

Addressing Accountability in Pastoral Misconduct (Response to an Overture from 2024)

I. Background

Synod 2024 received an overture (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 434-36) from a member of Hancock (Minn.) CRC, identifying a problem (determining and overseeing appropriate accountability for pastors found to have been responsible for abuse, misconduct, maltreatment, or job performance deficiencies) and proposing a solution (a licensing board).

Synod responded to the overture by pointing out an insurmountable challenge with the solution—namely, that such a licensing board “would exist outside of existing CRCNA structures” and thus “would conflict with CRCNA church polity.” But while noting that a variety of current structures and systems are designed to address this accountability (classis positions and procedures, church visitors, Safe Church ministry, Dignity Team), Synod 2024 also saw enough merit in the “issues of accountability” mentioned in the overture to ask the general secretary to look at those issues and report to Synod 2026 on “how to address them within Reformed polity” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 908-9).

The overture suggested three concerns that could undermine the accountability our current structures intend to provide:

- a (typical) council’s “lack of objectivity . . . when investigating abuse of power situations and cases because of the council’s . . . friendship with the pastor/church leader, their need for the pastor/church leader’s approval, and their fear of retaliation and rebuttal should a council member stand up against a pastor/church leader”
- a council’s lack of “expertise when reviewing complaints and situations that involve abuse issues by church leaders”
- a council’s lack of “ability to know how to do investigations of pastor/church leader wrongdoing, how to question the accused, how to write reports about their investigations, and how to conduct interviews.”

We also note the overture’s concern about “the burden [on] councils and consistories when they are faced with how to handle a pastor’s/church leader’s misconduct, allegations of abuse, and other difficult situations.” While synod did not base its response on agreement with these concerns, Thrive ministry consultants have observed the same concerns in their work with churches.

The goal of this response, drafted by Thrive staff with input from the Office of General Secretary, is to strengthen the credibility, transparency, and pastoral integrity of ministry leaders in a way that benefits the CRCNA as a whole. Councils do at times lack sufficient training and are too close to situations to handle them objectively. Their processes and decisions should be supported and reinforced by outside resources that can provide increased oversight and accountability.

II. Areas of focus

The issues identified in the overture from 2024 and observed by Thrive ministry consultants can be classified under a number of general categories:

A. Churches must formally investigate any type of alleged misconduct against a ministry leader, not just sexual misconduct

The Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b states that “when allegations of abuse against a church leader are brought forward to a church council, the council will contact the classis interim committee, which will appoint church visitors” to offer support and advice. This happens inconsistently, and classis functionaries are generally not trained to respond well when allegations are brought forward. The phrase “allegations of abuse” is almost exclusively defined by leaders as sexual misconduct, extramarital affairs, or sexual abuse of minors and does not encompass the wide range of allegations of abuse or ungodly conduct that may be received. Therefore the classis interim committee is rarely informed of allegations. This report will recommend an amendment to Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b to include “allegations of any type including general misconduct” and to include the safe church coordinator in the response team.

Expanding the scope to include a broader definition of abuse would reflect the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and would acknowledge that councils receive concerns related to a wide range of misconduct and ungodly behavior that can cause real harm even when not meeting a strict “abuse” threshold. Involving trained classis-level resource persons, including the safe church coordinator, would also increase consistency, expertise, and pastoral care in responses, and would reduce the burden on local councils who may lack training in responding to complex allegations. In addition, requiring third-party involvement in cases that could lead to discipline would strengthen accountability, protect all parties involved, and increase trust that decisions are made carefully, fairly, and with appropriate oversight.

B. Administrative leave in cases of sexual misconduct should be mandatory, not optional

The Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84 states that “an administrative leave may be imposed without prejudice.” Currently, leaves of absence are used inconsistently and are often imposed only in formal advisory panel situations. It can be difficult for councils to discern when a leave of absence should be considered in a case of allegations of abuse or misconduct. This can leave congregations and leaders in unclear situations, and the ambiguity may fail to communicate the seriousness of the allegations or the need to protect the community during an investigation. Clarifying and standardizing the use of nondisciplinary leaves would help to ensure consistent, transparent, and safe responses across the denomination.

This report therefore recommends an amendment to Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84, to impose a nondisciplinary, mandatory leave of absence for allegations of sexual misconduct of any kind. Councils should always consider the necessity of a leave of absence following any allegation of abuse or ungodly conduct, including the message it sends about continuing in a leadership role while an investigation is conducted. Attention should be given to all allegations of abuse or misconduct, not only to those involving formal investigations or advisory panels.

