

Advisory Committee 9, Gravamen, Rev. Petr Kornilov reporting, presents the following:

**I. Response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 58, 60, 62-64, 22, 27, 35-43; Communications 2-4, and 6**

*A. Materials*

1. Overtures 49-51 (*Deferred from 2023*), pp. 351-66
2. Overtures 53-55 (*Deferred from 2023*), pp. 367-74
3. Overture 58 (*Deferred from 2023*), pp. 377-80
4. Overture 60 (*Deferred from 2023*), pp. 381-82
5. Overture 62-64 (*Deferred from 2023*), pp. 384-87
6. Overture 20, recommendation 1, p. 465
7. Overture 22, pp. 466-71
8. Overture 27, pp. 481-89
9. Overtures 35-43, pp. 506-29
10. Communications 2-4, pp. 540-50
11. Communication 6, pp. 552-53

*B. Preamble*

Officebearers in the CRCNA covenant together in submission to God's Word "in all matters of faith and life." They "affirm" the creeds and confessions. They "heartily believe" these creeds and confessions "fully agree with the word of God." They vow to "promote and defend [these] doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). While it may appear this is a high bar, we believe Scripture intends this bar and thus, God will help us.

Scripture assumes there are doctrines one must know to become a Christian and grow in faith (Jude 4; Gal. 1:9; Heb. 6:1-2; 2 John 9-11). Scripture is clear that pastors and elders must know and be able to teach these doctrines (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:2). Scripture urges Christians to live by and keep these doctrines (1 Tim. 4:16). These are the doctrines the church recognizes and summarizes in our creeds and confessions. We don't draw doctrinal borders in the same place as other Christian traditions, however, these are the doctrines that "locate us within the larger body of Christ" (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). Therefore, these are the doctrines officebearers must affirm and heartily believe without reservation, "God, helping us." In the history of the church this is called "confessional subscription."

Christian Reformed history shows the church wrestling with how to maintain confessional subscription, while at the same time, recognizing that officebearers may at times develop doubts or difficulties with the doctrines they have sworn to heartily believe, promote and defend. In light of this

tension, Synod 1976 helpfully distinguished between two types of gravamina. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is to be used when an officebearer has a difficulty with a doctrine, while a confessional-revision gravamen is to be used when an officebearer believes the confessions are in error.

As we considered the overtures and communications regarding confessional-difficulty gravamina, we noticed two different understandings concerning their nature and use:

- 1) In one understanding, an officebearer uses a confessional-difficulty gravamen to express a personal difficulty to a council. The council would then judge whether they could tolerate the officebearer's disagreement with the confessions. If so, the officebearer could continue to serve with the gravamen submitted to their local council.
- 2) In the other understanding, an officebearer uses a gravamen to express a personal difficulty to a council. However, the purpose of expressing the difficulty is to determine whether the officebearer's gravamen is in line with the doctrines of our confessions, and if not, to help the officebearer pursue a path toward alignment – enlisting the help of the classis and synod if necessary.

Currently, both understandings of confessional-difficulty gravamen have some merit because the current wording of the church order is not sufficiently clear. It is our desire to provide that clarity.

#### *C. Background:*

Synod 1976 declared that Dr. Harry Boer's communication to Synod in 1975 was a confessional-difficulty gravamen, thus, retroactively creating the first ever confessional-difficulty gravamen. What Synod 1976 did not declare and what no synod has ever said is that this type of gravamen is a way for someone to take exception to the church's creeds and confessions. In fact, what synod did say to Dr. Boer helps clarify the intended nature and use of gravamen. Synod appointed a committee to discuss these matters with Dr. Boer and report back to Synod 1977. If the committee was not able to resolve Dr. Boer's difficulty, he could then submit a confessional-revision gravamen. (*Acts of Synod 1976*, Art. 68, p. 75). Thus, the first ever confessional-difficulty gravamen was timebound (since Dr. Boer had until Synod 1977) and started a process that would escalate into a confessional-revision gravamen if not resolved within that time frame. Therefore, Synod 1976 understood the confessional-difficulty gravamen as a personal request for help in resolving the officebearer's doubts. The way a council, classis, or synod was to do that was by providing the officebearer with the "information and/or clarification" of the confessions (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

#### *D. Introduction:*

According to Synod 1976 and the Church Order, a confessional-difficulty gravamen occurs when “a subscriber (i.e. an officebearer) expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, 1). This kind of gravamen is submitted by an officebearer to a church council for “examination and judgment” as “a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, B, 2).

