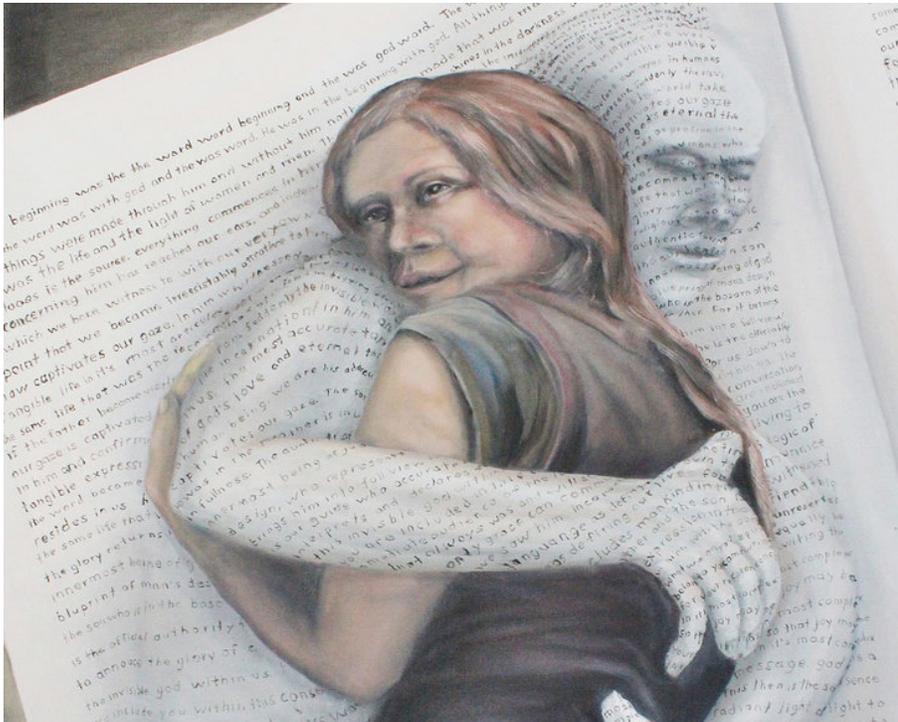


FIVE MAJOR CONCERNS

Why 31 overtures are against full adoption of the CRC's Human Sexuality Report.

[Paul Verhoef](#)



"Enfolded From the Beginning" by Peter Reitsma (24"x 36", oil on canvas, 2021, peterreitsma.com), cropped. See full image below.

Before the Christian Reformed Church's (CRC) annual June Synod for 2021 was cancelled in late February, there were at least 58 formal responses to the Human Sexuality Report (HSR) on classical agendas (not including 15 responses specific to Neland Ave CRC). Generally, 12 were for "fully adopting" the HSR, 15 asked for "more time," and 31 were "against full adoption of the HSR" in various ways. Many of these are not in the Agenda for Synod 2021 – some were withdrawn or tabled because Synod was canceled, and a few overtures were defeated at the classical level. While it is worth reading the Agenda for a sampling of these responses, this article attempts to provide a summary of all 31 "against" responses (even the unprinted ones) because these "against" responses may help us discern some important conversational trajectories. Two brief notes. First, most of these 31 responses were written before the end of January; they represent only the beginning of the discussion. Second, there are many other types of responses to the HSR, many available online – classical conversations, seminary town halls and public white papers.

Let me also briefly name my bias. My own biblical exegesis, theological engagement and spiritual discernment leads me to an "affirming" position regarding same-sex marriage. And yet I am a CRC minister intentionally trying to live within and be respectful of our CRC's "traditional" position. I love my ministerial calling, desire to remain in the CRC, and have tried to navigate this dynamic with integrity. Someday, I'll share that story perhaps – unsurprisingly, there's conflict in the narrative.