Differentiating between leaves of absence and suspension will ensure clarity in process and communication, protecting both the leader under investigation and the congregation. Mandatory, nondisciplinary leaves provide an appropriate response while investigations are conducted, demonstrating seriousness and care for all parties. The need for a leave of absence should be considered in all relevant situations to safeguard congregations and maintain trust in church leadership.

C. Church visitors and councils need more clearly defined expectations for how to handle suspension and reinstatement

Church Order Articles 82-84 state that a neighboring council must approve a council's response. This approval is often binary—to discipline or not; to suspend or not—rather than to consider a more dimensional form of involvement. Further, the role of the church visitors in such cases is largely undefined, and the lifting of a suspension does not explicitly require the concurrence of (or even notification to) any outside party beyond the local council that imposed the suspension.

This report recommends an amendment first of all to Supplement, Church Order Art. 42-b to clarify that classis is required, at least through approval of a church visitor's report, to coordinate the involvement of safe church team representatives and to review a council's response to an allegation and provide oversight. Councils may lack sufficient objectivity to fully evaluate their own responses, and classis can instruct a council to perform a more detailed review if the initial response is deemed insufficient. Thrive staff also observe that it may be wise for councils responding to abuse allegations to invite the church visitors to be present during the consultation with a neighboring council required by synodical regulations.

In addition, this report recommends changes to Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84 to require notification to the neighboring council as well as the church visitors when a suspension is lifted. Such matters should be reported to classis in the written report of the church visitors. The goal of this report is not to second-guess the council's decision but to provide greater transparency and credibility to the decisions of a council in a sensitive situation. The report of the church visitors would only be open for discussion and instruction to the council where there is concern about the adequacy of the council's response. This requirement, however, would ensure that there is a written record of the suspension and its resolution in the records of

classis, an issue that is of particular importance for the supervision of ministers of the Word.

Corresponding changes to the “Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations against a Church Leader” are also included in this report’s recommendations in order to bring these procedures up to date with these other synodical regulations.

D. Councils are responsible to oversee the life and doctrine of all ministers whose credentials they hold (even if those ministers serve in another setting)

In several situations in the past few years, denominational staff have consulted with classis and council leaders who were caught off guard by the responsibility of responding to allegations of misconduct against a minister whose credentials they held but whose ministry was with another institution. Holding a minister’s credentials is not a mere administrative formality but a commitment to ecclesiastical supervision. A council that accepts this responsibility must ensure that it possesses the means to provide the oversight promised. When councils fail to maintain regular, substantive contact with noncongregational ministers, the “supervision of life and doctrine” becomes impossible to execute. This lack of engagement leaves the minister without a support system and leaves the council unable to faithfully fulfill its responsibility. Without proper oversight, those under the pastor’s leadership may be left in a vulnerable position.

However, this observation is not intended to frighten councils from carrying out this important responsibility. Synod 2024 received a report offering advice for councils holding the credentials of noncongregational ministers (see *Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 86-88, 93-94). Because all supervision has relationship at its core, that report reminded councils and classes (as well as the pastors being supervised) of the importance of regular check-ins so that these relationships are as meaningful as possible. In this way, “the concept of call is honored more effectively, ministers in noncongregational service are blessed and encouraged [as well as supervised], and the calling church is aware of its ministry ‘reach’ via the ministers whose credentials it holds” (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, p. 94). Our ecclesiastical system provides support for councils facing unexpected challenges related to allegations of misconduct by the pastors it supervises, and we encourage councils to take ownership of the supervision process in the trust that God will provide the resources to address difficult pastoral situations if the time should come.

E. Background checks must become a routine part of the pastoral calling process

Synodical regulations already require a disclosure of past legal or ecclesiastical complaints for new candidates for ministry or for those seeking admission to CRC ministry from another denomination (*Agenda for Synod 2006*, pp. 321-22; *Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 662), and such reference checks are also part of the process of readmission of ministers released from CRC ordination (Supplement, Art. 14-e). Thrive encourages this for all churches as part

of the calling process, whether for a minister of the Word, a commissioned pastor, or even an interim pastor.

Currently, however, there is no standard process for reporting past allegations of ungodly behavior for CRC ministers. In several cases, this has meant that pastors have faced allegations in multiple settings without other churches being aware. While our polity cannot compel churches to conduct such background checks as part of their calling process, we do have the ability to create a system to make this information available and to encourage churches to use it. Recognizing the reality that allegations may sometimes be used unfairly to undermine a pastor's future ministry, or that churches may have a bias against pastors who have an allegation on their record, we believe that a system would need to be developed in such a way as to encourage pastors to disclose such information themselves, and to limit information about allegations so that a church can access that only during later stages of the calling process. This report's recommendations will reflect this approach.

