

# CHURCH ORDER REVIEW TASK FORCE REPORT

## *Report Outline*

- I. Introduction
  - II. Mandate, observations, and background
  - III. Accountability and supervision
  - IV. Transitions and release from ministry
  - V. Concluding observations
  - VI. Recommendations
- Addenda
- A. Updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and Their Supplements
  - B. Updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, and 42 and Their Supplements
  - C. Covenant of Joint Supervision for Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors Serving in Noncongregational Ministry Positions
  - D. Separation Agreement Template
  - E. Guidelines for Pastors and Congregations in Times of Conflict
  - F. Resources and Forms Related to the Calling, Supervision, and Release of Ministers

## **I. Introduction**

Over the past several decades, the Christian Reformed Church in North America has seen an increase in the number of issues and concerns related to the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word in what are often called “specialized ministries,” and to the release of ministers from congregations and/or from the denomination as a whole. One of the more common concerns relates to Article 17 of the Church Order because actions related to this provision often bear a stigma for pastors and churches. This concern has caused a number of individuals and churches to suggest changes to our way of handling these kinds of situations as a denomination. Some of the concerns and suggested changes are highlighted in Overtures 4, 5, and 6 deferred from 2020 to be addressed by Synod 2022, and in Overture 10 to Synod 2022. These overtures suggest that our churches and classes would be helped by clearer guidelines and possible changes to Church Order provisions related to the supervision and release of ministers.

As a result of these discussions, Synod 2022 approved the establishment of a Church Order Review Task Force (CORTF) (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). Following the parameters of composition and membership delineated by synod, the task force was formed with the following members: Rev. Laura de Jong, Rev. Chelsey Harmon, Pastor James Jones, Mr. Casey Jen, Rev. Rita

Klein-Geltink (reporter), Rev. John Sideco, Rev. Kathy Smith (ex-officio), and Rev. Joel Vande Werken (chair). The task force was also assisted by advisors Rev. Dave Den Haan (Thrive) and Rev. Susan LaClear (Candidacy Committee), and we gratefully acknowledge the administrative assistance provided by Cassie Beadle and the wisdom of other denominational staff with whom we consulted.

The mandate of the task force has been as follows:

to conduct a comprehensive review of Church Order Articles 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 and their Supplements in conversation with Pastor Church Resources [now called Thrive] and relevant voices, and to bring an interim report to Synod 2023 through the COD and a final report to Synod 2024.

The task force shall develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions and more effective oversight of individuals in specialized ministries, including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8.

*(Acts of Synod 2022, p. 849)*

The task force met on a number of occasions via Zoom (Nov. 7 and Dec. 5, 2022; Feb. 28, Apr. 11, May 23, July 17, Aug. 22, Sept. 25, Oct. 30, Nov. 9, and Nov. 20, 2023) and conducted one in-person meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Feb. 1-2, 2023). The task force submitted an interim report through the COD to Synod 2023 (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 72-73). And here, following regular updates to the Council of Delegates and interactions with a number of individuals across the CRCNA, the Church Order Review Task Force presents its full report to Synod 2024.

## **II. Mandate, observations, and background**

### *A. Initial Observations*

The Church Order addresses a wide variety of situations in Articles 12-17. While it is important for the church to have agreed-upon processes to regulate its organization, it is not possible to create a separate set of rules or procedures to address every situation. In fact, it is expressly *not* the purpose of the Christian Reformed Church Order to do so. Dating back to the time of John Calvin, the purposeful practice within the Reformed tradition has been to create guidelines grounded in theological commitments that enable the church to function in a healthy and peaceful way (1 Cor. 14:40) and which allow for both flexibility and wisdom to be used in any particular situation.

Because our polity is rooted in a deep commitment to the creeds and confessions, these statements of faith provide the conceptual guidance that allows us to have a relatively “thin” Church Order that does not need to anticipate or address every eventuality but provides general guidance, with

the assumption that other denominational resources will be available for particular situations. As the introduction to the Church Order states, these articles contain the “collective wisdom of the church” so that this wisdom might be “passed on from generation to generation.” The task force committed to carrying out its mandate in the same spirit. Thus we recognize that the following guidelines may seem too general for some situations, but we believe this approach is necessary and appropriate within a covenant community seeking the wisdom of God’s Spirit for their particular situation. And while we believe that good structures and policies can contribute to healthy church life, we also humbly recognize the limits of Church Order to address concerns that may arise. On many occasions as we carried out our work, we were reminded of the importance of covenant community and relationship building, and we encourage pastors, councils, classes, and any others who are involved in the issues addressed in this report to recognize Church Order as no more than a tool—a good tool, but only a tool—that points us toward deeper and healthier relationships rooted in Christ.

One particular issue the task force was asked to recognize was “the increasing use of Article 17 and its often-perceived stigma” (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). Of all the areas covered in this report, the discussion concerning appropriate application of Article 17 arouses the strongest feelings, because the article is often applied in situations of conflict and pain for both pastors and churches. While synod’s mandate primarily addresses the need for administrative guidelines and potential updates to the Church Order, the task force is also keenly aware that behind every situation involving transition and supervision are real people and real ministry situations. Our goal is to help churches and pastors find ways to address these situations in community rather than in isolation, with a balance of grace and truth that reflects the ministry of Christ. We also acknowledge that the increased use of Article 17 is due in part to a rise in the release of ministers for nonconflict related reasons, such as the pursuit of further degree studies, family care leave, spousal job changes, and the disbanding or disaffiliation of congregations.

#### 1. Organization of this report

As we began our work, we recognized two broad areas of discussion within our mandate. First, we faced several issues dealing with supervision, accountability, and support for ministers of the Word in noncongregational settings. These issues roughly corresponded (but were not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 12-13. Second, we identified a number of issues related to transitions in ministry, especially when a minister of the Word is released from a particular call without another call in place, or when a minister resigns from ordained ministry in the denomination as a whole. These issues roughly corresponded to (but were not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 14 and 17. This report will largely use these two areas as a framework for organizing the material we reviewed as we carried out synod’s

assignment. For each of these two main sections, we will attempt to meet four objectives:

- provide background observations and theological reflections
- identify key issues, observations, and concerns arising in today's context, with particular attention to those named in the overtures referred to the task force
- note resources and guidance available within the denomination
- provide recommendations for the improvement of the Church Order and its Supplements, as well as potential action steps by denominational assemblies or staff

We also intend, in this first main section of our report, to offer observations about the theology of office and ordination that guides our thinking as a denomination. While there are a number of practical and pastoral considerations to keep in mind as we process matters related to a specific call, or to a release from a specific ministry, it is essential for the work of the church that we keep in mind the overall goal of advancing the work of God's kingdom. Thus we want to ground all of our work, including those matters that appear more administrative in nature, in the testimony of Scripture and in the wisdom of theological reflection done within the Reformed tradition over the years. We hope to return to some of these reflections in the concluding section of our report as well (see section V, B), before providing a summary of our final recommendations to synod.

## 2. The limits of our mandate

It is also helpful to recognize the limits of our mandate. First, we note that a number of issues that could be related to the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word are not covered in the articles of Church Order assigned in our mandate. To begin with, we were not tasked to reconsider the definition of the "ministry of the Word" (Art. 11). Thus we will assume the validity and usefulness of that definition. Nor does our mandate cover issues related to bivocationality and the support of bivocational ministers by their councils (Art. 15). Those topics have already been addressed by the Study of Bivocationality Task Force (see *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314; *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962-67, 975), and we found that their report provided helpful observations and insights about the changing nature of ministry today. Our mandate also does not specifically call us to address the supervision of retired ministers (Art. 18), though we will make some observations about this task (see section V, A, 2). In addition, with Overture 4 (deferred from 2020): "Amend Church Order Articles 12, 13, 14, and 17 with Respect to Supervision and Transition of Ministers," we observed that many of our discussions about ministers of the Word could foster similar dialogues about commissioned pastors, a subject to which we will return in our conclusion (see section V, A, 1). Because these matters are outside the scope of our mandate, we will explore only in limited detail the applications of our work in those areas.

### 3. Terminology

For the sake of simplicity, we will use the terms “pastor” and “minister” throughout this report as synonyms for “minister of the Word,” the technical term for the office under discussion in Articles 12-17. We recognize that these terms could also apply to some persons serving in the office of commissioned pastor, so we want to clarify at the beginning of this report that, unless otherwise noted, our observations about officebearers in the CRCNA are limited to the single office under consideration in Articles 12-17.

We also tried to determine the best way to describe pastors who are not serving in a local CRC setting. For many years the CRC described these positions as “extraordinary” (for example, see *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 55, 643). More recently, the language of “specialized” ministries has been used (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 13-b). Neither term, however, is satisfactory in our present context. “Extraordinary” implies there is something unusual or unique about a particular calling, but such a term hardly seems appropriate for a rapidly growing number of positions beyond the local congregation. Additionally, congregations are increasingly creating “specialized” ministry positions, bringing confusion when the term is only intended to apply to positions outside the local congregation. Thus we have chosen to identify these roles as “noncongregational,” with the understanding that this term also has limits because it may include calls to congregations outside the CRC. However, we believe the term is the best one available to describe positions outside a local CRC congregation, provided we bear in mind the term’s application to the on-loan or orderly-exchange provisions as well.

Finally, as Overture 4 observes, the language of Church Order has been somewhat inconsistent in the way it refers to the nature of calling and supervision, and churches and pastors could benefit from further clarity about the church polity expectations involved in these related concepts. Again, there are limits to any terminology we might choose, and some of the confusion about terminology reflects the growing influence of corporate structures on the organization of the church. However, we also recognize that there is no single theological term that applies to the specific avenues for ministerial service covered in Church Order Articles 12-17. Thus, while we will use a variety of terms in this report—including “role,” “work,” “task,” and “ministry”—we have opted to recommend changes to the Church Order that use the term “position” consistently to refer to the specific call in which a pastor is supervised.

#### *B. Theological reflection on the nature of office*

The present version of the Church Order has its basis in the revisions approved by synod in 1965, but the principles behind our Church Order date back much further. We begin with a theological consideration of the nature

of office as a recognition that our Church Order and practice must flow from our theology, and not the other way around. The Belgic Confession (Art. 30) teaches that the work of a pastor is to “preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.” Together with the elders and deacons, pastors “make up the council of the church” and provide for the faithful ministry of the church. The Belgic Confession draws on biblical principles emphasizing the need for leaders who “preach the Word” and who “correct, rebuke, and encourage” the development of sound doctrine and care for God’s people (2 Tim. 4:2-5; see also Acts 6:4; Matt. 18:18). Traditional forms used in the CRC for the ordination of ministers of the Word similarly emphasize the tasks of preaching, administering the sacraments, prayer, and shepherding the people of God in the Christian life (see *Psalter Hymnal* 1987, pp. 992-93, 995-96). These tasks receive a formal summary in Church Order Article 11, which declares: “The calling of a minister of the Word is to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture in order to gather in and equip the members so that the church of Jesus Christ may be built up.”

The CRC’s understanding of the nature of ecclesiastical office is based to a significant extent on two synodical study committee reports. Synod 1973 received a report titled “Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination,” which looked at the “nature of ecclesiastical office and the meaning of ordination as taught in Scripture and as exhibited in the history of the church of Christ” and considered “the question of the ministerial status of ministers engaged in extraordinary types of service—like Bible teaching in high schools or administrative duties” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 635; see *Acts of Synod 1971*, pp. 55, 643). Synod acknowledged that while some individuals are appointed to special tasks, the offices are to be understood in terms of functionality and “are primarily characterized by service, rather than by status, dominance, or privilege. The authority . . . associated with the special ministries is an authority defined by love and service” (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 715).

Twenty-eight years later, Synod 2001 received the report of the Committee to Study Ordination and “Official Acts of Ministry” and adopted “guidelines for understanding the nature of, and relationships among, the concepts and practices of ordination, the ‘official acts of ministry,’ and church office” (*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 503). Among several recommendations adopted by Synod 2001 from that report, these two regarding leadership continue to define our view of office and leadership today:

Leadership is centrally a relationship of trust and responsibility. Leaders are entrusted by Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, to take pastoral responsibility for a part of his flock. With this responsibility comes the authority of Christ for the purposes to which the leader has been called. . . .

Leaders must at the same time be recognized and trusted by the people of God as those who come with authority and blessings from the

Lord. This dual relationship of leader to Christ and leader to the people is what above all defines leadership in the church. Leaders are those who have both the call of Christ and the call of the people.

*(Acts of Synod 2001, pp. 503-4)*

These reports offer a helpful summary of the CRC's understanding of the nature of ordained ministry, which guides the application of Church Order to particular situations. And the important emphases on service and leadership continue to shape our denomination's approach to ordained ministry, especially to the work of a minister of the Word, to varying degrees in varying situations in the present context. This theological and pastoral summary leads to some additional reflections on specific theological issues to which we will return throughout this report.

### 1. The nature of a minister's call

In the Reformed tradition the office of minister of the Word is shaped by both an internal call—that is, a personal sense of the Spirit's nudging toward leadership in the church—and an external call, extended by the church through its assemblies. Thus a call to ministry, and to a specific ministry, is not simply a matter for personal discernment but one that also involves congregations, councils, and classes in the deliberative process. Ministry has historically been seen as a lifetime vocation that can be given up only in exceptional circumstances, as reflected in the language of Church Order that refers to pastors who "forsake the office" (Art. 14-c). Because ministers of the Word exercise their office on behalf of the wider church, it is also the office most specifically and extensively regulated by Church Order, both in terms of training and of accountability to the assemblies.

Because a minister's call is one considered in conjunction with other church leaders, the church has a special role to play in discerning calls to noncongregational positions. However, the classis and synodical deputies play an additional role of discerning whether a position outside the local congregation provides an appropriate avenue for service in ministerial tasks with the endorsement of the church. Some positions are considered to be preapproved for ministers of the Word, such as missions, chaplaincy, specialized transitional ministry, and synodical appointments or appointments ratified by synod (Art. 12-b). Other positions must be approved by classis with the concurrence of the synodical deputies as work that is "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" (Art. 12-c). In all calls, whether to congregational or noncongregational positions, the classis plays a role through its designated counselor (Art. 9).

Collective discernment is also required as ministers transition out of a particular call. The relationship between church and pastor is different from the relationship between a typical employer and employee. The CRC holds that pastors are not simply hired but that God is acting through the call of the congregation to bring a pastor into a specific place of ministry. This

understanding is reflected in the questions asked of a pastor at an ordination or installation service. Thus ministers may not leave an existing call without the consent of the council that issued the particular call (Art. 14-a). Further, CRC polity also prevents a congregation from dismissing a pastor simply because they no longer appreciate his or her ministry. The calling process and polity assume that both a community left behind and a community being entered should take part in the discernment process concerning a pastor's ministry. In addition, the wider church participates in this discernment through the involvement of classis functionaries or, on specific occasions, synodical deputies.

## 2. Ordination clings to a role in the church

CRC theology and practice tie ordination to an office, not an individual. Not only are the church assemblies involved in discerning a general calling into ministry, but also each ordained pastor requires a valid call from a church council in order to maintain standing as a minister of the Word in the CRC. This means that both pastors and councils must take the calling process seriously enough to see it as more than just a decision to "hire" or "fire" a church employee, or to "accept a position" with a particular employer. A pastor is not a "free agent" who can decide on the basis of personal preference where and when to serve in ministry. Thus Church Order insists that only those "officially called and ordained" may exercise office (Art. 3-b) and requires the consent of a council even when a pastor leaves a particular congregation (Art. 14-a). These requirements reflect Scripture's warning about persons who seek to represent the church on their own personal authority (see Rom. 16:17-18; 2 John 10-11).

Further, though the ministry of the Word has traditionally been seen as a lifetime vocation, the CRC has never considered lifetime ordination as an automatic privilege (although this principle comes to expression in different ways for a minister of the Word than for the other offices). Synod 1973, as it considered a significant study on the nature of ecclesiastical office and ordination, observed that ordination recognizes a minister's calling to a particular task—namely, that of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments in a certain setting. Thus ordination confers not a special status on an individual but rather the fact of their being set apart for a particular ministry that is strategic for the accomplishment of the church's total ministry (*Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 62-64). It should be noted that the CRC is somewhat different in this regard from other denominations, including many Presbyterian polities, in which the offices of pastor and elder are understood to have lifetime tenure. Though most ministers of the Word are called for indefinite terms, unlike the specific terms typically used with elders and deacons—ministerial term calls are also sometimes used (Supplement, Art. 8, C). The principle of limited tenure comes to expression in our polity for ministers of the Word in that ministers are ordained *for a certain role* and



retain their ordination only as long as they serve in a position which is “ministerial” in nature, consistent with this role.

### 3. The supervision of ministers of the Word

Because the ministry of the Word is a labor in and for the church, pastors exercise their office in close coordination with elders and deacons, who provide supervision and accountability as well as support and encouragement to those in the pastoral office. In distinction from other Reformed and Presbyterian polities, pastors in the CRCNA are supervised directly by a council rather than by a major assembly. This is true not only of pastors called to serve directly in a local congregation but also of those called to noncongregational service such as chaplains, professors of theology, ministers engaged in denominational work, or those serving in the growing number of other such noncongregational positions (as is clear by comparing Art. 13-a and 13-b). This local oversight of pastors places a significant responsibility on elders and deacons to understand their role in providing supervision and support as it relates to ministerial work, and this is evident in such responsibilities as the requirement of a council’s approval for release from a call (Art. 14-a; 17-a).

Synod 1978 dealt in some detail with the issue of the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” tasks of ministers of the Word (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 474-83). Among the key observations made to that synod was the principle that a minister of the Word is set apart by and for the church, for official tasks assigned by God to the church. While recognizing the challenge of supervising the work of noncongregational ministers at times, the study committee reminded synod of the importance of ecclesiastical oversight for all who represent the official ministry of the church (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 477-78). This reminder is perhaps even more important today, as the church has come to accept an increasing diversity of positions in which an individual may retain official standing as a representative of the institutional church. This reality affects both those ministers who serve in noncongregational positions (Art. 12-13) as well as those who are between calls because of a release from active ministry service in a congregation or other institution (Art. 17-a).

#### *C. New cultural realities and shifts in thinking about ministerial office*

Along with an increasing diversity of ministry positions in the church, there have been many other changes in the church and in wider culture since the substantial revisions to Church Order were adopted in 1965. Some of these changes are cultural; others are specific to the life of the church or of the Christian Reformed denomination. These changes have naturally shaped the way the church views office and ordination in our present context, as noted particularly in Overture 5 (deferred from 2020): “Appoint a Study Committee to Review Church Order Articles 12-17.” We highlight several of these changes here:

### 1. Growing use of “business” language and expectations in church leadership

One of the most notable shifts is the application of business principles to the life of the church. This is evident in churches using the language of “hiring” or “firing” a pastor rather than “calling” an individual to serve and “releasing” an individual from his or her call. It is seen in pastors who go about a “job search” without consulting their fellow officebearers, and in “pastor job descriptions” that resemble the job descriptions of corporate officers. A business model often emerges from a kind of pragmatism or desire for efficiency on the part of both churches and pastors, and from a loss of appreciation for the spiritual nature of ecclesiastical office or a respect for the individual holding office in the church. While pragmatism and efficiency have their place, such priorities can obscure the role of God in the life of his people and thus diminish the significance of the calling to a “ministry of the Word,” and to the sometimes difficult work of laboring together as witnesses to the grace of Jesus Christ. It may also result in unrealistic or unsustainable expectations from congregations, eventually resulting in conflict between pastors and churches. While there is much the church can learn from a variety of sources, including the business world, it is important to hold to a biblically and theologically informed view of the church and of ordained ministry when in the process of calling and supervising ministers of the Word. The church is a spiritual reality shaped by different principles, driven by different goals, and assessed according to different measurements. In a business model “hiring” and “firing” are pragmatic responses to a perception about how ministry is going and may not allow room to see how God’s Spirit may be at work in prophetic ways that challenge the understanding we have of ourselves as individuals and as church communities.

### 2. Significant differentiation of ministry positions within and beyond the local congregation

As in many occupations, ministry has seen increasing specialization in the past several decades. Whereas it was common for churches to have only a solo pastor, it is now becoming common for churches to be served by several individuals who may each bear a title such as “Pastor of \_\_\_\_\_.” The number of noncongregational ministry positions is also expanding, with pastors serving in denominational positions, as faculty in higher-education institutions, and with other ministry organizations. This requires the church to reframe its thinking about the specific tasks of ministers even as it continues to reflect on what lies at the center of those tasks. Individuals who serve in ministry both hold an “office” (an ecclesiastical designation) and a “position” (an organizational designation).

### 3. Diminished longevity in any occupation or career

In today’s job environment, adults will typically change jobs a number of times in their lifetime. This reality is also reflected in the church. While once

it could be assumed that ordained ministry was a call to dedicate one's life and full-time labor to the work of the institutional church, that is no longer the case. Further, life circumstances such as a spouse's career opportunities, a desire for further education, or the need to care for children or elderly parents can affect one's sense of continued calling to the traditional tasks of ordained ministry in ways not envisioned several decades ago. And as the Study of Bivocationality Task Force noted, the ministerial calling is increasingly seen as one that can be fulfilled in combination with other occupations which may or may not be related to positions traditionally seen as pastoral (see *Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 294-96). Yet despite the growing number of reasons for leaving a particular congregation or ordained ministry altogether, there remains a certain stigma attached to such a departure. Our single process for separation from a specific call means that the suspicion of conflict may attach to pastors who leave any ministry role, even if conflict played no part in the decisions. We will explore this reality in more detail in section IV, B, 4, below.

#### 4. Increased concern over ministerial "fit"

Just as pastoral ministry is becoming increasingly specialized, congregations are sensing a uniqueness in their own calling, such that pastoral calls must include increasing awareness of the particular local needs of a congregation. As individual CRC congregations increasingly see themselves as having a unique culture and set of expectations, they become more particular about their minister's alignment with the congregation's values. Pastor search processes take longer, and fewer opportunities exist for pastors to move to a congregation that will offer a better fit. In addition, pastors, who have become more particular themselves, are less likely to accept new calls. This situation can create a sense of impatience at times on the part of a congregation, a pastor, or both, when there is a sense of misalignment between them.

#### 5. Anxiety from increased pace of change

The speed with which the surrounding culture moves has created in many churches a reactionary impulse to move just as quickly, diminishing the capacity to bear with one another and look prayerfully for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Churches in North America face a season of declining membership, and congregations sometimes believe that a change in pastoral leadership may be the needed catalyst for renewal or growth.

#### 6. Decreased awareness of or appreciation for church procedures

As Overture 5 notes, "Church leadership is often undertrained in Church Order which, in times of conflict or dissatisfaction with the pastor, can result in (1) failure to use the tools Church Order provides, such as church visitors and/or the wisdom of classis and other classical functionaries, and (2) deferring instead to Pastor Church Resources [now Thrive] for a quick solution." Sometimes assemblies and pastors opt for pragmatic solutions, perhaps in an effort to avoid conflict or avoid the awkwardness or formality

prescribed by Church Order. Unfortunately, as was emphasized to our task force on several occasions by classis leaders and denominational staff, sometimes the “shortcuts” — which seem convenient at the time — result in more work later on as informal solutions lead to uncertainties about what was actually decided, or how to implement agreements concluded upon assumptions rather than clear decisions. As one denominational staff member observed, “In a world full of devices and apps, we need to resist the temptation to find quick fixes that allow us to bypass the hard work of discernment and discipleship that’s done as we seek the Spirit’s guidance in messy community.” It is important to recognize that Church Order, similarly, cannot provide a “quick fix.” Rather, it offers a framework for doing the kind of discernment and discipleship necessary to identify ways in which God’s Spirit may be working in a particular situation.

7. Increasing ethnic and cultural diversity within the denomination  
CRC theology and ecclesiology are heavily shaped by Reformed thinking that has emerged from a Dutch-American and Dutch-Canadian context. Nevertheless, our community of faith is not identical to that of the generations before us. All facets of our church life and identity have changed and are changing, from theological understanding, biblical interpretation, and mandates in Church Order, to cultural and societal values that call us to faithful witness in the world. Some find that the CRC they know from the past is not the CRC they are experiencing in the present. Likewise, we have become more diverse as God has enfolded people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and congregations in new geographic regions, into the Christian Reformed Church. Such diversity, from the past to the present and across ethnic and cultural contexts, results in diversity of thought and practice, and all of this changes the cultural context for CRC congregations as well as for the denomination as a whole.

Beyond the simplistic generalization of Western individual rights versus Eastern communal responsibilities, within various cultures there are different emphases on law and guilt versus interpersonal relationships, democratic egalitarianism versus hierarchical structures, and leaders’ authority versus servanthood, to name but a few. With this in mind, we want to note that the application of the Church Order should take cultural context into consideration, and the processes should be held loosely in any particular situation rather than tightly across all situations. Our structures of accountability are important, but these should not be reduced to the confines of paperwork and reports. As followers of Christ, we commit to live out an accountability that is marked by a posture of “one another” and the productive stewardship of relationships. The values articulated in the 1996 synodical report that is now published as *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* (see [crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf](http://crcna.org/sites/default/files/diversefamily.pdf); *Acts of Synod 1996*, pp. 510-515, 595-619) provide a helpful framework for living out this call in the

application of Church Order to an increasingly diverse number of situations in the CRC today.