WHAT THE 'AGAINST' RESPONSES ARE NOT ASKING FOR

None of the overtures ask the CRC to become an affirming denomination. Yes, there is pushback on biblical exegesis within the report. Yes, some ask that we make this a local church decision instead of forcing denomination-wide agreement. Already people have said, "There are two sides, and I can't become affirming." But that's not the situation as depicted by these overtures. Instead the overtures are asking the CRC to respectfully honour the covenant commitments that the denomination has made over the last 48 years – to stick together as we have already been doing – unity without uniformity, diversity without fragmentation. In short, unity in our diversity.

What, then, are the main concerns of these overtures? They fall into five main categories. Let me go through them briefly.

1. EXCLUDED VOICES

Why would the HSR committee table not reflect all of those welcomed around our CRC communion table? If we are hoping to honestly talk about human sexuality, can we all be represented better around the discussion table? Synod 2016 knew that at least 14 percent of CRC pastors would "allow same-sex marriage in the church," a number that was reported higher among members (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, 405-416). It also knew that there were many affirming LGBTQ people in the denomination. But every member of the HSR committee was required to "adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships." While "adhere to" is not strictly synonymous with "agree with," this is the first time in Synodical history where members and office-bearers in good standing were excluded from the nominations. This intentional predisposition in committee make-up is a concern noted in many overtures.

What is asked in response to those exclusions? To give meaningful voice to our diversity. Some have suggested starting over with a more representative committee; others have suggested starting again by organizing a "listening tour"; and some suggest that we receive the HSR as one perspective and balance it by creating or curating more reports or readings from other perspectives.

2. NAMING THE HARM

Exclusion hurts. It hurts those excluded – where's the respect for unity, for our "belonging"? It also damages the result – how can we have adequate thoughtful conversation if a whole segment of voices is muted? Responses suggest that the committee's synodically-shaped representation was disrespectfully inadequate and willfully exclusive.

But overtures also argue that adopting the HSR would cause further harm. One overture states, "Members of our community will be harmed by the adoption of this report, as demonstrated by the personal impact statements that follow," providing six anonymous personal impact statements (*Agenda for Synod 2021*, 421-425). In another overture signed by 25 students from across 10 post-

secondary campuses in North America, there are 13 personal impact statements (404-410). And a few overtures describe their local church and name the damage to their embodied mission if this HSR is adopted.

Harm to LGBTQ persons is also clearly named. One overture notes that “the negative impact of declaring status confessionis would disproportionately fall on LGBTQ persons in our churches, especially LGBTQ youth, who already experience high levels of bullying, internalized shame and self-loathing, self-harm, and suicidal ideation and attempt.” The overture notes that the HSR uses the Trevor Project National Survey to demonstrate the harm to transgender youth, but “fails to discuss or take into account the well-documented harms experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer youth” (426).

There is one more commonly mentioned harm – or at least real concern – of adopting the HSR: would we lose the leadership of the many affirming pastors, elders and deacons if we named the “traditional” position to be confessional?

3. CLARIFYING CONFSSIONAL STATUS

But wait a second. Hasn't the CRC had a “traditional” position against same-sex marriage since 1973? Yes, but the question is: “How do these positions function? Does every office-bearer need to ‘confess’ or agree with the position or is there room for respectful disagreement?”

The HSR committee concludes that “the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status” (HSR, 146). Disagreement with this conclusion is at the centre of nearly half of the overtures.

Please note: none of the overtures suggest that matters of human sexuality are not confessional or are unimportant to Jesus. Those sending overtures agree with how the Heidelberg Catechism beautifully interprets “Do not commit adultery” in a way that places our entire sexual lives under the Lordship of Christ. No overture is suggesting that Christians are free to shape our sex lives however we want. And no overture has asked us to toss out our 1973 position.

So what do the overtures say? The overtures say that the 1973 position on same-sex marriage was never given confessional status by Synod. It’s a position, not a confession. Unless Synod declares a position to have confessional status, it doesn’t. That’s what Synod said in 1975: office-bearers should operate with healthy respect for all CRC positions, but do not need to affirm them as confessions. That’s our CRC covenant together. Adopting the HSR would significantly change this covenant commitment. There is much more that can be found in the Agenda, but a couple overtures have asked, “Synod, can you please clarify all of this confusion?”

