

Overture regarding conflict in authority to delegate office bearers to classis from Exeter CRC, Exeter.

March 11, 2025

Classis Huron,

Exeter CRC was selected to form part of the classis overture committee to review and provide recommendations for the overtures submitted that were discussed at this past Classis meeting on February 26, 2025. One of the overtures, though we did not agree with the overture's solution to the problem, brought up a pressing issue needing rectification regarding the governing authority of Synod and Classis and how we proceed when there is a conflict between the two. This issue is described more thoroughly below.

As the overture committee assessed the validity of the overture, we worked back and forth with Community CRC (CCRC), and along the process we were in general agreement. However, by the end of the process we realized that CCRC's solution to the problem was out of order. And so, we prepared our own overture to Synod as an attempt at a friendly amendment in the spirit of rectifying the problem of the conflict of authority between Classis and Synod, while also doing so in good order.

Unfortunately, our proposed solution was not amenable to CCRC and they decided the amendment was unfriendly, preferring to remain with their solution. And so, the classis overture committee decided not accede to their overture as we deemed that it was not in good order. The Classis body then deliberated on the overture as submitted by CCRC, and it was deemed by classis to be out of order and the overture was defeated.

Unfortunately, this leaves the problem of having a conflict in authority in how we seat delegates at classis unresolved. The Classis overture committee's amended overture was not looked at as it was not prepared and reviewed by a church council and it was not deemed to be friendly by the original church submitting the overture.

Exeter CRC has met and deliberated on this matter and humbly submits this overture, which is largely the work prepared by the classis overture committee, to classis Huron to deliberate on as a possible solution to this authority and church order issue. Ultimately, if passed recommendation A would be passed on to Synod as a means of seeking to rectify the issue, and recommendation B would help classis in the meantime to discern the legal implications of how we choose to move forward. The intent of this overture is to clarify authority so that Classis can work within the law, classical bylaws, and church order while respecting the decisions of Synod.

General Background:

The Classis overture committee recognized that CCRC's overture addressed 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 Theological Seminary, and Synod parliamentarian, the Classis overture committee believed 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.

The Classis overture committee also recognized 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 was the Classis overture committee's understanding that there has been communication between visiting church pastors and churches within our Classis who submitted a letter of protest to prior synods. They 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 their 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, the Classis overture committee believed 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.

The Classis overture committee suggested 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, the Classis overture committee noted that any officebearers with pending gravamen are to recuse themselves from delegation to broader assemblies.

Given feedback and deliberation with others in our Classis, the Classis overture committee believed 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. We recognized 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, and therefore meet the classis requirements to be seated as delegates to classis. 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.

Many thanks for your consideration,

Signed,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'G. Steenbeek', with a stylized, cursive script.

Gerard Steenbeek