F. Classis safe church team coordinators should be appointed in collaboration with Thrive

Regional pastors are appointed in collaboration with Thrive. This allows the denominational agency overseeing the regional pastor program to be involved in the resourcing and training of regional pastors and to indicate any potential concerns before such appointments are made (see discussion in the *Agenda for Synod 2018*, p. 43). This report recommends that a similar procedure be adopted for safe church coordinators. This would allow Thrive to standardize the job description and participate in the interview process and selection of the candidate.

G. Thrive is able to provide substantial support to church assemblies in these situations

Thrive frequently encounters situations in which allegations or concerns are not handled effectively—sometimes resulting in unresolved issues and ongoing harm within congregations. For this reason we want to call attention to the resources available through Thrive and to the value of consultation in cases of ungodly conduct. Early consultation provides councils with guidance, expertise, and support, ensuring that responses are consistent, fair, and aligned with denominational expectations. Resourcing from outside congregations also promotes accountability, encourages councils to seek help rather than handling complex matters in isolation, and helps to safeguard the well-being of congregations and leaders.

Synod 2024 also observed, in responding to the overture from 2024, the importance of the resources available through Safe Church and the Dignity Team along with classis positions and procedures that exist to help church assemblies navigating allegations of abuse (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 909). This report aims to echo synod's encouragement for churches to utilize these resources rather than attempting to address such complex concerns alone.

Our polity emphasizes the importance of mutual discernment, available through a multiplicity of church assemblies. Though certainly there will be concerns about confidentiality when dealing with allegations of ungodly conduct by church leaders, protecting the privacy of the accused does not mean that councils (or, in some cases, council leaders) may fail to invite others into the conversation who can invite healthy discernment. While acknowledging the many wise leaders God has placed in the assemblies of the CRCNA, we also encourage councils and classes to utilize the resources developed by denominational staff specializing in procedures for responding to allegations of misconduct, as well as to lean into the shared discernment of the church's assemblies and functionaries such as church visitors.

H. These procedures should be reevaluated regularly

Finally, it should be noted that abuse prevention and response is a part of the church's life that is very much a topic of public discussion at this time, and that the legal and cultural factors shaping the church's response to allegations of ungodly conduct shift frequently. For these reasons the CRC would benefit from a regular review of the synodical regulations concerning these procedures. While changes could be adopted at any time by means of the ordinary synodical process, this report will recommend a regular review every three years in consultation with congregational support staff.

III. Conclusion

Synod 2024, in responding to the overture from 2024, recognized concerns over issues of accountability while at the same time suggesting that these issues could be adequately addressed by existing mechanisms in Reformed polity (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 909). This report largely agrees that we have structures in place to take seriously whatever allegations of wrongdoing are raised. Thus we recommend no substantive changes to the structures identified in the Church Order: the original authority of councils, the responsibility of classes in situations of special discipline, the advisory role of church visitors, and the place of the denomination as a support to the churches' ministry. While no system is perfect, Thrive consultants and other denominational staff can point to numerous situations in which church assemblies did take on the hard work of responding to allegations against a pastor and did so with careful, serious attention to God's truth and grace. We are thankful for all of the council members and classis leaders who have taken on such difficult responsibilities. Their work represents a faithful application of the gospel's recognition of the depth of human sin even in the church, and a trust that God disciplines those he loves (see Heb. 12:4-11).

This report also recognizes, however, that our structures do not always function as intended. For this reason, the following recommendations provide clarification about the roles of some of our ecclesiastical mechanisms when responding to allegations of ungodly conduct. These recommendations also provide strong encouragement for churches not to "go it alone"

when facing such complex situations. And they provide avenues for future follow-up to ensure that, as much as possible, we continue to address issues of accountability that may be easy to overlook.

