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Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government

2015 REVISION
(Includes 2016 Updates)



Christian
Reformed
Church

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I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

B. Ministers of the Word (continued)

Article 14: Release from Ministerial Office and Re-ordination

- a. A minister of the Word shall not leave the congregation with which the minister is connected for another church without the consent of the council.
- b. A minister of the Word who resigns from the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church to enter a ministry outside the denomination shall be released from office by the classis with an appropriate declaration reflecting the resigned minister's status and with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-b

- c. A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, may not forsake the office. A minister may, however, be released from office to enter upon a non-ministerial vocation for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-c

- d. A minister of the Word who has entered upon a vocation which classis judges to be non-ministerial shall be released from office within one year of that judgment. The concurring advice of the synodical deputies shall be obtained at the time of the judgment.
- e. A former minister of the Word who was released from office may be declared eligible for call upon approval of the classis by which such action was taken, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. The classis, in the presence of the deputies, shall conduct an interview that examines the circumstances surrounding the release and the renewed desire to serve in ministry. Upon acceptance of a call, the person shall be re-ordained.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-e

Church Order Supplement

ARTICLE 14-b

Declaration regarding ministers who resign from the CRC

- a. Synod directed the churches and classes dealing with ministers who depart from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) in order to seek ordination in the ministry of the Word

in another church to take note of the statement made by Synod 1978 that “Synod has instructed all our churches and classes that in all cases of resignation a proper resolution of dismissal must be adopted with the concurring advice of synodical deputies” and to realize that this statement allows for a broad degree of flexibility in responding to such situations (cf. *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73).

- b. Synod directed the churches and classes to take into account the manner and spirit in which a minister has acted during the time leading up to and including departure from office when determining what action to take. (Some situations may require a deposition; others may require only a simple release from office.)
- c. Synod encouraged the churches and classes
 - 1) To recognize carefully the conditions and circumstances of a particular case that may come to their attention (e.g., whether it be a formal or a de facto resignation) and, having done so,
 - 2) To make a declaration reflecting the resigned minister’s status that is appropriate to the way and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including the minister’s resignation from office. Such a declaration could reflect one of the following:
 - a) The resigned minister is honorably released.
 - b) The resigned minister is released.
 - c) The resigned minister is dismissed.
 - d) The resigned minister is in the status of one deposed.

Note: In distinction from a minister who retires, any resigned minister no longer retains the honor and title of minister of the Word in, nor has an official connection with, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (cf. Church Order Article 18-b).

- d. Synod encouraged churches and classes to prayerfully consider the following principles in their deliberations:
 - 1) Schismatic activities are to be considered a serious violation of the sacred trust associated with ordination and a dishonoring of God which results in pain and brokenness in the body of Christ.
 - 2) All declarations by churches and classes should clearly evidence hope for the possibility of restoration and mutual reconciliation.

(*Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 581-82)

ARTICLE 14-c

The provisions of Supplement, Article 14-b also apply to Article 14-c, especially in those situations when ministers resign under discipline or to avoid discipline.

ARTICLE 14-e

The provisions of Supplement, Article 84 related to reinstatement of ministers who have been deposed also apply to ministers who resign under discipline or to avoid discipline and later seek reordination by way of Article 14-e.

(*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 866)

1. Transfer from one congregation to another

Church Order Article 14-a, is designed to protect the binding character of the tie between a minister and the congregation being served. It prescribes that no minister is permitted to leave the congregation being served for another congregation without the consent of the council. This clearly implies that, before ministers decide to accept (or decline) a call from another congregation, they should discuss the matter with their council and seek its support and consent.

2. Release from the office of minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church.

Article 14-b permits ministers to seek release from the office of minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church to enter the ministry of another denomination. Supplement, Article 14-b, regulates the declarations that should be made when such requests are received by classes. If at any time in the future such a minister desires to return to the ministry of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church then the procedure prescribed in Church Order Article 8, must be followed (*Acts of Synod 1994*, p. 492).

3. Release from the ministry of the Word

Article 14-c declares that ministers are bound to their calling as ministers of the Word. They may not forsake it lightly. If, however, a minister of the Word desires to enter a non-ministerial vocation, the minister may be released from office to enter upon such a vocation for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. Ministers of the Word who feel that they must temporarily or permanently enter upon a non-ministerial vocation should consult with their council and give good reason for the decision. If the reason is judged sufficient by the council, the classis and the synodical deputies are called upon to take official action in declaring that the given minister is released from ministerial office. In most instances, historically speaking, ministers who have requested release from the ministry of the Word to enter into another occupation have been granted such a release. The rationale for granting such release is, at least in part, that a minister's sense of "internal" call to serve as a minister of the Word is an indispensable component of effective service. If such "internal" conviction is no longer present, then release from office is an appropriate response by the church. There is no basis in Scripture that a call to the ministry of the Word must be for life, and there are numerous occupations where Christians with a theological education can serve with distinction without making the case that the position is "ecclesiastical in nature."

