



Christian  
Reformed  
Church

# Commissioned Pastor Handbook 2024



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# Commissioned Pastor Handbook

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## **I. Purpose of Commissioned Pastor Handbook**

This handbook about the office of commissioned pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America is intended as a resource for individuals, church councils, and classis leaders as they consider the various ways to make use of this office and the procedures that are involved. This volume reports actions synod has taken and policies synod has approved. It also offers commentary on those actions and policies (noting appropriate sources) as well as historical context, which can be accessed in the endnotes.

As the office of commissioned pastor has evolved over the past decades<sup>1</sup> and may well continue in that process, this handbook is intended to be a guide to and a reminder of the rules and statements of synod related to the office of commissioned pastor. It serves alongside the Rules for Synodical Procedure, the Journey Toward Ordination, and other approved statements of practice providing guidelines for ministry and life within the CRCNA.

## **II. General Description of the Office of Commissioned Pastor**

### **A. Intended purpose of the office**

Commissioned pastors represent one of two pastoral offices recognized by our denomination (the other being minister of the Word). The differences between the two offices involve (a) limits on the scope of ministry for a commissioned pastor, (b) less-specific educational qualifications required for commissioned pastors in solo pastor positions, and (c) no denominationally specified educational requirements for other commissioned pastors.<sup>2</sup>

Synod intended for the commissioned pastor office “to provide *limited* but *real* ecclesiastical authority for a *specific* ministry role ... for a *particular* area of ministry in God’s kingdom,” whether that be “the local church, mission field, educational institution, etc.” (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 243; see *Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 434).

### **B. Title of the office**

All offices, according to our Church Order, “differ from each other only in mandate and task, not in dignity and honor” (Church Order Article 2). This is a biblical and polity principle for the Christian Reformed Church, and misperceptions to the contrary must be so identified and challenged. Just as the office of deacon is no longer viewed in most circles as “second class” to the office of elder, but as a distinct office with a different focus than that of the office of elder, the church must squarely challenge negative misperceptions of the office of commissioned pastor.<sup>3</sup>

Both *commissioned pastor* and *minister of the Word* are mainly Church Order terms used to designate the two offices. In practice the churches use a variety of other terms to designate those serving in pastoral and staff roles

(e.g., Pastor, Reverend, Evangelist, Chaplain, Pastor of Education, Pastor of Youth, Minister of Congregational Life). The reality is that local classes, congregations, and communities develop their own language to describe both ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors.

This is in keeping with the intent of synod, as stated in the *Acts of Synod 2001* (p. 506) and now in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

The office of evangelist [term used in 2001 for the office now titled *commissioned pastor*] may be understood to have the character of pastoral extension. Evangelists extend the work of pastoral leadership by founding and working in new congregations and by extending the ministry of organized congregations into specialized areas, including, but not limited to, youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and evangelism [see also Church Order Article 24]. . . . By the broader application of the office of evangelist, with its existing regulations, to a variety of ministry positions, the church avoids the multiplication of offices and provides a way of recognizing and regulating a variety of pastoral positions in our churches. These positions may be identified by titles that indicate their ministry distinctiveness such as chaplain, pastor of education, pastor of youth, minister of congregational life, and so forth.

(*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 506)

### **C. Nature of the office**

The office of commissioned pastor is recognized in the Christian Reformed Church as a flexible, very localized ordination into pastoral ministry. As indicated above (*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 506), *commissioned pastor* is an “umbrella term” for a variety of ministry positions such as evangelist, chaplain, pastor of outreach, of youth, of congregational life, and more, and may be understood to have the nature of “pastoral extension,” serving to extend “the ministry of organized congregations into specialized areas, including, but not limited to, youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and evangelism.”

### **D. Brief overview of the process of ordaining a commissioned pastor**

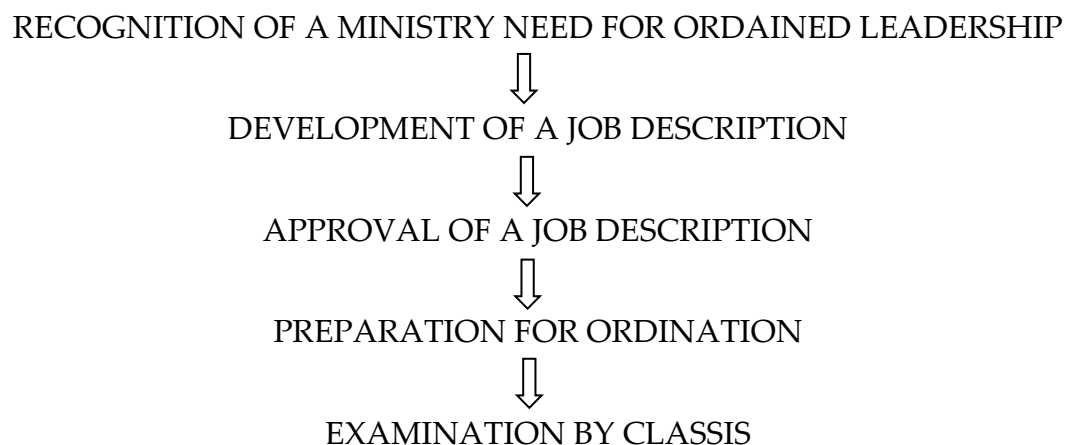
Ordination to the office of commissioned pastor arises out of a local ministry context in which a ministry will (a) show the need for ordained leadership and (b) create a job description. The job description will be considered by the classis in consultation with representatives from three neighboring classes (i.e., the synodical deputies). Once all are agreed that the ministry as described in the job description fits the intention of Article 23 (as described by the guidelines adopted by Synod 2001), the process toward ordination will continue. This process involves verifying relevant ministry skills, designing and engaging in a learning plan (where appropriate), gathering necessary documents, preparing a sermon to be

critiqued (if preaching is part of the job description), and preparing for an oral exam at the classis level.

It is noteworthy that up to this point very little has been said about the individual to be ordained. There is an underlying assumption that an individual will emerge who can fit the ministry position being created or recognized. All parties concerned need to be in prayer that such a “match” will occur and be affirmed through this process of discernment.

If your local ministry is doing work that would be well served by the ordained leadership of a commissioned pastor, you are encouraged to speak to the classis leadership in your area. If you are an individual who wishes to be used in ministry as an ordained commissioned pastor, talk to your local church or classis leaders. Seek out especially the members of an area Classical Ministerial Leadership Team. Together as a church, we are actively asking “the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2).

### **Flow Chart Summarizing the Process of Ordaining a Commissioned Pastor**



## **III. Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and Their Supplements**

### **Article 23**

- a. The task of the commissioned pastor is to bear witness to Christ through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, church education, pastoral care, evangelism, and other ministries in order that believers may be called to comprehensive discipleship and unbelievers may be called to faith.
- b. Commissioned pastors shall function under the direct supervision of the council, giving regular reports to it and being present at its meetings, particularly when their work is under consideration.