Our confessions remind us that even believers can fall into “serious and outrageous” sins (Canons of Dort, Pt. 5, Art. 4; see Gen. 12:10-20, 2 Sam. 11, Matt. 26:69-75), which should not be addressed through “cheap grace.” This was an important emphasis as well in the study committee report that originally led to the creation of the denomination’s safe church ministry (*Agenda for Synod 1992*, pp. 332-33). As a denomination, we have taken steps to address that reality by reminding officebearers of the necessity of holiness in their leadership (Church Order Art. 5, and the Covenant for Officebearers and Code of Conduct found in its Supplements) and by providing avenues for special discipline (Art. 82-84) and appeals (Art. 30) when leaders fall into sin. We believe that God has placed consistories in positions of authority to supervise the life and conduct of fellow officebearers (Art. 25-b), and that synod is correct to note that such structures are normally sufficient to address concerns about accountability. We lament those times when our human fears and biases have kept our systems from functioning as instruments of God’s justice and truth, yet we continue to trust that God’s Spirit will provide the necessary strength for our churches to grow in their ability to act as instruments of Christ’s redemption and healing.

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod amend the regulations of Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b, as presented in Appendix A to this report, in order to expand the definition of “abuse” situations requiring formal involvement from assemblies outside the council, and to clarify the role of church visitors in responding to abuse allegations against an officebearer.

Grounds:

1. The current wording of Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b suggests that the classis’ involvement is mainly limited to allegations of physical and sexual abuse rather than ungodly conduct in general.
2. “Churches are to call on the church visitors whenever serious challenges arise . . .” (Art. 42-b).
3. The proposed revisions assist classes by providing clear guidelines for the involvement of the church visitors in responding to allegations of wrongdoing.

B. That synod amend the regulations of Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84, as presented in Appendix A to this report, in order to require the imposition of an administrative leave when allegations of ungodly conduct are received, and to mandate the involvement of a neighboring council in the lifting of an officebearer’s suspension.

Grounds:

1. Leaves of absence are applied inconsistently and often do not allow for an adequate investigation of allegations brought against a church leader.
2. Although a neighboring council must concur when an officebearer is suspended, and church visitors are to be involved in such situations, there is currently no corresponding expectation that other assemblies be involved when a council believes it has adequately responded to serious concerns about ungodly conduct.

C. That synod approve the updates to the “Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations against a Church Leader,” as presented in Appendix B to this report, in order to bring that document into harmony with the changes to Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b and Articles 82-84.

D. That synod remind churches holding the credentials of noncongregational ministers (including chaplains, missionaries, professors, pastors loaned to other congregations, and those in other specialized ministry positions) that the councils of those churches hold primary responsibility for supervising the doctrine and life of such pastors (Church Order, Art. 13-b), and that synod call particular attention to the requirement that the supervising council has a duty to respond to allegations of ungodly conduct even if those allegations arise in the context of another institution or denomination (see Supplement, Church Order Art. 8, D, 9; Supplement, Art. 13-b, B; Supplement, Art. 42-b, b). While such a response may take place in coordination with the other church or institution, ultimate responsibility for decisions of discipline lies with the CRC assemblies.

Ground: A council that accepts this responsibility must ensure it possesses the means to provide the oversight promised.

E. That synod encourage churches, as part of their pastoral search process, to conduct a background check on pastoral candidates before presenting a nomination to the congregation for approval, and that synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to develop a process for maintaining a history of allegations against pastors while accounting for the sensitive nature of such information.

Grounds:

1. Such evaluations are required for new applicants for CRC ministry (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 366, 385; *Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 465), but there is currently no system in place to assist churches in being aware of issues that may have arisen since a pastor’s ordination.
2. The need for churches to be aware of allegations of ungodly conduct must be framed by concern for appropriate recognition of confidentiality concerns, particularly where allegations remain unproven or have been adequately addressed.

F. That synod remind churches of the resources available through the denomination, particularly through Thrive, to support the assemblies' response to allegations of ungodly conduct, and that synod strongly advise councils and classes to make use of these resources when dealing with such matters.

G. That synod instruct classes to consult with Thrive staff in the process of appointing new classis safe church coordinators.

Grounds:

1. This proposal represents a deliberate attempt to keep appointment and accountability close to each other within the classis, while at the same time maintaining a vital and necessary connection with Thrive.
2. This method has been utilized well for the appointment of regional pastors (Supplement, Church Order Art. 42-d, b; see *Agenda for Synod 2018*, p. 43).

H. That synod instruct the Office of General Secretary to review the CRCNA's abuse response procedures every three years in order to report to subsequent synods on the effectiveness of these procedures.

Ground: The continued prominence of this issue in the church and in wider society merits the regular review of our procedures.

I. That synod express its deep appreciation for the councils and classes who have sought to faithfully address allegations of abuse against a church leader under their supervision, and that synod pray for the Spirit's wisdom and clear guidance for all officebearers who may find themselves confronting such difficult situations in the future.