### Conclusion

We want to emphasize that a number of these shifting realities are not, in and of themselves, either good or bad. They are simply changes that we need to be aware of because they affect our understanding about the relationship between Christ's church and the world today and thus also affect the way we think about the nature of ministry and leadership in and for the church. In the next two sections of this report we will identify some of the ways these cultural changes may call us to rethink the practical workings of Church Order in relation to the supervision of ministers and releases from calls. Again, our desire in this process is not simply to create different procedures but to recognize these procedures as tools to help pastors, churches, and assemblies feel a deep sense of connection and belonging as we collectively discern how to serve faithfully in the CRC.

### *D. Methodology*

As our task force began its work, we spent a significant amount of time reviewing classis and denominational records in order to understand the current landscape of ministry in the CRCNA as it relates to matters addressed in Articles 12-17. In addition, the task force requested feedback from the stated clerks through an online survey and through an in-person discussion at the stated clerks' conference in January 2023. Hearing stories was a necessary part of our process; we solicited these through our networks. Direct feedback and stories came from individuals via emails, conversations, denominational representatives, and classis contacts.

Because the topics covered in this report affect specific groups of individuals, the task force also consulted with denominational leaders with experience in the areas of chaplaincy (Tim Rietkerk) and diversity (Reginald Smith). We corresponded with the leadership of Resonate Global Mission with regard to its understanding about how calls to missions should be processed, with ethnic ministry leaders from various non-Anglo communities across the CRC, with denominational Human Resources personnel in both the U.S. and Canada regarding employment best practices, and with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee concerning implications of changes proposed to the present Church Order Article 13-c. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions they have made to this report, as well as the input of all who shared stories of ministry from which we could learn.

Finally, the task force looked at a significant amount of data from classis minutes, from the CRCNA *Yearbook*, and from the *Acts of Synod* to help us understand trends related to noncongregational ministries and the frequency with which classes address specific requests related to Articles 12-17 of the Church Order. Relevant findings will be reported at appropriate points as they affect the recommendations presented later in this report.

The task force is thankful for the work of the *Yearbook* staff and other denominational employees for their assistance in collecting the data relevant to our discussions.

### III. Accountability and supervision

#### A. Background and theological observations

As noted in the introduction, one key area of our task force's mandate involves the calling, supervision, and support of pastors serving in settings outside a local CRC congregation. Within this area of focus, we will first explore the subject of calling (Art. 12) and then move on to issues of accountability and support (Art. 13).

The CRC's understanding of all ministry is rooted in the perspective described in section II of this report: ordained ministry recognizes both the call to serve the risen Lord and the responsibility to represent that risen Lord in a position of trust and authority. Since the time of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), Reformed churches have recognized a legitimate place for ministry in settings other than the local congregation. However, the CRC has always experienced a certain tension about such positions, as it has sought to discern which positions should be deemed "ministerial" and how to apply such discernment to changing cultural situations.

The historic tension in the CRC over what has been called "extraordinary" ministry is evident in past reports to synod (see *Agenda for Synod 1930*, pp. 30-49; *Acts of Synod 1950*, pp. 322-43; *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 233-52; *Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 474-83). These reports provide helpful background for our present work and thinking on these matters.

#### 1. Calling ministers to serve in noncongregational settings (Art. 12)

##### a. The nature of ordained ministry

Church Order Article 12 addresses the specific tasks and callings of a minister of the Word. Article 12-a describes the tasks of a minister in a CRC congregation, which has historically been the work of most CRC ministers: to "preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth," and other similar responsibilities. Exceptions were granted for ministers serving in the work of missions, in denominational leadership, or in chaplaincy positions deemed clearly "ecclesiastical" — generally these positions were, by definition, "extraordinary" and their ministerial character was undefined. As a result, synod heard recurrent concerns about the consistency of the standards applied to determine what work was, indeed, genuinely "ministerial" (see *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 324; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 56).

When it adopted the present reading of Articles 11-12, Synod 1978 helpfully observed that the CRC recognizes only one class of ministers. What distinguishes pastors of congregations from other ministers is not their call to minister the Word but rather the *setting* (either the local

congregation, or some other setting) and the *specific tasks* (either general congregational ministry, or some “specialized” work applying the message of the Word to the world). Synod 1978 therefore abandoned the traditional language requiring that positions outside the local CRC congregation be “spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling,” and concentrated instead on attempting to ensure that “each approved ministry position will be in fact a meaningful and appropriate expression of the essential nature (purpose and primary task) of the ministry of the Word” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 479). This shift in language provides a helpful starting point for our own current reflections on ways to connect ministry outside the local congregation to the work of the wider church.

One recurrent emphasis in the discussions of synod has been the expectation that fields of labor beyond the local church still require a formal call from and accountability to “the church as an organization” through a local consistory [now council] (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 477-78; cf. *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 58). We note that this is different from the practice in other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, which place the supervision of pastors at the classis level. Because this issue needs further definition, we will return to it below (see section III, C, 1).

b. Two categories of “extraordinary” positions

Synod has been hesitant to identify all of the specific types of positions in which a pastor may serve beyond the local congregation in an ordained capacity, preferring to leave such decisions to the classis. There are, however, some positions that synod has granted blanket endorsement. As such, synod has developed two basic categories of noncongregational service: those which have prior synodical endorsement (Art. 12-b), and those which require the classis to judge the merits of the position’s connection to ordained ministry (Art. 12-c). This distinction first originated in 1947, when synod approved the position of radio minister as being ministerial and subsequently determined that its ruling applied retroactively to other synodically appointed positions and to missionaries; later, chaplains and specialized transitional ministers were also added (*Acts of Synod 1947*, pp. 21, 59-60, 71; see also *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 249-53 and section III, B, 7 below). All other positions are covered in Article 12-c and require a specific declaration from the classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, that the position being filled “is consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word ” and is in keeping with other synodical requirements.

c. Limitations on approval of ministry positions outside a congregation

Ordained ministry must be focused on the Word and sacraments (Art. 11); as an earlier synodical report puts it, such ministry has a focus on the “welfare of the church” rather than on the welfare of another institution

(*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 248; cf. *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 477). At the same time, the growth of bivocational (or multivocational) ministry makes clear that ordination as a minister of the Word does not require that a pastor be focused *only* on the welfare of the church or on the Word and sacraments. But this understanding does provide at least a helpful starting point for evaluating a new request for a “noncongregational” position. It is further worth noting that Article 12-c expects that a vacancy in such a position will lead to a review by classis and the synodical deputies before another call to that position is issued (current Supplement, Art. 12-c, a, 4).

d. Ministers serving on loan

The current Article 13-c was added to the Church Order in 1976. The study committee reporting to that synod (see *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 32-34, 497-517) noted that while there is overlap among ministers serving on loan to non-CRC congregations and ministers serving the CRC in noncongregational positions, the question for those on loan is consistency with the work of a CRC minister rather than consistency with the work of a minister in general. We would note that this category of pastors serving on loan is also similar to, but distinct from, that governed by provisions for the “Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers,” which allows CRC pastors to receive calls to RCA congregations (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D).

Synod agreed that such loans to other denominations could be consistent with CRC ministry, but with the stipulation that these provisions are temporary and serve the cause of a *Reformed* witness in the context of the non-CRC congregation (*Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 510-11). Put simply, the CRC did not intend to train and ordain ministers or to supervise pastors’ work in positions in other denominations, and synod thus attempted to put specific criteria in place to ensure that the loaning of pastors to churches outside the CRC did not become a general practice. The challenges of enforcing this latter provision is a subject to which we will return below (see section III, C, 4).

*Summary*

The issues noted here indicate the basic understandings of the nature of called ministry positions in the CRC. While the nature of ecclesiastical office involves service to the Lord, ordination also confers a representative function on those who serve in ecclesiastical offices. Ministers of the Word visibly represent and speak for the institutional church. Thus ordination requires some kind of significant connection to the gospel witness *of the wider denomination*. This reality will affect the way councils and classes discern whether a particular position fits our denominational understanding of the ministry of the Word, and will affect the nature of supervision for such positions.



## 2. The nature of supervision (Art. 13)

Ministers of the Word are required to submit themselves to continuing supervision as they carry out their work. As observed in section II of this report, ordained servants in the church are not simply “free agents” but representatives of the church whose position therefore requires them to be in contact with other church leaders who can encourage, support, and supervise them in their service to the Lord. Article 13 identifies some key principles that guide the outworking of this supervision:

### a. Accountable to the local council

One key element of the CRC view of ministers in noncongregational positions is the recognition that they remain under the supervision of the local council. Article 13-a summarizes the supervisory arrangements of pastors in congregational settings by noting that such pastors are “directly accountable to the calling church, and therefore shall be supervised in life, doctrine, and duties by that church.” With the exception of supervising duties, this summarizes the CRC’s view of all noncongregational pastors as well: each minister of the Word is accountable to, and supervised by, the council of the local church, which has “primary responsibility” for overseeing the minister’s doctrine and life (Art. 13-b).

### b. For the ministry of the Word

Recalling that Article 11 governs this whole section of the Church Order, we could say that the council is regularly to consider how a pastor’s work of proclaiming, explaining, and applying Holy Scripture fulfills the ministerial calling to “gather in and equip the members so that the church of Jesus Christ may be built up.” As we have noted before, the ministry of the *Word* is central to the calling of this office: while all Christians are to be people of the Word, there is a particular responsibility of ministers to live and work in a way that allows the Word of God to be displayed at the center of their vocation.

### c. Joint supervision

The current Articles 13-b and 13-c address the situation of pastors whose position is not in a local CRC congregation and is therefore subject to the authority of more than one body. The supervising organization may be a denominational agency, an educational institution, a hospital, the military, a corporation, or another congregation. In all of these cases, Church Order and synodical regulations distinguish between supervision of life and doctrine, which remains with a local CRC council, and supervision of duties, which is exercised by the “partner(s) in supervision” (see Supplement, Art. 13-b). This distinction means that ecclesiastical discipline remains the responsibility of the council. While the current Church Order Supplement only notes this disciplinary responsibility in the section of the Supplement describing the joint supervision of pastors on loan to other denominations (Supplement, Art. 13-c, f), the principle is implied in all joint-supervision arrangements.

d. Continued adherence to CRC doctrine and polity

We list this consideration separately in order to call particular attention to it. Though this expectation is currently only spelled out in regard to ministers serving on loan (Supplement, Art. 13-c, c), the CRC clearly expects all its officebearers to adhere to the doctrine and polity commitments of the denomination as indicated by their commitment to the Covenant for Officebearers (Art. 5). Missionaries, chaplains, and other CRC ministers who serve outside a local CRC congregation are no less bound to these commitments than are congregational pastors or those serving on loan.

e. "Proper support"

The CRC expects that councils shall attend to the "proper support" of the work of ministers of the Word (Art. 15). While this is not, strictly speaking, a matter of accountability, it is a matter that speaks to the relationship between the pastor and the council of the calling church. Again, these issues are not covered directly by the Church Order but are implied in portions of the Supplement that address participation in the Christian Reformed Church ministers' pension plan and other benefits (e.g., see Supplement, Art. 13-c, g; and Supplement, Art. 15). In the past, synod has recognized that salary and benefits support for ordained clergy are the primary responsibility of the employing organization (*Acts of Synod 1969*, p. 48; *Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 622-23; *Acts of Synod 2005*, pp. 742-43). Thus the calling church's main duty in the matter of "proper support" is to work with the ministers it calls to ensure that the matters addressed in Article 15 and its Supplement have been sufficiently addressed in the calling process (see also *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 963-64).

It should be noted, however, that the support of ministers of the Word is not just a matter of salary and benefits. For this reason we encourage congregations to consider ways to support the work of noncongregational ministers through prayer and other relational support (see section III, C, 6 below).

*Conclusions*

Articles 12 and 13 identify a number of important principles for the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word in the CRC, and in particular in how the local church is called to support and oversee the work of pastors not in the direct service of a CRC congregation. However, as we shall see, the context in which calling and supervision occur today has continued to grow in complexity and scope. Thus it is important to note the principles we have identified above as we consider particular questions that arise in the present context.

*B. Issues and Observations*

The cultural realities and changes in thinking about the ministerial office (mentioned in the opening section of this report) present a number of issues and questions about the supervision and accountability of pastors.

1. Growth in the number and variety of “other called positions”

In 1950 the vast majority of pastors in the CRC served in a congregational setting. As the chart below indicates, the number of CRC pastors serving in “other called positions” increased dramatically between 1950 and 1975, and that number has continued to grow (though not as significantly, particularly as a percentage) in the years since. This increase appears somewhat less significant when considering a roughly corresponding decrease in the percentage of CRC pastors serving in world missions, but the rise still indicates an expansion of the areas in which CRC ministers serve. The CRC has a significant number of active pastors ordained as chaplains (almost 9%) and a roughly similar number serving as professors, administrators of Christian organizations, or ministers on loan to congregations outside the CRC (about 3% in each of these categories).

	1950	1975	2000	2023
Congregational Ministry#	283	580	612	808
Missions^	34	57	45	34
Other called positions*	29	147	236	273
Eligible for call but not serving+	0	19	48	93
Emeritus	42	169	368	786

#This number includes church planters whose credentials are held by another church.

^Numbers for 1950 include home missionaries without a set charge.

\*This includes chaplains, educators, denominational personnel, and other similar positions.

+This largely includes those who are eligible for call via Article 17 but not actively serving in a called ministry position.

(Source: CRC *Yearbook* for years shown)

When combining the numbers of missionaries and of pastors who have no call with the number of “other called positions,” the result is that almost a third of all active (not retired) CRC pastors have their primary responsibility outside the ministry of a local congregation. (This does not take into account those serving in such positions as commissioned pastors.) This dramatic shift means that some questions that have long accompanied our understanding of ordained ministry, and how such positions are related to the local church, have now come to the fore in new ways. The sheer number of “other called positions” also means that local congregations are faced with both the challenge and the opportunity of determining how best to provide accountability and encouragement for the significant number of pastors whose ministry may not be readily visible to the local congregation.

Our task force identified a number of positions for which a significant portion of the responsibilities are supervised outside of a local CRC congregation, while the official responsibility for doctrine and life remains with the council:

- Chaplains
  - Military, hospital, or workplace chaplains (Art. 12-b)
  - Other institutional chaplains (Art. 12-c)
- Pastors serving congregations other than the CRC congregation that holds their credentials
  - Missionaries (Art. 12-b or 12-c)
  - Church planters (Art. 38-a)
  - Serving churches in the RCA (Art. 8)
  - On loan to other denominations (current Art. 13-c)
  - Specialized transitional ministers (Art. 12-b)
  - Pastors serving two congregations (either within or outside the CRC)
  - Interim pastors (often retired or sometimes between calls, cf. Art. 17 or 18)
- Pastors serving in educational settings
  - Theology professors at Calvin Theological Seminary (Art. 12-b)
  - Theology professors at other institutions (Art. 12-c)
  - Christian school teachers (Art. 12-c)
  - University campus ministry leaders (Art. 12-c)
- Pastors working in administrative settings
  - Denominational employees (Art. 12-b or 12-c)
  - Employees of other nonprofit organizations (Art. 12-c)
- Bivocational pastors (proposed Supplement, Art. 15, Guideline 3)
- Pastors without a current call
  - Released from a congregation (Art. 17)
  - Term call concluded (Art. 8)
- Retired pastors (Art. 18)

(For a representative list of specific positions approved over the years, see the *Index of Synodical Decisions 1857-2000*, pp. 404-10.)

As is evident from this list, many but not all of these positions are regulated by Articles 12-13 of the Church Order. For some types of positions, the regulations may be covered by more than one area of Church Order; for others, wisdom is required to determine how best to address each situation. In addition, we observe synod's existing expectation that church visitors inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and that appropriate action is taken in cases that do not conform to synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

## 2. A “patchwork” of regulations

Because of the growth in noncongregational positions over the past several decades, the Church Order articles and supplements addressing these situations have developed in an ad hoc fashion rather than as a coherent approach to ordained ministry in noncongregational positions. We note the following gaps and inconsistencies:

- The current Supplement to Article 12-c contains regulations for “other called positions,” but it is clear that its calling process, in general, also applies to those positions covered in Article 12-b.
- While most regulations for pastoral responsibilities are addressed in the current Article 12, some other situations are covered elsewhere in the Church Order. Most notably, the calling process for ministers serving on loan to other denominations is covered in the current Article 13-c, and calls for CRC pastors serving in the RCA are covered in the Supplement to Article 8.
- The current Supplement to Article 13-b contains a variety of regulations addressing both the calling process and the supervision of ministers in a way that focuses especially on service in a CRC agency or in an institutional chaplaincy. This material could be more appropriately divided between Article 12 and Article 13 and their Supplements, and it could be articulated in a way that makes it more generally applicable to all ministers in noncongregational service.
- Calls extended via Article 13 and the orderly exchange process in Supplement, Article 8, D, currently lack specific reference to the mechanism of a classis counselor who would normally review the terms of call on behalf of the classis.
- Regulations for participation in the ministers’ pension plan, which is a matter applicable to the call process for all pastors, is currently addressed only in the supervisory portions related to ministers serving on loan (Supplement, Art. 13-c).

In our recommendations concerning Church Order, we have attempted to standardize the approach to the material in Articles 12-13 so that, as much as possible, all material related to the calling of pastors appears in Article 12 and its Supplements and so that all material related to supervision appears in Article 13 and its Supplements. Further, we have tried to express principles of calling and supervision in ways that make them generally applicable to as many situations as possible.

## 3. Determining the scope and parameters of an ordained position

Perhaps the most basic question to be considered is what it means for an individual to serve in ordained ministry. The CRC has long had an unclear sense of the boundaries of ordained ministry. Almost every study committee reporting on this topic has called synod’s attention to the challenges of determining which positions are acceptable expressions of the ministerial

office, and which ones are not. Noting the complexity of determining what is or is not a ministerial calling, and the “growing elasticity in what constitutes the work of a chaplain,” the advisory committee for Synod 1978 challenged the classes to “prevent the development of many pseudo-ministerial positions which may be proposed as being consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 45-46).

As the Church Order indicates, the denomination has determined that certain kinds of noncongregational positions are, indeed, ministerial and do not require special permission from a classis before a call is extended (Art. 12-b). This informal list of “approved positions,” which historically included educators, missionaries, and chaplains, was expanded in 1978 and again in 2002 to include appointments made or ratified by synod (*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 45-48; *Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 469) and again in 2013 to include specialized transitional ministers (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 614).

Yet this growing support for nontraditional views of ordained ministry still leaves unanswered some of the basic questions: Which areas of service qualify for “ordained ministry of the Word,” and which ones do not? What lies at the center of all ordained ministry? While Church Order makes clear that service in a particular congregation is not essential to ordination as a minister of the Word, it is less clear at what point a noncongregational minister no longer serves to “gather in and equip the members” for the building up of Christ’s church (cf. Art. 11). We will return to this question in section III, C, 1, below.

#### 4. Balancing an individual’s personal sense of call versus ecclesiastical discernment processes

The Reformed tradition has long emphasized the importance of corporate discernment in the calling process. But as the landscape of ministry changes to include an increasing desire for flexibility in career paths, there are a growing number of occasions in which a person takes what would have been considered a nonministerial job, but for various reasons wishes to maintain ordained status as he or she engages in that position. The calling church must therefore determine if a position fits within the scope of ministry as outlined by the Church Order. Such requests for consideration, however, often come after the person has accepted the position, and there may be a lack of clarity regarding how that position is consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word. Situations like that can leave the church in an awkward position and without a real sense that they have extended a call; it may seem rather like they are merely rubber-stamping an action that has already been taken, and with limited input into or a sense of ownership over the call being extended. That is unfortunate for both the church and the individual receiving the call, who then loses the support and encouragement that the calling process is designed to offer.

Church Order Article 14-a also requires that a minister seek the permission of the calling church before leaving an approved position. As Overture 4 (deferred from 2020) points out, however, ministers can have their position in an organization terminated or radically changed solely at the discretion of the organization without prior consultation with either the minister or the calling church. In any case, whether the change in status is effected unilaterally or upon prior consultation, it still renders the minister without a call to a specific position, prompting the need to redefine the relationship between the noncongregational minister and the calling church. The sometimes-abrupt nature of such transitions and the inconsistent nature of some organizations' communications with the noncongregational ministers' calling or supervising churches can place churches and classes in an awkward position. At the same time, we note, councils and classes can still choose not to succumb to outside pressures to bypass the processes spelled out in the Church Order, and they can work with individual pastors to discern how best to provide both support and accountability as they serve in CRC ministry.

#### 5. Congregational responsibilities for pastoral calls

In addition, congregations are sometimes hesitant to extend calls for noncongregational ministry positions due to concerns over financial requirements such as housing allowance, pension, or insurance for the pastor being called. This concern extends perhaps especially to matters of liability—financial and pastoral—should a ministry position be terminated by another institution, perhaps even while a pastor is serving in a position at a nonchurch institution. Traditionally, the CRC denomination assumed a great amount of responsibility for the financial support of its pastors, even to the point of funding pensions for those employed outside the local church until just a few decades ago (*Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 622-23). As noted above, synod has indicated that primary responsibility for providing “proper support” for all pastors who serve outside a local CRC congregation lies with the employing organization, not with the calling church (see above, section III, A, 2, e). Nevertheless, these concerns are real. We will attempt to address some of these issues when we return to our recommendations and resources below (see Section III, C).

#### 6. When to involve synodical deputies

One issue in particular that deserves mention here is the role of the classis and the synodical deputies in the approval of chaplaincy positions as consistent with the ministry of the Word. Originally the CRC's Church Order allowed for ministers to serve “institutions of mercy or otherwise” as long as they had a valid call from a local congregation (pre-1965 Church Order Art. 6). To this provision synod added the regulation that the classis should review the “spiritual character” of the specific assignment, a measure to which the concurrence of synodical deputies was later added (see *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 138). Further, Synod 1978

specifically noted that ecclesiastical endorsement of chaplains was *not* intended to be a substitute for the process of ecclesiastical discernment about the appropriateness of an ordained minister serving in that position (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46), a position still accepted by the CRC's chaplain support ministries through Thrive. The subsequent amendment of Article 12-b to include mention of chaplaincy (see *Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 687), however, gives the impression that endorsement as a chaplain is, in fact, a synodically authorized endorsement of all such positions for ordained pastors. And while synodical regulations specifically address the issue of chaplaincy, we would note that the growth in the types of mission positions, as well as the development of specialized transitional ministries, means that there is additional need to clarify the distinction between which of these positions are covered by Article 12-b and which are addressed by Article 12-c.

#### 7. Joint supervision of pastors in noncongregational ministry positions

As noncongregational ministry positions become increasingly common, so does the need for joint-supervisory relationships between the calling church and the hiring organization. Article 13-b states that in such cases, "the council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties." It is sometimes unclear, however, what the responsibility of each party is to inform the other of changes or problems that have arisen in the scope of their supervision, and by what means this reporting happens. In some settings, such as military chaplaincy, the employing institution does not feel bound to ecclesiastical processes before implementing changes that might affect a pastor's call from the church. If there is a change in job description or a termination of a position, the pastor called to that position can suddenly find they are without the position to which they were ordained, thus making their ordination status unclear. If the calling church is similarly unaware of this situation, it can become even more difficult to navigate. This requires some measure of flexibility from the institutional church as well as pastors.

Synod 2002 considered the overlap between legal and ecclesiastical aspects of employment for ministers serving as denominational staff. Such pastors are, in legal terms, "at-will employees" who may be dismissed from employment due to internal considerations, subject to procedures that protect against arbitrary or capricious decision making by the employer (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 43-47). As increasing numbers of CRC pastors are employed by institutions outside the denomination, however, calling churches face a correspondingly growing number of potential employment scenarios to navigate as they carry out the responsibilities inherent in the calls they have extended. This requires wise consideration as churches develop systems of joint support and supervision for pastors in noncongregational positions, and it calls for diligence on the part of churches and pastors to live out the commitments they have made for support and supervision. This



consideration is currently articulated specifically in the Supplement to Article 13-b, which was put in place by Synod 2002 to ensure that each ministry partner in supervision would inform the other about any deviations in doctrine, life, or duties “before any action is taken” that would affect the minister’s status (see *Acts of Synod 2002*, pp. 469-70).