4. Faulty terminology and procedure in releases

In some cases, ministers have resigned from office. A word of caution should be used about the concept of resignation. Resignation implies an individual decision which can amount to a deliberate forsaking of office. In the case of the resignation of church members, synod "warns against such

expressions as ‘accepting the resignation of’” since the responsibility for such a decision must remain with the person who decides to withdraw from the church. When a minister of the Word resigns from office, the assemblies must deal with the resignation as an irregular procedure. The assemblies may have to acquiesce in the resignation of a minister of the Word but ought not to use the terminology of “accepting the resignation.”

5. Regulations pertaining to release from ministerial office

Whenever a minister of the Word enters upon a vocation that is not properly within the scope of the office of minister of the Word, the church holding the minister’s credentials incurs a responsibility to investigate the matter.

Article 14-d, which was adopted by Synod 1982, specifies that action shall be taken promptly by councils and classes with respect to termination of the ministerial office of pastors whose vocation has not been approved by the assemblies. When a classis judges the work of a minister to be non-ministerial in character, the minister shall be released from office within one year of that judgment. The concurring advice of the synodical deputies shall be obtained at the time of the judgment.

The effective date of the termination of ministerial office is determined by the council and/or classis that approved the release of the minister of the Word.

6. Return to office of a minister of the Word honorably released or simply released

Article 14-e makes provisions for the minister who has been released to return to the office of minister of the Word. (See also Supplement 14-b.) However, while technically this provision applies to all releases (whatever the declaration that accompanies the release) it is clear that “honorably release” and “release” are likely to be less complicated situations for a possible return to office. Those whose dismissal includes the declaration of “dismissed” or “the status of one deposed” will require a more in-depth scrutiny when return to office is considered. It is likely that in cases for which the accompanying declaration includes “the status of one deposed,” Church Order Articles 82-84 will also apply.

A former minister of the Word desiring to return to ministerial office must request the classis by which the release was obtained to declare the minister to be eligible to receive a call. While no specifics are stated in the Church Order per se, it is reasonable to assume that a return to ministerial office involves an interview at classis with the person requesting return to office. Following such an interview the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, may grant the request and declare the applicant eligible for a call. Similarly, the Church Order does not specify for how long such eligibility is in effect, but it is reasonable to assume that it is for two years unless extended by classis upon request. The reason for that assumption is that the Church Order imposes the two-year limit in other situations.

Upon acceptance of a call a former minister of the Word shall be re-ordained to this office. In accord with the scriptural teaching that ordination should be understood as the appointment or setting apart of certain

members of the church for particular ministries Article 14-e provides that ministers of the Word, like elders, deacons, and evangelists, may be re-ordained after periods of release from office.

7. Return to office of a minister of the Word who is released (or who resigned) while subject to or being likely to face disciplinary action

In the case of ministers of the Word who resign their office or who request release from office because they have committed some sin which makes it impossible to continue in office, the conditions and procedures of Church Order Article 83, and Supplement, Articles 82-84, should be followed. (See Supplement, Article 14-c.)

Synod 2016 clarified the use of Article 14-e so that it would not be in conflict with the provisions stated in Supplement, Article 84. It is incumbent on both the classis and synodical deputies to take note of all the provisions in Church Order Article 14 and its Supplements, as well as Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements, when dealing with reordination matters.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

B. Ministers of the Word (continued)

Article 18: Retirement of Ministers

- a. A minister who has reached retirement age, or who because of physical or mental disability is incapable of performing the duties of the office, is eligible for retirement. Retirement shall take place with the approval of the council and classis and in accordance with synodical regulations.
- b. A retired minister shall retain the title of minister of the Word and the authority, conferred by the church, to perform official acts of ministry. Supervision shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation. The supervising church shall be responsible for providing honorably for the minister's support and that of qualifying dependents according to synodical regulations.
- c. Should the reasons for retirement no longer exist, the minister emeritus shall request the council and classis which recommended the retirement to declare the minister eligible for call.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 18

ARTICLE 18

Retirement

Ministers shall have the privilege of retiring at the age of sixty-six years, if they so desire.

(Acts of Synod 2011, p. 813)

Supervision of an emeritus minister (except when the minister remains as a member in the congregation, or when the emeritation is expected to be of a temporary nature) may be transferred, at the minister's request, to the church where they become a member after emeritation.