- c. Commissioned pastors shall be acknowledged as such in their calling churches. Normally, their work on the church council shall be limited to the ministries in which they serve as commissioned pastors.
- d. Each church through its council shall attend to the proper support of its commissioned pastor.

**Supplement, Article 23-a (general notes regarding the administration of the office)**

The office of commissioned pastor is applicable to a variety of ministries, provided that these ministries fit the following guidelines adopted by Synod 2001:

“The office of evangelist[\*] may be understood to have the character of pastoral extension. Evangelists extend the work of pastoral leadership by founding and working in new congregations and by extending the ministry of organized congregations into specialized areas, including, but not limited to, youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and evangelism. . . . By the broader application of the office of evangelist, with its existing regulations, to a variety of ministry positions, the church avoids the multiplication of offices and provides a way of recognizing and regulating a variety of pastoral positions in our churches. These positions may be identified by titles that indicate their ministry distinctiveness such as chaplain, pastor of education, pastor of youth, minister of congregational life, and so forth.”

(*Acts of Synod 2001*, p. 506)

[\*Note: In 2001 the office was known as *evangelist*. The title was changed to *ministry associate* by Synod 2003 and to *commissioned pastor* by Synod 2012.]

All commissioned pastor positions must be approved by classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, to determine whether or not the position fits these guidelines adopted by Synod 2001. All commissioned pastors must demonstrate through an examination their ability to function in the ministry to which they are being called.

Examinations for the office of commissioned pastor must follow the guidelines established by synod as described and recorded in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

The Commissioned Pastor Handbook shall be consulted regularly, as it offers guidelines and regulations approved by synod. These include the protocol for examination, the creation of job descriptions, and the standards and qualifications to be met by those seeking to be ordained as commissioned pastors.

(*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 783)

Commissioned pastor job descriptions related to the ministry of chaplaincy must be approved in consultation with Chaplaincy and Care Ministry. The mandate, characteristics, and guiding principles that define chaplains ordained as ministers of the Word are applicable to chaplains ordained under Article 23.

(*Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 613)

### **Supplement, Article 23-d**

#### *“Proper Support” Defined*

Proper support of a commissioned pastor is to include as appropriate an adequate salary, medical insurance, disability insurance, a housing provision, payment to an appropriate pension or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items.

To “attend to” proper support does not imply that the calling church is responsible to provide all of these items of support. Rather, the calling church is responsible to ensure that the commissioned pastor has a plan that addresses these items. In many ministries the local church itself accepts these responsibilities in order to facilitate full-time or part-time ministry service. In other settings—such as church planting, various forms of chaplaincy, bivocational arrangements, multipoint ministries, and so on—the financial plan will include income and benefits provided by a variety of potential sources. The calling church’s support of the financial plan should be carefully reviewed at the time classis approves the commissioned pastor’s position. This includes a call to bivocational ministry or when a pastor and church decide to change their financial arrangement.

#### *Guidelines for Churches in Conversations with Pastors about “Proper Support”*

1. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.
2. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) shall be mutually discerned by the commissioned pastor(s) and the supervising council. The support plan, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by classis along with the position description, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and nonministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.
3. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of commissioned pastors, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

(*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 852-53)



## Article 24

- a. Commissioned pastors may serve in a solo or senior leadership position in an organized church only with the permission of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies, following the synodically approved rules for such an arrangement, which are explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.
- b. Commissioned pastors may be called to a position in which the call is for a specified term contingent upon accountable progress toward completion of the requirements for ordination as a minister of the Word. Approval of the classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, is required as to the terms of such a call and the accountability of progress in the proposed learning plan.
- c. Commissioned pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure the approval of their councils and classes.
- d. A commissioned pastor position may be eliminated and a commissioned pastor may be released only with the concurrence of the classis that approved the position, with attention to the rules and processes approved by synod.
- e. A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of classis, be given the title of *commissioned pastor emeritus*.

### Supplement, Article 24-a

Commissioned pastors may serve in positions of solo leadership in an established church only in specific circumstances. Three of these circumstances were specified before 2019 in Church Order Articles 23-b, 23-c, and 23-d. A fourth was adopted by Synod 2018. All four are now presented and explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook (sections IV, I and J). A classis may decide to make such appointments contingent upon implementation of a learning plan leading toward meeting the qualifications for minister of the Word, as described in Church Order Article 24-b. In all cases in which a commissioned pastor serves in a solo leadership position in an emerging or organized church, it is mandatory that such a person, in cooperation with classis, shall develop and complete a contextualized learning plan for denominational orientation, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee, as described in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

### Supplement, Article 24-b

In various cases a commissioned pastor may desire or be encouraged to seek ordination as a minister of the Word, following the process prescribed in Article 6, including the required education. Though not expected in all circumstances of persons serving as commissioned pastors, a plan toward candidacy as a minister of the Word may be

beneficial for the pastor and the church. Local ministries in partnership with their classis and synodical deputies may consider the advisability of constructing such a plan, and of using a renewable “term call” for such cases as a way to hold the commissioned pastor accountable to making progress in the plan.

#### **Supplement, Article 24-c**

On occasion a commissioned pastor working in a position outside of a local congregation may desire to transition to a different calling church. This scenario and other transitions for commissioned pastors are addressed in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

#### **Supplement, Article 24-d**

Synod has offered, on various occasions, guidelines regarding the conclusion of an approved commissioned pastor position, the resignation of a commissioned pastor, and the release of a commissioned pastor. Synod also instructs classes to make an appropriate declaration reflecting the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. These guidelines and options regarding status are the same as those for minister of the Word and can be found in Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2 or in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

#### **Supplement, Article 24-e**

A commissioned pastor emeritus may, upon the judgment of classis, retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry in ways consistent with their ordination prior to retirement. Supervision of a commissioned pastor emeritus shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation with the approval of the classis(es) involved.

*(Acts of Synod 2019, p. 783)*

### **IV. Discerning the Use of the Office of Commissioned Pastor<sup>4</sup>**

#### **A. Job descriptions**

##### *Elements of a Good Job Description<sup>5</sup>*

1. A description of the functions and responsibilities that are ministerial in nature (see the first paragraph of Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a).
2. A description of the supervision and lines of accountability for the position.
3. Specific notation of whether preaching and/or administering the sacraments are to be included in the position.

