

2019



Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government

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Christian Reformed
Church



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Preface

This edition of the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* incorporates decisions made by the synods of the Christian Reformed Church in North America through Synod 2019. It is our hope and prayer that this manual will prove to be a helpful resource for the church as a whole, as well as for denominational functionaries who are called upon to give guidance and direction when the church gathers in its various assemblies.

For many years experts in church polity have served the Christian Reformed Church well by writing helpful commentaries on its particular form of church government. These commentaries tend to be broad in focus, looking beyond our practices to the principles that undergird the original and acculturated Church Orders within Reformed circles as they have developed since the sixteenth century. Those who have contributed in this way within the CRC include leaders like Gerrit K. Hemkes, William Heyns, Ralph J. Bos, Henry Beets, John L. Schaver, Martin Monsma, Idzerd Van Dellen, Howard B. Spaan, Richard R. De Ridder, and Henry DeMoor.

This *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* focuses more intently on current Church Order and the pertinent decisions of CRC synods that have shaped it. The work offers brief explanations of important developments and collates what assemblies have decided with regard to particular articles and supplements. Those who have contributed in this way include William P. Brink, Richard R. De Ridder, Leonard J. Hofman, David H. Engelhard, Peter Borgdorff, and Henry DeMoor. We owe all of these contributors our gratitude for their significant service. The fruit of their work continues also in this latest edition of the manual.

Steven R. Timmermans
Executive Director
October 2019

Foreword:

Polity of the Christian Reformed Church

I. Reformed church polity

The Christian Reformed Church in North America, in harmony with the Word of God and the Reformed creeds, acknowledges Jesus Christ as the only head and ruler of the church. Its synods have adopted a Church Order so that all things may be done “in a fitting and orderly way” and as reflects the true nature of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:40).

The general pattern of the organization provided by the Church Order is modified-presbyterian: that is, a system of leadership by elders (presbyters) who represent Christ in his church. Reformed church polity is not strictly presbyterian in all respects however (hence the designation “modified-presbyterian”). Reformed church polity differs in approach from Presbyterian church polity in that Reformed church polity, while regulative, is not confessional in nature and the Church Order does not have the same standing as the creeds.

Reformed churches do not claim that every detail of church polity is determined by the Scriptures. Only certain basic principles are found there, providing general direction to the church. Details may and do vary from one family of Reformed churches to another because expediency and specific circumstances often require varying approaches.

Church polity is not—and should not be made—a fixed, rigid system of rules. Whenever the churches would benefit from doing so, the specific application of the general principles derived from Scripture ought to be changed. In a previous version of its Church Order, the Christian Reformed Church expressed this conviction in the following way: “These Articles . . . have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they (if the profit of the Church demands otherwise) may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished.”¹ There is, as a result, an amazing amount of flexibility in procedures and practices possible within the polity of the Christian Reformed Church.

II. The origin of the Church Order

The Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church has its origin in the Calvinist Reformation in the Netherlands, where a form of government for the emerging Reformed churches of the Lowlands gradually developed in the late 1500s. Eventually, the final structure was refined and adopted by the National Synod of Dort in 1618-19. Although the Church Order of 1618-19 was widely used, it never received the official approval of the state government, which controlled the national church.

Later, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era, a new Church Order was officially imposed on the Dutch church by King William I (1816). This new Church Order was viewed by some church leaders as part of a general drift toward liberalism and political control of the churches. Their concern included not only the polity but also the liturgy and doctrine of the church and led to the *Afscheiding*

¹ *Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (adopted by Synod 1920), Article 86.

(secession movement), which split the national church in 1834. The secession churches repudiated King William's Church Order and restored the original Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort. At their Synod of Amsterdam (1840), a revision of the Church Order of Dort became the official polity of the secession churches.

The immigrants who constituted the early Dutch colonies of Western Michigan and who organized their congregations into Classis Holland and at first affiliated with the Reformed Church in America adhered to the 1840 revision. Complaints about departures from the Dort Church Order were among the grounds cited by those who seceded in 1857 from the Reformed Church in America to form what became the Christian Reformed Church. The newly founded denomination adopted the 1840 Church Order as its own in one of its earliest sessions.