When an assembly examines and judges a confessional-difficulty gravamen, it must do so according to Church Order which also clearly states (1) “no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 3) and (2) the person signing the Covenant for Officebearers must affirm “without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5, A, 1). This means an officebearer must affirm all the doctrines contained in our confessions without reservation upon ordination making a confessional-difficulty gravamen for those occasions when a difficulty develops after ordination has taken place. It is, therefore, an opportunity for discipleship. This also means an assembly cannot tolerate an officebearer’s disagreement with the confessions as that would be, de facto, taking an exception (or holding a settled conviction contrary to) the confessions. It is a temporary tool for discipleship to help an officebearer once again affirm that the doctrines in the creeds and confessions “fully agree with the Word of God,” and promise “to be formed and governed by them,” and to “heartily believe and . . . promote and defend their doctrines . . .” (Church Order Supplement, Art. 5). If an officebearer cannot resolve their difficulty or develops a settled conviction contrary to the confessions, the confessional-difficulty would reveal that the officebearer is, at the very least, located elsewhere in the body of Christ or that our confessions are wrong. The officebearer would then bear the burden of proof to establish that through a confessional-revision gravamen.

With all this in mind, “examination” of a confessional-difficulty gravamen occurs when the assembly addressed discerns the nature and extent of the officebearer’s difficulty and then provides the information and/or clarification being sought. “Judgment” of a confessional-difficulty gravamen occurs when the assembly determines whether the officebearer’s difficulty is within or outside of confessional subscription. “Examination and judgment” cannot mean determining whether or not the officebearer’s difficulty is a tolerable disagreement with the confessions as that would contradict the church’s understanding of confessional subscription.

While the creeds and confessions of the church are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.

Since discipleship is personal and pastoral, working through a confessional-difficulty gravamen must begin locally. The church council provides the best context for trust, encouragement and support. However, if the local council cannot examine and judge the confessional-difficulty gravamen, they can appeal to the broader assemblies for help toward a resolution. Our intent is to provide a flexible and contextual plan of action while also clarifying the temporary nature of a confessional-difficulty gravamen. In doing so we honor the personal and pastoral nature of the gravamen process while also bringing integrity to its use and function.

Moreover, since the council would know about the difficulty, but the broader assemblies would not, officebearers who are working through a confessional-difficulty should recuse themselves from delegation to any broader assemblies so as to focus on working through their difficulty.

This process not only aims to resolve the officebearer's confessional-difficulty with grace and truth, it also provides support and accountability, in such a way that leads toward resolution.

May God be glorified and the church strengthened through these recommendations:

*E. Recommendations:*

1. That synod affirm that confessional-difficulty gravamina are not meant, nor should be used as an exception to the confessions.

*Grounds:*

- a. There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing an officebearer to maintain a settled conviction contrary to (i.e. an exception) the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions. Officebearers are expected to hold to the creeds and confessions without reservation upon becoming officebearers.
  - b. Holding a settled conviction contrary to the confessions in perpetuity would contradict the Covenant for Officebearers.
2. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the definition and proper use of a confessional-difficulty gravamen (changes are indicated by underlined or ~~strike through~~).

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, 1 and 2

1. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a temporary gravamen in which an officebearer ~~a subscriber~~, subsequent to their ordination, develops and then expresses a personal difficulty with a point of doctrine/teaching contained in the confessions but does not have a settled conviction contrary to, nor call for a revision of the confessions, ~~and~~

2. A *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which an officebearer ~~a subscriber~~ makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, A, 1

1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions standards of the church as being doctrines ~~that are~~ taught in the Word of God. “Without reservation” means that an officebearer does not have a difficulty or hold a settled conviction contrary to any of the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions. This includes what synod has declared to have confessional status.

*Grounds:*

- a. There is confusion as to the definition of a confessional-difficulty gravamen.
- b. If one believes a doctrine is in error, one may submit a confessional-revision gravamen, making the case to the broader body. However, the purpose of a confessional-difficulty gravamen is to express and then work through a difficulty. It is not to be used to hold an unresolved difficulty in perpetuity.
- c. Although the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA are neither inerrant nor exhaustive, they are a comprehensive summary of everything deemed essential for the faith and life of our denomination.
- d. There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing an officebearer to take an exception to the creeds and confessions. Officebearers are expected to hold to the creeds and confessions without reservation upon becoming officebearers.

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 1

1. ~~Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons~~ Officebearers shall submit their “difficulties” to their councils for counsel, examination, and judgment. *[Note: The rest of subpoint 1 becomes subpoint 6 below.]* Upon receiving a confessional-difficulty gravamen, the council shall begin a process of discipleship and discernment toward the officebearer’s full alignment with the confessions. The council is responsible for providing time, encouragement, and counsel so that all parties work to resolve the confessional-difficulty in a spirit of love, humility, and fellowship.

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B, 2

2. As part of this process, the council shall:

- a) Examine and judge the nature and extent of the difficulty in question and discern whether an officebearer has a sincere difficulty or a settled conviction contrary to the confessions better served by filing a confessional-revision gravamen.
- b) Develop a concrete course of action to resolve the confessional-difficulty. The course of action will include counsel and discipleship for the officebearer, providing them the information and/or clarification being sought.
- c) Set a reasonable timeline for the resolution of the confessional-difficulty. The total timeline shall not exceed 3 years from the time the difficulty is received by a council.