#### 8. Geographical considerations

Since oversight of the everyday duties of a minister in a noncongregational position happens by the hiring organization, the calling church’s supervision can happen from a greater distance and with less frequent direct reporting. Thus it is possible for a minister to be called to a position and have their credentials held by a church significantly outside any geographic proximity to where they work, perhaps because of prior affiliation with or affinity to that congregation. This raises questions regarding membership—can a person called by one church be a member at another church (including one outside the CRC)?—and, in turn, regarding classis engagement and the importance of local congregations’ knowing who is ministering in their midst or on their behalf elsewhere. While the Church Order presently expects that pastors serving on loan to a congregation “in close proximity to a Christian Reformed congregation of another classis” gain “approval” from that classis as well as from the classis of his or her own calling church (Supplement, Art. 13-c, d), we note that synod has, in the past, endorsed the principle of geographic proximity in all noncongregational calls (*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 58; *Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58). While notification may feel burdensome at times, particularly when classes lie in close geographic proximity to one another, there is wisdom in synod’s suggestion for respectful communication when official ministry takes place on behalf of the CRC within the bounds of another classis.

#### 9. Encouragement, not just regulation

While we believe that the intent behind our Church Order has always been mutual support and encouragement for those serving the Lord and his church, the current framework of these portions of Church Order leans heavily in the direction of regulation and discipline. This is most evident in the current Supplement to Article 13-b, which leads by focusing on disciplinary situations, but even a quick glance at this portion of the Church Order reveals that encouragement of pastors has not been a stated priority. While we recognize the necessity of regulation, we believe that both pastors and churches would be well served to have at least some mention of the importance of mutual encouragement in the Church Order. Holding the ministerial credentials for a minister in noncongregational service should be seen as an opportunity for a congregation, not a burden. This is especially true given the increasing diversity of the CRC. As outlined in the previous section, processes of supervision and accountability should be seen not simply as matters of administrative paperwork but as opportunities to build relationships and to invest in ministry together. Where cultural gaps

exist between a pastor and the calling church, the intentionality required in such relationships only grows.

### *C. Resources and guidance*

As we work toward our recommendations concerning the calling and supervision of pastors whose position lies outside a local CRC congregation, we want to highlight some resources to assist councils, classes, and pastors in applying the principles of Church Order to the context of ministry today. But, first, we want to address some matters of terminology. There are two phrases used frequently in Church Order and synodical pronouncements that would benefit from further definition as we consider accountability and supervision for ministers in noncongregational positions.

1. “Consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” (current Art. 12-c) This phrase is intended to convey a distinction between work that is done by a representative of the CRC’s ministry, and that which is done as part of the general office of all believers. As noted above, there is no firm distinction between a position that is “ministerial” and one that is not. However, we agree with past synods that it is important to maintain the character of the ministerial office as one that is more than just an endorsement of one’s service as a valuable Christian witness but also contributes significantly and officially to the church’s witness to the Word of God. As Synod 1978 put it, “The real nature of ministry [is] proclamation under the authority of the church . . .” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 45). In keeping with the understanding of office and ordination outlined in the previous section (II, B), a good working definition of “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” could be as follows:

Positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ.

Thus we suggest some key questions to help discern whether a position under consideration is indeed “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word,” and particularly with that calling *as a CRC minister* (which is a key part of our common ecclesiastical discernment):

- a. Does the position involve a significant degree of proclamation of the Word in preaching, public worship, pastoral care, or other contexts in which the minister is understood to be a representative of the church of Christ?
- b. Does the position help to gather in and equip members for the church of Jesus Christ so that the body may be built up?

- c. Does the individual in this position intend to carry out these tasks in cooperation with a local congregation, and under the authority of a CRC council, with the appropriate training and gifts?
- d. Do the tasks assigned under the position conflict in any way with the commitment a minister makes as a signatory of the CRC's Covenant for Officebearers?

We have drawn these questions from Church Order Article 11 and from the CRC's liturgical forms for the installation of ministers of the Word. In posing these questions, we suggest that they might serve as a kind of template by which to discern, in conversation with the pastor and the assemblies of the church, whether the intention of the position is to continue in the formal service of the local congregation or to serve the Lord in some other way.

We could also note here some of the positions that classes and synods have judged to be nonministerial in character, such as "spiritual director," "spiritual care practitioner," "pastoral counselor," professors of nontheological subjects, teachers at non-Reformed educational institutions, school administrators, fundraising positions for Christian organizations, and editorial positions for publishing houses (cf. *Acts of Synod 1928*, pp. 140-41; *Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; Henry De Moor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* [2nd Edition, 2020], p. 80); it should be noted that these positions would also apply to discussions about Article 14-d. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does make clear that persons who choose to serve the Lord in such capacities may not necessarily be able to keep or establish ministerial credentials or be called by local congregations in those capacities. The church should also be aware of ways in which expectations for chaplains are changing: in an increasing number of cases, public institutions prefer that chaplains be seen as "psychospiritual therapists" rather than as representatives of a particular Christian church. Such an employer expectation would then clash with the church's desire that its ordained leaders faithfully extend the ministry of the body of Christ.

## 2. "Called in the regular manner" (current Art. 12-b)

The "regular" means of extending a call are not identified in any single place in the Church Order, but the basic pattern can be established from various articles:

- A council extends a call to a pastor by presenting a nomination to the congregation (Art. 4-a), who affirms the council's call by means of a congregational vote (Art. 4-c; Art. 37).
- Candidates elected to office are ordained or installed in a public worship service of the church (Art. 4-d).
- The classis is involved in these matters through the work of a classical counselor, who is an officebearer from another congregation who acts on behalf of the classis to see that ecclesiastical regulations have been followed (Art. 9; Art. 42-c).

- The ordination of candidates and the installation of ministers are regulated according to Articles 10-a and 10-b.

This may sound burdensome at first glance, but these steps actually provide an opportunity for the congregation to embrace the way its ministry is extended through the specialized service of the individual being called. These regulations also provide protection for both the local church and the pastor being called by ensuring that various aspects of “proper support” and potential issues in joint supervision have been adequately addressed during the calling process. The involvement of the classis, through the classical counselor, provides one additional level of awareness and support to that of the other parties involved in these discussions. By means of the denomination’s letter of call and other documents that draw on the wisdom of numerous conversations about the nature of ministry, the calling process encourages clarity about the arrangements for a noncongregational call and hopefully avoids misunderstandings that could lead to hurt and confusion further on.

With the exception of the liturgical forms listed below, it should be noted that the letter of call and other documents are not synodically approved in the sense that they need to be used in a specific form. Rather, they are templates that reflect the priorities synod has expressed in the past for providing proper support and accountability for pastors in various tasks within and outside the local CRC congregation. The denomination’s website includes sample letters of call as well as a template for a covenant of joint supervision, for chaplains. The denomination also provides liturgical forms for the ordination of ministers of the Word, not just in local congregations but for other areas of service as well. We suggest that these forms be adapted for use in a variety of ministry settings and collected in one place on the denominational website.

Some of the current resources that exist are listed in Addendum F. We will be recommending some templates for adoption, but it should be understood that the documents we are recommending do not need to replace the existing ones already developed to address more specific situations.

### 3. Distinction between Article 12-b and Article 12-c positions

One area of confusion has to do with trying to determine which calls require classis approval and synodical deputy concurrence, and which do not. As noted above, Article 12-b reflects a long-standing recognition in the Reformed tradition that missions and chaplaincy offer important ways for the church to extend its witness beyond the local congregation. However, Article 12-b is not intended to bypass the question of whether a *particular position* fits the ministerial calling or not; it merely leaves that question fully in the hands of the local assemblies rather than requiring classis approval with the additional concurrence of synodical deputies.

As a task force, we recommend the following guidelines for determining whether a position can be approved under Article 12-b or 12-c:

- a. When Article 12-b refers to “the work of missions, chaplaincy, or specialized transitional ministry,” we understand it to be indicating positions in which ministers specifically represent the CRC in work ordinarily recognizable as fitting into those categories of service. This article, then, would cover such positions as missionary pastors; chaplains in health care, military, or prison settings; and trained STMs—and only those endorsed by an appropriate denominational agency. All other missions, chaplaincy, and transitional ministry positions should be reviewed through Article 12-c.
- b. When Article 12-b refers to those appointed by synod directly, or ratified by synod, it is referring to those individuals for whom synodical approval is required in some formal way. This includes the general secretary and other executive leaders of the CRC, as well as theology professors at Calvin Theological Seminary who also serve as ministers of the Word. All other denominational staff positions, as well as positions for professors of theology at other institutions, should be processed via Article 12-c.
- c. Synod has spoken in the past about the importance of classis discernment even in chaplaincy positions. We would suggest, therefore, that even for positions covered by Article 12-b, the classis take note in its minutes that a call has been extended that is consistent with the work of a minister of the Word. We believe this could happen quite naturally if all pastors are “called in the regular manner,” as such noncongregational calls would also then be reported to the classis as part of the work of the classis counselor.
- d. Endorsement by a denominational agency does not necessarily imply that a position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.” Some individuals may meet the professional requirements for chaplaincy endorsement but may be invited to serve in institutions where the distinctive witness of the Christian church is not welcome. Councils and classes should exercise discernment in each individual case, particularly when considering whether “spiritual care practitioners,” “spiritual directors,” transitional ministers not endorsed by Thrive, or positions in counseling or academic settings are “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” as required by Article 12-c.

#### 4. Provisions for loaning pastors beyond the CRC

The provisions under which CRC pastors may serve on loan outside the denomination have not been reviewed in any significant way since they were adopted in 1976. In particular, the requirement that the “inviting body” (to use the language of “orderly exchange” with the RCA—Supplement, Art. 8, D) “seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed

Church” (Supplement, Art. 13-c, a) requires new consideration. In the context of growing ecumenicity and increasingly porous boundaries between denominations, this requirement now seems unnecessarily restrictive and increasingly unenforceable.

We note further that the CRC allows its own pastors to be loaned to another denomination but does not allow another denomination’s pastors, except for those in the RCA, to accept a call to a CRC congregation. This too seems at first glance to be unnecessarily restrictive. However, this policy reflects an intentional decision on the part of the denomination: our understanding of office requires that those who serve in church office must be, first of all, “confessing members of the church” (Art. 3-a; *Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 506). Thus any congregation that desires to call a non-CRC or non-RCA minister is asked to follow the procedures of Article 8 and its Supplement before simply pursuing the services of a non-CRC minister.

Extended service beyond the boundaries of the CRC, like all noncongregational service in the CRC, requires discernment not only on the part of the minister of the Word but also on the part of the assemblies placing a call. This is explicitly stated in the regulations concerning the orderly exchange of ministers with the RCA, which require “consultation with and . . . concurrence of the” calling church (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7). The precise mechanism for such consultation and concurrence is not specified in the case of an “orderly exchange.” Thus we suggest that, for any call beyond the local CRC, there is wisdom in obtaining some kind of formal concurrence from both the calling church and the classis. This approach would include the kinds of informal arrangements that sometimes happen when neighboring churches who share an ethnic community might invite a CRC pastor to fill the pulpit on an extended basis. In the case of on-loan service, a second installation by the calling church would be an unnecessary step; however, formal representation by the calling church at an installation service, and a notification in the minutes of the council and classis, would seem a wise and helpful way to indicate the CRC’s encouragement and official support for this kind of ministry.

##### 5. Guidance for participation in the major assemblies

One area of uncertainty lies in how best to apply the privileges of officebearers in relation to the major assemblies. For a number of years the Church Order has allowed classes, at their discretion, to allow the delegation of officebearers from emerging churches (Supplement, Art. 40-a, c). These officebearers (ministers of the Word or commissioned pastors serving as church planters) are delegated by the supervising church council on behalf of the emerging church they serve. However, though other noncongregational pastors may serve a variety of functions within a classis, they may serve as delegates only if the council holding their credentials delegates a chaplain, missionary, or other noncongregational pastor in place of the congregation’s own pastor. This practice makes clear the CRC understanding

that classis be a gathering of *churches* rather than of *ministers* (see *Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 57, pp. 167-70). Though classes have often utilized the provision of Article 40-a that allows noncongregational ministers an “advisory voice,” there are occasionally awkward moments when nondelegated officebearers have different expectations than what is allowed by Church Order (classis has discretion about whether to allow such officebearers to remain for executive session, but as guests of the classis they are not permitted to vote).

Though we want to be sensitive to the contributions such officebearers may make to a classis meeting, we would reaffirm the principle of Church Order that major assemblies are composed of officebearers from the *constituent* minor assemblies (Art. 34). The classis is a gathering of neighboring churches (Art. 39), not a ministerial gathering, and therefore delegates must be officebearers of the local congregation which has sent them (Art. 40-a). This means that most ministers serving in institutions other than the local congregation are not eligible to serve as delegates unless they are serving as an elder or deacon in that congregation. STMs and other interim pastors, because their credentials are not held in the local congregation, cannot serve as delegates to a classis meeting (though we recognize the wisdom of such ministers attending classis and presenting, in an advisory fashion, the insights they have as the temporary leaders of a local congregation), nor to a gathering of synod. One exception to this rule is that RCA ministers serving as pastors of CRC congregations are allowed to serve as delegates to classis and synod (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 10; Supplement, Art. 38-g, 1, k; Supplement, Art. 38-h, h).

#### 6. Encouragement, not just regulation

It is impossible for the Church Order to offer a full list of ways in which congregations can provide ongoing support and encouragement for ministers whose primary service is somewhere other than the local church that holds their credentials. However, the following list identifies some of the practices which churches or pastors in noncongregational ministries have found helpful:

- Preaching opportunities
- Opportunities to participate in the administration of sacraments
- Opportunities to share reports about the work of ministry and to gain encouragement for that work
- Opportunities to equip the congregation and/or classis for Christian witness and service in the world
- Dinner with council representatives
- Regular contact from church leaders
- Prayer support
- Pastoral ministry in cases of need
- Opportunities to serve the classis (e.g., assisting with a candidate’s examination, or as a church visitor, etc.)

Scripture in several places instructs the church to honor the work of those who serve in ministry and to find ways to encourage and support their work (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17). Our congregations have long embraced the idea of supportive care in response to missionaries; we would encourage churches to take a similar attitude toward chaplains, professors, pastors serving on loan, denominational employees, and other such ministers. The church visitors can help to keep this encouragement in front of churches by making the support of noncongregational ministers one topic addressed in the annual conversation with the council (see *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

Because all ministry involves relationships that take time to build, we offer these suggestions not as regulatory material but as ideas for how to make these relationships more meaningful, so that the concept of call is honored more effectively, ministers in noncongregational service are blessed and encouraged, and the calling church is aware of its ministry "reach" via the ministers whose credentials it holds. A covenant of joint supervision has relationship at its core, and should be seen by both churches and pastors as an invitation to supportive ministry relationships rather than just a contract spelling out required details of a calling process. For this reason we are encouraging covenants of joint supervision for all pastors called to serve beyond a local congregation. While such covenants may have mixed results depending on the degree to which they are embraced by both ministers and churches, they are helpful in identifying the specific issues that all parties need to think through.

In addition, "proper support" recognizes the value of a regular review of the terms of joint supervision for pastors serving outside a local congregation. The chaplaincy support team at Thrive requires a formal review of the terms of endorsement every five years. While no such requirements exist for other positions outside the local congregation, we note the wisdom of including such a regular review as part of the initial calling process. Including relationship-building opportunities, such as the ones listed above, will help to facilitate such reviews and hopefully to identify potential concerns before they become serious issues.

#### *Summary*

As this section indicates, the changing nature of ordained ministry presents pastors, churches, and classes with an increasingly complex task of identifying ways to support, encourage, and hold accountable those who represent the church of Christ in ministries beyond its institutional boundaries. However, the complexity of the task should not discourage churches from also recognizing the important opportunities gained by commissioning ministers of the Word to serve in such contexts, and by viewing such pastors as agents of the local church who extend the congregation's ministry where other members of the church may find it difficult to go. It is our desire that the following recommendations will call attention to these opportunities



and encourage congregations and pastors to work together to serve the Lord of the church faithfully in settings beyond the local church.

*D. Recommendations concerning accountability for pastors in noncongregational settings*

Synod's mandate charges this task force to provide, among other things, suggestions for "more effective oversight of individuals in [noncongregational] ministries" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). We have also attempted to engage with the suggestions of Overture 4 (deferred from 2020), which addressed concerns about inconsistency of language related to noncongregational positions, the desire for a Covenant of Joint Supervision for all pastors in such settings, and a clear instruction to communicate with the calling church when significant changes are made to a position outside the local congregation. In fulfillment of this portion of our mandate, we will be making the following recommendations to synod regarding ministers of the Word in noncongregational positions (see section VI. Recommendations, below, for the full text):

- changes to the wording of Articles 12-17 to clarify the distinction between the "work" of a minister and the "position" to which a pastor is called
- rearrangement of the material in Articles 12-13 and their Supplements to provide greater clarity and consistency in matters related to the supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings
- proposed formal definitions of the concepts of being "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" and being "called in the regular manner"
- requirement of a Covenant of Joint Supervision for all pastors in noncongregational positions
- commendation of identified resources to celebrate and support the ministry of pastors in noncongregational settings

It is our prayer that these updates and reflections will enable the church better to support and celebrate the work God is doing beyond the bounds of the local church in order to gather in and equip the members of Christ's church so that the kingdom of God may grow.

#### **IV. Transitions and release from ministry**

*A. Background and theological observations*

The second key area of our task force's mandate relates to the release of ministers of the Word from ministry positions or from service in the denomination as a whole. As noted in the introduction, the issues addressed here roughly correspond to matters addressed by Church Order Articles 14-17, though they are not strictly limited to those portions of the Church Order.

In section II of this report, we identified some aspects of a Reformed understanding of the nature of a minister's call, and these inform our understanding of how and when a pastor may be released from a call. As noted there, ordination is understood as a long-term (traditionally lifetime) calling exercised on behalf of the church, and ordination is tied not to an individual but to a specific set of ministry roles. Therefore the release of a pastor from a congregation or from service in the denomination is not a light matter.

As we move on to discuss the Church Order articles pertaining to the separation of ministers of the Word from their ministry positions, we begin with a few stories. These stories are compilations of accounts that many have experienced during an Article 17 or 14 separation—and the names in these stories are fictitious.

#### *Story 1*

Pastor Liam wasn't expecting the Article 17 separation request issued by his council. Even after nearly three years of increasing disagreement with his council over the future of the church, Pastor Liam was surprised that his council sent a formal request to classis asking for his removal as their pastor. They cited his lack of leadership and their lack of trust in him. At the next classis meeting, in executive session, Pastor Liam shared his perspective on the situation. No one spoke on his behalf. In the discussion that followed, there appeared to be little room for Spirit-led discernment and conversation, and no possibility of reconciliation. Classis approved the Article 17 separation with three-months' salary and benefits, and they appointed an oversight committee for him but not one for the church. The classis minutes did not include a reason for the separation. A year later, the classis oversight committee recommended to classis that he be allowed to take another call, and classis approved. Fifteen years later, Liam and his family are still extremely discouraged and hurting. In every one of his applications for another call, Liam cannot share about the healthy years of his ministry without questions about his Article 17 separation, thus reopening his and his family's wounds in every interview. There is no healing and no closure for them.

#### *Story 2*

The council of Lakewood CRC wasn't expecting the Article 17 separation request issued by Pastor Ethan. There had always been some level of disagreement between Pastor Ethan and the council on matters of both leadership style and theology, but the council was surprised when Pastor Ethan said it had reached a point where he didn't think those disagreements could be resolved. At the next classis meeting, in executive session, both Pastor Ethan and council representatives shared their perspectives on the situation, but the classis found it difficult to know what to discuss. Classis approved Pastor Ethan's Article 17 separation with three-months' salary and benefits, recommended the church retain a specialized transitional minister, and appointed an oversight committee for both Pastor Ethan and the

church. The classis minutes did not include a reason for the separation. Six months later, the classis oversight committee recommended to classis that the church be allowed to call another minister, and classis approved. Years later, church members remain confused about what really happened with Pastor Ethan, and some still wonder what they did to make him want to leave. There is no healing and no closure for the church.

### *Story 3*

Pastor Val was very confused and discouraged. After four years of trying to start and grow a church plant, it was becoming clear to everyone that this church plant would struggle to become a stable church. Whenever a new person showed up at the church, it seemed that a previously committed attendee would move on. Pastor Val was not sure what she should do next. Had she misheard God's call to be a church planter and a proclaimer of the good news? She and her sponsoring church's council could ask classis for an Article 17 separation of her call to the church plant, with a two-year eligibility period to receive a call to another ministry in the denomination. Or they could ask classis for an Article 14 separation of her call from the ministry to enter a nonministerial vocation or to serve in another denomination. Should she go for more education and training, using either an Article 17 separation to allow her to work toward a second theological degree, or an Article 14 separation enabling her to contemplate a completely different career? Or should she take extended time off from pastoral ministry through either Article 14 or 17 and use her time to care for her young children and aging parents? If she did, what would her identity be? What were her gifts to use in the kingdom? What was her next calling, and where? But, most importantly, where was God in all of this?

The issues raised in these composite stories are not new. Synod has received significant reports on matters related to the release of ministers several times in the past few decades (see *Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 581-89; *Acts of Synod 1987*, pp. 422-30; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-400). In addition, the pastor and church support team at Thrive has developed a number of resources that provide valuable guidance for various situations leading to separation from a ministry setting. These reports provide important background for the reflections of this present task force, which we summarize here:

#### 1. The reality of separations

Though Reformed church polity has historically held that neither churches nor pastors should ordinarily break the ministry partnership to which they have mutually committed in the calling process, the Church Order has always provided space for separations by way of exception. Synod has recognized that situations may exist that would warrant the separation of a pastor and a church without requiring discipline or rendering the pastor ineligible to receive another call (*Acts of Synod 1960*, p. 46). Prior to 1965 the Church Order required "proper support" for pastors by preventing

councils from dismissing a minister from service “without the knowledge and approbation of classis” and the synodical deputies (pre-1965 Church Order, Art. 11). By the time a revision of the Church Order was adopted in 1965, the matter of separation was given more formal attention, and the procedures now outlined in Article 17 had begun to take shape (see *Acts of Synod 1960*, p. 139, for background).

In addition, the Church Order has always provided for release from office in the case of “weighty reasons” (pre-1965 Church Order, Art. 12). At one time, such releases required only the approval of the classis; in 1965 the concurrence of synodical deputies was added to what became Article 14 in order to provide further safeguards for pastors. Recent decades have seen an increase in releases from office for various reasons, and the Church Order has become more specific in identifying which pastors may leave CRC ministry for a ministry outside the denomination (Art. 14-b) and which ones may leave for a nonministerial vocation (Art. 14-c or 14-d). In both situations, reentry into CRC ministry is possible via Article 8 for those who have been ordained in another denomination, or via Article 14-e for those who have left to pursue a nonministerial vocation.

The growing number of both Article 17 and Article 14 separations has attracted a great deal of attention and concern in recent years. Data from the *Acts of Synod* offers a picture of the dramatic rate of growth in such separations in recent decades:

CO Art.	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
14-b	4	5	14	12	9	8	6	7	11	13	14
14-c			1	6	0	3	3	4	6	7	5
14-d				0	1	1	2	0	0	3	0
17-a	2	3	0	15	17	20	13	13	23	19	20
17-c extension					6	12	14	11	12	12	17
17-c/d release					5	0	4	3	1	4	1

*Note:* Some subsections of the present Church Order Articles 14 and 17 were not in force in the earlier periods covered by this chart and so are left blank.

Classis and synod minutes for the past 10 years (2013-2022) show a yearly average of seventeen Article 14-b/-c/-d processes and sixteen Article 17-a processes. As the chart above indicates, this represents a significant increase in separations from just a few decades ago.

## 2. Many reasons for separations

As noted above (in section II, C), the increase in these situations of separation can be attributed, in part, to a changing cultural context. The CRC has

traditionally recognized the call to ordained ministry of the Word as a life-long calling (Art. 14-c). But there is a growing sense that people may be called to different roles and tasks during their lifetime. In fact, Synod 1978 added Article 14-c precisely to call attention to legitimate reasons why a pastor might leave ordained ministry, and synod observed that there is no biblical warrant to say that a minister of the Word must be expected to serve in this office for life (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 47).

As the ministerial role has evolved in different ways, so has the congregational setting. In section II, C of this report we discussed increased concern over ministerial “fit” and the corresponding decrease in tolerance for situations perceived to be a less-than-ideal “fit,” leading to an increase in Article 17 separations. But similar to Article 14 releases, there are a number of reasons why a pastor and congregation might part ways:

- A pastor might need to step away from ministry for a time while elderly parents require extensive care.
- A pastor may choose to be a stay-at-home parent.
- A pastor might leave to pursue further education.
- A pastor’s giftedness and the church’s ministry context might not align. “No minister can be expected to be able to serve any and every congregation” (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 586).
- A church closure or disaffiliation, or downsizing of staff, may mean that a pastor’s ministry position ends.
- God may be leading a pastor to consider a new vocation.
- A pastor’s spouse’s career or education path may necessitate a move.

There may be a combination of factors, opportunities, and needs that would necessitate a separation between church and pastor. As the Thrive website notes, “Whatever the reason, these separations are always significant, and therefore require substantial discernment from the pastor, the council, the classis, and the synodical deputies.” Thus the Church Order wisely avoids naming specific situations and instead generalizes that releases may be allowed for “weighty reasons.”