The following observations were received and recommended to congregations and classes as helpful advice in the administration of Church Order Articles 23-24:<sup>6</sup>

### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee**

- When approving a job description that involves a commissioned pastor serving in a position outside of North America, it would be wise for the classis, the calling church, or the potential commissioned pastor to secure a letter of endorsement from our denominational missions agency. Resonate Global Mission has developed a straightforward protocol for such endorsement, which will assure all parties concerned that the ministry proposed will be done responsibly. It will also enable such commissioned pastors to receive the support and encouragement of our regional missions teams across the globe.
- When approving a job description involving a commissioned pastor serving in a position that has chaplaincy embedded in the work, it would be wise for the classis, the calling church, or the potential commissioned pastor to secure a letter of endorsement from the denominational Office of Chaplaincy and Care Ministry. Such a letter would be a blessing to the chaplain and the church as it would enable a connection to the growing cadre of endorsed CRC chaplains.
- With the current and broadening use of the office of commissioned pastor it becomes clear that a common description of a commissioned pastor position as “confined to the boundaries of the classis that ordains them” is erroneous. Church Order Article 24-c states that “commissioned pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure the approval of their councils and classes.” The boundaries or limits placed on a commissioned pastor are determined by the field of labor as defined in the job description, not by geography.
- We suggest that it would be wise for a job description to state explicitly whether a commissioned pastor will preach, and whether the preaching will occur in the form of occasional service as a “pulpit supply pastor” in neighboring churches. There is an erroneous belief that any commissioned pastor who preaches has license to preach anywhere in the classis. The Church Order in Article 23 does not specify this. Rather, limits and boundaries of the work of a commissioned pastor are specified in the job description. If the preaching responsibilities of a commissioned pastor are intended to enable this person to serve as pulpit supply at other churches in the classis, it would be best for the job description to say so and for the classical examination to be of the same nature as those given before granting such licensure.

- Regarding the phenomenon of ministry positions evolving over time beyond their stated job descriptions and the responsibility of classes with regard to such changes:

The Candidacy Committee suggests that this is one of many areas in church life where spiritual discernment and common sense need to guide us, rather than increased procedure and rule. We have observed a number of cases in which a classis interim committee has responsibly deliberated regarding a changing job description, determining whether it has become something new which needs approval by classis, or whether it remains the same at its heart. Classis interim committees are free to share their decisions with classis, or even to present a motion that their judgment regarding a changing job description be approved. Synodical deputies can also be consulted, formally or informally, and they would, of course, be invited to the conversation if indeed a job description were to change so much as to be judged “new.”

*(Agenda for Synod 2016, p. 267)*

### **B. Special mention regarding chaplaincy and the office of commissioned pastor**

It bears special mention that one of the most productive uses of the office of commissioned pastor has been in the area of chaplaincy.<sup>7</sup>

From Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

Commissioned pastor job descriptions related to the ministry of chaplaincy must be approved in consultation with Chaplaincy and Care Ministry. The mandate, characteristics, and guiding principles that define chaplains ordained as ministers of the Word are applicable to chaplains ordained under Article 23.

For more information and reflection on this issue, consult the *Agenda for Synod 2003*, pp. 67-71 and the *Acts of Synod 2003*, pp. 609-13.

### **C. Appointment to service in an established (organized) congregation (Article 24-a)<sup>8</sup>**

Church Order Article 24-a:

Commissioned pastors may serve in a solo or senior leadership position in an organized church only with the permission of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies, following the synodically approved rules for such an arrangement, which are explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

### **Synodically approved rules for Article 24-a**

There are three scenarios in which a commissioned pastor may serve as a lead or solo pastor in an established church through the use of Church Order Article 24-a:

1. Commissioned pastors who are planting a church may continue to serve for “a reasonable period of transition”<sup>9</sup> after the church becomes an organized congregation.
2. Commissioned pastors who serve in an organized church alongside a minister of the Word may, in exceptional circumstances, move into the senior/solo role if the minister of the Word leaves.
3. In unique ministry contexts a commissioned pastor may be called to serve in an organized congregation.

*Regarding scenario 1 above:*

Ordinarily, the office of commissioned pastors who serve in emerging congregations will terminate when a group of believers becomes an organized church. However, upon organization and with the approval of the newly formed council and the classis, commissioned pastors may continue to serve the newly organized church until an ordained minister of the Word is installed or until they have served the newly organized church for a reasonable period of transition. Commissioned pastors who continue to serve a newly organized congregation beyond this reasonable period of transition must seek the permission of classis with the concurrence of the synodical deputies.<sup>10</sup>

*Regarding scenario 2 above:*

Commissioned pastors may also serve in organized congregations along with a minister of the Word and may serve as chaplains in institutional settings in the community. Commissioned pastors who have served an organized congregation along with a minister of the Word may, in exceptional circumstances, with the approval of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies, continue serving that congregation as a solo pastor after the minister of the Word has left.<sup>11</sup>

*Regarding scenario 3 above:*

Commissioned pastors may be called to serve as solo pastors in organized congregations if the classis, with concurring advice of synodical deputies, ascertains that such congregations are from a ministry context where the standards for pastoral preparation required by Articles 6, 7, or 8 are not presently practical.<sup>12</sup> The ministry context is ordinarily one in which cultural differences (e.g., ethnic, social, economic, educational, language) between the congregation and its ministry context on the one hand, and the dominant culture of the denomination as expressed in the seminary, other leadership development entities, and broader denominational life on the other hand (a) present significant obstacles to raising up Indigenous leadership in ways that are sustainable by the respective congregations and communities, and (b) have resulted in limited- or non-availability of competent Indigenous leaders trained for ministry via one of the prescribed routes for ministry of the Word.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that great wisdom is needed in decisions regarding approval of a commissioned pastor for service as a solo or lead pastor in an organized congregation. In all three scenarios above, the deliberation of classis and the advice of synodical deputies are required. Terms used in these statements of synod have a purposeful flexibility allowing for a contextual decision.

### **Required learning plans**

It should be noted that *a learning plan is to be approved by the Candidacy Committee and completed in all cases in which a commissioned pastor is approved for service in a solo leadership position, whether in an emerging church or in an established (organized) church.* It is in the interest of the pastor, the ministry, and the denomination for solo and lead commissioned pastors to be well acquainted with denominational distinctives. Thus, Church Order Supplement, Article 24-a says:

Commissioned pastors may serve in positions of solo leadership in an established church only in specific circumstances. Three of these circumstances were specified before 2019 in Church Order Articles 23-b, 23-c, and 23-d. A fourth was adopted by Synod 2018. All four are now presented and explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook (sections IV, I and J). A classis may decide to make such appointments contingent upon implementation of a learning plan leading toward meeting the qualifications for minister of the Word, as described in Church Order Article 24-b. In all cases in which a commissioned pastor serves in a solo leadership position in an emerging or organized church, it is mandatory that such a person, in cooperation with classis, shall develop and complete a contextualized learning plan for denominational orientation, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee, as described in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

To summarize, there are three scenarios, formerly noted in the Church Order and still valid, by which a commissioned pastor may serve as a lead or solo pastor in an established church. There is also a fourth scenario, referred to unofficially as a “bridge ordination,” to which we now turn our attention.

### **D. Use of the commissioned pastor office as a “bridge” to becoming a minister of the Word (Article 24-b)**

The scenarios in which established churches may call a commissioned pastor (through Church Order Article 24-a) to serve them as a solo or lead pastor are specific and unusual (see section IV, C above for a description of the three scenarios). They are related to particular ministry contexts that are different from the dominant culture of the denomination and its seminary. If none of these scenarios apply, but a church (with approval of its counselor and synodical deputies) discerns a need to call and ordain a

commissioned pastor as the solo or lead pastor of an organized church, there is one other synod-approved way to proceed.<sup>14</sup>

Church Order Article 24-b:

Commissioned pastors may be called to a position in which the call is for a specified term contingent upon accountable progress toward completion of the requirements for ordination as a minister of the Word. Approval of the classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, is required as to the terms of such a call and the accountability of progress in the proposed learning plan.

#### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee<sup>15</sup>**

- It is wise for the appointed church counselor to direct the attention of the organized congregation desiring to call a person to serve as commissioned pastor to the reality that we have a considerable number of fully qualified and ready candidates for minister of the Word and currently ordained ministers of the Word eligible for call.
- Further, the church counselor is responsible to direct the congregation to the unique criteria cited in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-d (now presented in this handbook as “scenario 3” in section IV, C above). The decision to take this step is not only that of the local council or congregation. It also requires the support of classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies.
- Having offered these first two items of reflection to those inquiring about this matter, the Candidacy Committee has suggested that any such arrangement to call a commissioned pastor to a lead position in an organized church be done with an explicit condition that the commissioned pastor make progress toward attaining an M.Div. degree and approval as a candidate for minister of the Word. The condition can be written into the motion of approval relative to the use of Article 24-b, with a suitable time line, with expectations of reporting, with expectations of support by the calling church, and with recognition that the approval can be reversed at a given point if the conditions are not met. With such understandings as have just been cited, there are some effective relationships currently under way in which a commissioned pastor is serving an organized church while also making progress toward ordination as a minister of the Word. At the appropriate time (i.e., when the person is declared a candidate) these commissioned pastors receive a call to continue to serve, as a minister of the Word, and all the appropriate and normal steps of classical examination are conducted.
- It should be noted that Article 24-b is not intended to apply to all cases in which a commissioned pastor is approved for a lead or solo position in an established congregation (note the three scenarios described in section IV, C above). The statement uses the qualifier “may,” not

“shall.” Individual circumstances will vary. Yet this highlights an opportunity that the classis and synodical deputies have to encourage accredited theological education toward meeting the expectations for the office of minister of the Word. In many cases the pastor, the congregation, the classis, and the church at large will be blessed by such effort.

Note the following words of Church Order Supplement, Article 24-b as it speaks to this:

In various cases a commissioned pastor may desire or be encouraged to seek ordination as a minister of the Word, following the process prescribed in Article 6, including the required education. Though not expected in all circumstances of persons serving as commissioned pastors, a plan toward candidacy as a minister of the Word may be beneficial for the pastor and the church. Local ministries in partnership with their classis and synodical deputies may consider the advisability of constructing such a plan, and of using a renewable “term call” for such cases as a way to hold the commissioned pastor accountable to making progress in the plan.

The Candidacy Committee is eager to serve the church through consultation with local pastors, synodical deputies, and classis functionaries as these conversations are conducted.

## **V. Preparing the Commissioned Pastor Candidate**

### **A. Qualifications for a commissioned pastor**

These are the desired qualifications of a candidate for ordination as a commissioned pastor.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Character*

The commissioned pastor is mature in Christ. “Christ-likeness” covers all of what it means to be godly. The following guidelines, which are rooted in Scripture (references are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive), suggest many aspects of godly character:

1. **Devoted to Jesus**—The commissioned pastor is “in Christ” (John 15:5), filled with his Spirit (Acts 1:8), and exercises personal spiritual disciplines.
2. **Committed to the church and its mission** (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 5:22)—The commissioned pastor is a person in Christian community. She/he has been tested and proven. She/he has been recognized as prepared for ministry by the community of believers and evidences accountability to it.
3. **Called and gifted** (Matt. 28:16ff.; Acts 1:8)—The commissioned pastor has a calling from God that is confirmed by the church. That calling



- provides her/him with a mission, with vision, and with intrinsic motivation. She/he ministers out of giftedness (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12; etc.).
4. **Filled with love** (Matt. 22:37-40)—The commissioned pastor is characterized by love—love of God, love of self, and love of others, including lost and diverse people.
  5. **Possesses the fruit of the Spirit** (Gal. 5:22-23)—The commissioned pastor gives evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.
  6. **Possesses the qualities of an officebearer** (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9)—The commissioned pastor demonstrates such qualities as being reputable, loyal, self-disciplined, respected, hospitable, mature, honest, sincere, teachable and able to teach, emotionally stable, blameless, lover of God and not money, resilient, responsible, not quick-tempered, not overbearing, not quarrelsome, not abusive (of others or substances), managing her/his own household well (including spousal support of ministry), risk-taking, flexible, adaptable, etc.
  7. **Has a servant's heart** (Matt. 20:26)—The commissioned pastor is a servant-leader.
  8. **Possesses wisdom** (Prov. 1:1-7)—The commissioned pastor lives according to God's design, recognizes Christ as "wisdom from God" (1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3), and seeks wisdom from above (James 1:5; 3:13).
  9. **Manages life well**—The commissioned pastor practices good stewardship of time, talents, finances, and physical creation (Gen. 1:27-28; Ps. 8:6-8).
  10. **Eager to learn**—The commissioned pastor is a lifelong learner, ever studying God's Word and world (Ps. 19) and demonstrates that she/he has been and is currently being mentored.

### *Biblical Knowledge*

The commissioned pastor has a working knowledge of the Bible in her/his native language, and

1. is able to identify Scripture's main themes (covenant, kingdom of God, *missio Dei*, etc.) and to locate their place in the redemptive history that is centered in Christ;
2. has command of the divisions of Scripture (law, prophets, gospels, epistles, etc.), the historical and literary contexts of each biblical book, and basic hermeneutical principles required to interpret them;
3. is able to demonstrate knowledge of key Scripture passages, and to apply them appropriately to life and ministry.

Based on the above, the commissioned pastor is able to prepare and preach/teach meaningful and motivational messages/lessons that are true to Scripture. The commissioned pastor is able to communicate clearly the gospel to unbelievers and believers.

### *Theological Knowledge*

1. The commissioned pastor has knowledge of doctrinal standards and systematic theology at the level of Berkhof's *Manual of Christian Doctrine*. This would include knowledge of Reformed systematic theology, the ecumenical creeds, and the three confessional standards of the Christian Reformed Church. Furthermore, the commissioned pastor is able to differentiate and defend the Reformed faith biblically from other systems of thought, both Christian and non-Christian. She/he is able to reflect from a biblical perspective on the cultures, circumstances, and events of everyday life and ministry.
2. The commissioned pastor has a basic knowledge of church history (including Christian Reformed Church history and culture) and is able to apply its lessons to present reality and ministry.