This transfer is to be made in the following manner: the council of the church which the emeritus minister served last formally requests the council of the church which the emeritus minister wishes to join, to exercise supervision over the minister.

(Acts of Synod 1968, p. 69)

Early Retirement Option

Ministers of the Word shall be granted the privilege of retiring at the age of fifty-five years, with the approval of the classes involved, under the reduced pension scale adopted by Synod 2011.

(Acts of Synod 1993, p. 579)

(Acts of Synod 2011, p. 813)

“Official Acts of Ministry”

- 1) Certain acts of ministry—among them the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the pronouncement of blessings for the people, the laying of hands on new leaders, and the reception and formal dismissal of members—are part of the ministry of Christ to his followers and are entrusted to the church and, within the church, to its ordained leaders, not to a specific office.
- 2) Therefore, no long-standing, organized congregation of Christians should be deprived of these liturgical acts simply because it cannot provide for the presence of an ordained minister or commissioned pastor.
- 3) These acts of ministry symbolize and strengthen the relationships among the Lord, leaders, and the people of God. Their use is a sacred trust given to leaders by the Lord for the purpose of strengthening the flock. Therefore the administration of these acts should continue to be regulated by the church.

(Acts of Synod 2001, p. 504)

Commentary

I. Eligibility for retirement

Article 18-a specifies two valid reasons for retirement of a minister:

a. Retirement age

The Church Order specifies the normal retirement age for ministers to be 66. However, Synod 1991 approved pension-plan language to provide an early retirement benefit at age fifty-five with the provision that the pension benefit is reduced as per the rules of the Minister’s Pension Fund (see *Agenda for Synod 1991*, p. 184; *Acts of Synod 1991*, pp. 751-52).

b. Physical or mental disability

Ministers are eligible for retirement if their physical or mental disability is of such a nature that they are incapable of performing the duties of the office. Before ministers are declared eligible for such retirement, their physical or mental disability must be certified by a physician.

III. THE TASK AND ACTIVITIES OF THE CHURCH

C. Pastoral Care (continued)

Article 69: Solemnization of Marriage

- a. Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care to marry only in the Lord.
- b. Christian marriages should be solemnized with appropriate admonitions, promises, and prayers, as provided for in the official form. Marriages may be solemnized either in a worship service or in private gatherings of relatives and friends.
- c. Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 69-c

Church Order Supplement

ARTICLE 69-c

The pastoral guidance recommended to the churches by Synod 2016, found in the minority report of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same-sex Marriage (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 436-43), represents one example of how synod has determined that a marriage is considered to be in conflict with the Word of God.

(cf. *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 918)

Commentary

1. Instruction concerning marriage in the Lord

To marry in the Lord means to marry a person who is a Christian. Officebearers have the responsibility to provide such instruction and admonition to those under their spiritual care.

2. Solemnization of marriage

- a. The form for marriage

Approved forms for the solemnization of marriage have been adopted by Synod 1979 and are printed in the “Liturgical Forms and Resources” section of the *Psalter Hymnal*.
- b. The marriage ceremony

Article 69-b also provides the option that marriages may be solemnized either in a worship service or in private gatherings of relatives and friends.

Some countries require a separate civil ceremony, and the church may encourage an additional ecclesiastical ceremony of confirmation. Because customs in Canada and the United States require only one ceremony, the Church Order offers officiating persons the option of conducting the ceremony either in a regular worship service (presuming the officiating person is an ordained minister or a commissioned pastor) or in a private gathering. It is worthy of note that officiating ministers function in dual capacity. On the one hand, the officiating person is a representative of the state. On the other hand, the minister is always a representative of the church.

In Canada that state authorization is granted by the province within which the marriage is to take place. When a marriage is officiated by a non-resident person, permission for a one-time license must be obtained. Resident qualifying officiators must obtain a license to function in such capacity, and such license remains valid for as long as that person lives and serves within that province. The criteria for obtaining a license is that the officiating person must be ordained for ministerial duties by his/her home denomination.

In the United States the rules are somewhat different. All that is required in the U.S. is that the officiating person be ordained by his/her denomination. There is no residence requirement associated with the authority to solemnize marriages in the various states.

As mentioned in the comments on Article 23 in this manual, these regulations raise an interesting question about whether commissioned pastors may solemnize marriages at any place and at any time. The general restriction associated with the office of commissioned pastor approved by synod is that the commissioned pastor functions within the specific position approved by classis and the ordination is valid only within the boundaries of classis. Some might say that such limitation only applies to the "official acts of ministry," but in reality synod's decision relative to Church Order Article 23 restricts the "office," not just some of its functions. If the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are restricted, then it follows that a commissioned pastor is not considered to be ordained outside of the classis within which he/she works. The reason for emphasizing this issue is that the solemnization of marriage is a matter of legal import, and the state has its own rules. At the same time, the church has its rules. It is important for all involved in a marriage ceremony that the relevant rules be carefully observed lest, at a later time, objections are raised as to the appropriateness of the solemnization ceremony.

