

2017 PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

The 2017 General Synod adopted the following amendments to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America and recommended them to the classes for their approval in accordance with the Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and the Disciplinary Procedures (*Book of Church Order [BCO]*, 2017 edition, p. 73). A brief explanatory comment (not in bold) precedes each proposed amendment; it is not part of the proposed amendment to the Constitution and is not being voted on by the classes. For further background information about each of the proposed amendments, refer to the indicated pages of the 2017 *Minutes of the General Synod*. The minutes are available online at www.rca.org/minutes.

The amendments in the text below are indicated with proposed deletions stricken out and additions underlined.

1. Fuller Integration of the Commissioned Pastor into the Polity of the Reformed Church in America (*MGS 2017*, R 17-41, pp. 257-263)

Two foci are addressed in these proposed amendments approved by the 2017 General Synod. One focus is the 2016 General Synod's directive to the Commission on Theology (COT) to consider the capacity in which commissioned pastors would participate in regional synod and General Synod assemblies (*MGS 2016*, R 16-21, R 16-23, and R 16-25, pp. 148-149). Specifically, should these broader assemblies recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder, or as a servant of the church who functions as a minister? In other words, would the commissioned pastor be sent as an elder delegate or as a minister delegate? The COT concluded that "office" is the most significant identifying characteristic when forming assemblies in the RCA. The office into which a commissioned pastor is ordained is the office of elder. Therefore, if commissioned pastors are to attend the synods as delegates, they will attend as elders. All offices exist to bear witness to the prophetic ministry of Christ. Our broader assemblies are an assembly of offices and not a gathering of those called to ministry. See the 2017 COT report to General Synod for a fuller explanation (*MGS 2017*, pp. 314-319).

The second focus is the 2016 General Synod's directive that the commissioned pastor be more fully integrated into the *BCO*. Currently, one article (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17; 2017 edition, pp. 58-60) sets forth the role and relationship of the commissioned pastor to the classis and local congregation, but the corresponding articles in other parts of the *BCO* do not mention commissioned pastors. These proposed changes seek to more fully integrate the role and relationship of the commissioned pastor to these bodies. Note two parallel principles that make commissioned pastors unique in our Reformed polity: One, commissioned pastors are ordained elders. The office of elder serves the local church. The purpose of the office of elder is for the governance of the congregation and for the effectiveness of the local church in ministry. Therefore, the commissioned pastor serves in the local church, not in a specialized ministry capacity that is not connected to a local church. The role was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry. Two, the commissioned pastor is commissioned by the classis and therefore is a member of the classis during the period of commissioned service in order that the classis may oversee the assigned ministry. The classis has two forms of membership: enrolled members and delegated members. Commissioned pastors are enrolled members during their period of commissioned service and may not serve as an elder-delegated member to the classis during this period.

The following highlights may help with a review of the proposed changes. In Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, note that a commissioned pastor may be a member of a consistory as a commissioned pastor if that appointment is included in the commission authorized by the classis. (The congregation could also elect the person to a term of service on the consistory as an elder.) But a commissioned pastor is not automatically a member of a consistory by virtue of being a commissioned pastor. In the proposed Chapter 1, Part II, Articles 1, 2, and 4, the commissioned pastor is more fully integrated into the membership and ministry of the classis. Article 7's proposed changes recognize that a commissioned pastor may serve as a pastor of a local church, and therefore the constitutional inquiry questions would also include commissioned pastors. Article 17 is rearranged to more easily identify the various stages of the commissioned pastor's relationship with the classis, and the language is updated.

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 1. Definitions

Sec. 1. A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, ~~and the elders and deacons currently installed in office, and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis.~~ (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 8.) A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. An organizing church has a classis-appointed governing body that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

Sec 8. ... Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call and/or commissioned pastor/s (if any), are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. ... Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught ~~by the minister/s~~ is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Consistory

Sec. 9. A consistory or its minister may request the classis to terminate the minister's relationship to that church. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8.) A consistory or its commissioned pastor may request the classis to terminate the commissioned pastor's commissioning to that church.

