

OVERTURE 28

Envision Two Distinct Christian Reformed Churches

I. Process

In a concrete demonstration of respect for the weighty issues raised in this overture, and to give greater confidence in the result by way of full transparency, it is requested that the officers of Synod 2025 make the following ruling about procedure before the June session begins:

- A. Two advisory committees, one made up of synodical delegates from the U.S. and one made up of delegates from Canada, will deliberate in committee independently and also report on this overture on the floor of synod independently.
- B. At the time of the voting on this overture, the tally of votes by the delegates' country of origin will be made known (i.e., the votes in favour and against among the Canadian delegates, and the votes in favor and against among the U.S. delegates).
- C. The outcome of the deliberation and vote by delegates will be referred to the churches for confirmation. Each church in the U.S. and Canada will be asked to vote on this ecclesiastical reorganization. Each church's decision is to be reported to the Office of General Secretary by November 1.
- D. If a majority of either Canadian or U.S. churches supports the reorganization, the overture shall be considered passed.

II. Context

Canadian members of the CRCNA have, for many years, been discouraged by the ways in which ministry in Canada has been overshadowed or hindered by the binational nature and structure of the denomination. Off and on there have been calls for a separate CRC Canada, but the response has typically been to make structural changes (such as those resulting from the 2022 Structure and Leadership Task Force [SALT] report) that do not address the core problem. That is, structural changes have not allowed Canadian members, ministry leaders, churches, and classes to have full direction of ministries and resources to equip us to be more fully effective in our own context. With the increasing differences between our two countries, it is past time for the CRCNA to restructure into two sister denominations.

III. Overture

The Council of Meadowlands Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Ancaster, Ontario, overtures Synod 2025 to do the following:

- A. Envision the CRCNA as two distinct Christian Reformed Churches, one in Canada and one in the United States.
- B. Make the changes necessary for this ecclesiastical reorganization to be accomplished.
- C. Task the U.S. Ministry Board and the Canadian Ministry Board with rewriting the relevant joint ministry agreements to ensure continued cooperation and collaboration among agency staff.

Grounds:

1. The differing ministry contexts in each country (historical, cultural, and political) require different missional and ministry approaches with the full support of autonomous denominational structures.

Canada and the United States are different countries, with different political, religious, educational, media, and social cultures, which lead to different assumptions and approaches in diverse matters from politics to health care, from criminal justice to patriotism. Christ's followers in each country are called to bring the gospel to bear on all aspects of life in community and to preach the good news in a way that speaks to the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens. Fulfilling that calling faithfully requires contextualization by those who understand the culture from within and have the authority to make final decisions about what effective ministry looks like. In many ways, being a cross-border denomination is more harmful than helpful to the Canadian church.

For example, separate Canadian and U.S. CRC denominations will better enable effective missional initiatives and local church witness within Canada. In recent months, differences and tensions between our two countries have increased. The average Canadian (87%, according to recent polling) bristles at talk of using economic coercion to force Canada to become the 51st state. In such a context, being a minority partner within what is seen as an increasingly evangelical American denomination is harmful to our outreach.

It is difficult, within our present denominational structure, for Canadian ministry to establish itself as distinctly Canadian. This is not a new challenge; it was publicly named already back in 1957, the denomination's centennial year, in a

document published by two Canadian CRC pastors, Revs. Francois Guillaume and Henry A. Venema:

Everything that applies and is good for the United States is not necessarily applicable and good for Canada. We must find a way in which each of our Church sectors fully realize their own respective rights and powers. We have our own Classes. Our own national particular synods are absolutely necessary unto these things....Let us postpone it no longer.[1]

Since 1957, the struggles and tensions have continued in different ways, from the failure of Synod 1999 to adopt a regional synod proposal, to the repeated loss of ministry leaders in Canada.[2] While the current structure that came out of the SALT report has addressed many concerns, it ultimately has not been able to satisfy all the requirements of contextualized ministry. For instance, in spite of the existence of the Canadian Ministry Board within the Council of Delegates (COD), Canadian members still have no direct means to oversee, guide, or correct our shared ministries in Canada.

2. Separate Canadian and U.S. denominations are necessary to ensure that all decisions which affect ministry in Canada are made by Canadian ministry leaders.