The officiating person also represents the church—at least symbolically. Where Church Order Article 69-c states that "ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God," the presumption is that the church has more than a passing interest in any solemnization ceremony. Technically the local church council or consistory does not authorize any marriage and does not totally control the decision of the officiating representative. In a more general sense, though, church councils do have a responsibility to "oversee" the work of the minister or commissioned pastor. It is advisable that these matters be discussed with pastoral sensitivities to the members involved.

3. Divorce and remarriage

The Church Order does not deal specifically with the questions relating to divorce and remarriage. There are, however, important synodical decisions (1956 and 1980) that are helpful in addressing this issue in specific situations.

4. Marriage in conflict with the Word of God

Synod 2016 struggled at length to decide how best to respond to the majority and minority study committee reports dealing with same-sex marriage issues. Ultimately synod decided to receive both reports as information and then also decided to recommend that the churches consider the *pastoral guidance* contained in the minority report. It is important to take note that Synod 2016 recommended only the pastoral guidance to the churches. Local consistories ultimately are responsible for the manner in which pastoral care is provided in individual situations. Synod deals only with pastoral or disciplinary matters in local congregations upon appeal. It may be tempting for some to cite Synod 2016's recommendation of pastoral guidance as a synodically mandated position, but the administration of pastoral care and discipline is clearly within the domain of the local church. Therefore, as the Supplement clearly states, the synodical recommendation "represents one example of how synod has determined that a marriage is considered to be in conflict with the Word of God."

IV. THE ADMONITION AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

C. The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers

Article 82: Special Discipline

All officebearers, in addition to being subject to general discipline, are subject to special discipline, which consists of suspension and deposition from office.

Church Order Supplement

ARTICLES 82-84

The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers

- a. An administrative leave may be imposed without prejudice by the council in order to investigate allegations of deviation from sound doctrine or godly conduct. Compensation and benefits would continue, and any duties to be performed during the leave would be specified by the council. All suspensions and administrative leaves are temporary.
- b. Officebearers who confess to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct will be considered guilty of serious deviation from godly conduct and worthy of discipline.
- c. General discipline shall not be applied to an officebearer unless he/ she has first been suspended from office.
- d. The appropriate assembly shall determine whether, in a given instance, deposition from office shall take place immediately, without previous suspension.
- e. Suspension/deposition of elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors
 - 1) The suspension or deposition of an elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor shall be imposed by the council with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis.
 - 2) If the neighboring council fails to concur in the position of the council of the elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor involved, the latter council shall either alter its original judgment or present the case to classis.
- f. Suspension/deposition of ministers
 - 1) The suspension of a minister of the Word shall be imposed by the council of the minister's church with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis.
 - 2) If the neighboring council fails to concur in the position of the council of the minister involved, the latter council shall either alter its original judgment or present the case to classis.

- 3) The deposition of a minister shall not be effected without the approval of classis together with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.
- g. Ministers subject to two councils
 - 1) A minister of the Word whose membership resides with a congregation other than the calling church is subject to the admonition and discipline of the councils of both churches. Either council may initiate disciplinary action, but neither shall act without conferring with the other.
 - 2) If the councils disagree, the case shall be submitted to the classis of the calling church for disposition.
- h. The lifting of suspension is the prerogative of the assembly which imposed the suspension.
- i. The council of the church which deposed the minister shall declare the deposed minister eligible to receive a call upon the affirmative judgment of the classis which approved the deposition, together with the concurrence of the synodical deputies. Upon acceptance of a call, the previously deposed minister shall be reordained.
- j. When a minister resigns under discipline or to avoid discipline, he or she should be released from office per Article 14-c, noting that the provisions of Supplement 14-b also apply to Article 14-c, especially in these situations.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-c
(Acts of Synod 1991, pp. 719-20)
(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 863-64)

Note: Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding suspension and/or deposition from ministerial office adopted by Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 396-99).

Commentary

I. Administrative leave without prejudice

Synod 2016 added two provisions to Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84 that deal with *The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers*. The added provisions are not entirely new in practice but were not previously detailed in the Supplement. In that sense the additions can be understood as clarifications.