J. That synod thank Thrive staff for their work in supporting churches and classes as they seek to prevent and respond to incidents of ungodly conduct by church leaders, and that synod accept this response as a fulfillment of the instruction of Synod 2024.

Thrive staff, with input from the
Office of General Secretary

APPENDIX A

Updates to Church Order Supplement

I. Proposed updates to Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b

We propose that the Supplement, Church Order Article 42-b be changed as follows (with additions indicated by underline and deletions indicated by ~~strikethrough~~):

Supplement, Article 42-b
[subpoint a unchanged]

- b. When allegations of abuse or other ungodly conduct against a church leader are brought forward to a church council, the council

will contact the classis interim committee, which will appoint church visitors to do the following:

- 1) Meet with the church council of the accused for the purposes of advice, encouragement, and support as the council determines the most appropriate process for investigating and responding to the allegations (~~advisory panel process, independent investigation, mediation/restorative conversations, other~~) and to ensure the involvement of safe church team representatives in addressing the concerns.
- 2) ~~Participate as an observer on the panel if an advisory panel process is initiated.~~
- 23) Advise the church council as they discern how to follow up on and respond to the ~~advisory panel findings of an investigation.~~
- 34) Prepare a written report detailing their observations of the ~~advisory panel investigation's~~ proceedings and the council's response. The report is to be kept confidential and will be submitted to the church council and, if requested, to the claimant, the claimant's advocate, the accused, and the support person for the accused. The report is to ~~be kept confidential and may be~~ submitted to classis with a summary providing an account of the church visitors' work (Church Order Art. 42-b) with the full report submitted confidentially but considered only if there is an appeal of the council's decision. All parties shall commit to maintaining the confidentiality of the report.

II. Proposed updates to Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84

We propose that the Supplement, Church Order Articles 82-84 be changed as follows (with additions indicated by underline and deletions indicated by ~~striketrough~~):

Supplement, Articles 82-84

The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers

- a. An administrative leave may be imposed without prejudice by the council in order to investigate allegations of deviation from sound doctrine or godly conduct. Such administrative leave is mandatory for allegations of any kind of sexual misconduct. Compensation and benefits would continue, and any duties to be performed during the leave would be specified by the council. All suspensions and administrative leaves are temporary.

[subpoints b-g unchanged]

- h. The lifting of suspension is the prerogative of the assembly which imposed suspension, with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis.

[subpoints i-k unchanged]

Updates to “Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations against a Church Leader”

We propose that the “Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations against a Church Leader” be changed as follows (with additions indicated by underline and deletions indicated by ~~strikethrough~~):

[point 1 unchanged]

2. Responding to abuse by a church leader when the claimant is an adult

The guidelines in this section describe the process to be followed (1) when the claimant is an adult or (2) when the claimant comes forward as an adult with an allegation of abuse that took place during childhood or adolescence.

- a. The claimant contacts the Thrive safe church consultant office of Safe Church Ministry or a classis safe church team for an advocate. The advocate will assist the claimant with her or his allegation by helping to compile witnesses and testimony, by attending the panel session with the claimant, and by advocating for the claimant before other ecclesiastical bodies. If an allegation is first addressed (whether formally or informally) to a council or classis, the assembly should contact the denominational or classis safe church consultant to initiate the process of addressing the allegation.
- b. The advocate should contact a member of the executive committee or similar committee (executive) of the accused person’s church council or the chairperson of the safe church team (team) with the allegation of abuse. The contact should include the allegation in writing with the names of the claimant and the accused person.
- c. The executive notifies the safe church team chairperson (or the chairperson notifies the executive) of the advocate’s contact. The executive (or chairperson) will identify the claimant, the accused person, and the allegation known at that time. The council will also contact the interim committee of its classis, which will appoint church visitors to assist the council in responding to the allegations (Church Order Art. 42-b).
- d. The executive calls a meeting ~~with the executive committee or to~~ include representatives of the council, the claimant’s advocate, ~~the church’s Safe Church leader or the Classis Safe Church Coordinator~~ a safe church representative, and the church visitors to

develop a plan for exploring the veracity of the allegations.[‡] Ordinarily, the plan will involve