Comparatively few revisions were made of this Church Order in succeeding years. The Synod of 1914 adopted a revision that incorporated the stance of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, whose American followers tended toward a kind of congregationalism. This trend toward congregationalism was not at all congenial to Kuyper's opponents, who maintained that broader assemblies of the church (classis and synod) were legitimately acting in the capacity of the church of Jesus Christ when in assembly. These tensions have never been resolved completely within the polity of the Christian Reformed Church. Each emphasis serves, however, to keep the other in balance, and consequently neither assumes the dominant role in the practice of the church.

III. The revision of 1965

The 1950 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church began a long revision process in response to an official request from the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN)* that the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and South Africa and the Christian Reformed Church cooperate in producing an international, uniform Church Order. Although this international attempt soon proved unrealistic, it did focus the attention of the church on matters of church polity and create a new impetus for change.

Contemporary society was undergoing rapid change. This, together with the exposure to the world at large of many church members who served in the armed forces overseas and the significant adjustments demanded by the vast number of Dutch immigrants to Canada and the United States after World War II, suggested the need for a review of the polity of the church. In order to respond to the changes in society and the place of the church's witness to the world, the church began to reflect seriously on the nature of its Church Order. A vital part of the Reformed heritage is found in the principle that the polity of the church ought to be responsive to the times in which the church serves its generation.

In 1965 a Revised Church Order was adopted, retaining by specific direction of preceding synods the basic format of the Church Order of Dort. The Revised Church Order of 1965 demonstrates that the church is awake to its responsibilities in the contemporary world and is desirous of responding to that world in obedience to her Lord.

IV. Recent trends reflected in the Church Order

Observant students of the Church Order's development will note that a number of trends within the church in recent years are increasingly reflected

in the manner in which the Christian Reformed Church deals with its Church Order.

A. Revisions

A surprising number of revisions of the Church Order have been made since its adoption in 1965. Between the years 1912 and 1965 only two significant changes were made in the Church Order. From 1965 to 2015 more than sixty articles have been revised, some more than once. This trend continues unabated. Almost an equal number of requests for revision of other articles were rejected by the synods during the same periods. The intent and/or application of other articles have been clarified as needed or requested.

B. The office of every believer

There is a growing interest in the subject of individual church members' responsibility in and for the ministry of the whole church. That interest flows, in part at least, from the Reformed principle that emphasizes the "priesthood of all believers." Although the structure of the Church Order has historically been oriented toward official functions performed by ordained office holders and ecclesiastical assemblies, some recent modifications have been in the direction of the responsibilities of the believers (see, for example, Art. 74-c and Art. 79-b).

C. The nature of office in the church

There has also been growing interest expressed for a clearer definition of the nature of office in the church. The report on "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" (Report 44, *Acts of Synod 1973*) established and defined basic biblical principles and continues to make contributions to the church's understanding of office and ordination.

While the function of elders and pastors is fairly well established in the life of the church, the place of the diaconate in the church's structure has received more specific attention in recent years. This development is wholesome and has stimulated serious efforts to give the diaconal office its proper place in the ministries of the local church and in the church's ministry to the community and the world. The opening of the office of deacon to all confessing members of the church by Synods 1978 and 1984 made for a significant change with respect to the diaconal office. Another step forward came when Synod 1997 permitted classes to allow the delegation of deacons to classis meetings (see Church Order Art. 40 and its Supplement). Further, Synod 2015 approved the delegation of deacons to synod (see Church Order Art. 45).

Synod 1978 established the position of evangelist. Rather than creating a fourth office at that time synod decided that an evangelist would function as part of the office of elder. In 2003 the position was renamed *ministry associate*. Synod 2012 renamed and expanded the position into a fourth office: *commissioned pastor*. Synod increasingly recognized that there are circumstances in which specific authorization needs to be given to selected and qualified persons to perform functions previously performed only by ministers of the Word. This fourth office derives its function from Article 23 in the Church Order.

D. Synodical study committees

Synodical study committees continue to serve the church with significant biblical and theological research. It is a joyful experience to note that biblical data and norms continue to govern these studies and the conclusions of the committees. The impact of these reports cannot be measured simply by synodical approval or action. Sometimes a number of years pass before the conclusions of these studies are translated into action.

In recent years, there has been an increasing tendency for synods and/or the Council of Delegates to appoint task forces for particular purposes. This is the result of a desire to handle certain issues more efficiently when they do not require study as extensive as would be expected in traditional study committees.

In this volume, reference will be made under specific Church Order articles to appropriate studies on related subjects. We cannot afford to ignore the work that has been done before us and upon which we are challenged to build today.

