

Advisory Committee 3, Church Order and Related Matters, Rev. Michael Borgert reporting, presents the following:

I. Response to Overture 75 (*Deferred from 2023*), Evaluate Polity to Clarify Relationship of Assemblies

A. Materials

Overture 75, pp. 407-08

B. Preamble

Advisory Committee 3 agrees with the heart of Overture 75, that the deep confusion over the relationships among assemblies in the Christian Reformed Church merits a careful biblical and theological study of Reformed polity with the goal of clarifying these relationships, especially with regard to church discipline.

We wrestled with two overlapping approaches to this challenge: the Overture 76 request for a Task Force and the Overture 75 request for a Study Committee. While these approaches are both needed, we felt (1) that Overture 76 better addressed the urgent need for Church Order guidelines to assist councils, classes and synod and (2) that Overture 75 could build on Overture 76 (see Ground 6).

In addition, Advisory Committee 3 recognizes the limited resources and time available for task forces and study committees, and so decided to recommend just one this year, recommending that synod defer Overture 75 to a subsequent synod.

C. Recommendation

That synod defer Overture 75 to Synod 2025.

Grounds:

1. There is considerable confusion over the nature and authority of church assemblies today. This is causing chaos in the church and must be addressed.
2. These difficulties are deep and serious and can only be appropriately addressed by agreement at the biblical and theological level first, and then applied to our polity, Church Order, and practice.
3. Local churches and classes lack the time and resources to handle such an extensive biblical, theological, and historical task. It involves all our churches, so it must be addressed at the synodical level.
4. The task is significant in both weight, content, and impact, and it requires a full study committee to do it justice.
5. There is considerable overlap between this overture and Overture 76 with respect to the application of church discipline and disaffiliation. These two overtures reflect the urgent need for guidelines (the Task

Force approach) as well as the need for a careful, deep-dive into the relationship among council, classis and synod (the Study Committee approach). Given time, energy and resource limitations, Advisory Committee 3 chose to address the urgent need first, then recommend that Synod 2024 defer a Study Committee to a future synod.

6. A Study Committee will benefit from the work of a Task Force to address discipline and disaffiliation and by the opportunity to observe how intervening synods apply the Church Order in these cases.

II. Response to Overture 76: (Deferred from 2022), Appoint a Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly

A. Materials

Overture 76, pp. 408-10

B. Preamble

Overture 76 notes that CRC church polity has provisions for accountability at the level of individual members (Church Order Art. 81) and officerbearer level (Articles 82-84). However, the overture continues that these principles are “opaque” for consistory, classis, or individuals appointed as synodical or classical functionaries. Also unclear is the process of discipline by a broader assembly. Previous synods have affirmed the principle that a classis has some authority over a council, but our church order does not offer clear guidance (see Overture 76 for examples).

In addition, our Church Order does not address the disaffiliation of a classis by synod. Without this Church Order guidance, what the overture calls a “uniform standard,” broader assemblies are open to the charge of inconsistencies or injustice (Church Order, Article 87).

The overture acknowledges that ecclesial authority is original to the local council and the authority of broader assemblies if delegated (Church Order 27). However, the Church Order lacks guidance for how these broader assemblies are to initiate church discipline.

The goal of church discipline is always to bring back those who wander from the truth (James 5:19-20). Clear discipline and disaffiliation procedures would equip officebearers to follow synod’s decision to “admonish councils and classes to promote confessional fidelity and mutuality to pursue special discipline” (Acts of Synod, 2019, pp. 818-819).

Proposed Mandate for Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers, Including Disaffiliation Initiated by a Major Assembly through established Task Force procedure timeline:

1. Engage in biblical and theological study of church discipline in order to develop principles for application of biblical church discipline.

2. Suggest Church Order changes to provide councils, classes and synod with guidelines for biblical church discipline.
3. The proposed makeup of the Task Force should include a Church Order parliamentarian, at least one seasoned Church Visitor, at least one experienced Synodical Deputy, a Stated Clerk, and John Tamming.
4. Report to Synod 2026.

C. Recommendation

That synod accede to Overture 76.

Grounds:

1. There is confusion in our churches and classes over the application of discipline, one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Article 29). This confusion leads to serious difficulties that can only be addressed by developing biblical principles of church discipline and Reformed polity, then applying these principles to our Church Order.
2. The Church Order lacks a clear mechanism for discipline and disfiliation initiated by a broader assembly. Such a mechanism would assist churches, classes and synod to respond to error. This lack is significant enough to merit the attention of a Task Force.
3. The practice of the church and past synodical decisions affirm the authority of broader assemblies to depose officebearers or councils (see Overture 76 for examples).
4. The authority of church visitors, counselors, and those appointed to advisory roles by synod is not delineated in our Church Order.
5. Clear guidelines would protect classes, councils and officebearers from inconsistent application of discipline.
6. Such a Task Force and the report it would produce was something requested by the Neland CRC “in loco” committee appointed by Synod 2022. (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, Recommendation E, p. 325)

III. Response to Overture 18: Appoint a Task Force to Review the Covenant for Officebearers

A. Materials

Overture 18, pp. 459-64

B. Preamble

Overture 18 was brought by Classis Eastern Canada. The overture asks Synod to appoint a task force to review the Covenant for Office-bearers and Church Order Article 5 which grounds it. The proposed task force would:

- Clarify the extent to which serving in church leadership should be contingent upon interpretations of specific provisions in a confession.
- Clarify how the Covenant for Office-bearers is to be implemented at all levels of church assemblies.
- Promote greater respect for the role of the local church as it deliberates together and provides guidance as to how to apply specific provisions in the confessions to specific situations in local contexts.
- Promote greater respect for thoughtful, prayerful conscientious decision making within the local church community.

After extensive discussion and consideration, our committee voted not to adopt this overture. While we are sensitive to the circumstances which prompted the classis bringing the overture, we were not convinced that it presented news grounds to justify the appointment of a task force.

C. Recommendation

That synod not accede to Overture 18.

Grounds:

1. No new information about the concerns of the Covenant for Office bearers is included in this overture (Church Order Art.31).
2. Church Order Art. 5 Supplement A.3 is clear about how gravamina works in Church Order Art. 5 and states, "No one is able to decide for oneself or for the church what is not a doctrine in the confessions and that the assemblies of the church."
3. The overture does not clarify how Church Order Art. 5 including gravamen is insufficient to deal with the process of conscientious decision making.
4. *The Agenda for Synod 2023*, Overtures 20, 21, 22, 23, 40, 47, Neland appeal p.622-627 & Communication from Council of Fellowship CRC, Toronto, Ontario. p.611, dealt with virtually all the areas of concern as mentioned in Overture 18 of the *Agenda for Synod 2024*.