

CHURCH ORDER AND APPEALS

Chair: Rev. Bert Slofstra
Reporter: Rev. Bruce A. Persenaire

I. **Diakonia Remixed: Office of Deacon Task Force**

A. *Materials:* Diakonia Remixed: Office of Deacon Task Force Report, pp. 263-98

B. *Privilege of the floor:* Mr. Terry Woodnorth, chair; Rev. Roy Berkenbosch, reporter; and task force members Mr. Andrew Ryskamp and Mrs. Lori Wiersma

C. *Background*

Your committee wants to take note of the deep gratitude we have for the work done by the task force. They have worked hard and have given us not just a vision of the office of deacon that has merit, but also a vision of the church, which is significant.

Your committee began by looking at the report as a whole and discussing our response to the report and its recommendations. We met with members of the task force hearing about their journey and how they came to the conclusion that the task and work of deacons needed to be revitalized. We then expressed to them some of our concerns and heard their reaction. We then began the work of considering the recommendations, one by one. As we began the process of doing this work, the advisory committee soon found itself not adopting some of the proposed changes in Church Order, adopting others, and modifying still others. After spending a good deal of time doing this, it became apparent to the committee that further work and study needed to be done to bring forward many of the good recommendations that the task force suggests.

D. *Observations*

1. Of all the recommendations and changes that the task force proposes, one of the most significant is that deacons need to be brought to our major assemblies so that the church can fully benefit from their gifts and input and have all offices fully represented. Our committee wants to honor that desire and that change.
2. Before that change can be implemented, we believe that more work needs to be done in distinguishing between the unique work of elders and deacons. While the task force has done good work in casting a new vision for a revitalized diaconate; we believe that the office of elder and its work as defined in the Church Order needs a new look. Before Church Order changes can be made to the work and role of deacons, we believe the church will be best served if a similar study is done for the work and role of elder.
3. With regard to the work done by the task force regarding revitalizing and giving a new vision for the work of the deacons, we believe that more study needs to be done regarding the task and mandate of both classis and synod. What will deacons do there, especially after having been given this revitalized vision of the diaconal task? Will there be work done at synod and classis that is unique to the office of elder; and that is also unique to the office of deacon? These are things that the task force believed did not need to be addressed; we believe they need to be answered in study.

4. We had several difficulties with the task force's use and application of Ephesians 4.11-13, and shared the concerns expressed by CRWM's supplement regarding the task force's use of the work, "diakonia". This concern was also raised in several of the overtures.
5. The work of the task force may have been hampered by the presence of three distinct agendas:
 - a. Review of the Church Order articles relating to the office of deacons and major assemblies.
 - b. The work of revitalizing the diaconate.
 - c. The effective coordination of ministry efforts by the whole church for the transformation of communities.

E. Recommendations

1. That synod propose the following changes to Church Order Articles 40 and 45, for adoption by the Synod 2015 with full implementation of Article 45 by Synod 2016.

Proposed Article 40

- a. The council of each church shall delegate a minister, an elder, **and a deacon** to the classis. If a church is without a minister, or the minister is prevented from attending, **another elder** shall be delegated **in place of the minister**. Officebearers who are not delegated may also attend classis and may be given an advisory voice.

Proposed Supplement, Article 40-a

- a. The gender of delegates to a classis shall be consistent with the decisions of that classis concerning the supplement to Article 3-a of the Church Order. Delegates who believe the seating of women delegates is in violation of the Word of God may record their protest on the appropriate credentials. Their names, along with their protests, shall be included in the official record of each classis meeting. If a classis so desires, it may also invite emerging churches to delegate **three** officebearers to the meetings of classis.
 (Acts of Synod 1997, p. 621)
 (Amended Acts of Synod 2007, p. 612)
 (Amended Acts of Synod 2009, p. 613)

Modification for Churches of Classis Red Mesa

- a. The council of each church shall delegate a minister, **an elder, and a deacon** to the classis. If a church is without a minister or a minister, **elder, or deacon delegate** is prevented from attending, **any combination of three officebearers may be delegated**. Officebearers who are not delegated also may attend classis and may be given an advisory voice.
- b. The presiding officers of classis shall be selected from officebearers within the classis. **Ordinarily** the same presiding officers shall not be chosen twice in succession.

(Acts of Synod 1981, p. 16)

Proposed Article 45

The synod is the assembly representing the churches of all the classes. Each classis shall delegate **one minister, one elder, one deacon, and one other officebearer** to the synod.