Sec. 11.

- e. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by a Minister of Word and Sacrament, a commissioned pastor under contract with the congregation, a preaching elder under contract with the congregation, or a candidate for ministry appointed pursuant to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7.**
- 1. A consistory or a governing body may issue an invitation to preach to a minister of another denomination whose character and standard is known.**
 - 2. A consistory or governing body may determine whether to issue an invitation to preach to a minister whose character and standard is not**

known to them once that minister has first furnished the consistory or governing body with written evidence of recent date of that minister's good ministerial standing and the minister's authorization to preach the Word.

3. A consistory or a governing body may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Sec. 11.

- e. ~~The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.~~

Chapter 1, Part II

Article 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body, commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis, and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds. The classis is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates, ~~and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis,~~ and commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 2. The classis shall exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds, and shall enforce the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The classis shall examine candidates for ministry throughout their training process and prior to granting a certificate of licensure. ~~students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination.~~ The classis shall examine candidates for commissioned pastor throughout their training process and/or prior to commissioning.

Sec. 10. The classis shall approve and disapprove calls and contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between ministers and churches or congregations. The classis shall approve and disapprove contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between commissioned pastors and churches or congregations.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and ~~commissioned pastors,~~ and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ~~ministers-classis members~~ and two elder delegates. At least ten days' notice of any special session shall be given to all the ~~ministers-members~~ and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ~~ministers-classis members~~ and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 6. Transaction of Business

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the *Book of Church Order*, a members of a classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be a member of the classis or a confessing members of one of its the churches or congregations in the classis.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage ~~the ministers~~ its members and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods:

- m. Does the consistory or governing body regularly engage its minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s in a mutual reflection on the ministerial needs and challenges of the congregation?
- n. Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?

Article 15. Supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament

Sec. 12. The classis shall keep a record book in which the declarations for licensed candidates, commissioned pastors, and ministers are clearly written. Those who are received on examination or on certificate shall subscribe to the proper declaration in the presence of the classis.

Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors

Sec. 1. A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis and under the auspices of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

- a.** A consistory or governing body may recommend a confessing member of a Reformed church to the classis as a candidate to become a commissioned pastor.
- b.** ~~Sec. 3.~~ Upon acceptance of the consistory's application on behalf of a candidate, the classis shall approve and supervise a training plan for that person. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits ministry competence in 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the Government, the Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.
- c.** ~~Sec. 4.~~ In satisfying itself concerning a candidate's ministry competence, the classis shall employ criteria established by the General Synod Council.

Sec. 3. Confirming an Invitation to Ministry

- a.** ~~Sec. 5.~~ Upon satisfaction by the classis of the candidate's ministerial competence, the classis shall ~~identify~~ confirm the specific form of commissioned service appropriate to the gifts and training of the candidate. When the classis receives an invitation for a ministry from one of its local churches or congregations it deems appropriate for the candidate, and upon the candidate's acceptance of this invitation to ministry, the classis shall 1) authorize the ministry, 2) approve a contract, and 3) commission the candidate to the authorized ministry to the extent of the contract. A church or congregation shall not enter into a contract with a commissioned pastor except by the approval of the classis.
- b.** ~~Sec. 6.~~ After a classis approves a candidate for commission to an authorized ministry, the classis shall appoint a time and place for a commissioning service at a regular or special classis session. The service shall utilize a liturgy approved by the General Synod. The commissioned pastor shall read aloud and sign the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (Appendix, Formulary No. 16) shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis as part of that order for commissioning. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12.)
- c.** ~~Sec. 7.~~ The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor

- a. ~~Sec. 8.~~ The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:**
- 1. To serve as a member of consistory.**
 - 2. ~~a.~~ Serve as presiding officer of the consistory at its request and may be appointed supervisor of that consistory.**
 - 3. ~~b.~~ Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.**
 - 4. ~~c.~~ Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by consistory and subject to state and provincial law.**
- b. ~~Sec. 9.~~ The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, ~~but~~ and shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.**
- c. ~~Sec. 10.~~ The classis shall evaluate the performance of the commissioned pastor ~~at least~~ annually.**
- d. ~~Sec. 11.~~ Upon completion of the authorized ministry by a commissioned pastor, the classis shall provide to that person a written statement of the training received and the ministry that was performed.**
- e. ~~Sec. 12.~~ The commissioned pastor shall remain a member of a local church, but is amenable solely to the discipline of the classis as set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 of the *Book of Church Order*, for the period of commissioned service.**
- f. The classis in which a commissioned pastor's membership is held is the only classis to which the commissioned pastor is amenable.**
- g. ~~Sec. 13.~~ Upon request of the regional synod, ~~t~~ The classis shall submit to an annual review upon request of regional synod of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision.**

2. Furloughing Missionaries (MGS 2017, R 17-42, p. 263)

The *BCO* currently provides that furloughing missionaries may serve as delegates to General Synod (see *BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5; 2017 edition, p. 65 and p. 67). The issue of concern with these *BCO* sections is that RCA Global Mission no longer uses the designation of "furloughing missionaries." In other words, the RCA no longer has furloughing missionaries.

The proposed changes offer revisions that reflect current terminology and practices without changing our long-held value that missionaries are a needed presence at our General Synod gatherings.

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1

... Certification Agency; a number of ~~furloughing~~ missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the bylaws of General Synod ...

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3

Sec. 5. The classis may appoint as a delegate one of its members who is a ~~The furloughing missionary on home assignment at the time of~~ with at least five years of service in the field ~~shall be eligible for appointment to the General Synod. The missionary delegate from the classis of membership once during each furlough and shall not be counted as one of the regular delegates of that classis and may serve as a missionary delegate only once every five years.~~

3. Supersession of a Consistory (MGS 2017, R 17-43, pp. 264-266)

After receiving questions about the supersession process, the Commission on Church Order worked with the relevant BCO passage (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9; 2017 edition, pp. 37-39) to simplify and clarify the steps necessary to enact a supersession of a consistory. Two particular topics were addressed: 1) the relationship of the pastor(s) to the supersession action; and 2) the repeated requirement in the text for a two-thirds vote by the classis to take actions.

Regarding the relationship of the pastor to the supersession action, the proposed text understands that if the consistory is dissolved then the call to the pastor(s) no longer exists. In other words, the pastoral relationship dissolved since there isn't a consistory with which to have such a relationship or to which the pastor can be installed. Therefore, the proposed text plainly states that the pastoral relationship is dissolved. Please note that (a) a minister whose call is dissolved as a part of a supersession process may nevertheless continue to serve under contract in a capacity agreed upon by the minister and the supersession team exercising functions that are necessary for the administration of the church, and (b) nothing prevents a reconstituted consistory from extending a new call to the minister whose call was dissolved as a part of the supersession process.

Regarding the two-thirds majority vote, the proposed text clarifies that a two-thirds vote is required at two places in the process: when the classis first acts to supersede a consistory and establish a supersession team, and when the classis acts to reconstitute a consistory and thus end the supersession period.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9

~~Sec. 2. Classis shall be directed by the following rules when superseding a consistory:~~

- a. Before superseding a consistory, the classis shall notify the church consistory and the ministers (if any) of its intention and summon the**

governing body consistory to show cause why that consistory should not be dissolved and the church and its property be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may instead advise the classis of its approval of this action.

Sec. 3. The notice required by Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 2 shall include the following:

4a. The basis upon which the classis is seeking supersession, with specific reference to a condition found in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 1.

b. Notice that the action of supersession causes the termination of the ministerial relationship.