The first addition provides for an administrative leave (without prejudice), imposed by the council of a church, “in order to investigate allegations of deviation from sound doctrine or godly conduct.” Such an administrative leave may precede formal disciplinary action (e.g., suspension or deposition) but is not a required step in the disciplinary process. In other words, an administrative leave is an option “in order to investigate . . .” but, in and of itself, is not a disciplinary action. Like suspension, an administrative leave is always temporary; however, the on-leave officebearer, unlike an officebearer on suspension, may perform some

duties, as specified by the council, during the administrative leave. Salary and benefits would remain in force during an administrative leave.

2. Determination of sexual misconduct

The second addition made by Synod 2016 to Supplement, Articles 82-84 clarifies a judgment to be made by the council if the determination of sexual misconduct (or confession of such) is involved. The clarification is that all such conduct be considered as a “serious deviation from godly conduct and worthy of discipline.” The reason for the clarification is that at times church councils have stopped short of treating sexual misconduct as a deviation from godly conduct. The intent of this clarification is to restrict council’s options and to provide for a more evenhanded administration of discipline for all officebearers.

3. Definitions: suspension and deposition

Officebearers are subject to two forms of discipline: general and special. General discipline applies to all members of the church; special discipline applies only to officebearers and refers to the following:

- a. Suspension from office is the temporary exclusion of an officebearer from exercising the duties of office. Suspension may be preliminary to deposition but a suspension does not necessarily lead to deposition.
- b. Deposition from office pertains to the removal of an officebearer from office.

4. Priority of special discipline

Special discipline has priority in the case of those who hold office in the church. General discipline should not be applied to officebearers unless they have first been suspended from office. It is possible that an officebearer might come under special discipline only, and that general discipline is not applicable in a particular case.

This provision embodies the thought that the offense for which an officebearer might be disciplined as a member (general discipline) must be an offense that makes him or her also worthy of the special discipline. Special discipline must be applied before general discipline is applied. The two forms of discipline may run simultaneously.

5. Jurisdiction of broader assemblies in disciplinary decisions

The appropriate assembly shall determine whether, in a given instance, deposition from office shall take place immediately, without previous suspension.

Ordinarily the act of deposition by any assembly is preceded by suspension from office.

- a. Discipline of a council by a classis
 - 1) The deposition of a council by a classis has been upheld by synod on various occasions.
 - 2) Ordinarily, before a classis proceeds to the deposition of a council, or members of a council, the classis must proceed by way of suspension in accord with Article 82 of the Church Order. Before suspension or

deposition may take place, the assembly must determine which of the officebearers in the council is/are subject to the discipline imposed. Discipline by its nature must be applied to individuals rather than to groups or assemblies. This is an important point. If all the members of a council share in a disciplinary offense, then the classis can, in a sense, suspend the council; Church Order Articles 82-84 address only the suspension and deposition of officebearers, not assemblies.

- 3) A classis may not depose a council that has appealed to synod. This is an exception to the general rule that appeals do not normally suspend the judgment of an assembly. This exception, no doubt, is because of the seriousness of the issues involved.
- 4) In response to a specific case and its appeal, synod declared that the Church Order concerns itself with normal situations. When a situation is abnormal, the Church Order cannot be applied in a legalistic way (*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 28-29; *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 55).

b. Emergency prerogatives of major assemblies

Synod 1982 declared that it is indeed proper according to Reformed church polity for either classis or synod to intervene in the affairs of a local congregation if the welfare of the congregation is at stake (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 55).

Synod 1980 in a specific case decided that a classis was not guilty of abusing its God-given authority when it had been accused of “lording it over [a local consistory] and exercising ecclesiastical authority in a hierarchical manner not in keeping with the domain and character of the authority entrusted to it by way of delegation” (*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 28-29).

Synod 1991 reminded a classis that in matters of discipline great care should be taken to exhaust all other avenues to resolve the dispute prior to ordering the suspension of a council or officebearers. In such matters the assembly exercising the authority should err on the side of caution, permitting full opportunity for other pastoral efforts to take effect (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 771).

6. Discipline applied to officebearers in special situations

In these situations the discipline is the responsibility of the church holding the officebearer’s credentials.

a. Retired ministers

Synod 1968 made the following declarations concerning the supervision of emeritus ministers:

- 1) Synod declares that supervision of an emeritus minister (except when he or she remains a member in his/her last congregation, or when the emeritation is expected to be of a temporary nature) may be transferred, at his/her request, to the church of which he/she becomes a member after emeritation.
- 2) This transfer is to be made in the following manner: the consistory of the church which the emeritus minister served last formally requests the consistory of the church which the emeritus minister wishes to join, to exercise supervision over him/her.

