

Committee 2: Overtures of Covenant of Grace PRC and Providence PRC

I. Information:

A. Regarding the overture of Covenant of Grace PRC (Agenda, pp. 297-304):

1. The consistory of Covenant of Grace PRC presents an overture to Synod to “appoint a committee to research and engage an external third party, independent organization to conduct an investigation into sexual abuse in the PRCA” (Agenda, p. 300). Their main grounds are that our Reformed church polity does not prohibit such action, the current climate in and around our churches necessitates an investigation, and an investigation will promote the health and unity of our churches.
2. Covenant of Grace presented the overture to the meeting of Classis West on March 1-2, 2023. Classis West decided not to approve the overture on the grounds that “the overture has insufficient information for Classis to make an informed judgment to approve the request” and “with the limited information that is provided about what would be the nature and work of a third party investigation, the overture does not show the necessity of such an investigation from the Scriptures” (Agenda, p. 298).
3. Covenant of Grace’s consistory has decided to present their overture to Synod to be adjudicated, as is their right per the synodical rules for overtures.

B. Regarding the overture of Providence PRC (Agenda, pp. 305-384):

1. The consistory of Providence PRC presents an overture to Synod “that the PRCA commission G.R.A.C.E. (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) to perform a full, independent, third-party investigation into her handling of abuse” (Agenda, p. 305).
2. Providence presented the overture to the meeting of Classis East on January 11-12, 2023. Classis East decided to “appoint a special committee to give more definition to the overture in order to submit it as a classis to Synod 2023.” This work included the following: “clearly define a scope of work,” “research and vet third-party organizations and bring a recommendation to classis,” and “address possible church political matters concerning implementation of the proposal” (Agenda, p. 336).
3. The special committee reported to the reconvened meeting on March 15, 2023 with a majority and minority report. The majority report advised that “Classis East not approve the overture of Providence PRC” (Agenda, p. 340). The minority report advised that “Classis East approve the substance of the overture from Providence PRC and forward it to Synod 2023, as further defined in this [minority] report” and “Classis East recommend to synod that synod contract Guidepost Solutions to do the work of investigation” (Agenda, pp. 351, 353). Classis East approved the majority report’s recommendation.
4. Protests of the grounds used by Classis East in its March 15 decision came to the May 10, 2023 meeting of Classis East. Classis voted to uphold the main points of the protests, in so doing declaring that its grounds were in error. The result of these decisions is that Classis has effectively neither approved nor rejected the overture. The decisions of Classis were provided by way of a supplementary letter to Synod from the stated clerk of Classis East.
5. Prior to the May meeting of Classis East, Providence PRC’s consistory decided to present their overture to Synod to be adjudicated, as is their right per the synodical rules for overtures.

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- II. Recommendation 1: That Synod not approve the overture of Covenant of Grace PRC.
Ground: Covenant of Grace's overture considered on its own has insufficient information for Synod to make an informed judgment whether or not to approve the request. For an assembly to adjudicate a matter, the assembly must have the facts of the matter before it. While the overture speaks to how a third party would be researched and engaged, the overture says almost nothing about what a third party is or what a third party would do.
Carried.

- III. Recommendation 2: That Synod approve the substance of the overture from Providence PRC to hire a third-party organization to investigate sexual abuse in the PRCA, in the manner explained below.

Explanation:

A. The scope of the work:

1. Without minimizing the evil and harm of other kinds of abuse, the scope of the investigation shall be limited to *sexual* abuse. Sexual abuse can be defined as "any type of sexual behavior or sexual contact that is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority" (*Standard Bearer*, vol. 98, no. 15 [May 1, 2022], 345). Should, in the course of the investigation, other forms of abuse (such as spousal abuse) be discovered, relevant information may be channeled to the consistories, but these cases would not form part of the final report.
2. The third-party shall be commissioned to:
 - a. Receive and investigate reports of all sexual abuse committed by current or former members, including officebearers, of the PRCA.
 - b. Uncover patterns of sexual abuse in our churches that can be identified to help consistories better understand the nature of sexual abuse.
 - c. Uncover general patterns of how consistories have responded to reports of sexual abuse (e.g. whether or not they reported to the civil authorities, whether or not they investigated seriously initial charges of sexual abuse, whether or not they understood the deceptive nature of an abuser). The third-party investigators, not being experts in church polity, will not delve into the specifics of how the church order was applied in matters of church discipline, but as experts in sexual abuse will assess the level of understanding of sexual abuse in those who conduct church discipline.
3. The scope shall *exclude* an investigation or assessment of the PRCA's doctrine or church government/polity.

