

CHURCH ORDER

of the Canadian Reformed Churches

I. INTRODUCTION

Article 1 - Purpose and Division

For the maintenance of good order in the Church of Christ it is necessary that there be: offices and supervision of doctrine; assemblies; worship, sacraments, and ceremonies; and discipline. These matters will be dealt with in the above-mentioned order.

II. OFFICES AND SUPERVISION OF DOCTRINE

Article 2 - The Offices

The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.

Article 3 - The Calling to Office

No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto.

Only those male members shall be eligible for office who have made profession of faith and may be considered to meet the conditions as set forth in Holy Scripture, e.g. in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

The election to any office shall take place with the co-operation of the congregation, after preceding prayers, and according to the regulations adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons. The consistory with the deacons shall be free to give the congregation the opportunity beforehand to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed fit for the respective offices.

The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation either as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled, or at the most twice as many, from which number the congregation shall choose as many, as are needed.

Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory with the deacons in accordance with the adopted regulations.

Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers shall be publicly announced to the congregation for its approbation on at least two consecutive Sundays.

The ordination or installation shall take place with the use of the relevant forms.

Article 4 - Eligibility for the Ministry

A. ELIGIBILITY

Only those shall be called to the office of minister of the Word who

1. Have been declared eligible for call by the Churches;
2. Are already serving in that capacity in one of the Churches; or
3. Have been declared eligible in, or are serving in one of the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches maintain a sister-Church relationship.

B. DECLARED ELIGIBLE

Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the Churches who

1. Have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live. This examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the documents necessary to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the Churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the Churches.
2. Served in the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches do not maintain a sister-Church relationship, and have been examined by the classis in which they live, with due observance of the general ecclesiastical regulations adopted for that purpose.
3. Have been examined according to the rule described in Article 8.

C. CALLING TWICE

For a second call to the same minister in the same vacancy the approval of classis shall be required.

D. COUNSELLOR

When a vacant Church extends a call, the advice of the counsellor shall be asked.

Article 5 - Ordination and Installation of Ministers of the Word

A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry before, the following shall be observed:

- 1.** They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call. Classis shall approve the call
 - a.** Upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, signed by the consistory of the Church to which he belongs;
 - b.** Upon a peremptory examination of the candidate by classis with satisfactory results. This examination shall take place with the co-operation and concurring advice of deputies of the regional synod.
- 2.** For the ordination they shall show also to the consistory good testimonials concerning their doctrine and conduct from the Church(es) to which they have belonged since their preparatory examination.

B. Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:

They shall be installed after classis has approved the call.

For this approbation as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that Church and classis, or from the Church only, in case he remains within the same classis.

C. For the classical approbation of a call of those who are serving in one of the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches maintain a sister-Church relationship a colloquium shall be required which will deal especially with the doctrine and polity of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

D. For the classical approbation of a call shall further be required a declaration by the calling Church that the proper announcements have been made and that the congregation has given its approval to the call.

Article 6 - Bound to a Church

No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain Church, to be stationed in a certain place, or to be sent out for the gathering of the Church from among the heathen or from among those who have become estranged from the gospel; or is to be charged with some other special ministerial task.

Article 7 - Recent Converts

No one who has recently come to the confession of the Reformed Religion shall be declared eligible for call within the Churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and has been carefully examined by classis with the co-operation of the deputies of the regional synod.

Article 8 - Exceptional Gifts

Persons who have not pursued the regular course of study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is assurance of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech.

When such persons present themselves for the ministry, classis, after the approval of regional synod, shall examine them in a preparatory examination and allow them to speak an edifying word in the Churches of the classis; and further deal with them as it shall deem edifying, with observance of the general ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.

Article 9 - From One Church to Another

A minister, once lawfully called, shall not leave the Church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of the consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis.

On the other hand, no Church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the Church and the classis where he served, or of the Church only, if he remains within the same classis.

Article 10 - Proper Support

The consistory with the deacons, as representing the congregation, shall be bound to provide for the proper support of its minister(s).

Article 11 - Dismissal

If a minister of the Word is judged unfit and incapable of serving the congregation fruitfully and to its edification, without there being any reason for Church discipline, the consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss him from his service within the congregation without the approbation of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, and not without proper arrangements regarding the support of the minister and his family for a reasonable period of time.