E. Healthy tensions

Within Reformed church polity we continue to see healthy tensions between the rights and prerogatives of the local congregation and the authority of the broader assemblies (i.e., classes and synod). One side of the tension comes from those who desire greater uniformity among the churches in order to retain, or even enhance, denominational cohesiveness. The other side of the tension comes from those who prefer the church's polity to be flexible enough to maintain the liberty of the local church while holding to a common, basic, confessional commitment in our denominational relationships. To maintain balance between these two perspectives is not easy. It is likely that this tension will remain a factor in the life of the Christian Reformed Church for some time to come, but it is desirable that the tension not overtake the value of doing what is best for the welfare of the whole church.

F. North American environment

Any comparative review of Christian Reformed Church government with its European antecedents demonstrates how clearly the church has become a part of its North American environment. As a denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America maintains ties with Reformed churches throughout the world and is affected by theological movements and developments among them. The CRC shares many concerns with other churches of the Reformed family, but many of these concerns are based less on our common roots than on the character of our age. There are other concerns that arise from our peculiar situation in Canada and the United States. The very failure of the 1950 attempt to produce an internationally uniform Church Order for Reformed churches evidenced wholesome changes within each denomination as each responded to its specific environment. It is to be hoped that in the future we shall likewise profit from our associations with churches both within and beyond our own traditions as well as from national and emerging churches with which we cooperate in mission and benevolent ministries.

More recently the denomination is coming to grips with the need to modify certain articles of the Church Order in order to provide for the special circumstances of members and churches of multicultural and multiracial groups. The modification of certain Church Order articles approved by synod for the Native American communities comprising Classis Red Mesa is one example. Another

example is synod's consideration of theological education requirements for ethnically diverse ministerial candidates. Still another example is the concern for incorporating various ethnic churches into what was, until a few decades ago, a mostly homogeneous denomination. What is so encouraging and hopeful in all this change is that the basic principles remain while their application becomes more varied. The real test will come, however, in how well the church as a whole practices what is desirable and clear in theory and whether a way is found to give a place to everyone as members in Christ's church.

V. Using the Church Order and this manual

This *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* is not intended as an exhaustive resource book to be consulted when one wants to know whether synod said something about a matter or what it has decided on a particular subject. Nor is its purpose to settle arguments over fine points raised in council rooms. To use it in this way would defeat the purpose both of this volume and of the Church Order itself. The intention of this manual is to provide information and perspective on important decisions of past synods that are regulative for the future. For closer examination of principles that undergird those decisions, readers may wish to consult commentaries on church polity written by CRC leaders like Hemkes, Heyns, Bos, Beets, Schaver, Monsma, Van Dellen, and Spaan. The most recently published is DeMoor's *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary*.

This volume collates and interprets synodical decisions, reports, and advice. In one sense the material contained in this manual is prescriptive, since the Christian Reformed Church, by means of its Church Order, "regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities" (Church Order Art. 1). In another sense this material is descriptive of where the Christian Reformed Church finds itself at this particular moment of its existence. The book has been written and compiled with the conscious realization that a project such as this is always dated. Subsequent decisions to this edition will be forthcoming and, therefore, updated editions will be made available periodically.

The task of compilation demands that judgments be made about what to include and what to exclude. The criteria employed were the welfare of the church today and guidance for the church in the future. When reviewing the multitude of regulations, decisions, and advice that synods have adopted through the years, it becomes clear that some synodical decisions are too dated to be included. The purpose of this manual is to provide information that is pertinent as the church ministers in a contemporary context. For the most part, decisions and references that go back more than twenty-five years are not included in this manual.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH ORDER

Article 1: The Purpose and Basis of the Church Order

- a. The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that officebearers are “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12), and to do so “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities in the following articles.
- b. The main subjects treated in this Church Order are The Offices of the Church, The Assemblies of the Church, The Task and Activities of the Church, and The Admonition and Discipline of the Church.

Commentary

Article 1 of the Church Order provides the rationale, as well as a statement of purpose, for the role and use of the Church Order. The general nature of this article requires that it be interpreted within the context of the following considerations.

I. Principles of Reformed church polity

There are three basic principles imbedded in Reformed church polity:

- a. Complete submission to the Word of God and the Reformed Creeds
The Church Order is subordinate to the Word of God and to the Reformed creeds insofar as either addresses a Church Order matter. To the degree that biblical teaching can be applied to a Church Order issue, the Holy Scriptures are the final court of appeal in matters of church government and practice.