- ~~Suspending~~ placing the accused on administrative leave from their duties without prejudice until the allegations have been investigated.
- participating in a 60-minute safe church ~~Ministry~~ orientation and training on due process, abuse awareness, and response (cf. Supplement, Church Order Art. 30-a, A, 3).¹²
- at least one of the following processes:
 - 1) an advisory panel process exploring the gravity and probability of the allegations of abuse (the denominational ~~Safe Church Ministry~~ office is available to convene the panel)
 - 2) an independent investigation into the allegations of abuse (the denominational ~~Safe Church Ministry~~ office will keep a list of reputable investigators). It is strongly recommended that councils make use of an independent investigator in the following situations:
 - a) The accused or claimant is a prominent leader in the community or region such that impartiality is especially elusive.
 - b) The accusations consist of multiple victims or multiple jurisdictions.
 - c) Real or perceived conflicts of interest make impartiality especially elusive.
 - 3) an internal investigation led by a designated investigation team
 - 4) mediational/restorative conversations or other avenues of resolution
- e. Denominational ~~Safe Church Ministry~~ staff are available to help the council execute the agreed-upon plan for responding to abuse (i.e., providing a list of independent investigators, initiating an advisory panel, providing training and counsel, and/or providing resources regarding how to conduct a church investigation).

[‡]Before handling situations involving abuse allegations against a church leader, members of a council along with the church visitors will participate in a 60 minute Safe Church Ministry orientation and training on due process, abuse awareness and response. Training will be made available through Safe Church Ministry.

¹² This training might be fulfilled through watching and discussing a safe church ~~Ministry~~ training video, participating in an in-person training by a safe church representative or mental health professional, engaging in a live online Zoom training with safe church staff, or taking part in some combination of these options.

f. Ordinarily, once a formal claim is filed, neither the claimant (advocate) nor the accused person should meet with the council prior to the time when the panel's report is considered.

3. Convening an Advisory Panel

[subpoint a unchanged]

b. If a classis does not yet have a safe church team, then the advocate or the executive should contact the nearest team to convene an advisory panel (panel). A panel should be convened as soon as possible after it receives a request to convene. If the accused person is an employee of the CRCNA or an agency of the CRCNA, the panel shall include an observer who is a representative of the employer to be named by the executive director of the CRCNA in consultation with any agency involved. If the accused person is an officebearer, the panel ~~will ordinarily~~ shall include two church visitors of the classis of the accused's church as observers. The observers shall not participate in the panel but simply observe the proceedings.

[subpoints c - l unchanged]

m. The council has thirty days from receipt of the report to adjudicate the allegation and decide the next course of action. The council will notify in writing the claimant and the accused person of its adjudication and its next course of action. The council may conduct its own hearing into the matter, and if so, the claimant and the accused person may have legal counsel present at the council's expense. Guidance on hearing procedures can be found in the Supplement to Article 30-c of the Church Order, "Judicial Code of Rights and Procedures," ~~Sections 2-5~~ Articles 2-14.

n. The church visitors shall be present at all deliberations regarding the council's response to the allegations of abuse. At the end of the deliberations, the church visitors will prepare a written report detailing their observations of the advisory panel proceedings and the council's response (Thrive has a template available). The report is to be kept confidential and will be given only to the church council, and, if requested, to the claimant, the claimant's advocate, the accused, and the support person for the accused. The report ~~may~~ is to be submitted to classis with a summary providing an account of the church visitors' work (Church Order Art. 42-b), with the full report submitted confidentially but only considered if there is an appeal of the council's decision to classis.

[subpoint o unchanged]

p. Either the claimant or ~~and~~ the accused person may appeal the decision of the council. Such appeals should be addressed to the

classis, where standard appeal procedures are applied as outlined in Article 30 of the Church Order and its Supplements. When an Article 30-a appeal involving allegations of abuse against a church leader comes before classis, the synodical deputies will advise the classis in order to ensure that fair process and proper respect and care for all involved are maintained (per Church Order Art. 48-c).²³

4. Five important footnotes

- a. These are *suggested* guidelines. The circumstances of abuse may dictate that church officials deviate from them. In addition, state and provincial laws vary somewhat in terms of the manner in which abuse is defined and how it should be reported. The presumption should be in favor of following the guidelines in the case of each allegation of abuse; however, the church is best served by retaining legal counsel with expertise in the area to define the legal standards relevant to a particular jurisdiction. Furthermore, ~~denominational staff should~~ ~~the director of Safe Church Ministry can~~ be consulted regarding the application of the guidelines.

[subpoints b-e unchanged]

²³ “Besides the duties elsewhere stipulated, the deputies shall, upon request, extend help to the classes in the event of difficulties in order that proper unity, order, and sound doctrine may be maintained” (Church Order Art. 48-c).