Add the following new sections to Church Order Supplement, Article 5, B

- 3. As part of this process, the officebearer shall:
  - a) Refrain from teaching contrary to or disparaging the church's confessions or what synod has declared to have confessional status when they instruct, disciple, care for, and counsel others,
  - b) Recuse themselves from being delegated to broader assemblies while their confessional-difficulty remains unresolved,
  - c) Work in good faith toward full alignment with the confessions.
- 4. The confessional-difficulty gravamen is resolved when the officebearer either:
  - a) Affirms the creeds and confessions without reservations, or
  - b) Submits a confessional-revision gravamen, or
  - c) Resigns from office.

NOTE: If applicable, ministers and commissioned pastors may be honorably released at the conclusion of the confessional-difficulty gravamen process. Officebearers who leave office with an unresolved confessional-difficulty gravamen shall resolve their difficulty prior to being reordained.

- 5. During the process of discipleship and discernment, either the council or the officebearer with the confessional-difficulty gravamen may seek help from church visitors. Should a council be unable to resolve the gravamen submitted, they shall seek advice from church visitors.

*Note: The wording for subpoint 6 was originally part of Church Order Supplement Article 5, B, 1.*

- 6. If the ~~Should~~ a council ~~decide still cannot~~ that it is not able to judge resolve the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis ~~cannot~~ judges that it is ~~unable to decide~~ resolve the matter, it ~~may~~ shall submit it

the matter to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.

7. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall be handled with grace and truth. It shall not be open for discussion by the whole church, since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. A confessional-difficulty gravamen is not a settled conviction contrary to the confessions themselves or anything that holds confessional status. Therefore, an assembly may not merely acknowledge an officebearer's reservation regarding a confession—it must work toward resolving it. ~~since~~ This type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed. Likewise, this process may not be used to coerce conformity or resignation—the assembly must provide due pastoral care. This care includes, but is not limited to, offering instruction and clarification regarding the confession in question.

*Grounds:*

- a. It is necessary to have a delineated process that guides churches, classes, and synod according to the purposes of gravamina.
- b. These amendments resolve confessional difficulties in a spirit of grace and truth.
- c. These amendments clarify the confessional-difficulty gravamen process to prevent potential misuse and to ensure it serves its intended purpose effectively, which is to bring the process to a resolution.
- d. Another purpose of this process is to restore an officebearer to doctrinal unity or reveal where our standards may be in error. This process may also reveal that an officebearer is doctrinally located elsewhere in the larger body of Christ.
- e. These amendments ensure a more pastoral approach to resolving confessional difficulties, allowing sufficient time for thoughtful discernment and fostering a nurturing space that prioritizes pastoral care and mutual understanding.
- f. These provisions provide support and accountability by utilizing church visitors, ensuring that the resolution process adheres to the church's confessional standards, while embracing a spirit of love and fellowship.
- g. These amendments acknowledge that experiencing confessional difficulties may be part of one's discipleship and spiritual growth that requires nurturing spaces for honest wrestling during one's confessional-difficulty gravamen.

- h. These amendments enable officebearers to maintain their active role in the local church while honoring the church's understanding of its confessions.
3. That synod instruct those who have submitted a confessional-difficulty gravamen that is still unresolved to use the process as outlined in the changes to the Church Order Article 5 and Supplements.

*Grounds:*

- a. Since the gravamen process has been amended, gravamina submitted before this amendment remain unresolved.
  - b. This brings clarity and resolution to current unresolved gravamina within the parameters of the timeline included in the amended church order and supplement.
4. That synod call to the attention of the churches, the need to continually equip their members regarding our confessions, and their officebearers regarding church order.

*Ground:*

- a. The changing nature of our church demographic means that there are emerging churches and members who have not had much education regarding creeds and confessions.
5. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to withdraw the Synod 2022 FAQ Questions 7-11 and develop a new FAQ statement in light of the decisions of Synod 2024.

*Ground:*

- a. The materials provided in 2022 have been superseded by decisions made by Synod 2024.
6. That synod instruct the boards of denominational agencies and institutions to review and revise, as needed, their gravamina policies related to the decision of Synod 2024 and report on their actions to Synod 2025.

*Ground:*

- a. Implementing a consistent approach to handling gravamina provides clarity and safeguards fidelity to the creeds and confessions in the denomination's agencies and institutions.
7. That synod defer Overture 42 from 14th Street CRC in Holland to Synod 2025.

*Ground:*

- a. Due to the broader scope of Overture 42, the church will be better served if Synod 2025 devotes time to examining it.
8. That synod consider this to be its response to Overtures 49-51, 53-55, 58, 60, 62-64, 20 Recommendation 1, 22, 27, 35-41, 43.