	14-b release To outside CRC	14-c release Nonministerial	14-d release Nonministerial one year	14-e re-eligible After nonministerial	17-a release From congregation	17-c extend Eligibility	17-c Release from office	17-d release From ministry	Totals
Conflict	2	1	0	0	35	0	0	0	38
Another denomination	42	1	0	0	2	1	2	0	48
Calling	1	1	1	8	4	15	3	0	33
Chaplaincy	0	1	1	0	19	7	3	0	31
Church closing									
No call	10	8	0	0	2	4	8	0	33
Resign									
Another vocation	1	5	2	1	9	10	2	0	30
Education									
Personal									
Child care	8	4	0	0	6	6	0	0	26
Church disaffiliate									
Church financials									
Godly conduct, Safe Church									
Health, Retirement									
Immigration issues									
Moved, Loan/term end									
Theology									
Reasons	64	21	4	9	77	43	18	0	239
No reason given	44	17	10	5	67	59	7	6	215
Total	108	38	14	14	144	102	25	6	454
Pct with Reason	59%	55%	29%	64%	53%	42%	72%	0%	53%

Drawing on classis records, the preceding chart reflects the growing number of reasons for ministerial separations. From the materials available, reasons could be determined for only about 52 percent of the Article 14 and 17 actions (239 of 454), so we should be cautious about placing too much emphasis on this small set of data. A wide range of reasons for separation were declared, including chaplaincy, pursuit of another vocation, church closure or disaffiliation, family reasons, and further education. Only about 15 percent of the reasons (38 of 239) appeared to be related to conflict between a pastor and a congregation, and yet at the same time, about 52 percent of Article 17-a separations (81 of 156) involved an oversight committee for the pastor, church, or both. To summarize the data in this chart: Articles 14 and 17 provide for a wide range of situations and circumstances—anything that does not qualify as retirement (Art. 18) or a situation involving special discipline (Art. 82-84). Yet the assumptions of many in our denomination are that releases are related to conflict, a perception reinforced by the fact that much of the denominational resources assume conflict as an underlying cause of a release from a call.

It should be noted that the ministerial role is unique in that the consent of the council is required for a minister of the Word to be released from a given call (Art. 14-a). This provision extends as well to any separation between a church and a minister (including calls to noncongregational settings) regardless of who initiates the separation. This provision also recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the call to ministry and the covenantal nature of the relationship between a pastor and the calling church (see section II, B above). Further, ministers cannot simply be released from their call by a council without discernment from the wider church through its assemblies and synodical deputies. Thus situations in which “fit” may be an issue are predisposed to potential conflict as pastors and churches seek to discern how to maintain a ministry partnership from which there is no simple exit.

### 3. Resignations and leaves of absence

The Church Order contains several articles regulating releases from ministry, whether temporary or permanent, depending on the circumstances of the separation. Releases from congregational ministry have received the majority of attention in the overtures assigned to this task force by Synod 2022. Article 17 is used to address the separation between a calling church and a minister of the Word, but it is worth noting that this article governs the release from any call (including calls to noncongregational positions). Ministers released under Article 17 retain their ordination, are not under discipline, and are expected to return to active ministerial service.

When a longer absence from CRC ministry is anticipated, a minister might resign to enter either a ministry outside the denomination or a nonministerial vocation. These situations are handled through Article 14. Church Order requires that a declaration be made “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” (Supplement, Art. 14-b, c, 2). Such declarations provide a context for potential future discussions about readmission to ministry, should a pastor sense, once more, a calling to serve in the CRC.

Church Order also allows for a temporary leave of absence processed by the local council through Article 16. In no case was this article intended to offer an indefinite or terminal leave of absence. Some of the overtures assigned to this task force suggest that something like Article 16 might offer a mechanism to grant a permanent separation without the stigma of Article 17 (see, for example, Overture 6 from 2020). We observe, however, that past synods have addressed this matter with regard to educational leave, and for a time the CRC even attempted to create a system that allowed Article 16 to be used for certain terminal leaves of absence (see *Acts of Synod 1987*, pp. 425-27; cf. *Acts of Synod 1928*, p. 141). It became clear, however, that use of Article 16 as a mechanism for permanent release from a particular call was being used to circumvent the process of separation in Article 17, so,

after a decade, synod decided to return to the system now in place (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400).

It should be noted that Article 17 is itself a kind of temporary leave of absence, except there is no official call to which the minister will return and no set time frame for how long the leave should last. But, as with Article 16, eligibility for call following a pastoral separation is not indefinite. Article 17-c specifies that the term of eligibility shall last for two years, with the possibility of annual extensions with the approval of the classis and synodical deputies. This time frame was first adopted by synod in 1982, which recognized the importance of a consistent guideline for how long a pastor may remain without a congregational call before the call to “ministry in general” may be questioned by the wider church assemblies (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 585-87).

#### 4. Disciplinary actions

Articles 14 and 17 are intended to address situations in which pastors are not “worthy of discipline” (Art. 17-a). However, it must be recognized that the “release from ministry” through Articles 14 and 17, despite the attached stigma, may sometimes be used to circumvent the even greater stigma of formal ecclesiastical discipline. Our task force was specifically asked to note this concern (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849, ground 3). As synod has observed, when doctrinal or ethical behavior is not recognized and addressed openly and honestly, the church as a whole suffers, and in particular future congregations served by the pastor may be affected by a failure to apply discipline where it is required (see *Acts of Synod 1996*, pp. 578-79). In 1978 synod instructed churches and classes to adopt a “resolution of dismissal” in all cases of resignation. This instruction was given a more formal definition in 1994 when synod adopted the four potential declarations regarding the status of released ministers—“honorably released,” “released,” “dismissed,” or “in the status of one deposed”—which are now listed in Supplement, Article 14-b (see *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73; *Acts of Synod 1993*, pp. 581-82). The chart on the next page indicates the frequency of the use of each of these categories. While the use of the categories “dismissed” or “in the status of one deposed” suggests that a release *may* have occurred for reasons for which a pastor would otherwise be subject to discipline, it should be noted that the declaration is technically related to the “manner and spirit” in which a pastor resigned and may not necessarily indicate the reason for the resignation.

Because it is assumed that ministers released under Article 17 are not “worthy of discipline,” no similar declarations currently apply to releases from a particular call.



Situations requiring disciplinary action are processed through Church Order Articles 82-84. While the Supplement to Article 14 currently focuses on ministers who resign from the denomination because of doctrinal differences or schismatic activities, in recent years the CRC has become increasingly aware of the potential for ministers to resign due to moral failings. This task force calls attention once again to the instructions of Synod 2016 that guide the responses of the church assemblies to pastors who resign rather than allowing the process of formal discipline to run its course (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 866; see Supplement, Art. 14-e). Our confessions remind us of the validity of Christian discipline, indeed even as a tool used by God to bring about repentance and reform in the church (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 31; Belgic Confession, Art. 29). We also recognize that sin has consequences on one’s interactions with the community, and in some cases being forgiven does not necessarily mean that an offending pastor can or should continue representing Christ in the official ministry of the church.

Article	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Totals	Pct
<b>14-b release to outside CRC</b>												
honorably released	5	4	5	6	6	8	7	1	8		50	44%
released		1		4	6	4	15	3	3		36	32%
dismissed	1	1		3			1				6	5%
in the status of one deposited	1					2		3			6	5%
(empty)	2		1							13	16	14%
<b>14-c release nonministerial</b>												
honorably released		3	3	2	1	3	1	4	3	3	23	53%
released					1	2	2		1	2	8	19%
dismissed				2	1	1			2	2	8	19%
in the status of one deposited		1									1	2%
(empty)	3										3	7%
<b>14-d release nonministerial one year</b>												
honorably released	2	3			2	1					8	53%
released			2		1		1				4	27%
(empty)										3	3	20%
<b>14-e re-eligible after nonministerial</b>												
(empty)	1	1		1	1	3	3	2	1	2	15	
<b>Total Result</b>	15	14	11	18	19	24	30	13	18	25	187	
<b>Percent of All</b>	8%	7%	6%	10%	10%	13%	16%	7%	10%	13%	100%	

### B. Issues and observations

While our theology provides a foundation for how the CRC responds to issues of leadership transition and longevity in the ministerial calling, these issues are also affected by cultural realities and changes in thinking about the ministerial office. Section II of this report identified, in a general way, a number of these changes. We now turn our attention to issues and concerns particular to the processes addressed by Articles 14, 16, and 17.

#### 1. Uncertainty about process

At face value, the process usually followed for any separation is relatively straightforward: a request for a pastor’s release is made to classis (Art. 14-b/c or Art. 17-a), along with a proposal “for the support of a released minister” (Art. 17-b), and the classis and synodical deputies consider whether these arrangements meet their approval. The Supplements for Article 14

and 17 contain additional guidance concerning the involvement of church visitors, the appropriate responses of classis to the “manner and spirit” of a separation, potential oversight for a minister or a congregation after a separation occurs, and the proper support for a released pastor.

The actual details of a separation, however, can be much more challenging in particular situations. Especially in the case of Article 17 separations, a pastor and congregation may not always agree on the specifics of the separation agreement required by Article 17-b, or even on the reasons for the separation itself. Synod wisely called the attention of the churches to a separation agreement template (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935), but the existence of such a document is not well known among churches; nor is the process for working through differences of opinion well defined. In some cases, pastors and councils come to a classis meeting in general agreement about the necessity and terms of a separation but with lingering frustrations over the reasons and terms of the separation agreement. That can place classis delegates in an awkward situation as they try to discern who can address classis, and at what times, and who else may be in the room to overhear such conversations.

In this regard, it is helpful to remember that a classis meeting is a gathering of *churches* (Art. 39), so the official presentations on the floor of classis must be matters first addressed by a council. Though Article 17-a speaks of the possibility of a release initiated by a pastor, such releases are formally processed by the council in keeping with the principle that no minister should leave a call without the consent of the council that originally issued that call (Art. 14-a). Thus separation agreements are formally a request of a council to its classis even if initially requested by a pastor. In cases where a pastor disagrees with the reasons or terms of a separation, that disagreement would formally become an appeal to be processed by the classis under the procedures of Church Order Article 30. This means that a classis may, at times, exclude a pastor from executive-session proceedings in which his or her future is discussed by the classis delegates. Such governance is sound in theological principle (Belgic Confession, Art. 30) but may leave pastors feeling vulnerable as their ministry future is determined without their input. It is worth noting that entrance to ministry is similarly handled by assemblies who discuss the future of a candidate while the individual is not in the room (Supplement, Art. 10).

Another area of uncertainty involves release from a call issued jointly with another agency or a congregation outside the CRC. While Article 14-a expects that significant changes not be made to a pastor’s call without the consent of the council holding the minister’s credentials, the reality is that outside employers do not always consult the calling church before adjusting terms of employment. This is particularly the case with government employees and with those who work for large institutions. In such cases, the calling church and pastor should simply do their best to honor the

principles of joint supervision even when the release (employment termination) process does not fully align with the expectations of Church Order or with our theological convictions about ministry. Again, it is helpful to remember that just as all calls to noncongregational positions should be processed “in the regular manner,” so also Church Order expects that all releases from such positions should occur in keeping with synodical regulations.

Even when the pastor is supervised by another ecclesiastical entity, the precise process for a release is sometimes not clear. Church Order Supplement, Article 8, D, which governs the orderly exchange of ministers with the RCA, indicates that the polity of the calling church should be used for processing separations, adding that the calling church should act “in consultation with the sending church” (D, 7). This statement was added in response to confusion about the process of terminating a call in a unique setting—a call issued jointly by two denominations (*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 564-65). It is worth noting that pastors facing release from calls in union congregations or dually affiliated congregations (Art. 38-g or 38-h) could face similar issues even if the specific steps of release are different—though we are unaware of any situations in which this has developed in such congregations. In such situations it seems wise to expect that the process of “consultation” be conducted in a manner parallel to that of the role synodical deputies play in our own polity: receiving the documentation describing the proposed release, and taking part in the deliberations of the assembly processing that release. Because these situations are unusual, we do not believe it is necessary to develop regulations around them but merely to observe the importance of using similar situations to develop a wise response in whatever cases may arise.

## 2. Severance agreements

One of the most difficult aspects of an Article 17 separation is the establishment of a severance agreement. The Supplement to Article 17-a refers to guidelines adopted by Synod 1998 (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and updated by Synod 2010 (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). Though this information has been made easier to find through its inclusion on the Thrive website, historically its omission from the Church Order Supplement made it difficult for individual churches to access if they were unfamiliar with past acts of synod. In addition, some of the guidance provided may no longer fit today’s context. Specifically, while synodical guidelines on this matter require a minimum of thirteen weeks’ severance, that does not address the question of what a *fair* severance amount in today’s environment would be. As the calling process today increasingly takes more time, we may need to consider that the minimum severance amount required by synod may no longer meet the financial needs that arise in Article 17 situations today.

In some cases, pastors and church leaders have cited a “rule of thumb” that suggests a month of severance for each year served in that ministry (see DeMoor’s *Church Order Commentary*, pp. 103-4). But this “rule of thumb” is not an actual guideline, and in some cases a longer severance may place undue financial burdens on a church, especially in cases where a separation occurs after a long term of service or when a classis recommends that a church contract with (and pay) a specialized transitional minister. Conversely, depending on the situation, a minister and council might agree that a smaller severance package is appropriate and will provide a just compromise between meeting the needs of the pastor and the congregation. Though local situations may determine the appropriate amount, it is wise to recognize that any “rule of thumb” may have an upper limit. (For instance, some denominations specifically cap severance at no more than six months; others specify no more than nine).

Past guidance from synod and from Thrive identifies several principles that could be taken into account when deciding on an appropriate amount of severance. We offer the following purposes of severance for synod’s consideration as official guidance toward assisting councils and classes in their deliberations about these matters:

- a. Ministers are viewed not merely as employees but as individuals with calls from God that have been affirmed by the church. As part of the responsibility to provide “proper support” (Art. 15), councils and classes should seek to honor a minister’s ordination (see Art. 17-c; also 1 Cor. 9:10; Luke 10:7).
- b. Severance is a means for the releasing congregation to provide for the released minister during a period of time after the release, when the minister might otherwise be left without reliable income.
- c. Providing adequate financial resources for a limited period of time after a pastor is released from a call creates space for healing and for discernment about God’s call and the church’s continued call in the midst of possible anxiety and grief. Historically, synod has stated that a minimum of thirteen weeks of severance should be offered to allow for such a healing process to begin (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 394).
- d. While severance may be somewhat related to the amount of time served, it is not primarily intended to honor the length of service in a particular call, nor to be seen primarily as an indication of where the “blame” for the release belongs. The final determination of a severance amount requires discernment by the church assemblies with attention to all of the local variables involved.
- e. These guidelines for the severance package “may not apply in every circumstance of separation such as when a pastor leaves for purely personal reasons” (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16.) Some ministers receive no severance or choose not to request or to receive any compensation, due

to their personal reasons. In addition, the provision of a severance arrangement to pastors in noncongregational positions is ordinarily the responsibility of the employing organization rather than the council which has called the minister.

- f. Synodical regulations require that severance ordinarily be paid from the date of the classis meeting at which the separation agreement is approved. In some cases, such as when a pastor has been placed on a leave of absence prior to classis approval of the separation, it may be appropriate to consider any prior paid leave in discerning the final amount provided to the pastor.
- g. Some jurisdictions have specific rules governing the minimum size of an employee's severance. Churches and classes should consult local regulations to ensure that the arrangements for severance comply with any applicable laws.
- h. Because publicly stated reasons for a release from a call may not offer a full picture of the situation that led to a separation, the discernment of classis in decisions about the severance package is an important step and should not be neglected (Art. 17-b).

In the end, as with other matters related to calling and release, the amount of severance is intended to be a matter of common discernment and prayerful discussion among church leaders, focused on the thriving of the minister and the congregation.

Whenever possible, details of severance should be worked out ahead of a classis meeting as part of a separation agreement that receives formal approval from the classis as it processes the separation. In some cases, severance may not be needed at all (such as when a pastor intends to wait to pursue another call because of family circumstances or in order to seek further education), though it may still be a gracious gesture. In each situation, it may be helpful for the council to explain the factors leading to the decision to recommend a specific severance package. Since looks may be deceiving, it is helpful for a classis to follow all of the procedures prescribed for Article 17 for all such requests. Churches and classes seeking additional information should consult the guidance available online and in person through Thrive.

Our task force received requests from some correspondents to consider whether the severance ordinarily given for Article 17 separations was adequate, and whether to recommend the establishment of classis funds to provide additional funding in order to allow pastors a longer time to transition between calls. While it may be wise for classes to consider such special requests, a synodical requirement in this regard could place an undue burden on classes that already face increasing strains on available funds. We recognize that unfortunately the financial resources of churches and classes are limited and that sufficient funds may not be available to provide the

desired level of support to cover a lengthy time of transition. Churches and pastors facing unusually long periods of transition are encouraged to communicate transparently about the needs and expectations of financial support and to think creatively about ways to meet those needs.

### 3. Continued eligibility for call

Church Order specifies that pastors are eligible for call for two years following an Article 17 separation, and annual requests are allowed for an extension of eligibility after the initial two-year period. This time limit was adopted in 1982; prior to that time, the Church Order stated that a pastor should be released to enter a secular vocation via Article 14 if a call was not “eventually” forthcoming (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 586). The growing variety of circumstances leading to Article 17 separation today, however, means that the appropriate length of eligibility for call is not necessarily the same in each situation and requires continued discernment on the part of the church assemblies in conversation with the pastor. It should also be noted that the conclusion of a term call initiates a similar process to Article 17 with regard to oversight and continued eligibility for call (see Supplement, Art. 8, C, 3).

The limitations on eligibility for call reflect our theological conviction that pastors are not “free agents” and that ordination clings to the office rather than to a person (see section II, B, 2). Synod 1982 deemed two years to be sufficient for a pastor to ordinarily receive a new call. Though the data is difficult to interpret precisely, it appears that somewhere between half and two-thirds of pastors who experience an Article 17 separation receive a call within the next year; about 25-30 percent either choose retirement (Art. 18) or release from ministry (Art. 14-b/c/d) before facing the potential of a release from ministry due to the end of a period of eligibility for call (Art. 17-c). This suggests that the two-year time frame is likely sufficient and that the mechanism of continued requests for eligibility (Art. 17-d) is normally able to handle those situations in which further time may be appropriate to allow a pastor to receive a call.

Some situations will, inherently, anticipate a longer time frame between calls. If a pastor leaves a call in order to pursue further studies, for example, a period of five years or more may not be unusual before seeking another call. It should be noted that at some points in our history, educational leave was granted via what is now Article 16 rather than Article 17. Because Article 16 is not intended for indefinite leaves of absence, however, synod required pastors leaving congregational ministry for further study to request a release from ministry rather than a leave of absence (*Acts of Synod 1928*, p. 141; *Acts of Synod 1932*, p. 165). While this decision of synod has never formally been rescinded, it appears that an increasing number of pastors are using Article 17 for just such an extended leave. The same could be true when Article 17 is used to address certain life changes such as family leave, though synod has never formally addressed such situations.

Determining when the two-year period of eligibility begins poses another challenge for classes. While acknowledging there may be exceptions (such as when a pastor has been on leave for a lengthy period prior to the classis meeting), it seems most consistent to set the time period to commence on the date of the classis action. If the Article 17 request is approved without restrictions, the pastor would be eligible for two years from the date of that classis meeting. If an oversight committee is appointed, the pastor would be eligible for two years from the date of the classis meeting at which he or she is declared eligible for call following the period of oversight.

We are aware that in some situations, such as educational leave, classes have occasionally granted a term of eligibility longer than two years in order to avoid the need for continued extensions. Our task force received some feedback suggesting that a mechanism should be provided for granting “extended family leave” or “long-term study leave” — something with a time frame longer than two years. The challenge remains in determining when in fact an individual ceases to serve in the kinds of positions traditionally expected of someone serving as an ordained representative of the church (see section II, B, 2). We have therefore resisted creating an additional set of regulations that would determine in what situations a longer period of eligibility might be appropriate. Instead, we encourage pastors and churches to keep in mind that “eligibility for call” indicates that an individual is, indeed, actively intending to seek a call, and that ordination clings to such calls and not to the individuals. In cases where an extended period of eligibility is anticipated, continued conversation is helpful about what it means to do the work of a minister during a season of transition, and how to provide opportunities for ongoing encouragement and accountability (in line with section III, C, 6, above). We encourage pastors and congregations to consult the wisdom provided by past synodical studies on bivocationality (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 285-314) and term calls (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 587-88) for further reflection on how such arrangements might provide avenues for continued service in positions consistent with the ministry of the Word for pastors in transition.

#### 4. The perceived stigma

Despite the various reasons for which an Article 17 separation is a valid and helpful process, there remains a perceived stigma attached to an Article 17 separation. One likely source is the continued association of this article with what earlier versions of Church Order identified as an “intolerable situation” (the reading of Art. 17 from 1965 through 1983), as well as the association in many minds connecting conflict situations with Article 17. This stigma has led some to describe Article 17 as the “scarlet number” (see, for example, *The Banner*, Feb. 2012).

For many in the church, the assignment of an oversight committee would also signal to future ministry partners that something was “wrong” with the pastor or the church that needed to be fixed, and there would be

lingering doubts as to whether those “problems” were actually resolved. Further, our cultural stigmas against feeling in any way inadequate, inferior, or wrong can be strong shame triggers. However, this stigma runs counter to what we know about the Christian life individually and communally: the Spirit is continuously inviting us to grow and mature, and we are all called to be constantly learning and changing so that we, as the church, might grow up into the mature body of him who is our head, the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ. With this in mind, when oversight committees are assigned, we could describe their work as being similar to a vocational coach, spiritual director, and accountability partner for church councils and pastors.

Another source of the stigma comes from the misuse of Article 17 to impose disciplinary measures on a pastor instead of going through the steps of formal discipline outlined in Church Order Articles 82-84. Other churches and pastors have used Article 17 from an unwillingness to engage in conflict or challenge, retreating to Article 17 to escape from a moment when God may be prompting his people to grow and change. The general knowledge that this has happened has led to doubts about the integrity of Article 17 separations and has fed its unhealthy—and unhelpful—stigma. In addition, many of us have heard from churches, pastors, and pastor families who have deeply unsettling stories related to past Article 17 releases. Such stories form a “cloud of concern” around all Article 17 separations.

The task force weighed several options for addressing this perceived stigma. First, we considered a change in wording. The term “weighty reasons,” used to describe valid reasons for release from active ministerial service in a congregation, can carry a negative connotation. But “weighty reasons” are to be understood as valid or substantive reasons, many of which are not negative at all. After reviewing various options, we are recommending a change in the language of Articles 14-17 to refer to “valid” reasons, in a manner consistent with the use of that term elsewhere in Church Order. While we acknowledge that new terminology may take on the same negative connotations of past wording, we hope that this minor change may indicate a slight shift in the way Article 17 separations are perceived by removing some of the “weight” from these situations.

Second, we looked at the possibility of a terminal leave of absence in lieu of an outright release from a ministry position. A revised version of Article 16 has sometimes been suggested as a means of graciously allowing a pastor to separate from a call without the stigma of Article 17. But as was noted above (section IV, A, 3), Article 16 is not designed to provide an indefinite or terminal leave of absence. There are possibilities for using this article in a wider way than is currently practiced (see IV, C, 1, e, below), but such uses, we believe, would not replace a substantial number of Article 17 requests. In addition, a leave of absence without an intent to return to the ministry



position to which a pastor has been called could create additional confusion about his or her status. Therefore we largely rejected that possibility.

Some overtures (see *Deferred Agenda for Synods 2020-2021*, pp. 438, 446-48) also suggested that we create a new mechanism for the more “routine” separations between a pastor and a particular call, distinguishing such a release from those addressing conflicted situations. In some ways, this idea seems appealing because it could create an alternative means of handling separations that would avoid the stigma of Article 17. A two-track option, however, could also create a means to avoid naming the real reasons in situations where conflict is indeed a factor. This is not a new concern. In fact, the CRC attempted just such a two-track approach between 1988 and 1998 and decided to abandon the experiment and revert to the single approach for all separations (see *Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 550; *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 578; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400). As recently as 2012, synod considered the option again and rejected it on the basis of not wanting to single out any one special reason for release (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 749). We believe that the combined wisdom of past synods still provides sufficient reason to resist a multiple-track approach to releases.

In the end our task force concluded that the system we have in place now—namely, a single-track process for addressing all separation requests—remains the best and fairest system despite its drawbacks. Nor is our system unusual; other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations have taken a similar approach (see, for example, *RCA Book of Order*, 1, II, 15, 8; *PCUSA Book of Order*, G-2.09). Instead, we believe, the most fruitful approach to the issue of stigma will be to emphasize the variety of situations covered by Article 17 and the reality that many situations do not arise out of conflict. Proper use of this article, including a recognition of the place of formal discipline (Art. 82-84) when appropriate, can also help to limit the stigma by ensuring that Article 17 is not associated with inappropriate doctrine or behavior.

