

Reject the Better Together Style Protest Communications

I. Introduction

In fall 2023, the “Better Together Church” organization published a “Church In Protest Communication Template,”¹ which they then publicized and promoted. In January 2024 they reported that they were aware of at least 18 congregations, representing 13 different classes, who were considering adopting such a communication.² While every CRC classis, council, or member is free to send a communication to synod through the proper channels, declaring oneself in “protest” of the decisions of synod is a different matter. Further, these issues have specifically been recognized as confessional by two consecutive synods. Those who covenant with their fellow officebearers by signing the Covenant of Officebearers cannot make such declarations, as there is no such provision in Church Order for them to do so.

Therefore, these protest communications from Classis Grand Rapids East (Communication 26), as well as from the councils of First CRC Vancouver, British Columbia (Communication 17); Church of the Savior, South Bend, Indiana (Communication 18); Ann Arbor (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church (Communication 19); Waterloo (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church (Communication 20); Community CRC, Wyoming, Michigan (Communication 22); Fellowship Church, Edmonton, Alberta (Communication 23); Avenue CRC, Edmonton, Alberta (Communication 24); and Bethany CRC, Muskegon, Michigan (Communication 25) represent a serious breach of covenant. *They are declaring themselves out of order and out of fellowship with the denomination.*

II. Biblical and confessional grounds

Our Belgic Confession, in Article 28,³ summarizes Scripture's expectations that all people are compelled to “join and unite with” the church, and keep “the unity of the church.” Further, it instructs that this unity is maintained “by [their] submitting to its instruction and discipline.” If this obligation is laid upon every believer, how much more are the leaders of the church, the officebearers, to “set an example” (1 Tim. 4:12) of preserving such a unity through submission to the rulings of our broadest body?

Some might argue, “It would not be Protestant to just blindly submit to the rulings of synods or councils.” Our Church Order agrees with such a claim in that it never holds the rulings of synod nor the content of our confessions

¹ bettertogether.church/blog/churches-in-protest-a-communication-to-synod-2024; see also Appendix.

² bettertogether.church/blog/update-churches-in-protest

³ crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-28-the-obligations-of-church-members

above Holy Scripture. However, in accordance with Article 5 of our Church Order, if an officebearer is convicted that synod has erred on a confessional matter, they are to submit a confessional-revision gravamen and make their case from God's Word. This is the legitimate means by which one can make their case to change a confession or a confessional ruling of synod. But what protesting churches and classes have proposed is completely foreign to our Church Order, wars against the unity of the church, and is schismatic behavior (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 1:10).

III. Historical precedent

In their template, Better Together cites the "Communication of Protest from Classis Minnkota - Regarding the Seating of Female Delegates to Synod 2023."⁴ However, there are two serious errors in pointing to this as grounds for their "protests." First, synod has never made a declaration that the seating of female delegates at synod is a confessional matter and thus must be accepted by all. Instead, when Synod 1995 made its ruling on women in church office, it declared that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which "honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God" (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 731). Second, on the matter of female delegates to synod, Synod 2007 specifically declared that those who object have a right to declare their protest of this issue.⁵ Synods 2022 and 2023 did not make any such declaration, but in contrast both declared and then reaffirmed that this matter has confessional status and therefore is binding in the CRCNA.

IV. Overture

Therefore, Classis Zeeland overtures Synod 2024 to do the following:

- A. Reject the Protest Communications 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 as violations of our Church Order.

Ground:

Our Church Order does not provide a means for officebearers to send communications of protest upon confessional matters.

- B. Declare that all officebearers from classes and councils that have adopted such communications, unless they personally have filed an appeal of this decision to the next ecclesial body in line, are not currently capable of affirming the Covenant of Officebearers, and thus must be unseated from serving at Synod 2024.

Ground:

One cannot both declare themselves in "protest" of our confessions while at the same time "fully affirming" our confessions. Also, even if they personally voted against a decision of their council or classis, they

⁴ See Appendix.

⁵ *Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 612.

still share in that decision unless they personally have appealed the decision to the next body (either classis or synod).

Classis Zeeland
Ronald Meyer, stated clerk

APPENDIX

Church in Protest: A Communication Template to Send to Synod 2024

Background

In the wake of Synods 2022 and 2023, Better Together recognizes that many CRC congregations are struggling with the serious impasse that now exists between their congregation and the denomination, resulting from the declarations about same-sex relationships that have been given “confessional status.”