Even a casual reading of the Church Order shows a frequency of references to “the Word.” Pastors are called “minister[s] of the Word” (Art. 2); the preaching of the Word is an essential element in public worship services (Arts. 51, 54); synod approves the Bible versions used in worship (Art. 47); church societies have as their purpose “the study of God’s Word” (Art. 72).

Only five references are made to specific Scripture passages, however:

- 1) Article 1 refers to Ephesians 4:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:40, stating the principle of preparing “God’s people for works of service, that the body of Christ may be built up” and doing so “in a fitting and orderly way.”

- 2) Article 73 refers to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20 and parallels are implied) to which the churches must be obedient.
- 3) Article 79 references 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 pertaining to participation in the Lord's Supper.
- 4) Article 80 establishes procedures in matters of discipline on the basis of Matthew 18:15-17.

The creeds must also be taken seriously since Article 29 of the Church Order states that the decisions of the assemblies shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order itself.

The Christian Reformed Church subscribes to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. These three Reformed confessions form the confessional basis referenced in Article 1. In addition, the Christian Reformed Church subscribes to three ecumenical creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

- b. Acknowledgment that Christ is the only head of his church

The Bible speaks of the church as the body of Christ and of Christ as its head. He is the Lord of the Christian Church in all of its various denominational and congregational expressions. As the church's true and only head he has complete authority over its life and ministry (Belgic Confession, Art. 31). The ministry of the church is Christ's ministry, and as Christ's ministry it functions with the power and authority of Christ. Because Christ alone is Lord of the church no one may presume to rule in his place. Those who serve and exercise authority in the church must do so in Christ's name and according to his Word.

- c. The desire that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way"

The third principle of Reformed church polity is the apostolic injunction that "... everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14:40). Synod at various times has adopted principles and made decisions that approved specific organizational structures to assure that good order result at the local, classical, and synodical expressions of the church.

The Belgic Confession, Article 30, expresses the same sentiment where it is stated that everything will be done well and in good order in the church when persons are elected who are faithful and possess the spiritual qualifications such as the Apostle Paul articulated in his instructions to Timothy.

2. Relationship of Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and the Church Order

It is important to be clear about the relationship that pertains to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the Reformed confessions, and the Church Order. As stated above, the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God are first in priority and authority to the extent that the Bible addresses polity issues. The Reformed confessions are accepted as a true interpretation of this Word. The confessions are themselves subject to the Word. The Belgic Confession states (Art. 7):

Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.

From time to time synod has accepted new translations, and approved minor revisions, of the confessions to which the Christian Reformed Church subscribes. At various times synod has revised translations of the confessions (e.g., 1972, 1985, and 2006), but their essential character has been preserved and their teachings about the nature and functioning of the church remain as historically understood. In 1975 synod adopted the following with reference to the status of synodical decisions that deal with confessional content:

- a. The Reformed confessions are subordinate to the Scripture and are accepted “as a true interpretation of this Word” (Church Order Art. 1-a). These confessions are binding upon all the officebearers as indicated by their subscription to these confessions in the Covenant for Officebearers. These confessions are presumed to be accepted by all confessing members of the church as is indicated by their public profession of faith.
- b. Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions, and they shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).

The Church Order then is subordinate to both the Holy Scriptures and the Reformed confessions. It contains statements of principles derived from both sources as well as many regulations that reflect the contemporary situation of the church at the time such regulations were adopted. Reformed church polity has always maintained that the Church Order ought to be changed when the experience of the church requires a revision. If the Church Order is to serve its intended purpose then revision must be an ongoing process.

3. Divisions of the Church Order

The main subjects treated in the Church Order, in addition to the Introduction (Art. 1) and the Conclusion (Arts. 85-86), are as follows:

- a. The Offices of the Church (Arts. 2-25)
- b. The Assemblies of the Church (Arts. 26-50)
- c. The Task and Activities of the Church (Arts. 51-77)
- d. The Admonition and Discipline of the Church (Arts. 78-84)

Each of these deals with some aspect of the organizational structure and function of the church. The Church Order is concerned with the question of how the principles of the Word and the contemporary life of the church affect the way the church carries out its mission.

The Church Order’s scope is therefore limited. It touches on the life of the individual member only occasionally and marginally. Even then it does

this in terms of his or her relationship to the structured church. Many details of procedure and practice are omitted, giving each local church great liberty to structure its life and service in harmony with the general principles of Reformed polity. The very brevity of the Church Order confirms this feature.