At the same time, denominational records indicate that some pastors and churches find themselves going through multiple Article 17 separations. The existence of a pattern may justify some measure of caution for ministers or churches as they explore subsequent calls. Perhaps the most important step the CRC can take is to foster a greater spirit of trust and transparency about the reasons for separations and to strengthen the work of church visitors and oversight committees so that churches and pastors can consider how God may be at work in these situations—and particularly in situations where conflict is a reality.

##### 5. The reality of conflict and the need for healing

While this report attempts to emphasize that Article 17 separations occur for a variety of situations, the reality remains that there are times when a lack of compatibility between a church and pastor, or between members of

the ministry staff, is, in fact, the reason for the separation. We must also take into consideration that traumatic events, both in the personal lives of pastors and their families, or occurring during their work in ministry, can require permanent separations in order to bring about healing. We avoid or ignore these realities to the detriment of both pastor and church. As the Thrive website notes, an Article 17 process often becomes the formal acknowledgment that a pastor and council who once shared a common understanding of God's call no longer do or can share that understanding. In itself, that different sense of calling is enough to generate feelings of frustration and pain, even abandonment or rejection. Failing to address such a difficult situation can cause harm in the subsequent ministries of both the pastor and the church.

CRC polity has long recognized the possibility of conflict. Earlier editions of Church Order recognized that situations may arise that "make it impossible or undesirable that a minister continue to serve . . . [a] Church, even though these troubles and difficulties are not of such a nature that the minister must be suspended" (*Church Order Commentary*, 1941 edition, p. 55, on pre-1965 Art. 11). In the early years of the CRC, classes were permitted to take active steps to transfer a minister from one call to another in extreme situations. This was changed by Synod 1914 due to a growing recognition that the "hierarchical" nature of this process could be seen to be at odds with the CRC's deliberative polity (see pre-1914 Church Order Art. 11 and Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 1967 ed., p. 72). The involvement of classis and the synodical deputies was required in order to provide protection and "proper support" for the released minister. Subsequent to the adoption of the 1965 edition of the Church Order, synod recognized the challenge that could be posed when a council continued to hold the credentials of a pastor released due to conflict, and allowed for the transfer of credentials in such situations (*Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 35).

While a separation may be the most gracious and fruitful way to address the hurts and disappointments of a breakdown between church and pastor, the administrative process of separation can sometimes be in tension with pastoral care. Processing an Article 17 release requires a balance of transparency and confidentiality. In times of conflict, it may be helpful to consider the wisdom of earlier editions of the Church Order, which viewed separations in the context of "proper support" (pre-1965 Art. 11).

A 1982 report on Article 17, which led to the creation of the Pastor Church Relations office (now combined with other specialized ministries into Thrive), emphasized two key themes of *prevention* and *healing* (*Acts of Synod 1982*, pp. 581-89). This applies prior to conflict as well as in the midst of conflict and is reflected in our current procedures. For instance, as soon as one or the other begins to wonder if they're "stuck," the council and pastor are expected to honor their high view of God's call by inviting church visitors to come and help them reconcile their diverging impressions of God's call.

It should also be noted that a pastor should reach out to the regional pastor for support. Only after inviting the classis' support may the pastor or church begin the formal Article 17 process.

Once a pastor and council recognize that separation is inevitable, it is important to be mindful of the painful aspects of such a process. While it is difficult for an assembly to fully address the pain that results from a pastoral separation, it is pastorally wise to at least take some formal note of this reality. Synodical guidance advises that a pastor going through a separation identify an advocate—perhaps the regional pastor or another trusted advisor in the classis—who can be a liaison between the pastor, the council, and the classis (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 395; see c, 4, c).

The oversight committee may also play an important role in providing healing as they walk alongside a pastor and/or a church after a separation. While part of the oversight committee's role is "evaluation," the committee is also asked to address areas of "assistance" (Supplement, Art. 17-a, a and b). Thrive notes that pastors, during or after an Article 17 process, may experience difficulty in establishing healthy rhythms of sabbath and personal discipleship, inattentiveness to family and friends, a lack of self-awareness, or inattention to physical, emotional, and mental health. (This can be true for all pastors or church leaders undergoing an Article 17 process, regardless of whether conflict was a factor.) While an oversight committee cannot be expected to resolve every personal challenge faced by a separated pastor or council, it can play a role in asking helpful questions and connecting the people to healing resources in the denomination or beyond.

It is important to recognize that congregations too, may face deep wounds as a result of an Article 17 process. These wounds can present significant challenges for a community because various members of a church may process their emotions in radically different ways. Specialized transitional ministers (see Article 12-b) may help with this process, as they are trained to address challenges particular to a church in transition. Other denominational resources (see below) can help congregations identify areas where growth or spiritual renewal may be needed to confront any sinful patterns or hurt inflicted during the time of conflict.

Though much of the attention of the Church Order Review Task Force has been directed to issues related to Article 17, it should be noted that Article 14 releases from office may arouse similar emotions and concerns in both pastors and congregations. While the situations are different when a pastor has left formal ministry in the CRC altogether, it may be helpful for a classis to keep in mind the importance of finding ways to maintain connections and relationships through which God may bring about healing or reconciliation. As a people who proclaim that God can and does use conflict to accomplish his work in us, we need not fear conflict if we are able to see it as a

tool, albeit a sometimes painful one, to make something of God's character and care for us as his people.

#### 6. Supervision of pastors in between calls

As the rate of Article 17 separations increases, so too does the eventuality of pastors without a formal call. This situation creates some theological tension in light of our conviction that ordination clings to a role and not to a person. It is therefore important for churches and classes to consider the importance of continued supervision for ministers whose credentials they hold but who do not have a current call, and especially for those who continue to do ministerial work during a transitional period (such as during educational leave). It may also be important for pastors without a call to be honest about their intentions if a lengthy period of eligibility is anticipated, and to request an Article 14 release from office instead of seeking continued eligibility when they are not actually pursuing a call.

It is not always clear what ministry limits, if any, exist for a pastor separated from a congregation. As Thrive resources note, some kind of temporary restrictions on public ministry tasks can sometimes help a pastor rebuild relationships with God and others in nonprofessional ways. If a pastor is not eligible for call, it follows that some kind of restriction on formal ministry may be in place: a long-term role as stated supply in a church, for example, would seem to be against the spirit of such restrictions. These restrictions may be unique to each situation, preventing a set of standard guidelines, but should be discerned and clearly stated in the separation agreement. It would be wise for pastors under oversight to communicate regularly with the oversight committee to discern together what opportunities would be appropriate and would help the pastor become ready to re-engage ministry, and what should be declined at particular stages in the process of evaluating readiness for renewed ministry work. It should also be noted that pastors may refuse to cooperate with the expectations of a classis oversight committee. In such situations, a classis may find it has little choice but to release the pastor from ordained ministry via Article 17-d. Though unfortunate, this is a reasonable response by a classis in line with our understanding about the importance of discernment by church assemblies. At other times, pastors may decide to resign (Art. 14) or retire (Art. 18) rather than to follow through with the oversight process. Classes then can follow the process for a release from office with an appropriate declaration, or decide whether or not to approve of a retirement with retention of the title of the office and the authority to perform official acts of ministry.

Many of the principles for supervision of pastors in noncongregational positions outlined in section III, C, 6 would apply to the kinds of care, accountability, and oversight a council could give to a pastor whose credentials it holds while the pastor is without an active call. In situations following a release, it may be necessary to consider additional aspects of care specific to the emotions of ministry transitions. Recognizing that the

calling church may, at times, not be in the best position to offer such care, it is also possible that the classis could include such considerations in the mandate of an oversight committee, or bring them to the attention of the regional pastor. We also note that the Supplement to Article 17-a allows for the transfer of ministerial credentials to another church during this time of transition—within the classis only, if the minister is under oversight. In addition, we observe synod’s previous expectation that church visitors inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and to take appropriate action in cases that do not conform to synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72).

## 7. Reinstatement

When pastors experience an Article 17 separation, the hope is that there will be an eventual return to called ministry. While a new call may not resolve all the pain of a separation, it does provide a continued public affirmation of a pastor’s sense of calling and of his or her service to the wider church.

Article 14 creates a different kind of situation for pastors seeking reinstatement. Synodical regulations currently stipulate that pastors released to service in other denominations (Art. 14-b) be readmitted through the procedures outlined in Article 8 (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 491-92; see also *Agenda for Synod 2014*, pp. 467-68). Pastors released for a “non-ministerial vocation” (Art. 14-c or 14-d) seek readmission to CRC ministry through Article 14-e, processed through the classis that originally released the minister. As *Overture 10 (Agenda for Synod 2022*, pp. 514-15) notes, this creates an inconsistency in how the “manner and spirit” of the minister’s conduct leading up to and during a release is considered during the request for reinstatement process. It also means that any new synodical requirements for ordination added in the intervening years (such as abuse of power training or diversity training) may be overlooked.

While it is difficult to create a standard process for handling the variety of cases that may arise during a request for reinstatement to CRC ministry, some additional consistency in the process would be helpful. One important step would be the requirement of a similar examination of the “circumstances surrounding the release” (Art. 14-e) for pastors being readmitted from other denominations, as is currently the expectation for former pastors who resign for nonministerial vocations. We recognize that the classis which released the former pastor is best suited for this task, since they would presumably have the best access to local leaders with memory of the “circumstances surrounding the release” as well as to any records or classis executive session minutes regarding the release. It is also important that this process of declaring a person re-eligible for call is done in a manner consistent with the current standards set by synod. This function is ordinarily handled by the denominational Candidacy Committee.

Our task force examined a number of different options for processing such requests for re-eligibility for call. In the end, we determined that the local classis that released the pastor is the best judge of the minister's readiness for re-eligibility for call, in keeping with the patterns also established with regard to reinstatement in cases of discipline (see Supplement, Art. 82-84, h). Thus our recommendations will reflect our conclusions that all pastors released from CRC ministry via Article 14-b/c/d or 17-c/d follow the same pattern of requesting to be declared re-eligible for call through Article 14-e. A proposed new Supplement to Article 14-e outlines the process: the classis interview currently required by Article 14-e (with concurrence required from the synodical deputies) would be followed by a referral to the Candidacy Committee, which would oversee the completion of any additional requirements for ordination imposed by synod since the pastor's original admission to ministry in the CRC. Then, once these requirements have been completed, the pastor may be declared eligible for call and may receive and accept a call. As is the case for other pastors "called in the regular manner," the classis of the calling church, through its counselor and interim committee, would be responsible for ensuring that all ecclesiastical requirements for ministry have been met before the (re)ordination may proceed.

#### *Conclusion*

As with issues of supervision and accountability (Art. 12-13), the situations related to separation from a call or from CRC ministry are varied and unique, making it difficult to provide specific answers that would address every occasion. This report attempts to identify some of the important issues above, and in the remainder of this section attention will be given to some additional resources and recommendations that may potentially offer churches and pastors assistance as they work through a process that can be confusing and even painful. In the end we recognize again how even the best processes are limited by the people who are responsible for implementing them. Pastors who lack self-awareness or members of a church council who act in bad faith can misuse any set of procedures in ways that cause harm and sow distrust. While we cannot prevent such misuse, it is our hope, as authors of this report, that these reflections will offer opportunities for better communication and discernment of God's will on occasions when pastors and churches find it necessary to work toward a formal separation.

#### *C. Resources and guidance*

The mandate of the Church Order Review Task Force includes the charge to "develop suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849), a request echoing Overture 5 (deferred from 2020). As we review the existing materials, our task force believes that a number of such guidelines already exist and that the issue is not necessarily a lack of guidelines but a limited awareness of the resources and guidance that have

already been adopted. In this section we highlight some of these resources while also commending a few updated processes to the churches for consideration:

#### 1. Resources for Prevention

Our high view of calling and ministry invites us as churches and pastors to make use of resources that aid discernment. When diverging impressions of God's call arise, our shared commitment to the work of Christ in his church should lead us to seek ways to reconcile these impressions in order to continue shared ministry for the Lord's sake. Churches and pastors, then, should carefully and prayerfully consider the nature of called ministry (see section II, B above), acknowledging its origin in God's call and cultivating a curiosity about God's ways, especially in seasons of difficulty or disagreement.

Concretely this means using the resources available in our church polity to work toward healing and reconciliation in times of conflict. Those resources include the following:

- a. *Church visitors*: Church visitors represent the care and concern of the classis, and churches should avail themselves of the support and advice of church visitors. Church Order Article 42-b describes the involvement of church visitors in terms of permission: churches "are free to call on the church visitors whenever serious challenges arise. . . ." As reflected in this report's recommendations, we believe that stronger encouragement to make use of church visitors would be appropriate, indicating that churches are expected to seek the wise counsel of the wider church in times of difficulty or tension.

The CRC's *Guide for Church Visiting* contains a number of suggested questions that can help churches and pastors discern the health of a ministry setting. We suggest that this resource be reviewed and updated to include questions that would assist church visitors and others in working through situations of pastoral discernment, especially in the face of growing tension. As synod has observed, such early intervention can provide "a possibility of healthy resolution that becomes less likely after tensions have risen to a breaking point" (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 755).

- b. *Regional pastors*: Regional pastors serve as "pastors to pastors," coming alongside pastors in their classes as advocates and as supports for their spiritual, emotional, mental, and even physical health. The expertise and advice of regional pastors are a wonderful resource for ministers who encounter challenges in ministry and want to discern more clearly God's will for them in their ministry career.
- c. *Thrive*: The CRCNA agency Thrive provides support to pastors and congregations, implementing a commitment to promote healthy relationships, encourage one another in ministry, and aid in the discernment of next steps in seasons of growth, transition, or challenge.

- d. *Classical counselors*: This functionary role is designed to provide wise guidance to churches and pastors as a call is being processed, and to foster healthy relationships between a church and a pastor at the beginning of a call. Some classes have identified one or two individuals to whom all classical counselor assignments are given, in order to assure that all councils in need of counsel have access to an individual familiar with “ecclesiastical regulations and sound process” (Art. 42-c) to guide them through the calling process. While we do not believe this arrangement is always necessary, we see it as a helpful model to follow. At the very least, we encourage classes to recognize the importance of this functionary role and to value counselors who have the same kind of “experience and counsel” that Church Order currently expects of church visitors (Art. 42-b). We encourage classical counselors to understand the significance of their role, to be available to councils throughout the search and calling process, and to help churches send calls that will lead to fruitful relationships between the churches and pastors.
- e. *Leaves of absence*: Church Order Article 16 provides a process whereby a pastor can request a temporary leave of absence. In times of personal difficulty or church conflict, a leave of absence may provide valuable time and space to both a church and a minister. A period of rest can provide the soul care a minister may need, and that can allow both the church and the minister the opportunity to evaluate the present situation or to work through the challenges of discerning God’s will in a particular call. We are aware of a small but growing number of situations where councils have required a pastor to take a leave of absence. While we recognize the dangers of such a council-imposed leave, we believe there are times when a council may be in a better position than a pastor to discern the wisdom of a leave. Our recommendations will reflect this conviction, with the expectation of additional concurrence from classis functionaries as a safeguard against abuse.

## 2. Process questions

If indeed a church and pastor determine that the best course of action is separation, it is extremely important to have a healthy process in place in order to limit harm to either party, to honor the dignity and worth of all involved, and to ensure the most potential for fruitful ministry after the separation. In response to questions and uncertainties about the separation process, this report recommends several revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements. Synod 1998 adopted a series of guidelines for the separation of churches and pastors; these were updated slightly by Synod 2010 (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96; *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). As we reviewed these guidelines, it became clear that some of the material actually provided suggestions for addressing conflict before a separation between church and pastor became inevitable. As a result of our discussions, we have revised these guidelines substantially and have included additional provisions



aimed at resolving conflict before it reaches the point of a separation (see Addendum E). We include these updates in the hope that they will bless both the pastor's and the church's ministry when conflict plays a role in an Article 14 or 17 separation.

It should also be noted that the denomination has already produced many valuable resources to help address situations of separation. Because churches and classes may be uncertain about how to access the information, we list them here to highlight the particular aspects of guidance already available to churches. These documents can be found on the denominational website (see Addendum F).

Again, we highlight the fact that many of the issues and emotions that arise in an Article 17 separation have parallels in Article 14 situations. Because each of these situations is unique, we encourage church leaders—particularly those in councils and classes—to utilize the written resources identified above and to call on those with greater experience in such situations (such as the denominational staff of Thrive) when questions arise or greater guidance may be necessary. We would, further, encourage a regular review of these resources in order to identify areas where updates may be needed.

### 3. Separation agreements

The use of a separation agreement in times of conflict already has the strong encouragement of synod (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 393-95), and a template for separation agreements was approved by Synod 2022 (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58). Such templates are not only useful in situations of conflict but could be helpful in providing clarity in any time of separation, so we are recommending the use of this template for all Article 17 separations. Separation agreements can also help to supply an important means by which a council can provide “proper support” (Art. 15; Art. 17-b) for a pastor in a time of transition.

The separation agreement template presented in Addendum D may be adapted to specific situations. We also observe that the provision for non-disclosure in statement 5 of this template may strike some as unwise. Non-disclosure agreements are not prohibitions against all conversations related to a separation but, rather, about the terms of the agreement (especially those related to finances) and about demonstrably false statements that foster questions about the character of the other party.<sup>1</sup> The text of the proposed template places boundaries around those forms of speech in order to allow for healthy conversations about separation that bring clarity to the community. We encourage councils and pastors with concerns about issues

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<sup>1</sup> For more on nondisclosure agreements as they relate to the proposed template, see the article written by Thrive's Dave Den Haan on the CRC Network ([network.crcna.org](http://network.crcna.org)): “Who Gets to Say What, to Whom? New Separation Agreement Template” (9/23/2022, updated 12/11/2023)

of communication to draw on the wisdom of denominational resources such as Thrive in such situations.

As part of this report, our task force has developed an updated version of the template to address some of the issues of process identified above (see especially sections IV, B, 1-2 and IV, B, 6), and we recommend that the Church Order be updated to stipulate that separation agreements should be used in all Article 17 situations. Because Article 14 releases sometimes involve issues similar to those in Article 17 separations, we would also encourage churches and classes to consider whether a similar separation agreement might be helpful for managing an Article 14 release as well.

#### 4. After the separation

After a declaration of release has been made by the classis, a number of issues will require ongoing discernment and care, particularly if the release is due to conflict.

- a. *Oversight committees:* When a classis processes an Article 17 separation, the classis may choose to set up a committee to work with the church, or the minister, or both, to provide feedback and guidance in order to work toward a healthier calling process for subsequent ministry. Oversight committees are not simply intended to provide accountability but to work on creating positive transitions as well. These committees are charged with the responsibility of recommending whether a released pastor should be eligible for call and, if so, when. When assigned to a releasing congregation, an oversight committee is charged with recommending whether the congregation is ready to extend another call. The Thrive website includes a number of documents to guide this important work.
- b. *Finishing well together:* When a pastor and congregation separate from one another by way of an Article 17 release, it is important to bring the minister-congregation relationship to a close as well as possible. This will almost always involve a process involving prayer, discernment, and conversation rather than focusing on a single event. It may, especially in times of conflict, require attention to the work of reconciliation and to the need to provide pastoral care to the minister and the minister's family. Thrive is a valuable resource in such matters, and tools such as restorative conversation are valuable as well.

Yet particular events may, at times, provide a means of bringing closure. In some denominational traditions, including that of the Reformed Church in America, liturgies focusing on a "release from service to a congregation" are available to offer ways to publicly recognize the close of a season of ministry. Such liturgies also provide opportunities, though perhaps limited, to express a need for forgiveness and healing where necessary. Our task force is aware of some cases in which churches have utilized an informal liturgy of release, but it appears to us that in many

cases (especially awkward ones) churches in our denomination tend to move quickly to the “business” aspects of release without bringing these situations into times of worship. While liturgical resources focusing on release may not be applicable to every situation, we would encourage churches and pastors to consider these or similar means to lean into the spiritual nature of releases from ministry and to find appropriate ways to help pastors and congregations celebrate what God has done through a past season of ministry and to look for divine grace to sustain each party in the future. Such liturgies can help to reinforce our theology of calling and remind churches and pastors that just as God’s voice leads them to a call, we can expect God to work through a release as well.

If the separation is a particularly painful one, it will be critical for council leaders, with the help of church visitors, to discern the nature of the released minister’s involvement in the final worship service. Will the released pastor lead, preach at, participate in, contribute to, or simply be acknowledged in that final worship service together? What will enable the congregation to move toward thriving? What will provide the minister with the opportunity to bid farewell? What will be the best way for the minister and the congregation to speak to and listen to God together in the context of corporate worship?

- c. *Specialized transitional ministers*: Specialized transitional ministers (STMs) are trained to help congregations who have experienced the departure of a pastor due to resignation or release from call. Their work is to help congregations navigate the transitions from conflict to peace, from grief to joy, from unhealth to health, and from mission confusion to mission clarity. Thrive can help churches connect with STMs, and more information can be found at the STM website ([crcna.org/pcr/stm](http://crcna.org/pcr/stm)).
- d. *Resources for vocational assessment and discernment*: Thrive has identified a number of resources to assist pastors in the process of self-understanding and discernment about God’s leading in the internal call to ministry. A number of these resources are listed in Addendum F. In addition, pastors should remember that an external call to ministry should be discerned in careful discussion and prayer with other church leaders. Thus pastors should actively seek to engage their councils in conversation when thinking about changes to their position (Art. 14-a).

## 5. Prayer

We echo the comment of the Synod 1987 advisory committee that noted it “would like to have seen more attention given . . . to the role of the Holy Spirit in calling, the nature of calling, and the covenantal nature of the relationship between a pastor and a calling church . . .” (*Acts of Synod 1987*, p. 574). Though much of our reflection to this point has focused on procedure and policy, we reaffirm our comments made at the beginning of this report that the discernment of ministry calling is first and foremost a

spiritual matter. Through Thrive there are a number of options to aid both churches and pastors at various stages of ministry in prayerful discernment. When we neglect this spiritual aspect, we can easily overlook what God might be doing in a particular situation.

### *Conclusion*

The denomination has developed a wide variety of resources and guidance to assist churches and pastors in times of transition. Unfortunately many of these resources are unfamiliar or underutilized. This may be due, in part, to the awkwardness of many releases (even ones taken for relatively positive reasons) and the desire to simply bring a process to completion. We encourage both churches and pastors also to take the time to look for God's work in the changing circumstances of ministry.

### *D. Recommendations related to transitions and release from ministry*

Synod's mandate charges this task force to provide, among other things, "suggestions for clearer guidelines to pastors and churches in times of conflict, as well as assistance for positive pastoral transitions . . . including attention to the readmission of pastors via Article 8" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849). In addition, we reviewed the requests of the overtures that led to the formation of this task force, which included (in addition to the items assigned by synod's mandate) suggestions about distinguishing between "routine" and "complex" Article 17 separations (Overtures 4-6) and addressing instances of inappropriate avoidance of special discipline (Overture 5).

Our recommendations at the end of this report address these instructions and requests in the following ways:

#### 1. Suggestions for clearer guidelines in times of conflict

Though synod has already adopted a number of helpful guidelines over the years, many of these instructions have not been readily accessible to councils and classes. Other aspects of this guidance may have been generally understood by some church leaders but not spelled out in Church Order or in synodical regulations. We have attempted to remedy this by recommending the following:

- additions to the Church Order Supplement, Article 17-a to clarify how requests for release from a call are to be processed through church assemblies, and to require separation agreements in all situations of release from call (see Addendum B, proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 1 and a, 3)
- guidance for release from a call issued jointly by congregations in different denominations (see Addendum B, proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 5)
- changes to the Separation Agreement Template that clarify process questions (see Addendum D; also proposed updates to the guidance of Synod 1998 in Addendum E, C, 4)

- principles for determination of severance for consideration by synod (see section IV, B, 2)
- a reminder to the churches that Articles 14 and 17 are not appropriate tools for the avoidance of special discipline (Recommendation J, 3)

Grounds for these recommendations will be provided at the conclusion of the report.

## 2. Assistance for positive pastoral transitions

As noted above, we understand this portion of our mandate to be focused on transitions related to release from ministry and not from those related to acceptance of a call to a new church or ministry position (Art. 14-a). Inherent in this part of our mandate is also the underlying concern over stigma from Article 17 releases that, in some cases, inhibits positive pastoral transitions. Our recommendations will include the following:

- proposed changes to existing guidance from Synod 1998 to highlight the possibility of reconciliation even in the documentation focused on release from a call, and to note the importance of continued care for pastors and congregations in the time following a release (see proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 2 and a, 6)
- a proposed requirement that classis minutes record specific and publicly acknowledged reasons for a release from a call in order to help distinguish between “routine” or “complex” Article 17 processes (see proposed Supplement, Art. 17-a, a, 4)
- recognition of the growing variety of reasons for which Article 17 separations may occur, including cultural factors that do not include conflict as an underlying cause
- commendation of templates for oversight committee mandates and liturgical resources that can assist with the process for Spirit-led discernment and celebration of ministry transitions
- proposed changes to Church Order Article 16 to allow a council to initiate a leave of absence for a pastor in certain situations
- resources for vocational assessment and discernment

Grounds for these recommendations will be provided at the conclusion of the report.