Grounds:

- a. Numerous requests over the years have asked that the major assemblies seat deacons in order to have full representation and participation in carrying out the mission of the church.
 - b. Previous synodical reports have said that the Bible and the confessions do not prohibit the seating of deacons at major assemblies.
 - c. Delayed adoption and implementation will allow for clarification on outstanding issues, and thus allow for fuller conversation and ownership within the church.
2. That prior to adopting the proposed changes to Articles 40 and 45, a revised task force address the following areas for the consideration and approval of synod:
- a. Questions
 - 1) Church Order Article 35 assigns “tasks which belong to the common administration of the church” to the council (pastors, elders, and deacons). What biblical and confessional basis exists for those tasks, which on the congregational level belong distinctively to the office of elder and to the office of deacon (Church Order Art. 35), to be assigned collectively to elder and deacon delegates on the classical and synodical levels?
 - 2) What is the unity that the offices share, and how are the “honor and dignity” of the offices distinguished from how they differ in “mandate and task” (Church Order Article 2)? What does it mean to have parity of office?
 - 3) How does the distinctiveness of each office, the unique giftedness, parity of offices and yet differences in “mandate and task” influence and shape the agendas of major assemblies that would have both elders and deacons seated?
 - 4) In what ways can the agendas of the major assemblies be shaped for meaningful inclusion and participation by deacons, without tying the hands of the individual classis and their local expression (minimal regulation for maximum engagement)?
 - 5) What changes, highlights, or broadening of the mandate of synod would help make the seating of all officebearers at synod meaningful and beneficial?
 - b. The development of a plan for resourcing and revitalizing both elders and deacons, including plans for its implementation.
 - c. Recommendations for appropriate changes to the Church Order. This would include reviewing the proposed changes within the report of the 2013 Office of Deacon Task

Force, considering further changes relating to the other offices, and clarifying a missional vision, all with a view to integrating such recommended changes.

Grounds:

- a. Persistent concerns have been raised about perceived blurring of the lines distinguishing the offices while at the same time highlighting the need for acknowledging the unique giftedness of each office.
 - b. There is a perceived difference in how the report of the Office of Deacon Task Force addresses parity of office and how Church Order Article 2 addresses it.
 - c. Addressing these questions and concerns will help the church integrate the seating of deacons with the intended agenda of the major assembly.
 - d. A plan for resourcing and revitalizing the offices will help ensure that we do not end up simply making changes in the composition of current structures, but make these changes for the purpose of revitalized offices.
 - e. The current Office of Deacon Task Force, as per their mandate, addressed only one of the offices. There is value in doing the same for all the offices as may be appropriate, so that it is done in a complete and integrated manner rather than piecemeal.
3. That synod, in appointing a new task force, include two members of the current Office of Deacon Task Force, as well as others representing the offices and missional interests of the CRCNA, to address the matters identified in Recommendation 2 above. They will report their findings and recommendations to Synod 2015 and give a progress of their work to Synod 2014.

Grounds:

- a. Having two members of the current task force will give continuity to the work they have done.
 - b. Adding those with expertise in the other offices, as well as those with expertise in the area of mission, will allow for a fuller and more integrated inclusion of the diaconal office at major assemblies, and help move the 'mission' of assemblies in more missional directions.
4. That synod instruct the BOT to appoint up to seven deacons in the CRC during the interim years of Synod 2014 and Synod 2015 to represent the interests of deacons at synod, using the same guidelines for ethnic advisers and young adult representatives.

Ground: Diaconal advisers are representative voices of the diaconal membership of the CRC.

5. That synod mandate the Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture to consider how the inclusion of deacons at major assemblies will affect the culture and structure of the CRCNA.
6. That synod instruct the BOT to ask World Renew to take the lead role in facilitating the collaboration and networking necessary to support deacons. This will be done primarily by bringing leaders of resourcing organizations together for effective collaboration.
7. That synod refer the balance of Office of Deacon Task Force 2013 Recommendation G to the new task force.

8. That synod thank the Office of Deacon Task Force for its significant work toward a revitalized diaconate and toward a revitalized council, classis, and synod, and that synod dismiss the task force.
9. That synod declare this to be its answer to Overtures 19, 20, and 23; Communications 3, 4, 5, and 6; and the Christian Reformed World Missions Supplement.