(*Acts of Synod 1968*, pp. 68-69, 216-22)

b. Ministers not serving a local congregation

Synod 1964 adopted the following regulation concerning the supervision of ministers in specialized ministries:

The minister shall be properly ordained (installed) into office with the use of the form(s) (and adaptation) approved by Synod. The ministerial credentials shall be held by the calling church, and the consistory of the calling church shall exercise supervision over the minister's doctrine and life. The membership of the minister shall also reside with the calling church. The latter may be impossible in the case of foreign and home missionaries and chaplains in the armed forces. However, in all cases where possible, it must be observed.

(*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58; see also Supplement, Article 13-b)

c. Disagreement between councils

The Guidelines, Articles 82-84, provide that if a minister is subject to two councils and the councils disagree, the case shall be submitted to the classis of the calling church for disposition.

Note that the final decision is to be made by the classis of the calling church, not the classis of the church of which the minister is a member.

d. Initiation of discipline

Synod stated that in cases where a minister is subject to two councils, either council may initiate disciplinary action but neither shall act without conferring with the other.

7. Declaration re ministers who resign from the CRC

- a. Synod 1993 directed the churches and classes dealing with ministers who depart from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) in order to seek ordination in the ministry of the Word in another church to take note of the statement made by Synod 1978 that "Synod [remind(s)] all our churches and classes that in all cases of resignation a proper resolution of dismissal must be adopted with the concurring advice of synodical deputies" (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73) and to realize that this statement allows for a broad degree of flexibility in responding to such situations (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 581).
- b. Synod directed the churches and classes to take into account the manner and spirit in which a minister has acted during the time leading up to and including his departure from office when determining what action to take. (Some situations may require a deposition; others may require only a simple release from office.)
- c. Synod 1993 encouraged the churches and classes
- 1) to recognize carefully the conditions and circumstances of a particular case that may come to their attention (e.g., whether it is a formal or a de facto resignation) and, having done so,
 - 2) to make a declaration reflecting the resigned minister's status that is appropriate to the way and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including his resignation from office. Such a declaration could reflect one of the following:

- a) The resigned minister is honorably released.
- b) The resigned minister is released.
- c) The resigned minister is dismissed.
- d) The resigned minister is in the status of one deposed.

Note: In distinction from a minister who retires, a resigned minister no longer retains the honor and title of minister of the Word in, nor has an official connection with, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (cf. Church Order Article 18-b).

- d. Synod encouraged churches and classes to prayerfully consider the following principles in their deliberations:
 - 1) Schismatic activities are to be considered a serious violation of the sacred trust associated with ordination and a dishonoring of God which results in pain and brokenness in the body of Christ.
 - 2) All declarations by churches and classes should clearly evidence hope for the possibility of restoration and mutual reconciliation (*Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 581-82).

8. Suspension and deposition of elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors

Whereas in the deposition (termination) of ministers (Art. 90-c, pre-1991 Church Order) the concurring judgment of both classis and the synodical deputies is required, in the case of elders and deacons only the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis is needed. The reason for this distinction is related to the fact that ministers serve in a “denomination-wide” office while elders and deacons serve in a “local” office. Classis is involved only when these two councils fail to concur and the council does not alter its original judgment. In the case of commissioned pastors, Synod 2009 decided that the calling church shall seek the concurrence of classis in the event of deposition or termination. The classis referenced is the same as the one that originally approved the commissioned pastor’s position.

IV. THE ADMONITION AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

C. The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers (cont.)

Article 83: Grounds for Special Discipline

Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 83

Church Order Supplement

Article 83

One of the key dynamics in considering abuse of office is the imbalance and misuse of power. The power inherent in the role of officebearer represents a sacred trust and must not be misused.

(Acts of Synod 2016, p. 865)

Commentary

I. Grounds for special discipline

There are three reasons for applying special discipline to officebearers:

- a. Violation of the Covenant for Officebearers
This deals primarily with the requirement that officebearers maintain confessional integrity. Each officebearer signs the Covenant for Officebearers upon ordination to office, promising to uphold the doctrinal and confessional teaching of the Christian Reformed Church.
- b. Neglect or abuse of office
Neglect of office occurs when an officebearer abandons or fails to fulfill the requirements of office. Abuse of office occurs when someone uses the position of being in office for inappropriate ends or self-interest.
- c. Deviation from sound doctrine and godly conduct
Deviation from sound doctrine is closely related to section 1, a above. Deviation from godly conduct occurs when someone engages in significant inappropriate behavior. Synod has at various times addressed how abuse allegations against a church leader are to be handled, as well as processes for the protection of victims. Appendix B in this manual specifies these decisions and procedures. Synod 2015 decided that further work needs to be done in clarifying Church Order Articles 82-84, and a task force has been appointed to make recommendations to synod for approval.

d. Imbalance and abuse of power

Synod 2016 added a supplement to Church Order Article 83. This addition seeks to clarify a dynamic present in the ministry of officebearers. The dynamic referred to is the “imbalance and abuse of power” when officebearers “neglect or abuse” their office, or “in any way seriously deviate from . . . godly conduct. To guard against abusive behavior, and out of deep pastoral concern for abuse victims, officebearers need to be very aware that the “power inherent in the role of officebearer represents a sacred trust and must not be misused.”