## 3. Readmission of pastors via Article 8

We are recommending that synod adopt a process that directs all who have left ordained ministry in the CRC, either for service in another denomination or for nonministerial work, to a single consistent process for readmission via Article 14-e. We are further recommending that this process be spelled out in the Church Order Supplement.

The Recommendations section at the end of this report will provide greater detail and more specific grounds regarding these items.

## V. Concluding observations

As we conclude this report, we observe again that the sections of Church Order we were asked to review cover a wide variety of situations, and, despite our best intentions, it is not possible to address all of them by means of synodical regulations or through this report. We recognize, then, that much of what we have said still requires the wise application of church leaders in their own local contexts, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in each individual situation.

In our mandate, synod asked that we review the Church Order articles and their Supplements related to supervision and accountability, as well as those related to ministers' releases, and to make recommendations about how to more effectively offer support, supervision, and positive assistance in times of conflict. We hope that the proposals and resources we identified throughout this report, and especially in our closing recommendations, provide the kind of support and guidelines requested by synod. In this report we have also attempted to interact with the overtures that prompted synod to form this task force, as well as with input we received from others across the denomination.

### *A. Issues for future consideration*

Despite the many issues we have been able to attend to in this lengthy report, we found there are also several issues that either fall outside our mandate or that we were unable to address in the time we were assigned.

#### 1. Commissioned pastor impact

While the distinctive nature of the office of commissioned pastor means that not all the principles in this report apply to that office, we acknowledge along with Overture 4 (deferred from 2020) that some of the issues that affect ministers of the Word in noncongregational settings also affect commissioned pastors.

- a. The boundaries of "ministerial" work and the significance of ordination may provide assistance in giving further definition to the kinds of job descriptions that meet synodical guidelines (see Art. 23-a and its Supplement).
- b. The discussion of "proper support" and encouragement for commissioned pastors who serve in roles beyond the local congregation has aspects similar to those of ministers of the Word who serve in similar roles.
- c. The guidelines offered in Articles 14, 16, and 17 pertaining to both release from a call and reordination provide additional material to help councils and classes process the release of a commissioned pastor (Art. 24-d).

We recommend that synod task the Candidacy Committee with considering whether an update of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook would be appropriate for taking these matters into account.

## 2. Retired pastors

Though matters related to Article 18 are beyond the scope of this task force, we note that councils and classes face similar issues and concerns regarding retired pastors as for those regarding ministers who serve in noncongregational settings. Many retired pastors, though not serving in an active call, still serve in ways that officially represent the CRCNA and the wider church through a ministry of the Word, sacraments, and pastoral presence. “Providing honorably for [these pastors’] support” (Art. 18-b) goes beyond the provision of a pension, which is the main intention of Article 18; it also means supporting ministry in many of the ways identified above (section III, C, 6). As with noncongregational ministries, some congregations do well at providing support and accountability; other congregations, however, view retired ministers as a category that no longer requires such support.

Of course, retired pastors themselves may also benefit from the reminder that they remain under the “supervision” of a council as long as they retain the “title . . . and the authority” to perform official actions on behalf of the church (Art. 18-b). Today many retired pastors are not as closely connected to a local congregation as they would have been in a different generation. Some retire far from a CRC or use retirement to pursue other avenues of service that would not have been possible while in called ministry. In such cases, supervision and accountability may be somewhat challenging. So while it is technically outside our mandate to make observations about Article 18, we would note the importance of good communication and supportive relationships between retired pastors and the councils to which they remain accountable in faith and life.

## 3. Reinstatement of pastors released under special discipline

Just as our task force has noted the inconsistencies of our existing procedures regarding readmission of pastors who were released under various provisions of Article 14, we also note that the readmission process for ministers deposed under Articles 82-84 is not always clear. The current provisions of Church Order and synodical regulations presume but do not specify a process similar to what we have proposed as a supplement to Article 14-e. Though we believe that matters of readmission are properly the purview of the releasing classis, we also recognize the wisdom of having denominational staff (with greater resources and experience) provide a more consistent review of readmission applications, and in such a way as provides for a restored pastor's completion of synodical requirements imposed since the initial ordination. We believe that the denomination would be well served by a review of these procedures although they are beyond the scope of our mandate.

## 4. New trends in the calling process

An additional dynamic that came to the attention of our task force as we discussed the meaning of being “called in the regular manner” is a changing understanding of the call process. In churches shaped by different

cultural expectations, but also in an increasing number of other situations, leadership transitions sometimes occur when a pastor or a council works to “raise up” the next leader of the church, or for a given ministry. This approach seems scriptural in terms of the church identifying gifts and encouraging their expression and use, but it also seems to run against the Church Order requirement of having a number of names of suitable candidates presented to the congregation. We sense that care must be taken to ensure that the process of raising up leaders is open to communal discernment throughout. Such discernment can lead to ongoing refinement of a trainee’s sense of call, transparent assessment of the trainee’s readiness for next steps, and confidence within the trainee that ministry really is what he or she is called to.

In other contexts, councils have sought assistance from church staffing consultants to find suitable candidates in times of pastoral transition. Here too we recognize the benefits to be gained from seeking guidance and direction from “experts” with more experience than the typical search committee in looking at pastoral candidates. However, such a process can bypass the covenantal obligations we have as a denomination to give priority to CRC-ordained or -eligible candidates, and it can overlook the discernment we expect from the denominational assemblies that have confirmed the sense of God’s call to specific individuals on behalf of our churches. In addition, challenges arise when staffing consultants fail to acknowledge any disparities between a given candidate and the denomination in terms of theological commitments, educational expectations, and assumptions about the role of the minister within the congregation. This has further implications too for the ability of those released from call (Art. 17) to receive a new call, since there is an increasingly wide pool of potential pastoral candidates from which churches feel free to choose.

In some ways, these trends may be neither good nor bad but may simply reflect the reality of current cultural pressures. Therefore we do not believe that these issues currently need additional regulation from synod. But to the extent that these trends reflect the growing influence of business models that may at times be in tension with our theological commitments as a church, we encourage the churches and classes to take note of these trends and to exercise wise discernment as church leaders.

##### 5. Church Order changes proposed by Synod 2023

Two decisions of Synod 2023 specifically affect the work of this task force. Synod 2023 proposed changes to Church Order Article 14-d and to Supplement, Article 13-c for adoption by Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962, 993). The wording of Article 14-d falls within our mandate to review, and we agree with the basic premise that Article 14 intends to address situations in which a minister has forsaken the office completely and not those in which a pastor is intentionally pursuing bivocational ministry (see Addendum B). With regard to the proposed changes to Supplement, Article 13-c,



we recognize that the specific changes there are intended to address whether and how to include the Code of Conduct in our Church Order, and that that particular discussion is beyond the scope of our task force's mandate. However, in this report we are proposing that the material in Supplement, Article 13-c be shifted to Article 12 and its Supplements, and we have stated the requirements to adhere to the "faith and practice" of the CRC in a way that applies to all pastors in noncongregational settings, not only to those serving on loan to a congregation in another denomination (see Addendum A).

We call synod's attention to these issues in order that the impact of the decisions of Synod 2023 requiring a later synod's adoption are clear as synod takes action on our proposals this year.

#### *B. Additional observations*

As noted at the beginning of this report, we observe again that ecclesiastical processes have limited power to transform realities; these processes are worthwhile and significant only to the degree that they help to support relationships from which wholeness and healing may result. This is why our Church Order must be set in the light of Scripture and the confessions, which call us into relationship with the living God in Christ. It is out of our shared relationship in Christ that ministry flows, and through this relationship supervision and even releases become pathways to encouragement and even hope in the God who raises the dead.

Because we recognize that processes depend on people to implement them faithfully, and that the aim of the Church Order is to foster a framework for healthy relationships within the body of Christ, we highlight again the importance of building bridges especially in situations where issues of supervision, accountability, and release are being applied across cultures. We would encourage the denomination to ensure ready access in multiple languages to the Church Order and to synodically approved templates and guidance identified in this report. The CRC has sought, at various times, to provide resources in a variety of languages, and we are aware of work being done by the Office of General Secretary to develop internal capacity for translation services and to provide lists of theological and church polity terms in various languages for consistency in translation. Often these resources have been provided by leaders within these language groups, whose benefit to the denomination cannot be overstated. The principle of providing translations of such resources was, until 1965, even part of our Church Order (pre-1965 Art. 52; see also *Acts of Synod 1902*, p. 77; *Acts of Synod 1989*, p. 308). Unfortunately, that process has often proven costlier and more time intensive than expected (see *Acts of Synod 1990*, p. 598; *Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 215-16). While recognizing the challenges inherent in developing access to resources in a variety of languages, we would encourage a renewed look at the ways in which even translation software

can provide the beginning of such translations into languages frequently used in the CRC (such as Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Navajo) and to actively collect such resources on the denomination's website. With the Candidacy Committee report of a decade ago, we commend this matter to the churches and synod for discussion and consideration in the coming year (see *Acts Synod 2012*, p. 216).

In response to the increasing diversity of the denomination it is essential to recognize the need to listen to people who represent nonmajority cultures, and to mentor congregations and church leaders who are new to the CRC, in order to be sensitive to their own particular experiences. When a council or classis is dealing with an issue involving a congregation or pastor of a nonmajority cultural or language background, it may be helpful to seek assistance from other denominational leaders who can facilitate conversations in first languages with the requisite knowledge of cultural factors as well as CRC polity and practice. Ethnic minority leaders (such as those employed by Resonate) would not replace classis functionaries but should be seen as guides to help provide the relational ties that are essential to help Church Order function in a healthy manner. The denomination should continue to regularly update translations of the Church Order and its Supplements and make them easily available to non-Anglo congregations and classes. Finally, we encourage majority-culture churches to work together with nonmajority churches to bridge cultural gaps so that churches whose ethnic background is not Anglo may feel adequately supported and invested in the processes of church polity.

We would furthermore recommend an update to the introduction of the Church Order to highlight for readers the importance of seeking out such language and cultural resources as would help foster a deeper understanding of and trust in the systems established by synod to promote healthy ministry and address conflict. The more that local councils and classes can gain a sense of ownership over these processes, the easier it will be to discover the gift of healing and hope that God provides through the collective discernment and witness of the wider church. This is true even in situations where cross-cultural issues are not in play. For many churches and classes, supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings and questions of release from call are not everyday realities, so it is important to seek out the wisdom and learned experience from others in the wider denomination. This is also an important reason to continue to develop training resources for stated clerks, synodical deputies, regional pastors, church visitors, and other classis leaders who can assist churches and pastors in seasons of discernment and uncertainty. In some cases, that process could be assisted by updates to materials such as the *Manual for Synodical Deputies* or the *Guide for Conducting Church Visiting*, which should be reviewed in light of the changes proposed and the commentary provided by this report.

As we wrap up this report, we return to an observation we made as we began—that our overall goal in any regulations regarding ministry and leadership is to advance the work of God’s kingdom. Thus we want to ground all of our work, including those matters that appear more administrative in nature, in the testimony of Scripture and the wisdom of theological reflection done within the Reformed tradition over the years. In this regard, we echo the observations of a previous study committee addressing issues similar to ours: “The issues faced . . . are very complex and involve many facets of our church’s polity. Our primary concern is the welfare of God’s church and the individual ministers, congregations, and other parties concerned in stressful situations. . . . The success of these recommendations, it must be observed, will depend in the final analysis upon the local churches, their consistories, and pastors working together to do what is right and best” (Report of the Healing Ministries Committee, *Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 582). We reiterate the fact that the situations we are addressing depend, in the end, on the faithfulness and integrity of those tasked with carrying out the processes mandated by synod.

Unfortunately, in a sinful world there will always be ways in which our actions in a particular situation do not match our Christian commitment to truth and justice. No measure of regulation can prevent pastors or church assemblies from a sinful application of church regulations. What we can do, however, is provide guidance and regulations that help to foster the kind of Christlike conversation that brings about appropriate measures of support and accountability for people in ordained leadership that goes beyond a “quick fix” mentality. We can also encourage churches and leaders to slow down enough to listen to each other in order to bring their stories together in ways that create space for mutual discernment, following the lead of the Holy Spirit and drawing on the collective wisdom of past denominational policies as well as the collaborative experience of our various cultural contexts and individual situations in which God has placed us. We believe that our report and recommendations offer assistance in developing the types of practices that foster such mutual discernment and space for careful listening, and we pray that God’s Spirit directs our churches and pastors to applications of this guidance in ways that honor Christ and glorify him in the public ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

May God bless the work of his people in leadership and in our churches so that “the peace of Christ may rule in [our] hearts, since as members of one body [we are] called to peace.” And in all we do, as our church assemblies process matters of supervision or release, “whether in word or deed,” may it be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:15-17).

## VI. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Joel Vande Werken (chair) and Rita Klein-Geltink (reporter) when matters related to the Church Order Review Task Force report are considered.

B. That synod commend the report of the Church Order Review Task Force to the churches as a resource for addressing questions and concerns about the calling and supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings, for thinking about situations that may lead to a pastor's release from a call, and for considering the cultural factors that contribute to the complexity of these issues today.

### *Grounds:*

1. The report identifies and reaffirms much of the wisdom of past decisions of synod regarding the calling and supervision of pastors in noncongregational settings and regarding issues related to a pastor's release from a call.
2. The report presents in accessible form many of the resources pertaining to matters in the task force mandate.

C. That synod remind the churches that the Church Order and other polity resources identified in this report exist for the purpose of supporting ministry, giving shape to our church community, and fostering Spirit-led discernment and transparent conversation about the nature of ordained ministry and the work of building God's kingdom. These resources should be used in conjunction with diligent prayer and concerted efforts to deepen relationships for the reign of Christ among his people (sections II, A; V, B).

D. That synod reaffirm the following principles related to the calling, supervision, and release of ministers of the Word, with the understanding that these regulations form the basis for the proposed revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements that follow in later recommendations:

1. There is only one category of CRC ministers—that of minister of the Word—and the ministry of this office comes to expression in different settings within the service of the part of Christ's body known as the Christian Reformed Church (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 478; see section III, A, 1, a).
2. All ministers of the Word, whether serving in a local CRC congregation or in some other organization or congregation beyond the CRC, are expected to adhere to CRC doctrine and polity as indicated in the Covenant for Officebearers (*Acts of Synod 1976*, p. 502; see section III, A, 2, d).
3. All calls to ministers of the Word should be processed "in the regular manner," which requires a formal call from a council and congregation with accountability to the classis (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58; see section III, C, 2).

4. Participation in the major assemblies of the church is limited to officebearers of the constituent minor assemblies (with the exception of RCA ministers serving as pastors of CRC churches, per Supplement, Art. 8, D, 10). While other CRC officebearers who are not delegated may attend classis and be given an advisory voice, the participation of such officebearers is subject to the discernment and regulations of each classis (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 57; section III, C, 5).
5. Councils are responsible for ensuring that “proper support” has been provided for all active ministers whose credentials they hold, and to provide encouragement for the ministry done by those pastors, whether within or beyond the local CRC congregation (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 967; see section III, A, 2, e; B, 5; C, 2).
6. Church visitors should inquire annually about the status of all pastors not serving in congregational ministry, and should take steps to ensure that councils are providing appropriate “proper support” and encouragement and that situations comply with all synodical regulations (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 72; see section IV, B, 6; C, 6).
7. Ecclesiastical endorsement for chaplains, specialized transitional ministers, and other such positions is not intended as a replacement for the discernment of the church assemblies to determine whether a particular position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46; see section III, B, 6; C, 3).
8. When feasible, ministers of the Word should ordinarily be called by a local church in close geographic proximity to the congregation, institution, or agency being served, and the pastor’s membership should normally reside with the calling church (*Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 58; see section III, B, 8).
9. Classes are assemblies composed of delegates from the constituent councils; therefore the business to be conducted is that of the councils. This means that an individual pastor may be allowed to address the classis in a matter related to their call or release, but the matters considered by the classis are those brought to it by a council, except in cases of appeal (see Church Order Art. 39; section IV, B, 1).
10. Pastors are called by both God and the church as the Spirit speaks through the church’s members. It should be a weighty matter, therefore, requiring discernment from the wider church through its assemblies, when a pastor leaves a particular call or when a congregation requests permission to release a pastor. It is also important that the church avoid business language such as “hiring” to refer to the calling of a pastor (see Church Order Art. 14-a; section IV, A, 1).
11. The call to ministry, either in a local congregation or in the service of the wider church, is not necessarily a lifetime call. Therefore it should be understood that people following the call of God may be led into

different kinds of work over the course of a lifetime, and should welcome the wisdom of the wider church and its assemblies in the process of discernment when leaving a call (*Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 47; see section IV, A, 2).

12. Ordination clings to a role in the church, not to any specific individual. Because the ministry of the Word is a calling connected to the official service of the CRC and is not simply a professional credential, pastors who are not actively engaged in such service should seek to discern, in cooperation with the assemblies of the church, at what point a release from ministry would be more appropriate than continued ordination (*Acts of Synod 1986*, p. 586; see section II, B, 2).

E. That synod adopt the following regulations with regard to the calling, supervision, and release of ministers of the Word, with the understanding that these regulations form the basis for the proposed revisions to the Church Order and its Supplements that follow in later recommendations:

1. The basic pattern of what it means to be “called in the regular manner” (proposed Supplement, Art. 12, A; see section III, C, 2).
  - A council extends a call to a pastor by presenting a nomination to the congregation (Church Order Art. 4-a), who affirms the council’s call by means of a congregational vote (Art. 4-c; Art. 37).
  - Candidates elected to office are ordained or installed in a public worship service of the church (Art. 4-d).
  - The classis is involved in these matters through the work of a classical counselor, who is an officebearer from another congregation who acts on behalf of the classis to see that ecclesiastical regulations have been followed (Art. 9; Art. 42-c).
  - The ordination of candidates and the installation of ministers are regulated according to Church Order Articles 10-a and -b.

*Ground:* This gathers the regulations regarding the call process into one location in the Church Order.

2. The definition stating that positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ (see proposed Supplement, Art. 12, A). The questions for discernment as presented in section III, C, 1 of this report are key to this definition.

*Ground:* This definition reflects the general outline of the calling of a minister in Church Order Article 11 and aligns with past declarations of synod.

3. The requirement that all calls to positions beyond the bounds of a single local CRC congregation, whether such service is the minister’s

primary service or part of a bivocational or temporary arrangement, include a Covenant for Joint Supervision. This requirement also includes all pastors serving congregations outside the CRC, as well as pastors serving multiple congregations within the CRC (see section III, B, 6; C, 4).

*Grounds:*

- a. Such covenants protect both pastors and churches by ensuring that proper boundaries are in place and expectations are clearly spelled out to prevent misunderstanding or burnout, and to strengthen the encouragement a church provides for the ministry carried out in its name outside the local congregation.
  - b. While these covenants are currently required only of chaplains and denominational staff, there are benefits to the clarity gained for any minister whose ecclesiastical supervision and work lie with different organizations.
  - c. Though Church Order currently specifies the nature of supervision for pastors serving in RCA congregations (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 9; Supplement, Art. 13-c, f), the expectation of regular reporting to the sending council is not made explicit.
  - d. Synod 2023 recognized the importance of regular engagement concerning the “health and welfare” of pastors as part of conversations about the provision of “proper support” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 967).
4. The stipulation that approval of a position according to Article 12-b or 12-c requires a formal declaration that the position is “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” as part of the process of calling “in the regular manner” (section III, C, 3).

*Grounds:*

- a. It is the task of the assemblies to discern what positions outside the local congregation are “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.”
- b. This procedure is consistent with previous declarations of synod (*Acts of Synod 1950*, p. 61; *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 46) and with the current understanding of chaplaincy supported through Thrive, but this is not often understood to be part of the calling process for Article 12-b positions today.
- c. Requiring a formal note about the ministerial nature of all such positions helps to strengthen practices of oversight and support for ministers in noncongregational settings.
- d. Article 12-b recognizes that there is general agreement about the ministerial nature of certain kinds of work in missions, chaplaincy, or transitional ministry that do not require the extra discernment of synodical deputies.

5. The provision that ministers of the Word being loaned to non-CRC congregations, either as a primary call or as part of an arrangement to serve multiple churches, should serve only congregations who recognize the value of a Reformed witness and allow the minister to serve in a way consistent with the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church, ordinarily articulated through statements of faith in harmony with those of the Christian Reformed denomination. Such churches are not, however, required to be actively contemplating affiliation with the CRCNA as currently expected by Church Order (section III, C, 4).

*Grounds:*

- a. Though CRC pastors must remain true to the doctrinal commitments made in the Covenant for Officebearers, our current expectation that the receiving congregation “seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church” (current Supplement, Art. 13-c, a and b) is increasingly unrealistic.
  - b. This provision offers pastors, particularly in smaller non-Anglo churches who may face requests for long-term service in congregations outside the Reformed theological tradition, with a means of discernment from the wider church regarding the appropriateness of such arrangements.
6. The updated guidelines from Synod 1998 dealing with the separation of pastors and churches, which have been expanded to include matters related to prevention and healing for pastors and churches in times of conflict without the presumption of an inevitable separation, as presented in Addendum E (see section IV, C, 2).

*Grounds:*

- a. Synod 2022 specifically requested that the task force provide clearer guidelines for pastors and churches in times of conflict.
  - b. Though the title of the regulations adopted by Synod 1998 indicates their usefulness in guiding the process of separation between pastors and churches, the document also includes a number of helpful remarks aimed at helping churches and pastors through conflict without the presumption that a separation will be necessary.
  - c. The guidelines have not been substantially reviewed since 1998, despite significant shifts in ministry culture since that time.
7. The purposes of severance identified in section IV, B, 2 of this report.  
*Ground:* While the appropriate amount of severance requires the discernment of council and classis with regard to the specific details of each unique situation, a clear sense of the purposes of severance arrangements can assist church leaders in providing just and gracious provisions for pastors released from a call.



8. The updated readmission process for those who have been previously released from CRC ministry (see section IV, B, 7 and Addendum B, Proposed Supplement, Art. 14-e).

*Grounds:*

- a. Current regulations provide no requirement that candidates for re-admission complete the synodical requirements for ordination imposed since the initial admission to the ministry.
  - b. This will provide consistency in the way that all releases from CRC ministry are handled, thereby rescinding the previous directives that ministers released to another denomination should be readmitted through Article 8 rather than Article 14-e (*Acts of Synod 1994*, pp. 491-92).
9. The expectation that pastors and councils have a mutual responsibility to formulate and conclude a separation agreement that meets the approval of classis in all situations where a release from a call is necessary (section IV, C, 4).

*Grounds:*

- a. Synodical guidelines currently imply, but do not mandate, that separation agreements be used for all Article 17 situations (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-95).
  - b. Requiring a separation agreement in all situations fosters mutual discernment between pastors, councils, and classes about the circumstances of a release from a call.
  - c. A mutually agreed-upon separation agreement provides clarity of expectations and provisions for the pastor and council moving forward.
10. The process of “consultation,” in situations of release from calls issued jointly by both a CRC council and a congregation in another denomination (Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7), requires receiving the documentation describing the proposed release, and taking part in the deliberations of the assembly processing that release, in order to provide some measure of formal communication and mutual discernment between the appropriate assemblies in each denomination (section IV, B, 1).

*Ground:* As joint ministry opportunities become more common, it is helpful to have guidelines to address ministerial supervision and release in such situations.

F. That synod propose the updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and their Supplements for adoption by Synod 2025, as presented in Addendum A. It is understood that where these regulations place new expectations on councils or pastors (such as a Covenant of Joint Supervision), they apply only to new calls placed after the formal adoption of these changes by synod.

*Grounds:*

1. These changes explicitly incorporate the principles of earlier synods as well as the new regulations recommended above (see Recommendations D, 1-8; E, 1-5).
  2. These updates standardize the language of the Church Order and Its Supplements with regard to the “work” or “position” of a pastor, and they provide consistency in the descriptions given to service outside the local CRC congregation (section II, A, 3).
  3. Moving the present Article 13-c into Article 12 places all of the Church Order material related to the calling process in the same article (section III, B, 2).
  4. The new material in the proposed Supplement, Article 12 clarifies the universal nature of expectations about the council’s responsibility of “proper support” for all called positions, as well as the general applicability of regulatory processes that Church Order currently addresses to specific situations (section III, C, 2 and Recommendation 3, a).
  5. The order of the proposed Supplement, Article 13-b makes clear that the priority of the church is care and support rather than discipline (section III, C, 6).
  6. Applying these changes only to new calls placed after the effective date of these Church Order changes reduces the administrative burden on churches and pastors whose current calls were formulated under different expectations.
  7. Because the proposed Supplements are tightly bound up with the proposed updates to the Church Order, it makes sense to combine final approval of both until 2025 even though synod has already adopted the principles and regulations undergirding these revisions.
- G. That synod propose the updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, 42 and their Supplements for adoption by Synod 2025, as presented in Addendum B.