### *Skill—Practice of Ministry*

Commissioned pastors give evidence of ministry skills. The skills necessary for ministry are many, and not all commissioned pastors possess them in the same measure. Someone in a ministry position will be expected to demonstrate skills in relation to the particularity of her/his position. Commissioned pastors, whether in specialized ministry within an organized congregation or in new church development, use skills to lead the church of Jesus Christ to fulfill the New Testament purposes of outreach, worship, fellowship, discipleship, and service. Some necessary ministry skills are

1. **Leadership and administration**—The commissioned pastor is able to help people and the church move from where they are to where God wants them to be. To do this, commissioned pastors possess such skills as casting vision; creating ownership; creating functional, organizational systems; resolving conflict; developing gift-based ministries; planning ministry; developing and mentoring leaders; and managing time, money, and people (according to principles of CRC polity).
2. **Outreach**—The commissioned pastor is able personally to share (witness); to defend (apologetics) the faith; and to lead the church in reaching out to the lost, in receiving them, and in developing new churches.
3. **Worship**—The commissioned pastor is able to prepare and deliver messages/teach lessons (homiletics), administer the sacraments, and lead in worship and prayer.
4. **Pastoral Care**—The commissioned pastor possesses relational skills that enable her/him to provide personally and through the church (corporately) pastoral care, visitation, small groups, youth ministry, spiritual counsel, and conduct of weddings and funerals.

5. **Fellowship**—The commissioned pastor is able to foster a nurturing Christian community.
6. **Discipleship**—The commissioned pastor is able to raise up, teach, and nurture disciple-making disciples.
7. **Service**—The commissioned pastor is able to respond to personal and community needs by mobilizing the church for ministry.
8. **Specialized**—The commissioned pastor has any necessary skills specific to her/his particular calling within the church.

(See *Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 619; *Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 373-75)  
(Amended *Acts of Synod 2009*, pp. 583-84)

## **B. Learning plans**

A person preparing to be ordained as a commissioned pastor should engage a learning plan consistent with the approved job description. All learning plans originate at the classis level, with significant planning done by the person involved as well as the classis team.

### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee regarding learning plans<sup>17</sup>**

- Article 23-a includes an extended description of ministry standards that classes can use in judging readiness for ministry as an ordained commissioned pastor. These standard qualifications (presented in section V, A of this handbook) can surely guide the preparation phase for anyone contemplating this ordination.
- Previous study reports of synod have referred to a “principle of proportionality” relative to the preparation and readiness for commissioned pastor ordination. A potential commissioned pastor should demonstrate a given area of knowledge and skill in proportion to the degree that such knowledge and skill are part of the approved job description.
- The Candidacy Committee has created a list of training programs and ministries aimed at potential commissioned pastors. The list can be found on the Candidacy Forms and Resources page of the denominational website ([crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources](http://crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources)). There is opportunity to add to this list, and it has been prepared in the hope that it might be of service to churches, classes, and potential commissioned pastors as they contemplate learning plans.
- Classes have often proceeded too quickly toward an examination for ordination.<sup>18</sup> It is much wiser for a classis to prescribe a series of steps by which a potential commissioned pastor meets members and functionaries of the classis a few different times before a scheduled exam.

## **Learning plans for commissioned pastors who will serve in solo or lead positions**

Commissioned pastors may serve in a solo or lead position in an emerging church or, in some specific scenarios (see section IV, I for guidelines), in an organized church.

One particular concern of the denomination regarding learning plans and the preparation of those seeking ordination to the office of commissioned pastor is that any person serving in a lead role (senior or solo pastor) in a congregation identified with the CRCNA is going to in some way represent the CRCNA. Note, then, the following synodical statements:

Before a person who will serve as the solo pastor of an emerging or an organized church is examined for a position as a commissioned pastor, that person, in cooperation with classis, shall develop and complete a contextualized learning plan, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee. Ordinarily the learning plan would include an introduction to the CRC Church Order, CRC history, CRC ministry, CRC creeds and confessions, Reformed hermeneutics, and an introduction to the discipline and art of preaching.<sup>19</sup>

*Grounds:*

- a. This ensures that those who provide primary spiritual leadership in CRC congregations have been adequately trained in the basic denominational information that the church expects of its primary spiritual leaders.
- b. This enables a classis to have flexibility in the training mechanisms it uses for commissioned pastors, as a given learning plan can include many elements and learning experiences.
- c. This balances local flexibility and contextual sensitivity with a denominational voice via the Candidacy Committee, which is advantageous for consistency in denominational awareness among leaders in the CRC.

*(Acts of Synod 2013, p. 557)*

In a number of cases, however, classes proceeded with an examination for a commissioned pastor serving in a solo pastor role without consulting the Candidacy Committee.<sup>20</sup> The Candidacy Committee observed in 2017 that “this specific issue is one in which the denomination, its ministry, and its reputation are well served by consistent practice. It is in the interest of both the denomination and the local church to ensure that commissioned pastors charged with primary leadership at the local level are able to represent and support the denomination’s values” (*Agenda for Synod 2017*, p. 324).

The Candidacy Committee pondered this matter and proposed the following guideline, approved by synod: “At some point prior to any examination for ordination of a commissioned pastor being considered for

a solo pastor position in an emerging or organized church, the classis must ascertain that a learning plan has been approved by the classis and agreed to by the Candidacy Committee, and synodical deputies must affirm through a written report that such approvals have taken place” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 689).

Note also that the nature of the role of synodical deputies in this process is limited.<sup>21</sup> A classis acts only to affirm that they have evidence that a learning plan has been formed and carried out in consultation with the Candidacy Committee. The synodical deputies concur only that such an action has taken place. It is conceivable, and likely, that such concurrence could be done via email and that the physical presence of the deputies at the classis meeting is not required. The task of synodical deputy concurrence with the classis judgment of fitness for ministry is not required because commissioned pastors, as locally ordained servants, serve under the authority of the local classis, not the denomination.

Material for developing a learning plan for a commissioned pastor is available from the Candidacy Committee office (email: [candidacy@crcna.org](mailto:candidacy@crcna.org)) and can be found on the Candidacy Forms and Resources page of the denominational website.

### **C. Classis approval relative to timing**

In our use of Article 23 two actions are required by classis: (1) approval of the position and (2) examination and approval of a person to fill the position. Should these actions require two separate meetings? The following advice aims to clarify the two-step process.

#### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee<sup>22</sup>**

- It may indeed be wise in some cases for a classis to be sure that the matter of a job description be dealt with in a meeting distinct from a meeting in which a potential commissioned pastor filling the proposed position is examined.
- It is surely wise for any person who has been called to a position as a commissioned pastor to recognize the tentative nature of the call. The call is conditional upon successful examination, as is also the case for candidates for the office of minister of the Word. The call is also conditional upon the approval by classis of the job description.
- Frequently the proposed job description is intimately tied to an individual. In such cases the approval process can unavoidably get personal and potentially awkward.
- Circumstances may sometimes require that both approvals occur at the same classis meeting. Sequentially, of course, consideration of the issue of a position approval would precede the examination of a potential person to fill a position. It may in fact show wisdom on the part of classis and its leadership to schedule both the approval of the position and the examination of the potential pastor at the same meeting. There

are many cases in which classes meet only twice a year, so requiring extended approval time could impede ministry. Funding and approval processes may require more swift action than could be taken over the course of two meetings of classis.