4. Church Order supplements

Church Order supplements are synodical regulations pertaining to the implementation of the Church Order articles and are included with the Church Order by the decision of specific synods.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

A. General Provisions

Article 2: The Special Offices in the Church

The church recognizes the offices of minister of the Word, elder, deacon, and commissioned pastor. These offices differ from each other only in mandate and task, not in dignity and honor.

Commentary

I. General observations

This article deals with the special offices of the church. It is important to note the concept of offices in the Holy Scriptures and the Reformed confessions.

- a. The word *office* as we understand it in the church is neither an accurate translation of any Old Testament Hebrew word nor of any New Testament Greek word. As a general term for what we call an “office” (namely, a certain type of service within the church) the word *diakonia* (which means “ministry” or “service”) is generally used in the New Testament. We therefore follow the biblical pattern more closely when we designate the functions performed in and by the church and its members as ministries (services) rather than offices.
- b. This article calls attention to the “special” offices in the church as distinguished from the “general” office known as the priesthood of all believers. The Heidelberg Catechism describes the ministry or office of all believers in Lord’s Day 12, Question and Answer 32:

Q. **But why are you called a Christian?**

A. Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a free conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for eternity.

- c. In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul indicates the close relationship between some of the special offices in the church and the office of all members of Christ’s body. While urging every Christian “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (v. 1), he notes the intricate relationship between all offices in the church when he writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (vv. 11-12).

The special offices and the general office of all believers are blended together so that “speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow

up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (vv. 15-16).

- d. Those who wish to make a more complete study of the offices of the church should consult Report 44, "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" in the *Acts of Synod 1973* (pp. 635-716); Report 31, "Authority and Function of Elders and Deacons," in *Agenda for Synod 1987* (pp. 385-421); the report on "Ordination and 'Official Acts of Ministry'" in *Agenda for Synod 1999* (particularly pp. 284-89); and the report on "Ordination and 'Official Acts of Ministry'" in *Agenda for Synod 2001* (esp. pp. 269-91). These comprehensive reports present both an in-depth biblical study on office and ordination and an account of the historical development of the concepts of office and ordination.

2. The special offices of the church

The Church Order of Dort (1618-19) mentions four special offices: minister of the Word, professor of theology, elder, and deacon. These offices were recognized in our own early church orders until 1965, when only three offices were listed, the office of professor of theology no longer being recognized as distinct from that of minister of the Word. A fourth office, that of commissioned pastor (formerly called *ministry associate*, and even before that *evangelist*), was added in 1978. The Church Order specifies that these offices do not differ in "dignity and honor" but only in "mandate and task." The parity of offices is an important value in the polity of the CRC; while in practice there may be a tendency to elevate one office over another, such elevation is not supported by the Church Order.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

A. General Provisions (continued)

Article 3: Eligibility for Ecclesiastical Offices

- a. All adult confessing members of the church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the offices of minister, elder, deacon, and commissioned pastor.
- b. Only those who have been officially called and ordained or installed shall hold and exercise office in the church.

—Cf. Supplement, Articles 3-a, 45, and 48-a

ARTICLE 3-a

Regulations

1.
 - a. All congregations may, but will not be required to, allow women to serve in the office of minister, elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor.
 - b. Classes may, in keeping with their understanding of the biblical position on the role of women in ecclesiastical office, declare that women officebearers (ministers, elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors) may not be delegated to classis.
 - c. All duly elected and ordained officebearers may be delegated to synod. Officebearers shall not be asked to participate against their convictions.
2. Synodical deputies shall not be asked to participate against their conviction in any matter relating to ministers of the Word as provided in Articles 6-18 and 82-84 of the Church Order.
3. Every classis shall respect the prerogative of its constituent churches to call and ordain officebearers according to their own biblical convictions. No members of classis shall be required to participate against their convictions in a candidate's examination or in processing ministerial credentials. The examination for ordination of a female candidate may then be conducted by a *classis contracta* consisting of delegates from churches that do not object. In the event that a quorum cannot be found, representatives from churches in a neighboring classis may be invited to achieve the equivalent of a quorum.
4. Women ministers may not be approved for fields of labor outside North America where our partner churches do not permit the ordination of women.