B. The implementation of the work:

1. Synod shall appoint an ad hoc committee of ministers and elders (or former elders). This committee shall hire a third-party organization that will abide entirely by the guidelines set forth here; the committee shall not contract with an organization that will not abide by these guidelines. After hiring an organization, the committee shall liaise with the organization throughout the course of the investigation; the committee shall be the "contact party" between the PRCA and the third-party organization, should any questions, concerns, or requests arise during the process. This committee shall report to Synod 2024 on its labors.

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2. The third-party investigation will begin with a survey. The ad hoc committee will be able to see and adjust the content and format of the survey prior to distribution, which distribution shall take place through the ad hoc committee. Former members of the PRCA will also have access to the survey. Participation in the survey shall be voluntary. Survey participants may choose to remain anonymous, but the survey shall be designed in such a way that no one can make a specific allegation of sin against another specific individual anonymously. For the third party to channel to a consistory an allegation of sin against a specific individual that comes through the survey alone (without a followup interview), the survey participant must agree to have his/her name disclosed as well.
 3. Based on the responses to the survey, the third party will proceed to performing interviews with those who agree to be interviewed. Participation in the interviews shall also be voluntary. After conducting an interview, the third-party may channel to a consistory a specific allegation of sin against a specific individual anonymously, and every consistory will then have to judge whether it will receive such an anonymous allegation of sin brought by the third party as a credible victim advocate.
 4. During the course of investigating, the third-party organization may request information from relevant parties. A third-party organization, not having subpoena power, cannot compel a consistory or school board or other covenantal organization in any matter whatsoever, including that it cannot compel them to supply minutes or documents. A broader assembly cannot compel such compliance in this investigation either. However, as this investigation would be judged by synod to be for the good of the churches in common and would have the approval of the broadest assembly of the PRCA, Synod would urge the consistories to comply with the investigation, except it be for weighty reasons.
 5. The third-party will analyze the data it gathers and issue a report of its findings (see below on reporting).
 6. In light of the possibility of numerous allegations, there may be a need to assign a priority of investigation. If necessary, the ad hoc committee shall discuss this with the third-party, assigning priority of investigation to allegations of abuse committed against minors and allegations of abuse committed by Ronald Van Overloop and other former or current officebearers.
- C. The reporting of the work:
1. Through the course of the investigation, the third-party shall channel credible allegations of abuse directly to the consistories concerned, provided the one who suffered abuse consents. The third-party shall also bring to the attention of consistories any credible allegations of failures in responding to sexual abuse. At the beginning of the investigation, the ad hoc committee shall provide the third-party with the contact information of clerks of consistories.
 2. At the end of the investigation the third-party shall issue a final report to the entity that hired it, namely, to the Protestant Reformed Churches (via Synod's ad hoc committee). The report shall then be the property of the PRCA, that is, of her Synod.
 3. The final report shall consist of a general summary of the surveys and interviews. Where specific cases are used to illustrate patterns and trends, this shall not take place without the consent of the abused, and the third-party will use non-identifying language to describe these cases so that it is not possible for any cases to be

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identified even in a small, interconnected denomination. This report shall not contain the names of people or consistories or congregations, with the possible exception of the names of individuals who, because of their “sins and gross offenses” have been rendered “infamous before the world” (Church Order, Art. 80), which names are already public. Under no circumstances shall those who have suffered abuse be named in the public report. A third-party organization shall, as a matter of course, comply with all legal requirements to prevent libelous accusations against persons or consistories.

4. The ad hoc committee shall work with the third-party organization on the final report. The ad hoc committee will also bring to Synod for approval a recommended response to the findings of the third-party’s report, which would be an opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the denomination. In the interests of transparency, this final report along with Synod’s response shall be made public to the whole denomination. The report and response will only be made public after final approval from Synod. The report and response shall be sent to every consistory of the denomination, made available to every family of the denomination, and made available online.
- D. The mutual accountability after the work:
1. Church Order Art. 44 provides for mutual accountability through the church visitors. The task of the church visitors includes, as Article 44 says, “fraternally admonish[ing] those who have in anything been negligent” and “by their advice and assistance help[ing] direct all things unto the peace, upbuilding, and greatest profit of the churches.”
 2. Each classis will be encouraged to instruct its church visitors that, prior to meeting with each consistory for the annual church visitation, they request a report of all correspondence received from the third party with the names redacted. The church visitors would then discuss this correspondence with the consistory at the annual meeting, document the correspondence, and report their findings in summary form with names of consistories redacted to the classis.
- E. The hiring of the work:
1. The ad hoc committee shall seek to contract with Guidepost Solutions to do the work of investigation with the scope, implementation, and reporting described above.
 2. Guidepost is a secular organization, but they have experience working with Christian organizations. Guidepost has greater resources and more experience than similar third-party organizations in working with larger entities and in investigations of this magnitude. Guidepost has already agreed to abide by similar stipulations as are found in this proposal (cf. Agenda, p. 353).
 3. It is to be understood that contracting Guidepost to do this specific task would not imply or express agreement with all of the statements, positions, values, etc. of the organization or its members. Guidepost is competent to investigate, and the points of difference are not such as would adversely affect the investigation.
 4. If the ad hoc committee is unable to contract with Guidepost under the stipulations of the investigation as outlined above, they may then seek to contract with another competent third-party organization under the same stipulations.
- F. The financing of the work:

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1. Our preliminary judgment is that the cost of contracting with the third-party organization will be approximately \$100,000-\$200,000.
2. These funds will not be included in synodical assessments but be taken out of excess funds.

Grounds:

- A. It is wise to conduct a *denomination-wide investigation* into the matter of sexual abuse on account of the nature of the sin and its prevalence in our churches.
 1. The unique nature of the sin of sexual abuse warrants such special action. The effects of this evil upon an abuse victim are uniquely devastating and long-lasting, extending to the whole person and the several aspects of human existence: physiological, psychological, emotional, mental, spiritual. In light of these things, we ought to use all lawful means to seek out and help abuse victims throughout the denomination and work to prevent reoccurrence of this evil throughout the denomination.
 2. The case of Ronald Van Overloop warrants a denomination-wide investigation. As a former minister who served not only his consistory and congregation, but who also served the entire denomination in multiple capacities for many years, there is the likelihood of more abuse victims across congregational and classical lines. Since the church order makes clear that, besides the local consistory, the denomination also has a certain responsibility for the care and labors of the ministers, a thorough denomination-wide investigation of his sexual abuse is necessary.
 3. There are many additional cases of sexual abuse in our churches that have already been brought to light in recent years. This warrants a denomination-wide investigation into the extent of this sin in our midst.
 4. Consistories have admitted failures of handling cases of sexual abuse or have been shown their failures by the classes. This warrants a denomination-wide investigation into our handling of sexual abuse cases.
 5. The church has a solemn duty to: "Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed..." (Is. 1:17), and to: "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked" (Ps. 82:3, 4; cf. also Prov. 31:8, 9; Job 29:11-17). This duty includes protecting, delivering, and caring for victims of sexual abuse (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 107: "...and prevent his hurt as much as in us lies"). The duty of consistories also includes seeking the repentance of those who walk in this sin. An investigation, as a means, would help consistories denomination-wide in the execution of their duty. It would be a means of gathering information, including credible allegations of abuse, for consistories to exercise righteous judgment.
 6. As churches we have a special love and concern for the children of the covenant. Christ calls especially officebearers in the church to "feed [his] lambs" (John 21:15). He also gives a solemn warning: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). A denomination-wide investigation would help equip our churches to carry out our calling to protect our children and the future generations.
- B. It is wise to engage a *third-party organization* to conduct such a denomination-wide investigation.

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1. A third-party investigation would remove barriers that exist for some who have been abused, and victims of sexual abuse may report more readily to a third-party investigation. These barriers may include a sense of shame in disclosing one's abuse to officebearers one respects, fear/anxiety in disclosing one's abuse to officebearers one knows well, or broken down trust between members and officebearers.
 2. A third-party investigation would provide increased objectivity. As stated by the investigative committee of Classis East: *"It is absolutely imperative that the analysis of that information be objective. The committee does not want to be guilty of mishandling, misinterpreting, or responding wrongly to any reports that may be received of abuse or negligence."* (Investigative Committee Report, Minutes of Classis East, Jan. 2023, supplement 23).
 3. The amount of work that is required to do an investigation like this is more than a committee of our own can handle. The PRCA is limited in expertise and manpower to perform it. A third party possesses the resources to conduct such an investigation, including expertise in trauma-informed interviewing. The investigative committee, tasked with the investigation of one abuser, reported to Classis East: *"The task is potentially monumental when reports of abuse or negligence come in. This was driven home to us upon receiving the information from the above-mentioned victim. From this one person, there are potentially many leads to follow up on and interviews to be had, each one leading potentially to many others. What we had thought hypothetically would be a difficulty when information starts coming in became very concrete upon receiving this report from this victim. The amount of time and the expertise required to carry it out is great, neither of which the committee believes it possesses, but a reputable...third-party may."* (Investigative Committee Report, Minutes of Classis East, Jan. 2023, supplement 23).
 4. Some cases, like the case of Ronald Van Overloop, cross lines between individual churches, between classes, and between other covenantal institutions (e.g. schools, YP Federation). Cases also cross denominational lines, as some abusers have left the denomination and some who have been abused while in the PRCA have also left. This reality requires extensive investigation on multiple fronts, and such investigation is virtually impossible for our denomination to conduct on its own.
 5. A third-party investigation followed by a public report would shed light on a sin which hides in the darkness and must be dragged into the light. Such action by the churches would promote the healing of abuse victims by reassuring them that the churches are committed to exposing this sin, learning about its nature and effects, and dealing with it properly, both by ministering to the abused and seeking the repentance of the abuser.
 6. There are a number of important biblical principles that bear on our hiring a third party organization: the principle of humility (1 Peter 5:3, 5-6), the principle of uncovering the hidden works of darkness (Eph. 5:11-13), the principle of avoiding "respect of persons" (Prov. 24:23; Eph. 6:9).
- C. Hiring a third-party organization to conduct a denomination-wide investigation *in the manner outlined above* is consistent with our Reformed system of church government.
1. A third-party investigation conducted as outlined above would not infringe upon the rule of Christ over his church through elders.