2c. The time, date, and location of the classis meeting where supersession shall be considered.

3d. A statement that the consistory must appear at the meeting identified in ~~Section 13(a)(2)~~ the notice to show cause and show cause why it should not be dissolved.

~~**b.** If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may, instead, advise the classis of its approval of this action.~~

Sec. 4. After having heard the consistory, the classis may act to supersede the consistory. A decision to supersede requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. In combination with a decision to supersede or thereafter, the classis may also elect, in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.

b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management, and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

Sec. 5. ~~**c.** If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it shall dissolve the consistory and otherwise terminate the formal organization of that church and~~

a. When a consistory is superseded, the consistory is dissolved and any ministerial relationships of that church are terminated. The classis shall take such steps as may be necessary to bring that church, its ministry, and its property under the direct administration of the classis.

~~**d.b.** Such a church shall not have a consistory, but the~~ The classis shall designate these persons, not necessarily members of that church, who, in

lieu of the consistory, shall exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church. These persons shall serve the church in the same capacity as a consistory until such time as the life of the church has reached an end or a consistory for the church is reconstituted (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 97, Section 745). The supersession board is authorized to carry out the responsibilities of Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 2, 5, and 6, without further acts of the classis. In carrying out these responsibilities, the supersession board shall follow the requirements of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4. The classis may grant additional authority to the supersession board or may impose restrictions on the authority automatically granted to the supersession board.

- ~~e. The final action of the classis to dissolve a consistory shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.~~

~~Sec. 3. When the classis has superseded a consistory, it shall have the authority, in the exercise of its discretion and in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:~~

- ~~a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.~~
- ~~b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.~~

~~All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.~~

Sec. 64. The classis shall have the authority to reconstitute the consistory of a church when, in the judgment of the classis, sufficient growth has been achieved or suitable stability created so that the church can continue ministry without classis administration. The classis shall guide the consistory selection process (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 14). The decision to reconstitute the consistory requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. ~~All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.~~

4. Minister of Word and Sacrament (MGS 2017, R 17-44, pp. 268-269)

In RCA polity, there is one office to which all ministers are ordained; that is, the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. However, numerous persons have shown that the current *BCO* text can be interpreted to mean that pastors are Ministers of Word and Sacrament, but specialized ministers have their own office. To clear away this misinterpretation, these proposed amendments to the *BCO* text are presented. This proposed text does not introduce new meaning, but clarifies the intended meaning of the text.

Also, the proposed changes capitalize "Sacrament" in the title "Minister of Word and Sacrament." This change is being implemented editorially wherever "Minister of Word and Sacrament" is found in the *BCO*. Both Word and Sacrament are to be capitalized since both refer to Christ.

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Ministers of Word and Sacrament They are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or commissioned or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is ~~at the local church the minister serves as~~ pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

b. A specialized minister is a ~~Sec. 5. The office of the minister in a specialized ministry is to serve as~~ pastor and teacher of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. The specialized minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. The minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

c. Proper ecclesiastical designation of ministers shall accord with the nature of their ministry, such as pastor, teacher, professor, missionary, chaplain, president, executive secretary, director, or other appropriate designation.

5. Supervisor of Consistory (*MGS 2017, R 17-45, p. 270*)

The following proposed change to *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 34) is offered to allow classes to work together to meet one another's needs for supervision of churches experiencing a pastoral vacancy. The proposed amendment would permit the appointment of a classis supervisor who is a minister from another classis. This authorization could make it possible for this classis responsibility to be more broadly held, thereby relieving stress when one classis has too many vacancies for its ministers to properly attend to.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 3. The classis shall appoint ~~one of its ministers~~ a minister as supervisor of all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister. If the minister to be appointed as supervisor is a member of another classis, then the classis shall consult with the minister's classis of membership prior to making such appointment. The classis shall determine the appropriate responsibilities for the supervisor.