5. In the consideration of applications submitted by qualified women for candidacy for the office of minister of the Word, both the Candidacy Committee and synod shall ensure that trustees and delegates will not be forced to participate against their convictions. In the declaration of candidacy delegates may exercise their right to abstain from voting.
6. The executive director shall maintain a list of classes that have declared that women officebearers (ministers, elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors) may not be delegated to classis.

(Acts of Synod 2007, pp. 610-12)

Commentary

I. Eligibility for office

All ordained officebearers must meet the biblical requirements for leadership and service in the church. The following such requirements are clearly stated or implied:

a. Confession of faith

Persons considered for these offices must be confessing members of the Christian Reformed Church and be members in good standing in one of its congregations.

b. Other biblical requirements

Officebearers must meet the biblical requirements. Such general biblical requirements for officebearers include:

- 1) *Possessing the necessary gifts required for a particular office.* In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes that the church is like the body and the members have different gifts. Every officebearer needs to possess spiritual gifts, but not every officebearer possesses the spiritual gifts for all the offices. Discerning what gifts are needed for a particular office is the responsibility of the church.
- 2) *Possessing the gift of leadership.* Hebrews 13:7 places great emphasis on an exemplary life and leadership: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."
- 3) *Living an exemplary life.* According to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 officebearers should be above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, good managers of their families, respected both inside and outside of the church, and holding firm to the Word of God.
- 4) *Confessional integrity.* All officebearers are required to sign the Covenant for Officebearers attesting to their agreement with the confessional basis of the CRC. Such agreement is more than mere assent because it includes a commitment to promote and defend the essential positions of the Reformed faith as adopted by the synod of the CRC.

2. Ordination and installation

Only those who have been officially called and ordained or installed shall hold and exercise office in the church. For regulations concerning the ordination and installation of all officebearers see Article 4; for regulations specific to ministers of the Word see also Article 10; for regulations specific to commissioned pastors see Articles 23 and 24; for regulations specific to elders and deacons see Article 25.

3. Use of members' gifts

Synod on several occasions (1992, 2000, 2006, and 2007) encouraged the churches to use the gifts of women members to the fullest extent possible in the ministries of local congregations. With the decision of Synod 2007 to make the ordained offices accessible to any qualified member, it is no longer appropriate to treat the subject of "women's gifts" separate from the importance of using any member's gifts. At the same time, the gender distinction continues to be a reality in the life of the church. Synod approved the principle that "all confessing members who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the offices of minister, elder, deacon, and commissioned pastor," but also cautioned against enforcing that principle on those whose convictions prevent them from supporting that position. A complete account of how Synod 2007 dealt with this matter can be found in the *Agenda for Synod 2007* and the *Acts of Synod 2007*.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

A. General Provisions (continued)

Article 4: Calling to Special Offices

- a. In calling and electing to an office, the council shall ordinarily present to the congregation a nomination of at least twice the number to be elected. When the council submits a nomination which totals less than twice the number to be elected, it shall give reasons for doing so.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 4-a

- b. Prior to making nominations the council may give the congregation an opportunity to direct attention to suitably gifted persons.
- c. The election by the congregation shall take place under the supervision of the council after prayer and in accordance with the regulations established by the council. Adult confessing members in good standing shall have the right to vote.
- d. After having called the elected persons to their respective offices and having announced their names, the council shall proceed to ordain or install them if no valid impediment has arisen. The ordination or installation shall take place in the public worship services with the use of the prescribed ecclesiastical forms.

Church Order Supplement

ARTICLE 4-a

Modification for Churches of Classis Red Mesa

In calling to an office, the council shall present to the congregation a nomination of one or more persons for each position to be filled.

(Acts of Synod 1983, p. 660)

Use of Lot in Elections

The use of the lot in the election of officebearers is permitted when a congregational vote is part of the process.

(Acts of Synod 2003, p. 609)

I. Calling to an office and term call

The calling to an office (external call) is a function of a council and congregation. This concept of calling must be differentiated from a personal, subjective prompting or urge to serve in the church (internal call). The inner desire to serve in the offices of the church must be validated by an external and official judgment of the church. It is in the convergence of the internal sense of conviction and desire to serve in an office, and the external expression of the church's desire for a person to serve in such office that ordaining to office is validated.