2. Resignation of ministers (see also Art. 14 and 82)

a. Regulations related to resignation

Synod reminded all our churches and classes that in all cases of a ministerial resignation a proper resolution of dismissal must be adopted with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73; *Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 581-82).

b. Announcement of resignation

In the case of resignation, the stated clerk of the classis in which the resignation has taken place shall place an appropriate announcement in the denomination’s periodicals.

c. Effective date of resignation

Synod ruled that when a minister of the CRC resigns, his ministerial status in the CRC shall terminate on the date on which the consistory and/or classis determines that his resignation shall become effective (*Acts of Synod 1977*, p. 66; see also pp. 452-54).

3. The suspension of ministers—see Guidelines for the Suspension and/ or Deposition of Ministers of the Word (Appendix E)

a. By the council

The suspension of a minister of the Word shall be imposed by the council of the calling church with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis. A council may not suspend its own minister without the agreement of a neighboring council.

b. With the concurrence of a neighboring council

A council has two options when the neighboring council refuses to agree to the suspension of a minister. Either it must alter its judgment to suspend the minister, or it must bring the matter to classis for decision. In the meantime the minister is not suspended from office.

c. Implications of suspension

Suspension from the office of minister of the Word implies that the minister may not be nominated or called for a new position during the time of suspension and may not be engaged in the duties of the office or perform any of the “official acts of ministry” (see *Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 26). Synod 1975 decided that a public announcement of a suspension is at the discretion of the assemblies involved.

4. The lifting of suspension

a. Sufficient evidence of repentance

The suspension of an officebearer shall be lifted only upon sufficient evidence of repentance.

Because an officebearer may be suspended only for due cause, the suspension may be lifted when the cause has been removed, that is, when the suspended officebearer demonstrates sufficient evidence of repentance or the charges have not been sustained.

b. Ability to serve effectively

The judgment about the ability of a restored officebearer to serve effectively must be decided by those who make the decision to restore.

c. The prerogative for lifting suspension

The lifting of suspension is the prerogative of the assembly that imposed suspension.

If it was the council that imposed suspension, the same council must lift it. Similarly, if it was the classis that imposed suspension, the same classis must lift it.

5. Deposition of ministers—see **Guidelines for the Suspension and/or Deposition of Ministers of the Word (Appendix E)**

a. The right to depose a minister

The Supplement, Articles 82-84, speaks of approval of classis and the synodical deputies being required when a minister is deposed. This implies that it is the council which deposes a minister after such approval has been given. Only when a council is delinquent (or possibly in cases of appeal) do classis and synod have the right to take action (see above under Article 82 regarding Jurisdiction). All the offices (including that of the minister of the Word) reside in the local congregation.

b. Procedure

The procedure for notifying the churches about the deposition of a minister is as follows:

In the case of deposition, the stated clerk of the classis shall notify the stated clerks of all the other classes concerning the action, and these shall in turn notify each consistory within their classis.

(Acts of Synod 1972, p. 26)

The following procedure exists when the views of an officebearer not under its jurisdiction are in question.

- 1) When an *individual* has suspicions and concerns regarding an officebearer's doctrine or life, the individual should first engage in discussions with the party in question. An individual may also communicate concerns to the consistory of the officebearer in question or the synodical board if the officebearer serves under one. That consistory or board must decide whether or not the suspicions or concerns are valid. If that consistory and/or board judges the suspicions or concerns to be invalid, the procedure ends. If the suspicions or concerns are judged valid, the consistory must

follow the regulations of Church Order Article 83 and Church Order Supplement, Article 13-b. In cases when the determination was made by a denominational board, the concern must be referred to the council of the calling church in a manner as described in Church Order Supplement, Article 13-b.

- 2) When a *consistory* judges that it has sufficient grounds of suspicion against an officebearer not under its supervision, it may communicate such to that officebearer's consistory or the synodical board under which the officebearer serves. If the officebearer's consistory and/or synodical board then judges that the grounds of suspicion are insufficient to require further explanation, the procedure ends. If the suspicions or concerns are judged valid, the consistory must follow the regulations of the Church Order Article 83, and Church Order Supplement, Article 13-b; the denominational board must refer the matter to the council of the calling church and follow the procedure described in Church Order Supplement, Article 13-b.
- 3) When an individual or consistory makes formal charges, these must be adjudicated according to usual procedure prescribed by past practice and the Church Order.