If no call is forthcoming in three years, he shall be declared released from his ministerial status by the classis in which he served last.

Article 12 - Bound for Life

Inasmuch as a minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the Church for life, he is not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons, of which the consistory with the deacons shall judge, and which shall receive the approval of classis with the concurring advice of deputies of regional synod.

Article 13 - Retirement of Ministers

If a minister of the Word is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office because of age, illness, or physical or mental disability, he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain his official bond with the Church which he served last, and this Church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and/or dependants. Retirement of a minister shall take place with the approval of the consistory with the deacons and with the concurring advice of classis and of deputies of regional synod.

Article 14 - Temporary Release

If a minister, because of illness or for other substantial reasons, requests a temporary release from his service to the congregation, he can receive the same only with the approval of the consistory with the deacons and shall at all times be and remain subject to the call of the congregation.

Article 15 - Preaching in Other Places

No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another Church without the consent of the consistory of that Church.

Article 16 - The Office of Ministers of the Word

The specific duties of the office of minister of the Word are: thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of the Lord; to administer the sacraments; publicly to call upon the Name of God in behalf of the whole congregation; also to instruct the children of the Church in the doctrine of salvation, to visit the members of the congregation in their homes, and to comfort the sick with the Word of God; and further, with the elders, to keep the Church of God in good order, to exercise discipline, and to govern it in such a manner as the Lord has ordained.

Article 17 - Equality among the Ministers of the Word

Among the ministers of the Word equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgement of the consistory and, if necessary, of classis.

Article 18 - Missionaries

When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall be and remain subject to the Church Order. They shall report and give account of their labours to the Church which sent them and shall at all times remain subject to its calling.

It shall be their task, in the specific region assigned to them or chosen by them in consultation with the Church that sent them, to proclaim the Word of God, to administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His

Church, and to ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.

Article 19 - Training for the Ministry

The Churches shall maintain an institution for the training for the ministry. The task of the professors of theology is to instruct the students of theology in those disciplines which have been entrusted to them, so that the Churches may be provided with ministers of the Word who are able to fulfil the duties of their office as these have been described above.

Article 20 - Students of Theology

The Churches shall endeavour that there be students of theology,, extending financial aid to those who are in need of it.

Article 21 - An Edifying Word

Besides those who have been permitted, according to Article 8, to speak an edifying word, also others may be given such consent in accordance with general ecclesiastical regulations, for their own training and in order that they may become known to the congregations.

Article 22 - The Office of Elder

The specific duties of the office of elder are: together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life according to the gospel; faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly. They shall exercise Christian discipline according to the command of Christ against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent; they shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned. They further are to take care, being stewards of the house of God, that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order, and to tend the flock of Christ which is in their charge. Finally, it is their duty to assist the ministers of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Article 23 - The Office of Deacon

The specific duties of the office of deacon are: to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and to exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; further, to gather and manage the offerings and to distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

Article 24 - Term of Office

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years, according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The place of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others, unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the benefit of the Church render it advisable to have them serve another term, or to extend their term, or to declare their immediately eligible for re-election.

Article 25 - Equality to Be Maintained

Among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office, and also, as far as possible in other matters, of which the consistory shall judge.

Article 26 - Subscription to the Confession

All ministers of the Word, elders, deacons, and professors of theology shall subscribe to the Confessions of the Canadian Reformed Churches by signing the form(s) adopted for that purpose. Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses to do so shall, because of that very fact, be immediately suspended from office by the consistory with the deacons, and classis shall not receive him; and if he obstinately persist in his refusal, he shall be deposed from office.

Article 27 - False Doctrine

To ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

Article 28 - Civil Authorities

As it is the office of the civil authorities to promote in every way the holy ministry, so all office-bearers are in duty bound to impress diligently and sincerely upon the whole congregation the obedience, love, and respect which are due to the civil authorities; they shall set a good example to the whole congregation in this matter, and endeavour by due respect and communication to secure, and retain the favour of the authorities towards the Church, so that the Church of Christ may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.

III. THE ASSEMBLIES

Article 29 - The Ecclesiastical Assemblies

Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: The consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the general synod.

Article 30 - Ecclesiastical Matters

These assemblies shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner.