*Grounds:*

1. These changes explicitly incorporate the principles of earlier synods as well as the new regulations recommended above (see Recommendations D, 9-12; E, 6-9).
2. Church Order Articles 14 and 17 do not currently state explicitly that changes to and releases from a call to a noncongregational position are handled according to the same principles as those governing changes to and releases from a call to congregational ministry.

3. Replacing the word “weighty” with the word “valid” offsets the negative connotation that causes many to resist the procedures of Articles 14 and 17.
4. While pastors currently have the option of requesting a leave of absence, no provisions currently exist in Church Order to allow a council to provide an administrative leave in situations where discipline does not apply.
5. Because the proposed Supplements are tightly bound up with the proposed updates to the Church Order, it makes sense to combine final approval of both until 2025 even though synod has already adopted the principles and regulations undergirding these revisions.

H. That synod commend to the churches the following templates as models for use in the situations identified in this report, with the recognition that additional templates may already exist to address similar particular situations (sections III, A, 2; B, 7; C, 2; IV, B, 1-2; C, 3):

1. The model Covenant of Joint Supervision (Addendum C)
2. The updated Separation Agreement Template (Addendum D)

*Grounds:*

- a. These resources provide churches and classes with a basic format for mutual discernment in situations of noncongregational ministry or releases from service, while recognizing the value of templates that already exist to address specific situations.
- b. This recommendation follows the pattern established by synod in adopting the sample letter of call and allows flexibility in applying sample documents to particular circumstances.
- c. The Separation Agreement Template was formally adopted by synod and thus requires synodical approval to be updated (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935).

I. That synod commend to the churches the resources for letters of call, liturgical forms, suggestions for encouragement in ministry, and reporting templates found in Addendum F of this report (sections III, C, 2; IV, C, 2, 4).

*Ground:* Synod 2022 requested that the task force provide resources for more effective supervision of pastors in noncongregational positions.

J. That synod take the following steps to address the growing number of Article 17 releases, and to address concerns over the stigma of releases via Article 17 (sections IV, B, 4-7).

1. Note the variety of reasons why a minister might be released from a particular call, and that many of these reasons are related to cultural and ecclesiastical changes not associated with relationship tension or a lack of fit between the congregation and the pastor (see section IV,

- A, 2). These realities mean that separations between churches and pastors may continue to rise despite efforts to address them.
2. Remind classes and congregations of the importance of consistent and transparent application of the principles of Article 17, its Supplement, and other synodical guidance in ways that assist churches and pastors to see the work of Christ even in difficult situations (section IV, A, 1).
  3. Remind churches that Article 17 is not intended to serve as a mechanism to address violations of the Covenant for Officebearers, and that issues of special discipline should be addressed through the procedures of Church Order Articles 82-84 (section IV, A, 4).
  4. Commend to the churches the resources identified in this report for addressing concerns about the relationship between a minister and a congregation, particularly those aimed at preventing and managing conflict, noting especially the assistance for churches that is available through church visitors, regional pastors, and denominational support staff at Thrive. See Addendum F for a full list (sections IV, C, 1-2).
  5. Direct the Office of General Secretary to develop resources and guidance for Articles 14 and 17 where conflict is not the presenting issue, in order to reinforce the fact that conflict is not always the root cause of release from ministry (section IV, A, 2).
  6. Direct the Office of General Secretary to develop materials to assist church visitors in identifying and working through conflict between pastors and churches (sections IV, B, 5; C, 1, a).
  7. Remind churches of the need for continued prayer and mutual discernment regarding transitions in ministry, and of the importance of spiritual care for released ministers and their families (sections IV, B, 3-4; C, 5).

*Grounds:*

- a. The growing number of separations between churches and pastors, while concerning, stem in part from greater trends within the wider culture that will likely lead to continued growth in these requests despite efforts to address the issue.
- b. Many people in our churches continue to see a stigma for congregations and pastors who have experienced an Article 17 separation.
- c. Our single process for release of pastors from a call resembles that of other denominations, and synod has previously reaffirmed the validity of this approach to releases from call (*Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 399-400; *Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 749).
- d. Synod specifically asked this task force to take note of the temptation to use Articles 14 and 17 inappropriately as means of avoiding special discipline (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 849).

K. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to gather the resources identified above (Recommendations H; I; J, 4-5) into a single place on the CRC website for ready access by the churches, classes, and others who might use them (sections III, C, 2; C, 6).

*Ground:* These resources are not currently accessible in a single place on the denominational website.

L. That synod instruct the Council of Delegates to review any denominational policies for the translation of the Church Order and Its Supplements, and materials such as the key principles and regulations affirmed above (Recommendations D-E), with the goal of providing improved access to such materials for non-English speakers (section V, B).

*Grounds:*

1. The CRC has long recognized the importance of access to such documents in the languages in use in local contexts (*Acts of Synod 1902*, p. 77; *Acts of Synod 1989*, p. 308).
2. Though synod has been encouraged to consider the importance of intentional translation of documents (*Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 215-16), our task force was unable to find policies related to that instruction.
3. Many in the wider denomination do not appear to be familiar with the existing translations of such resources in other languages (see [crcna.org/synodresources](http://crcna.org/synodresources); [crcna.org/languages](http://crcna.org/languages)).

M. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to update the introduction to the Church Order to call attention to the translations of church polity materials available on the CRC website ([crcna.org/synodresources](http://crcna.org/synodresources); [crcna.org/languages](http://crcna.org/languages)), and to highlight the importance of consulting with ethnic ministry leaders when addressing situations of cultural and linguistic complexity, bringing these updates for approval by Synod 2025 (section II, C, 7).

*Grounds:*

1. This highlights the importance of consultation and conversation, particularly in situations where language or cultural differences may add greater complexity to already challenging situations.
2. The introduction to the Church Order has previous synodical approval (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 912-15).
3. Many in the wider denomination do not appear to be familiar with the existing translations of such resources in other languages.

N. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to review the forms for synodical deputies, guide for church visiting, training resources for classis personnel, and other relevant documents in order to make appropriate updates in light of the recommendations of this report (section V, B).

O. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee, while recognizing the differences that exist between the office of minister of the Word and the office of commissioned pastor, to note the implications of this task force’s work on the boundaries of ministerial work, the nature of “proper support,” and the regulations pertaining to release from a call, as it relates to commissioned pastors, and to bring to Synod 2025 any updates necessary to the Commissioned Pastor Handbook as a result of this task force’s observations and recommendations (section V, A, 1).

P. That synod note the implications of the process for declaring formerly released ministers as eligible for call in the proposed Supplement, Article 14-e and instruct the Council of Delegates to review Article 84 and its Supplement and propose appropriate updates to synod to bring the process for reinstatement of disciplined pastors into harmony with the procedures for re-admission of released pastors (section V, A, 3).

Q. That synod note the impact of this report’s proposals on the changes to Church Order Article 14-d and to Supplement, Article 13-c being considered for adoption by Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962, 993) and incorporate those changes appropriately as it considers the proposed changes to the Church Order in this report (section V, A, 5).

R. That synod declare the mandate of the Church Order Review Task Force fulfilled and dismiss the members of the task force with thanks.

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## ADDENDUM A

### Updates to Church Order Articles 12-13 and Their Supplements

*Note:* In the following Church Order materials, proposed additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~striketrough~~.

#### Article 12

a. *[unchanged]*

b. A minister of the Word who (1) accepts a position endorsed by the CRC related to ~~enters into the work of~~ missions, chaplaincy, or specialized transitional ministry; or (2) is appointed directly by synod; or (3) accepts an appointment that is ratified by synod shall be called in the regular manner by a local church, which acts in cooperation with the appropriate committees of classis or synod to ensure that provisions for accountability to the calling church are in place.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12

c. A minister of the Word may also serve the church in other positions that relate work which relates directly to the calling of a minister. Such ministers shall be called in the regular manner by a local church, but only after the calling church has demonstrated to the satisfaction of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, that the said work is consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word, that provisions for accountability to the calling church are in place, and that the duties of the position do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12-e

*[The following proposed Article 12-d has been moved and adapted from the previous Article 13-c.]*

~~de.~~ A minister of the Word may be loaned temporarily ~~by the calling church~~ to serve as pastor of a congregation outside the Christian Reformed Church, provided that the duties of the position do not conflict with the minister's commitment to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church. Such ministers shall also be called in the regular manner by a local church, but only with the approval of classis, ~~the concurring advice of the synodical deputies,~~ and in accordance with synodical regulations, including the concurring advice of the synodical deputies when necessary. ~~Although the specific duties may be regulated in cooperation with the other congregation, the supervision of doctrine and life rests with the calling church.~~

—Cf. Supplement, Article 12

### Article 13

a. *[unchanged]*

b. A minister of the Word whose position work is with a congregation, institution, or agency other than the calling church shall be supervised by the calling church in cooperation with any other congregations, institutions, or agencies involved. The council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 13-b

*[Article 13-c has been moved and adapted to become the proposed Article 12-d.]*

~~e.~~ A minister of the Word may be loaned temporarily ~~by the calling church~~ to serve as pastor of a congregation outside of the Christian Reformed Church, but only with the approval of classis, ~~the concurring advice of the synodical deputies,~~ and in accordance with the synodical regulations. ~~Although the specific duties may be regulated in cooperation~~

~~with the other congregation, the supervision of doctrine and life rests with the calling church.~~

—Cf. Supplement, Article 13-e

### Proposed changes to Supplement, Articles 12-13

The task force is proposing significant changes (with new text, adaptations, and reorganization) to the Supplements to Articles 12-13. The following table indicates where the various parts of the current Supplements are moved, replaced, or adapted in the proposed Supplements. In the proposed Supplements below, additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~strikethrough~~.

<i>Current Supplement</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>Proposed Supplement</i>
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a and a,1)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1 and 1, a
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 2)	replaced by	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, c
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 3)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, b
Suppl., Art. 12-c, a, 4)	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, d
Suppl., Art. 12-c, b	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 1, e
Suppl., Art. 12-c, c	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, B, 2
Suppl., Art. 12-c, d	moved to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, C
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 1	moved to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, B, 1
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 2	replaced by	Suppl., Art. 13-b, A
Suppl., Art. 13-b, para. 3	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, G
Suppl., Art. 13-c, para. 1	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, para. 1
Suppl., Art. 13-c, a-b	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, a
Suppl., Art. 13-c, c	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, D
Suppl., Art. 13-c, d	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, E
Suppl., Art. 13-c, e	moved to	Suppl., Art. 12, C, 2, b
Suppl., Art. 13-c, f	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 13-b, B, 2
Suppl., Art. 13-c, g	adapted to	Suppl., Art. 12, F

### Supplement, Article 12-e

*Regulations for the application of Article 12-e of the Church Order to specific tasks and situations:*

A. To be “called in the regular manner” means that a minister of the Word, whether called to serve a congregation or to serve in a noncongregational ministry, requires the following (see Church Order Articles 4, 9-10) in addition to the fulfillment of any other synodical regulations or classical approvals:



1. Nomination by the council and election by the congregation
2. An extension of a call by the council
3. Approval of the counselor who acts on behalf of classis
4. Ordination or installation in a public worship service

The requirement for a separate installation service during a CRC worship service is optional in the case of a minister serving on loan to a congregation in another denomination.

Noncongregational positions “consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word” are those in which a minister serves beyond a local CRC congregation to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture under the authority of and as a public representative of the church, in a way that the members of the church may be gathered in and built up in Christ.

#### B. Positions that do not require concurrence of the synodical deputies

1. Types of ministry positions
  - a. Positions regulated by Articles 9-10 of the Church Order. This includes congregational positions, whether solo-pastor positions or additional staff ministry positions; or also those of pastors serving multiple CRC congregations or in multiple vocational settings.
  - b. Positions regulated by Article 12-b of the Church Order. These include positions that have the endorsement of a synodically authorized body, such as those of chaplains, missionaries, and specialized transition ministers endorsed or accredited by the CRC denomination; or positions whose appointees are approved by or ratified by synod itself (such as professors of theology or other CRC executive staff positions requiring ratification by synod). Classis minutes should note that the position is deemed consistent with the ministry of the Word.
  - c. Calls regulated by Article 8-b of the Church Order and its supplemental rules. These include ministers who participate in the Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America. Classis minutes should indicate the concurrence of the sending body (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D, 7).
2. Prior to calling a minister of the Word to any noncongregational position ~~chaplaincy ministry~~, the calling church is required to ensure that the minister has secured any necessary endorsements from accrediting institutions within or outside the Christian Reformed Church, and that all synodical regulations have been followed. A Covenant of Joint Supervision shall be mutually agreed to and signed by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, Section D; Supplement, Art. 13-b). ~~obtain the endorsement of the Office of Chaplaincy Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church (Acts of Synod 1973, p. 56; amended Acts of Synod 1998, p. 391).~~

C. Positions that require specific approval of the classis and concurrence of synodical deputies

1. In all other cases of noncongregational positions, ~~t~~The calling church shall secure the prior approval of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, for each new ministerial position, by providing classis with the following information:
  - a. The description of the official position (purposes, duties, qualifications, etc.) as determined by the calling church in consultation with cooperating agencies as applicable.
  - b. The demonstration that the position will be consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word.
  - c. A Covenant of Joint Supervision that shall be mutually agreed to and signed by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization (cf. Supplement, Art. 13-b). ~~The evidence that the minister will be directly accountable to the calling church, including an outline of requirements for reporting to the calling church, and supervision by the calling church, in consultation with cooperating agencies as applicable.~~
  - d. When any position having been declared by a classis to be “spiritual in character and directly related to the ministerial calling” . . . becomes vacant, this position shall be reviewed by the classis and synodical deputies in light of Articles 11-14 of the Church Order before another call is issued.
  - e. When a new ministry opportunity can be met only by immediate action, the calling church (and the appropriate denominational agency) may obtain provisional approval from the classical interim committee, subject to subsequent approval by classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies. The letter of call must indicate the provisional nature of this call if such approval has not yet been granted. In the event that the provisional approval is not sustained and the minister desires to continue in the position, the minister may be ~~honorably~~ released from office and may be readmitted according to the regulations of the Church Order. (Cf. Article 14-e.)
2. Ministers ~~A minister~~ whose service is requested by a congregation outside the Christian Reformed Church may be loaned temporarily to serve such a church while still retaining ministerial status in the Christian Reformed Church in keeping with the following regulations:
  - a. The congregation seeking the services of the Christian Reformed minister recognizes the value of a Reformed witness and allows the minister to serve in a way consistent with the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church, ordinarily articulated through statements of faith in harmony with those of the Christian

~~Reformed denomination, is desirous of the Reformed faith and seriously contemplates affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church or some other Reformed denomination, or is already in a Reformed denomination and seeks to be strengthened in the Reformed faith.~~

~~—b. The minister contemplating service in a nondenominational church acknowledges this as an opportunity to encourage such a church to affiliate with either the Christian Reformed Church or a Reformed denomination similar to the Christian Reformed Church.~~

b. The loaning of such ministerial services may be for a period of time not to exceed two years. Extension of not more than two years each may be granted if circumstances warrant, with the approval of classis and the synodical deputies.

c. These regulations also apply when pastors whose credentials are held in the CRC receive a request to serve simultaneously in an additional congregation outside the CRC.

d. If the requested service is in the Reformed Church in America, calls shall be processed in keeping with the regulations for the Orderly Exchange of Ministers (cf. Supplement, Art. 8, D).

D. In all cases, the minister shall be called in the regular manner, and the council and the counselor shall render to classis an account of all matters processed. Classis minutes should reflect the work of the counselor in accordance with Church Order Article 42-c.

E. Where it is possible and feasible, ministers of the Word should ordinarily be called by a local church in close geographic proximity to the congregation, institution, or agency being served, and the pastor's membership should normally reside with the calling church. If the ministry position congregation to be served is in close proximity to a Christian Reformed congregation of another is located in a classis other than that of the calling church, the approval of that classis shall be required, in addition to the approval of the classis of the minister's calling church, and the synodical deputies.

F. Continuation under the Christian Reformed Church Pension Plan shall require that the minister, or the congregation, institution, or agency non-Christian Reformed church which is being served, shall contribute to the ministers' pension fund the amount which is determined annually by the Ministers' Pension Funds committees for ministers serving in noncongregational extraordinary positions outside of our denomination.

G. Supervision of a minister in noncongregational specialized ministry may be transferred, at the request of the minister or of the calling church, to another church. Such a tTransfer of ministerial credentials requires the regular calling process of the local church and must be approved by both councils and classes.

H. If a noncongregational ministry position is eliminated, the minister should be formally released according to the regulations of the Church Order appropriate to the situation.

### **Supplement, Article 13-b**

A. Provisions for cooperative supervision of ministers of the Word working for agencies and institutions not directly under the authority of the synod of the CRCNA are to be formulated and processed according to the regulations contained in Church Order Supplement, Article 12-c and the provisions regarding chaplains adopted by Synod 1998 (see Acts of Synod 1998, pp. 391-92, 457-60). When the position of a minister of the Word is with other than the calling church, the position shall be regulated by a Covenant of Joint Supervision as approved by the minister, the calling church, and the appointing organization, with concurrence of the classis. Any changes to the status of the Covenant of Joint Supervision, as soon as they are known, shall be submitted to all parties for review and concurrence.

B. Situations requiring a change in status of a CRC minister in a noncongregational setting

1. If any council, agency, or institution of the CRC involved in the cooperative supervision of a minister of the Word learns about significant deviation in doctrine, life, or duties, it shall officially inform in writing its partner(s) in that supervision about such deviation before any action is taken that affects that minister's status and future. A similar communication officially informing its partner(s) in supervision is expected from an agency or institution when a minister's status is altered at a time of downsizing or position elimination.
2. Should a the minister serving a non-CRC congregation or noncongregational ministry become subject to discipline, the supervising institution non-Christian Reformed congregation which is being served shall have the right to suspend the minister from serviceserving that church, but suspension from office and deposition may be applied only by the calling church council that is part of the Christian Reformed Church. A similar communication is requested when a minister's status is altered, whether due to a change in the job description or at a time of downsizing or position elimination.
3. In all cases of discipline or other changes in status regarding a ministry position, the minister should be formally released from the call or issued a new call according to the appropriate provisions of the Church Order.

C. The church visitors of classis shall inquire annually into the supervision of the calling church toward said minister(s) as well as the reporting of said minister(s) to the calling church. The church visitors shall inform classis of departure from the approved provisions for supervision and reporting.

*Note:* The change at the end of the following subsection D has already been proposed to Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 993).

D. All pastors serving in noncongregational positions remain bound to the faith and practice of the Christian Reformed Church as required by one's signature to the Covenant for Officebearers and as articulated in the Code of Conduct.

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## ADDENDUM B

### Updates to Church Order Articles 8, 14-17, and 42 and Their Supplements

*Note:* In the following Church Order materials, proposed additions are indicated by underline and deletions are indicated by ~~striketrough~~.

#### *Proposed Article 14*

- a. A minister of the Word shall not leave the call ~~the congregation~~ with which the minister is connected for another position ~~church~~ without the consent of the council which issued the call.
- b. *[unchanged]*
- 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 valid ~~weighty~~ reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-c

*Note:* The change in Article 14-d has already been proposed to Synod 2024 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 962-63).

- d. A minister of the Word who has entered upon a vocation which classis judges to be non-ministerial and forsakes the calling of a minister of the Word 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, and shall ensure that all synodical regulations have been met. Upon acceptance of a call, the person shall be reordained.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-e

*Proposed Article 16*

A minister who for valid reasons desires a temporary leave of absence from service to the congregation must have the approval of the council, which shall continue to have supervision over the minister. A council may also, in consultation with the minister, initiate the process of granting a temporary leave of absence when it believes that the situation warrants such an arrangement. In all cases of a temporary leave of absence the intention shall be that the minister shall return to service in that congregation.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 16

*Proposed Article 17*

- a. Ministers who are neither eligible for retirement nor worthy of discipline may for valid weighty reasons be released from active ministerial service in a position to which they have been called by a congregation, through action initiated by themselves, by a council, or jointly. Such release shall be given only with the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, and in accordance with synodical regulations.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 17-a

- b. *[unchanged]*
- c. A minister of the Word who has been released from active ministerial service ~~in a congregation~~ shall be eligible for call for a period of two years, after which time the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, shall declare the minister to be released from the ministerial office. For valid weighty reasons the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, may extend the eligibility for call on a yearly basis.
- d. *[unchanged]*

*Proposed Article 42-b*

- b. The church visitors shall consist of one or more teams of officebearers chosen for their experience and counsel. Team composition shall include a minister of the Word and at least one other officebearer. Their task shall be to ascertain whether the officebearers of the church faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe the provisions of the Church Order, and promote the building up of the body of Christ and the extension of God's kingdom. Churches are ~~free~~ to call on the church visitors whenever serious challenges arise that would benefit from their advice. The church visitors shall provide classis a written report of their work.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 42-b

*Proposed Supplement, Article 8, D, 7*

7. Approval for extended service must be done in consultation with and with the concurrence of the sending body. (In the CRC, the sending body is the calling church council; in the RCA, it is the classis holding the pastor's membership.) The minister remains accountable to the sending body for continuation of ministerial status. In the event of termination of a call, the polity of the calling church shall be followed, in consultation with the sending church and in accordance with synodically established procedures.

(*Acts of Synod 2014*, pp. 564-65)

*Proposed Supplement, Article 14-b, a-b*

Changes are proposed to sections a and b; sections c and d of Supplement, Article 14-b would remain unchanged.

- 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 This resolution statement allows for a broad degree of flexibility in responding to such situations (cf. *Acts of Synod 1978*, p. 73).~~
- b. In making such a resolution, ~~Synod directed the churches and classes~~ should ~~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.)

*Proposed Supplement, Article 14-e*

Process for reentry into CRC ministry after a release from office via Article 14 or 17:

1. A former minister who was released through the provisions of Article 14-b, 14-c, or 14-d or Article 17-c or 17-d and desires readmission to CRCNA ministry should be interviewed by the classis in which the original action was taken. The interview should examine the following:
  - a. the circumstances surrounding the release
  - b. the applicant's theological and ministerial journey since the release
  - c. the sense of call and renewed commitment to service in the CRC

- The classis, with the concurrence of the synodical deputies, shall then make a decision regarding whether to endorse the request to begin the process for readmission.
2. If approval is given to proceed, the classis shall notify the Candidacy Committee to guide the applicant through the completion of any requirements for ministry imposed by synod subsequent to the original ordination. If the applicant has served in ministry outside the CRC, the Candidacy Committee should also receive and review recommendations from the church and regional body last served by the minister.
  3. The Candidacy Committee shall notify the releasing classis once all requirements are complete and favorable recommendations have been received.
  4. Upon completion of all requirements, the releasing classis shall declare the former minister eligible for call. A former minister shall not be nominated for a call until the releasing classis and the Candidacy Committee have approved the applicant's eligibility for call. Eligibility for call shall be for a period of two years. An individual who has not received and accepted a call within that time and who desires to continue eligibility for call, must request an extension through the classis that approved the request for eligibility for call.
  5. The ordination and installation of a former minister who has been declared eligible for call shall require the approval of the calling church's classis counselor or the calling church's classis interim committee, which shall see that all synodical requirements have been met.
  6. 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)*

*Proposed Supplement, Article 16*

A council may initiate the process of granting a leave of absence only after seeking the advice of the church visitors, who should inform the classis of the situation when a written report is provided to the assembly (Church Order Art. 42-b). An initial leave of absence should be granted for no more than six weeks, with any extension of this time requiring additional advice of the church visitors. In no case may a leave of absence initiated by the council extend for a period of longer than twelve weeks.



*Proposed Supplement, Article 17-a*

A new section a is proposed; the current sections a and b would become sections b and c, respectively, and their content would remain unchanged, except as where indicated in subsection c, 2. The current *Note* at the end of Supplement, Article 17-a would be moved to section a, 4, as shown.

*Provisions regulating release from ministerial service in a congregation*

a. General Provisions

- 1) All Article 17 separations, even those requested by a pastor or those jointly initiated by a pastor and council, are formally a request of the calling council and shall be handled as such by the classis.
- 2) Pastors, churches, and classes are encouraged to take note of denominational resources available that provide assistance in the process of Article 17 separations, and to call upon outside resources or mediators when necessary (in addition to the involvement of classis representatives).
- 3) In all situations, councils and pastors shall utilize a formal separation agreement that identifies the publicly stated reason(s) for the separation, the effective date of the separation, the financial arrangements agreed upon by all parties, and other relevant information. This document shall be submitted to classis for its approval when the council formally requests the Article 17 separation. If the pastor and council disagree on specific matters, the areas of disagreement shall be clearly identified, and classis shall adjudicate those matters separately.
- 4) Classis minutes will concisely record the grounds for the separation—for example, family situation, conflict, continuing education, church closure, etc. Article 17 separations will be processed according to the guidelines set forth by synod and the appropriate denominational agencies. Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding “release from ministerial service” adopted by Synod 2024 (see *Acts of Synod 2024*, p. ) and Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and as amended by Synod 2010 (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16).
- 5) Releases from calls issued jointly between a CRC council and a congregation in another denomination should be processed in accordance with the principles established by Synod 2024 (see *Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. ).
- 6) If a separation does occur, it is important to recognize that there are continuing needs. The members of the congregation require continued support, opportunity to grieve, and guidance for future planning. The separated pastor and his/her family should not be forgotten as they leave the congregation and seek another call. The

congregation and classis should covenant to provide continuing ministry and care for them, assisting in any way possible to encourage personal healing and further opportunities for ministry.

ba. *[unchanged]*

cb. *[unchanged]* . . .

