

Church Order

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I. Response to Overtures 14-20 and Communication 1

A. Materials

1. Overture 14, pp. 370-372
2. Overture 16, pp. 373-375
3. Overture 17, pp. 376-378
4. Overture 18, pp. 379-380
5. Overture 19, pp. 381-382
6. Overture 20, pp. 382-383
7. Communication 1, p. 405

B. Preamble

Overtures 14, 16–20 and Communication 1, reflect a deep concern for the spiritual integrity of the church, the faithfulness of its officebearers, and the health of local congregations. The overtures collectively speak to the realities faced by councils and consistories as they disciple elders, deacons, and pastors into a deeper understanding of the Reformed confessions. They express a heartfelt desire to support officebearers who wrestle with aspects of our doctrinal standards while also upholding their calling to lead with integrity, humility, and submission to the Word of God.

We recognize that these overtures emerge from a context in which congregations are earnestly striving to nurture future leaders and foster maturity in the faith. Many councils have found themselves walking alongside officebearers—particularly younger or newer elders and deacons—who have expressed confusion, hesitation, or theological uncertainty about some doctrines contained in the confessions. At the same time, we affirm the desire of these churches to encourage growth and provide time for discernment in a supportive environment. The church is a community of discipleship, and synod affirms the essential pastoral work of mentoring and teaching those who serve.

We also hear the frustration expressed by councils who struggle to find willing and qualified elders and deacons who can affirm the confessions without reservation. We recognize the fears some may express—concerns that their council may lack sufficient officebearers, or that others face an uncertain future and the possible dissolution of their congregation. In some cases, this leads to calls for creative flexibility in term limits, timelines for resolution of confessional-difficulty gravamina, or reevaluation of the service limitations currently placed on those with unresolved difficulties. These overtures reflect a sincere effort to balance the church's high theological standards with the

practical realities of leadership in the local church.

In the view of our advisory committee some of the concerns expressed in these overtures may arise from misunderstandings or a lack of clarity about the nature of gravamina and the expectations of the Covenant for Officebearers. A careful reading of the Church Order and its Supplements, especially when paired with denominational resources such as the document *Guidance on the Meaning of “Affirming the Confessions”* from the Office of General Secretary, can help clarify these matters. For example, a confessional-difficulty gravamen is not merely a note of discomfort or curiosity—it signifies a genuine obstacle in affirming the church’s doctrine. The standard in the covenant for officebearers is that we communicate our views to the church when we “come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God’s Word”. As such, this rightly prompts a process of discernment and accountability. Further, while there are two recognized types of gravamina—confessional-difficulty and confessional-revision—these are not simply options to be selected at will but established channels for maintaining integrity within confessional subscription. Synod also emphasizes that honoring the church’s confessional standards is not at odds with grace and patience. Rather, the current processes and provisions already offer flexibility and pastoral space for growth. Councils are entrusted with original authority, and the Church Order gives them responsibility for evaluating gravamina and determining a suitable path forward. At the same time, synod and classis retain delegated authority to guard the unity and integrity of the church’s confession as a whole.

The desire to create additional timelines or exceptions—especially for elders and deacons—raises legitimate pastoral questions. However, synod must weigh these concerns against the potential risks of weakening the theological clarity and unity to which we are called. The shared confessions of the church are not merely theological ideals but summaries of the teaching of Scripture, to which all officebearers pledge allegiance. It is precisely this unity that enables us to faithfully carry out our shared mission as the CRCNA.

A deeper engagement with Church Order Article 5 and its supplements can help address many of the concerns that have prompted calls for a third category of gravamen. These existing resources already make space for honest wrestling, careful discernment, and communal trust, without weakening the integrity of our confessional commitments. The creation of a third category of gravamen also introduces confusion and undermines the theological and ecclesial clarity the CRC has worked to restore. Therefore, while we deeply respect the concerns expressed in these overtures, we believe the creation of a new category of gravamen is neither necessary nor wise. With gratitude for the careful thought, evident pastoral concern, and church-loving spirit that undergirds these overtures, we make the following recommendations to synod.

C. Recommendations

A. That synod recognize the struggle of many congregations in our denomination who have officebearers wrestling with aspects of our doctrinal standards while also

upholding their calling to lead with integrity, humility, and submission to the Word of God.

B. That synod amend the Church Order Supplement to clarify the nature of confessional subscription and of gravamina (with additions indicated by underline and deletions indicated by strikethrough).

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5

“Synod declares that gravamina fall into ~~at least two basic~~ types...”

Ground: The statement that “gravamina fall into at least two basic types” wrongly suggests that there are more types of gravamina available to officebearers other than ones adopted in our church order. The amendment clarifies that synod recognizes only two types of gravamina.

Amend Church Order Supplement, Article 5

A. Guidelines as to the meaning of affirming the confessions by means of the Covenant for Officebearers:

1. The person signing the Covenant for Officebearers affirms without reservation all the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions of the church as being doctrines taught in the Word of God. ~~“Without reservation” means that an officebearer does not have a difficulty or hold a settled conviction contrary to any of the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions. This includes what synod has declared to have confessional status.~~

2. “Without reservation” means that an officebearer does not have – to the best of their knowledge - either a difficulty persistent serious doubt or ~~hold a~~ settled conviction contrary to any of the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions. This includes what synod has declared to have confessional status.

3. ‘Without reservation’ does not mean that a signatory has an exhaustive knowledge of confessional Reformed theology. Nor does it mean that a signatory does not struggle emotionally with some doctrine. Nor does it mean that a signatory fully understands some doctrine.

[current subpoints 2 and 3 would become 4 and 5]

Grounds:

- a. The amendments clarify that an officebearer is not required to have an exhaustive knowledge of Scripture or of confessional Reformed theology in order to serve. Instead, what is required is that, to the best of their knowledge, they do not have either a difficulty/serious doubt or a settled conviction contrary to any of the doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions.
- b. The amendments further clarify that officebearers are humble disciples who expect to continue growing in their knowledge of Christ.
- c. The amendment clarifies that officebearers should continue to examine the

Scriptures to ensure that the confessions of the Church rightly reflect the Word of God.

C. That Synod encourage churches to devote substantial attention to discipling congregants and potential officebearers, through both teaching and worship, in the doctrines of the creeds and confessions, and to utilize resources from Thrive and Calvin Theological Seminary in doing so.

D. That synod urge classes to come alongside congregations which are having difficulties maintaining a functioning church council by providing guidance, teaching, care, encouragement, or even additional attention from church visitors.

E. That synod encourage congregations to consider alternative means of maintaining a functional church council, such as reducing the size of council or extending the length of officebearer terms.

Grounds:

- a. Greater attention to discipling congregants and potential officebearers will expand the pool of potential officebearers.
- b. One of the primary purposes of a classis is to support struggling churches. “If one part [of the body] suffers every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26a).
- c. Making adjustments to the size of council or the length of officebearer terms will give other potential officebearers time they need to wrestle with the Scriptural basis for our creeds and confessions. By God’s grace, this will result in a larger pool of qualified elder and deacon candidates.

F. That this be synod’s response to Overtures 14, 16-20, and Communication 1.