A major assembly shall deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its Churches in common.

A new matter which has not previously been presented to that major assembly may be put on the agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.

Article 31 - Appeals

If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major ecclesiastical assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

Article 32 - Credentials

Delegates to the major assemblies shall bring with them their credentials, signed by those sending them; they shall have a vote in all matters except those in which either they themselves or their Churches are particularly involved.

Article 33 - Proposals

Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.

Article 34 - Proceedings

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord.

Article 35 - President

In all assemblies there shall be a president whose task it

- a. To present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with;
- b. To ensure that every one observe due order in speaking;
- c. To deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their strong emotions;
- d. To discipline those who refuse to listen.

In major assemblies the office of the president shall cease when the assembly has ended.

Article 36 - Clerk

Also a clerk shall be appointed whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of all things worthy to be recorded.

Article 37 - Jurisdiction

The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the regional synod has over the classis, and the general synod over the regional synod.

Article 38 - Consistory

In all Churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders who, as a rule, shall meet at least once a month. As a rule the ministers of the Word shall preside. If a Church is served by more than one minister, they shall preside in turn.

Article 39 - Consistory and the Deacons

Where the number of elders is small, the deacons may be added to the consistory by local arrangement; this shall invariably be done where the number of elders or the number of deacons is less than three.

Article 40 - Constitution of a Consistory

In places where a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, this shall be done only with the advice of classis.

Article 41 - Places without a Consistory

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by classis to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

Article 42 - Meetings of Deacons

When the deacons meet separately, as a rule once a month, to deal with the matters pertaining to their office, they shall do so with calling upon the Name of God. They shall give account of their labours to the consistory.

The ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, also may visit these meetings.

Article 43 - Archives

The consistories and the major assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives.

Article 44 - Classical Meetings

The classical meetings shall consist of neighbouring Churches that respectively delegate, with proper credentials, a minister and an elder, or, if a Church has no minister, two elders, at such a time and place as were determined by the previous classis. Such meetings shall be held at least once in three months, unless the convening Church, in consultation with the neighbouring Church, concludes that no matters have been sent in by the Churches which would warrant the convening of a classis. Cancellation of a classis shall, however, not be permitted to occur twice in succession.

In these meetings the ministers shall preside in rotation, or one shall be chosen to preside; however, the same minister shall not be chosen twice in succession.

The president shall ask whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured, and whether there is any matter in which the consistories need the judgement and help of classis for the proper government of their Church.

At the close of the classical and other major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies. At the last classis before regional synod delegates shall be chosen to that synod.

If two or more ministers are serving a Church, those who have not been delegated shall have the right to attend the classical meetings in an advisory capacity.

Article 45 - Counsellors

Each vacant Church shall request classis to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call.

Article 46 - Church Visitors

Each year classis shall authorize at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the Churches in that year.

It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the adopted order is being observed and maintained in every respect; in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's Church.

They shall submit a written report of their visits to classis.

Article 47 - Regional Synod

Each year some neighbouring classes shall send delegates to meet in a regional synod. To this regional synod each classis shall delegate four ministers and four elders. If there are three classes, the number shall be three ministers and three elders; if there are four or more classes, the number shall be two ministers and two elders.

At the close of the regional as well as of the general synod the time and place of the next synod shall be determined and the convening Church for that meeting appointed.

In case it appears necessary to convene a regional or general synod before the appointed time, the convening Church shall determine the time and place with the advice of the classis or regional synod respectively.

At the last regional synod before the general synod delegates shall be chosen to that general synod.

Article 48 - Deputies of Regional Synod

Each regional synod shall appoint deputies who are to assist the classes in all cases provided for in the Church Order, and –upon the request of the classes– in cases of special difficulties.

These deputies shall keep proper record of their actions and submit a written report on them to synod, and, if so required, they shall give account of their actions.

They shall not be discharged from their task before and until synod itself discharges them.

Article 49 - General Synod

The general synod shall be held once every three years. Each regional synod shall delegate to this synod four ministers and four elders.

A general synod shall be convened before the appointed time if, according to the judgement of a regional synod, such appears necessary.