For some churches, the heart of the difficulty is differing understandings of marriage and human sexuality that arise from different interpretations of Scripture. These differences have been highlighted by Synod 2022's declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage.

For other churches, the heart of the impasse is Synod 2022's decision to give “confessional status” to this declaration, thereby putting it on the same level as all doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions of the Christian Reformed Church. Conferring confessional status requires all CRC members to agree with this teaching and all officebearers to explicitly bind themselves to this teaching when they sign the Covenant for Officebearers.

For other churches, the greatest challenge is not just the confessional status of the declaration, but the push to search out any violations of confessional orthodoxy and purge the denomination of any dissenting voices. Instead of allowing space for honest differences of biblical interpretation, synod has instructed classes to find, and “guide into compliance,” churches and officebearers with convictions that differ from the synodical declaration. This general approach raises concerns about the direction and spirit of the denomination as a whole.

Provision is made in the Church Order of the CRCNA for officebearers to give expression to their conscientious objection, not only to this new synodical declaration, but also to a variety of other possible areas of difficulty with the confessions of the CRCNA. Submitting what is called a “grava-men” allows officebearers to express their difficulty or doubt while still signing the Covenant for Officebearers with integrity and remaining members in good standing in their churches. However, there is now a strong push to functionally eliminate this provision—a matter to be taken up at Synod 2024.

If adopted, the restrictions to the gravamen process proposed at Synod 2023 (but deferred to Synod 2024) would leave many local churches with very few people eligible to serve as officebearers and thereby seriously impede their ability to function. Beyond synod's recent declaration about same-sex sexual activity, these sweeping changes would affect all potential officebearers who have difficulties or doubts about any of a number of doctrines, such as infant baptism, predestination, an eternal security, etc., resulting in barring them from service as elder, deacon, minister of the Word, or commissioned pastor. It would leave local churches bewildered and confused to have saints and lifelong leaders suddenly disqualified from church leadership because of a decision made by those wholly unknown to their congregation or its leaders.

Most disheartening of all, more and more CRC congregations and members have lost trust in synod's ability to serve as a deliberative body. Overtures to synod that raise significant biblical and theological matters that the church must engage have been summarily ignored (including confessional-revision gravamina that synod is required to adjudicate). Instead, synod has bundled together scores of such overtures and summarily declared sweeping decisions to be its answer to all of them, disregarding the fact that the answers provided often fail to adequately engage the actual concerns within the overtures themselves. This breakdown in synodical deliberation, combined with the seemingly overwhelming margin of support for this new direction in the church, leaves more and more churches feeling voiceless and helpless.

Given Synod 2023's unequivocal reaffirmation of Synod 2022's confessional declaration, there are now fewer options to address synod with these concerns. Yet churches who share these concerns feel deeply they must speak into the current crisis in the CRC. To that end, churches are invited to submit the communication below to Synod 2024 by way of their classis. This communication serves to identify such a church as a "Church in Protest" in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

While some may question the use of this term, the category of "Protest" is fitting ecclesiastical language used within the Christian Reformed Church. Protest is a term and category used in our Church Order and its supplements and can be found within the Rules for Synodical Procedure.

Additionally, a protest is an appropriate form of communication to synod. In fact, Classis Minnkota has submitted communications to synod for years as a classis participating under protest due to the seating of female delegates at the synodical level.

Therefore Better Together invites congregations to sign the following communication and to individually submit it to synod, by way of their classes. We desire and pray that the broader church and Synod 2024 will receive

protests such as this as cries of the heart from congregations that love the Christian Reformed Church.

For those with questions regarding the process for submitting this communication to synod or for other questions of clarification, feel free to reach out to Better Together (info@thirdwav.church). Finally, if you, your congregation, or your classis decide to submit a communication along these lines to Synod 2024, please be sure to alert Better Together by way of email.