- It is vital to the *highly versatile* nature of the office of commissioned pastor (see the SMCC report to Synod 2007) that the leadership of each classis wrestle with these issues associated with timing, the conditional nature of calls, and the ways best to serve ministry opportunities with responsive nimbleness.
- It also seems wise for the appropriate classis team and the mentor involved in a given case to adequately prepare a person who will be examined by classis for the office of commissioned pastor. Preparation includes completion of an appropriate and agreed upon learning plan. (Remember that in the case of commissioned pastors serving as solo pastors this plan must be created in consultation with the Candidacy Committee.) It is also a gift to provide adequate coaching of a potential commissioned pastor so as to handle with grace the dynamics of a classis meeting and examination.

#### **D. Examination protocol**

##### **General guidelines**

The Synod of the CRC has adopted guidelines for the examination of persons being ordained to the office of commissioned pastor. A general guideline adopted in coordination with the standards noted in section IV, C above states, "The classis shall ensure that the candidate meets the standards of character, knowledge, and skill adopted by Synod 2000" (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, p. 391). It is important to note that these standards were adopted with the presumption that what has been called "the principle of proportionality" would be applied (see *Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 376, 443). In other words, a potential commissioned pastor should demonstrate ministry skill "in proportion to" what the proposed and approved job description would require.

##### **Gathering documents**

Synod has also specified a set of documents that should be presented prior to any examination. These documents were listed in the Church Order Supplement and are now noted in this handbook as follows:

Presentation of the following documents

- a. A council recommendation from the church in which the appointee holds membership
- b. Evidence (diplomas, transcripts, etc.) of formal general education and of specialized training in the ministry area to which the candidate is being called
- c. A copy of the letter of appointment from the church that is requesting ordination of the candidate as commissioned pastor
- d. A copy of the candidate's letter of acceptance

This list of required documents does not need to be seen as exhaustive from a classis point of view. A given classis is free to broaden their list of required documents, as the context of the classis and of a given ministry might require. The Candidacy Forms and Resources page on the denominational website ([crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources](http://crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources)) includes some tools that a classis may want to consider as templates in the process of preparing a person for an examination as a commissioned pastor.

### **Pre-examination requirements**

- Criminal background check
- Psychological evaluation (required for those being examined for positions involving solo or senior leadership and recommended for all commissioned pastors)<sup>23</sup>
- Learning plan

### **Exam protocol**

Synod has specified that the following elements shall also be included in the classical examination:

Where applicable, presentation of a sermon

- a. In an official worship service, preferably on the Sunday preceding the meeting of classis and in the church to which the candidate for ordination has been called, the commissioned pastor shall preach a sermon on a text assigned by classis. Two members of classis shall be present to serve as sermon critics.
- b. A copy of the sermon shall be provided to the classical delegates. In the presence of the commissioned pastor, the sermon critics shall evaluate the sermon and the commissioned pastor's manner of conducting the entire worship service.

Examination in the following areas

- a. Knowledge of Scripture
- b. Knowledge of Reformed doctrine
- c. Knowledge of the standards of the church and the Church Order
- d. Practical matters regarding Christian testimony, walk of life, relationships with others, love for the church, approach to ministry, and promotion of Christ's kingdom

*Some additional observations*

- By rule of synod the concurrence of synodical deputies is not required for the examination of a candidate for the office of commissioned pastor.
- There is greater flexibility for a classis in the examination for the office of commissioned pastor than there is in the examination for the office of minister of the Word (see the careful protocol for those examinations as articulated in Church Order Article 10). Classes are

free to contextualize their examinations for commissioned pastor relative to the number of questioners, the time set aside, the timing of the exam in relation to the rest of the process for ordination, etc.

- See section V, A, 3 in this handbook for further thoughts about the practice of examining commissioned pastors.

#### **E. Guidance for video examination<sup>24</sup>**

The following notes are intended to offer some guidelines for use by classes in examinations of commissioned pastors according to Church Order Articles 23-24. These notes may also provide assistance as classes consider other uses of video technology.

The potential uses of video-conferencing technology cover a broad range:

- a. Sermon reviewers may observe a video of a preached sermon rather than being present in person.
- b. A pre-examination video conference may be conducted with a small team or even one appointed person interviewing the person who will be examined, and then a recording of the video could be distributed to classis delegates before the examination meeting. This process could allow the classis meeting examination to be more focused and perhaps more efficient.
- c. A video-conference option may be used for an examinee, a delegate, and/or a synodical deputy who is not present at the classis meeting (due to extreme distance or prohibitive cost of traveling to the classis meeting).
- d. A totally “virtual” meeting could be conducted by video conferencing, with all delegates participating from their individual computers/devices.

Other uses are likely possible and will be discovered as the use of technology in our daily lives continues to progress.

#### **Additional suggestions**

- a. Meeting in person is always preferable to meeting via video conference—the use of video conferencing, at least for the near future, should be the exception rather than the norm. Especially in the setting of examinations and interviews, the nuances of a person’s expression and voice are much stronger in face-to-face settings, and both the person being examined and the other persons present will be best served with an in-person atmosphere. Video meetings are more useful once a relationship has been established.
- b. Synodical deputies have been advised in the past that their physical presence is highly recommended where classis deliberation needs to occur. Yet there are certainly cases where routine matters such as approving a clearly presented job description, or a noncontroversial



release of a pastor, or the retirement of a pastor can be done via video conference, or conference call, or email.

- c. Where distance and cost factors are prohibitive, and where a classis is of a unified mind to experiment, video conferencing may be a useful tool, especially in the first few examples described above. Such experimenting may indeed result in experiencing a learning curve that may bless the rest of the denomination.
- d. Any successful experiment and use of video-conference technology will depend on the following:
  - having adequate and experienced technical support available at the time of the classis meeting
  - ascertaining beforehand that the connections, bandwidth, and equipment will be suitable in advance of the meeting (online participants will also need to test their equipment ahead of time to ensure that the technology parameters will be adequate)
  - anticipating and planning for the technical ability to facilitate questions from the assembly, and for managing any needed periods of executive session
  - assigning the technical functions (managing connections, chat questions, etc.) to someone at the meeting who does not already have responsibility for chairing or recording the minutes of the meeting

It should be noted that our CRCNA IT staff have gathered suggestions for well-functioning video-conference meetings and have placed them in a Network article: “Top 6 Tips for Improving Video Conferencing” (see [network.crcna.org/church-communications/top-6-tips-improving-video-conferencing](https://network.crcna.org/church-communications/top-6-tips-improving-video-conferencing))

## **VI. Guidance regarding the Office of Commissioned Pastor**

### **A. Compensation and benefits**

#### **Proper support for commissioned pastors**

Concerns have been raised that commissioned pastors are underpaid and undervalued. The same concerns have been raised for ministers of the Word. Synod has repeatedly exhorted the churches to adequately pay their pastors. The official letter of call for a minister of the Word speaks of churches offering salary to pastors, “knowing that laborers are worthy of their hire, to encourage you in the discharge of your duties and to free you from material needs while you are ministering God’s Word to us.” Synod 2024 defined proper support of commissioned pastors in this way (Church Order Supplement, Art. 23-d):

Proper support of a commissioned pastor is to include as appropriate an adequate salary, medical insurance, disability insurance, a housing provision, payment to an appropriate pension

or retirement plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items.