The calling of a person to the ministry of the Word for the first time (i.e., a candidate) involves the action of a local church's council, classis, and synod. The local church council in consultation with the congregation makes the decision to call; the classis, by way of an official "counselor," makes certain that proper procedure is followed and examines the candidate for ordination if a call is accepted. Synod is involved in this examination by way of three synodical deputies who must agree "to concur" with an action taken by the classis before the congregation can proceed with an installation of the candidate. A candidate for the ministry of the Word becomes eligible for a call in Christian Reformed churches by declaration of the synod. The process by which a candidate is approved for ordination by the classis of the calling church and the synodical deputies is outlined in Article 10 of the Church Order.

The calling to particular offices ordinarily involves a specified term of time. The tenure of office for elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors is described in the commentary on Church Order Articles 23, 24, and 25. The tenure of office for ministers of the Word is not dealt with in the Church Order. Generally Christian Reformed congregations do not specify a term of office in calling a pastor unless the provisions of a "term call" are invoked. Where more than one pastor is on the staff, a stated length of term is more common.

For ministers serving the denomination under the auspices of the Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church or one of its agencies, the call to a specified term of office may be used but not required. When such is the case, the continuation of service is subject to reappointment by the Council of Delegates or the agency by which the minister is commissioned (cf. Church Order Art. 12-13 and their supplements).

Synod 1987 declared that congregations have the option of calling their pastors for a specified term of service. For regulations pertaining to term calls, see Article 8 and Supplement, Article 8, section C.

2. Nominations for call

a. Number of nominations

The Church Order specifies that nominations of officebearers shall ordinarily consist of twice the number to be elected. If circumstances lead a council to nominate fewer than twice the number, the council should give reasons for departing from the general rule. The practice of dual nominations is evolving in the life of congregations. Cultural realities

being what they are, it is increasingly difficult to obtain the agreement of individuals to commit to council or board membership on an election basis. Single nominations at all levels of denominational life are becoming more common and reflect the changes to which the churches are subject.

b. Notifying the congregation

The Church Order requires that the council submit nominations for special offices to the congregation for approval. The first announcement should be made early enough for members to present possible objections at a regular meeting of the council. If no lawful objections are received, the names shall be presented at a congregational meeting for election.

c. Congregational suggestions for nominations

It is also desirable that the council, before presenting the nominations to the congregation, solicit suggestions for suitable persons to be considered. This opportunity is not required; however, with the trend toward single nominations, providing this opportunity becomes more important. Its inclusion in the Church Order indicates that this is generally a desirable procedure.

3. Election and selection

a. Election by the congregation shall take place at a regular congregational meeting under supervision of the council.

b. The right to vote shall be extended to all confessing members in good standing. It is common practice in the churches that younger confessing members are granted the privilege of participation in voting at congregational meetings once they reach the age of 18.

c. It has become the practice of some congregations to choose officebearers by lot. Synod addressed this trend in an important decision in 1989 (*Acts of Synod 1989*, pp. 500-502). Synod declared at that time "that the election of officebearers shall ordinarily be by way of a congregational election as described in Church Order Article 4 and [urged] the councils to follow this procedure." Synod also adopted a statement to encourage church councils to involve the congregation meaningfully in the nominating and electing process. Suggestions about how to do that can be found in this same synodical decision. Synod 2003 then added to this discussion by declaring "that the use of the lot in the election of officebearers is permitted when a congregational vote is part of the process" (see *Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 609). Congregational involvement presumably occurs when the congregation officially approves a slate of names from which several are then selected by lot.

d. The regulations for congregational meetings are dealt with in Article 37.

4. Ordination or installation

- a. The names of those elected to special offices are ordinarily announced to the congregation on two Sundays prior to ordination.
- b. The ordination (or installation) shall take place in a public worship service with the use of synodically approved ecclesiastical forms.
- c. For the understanding of ordination and the meaning of the ceremony of ordination, the "Guidelines for Understanding the Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" (Guidelines 9-12) will be helpful (see *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 62-63). Report 44 to Synod 1973 contains a helpful section on "The Meaning of Ordination" (see *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 638-49).
- d. Ordination to or installation into an ecclesiastical office is not the prerogative of individual ministers (or elders) but must be duly processed by the appropriate assembly of the church in accord with the regulations both of the Church Order and decisions of the assemblies. Reinstallation for all officebearers is required when a new term of service is initiated.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

A. General Provisions (continued)

Article 5: Signing the Covenant for Officebearers

All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 5

ARTICLE 5

Covenant for Officebearers

We, [the undersigned], believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God, which proclaims the good news of God's creation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Acknowledging the authority of God's Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.