Article 50 - Churches Abroad

The relation with Churches abroad shall be regulated by general synod. With foreign Churches of Reformed confession a sister-Church relationship shall be maintained as much as possible. On minor points of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice Churches abroad shall not be rejected.

Article 51 - Mission

The Churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task.

When Churches co-operate in this matter, they shall, as much as possible, observe the division into classes and regional synods.

IV. WORSHIP, SACRAMENTS, AND CEREMONIES

Article 52 - Worship Services

The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day.

The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.

Article 53 - Days of Commemoration

Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Article 54 - Days of Prayer

In time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the Churches, a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the Churches appointed for that purpose by general synod.

Article 55 - Psalms and Hymns

In the worship services the Psalms will be sung in the rhyming adopted by general synod and the Hymns approved by general synod.

Article 56 - Administration of Sacraments

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

Article 57 - Baptism

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

Article 58 - Schools

The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the Church has summarized it in her Confessions.

Article 59 - Baptism of Adults

Adults who have not been baptized shall be engrafted into the Christian Church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

Article 60 - Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

Article 61 - Admission to the Lord's Supper

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-Churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

Article 62 - Attestations

Communicant members who move to a sister-Church shall be given, after previous announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two of its members.

In the case of non-communicant members such an attestation shall be sent directly to the consistory of the Church concerned.

Article 63 - Marriage

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers—as authorized by the consistory—solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.

The solemnization of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service. The adopted Form for the Solemnization of Marriage shall be used.

Article 64 - Church Records

The consistory shall maintain Church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.

Article 65 - Funerals

Funerals are not ecclesiastical but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly.

V. CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE

Article 66 - Nature and Purpose

Since Church discipline is of a spiritual nature and, as one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, has been given to the Church to shut and to open that kingdom, the consistory shall ensure that it is used to punish sins against both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct, in order to reconcile the sinner with the Church and with his neighbour, and to remove all offence out of the Church of Christ – which can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18: 15-17 is followed in obedience.

Article 67 - Consistory Involvement

The consistory shall not deal with any matter pertaining to purity of doctrine or piety of life that is reported to it unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or that the sin committed is of a public character.

Article 68 - Excommunication

Anyone who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall inform the congregation of this by means of public announcements, so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition, and the excommunication may not take place without its co-operation.

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned.

In the second public announcement –which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained– the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned.

In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place.

In case a non-communicant member hardens himself in sin, the consistory shall in the same manner inform the congregation by means of public announcements.

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned.

In the second public announcement –which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained– the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned and a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place.

The time between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.

Article 69 - Repentance

When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless he has shown real amendment.

The consistory shall determine whether the benefit of the congregation requires that this confession of sin shall be made publicly and –in case it is made before the consistory or before two or three office-bearers– whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.

Article 70 - Readmission

When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the Church, the congregation shall be informed of his desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections.

The time between the public announcement and the readmission of the sinner shall be not less than one month.

If no lawful objection is raised, the readmission shall take place with the use of the Form for that purpose.

Article 71 - Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers

When ministers, elders, or deacons have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuse to heed the admonitions by the consistory with the deacons, they shall be suspended from office by the judgement of their own consistory with the deacons and of the consistory with the deacons of the neighbouring Church. When they harden themselves in their sin or when the sin committed is of such a nature that they cannot continue in office, the elders and deacons shall be deposed by the judgement of the above-mentioned consistories with the deacons. Classis, with the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, shall judge whether the ministers are to be deposed.

Article 72 - Serious and Gross Sins on the Part of Office-bearers

As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: false doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for excommunication with respect to other members of the Church.

Article 73 - Christian Censure

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

Article 74 - No Lording It Over Others

No Church shall in any way lord it over other Churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.

Article 75 - Property of the Churches

All property, both real and personal, which belongs to the Churches comprised respectively in classes, regional synods, and general synods in common, shall be held in trust for such Churches in equal shares by deputies or trustees appointed for that purpose from time to time by the appropriate classis, regional synod, or general synod, and such deputies or trustees shall be bound by the terms of their appointment and instruction and are subject to being discharged by a subsequent classis, regional synod, or general synod.

Article 76 - Observance and Revision of the Church Order

These articles, which regard the lawful order of the Church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the Churches demand such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented, or diminished. However, no consistory, classis, or regional synod shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the articles of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by a general synod.