To “attend to” proper support does not imply that the calling church is responsible to provide all of these items of support. Rather, the calling church is responsible to ensure that the commissioned pastor has a plan that addresses these items. In many traditional ministries the local church itself accepts these responsibilities in order to facilitate full-time or part-time ministry service. In other settings—such as church planting, various forms of chaplaincy, bivocational arrangements, multipoint ministries, and so on—the financial plan will include income and benefits provided by a variety of potential sources. The calling church’s support of the financial plan should be carefully reviewed at the time classis approves the commissioned pastor’s position. This includes a call to bivocational ministry or when a pastor and church decide to change their financial arrangement.

Synod also included these following guidelines (Supplement, Art. 23-d):

*Guidelines for Churches in Conversations with Pastors about “Proper Support”*

1. The value of the parsonage provided by the congregation may be used for part or all of the compensation package.
2. The nature and amount of time of the task(s) shall be mutually discerned by the commissioned pastor(s) and the supervising council. The support plan, including the financial plan, shall be specified in writing, approved by classis along with the position description, and normally reviewed annually by the supervising council. The average amount of time expended upon the total of the ministerial and nonministerial tasks shall not normally exceed sixty hours per week.
3. The supervising council shall annually attend to nonfinancial support of commissioned pastors, including but not limited to physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

### **Tax benefits**

Our denominational office, through the chief administrative officer, is available to consult with and give guidance to any ministry that wants to know how best to make use of the tax benefits that pertain to their commissioned pastor.

### **B. Retirement and pension issues<sup>25</sup>**

In current practice, ministers of the Word as well as commissioned pastors need to negotiate both insurance and retirement plans with their congregations and sponsoring ministries. In this sense, equity in our policies and regulations in this area between persons ordained as commissioned pastors and as ministers of the Word already exists.

While the denomination has a defined-benefit retirement plan (pension plan) for ministers of the Word, local congregations and ministries are encouraged to create a pension plan for those ordained as commissioned pastors (and any nonordained staff working 20 or more hours per week). A number of options are available for commissioned pastors and the ministries that support them. In the United States these include IRA (Individual Retirement Account) plans and 403b plans. In Canada these include RRSPs (Registered Retirement Savings Plans). Such plans (in comparison to the defined-benefit plan in place for ministers of the Word) are defined-contribution plans, and these plans are actually preferred by many for the advantages they offer participants.

A suggested contribution to such a plan is 10 percent of the offered salary and housing allowance, within limits allowed by law. For the sake of reference it can be noted that the Reformed Church in America recommendation to churches is 11 percent, and in the CRC denomination staff who are not ordained ministers of the Word can contribute 6 percent or more of salary within legal limits and will receive up to a 4 percent match for a total of 10 percent or more.

Commissioned pastors and representatives of the ministries that support them are welcome to contact the CRCNA pension and employee benefits office for advice and resources on commissioned pastor retirement planning.

### **C. Accountability and supervision of commissioned pastors**

Synod has declared that the classis shall ensure that commissioned pastors, especially those working at some distance from their calling congregations, will have proper supervision and support for their ministry.<sup>26</sup> Whenever an ordained pastor's work brings them outside the bounds of a local congregational ministry, there are challenges in supervision that need to be addressed.

#### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee<sup>27</sup>**

- Church Order Article 13 addresses this matter for ministers of the Word who serve in a ministry other than their calling church. A distinction in roles is called for wherein the local council supervises "doctrine and life" and the other ministries, institutions, and/or agencies involved supervise the ministry duties and performance. This arrangement also implies ongoing communication as needed between the council of the calling church and the supervising agencies that may be involved. We suggest that this same principle provides adequate guidance for church councils and classes as they face the challenges implicit in supervising commissioned pastors who work beyond the bounds of their calling church.
- It seems wise, then, that a job description should clearly delineate who the appropriate ministries and supervisors are in the case of a

commissioned pastor role taking place outside the bounds of a calling church.<sup>28</sup> For supervision of doctrine and life it may be helpful to specify in a letter of mutual covenant the frequency and nature of expected reports and visits to the calling church. Ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors who serve outside the bounds of the local church, along with their calling churches, will be enabled to enjoy a meaningful relationship through such explicit statements of understanding. The Office of Chaplaincy and Care Ministry has a template for such a letter, called a “Covenant of Joint Supervision,” and it is available on their website ([crcna.org/chaplaincy](http://crcna.org/chaplaincy)).

#### **D. Service of commissioned pastors at synod and on denominational boards, committees, and task forces**

A commissioned pastor serving as a solo pastor in an organized congregation may be delegated by a classis to synod as a ministerial delegate. In addition, all other commissioned pastors may be delegated to synod as elder delegates. Note the following statements in Church Order Supplement, Article 45, b, 2-3:

A commissioned pastor serving as a solo pastor of an organized congregation may be sent as a ministerial delegate to synod and nominated to serve in other denominational functions where a person must normally be a minister of the Word (see *Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 665).

Commissioned pastors serving in emerging churches and associate staff positions may be delegated as elder delegates to synod and nominated to serve in other denominational functions where a person must normally be an elder<sup>29</sup> (see *Acts of Synod 2013*, pp. 559-60).

Thus, ministry leaders ordained as commissioned pastors are offered the full range of opportunity to serve the broader church as delegates to synod or as appointees to a denominational board or committee. Where the appointment is dependent on a designation as a “minister delegate,” only a commissioned pastor serving as a solo pastor in an organized congregation would be eligible. In appointments where an “elder designation” is required, or no designation is required, all other commissioned pastors would be eligible.

#### **E. Moving and transitions**

When commissioned pastors accept another call, their ordination shall require the approval of the classis to which their calling church belongs, to which the commissioned pastors shall have presented good ecclesiastical testimonies of doctrine and life given to them by their former council and classis.<sup>30</sup>

##### **1. Do commissioned pastors who move need to be reexamined?<sup>31</sup>**

Those ordained in the office of minister of the Word may move throughout the denomination without being reexamined, but

commissioned pastors require a new examination each time they take a new position. A new congregation, ministry, or classis calling a commissioned pastor from another congregation, ministry, or classis is entitled to such a reexamination, not only as a matter of Church Order regulation but also as a matter of principle. By definition, a commissioned pastor is ordained to, and judged to be qualified for, a particular ministry. A different church and classis must thoroughly discern whether a commissioned pastor is qualified to serve in a different congregation and likely a different role. A different congregation and classis contemplating the call of a commissioned pastor is only being responsible in making a fresh assessment of a commissioned pastor's qualifications *for this particular congregation and position*.

