional. This does not strictly put Waterloo CRC's protest 'out of bounds'.
- c. However, it is clear from our visit that Waterloo CRC promotes an approach to human sexuality that is 'out of bounds' in the CRCNA. Therefore, we do need to revisit this motion soon.

- 5. That Classis Huron recommend the Councils of Waterloo CRC and Bethel CRC Listowel work towards better mutual understanding and respect.**

Ground:

- a. While Bethel is correct that the issue before Classis Huron is a classis matter, and not simply a matter between two congregations, it is clear that there is a level of distrust and wrong assumptions made by both councils about each other. Working together towards reconciliation will help build trust and unity in our classis.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Darrell Bierman, Rev. Ed den Haan, & Rev. Victor Laarman