

CHURCH ORDER REVIEW TASK FORCE REPORT

Executive Summary

Over the past several decades, the Christian Reformed Church in North America has seen an increasing number of issues and concerns related to the release of ministers from congregations and/or from the denomination as a whole, as well as to the calling and supervision of ministers of the Word in what are often called “specialized ministries.” One of the more common concerns relates to Church Order Article 17, because actions related to this provision often bear a stigma for both pastors and churches. Some of these concerns suggest that our churches and classes would be helped by clearer guidelines and possible changes to Church Order concerning the supervision and release of ministers.

In response, Synod 2022 instructed the Council of Delegates to appoint a Church Order Review Task Force (CORTF) with a mandate “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 . . . 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.”

Our Church Order does not seek to anticipate or address every eventuality, but instead provides particular guidance for the affairs of the church, with an assumption that such guidance will be applied wisely by classes, congregations, pastors, and other ministry leaders. We should be 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 that our Church Order is no more than a tool—a good tool, but only a tool—that points us toward deeper and healthier relationships rooted in Christ.

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. A call to ministry, and to a specific ministry, is not simply a matter for personal discernment but one which also involves congregations, councils, and classes in the deliberative process. Thus CRC theology and practice tie ordination to an office, not to an individual.

As our task force warmed to its work, members quickly recognized that there have been many changes in the church and in wider culture. Some of these changes are cultural; others are specific to the life of the church or the Christian Reformed denomination. 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 pose new challenges and opportunities; these changes affect the way that people view the relationship between Christ's church and the world today, and they shape the way we think about the nature of ministry and leadership in and for the church.

There were two broad areas within our mandate. First, there were several issues dealing with supervision, accountability, and support for ministers of the Word in what the task force is calling "noncongregational" settings. These issues roughly correspond to (but are not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 12 and 13. Second, there were a number of issues related to transitions in ministry, especially when a minister of the Word is released from a particular call, or is released from ordained ministry in the denomination as a whole. These issues roughly correspond to (but are not limited to) matters addressed in Articles 14 and 17.

Articles 12 and 13 identify a number of important principles in the way we call and supervise ministers of the Word in the CRC, and in particular in the ways the local church is called to support and oversee the work of its pastors who are not in the direct service of a CRC congregation. Holding the ministerial credentials for a minister in noncongregational service should be seen as an opportunity rather than as a burden for a congregation. This is especially true given the increasing diversity of the CRC and the types of ministries to which pastors are called. Because all ministry involves relationships that take time to build, we offer these suggestions about Articles 12 and 13 not as regulatory material but as ideas on 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.

Articles 14 and 17, related to releases from a specific call or from CRC ministry in general, also involve a wide variety of situations for which helpful guidance is needed but for which it can be difficult to provide specific answers that would address every occasion of a formal separation. But, whatever the reason(s), these separations require substantial discernment from the pastor, the council, the classis, and the synodical deputies. Ongoing pastoral care is needed to restore relationships and to ensure that both church and pastor can heal and continue their ministries.

In summary, the Church Order Review Task Force recommends that Synod 2024 do the following:

- a. reaffirm principles related to the calling, supervision, and release of ministers of the Word
- b. encourage the support and accountability of a minister in a noncongregational service, including the use of a Joint Covenant for Supervision

- c. clarify the separation process of a minister and a church, including the use of a Separation Agreement, as well as the reinstatement process of a former minister, by providing a number of updates to the Church Order and its Supplements along with additional templates and synodical guidance
- d. remind the churches and classes that our Church Order exists for the purpose of fostering Spirit-led discernment about the work of building God's kingdom