(See *Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 613.)

IV. THE ADMONITION AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

C. The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers (cont.)

Article 84: Reinstatement to Office

Persons who have been suspended or deposed from office may be reinstated if they give sufficient evidence of repentance and if the church judges that they are able to serve effectively. Requests for reinstatement to office by those deposed for acts of sexual abuse or sexual misconduct shall be dealt with according to guidelines adopted by synod.

—Cf. Supplement, Articles 78-84

—Cf. Supplement, Articles 82-84

—Cf. Supplement, Article 84

Church Order Supplement

Article 84

Regulations for Reinstatement of Office Bearers Guilty of Sexual Misconduct

When reinstatement is requested by a former officebearer who confessed to or was determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct leading up to suspension and deposition from office:

1. Reinstatement to office shall be denied to individuals who:
 - a. Confessed to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct against a minor.
 - b. Confessed to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct against more than one victim in a single church or community.
 - c. Confessed to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct in more than one community or church.
 - d. Confessed to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct and other related ungodly conduct.

Examples of related ungodly conduct include, but are not limited to, participation in pornography, engaging in sexual contact in return for payment or any other favor, or voyeuristic behavior, displays of sexually offensive material, suggestive gestures and remarks, and other sexually intimidating behavior.

2. Councils and classes shall not reinstate a former officebearer suspended or deposed for sexual misconduct or ungodly conduct not covered in items 1, a-d without receiving the advice of legal counsel concerning the church's liability and the advice

of a Christian licensed psychologist concerning the likelihood of an officebearer's reoffending.

Note 1: The "Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations Against a Church Leader" adopted by Synod 2010 (cf. *Agenda for Synod 2010*, pp. 503-504) define sexual misconduct as

- exploiting or grooming (preparing) a minor or an adult—regardless of consent or circumstances—for the purpose of sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy, with the result of either sexual gratification or power and control over the minor or adult;
- unwelcome touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between co-workers, co-volunteers; or
- sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between a supervisor and a subordinate who serve together in a church program or church ministry.

Note 2: These rules that prevent the reinstatement of deposed officebearers in particular situations also apply to those ministers who have been released by way of Article 14 and have been declared "dismissed" or "in the status of one deposed" due to those situations.

(*Acts of Synod 2004*, pp 611-12)
(*Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 865-66)

Commentary

1. Conditions for reinstatement to office

Three conditions govern the reinstatement of deposed officebearers:

a. Evidence of repentance

Deposed officebearers shall not be restored unless they give sufficient evidence of genuine repentance.

b. Prospect of working unhindered and without handicap

It must be evident that, if suspended or deposed officebearers are to be restored to office, they must be able to serve without being hindered by the handicap of their past sin.

c. The welfare of the church

It must also be evident that restoration to office would be to the glory of God and for the true welfare of the church.

2. Reinstatement of deposed ministers

The judgment of whether deposed ministers shall subsequently be declared eligible for call shall be made by the classis in which they were deposed together with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.

In 1978 synod added the provision that upon acceptance of a call after being declared eligible by the classis in which they were deposed, deposed ministers must be re-ordained.

A similar regulation was adopted with respect to ministers who are released from their ministerial office for weighty reasons but without discipline (Church Order Article 14).

3. Reinstatement of ministers who resigned

The same reasons which apply to cases of deposition of a minister were judged by synod to apply also to cases of resignation: Only that classis which acquiesces in the resignation of the minister is in possession of all the facts of the case and is thereby qualified to judge of the merits of a subsequent application for readmission.

4. Sexual misconduct and other ungodly conduct

Synod 2016 updated the examples cited in Supplement, Article 84, 1, d to make them more comprehensive and current. As the reality and dynamics of sexual abuse become more recognized, its underlying causes are being more clearly understood. Sexual abuse seldom if ever happens in a vacuum. Viewing pornography, engaging in prostitution, and/or voyeurism is not only sexually abusive but is often a precursor to even more abusive behavior.

Synod 2016 also updated and added clarifying notes at the end of Supplement, Article 84. There has apparently been significant variation among church councils, classes, and synodical deputies in the handling of discipline of officebearers (and reinstatement of the same) who have been found guilty of sexual misconduct. Because such matters are not merely of local impact and are addressed in the Church Order and its Supplements, it is imperative that there be consistency in addressing specific situations. Not only is that a basic principle of fairness, but consistency of practice is also an important criterion required by legal and judicial procedures. It is the responsibility of all involved in such procedures to follow the synodical guidelines that pertain to disciplining officebearers.