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cases, a member or consistory would be publicly charged before the churches, and even before the world, without the consistory having judged the matter and made the decision to announce it publicly. Therefore, the public report shall be written and distributed as described above.

2. Synod has the jurisdiction to mandate a denomination-wide investigation. While synod cannot compel local congregations to comply with a third-party investigation, it is in the nature of a federation that synod makes decisions that affect the churches in common. Synod, as a broader assembly, deals with matters that “pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common” (Church Order, Art. 30). **Carried.**
- IV. Recommendation 3: That Synod appoint an ad hoc committee consisting of Rev. N. Decker, Rev. W. Langerak, Rev. J. Mahtani, Andy Bylsma, Dean Poppema, and Tom Vanderwoude. This committee will seek out two officebearers from Classis West to be included on the committee and will have the discretion to appoint alternates if necessary. **Carried.**

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- a. The work of a third party *investigating* cases of sexual abuse does not infringe upon the rule of Christ through elders. Rather than displace the work of the consistory, a third-party investigation would be a means, employed by the churches in common, unto the furtherance of the work of the consistory. A third-party investigation would be a means of gathering information to local consistories. It would remain the responsibility of the consistory actually to do the work of conducting its own investigation and exercising Christian discipline. The autonomy of the local consistory does not preclude the churches from availing themselves of means in the execution of the work. In fact, means of various kinds outside the denomination are often employed by consistories in the service of their work, whether it be arranging a counselor for a member, directing another to a rehab center, interviewing someone not a member concerning a discipline case, or even cooperating with and seeking advice/information from a detective or an attorney. A third-party investigation would not do the work of the consistory, but be a means employed by the churches in the service of the work that only the consistory may and must do.
- b. The work of a third party *bringing credible allegations* of sexual abuse to consistories does not infringe upon the rule of Christ through elders. The third party will report to the consistory what it deems to be credible allegations of abuse. However, the third party can go no further than report information to the consistory together with its evaluation of the credibility of the allegation. It would remain the responsibility of the consistory to judge that information and take warranted action, including Christian discipline. The third party cannot and will not exercise Christian discipline.
- c. The work of a third party *assessing* the response of officebearers to reports of sexual abuse does not infringe upon the rule of Christ through elders. The third-party is a means employed by the churches to serve them with advice so that we might grow and learn, but the church is not bound to the assessment of the third-party. Also, the third-party investigators, not being experts in church polity, will not delve into the specifics of how the church order was applied in matters of church discipline, but as experts in sexual abuse will assess the level of understanding of sexual abuse in those who conduct church discipline.
- d. The work of a third party *reporting publicly* on its findings in the manner outlined above does not infringe upon the rule of Christ through elders as understood in the principles of Reformed church polity. A public report that names individuals whose names have not yet been publicly announced by a consistory would overstep the jurisdiction of the consistory, which is the body responsible for making the decision to announce publicly the name of the member. Announcing sin “which is of a private character” but which still “giv[es] public offense” (Church Order, Art. 72) is the prerogative of the consistory. Announcing “public sin” (Church Order, Art. 74) is the prerogative of the consistory. Announcing “the obstinacy of the sinner ... publicly ...to the congregation” (Church Order, Art. 77) is the prerogative of the consistory. Similarly, a public report that publishes by name mishandling on the part of officebearers or consistories would effectively circumvent the process of protest and appeal and convict without due process (Church Order, Art. 31). In both