2) In conjunction with the church council, the committee shall secure interim pastoral leadership, preferably a specialized interim pastor, and set goals. (~~Thrive Pastor Church Relations~~ is able to assist with securing pastoral leadership.)

3) *[unchanged]* . . .

Note: ~~Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding “release from ministerial service” adopted by Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and as amended by Synod 2010 (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16).~~

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## ADDENDUM C

### **Covenant of Joint Supervision for Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors Serving in Noncongregational Ministry Positions**

This Covenant of Joint Supervision is a basic resource for churches and pastors to use in the calling and supervision of CRC ministers of the Word (MW) and commissioned pastors (CP) who serve in ministry positions with agencies, institutions, or organizations other than their calling church, and in keeping with CRC Church Order Articles 12, 13, 14, 23, and relevant Supplements. These noncongregational ministry positions include but are not limited to those of denominational leaders, missionaries, chaplains, campus pastors, church planters, theological professors, specialized transitional ministers, Bible teachers, and ministry leaders with Christian nonprofit organizations. This Covenant of Joint Supervision also applies to pastors serving on loan with other denominations and could be adapted for use in other ministry settings as well.

As a template, this document should be tailored to the specific situation in which the calling church and the MW/CP is involved. In addition, the calling church may consider whether new or expanded provisions should be included, and it should ensure that federal, state, and provincial laws are observed.

The expectations and responsibilities listed below are designed to facilitate effective supervision of noncongregational ministers/ministries, as stipulated in Church Order Article 13-b:

A minister of the Word whose position work is with a congregation, institution, or agency other than the calling church shall be supervised by the calling church in cooperation with any other congregations, institutions, or agencies involved. The council of the calling church shall have primary responsibility for supervision of doctrine and life. The congregations, institutions, or agencies, where applicable, shall have primary responsibility for supervision of duties.

A. Expectations of the Minister of the Word/Commissioned Pastor:

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(name)

1. Submit your position description to the council of your calling church, accompanied by (a) your employing organization's mission statement, (b) your letter of appointment, and (c) a summary description for information to the congregation.
2. Inform your organization of the contact person(s) for your calling church.
3. Request that your calling church extend to you a letter of call for the ministry position. Upon receiving such a letter, submit a letter of acceptance to your calling church, provisional *as applicable* upon classis approval of the position description and, if necessary, upon sustaining an examination for ordination.
4. Submit an annual report to the council of the calling church, if possible with input from the employing organization, detailing the work you are doing as part of the call issued by the church to the noncongregational position (see also section C, 3 below).
5. Meet with the council of the calling church at least once annually, in the manner stipulated in section B, 4 below to review, discuss, and pray regarding the following:
  - a. your personal and spiritual life, including family joys and concerns
  - b. your professional life, including a summary of your annual work review as provided by your employing organization
6. Participate in the congregational life and ministry of your calling church in keeping with gifting and availability, and as mutually agreed (cf. section B, 5). When the MW/CP and the calling church are not in geographic proximity to one another, the MW/CP and council should identify specific steps to allow the congregation to provide appropriate support and care for the MW/CP. This may require a partnership with a congregation that is near the MW/CP and is willing to act on behalf of the calling church. In the case of specialized transitional ministers this may be the contracting church.

7. Inform your calling church, *as soon as known*, of an impending change or conclusion to your ministry position or appointment, and/or of your desire or intention to resign your ministry position for educational, professional, personal/family, or other reasons.
8. Inform your employing organization in the event of transferring your church membership and ecclesiastical credentials to a different calling church.
9. Meet other expectations of your calling church and employing organization, if any, as stipulated:

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*Examples include a code of ethics as required of CRC chaplains, joint supervision for ordained CRCNA staff (signature required), a code of conduct or other expectations and concerns as stipulated by the respective organization.*

**B. Responsibilities of the Calling Church:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 (name)

1. Extend a letter of call to the MW/CP “in the regular manner,” in keeping with synodical regulations (Church Order Art. 12 and Supplement) and, *as applicable*,
  - a. recommend the noncongregational ministry position for classis approval.
  - b. request that classis examine the MW/CP candidate for ordination.
2. Prior to proceeding with the installation of a previously ordained MW/CP, have in hand the classis-approved ecclesiastical credentials or other required approval.
3. Arrange for the formal installation of the MW/CP in the position to which they have been called, ordinarily in a public worship service with the use of the prescribed ecclesiastical forms (Church Order Art. 4-d).
4. Arrange to meet with the MW/CP at least once annually for reporting, support, and prayer (cf. section A, 5 above) regarding the following:
  - a. the MW/CP’s personal and spiritual life, including family joys and concerns.
  - b. the MW/CP’s professional life, including a brief description of their annual work as provided by their employing organization

These meetings shall take place with the council or its appointed representatives, as stipulated below, in fulfillment of the above purposes.

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5. Invite and encourage the MW/CP to participate in your congregational life and ministry in keeping with their gifting and availability, and as mutually agreed (cf. section A, 6).
6. Meet other responsibilities toward the MW/CP or the employing organization, if any, as stipulated:

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7. If the calling church notes significant concerns regarding the MW/CP's doctrine and life, the calling church will summarize those concerns to the employing organization and may request a joint meeting with the MW/CP to address those concerns.

Note: The calling church should also discuss with the employing organization on what matters, if any, it would expect to receive communications regarding any concerns about a MW/CP's doctrine and life, while noting that an organization's ability to communicate any such concerns may be limited by applicable employment law and/or internal policies. In the case of a church council, agency, or institution of the CRCNA, however, such communications are expected (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 13-b).

8. Inquire directly of the MW/CP and the employing organization regarding reasons for significant changes, or for the conclusion of the ministry position or its termination by the employing organization, or for the resignation of the MW/CP from the ministry appointment (cf. section C, 3 below).
9. In the event of the conclusion of the position, or its termination, or of resignation by the MW/CP, the calling church shall obtain the concurrence of the classis prior to declaring the MW/CP eligible for call to a new ministry position.

**C. Responsibilities of the Employing Organization:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(name)

1. Provide the MW/CP with appropriate compensation and support.
2. Provide the MW/CP with required training, reporting protocol, and professional support, as stipulated:

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3. Inform the calling church in writing when the position of a MW/CP is being altered or eliminated (cf. section B, 8 above).

Note: This protocol is not intended to interfere with the employing organization's right (and potential need) to take immediate employment action when

necessary for compliance with applicable laws, protection of other staff, or other compelling reasons.

4. Meet other responsibilities toward the MW/CP or calling church, if any, as stipulated:

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#### **D. Responsibilities of the Classis**

Through the work of the classis-appointed counselor, ensure that all synodical regulations related to calling procedures have been followed by the council prior to the installation of a MW/CP in a noncongregational position.

Review the description of the position to which the MW/CP has been called to ensure alignment with regulations of Church Order and to verify that protocols related to the accountability of the MW/CP to the calling church are in place (Art. 12-b and 12-c). In situations where the Church Order requires the involvement of synodical deputies, the classis should arrange for their involvement.

Inquire annually, through the church visitors, into the supervision and reporting of noncongregational ministers to the local council, and inform classis of any departure from synodical regulations (Supplement, Art. 13-b, C).

Required Signatures:

MW/CP \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Calling Church \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**This completed Covenant of Joint Supervision has been approved by the following authorized designee of classis:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Classis position)

## **Separation Agreement Template**

*Note:* In the following proposed document, textual additions to the template adopted by Synod 2022 (*Acts of Synod 2022*, pp. 757-58, 935) are indicated by underline.

### **I. Introduction**

This separation agreement template is a basic resource for churches and pastors and should be tailored to address the specific circumstances of any particular pastor's departure. Churches would be wise to engage legal counsel to address whether new or expanded provisions should be included, and to ensure that federal, state, and provincial laws are observed.

This template is grounded in the work of Synod 1998 (see *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-94) and in subsequent work to update the specific guidelines adopted at that time. It should be noted that this agreement could become void in the event that the pastor, after signing it, were to act in violation of his/her ordination vows, act in violation of the agreement, renounce the jurisdiction of the Christian Reformed Church, or become the subject of criminal charges.

From the standpoint of ecclesiastical procedure, this template is a resolution adopted by the council, asking that its classis take a particular action regarding its minister. Though ideally ministers and councils would fully agree on the terms of a separation, it is possible that both parties may agree on the need for separation without fully agreeing on details related to the separation. Where there is disagreement, the council and minister should clearly indicate, at a point sufficiently ahead of the classis meeting, any differences in understanding and expectations concerning the terms of the separation. At the classis meeting, any differences from the arrangements proposed by council would be adjudicated by classis (if necessary, through the appeals processes of Church Order Art. 30, or through similar procedures developed by the classis interim committee). The process for adjudication should be communicated to all parties prior to the classis meeting at which any differences of opinion between pastor and council are discussed.

### **II. Principles regarding the use of this resource**

It is hoped that the agreement that arises from this resource provides for a separation that is characterized by love, respect, and care for one another. It is also hoped that all communications leading up to and following from this agreement will be marked by both truth and grace. These hopes can be expressed as principles:

1. Church has a legitimate interest in
  - a. minister speaking truthfully and graciously about it.

- b. minister avoiding all false statements about the church, its leaders, and/or the reasons behind the separation.
2. Minister has a legitimate interest in
  - a. church, through its council, speaking truthfully and graciously about him/her.
  - b. church, through its council, avoiding all false statements about the minister and/or the reasons behind the separation.
3. The Christian Reformed Church in North America and its member congregations have a legitimate interest in allowing churches and ministers who separate from one another to provide truthful information about one another and the reason(s) for the separation. Congregations shall be expected to do this through their councils and classes, and synod shall be expected to do this through procedures (either formally prescribed by Church Order or informally adopted for a particular situation) that allow all the parties involved to be heard.
4. This template is a resource for discussing matters that must receive the approval of classis, as required by Church Order. Thus, it is a proposal and does not come into effect until classis grants the approval required by Article 17, its Supplement, and other relevant synodical or classical regulations. Any changes made by classis or by synod supersede the proposals in this document.

### Sample Separation Agreement

This Separation Agreement is made as of the date executed below between \_\_\_\_\_ Christian Reformed Church ("Church") and Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ ("Minister") and will become effective as of the date of Classis \_\_\_\_\_ approval.

1. **Termination:** Termination of Minister's service to Church will become effective on \_\_\_\_\_, when he/she will be relieved of all duties and benefits of the position, except as expressly preserved in this Agreement. The parties will work together to agree upon an appropriate communication to the congregation and any identified external parties.

**This separation, as printed in the public records of the CRC's assemblies, is taking place for the following reason(s):**

*(Indicate whether this request originated from the pastor, the council, or both.)*

- Educational leave
- Family leave
- Challenges in the relationship between church and pastor
- Theological difference between church and pastor



- Spouse's work situation requires a change
- Congregational financial difficulties or church closing
- Church disbands or disaffiliates from the CRC
- Other (please specify)

Additional information (included for the synodical deputies or for the confidential records of councils and classis):

This "additional information" will not become part of the public record but may be shared with classis personnel (classis delegates, church counselor, regional pastor, etc.). These notes will not be released to individuals outside the classis without classis' authorization. Note that disciplinary reasons for separation should be dealt with according to the procedures of the Church Order Articles 82-84.

- 2. Date of Last Service:** Minister will conduct his/her final act of service to Church on \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3. Financial Provision:** Church will provide Minister with a total of \$\_\_\_\_\_, representing Minister's salary for \_\_\_\_ weeks/months [including/excluding such things as book allowance, mileage expenses, etc.]. This severance will be paid in weekly/biweekly installments of \$\_\_\_\_\_, less appropriate payroll deductions. For \_\_\_\_ weeks/months, Church will also continue these benefits for Minister: \_\_\_\_\_. Minister may remain in the Church parsonage until \_\_\_\_\_, when it must be vacated.
- 4. General Release:** On behalf of himself/herself and anyone who could claim through him/her, Minister waives and releases Church, Classis \_\_\_\_\_, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America ("CRCNA") from all claims and damages. This is intended as a general release covering all claims whatsoever.
- 5. Confidentiality:** Minister agrees to maintain the confidentiality of the terms of this agreement and of the nonpublic matters of Church that came to his/her attention during the course of his/her ministerial service. Church, through its Council, agrees not to disclose the terms of this Agreement.
- 6. Public Communications:** Minister agrees not to make, or encourage others to make, false statements about Church, Classis \_\_\_\_\_, or the

CRCNA. Church, through its Council, agrees not to make, or encourage others to make, false statements about Minister.

7. **Non-Recruitment:** Minister agrees not to directly or indirectly engage in any activity designed to cause any Church member to relinquish membership or cause any person not to become a member of Church.

8. **Public Ministry:** The council and pastor have currently discussed the following allowances and/or restrictions on public ministry. It should be noted that any final decisions about public ministry or any future adjustments to this arrangement are the prerogative of classis itself, or its oversight committee, if one is appointed.

98. **Dispute and Venue:** This Agreement constitutes the entire understanding of the parties. Any dispute regarding this Agreement which cannot be resolved by the parties will be reconciled by Classis \_\_\_\_\_ or, on appeal, by synod. The decision of synod is final and binding on the parties.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Minister \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ On behalf of Church \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ No reservations from council's proposal

\_\_\_\_\_ With reservations as noted (see statement 8 above):

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## ADDENDUM E

### **Guidelines for Pastors and Congregations in Times of Conflict**

The following guidelines expand on work done by Synod 1998 (cf. *Agenda for Synod 1998*, pp. 152-156; *Acts of Synod 1998*, pp. 392-96) and Synod 2010 (cf. *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). Though originally intended to offer guidance during the process of separations, the counsel given by these synods is expanded upon here in the hope that God might provide healing in some situations of conflict and thus prevent separations between pastors and congregations. To this end, all parties are encouraged to note the following resources and suggestions that aim toward restoration (A, 1-4; B, 1-4; C, 1-3) rather than assuming that separation is inevitable.

#### A. Responsibilities of the pastor

1. Promptly inform the regional pastor and church visitors when signs of conflict arise, and maintain regular communication (see Church Order Art. 42).
2. Conduct oneself so as not to disrupt further the peace and unity of the congregation, and work with the council to discern the reasons for the conflict (see B, 3 below).
3. Identify a personal advocate who can assist in the process. This individual may or may not be the regional pastor. The personal advocate may also be a different individual than the liaison designated by classis to help facilitate communication between all parties (see C, 4, c below).
4. Be amenable to career counseling and/or personal counseling, and to the guidance of church assemblies and their representatives.
5. Update the Pastoral Profile and contact the Ministerial Information Service (Thrive) if relocation becomes necessary.
6. Help formulate and sign a separation agreement with the council if there is a separation (see B, 5 below).
7. Cooperate with any oversight committee that might be established by the classis (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 17-a).
8. A pastor who moves to another region shall inform the releasing council and classis, as well as the classis in the new region into which the pastor has moved. The councils and classes involved shall communicate with the pastor to discern whether a transfer of membership and ministry credentials would be appropriate, depending on whether the pastor is under oversight by the classis (see Supplement, Art. 17-a, b, 5-6).

#### B. Responsibilities of the council

1. Seek assistance from the classical church visitors and regional pastor when signs of conflict begin (see Church Order Art. 42).

2. Be willing to work with designated person(s) (e.g., Thrive staff, classical regional pastor and church visitors, mediation specialists) toward reconciliation. This includes accepting both the time and cost required by such intervention.
3. Along with the pastor, determine the reasons for the conflict and/or separation (see also A, 2).
  - a. This step requires accountability from both council and pastor.
  - b. Depending on the causes of the conflict, councils should determine whether a leave of absence for pastoral purposes (Art. 16) may be an appropriate response to the problems that have arisen. In situations of special discipline, the procedures of Articles 82-84 should be followed rather than those of Article 16 or 17.
  - c. The council should, in consultation with the church visitors, define the relationship of the pastor to the church during this process, including the extent to which normal ministerial duties would continue.
4. Inform the congregation of decisions that are being made about the relationship to the pastor. This should be done in a timely manner, in consultation with the pastor, and members should be apprised of the process (see Art. 37).
5. If a decision is made to release the pastor from active ministerial service in the congregation (Art. 17-a), the council shall prepare a separation agreement with the pastor, addressing the issues noted in the separation agreement template adopted by synod (see Separation Agreement Template).
6. Present to the classis the specific reasons for the separation. This involves the dynamics and behaviors of both the pastor and the council/congregation. Since the separation commences with the official decision by classis, this may necessitate a special meeting of classis to process the separation in a timely manner.
7. Consider engaging the services of a specialized transitional minister (STM) who has been trained to guide the congregation in processing the reasons for any conflict, working toward interpersonal healing, and preparing for a strong relationship with its next minister. In some cases, classis may direct the church to delay calling another pastor until such transitional work is completed.
8. Provide a compensation package (see Art. 16-b and 17-b) that includes the following:
  - a. Cash salary—a minimum of thirteen (13) weeks from the official decision of classis is ordinarily required, with the specific details determined in discussion between the parties. Any recommendation must be approved by the full classis.

- b. Parsonage occupancy or housing allowance.
- c. Provision for continuation of medical- and dental-insurance benefits.
- d. Provision for continuation of Ministers' Pension benefits.
- e. The church served at the time of separation is responsible for the severance compensation.

*Note:* This package may not apply in every circumstance of separation, such as when a pastor leaves for purely personal reasons (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 915-16). It may at times also be appropriate to use a date other than the date of the classis meeting in calculating the duration of a severance payment, particularly if the release is requested after a lengthy leave of absence. Denominational resources are also available to assist with determining an appropriate amount of severance, in accordance with the principles established by Synod \_\_\_ (*Acts of Synod* \_\_\_, pp. \_\_\_).

### C. Responsibilities of classis

1. Church visitors should be available to assist or may take initiative if necessary when there is an indication of conflict or other relationship difficulty. They may be involved in reconciliation or mediation, or they may recommend that there be others who can assist the pastor and congregation in this process—for example, a committee from the classis or outside resource persons such as representatives of Thrive or mediation specialists.
2. Concurrent with the work of the church visitors, the regional pastor should be called to provide emotional support and guidance for the pastor. The regional pastor, often one of the first persons aware of tensions, can serve as a gatekeeper and adviser for the pastor in the process of mediation.
3. Church visitors should continue to provide support and guidance for the council and congregation. They may assist the council in communication with the congregation.
4. If a separation of the pastor from the congregation is recommended, the classis shall do the following:
  - a. Assist the council in determining whether a separation is appropriate. If it is appropriate, give guidance as to whether there should be a release or a suspension (see B, 3, b above).
  - b. If necessary, call a special meeting of classis to process the separation in a timely manner.
  - c. Assign an individual (not the regional pastor) or team to serve as a liaison between the pastor, the congregation, and the classis in the process of the separation. Such a liaison should be acceptable to all

parties involved (see A, 3 above). Because a classis is a gathering of churches (Church Order Art. 39), it is not necessarily the case that the pastor should expect to be present for the entire discussion of the request for release. Just as a classis discusses a pastor's admission to ministry without the individual present, so also it may be inappropriate for the pastor to remain for a discussion in which he or she is particularly involved (Art. 34).

- d. Determine the framework for discussion at the classis meeting. Sensitive matters should be addressed in executive session, and the classis interim committee should seek to keep all parties informed about who will be present at various times, and who may be authorized to speak. Such arrangements may be particularly important in situations where the pastor and council do not agree on particular terms of the separation agreement. In such cases, the classis church visitors should work with the council and the pastor to form an agreement that is agreeable to all. Should no agreement be realized, then the council may proceed with its proposal, but the rules for appeal (Art. 30) may be invoked by the pastor after the classis has rendered its decision on the council's proposal.
- e. Approve a separation agreement between pastor and council, and record in the records of classis specific reasons for the separation in keeping with the regulations of Church Order Article 17 and its Supplement (see B, 5 above). A separation agreement template was approved by Synod \_\_\_ (*Acts of Synod* \_\_\_, pp. \_\_\_).  
*Note:* Copies of this agreement should be given to the pastor, the council, the classis, and the Thrive office.
- f. Encourage the pastor and/or the congregation to seek continued help in learning from this situation and facing their responsibilities. In some cases, this may require appointing an oversight committee for evaluation and assistance to plan and monitor progress toward eligibility for call and/or readiness to extend a call. (This will often require specific recommendations and continued involvement; see Supplement, Art. 17-a, b-c.)
- g. Recommend, when appropriate, specific follow-up for the congregation, such as a specialized transitional minister (STM) to help with healing and preparing for the future.

#### D. A pastoral note

It is important that ecclesiastical due process be followed in the separation procedure. When Synod 1996 asked that the preceding guidelines be prepared, it did so against a background of concern for the possibility of healing for both pastors and congregations. When signs of conflict or disagreements arise, it is crucial that the pastor, council, and classis take prompt

action to deal with these issues. When there is early intervention and open communication, reconciliation is a greater possibility.

If the pastor and council or congregation are not able to mediate differences, it may be advisable to bring in outside resource persons. If a separation does occur, it is important to recognize that there are continuing needs. The members of the congregation require continued support, opportunity to grieve, and guidance for future planning. The separated pastor and the pastor's family should not be forgotten as they leave the congregation and seek another call. The congregation and classis should covenant to provide continuing ministry and care for them, assisting in any way possible to encourage personal healing and further opportunities for ministry.

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## ADDENDUM F

### **Resources and Forms Related to the Calling, Supervision, and Release of Ministers**

*Church Order and polity resources*

1. Church Order and synodical resources

Synod Resources, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org/synod-resources](http://crcna.org/synod-resources)), includes Church Order in English, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese

*Guide for Conducting Church Visiting* ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))

*Manual for Synodical Deputies* ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))

2. Principles related to calling and release

Definition of "called in the regular manner" (Report, section III, C, 2)

Definition of "consistent with the calling of a minister of the Word" (Report, section III, C, 1)

Questions for discernment of consistency with ministry of the Word (Report, section III, C, 1)

Differentiation of Article 12-b and 12-c positions (Report, section III, C, 3)

Observations about joint supervision (Report, section III, C, 7)

Geographic proximity (Report, section III, C, 8)

3. Synodical guidance on calling and release

1998 Synodical Guidelines, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (proposed for updating by this report)

Readmission process for ministers released from CRC (Report, section IV, C, 7)

Guidelines for pastors loaned to congregations outside the CRC (Report, section III, C, 4)

Guidelines for consultation in cases of calls issued jointly (Report, section IV, B, 1)

Representative list of noncongregational positions (Report, section III, B, 1)

Guidelines for participation in major assemblies (Report, section III, C, 5)

*Resources for calling, support, and accountability in noncongregational settings*

1. Letters of call

CRCNA Letter of Call (2021)

Chaplains

Specialized transitional ministers (STMs)

2. Liturgical forms

Synodically approved forms for ordination/installation

Ordination/installation for missionary, church planter, professor of theology

Ordination/installation for chaplains

Commissioning, installation, and blessing for specialized transitional ministers

3. Covenants of Joint Supervision

Chaplains

CRC staff positions

Campus ministry

4. Reporting templates

Chaplains annual report form

5. Suggestions for encouragement in ministry

Thrive

Resources, Chaplain support, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))

Church resources ([resonateglobalmission.org](http://resonateglobalmission.org))

Recommendations in this report (see section III, C, 6)

Observations concerning “proper support” (Report, sections III, A, 2, e; B, 5)

*Resources for addressing situations of conflict and/or release from call*

1. Preventative resources

Church visitors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))

Classis counselors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))

Regional pastors, Classis, Christian Reformed Church ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org))



- Thrive's pastor and church support team consultation process overview (videos)
2. Changes to noncongregational calls
    - Observations regarding joint supervision (Report, section III, C, 7)
  3. Guidelines for separation processes
    - Article 17 guidance, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
    - An introduction to Article 17, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
    - Severance, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org) (proposed for updating by this report)
    - Addendum D—Separation Agreement Template
    - Purposes of severance (Report, section IV, B, 2)
  4. Transition and discernment materials
    - Oversight committees for churches, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
    - Oversight committees for pastors, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
    - Pastor Oversight Committee Sample Mandate (crcna.org)
    - Specialized transitional ministers, Thrive (pastor and church support), Christian Reformed Church (crcna.org)
    - Observations concerning reasons for separation (Report, section IV, A, 2)
    - Restorative Practices in Faith Communities, CRC Network (network.crcna.org)
  5. Liturgical forms
    - Service of Farewell and Godspeed for Pastor and Congregation, Reformed Church in America (rca.org)
  6. Resources for vocational assessment and discernment (contact Thrive for additional information)
    - Peer discussion and discernment, in the form of SPE groups
    - Vocational ministry assessments such as the Birkman Assessment
    - Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit
    - Pastor sabbaticals