Churches in Protest Communication

We, (Insert Church Name Here) declare ourselves to be a “church in protest” within the Christian Reformed Church in North America. By this declaration,

1. We express our disagreement with Synod 2022's use of “confessional status” to require all members of the CRC to agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration that all same-sex sexual activity is sinful, including same-sex sexual activity within a faithful, lifelong, and legal marriage (hereafter referred to as “Synod 2022's confessional declaration”). We consider church members and officebearers in our church who disagree with that declaration for sound biblical and theological reasons to still be members in good standing. We disagree with Synod 2023's decision that they must be “guided into compliance.”
2. We qualify our status as a Christian Reformed Church, given that the “confessional status” attached to Synod 2022's confessional declaration assumes uniform agreement of all CRC members. We lament that we now are forced to have a metaphorical asterisk by our church name: “Yes, we are Christian Reformed, but we must clarify that many in our church do not agree with Synod 2022's confessional declaration.”
3. We declare that any restrictions upon the use of confessional-difficulty gravamina, by which officebearers can currently declare their conscientious objections to the interpretations of the confessions, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration, and sign the Covenant for Officebearers, will seriously impede the ability of many churches to function, especially at the council level. We judge that it is neither right, feasible, nor morally necessary for any church's ministry leadership to be limited only to the people who unreservedly agree with all of the confessional interpretations, including Synod 2022's confessional declaration.
4. We desire to be transparent with synod that the disagreements of many of our church's members with Synod 2022's confessional declaration, as expressed above, are settled. While all members of the church must at all times be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be disingenuous for us as a church to deny, minimize, or hide a fundamental and intractable disagreement between a significant number of members in

good standing in our church and the CRC's official teaching on this matter.

5. We declare that the only way we can remain a Christian Reformed Church with integrity, given Synod 2022's confessional declaration, is "under protest." Though under protest, we continue to participate because we love the CRCNA and seek God's blessing upon our denomination.

Finally, the Council of (Insert Church Name Here) adopts this protest as its own and forwards it as a communication to classis, requesting that classis adopt it and forward it as a communication to Synod 2024.

Date: _____

(Authorized Signatory for Council)

*****Additional Note Regarding Submitting Communications on Behalf of Individual Members or Groups of Members from a CRC Congregation:**

The communication above is designed to be sent by a local church council on to its respective classis. It includes a request that the classis adopt the communication as its own and then send it on to Synod 2024. If the regional classis chooses not to adopt the communication, the local church council can choose to send it on to Synod 2024 as its own communication.

In a similar vein, individual members or groups of members are also eligible to send communications forward to synod. If an individual member or group of members of a particular congregation desires to communicate in this way, the proper pathway requires such a communication to first be presented to that individual member or group of members' local church council. This must include a request that the local council adopt the communication as its own and then send it on to classis and subsequently to Synod 2024. If a local council refuses to adopt such a communication the individual member or group of members can choose to submit the communication on to classis without the local council's approval. If the regional classis refuses to adopt the communication, the individual member or group of members can submit the communication on to synod.

In the case of an individual member or group of members submitting a similar communication, changes to the template document will be required so as to accurately represent the submitting party.

For More on the Approved Process for Submitting Communications to Synod:

How Can I Communicate My Views to Synod? by Kathy Smith

thebanner.org/columns/2023/OI-how-can-i-communicate-mv-views-to-synod

Synodical Rules of Procedure Process for Communications to be Legally Before Synod

crcna.org/sites/default/files/2022_rules_for_synodical_procedure.pdf
(pp. 9-12)

For FAQs See Educational Resources Regarding a Church in Protest Communication:

Better Together recognizes that congregations may have questions regarding the use of this kind of communication and its contents. To help provide both greater background and context, below are several additional resources organized according to topic.

Source Material from Synod 2023 sent on to Synod 2024 which Calls for the Restrictions of Gravamina Going Forward:

Synod 2023 - Advisory Committee 8 - Church Order II - Majority Report 8E

crcna.org/sites/default/files/Advisory%20Committee%208E%20Majority%20-%20Synod%202023.pdf

More Information on the History and Use of Gravamina:

Summary of the History behind the Guidelines for Gravamina by Kathy Smith

www.crcna.org/news-and-events/news/summary-history-behind-guidelines-gravamina

Gravamen: What It Is and How to Use It by Kathy Smith

crcna.org/news-and-events/news/gravamen-what-it-and-how-use-it

Example of a Past Letter of Protest Received by Synod 2023:

Communication of Protest from Classis Minnkota - Regarding the Seating of Female Delegates to Synod 2023

crcna.org/sites/default/files/2023_agenda.pdf (pp. 599-600)