We affirm three creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith. In doing so, we confess our faith in unity with followers of Jesus Christ throughout all ages and among all nations.

We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

Along with these historic creeds and confessions, we also recognize the witness of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides us in our present context.

We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that

a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(Acts of Synod 2012, pp. 761-72)

*To be signed by professors, ministers, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons when ordained and / or installed in office.

Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina

Synod declares that gravamina fall into at least two basic types:

1. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
 2. A *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.
- A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers:
1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
 2. The signatory does not by affirming the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the signatory declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them.
 3. A signatory is bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions. However, no one is free to decide for oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.
- B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:
1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their "difficulties" to their councils for examination and judgment. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it

is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.

2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter 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. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.

C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:

1. The basic assumption of the church in requiring affirmation of the Covenant for Officebearers is that the doctrines contained in the confessions of the church fully agree with the Word of God. The burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the signatory who calls upon the church to justify or revise its confessions.
2. Ministers (including missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their gravamina calling for revision of the confessions to their councils for examination and judgment. Should the council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, classis may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
3. If the gravamen is adopted by the council and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies, and therefore it is open for discussion in the whole church.
4. If the gravamen is rejected by the classis, it may be appealed to synod; and when the constituted synod declares the matter to be legally before it for action, all the signers of the Covenant for Officebearers shall be free to discuss it together with the whole church until adjudicated by synod.
5. Since the subscriber has the right of appeal from the judgment of a council to classis and from classis to synod, the mere fact that the matter is being appealed shall not be a reason for suspending or otherwise disciplining an officebearer, provided other provisions of the Church Order are observed.
6. A revision of the confessions shall not be adopted by synod until the whole church membership has had adequate opportunity to consider it.

(Acts of Synod 2012, pp. 762-65)

1. Occasions requiring signature

The Covenant for Officebearers is signed by each officebearer at the time of installation into office in a local congregation, or the first time a person is delegated to a meeting of a classis. When an officebearer assumes an office in another council or classis, the Covenant for Officebearers of that assembly must be signed in the same manner.

Each council and each classis should preserve and maintain its official copy of the Covenant for Officebearers (with the accumulated signatures) along with its official minutes, and it should be on hand when new officebearers are inducted.

At synodical gatherings the delegates publicly affirm their agreement with the beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church. Such agreement is expressed by the delegates rising following the reading. The Public Declaration of Agreement with the Beliefs of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, included in the final pages of the Rules for Synodical Procedure (downloadable at www.crcna.org/SynodResources), is normally read by the president of synod during the opening session of synod.

2. The Covenant for Officebearers (previously the Form of Subscription)

Synod 1981 (*Acts of Synod 1981*, p. 15) approved a modified Form of Subscription for Classis Red Mesa on the grounds that the present form is not intelligible to persons whose primary language is Navajo or Zuni. Since then, other groups for whom English is a second language have had similar concerns. In 1987 synod adopted grounds that advanced the desirability of a revised Form of Subscription in these words: "A Form of Subscription in contemporary language would be a way to show sensitivity to the growing number of multicultural groups in the CRC who find the present language of the Form of Subscription difficult to understand." Furthermore, synod also decided that "the present language should be modified to express the interpretations given by synod in recent years," and "it would be preferable to have one Form of Subscription for all churches/ assemblies of the Christian Reformed denomination" (*Acts of Synod 1987*, p. 621). Synod 2006 adopted a recommendation that the Form of Subscription be revised in contemporary language and in the light of the church's current understanding of what officebearers must consent to as leaders in the church. Synod 2012 adopted the Covenant for Officebearers to replace the Form of Subscription (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 762-65).

3. Proper use of the Covenant for Officebearers

The Church Order provides that any charge against an ordained minister must be brought in accordance with procedures outlined in the Covenant for Officebearers and in Church Order Articles 82-84. Such a charge must be brought to the minister's calling church council, which has the exclusive right (except upon appeal to classis or synod) to determine the validity of the charge(s) made.

4. Gravamina

Differing sentiments, dissent, or difficulties pertaining to the confessional standards must be dealt with in accord with the stipulations of the Covenant for Officebearers. When a person presents a difficulty with, or an objection to, some aspect of the creedal standards, it is called a gravamen. Synod 1976 adopted Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina (cf. Church Order Supplement, Art. 5).