At present, the final authority on matters of ecclesiology and ministry is the annual denominational synod. This body's delegates, generally reflective of the numbers of members in each country, are 78 percent from the U.S. and 23 percent from Canada. This imbalance is slightly mitigated but still strongly reflected in the composition of the COD. It is to be expected, and is the case, that when discussing and voting on policy and ministry direction, the decisions generally reflect what is preferred and fitting for ministry in the U.S. While this is understandable, it leaves Canadian churches and our shared and individual ministries at a distinct disadvantage. In numerous examples, both past and present, ministry in Canada has suffered because Canadian needs were given a lower priority to CRCNA goals and objectives.

For example, a recent policy decision of the COD was that, in the light of faltering revenues for denominational ministries, actions taken to reduce staff or programs "should be as similar as possible on each side of the border when a specific agency program is impacted." The policy further notes that "even if [revenue decline] is a country-specific issue, many times there will be implications for joint ministry." What is missing is a parallel policy that

recognizes differentiation based on context, to provide balance and guidance in cases where ministry priorities in the two countries differ. The Canadian Ministry Plan of 2004 was shelved when, during a time of fiscal restraint, the denominational structures put a higher priority on cross-border sameness over country specific ministry needs.

Currently, decision making is divided into two spheres: ecclesiastical (synod) and ministry/operations (the COD). This is inconsistent with a Reformed emphasis on integration of word and work, something that is especially valued in the Reformational heritage within the Canadian church. Furthermore, experience in Canada shows how theological decisions affect operations (e.g., Indigenous ministries, justice ministries, and the purpose and use of gravamina). By integrating theological deliberations and ministry operations at a Canadian synod, this problematic and unnecessary dividing wall can be removed.

3. Restructuring to create denominations in each country is the best way to ensure proper governance and accountability within the CRC in Canada.

Members of Canadian churches who want to have some input into Canadian ministries are told they should speak to their classis delegate to the Council of Delegates. This person, chosen by delegates at one classis meeting, may or may not be known by church members, and the delegate may or may not take forward any suggestions or concerns that they receive or hear. There is no formal and transparent process, such as overtures, that Canadian members can use to have a more meaningful voice in decisions about priorities and directions for ministry in Canada. While concerns are acknowledged, there is no clear way of knowing if they are taken seriously. There is no clear process of accountability back to members of churches. Appointment of a delegate to the Council of Delegates by a classis is a weak form of accountability when the desired goal is dynamic, shared ministry from local to regional to national levels.

An additional governance structure problem is the inherent conflict of interest in the exercise of duty of care. Members of the Canadian Ministry Board wear two hats. They have a responsibility to protect the best interests of Canadian CRC congregations, and they have a responsibility to protect the best interests of the whole CRCNA. Much of the time those interests may converge, but there are times when the best interests of the two may not be the same. In those moments their first priority is to the whole COD (i.e., they are required to go along with a decision of the whole COD, even if there is strong evidence that another decision would serve the interests of Canadian churches better). An example is the

inability of the members of the Canadian Ministry Board to seriously consider the merits of separate U.S. and Canadian denominations. They have acknowledged that speaking in favour of that would constitute a breach of their duty of care to the larger COD. They may be genuinely convinced that the binational system serves Canada better; but, if they did not think so, they would be unable to pursue their views because it would violate their primary duty of care obligation to the COD.

It is unfair to put people in positions where they have a conflict of interest. Good governance in responsible institutions finds ways to prevent such conflicts. A Canadian CRC with a Canadian synod to deliberate and make decisions for ministry in Canada would provide the Canadian Ministry Board with a clearer mandate, more specific directions from a wider membership, and more robust accountability.

4. The creation of country-specific Christian Reformed denominations will create deliberative and collaborative spaces with the full authority to make decisions.

CRC congregations and ministry leaders in Canada currently have no space or assembly to gather together and share ideas, hopes, and goals for working together from coast to coast to coast. The result is disparate efforts and hindered imaginations. The synod-mandated Canadian gatherings are not structured or equipped to do this important work.

Canadian CRC members have demonstrated again and again their capacity for strong and creative shared ministries that have a powerful and lasting impact in society. The Christian Labour Association of Canada, the Christian Courier, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Redeemer University, and the Institute for Christian Studies are but a few examples. They are a demonstration of the historic Reformed understanding of the call to engage with and transform our world for Christ.

It might be argued that these successful examples demonstrate that there is no need of a distinct Canadian CRC, considering what's been accomplished and our demonstrated ability to work together. The truth is that much of our best ministry came about when Canadian members did have a collaborative space, when the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada (CCRCC) was active between 1966 and 1997. Given the many areas in which Canadians have had a shared and unique interest in ministry together—reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours, campus ministry, institutional chaplaincy, prison

ministry, refugee resettlement, diaconal ministry, and environmental stewardship, to name a few—one can only imagine what could be accomplished with the time and space to collaborate together. A Canadian synod would create stronger country-wide partnerships, increase formal and substantive ministry accountability, and bring together ministry knowledge, leadership skills, spiritual gifts, and other resources to better steward our shared calling within Canada.