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4. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

There is more careful scholarship for an “affirming” biblical theology today than there has been at any point in history. That doesn’t mean it’s right, but it is “out there.” In part, this is what Classis Grand Rapids East summarized in their 142-page report sent to Synod 2016.

As noted above, most overtures spent their time naming exclusion, decrying harms and asking that this not be elevated to confessional status. Not many spent their time critiquing the Biblical theology of the HSR (I expect more Biblical response by 2022).

But concerns are named, like the HSR’s treatment of *imago dei*; the implication that marriage is for sex and sex is for procreation; and the depiction of God in Genesis 3 as primarily punitive rather than relational. And there are concerns about the exegesis and conclusions around Matthew 19, a foundational text for the HSR. Overtures question if it is appropriate to rely on creational norms around gender and sexuality when historically our use of creational norms has supported apartheid, racism and gender bias. There is worry that the HSR’s chosen hermeneutical framework – creation-fall-redemption – impairs careful listening to Biblical texts. And many feel that the HSR inappropriately concludes with absolute certainty. Is the Bible as clear as depicted? Finally, in the context of this last year, it is noted that our culture has been inordinately (mis)shaped by majority voices. Do we need to review our hermeneutical approach with an ear to marginalized voices? There is not much particular response to the homosexuality section other than a recurring articulation that serious biblical scholars are too easily dismissed by what feels like a biased committee.

For a sampling, read overtures 24, 27 and communication 5, but also look at the Calvin University library website and read the theological responses to the HSR by Dr. Robert MacLarkey and Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff.

5. POOR SCIENTIFIC REPRESENTATION

If bias is a concern in how the HSR approaches its biblical and theological work, the concern about bias is amplified in regard to how the report uses science. There may be no clearer voice of concern regarding the work of the HSR than this line from a letter signed by 147 faculty and staff from Calvin University: “The report insufficiently engages with relevant scholarship from our disciplines, leading to a biased view of the theological, scriptural and scientific basis for the report. The discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation lack the scientific and hermeneutic rigor and accuracy of prevailing peer-reviewed scholarship and thereby have the potential to compromise Calvin’s academic reputation” (*Agenda*, 444).

The overture with the clearest examples of these concerns, focused on the gender identity section, was withdrawn for the moment. There are only scattered references in the published *Agenda*, but one overture describes the HSR’s treatment of scientific research as “opinions seeking data” (*Agenda*, 470). This conversation will continue.

A PLEA FOR UNITY FRAMED BY MUTUAL RESPECT

One of the recurring themes from those overtures against fully adopting the HSR is a plea for unity. An overture from 25 students asks Synod to “prioritize the unity of the body of Christ.” Many churches name their experience of already having unity in mission while having diverse perspectives in their congregation.

If local congregations can flourish in their mission as a diverse body, can our denomination also flourish in our mission as a diverse body? It is a real question. I wonder if we need to have an honest conversation about mutual respect. What does the “respect” in “respectful disagreement” look like? And what does it mean to make room for those who disagree? Labelling one another is not helpful: false prophet, homophobic, dismissive of the Bible, responding out of fear – so many dismissive labels. Can we take one another seriously, trusting that the Spirit of God is at work in shaping us all, leaning in to listen with mutual respect? Can we discern a pathway forward together?



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A CRC minister, Paul has worked at the University of Calgary as a Christian Reformed Chaplain since 2004. With the intention of remaining in conversation with CRC theology, he recently started a Doctorate of Ministry at Calvin Theological Seminary.



“Enfolded From the Beginning” by Peter Reitsma (24”x 36”, oil on canvas, 2021, peterreitsma.com) was prompted by the overture sent by his church, Meadowvale Community CRC in Toronto. Painting and overture both emphasize love and grace as the heart of the gospel.