5. A Canadian CRC will be better equipped to forge a uniquely Canadian theological culture and identity.

The theology and practice of the wider church in Canada has long been heavily influenced by Christianity in the U.S. In his foreword to *Blessed Are the Undone* by Angela Reitsma Bick and Peter Schuurman, Neal De Roo writes:

Angela and Peter point out that it is a particular kind of Christianity that is being deconstructed today: an American (and predominantly white) evangelicalism that has tied itself quite closely to certain cultural and political markers.... That American evangelicalism is American doesn't automatically make it suspect. But it does make it American in ways that may not fit well within our context here in Canada.[3]

Such deconstruction has made clearer than before that the church in Canada needs to wrestle with, debate, develop, and articulate a uniquely Canadian understanding of what it means to follow Christ. This is because the societal context for the church in each country is quite different: “Christians are—sorry to say—an embarrassed minority in Canada, while evangelicals in the U.S. are a powerful and controversial voting bloc that casts a shadow to the north.”[4]

The evidence of a need (and giftedness) for differing approaches to being the church on either side of the border are already present in the CRCNA. It has long been observed that Canadian CRC congregations and members have a unique heart for certain areas of ministry and theological focus, such as diaconal work, justice advocacy, campus ministry, and Indigenous reconciliation. Another example is the role of women in ecclesiastical offices. In Canada, women are seated at all classes, whereas four U.S. classes do not permit women to be delegates; 87 percent of Canadian churches have women deacons, compared to 68 percent in the U.S.; 72 percent of Canadian churches have women elders, compared to 44 percent in the U.S.

The development of a Canadian expression of Reformed Christianity is difficult as a small minority within a binational denomination. In fact, it could be argued

that the identification of the CRCNA as a “binational” denomination itself reflects a U.S. understanding of nationality. In Canada, Quebec is recognized as a distinct nation within our federation. Our Indigenous neighbours are recognized as the First Nations within our country’s borders.

6. Restructuring the CRCNA into a CRC Canada and a CRC U.S. is consistent with the recently adopted global CRC initiative.

Synod 2024 adopted the report of a COD study committee tasked with exploring “the integration of international churches into the composition of the CRC.”[5] The adoption of this report reflects a desire to bless and be blessed in turn by our sister denominations around the world through a shared Reformed identity and unique cultural and contextual differences. It is an expression of a “vision for a deeper global engagement” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 708).

While the CRCNA has decided to pursue this initiative, synod also acknowledged a number of challenges identified by the Global Vision report, including “physical distance; cultural and language differences.” They also stated that “an ever-present concern is paternalism,” along with the “concern about maintaining local autonomy” expressed by some leaders of Reformed denominations outside North America (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 691, 704). The Canadian experience suggests these global leaders are wise to be cautious, and these concerns have been repeatedly experienced and identified by CRC ministry leaders in Canada.

In pursuing this Global Vision, Synod 2024 made a firm statement that free and equal partnership with churches in different countries is a high value. It was also made clear that the goal is not incorporating or absorbing those other denominations into the CRCNA and blunting their distinctiveness or unique contribution, but instead “developing an ecclesiastical body that would be the global CRC church. This body would not be a single global denomination but, rather, an opportunity for the CRCNA and its global partners to go deeper in partnership with each other.”[6] The creation of a distinct Canadian CRC in an equal partner relationship to a distinct U.S. CRC would be a consistent application of these expressed values.

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Note: This overture was submitted to Classis Hamilton at its February 22, 2025, meeting but was not adopted.

References:

[1] Francois Guillaume and Henry A. Venema, *The United States and Canada in the Christian Reformed Church* (Toronto, Ont.: Pro Rege Publishing Company, 1957), p. 47.

[2] Ray Elgersma, “Why I Changed My Mind about the CRC’s Bi-Nationality” [Letter to the editor], *Christian Courier* (2024, Mar. 4); Christiancourier.ca.

[3] Angela Reitsma Bick and Peter Schuurman, *Blessed Are the Undone: Testimonies of Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada* (Saskatoon, Sask.: New Leaf Network Press, 2024), p. xv.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[5] See crcna.org/Synod2024FAQ, “The CRCNA’s Global Vision,” question 1.

[6] *Ibid.*, 2.