However, there is room for classis discretion in this area. Note this statement that was formerly included in the Church Order Supplement to Article 23-a (italics in first sentence added for emphasis):<sup>32</sup>

Before examining a person for the office of commissioned pastor *or granting permission to install a previously ordained commissioned pastor in a new position*, the classis, with the concurring advice of synodical deputies, will determine whether or not the position to which the person is being called fits the guidelines adopted by Synod 2001. In addition, the candidates for the office of commissioned pastor must have proven ability to function in the ministry to which they are being called.

In practice, many classes have accepted as sufficient the examination of a "previously ordained commissioned pastor." In such cases the reputation of that person, the similarity of the ministry positions, and/or the recommendation of the previous ministry and classis have been judged by the classis as strong enough to merit no further local examination. Considering the reality that ordination in this office does not transfer, "the person can bring testimonies, but ordination is new with the commissioning to each position" (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 270).<sup>33</sup>

The reexamination requirement, when balanced with the freedom to forgo the examination under certain circumstances, gives congregations and classes the proper balance of due diligence and flexibility as they contemplate calling a commissioned pastor from another ministry setting.

#### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee<sup>34</sup>**

- Practically speaking, the first official step in any change to a new assignment is to ascertain that the relevant job description is approved. If it has not been approved previously, such approval requires an action of classis with the concurrence of the synodical deputies.
- Then, judging on the similarity of the previous service of the potential commissioned pastor and the new proposed service, and judging on the effectiveness of the potential commissioned pastor in their previous ministry, the classis leadership could propose that classis

offer permission to move toward ordination based on the examination conducted for the previous service.

- A letter of recommendation from a previous ministry and from a previous classis of service is required and should serve usefully for a commissioned pastor to present to a classis leadership team seeking to discern the nature and need of a “reexamination” for a new position in the same or in a different classis.
- Keep in mind that the “default practice” is that of examining a person for each commissioned pastor assignment.
- Recognize the option that a briefer examination, more akin to an interview, may be a useful substitute to a full examination. This would enable the classis to get to know the new commissioned pastor and give occasion to offer prayer for the person and the ministry involved. Although this option is not prescribed in the Church Order for either a commissioned pastor or a minister of the Word who is new to a classis, it might be a beneficial practice at classis for both.

## **2. Is it possible to move a commissioned pastor’s credentials from one calling church to another?**

There are cases in which a commissioned pastor who is serving in a ministry outside of a local church may desire to move his/her membership to another church, whose council would then supervise the pastor’s doctrine and life.<sup>35</sup>

The protocol approved by synod mirrors the accepted practice for ministers of the Word who transfer their credentials from one congregation to another while remaining in their same ministry role (outside of a given congregation, in missions, chaplaincy, or some approved agency work). This practice requires statements of agreement from both the current calling church and the new calling church. It also presumes that the job description is not changing. Finally, the transfer is noted in the minutes of whichever classes are involved (for appropriate recordkeeping, awareness, and accountability).

### **Protocol for transferring credentials of a commissioned pastor from one calling church to another<sup>36</sup>**

1. A commissioned pastor who serves in an approved ministry not lodged in a local church may request transfer of their church membership and transfer of their call from one congregation to another.
2. Both the “sending church” and the “receiving church” must agree to the transfer with the understanding that the receiving church agrees to extend such a call and take over the supervision of the doctrine and life of the commissioned pastor.
3. The call must be approved by the classis and duly noted as part of the history of the approval of the related job description.

4. The job description must remain unchanged, since alteration of the job description would require the approval of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies.
5. If the “receiving church” is in a classis other than that of the “sending church,” the “receiving church” classis must approve the transfer and job description, with the concurrence of the synodical deputies, and the receiving classis will have the option of conducting an interview or examination of the commissioned pastor.

### **3. In what ways can our process encourage and support commissioned pastors as they face transitions in ministry?**

Related to the previous item is the challenge of offering appropriate support to commissioned pastors as they face life transitions. In some cases, transitions occur as a person moves from one ordained position to another. In other cases, the transition involves a movement out of ordained ministry or a potential return to ordained ministry after a period of time away from ordained ministry.

The Church Order gives clear, and sometimes complex, processes for ministers of the Word in transition (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 318-28). The general principle regarding ordained service is that ordination is tied to ministry rather than to a person. In this regard, an active ordained minister of the Word who is not eligible for retirement and who exits an assigned ministry is given a period of two years to enter another approved ministry assignment (Church Order Article 17-c). That period may be extended on a yearly basis for reasons that are weighty in the judgment of classis with the concurrence of synodical deputies. Ministers of the Word who leave ordained ministry and enter a vocation that is judged to be nonministerial are expected to be released from office within one year of that judgment (Church Order Article 14-d). Any former minister of the Word may be eligible to reenter ordained service with the approval of the classis that approved the release from office (Church Order Article 14-e).

With respect to the sense of calling and the meaning of ordination, the assumptions about ordination for commissioned pastors are similar to those for ministers of the Word; however, when a ministry assignment concludes for a commissioned pastor, there is no specified “period of grace” built into the process. Rather than waiting one or two years, or more, to declare a person as no longer ordained, the expectation is that when a commissioned pastor leaves a ministry assignment, they are no longer considered to be ordained.

There can be, however, an inherent period of grace in the process even for commissioned pastors. The ordination status of a commissioned pastor may not be officially considered as concluded until it is reported to classis and recognized as such. In consideration of this reality, a classis has the option of offering a reasonable period of time, depending on the circumstances, in which a transitioning commissioned pastor can facilitate

a transition to either a new ministry or a nonministerial vocational assignment.<sup>37</sup>

### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee**

- The Church Order articles on transitions for ministers of the Word offer some helpful principles for grace-filled treatment of commissioned pastors who are in transition (Church Order Articles 14 and 17).
- The report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2016 reflects on various options that a classis and church council can consider as they deal with individual cases of transition (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 268-71).
- It is extremely important for the proper maintenance of records by the classis clerks, and by the synodical office, that classes note in their minutes, with clarity, any action taken regarding a transition of a commissioned pastor. The official transition cannot be recognized until classis declares it to have happened, and delinquency in reporting transitions can create numerous problems.
- Because the offices of minister of the Word and commissioned pastor differ from one another with regard to “automatic portability” (since a minister of the Word is ordained for ministry denomination-wide, and a commissioned pastor is ordained only for a specific ministry task), it is wise for the classis to be deliberative and discerning in the process of acknowledging the transition of a commissioned pastor. Approval of the new ministry position, as well as a thoughtful practice for a contextualized examination for the new position, needs to be taken into account.<sup>38</sup>

### **F. Termination of positions and personnel**

A painful part of church life for a commissioned pastor, for a ministry, and for a classis is any occasion in which a ministry position is eliminated or when a person serving in a ministry position is asked to leave. This is an area in our practice of commissioned pastor ordination where pastoral sensitivity and spiritual wisdom are needed. Each case will have different dynamics, and the relevant supervising bodies and classis leaders need to be in open communication in order to serve the church well.

Although termination can be voluntary or involuntary, the sad reality is that there have been cases in which a commissioned pastor has not been treated fairly in the conclusion of ministry service. Especially when the ministry service is at a local church, our corporate covenants require that we confer together to be sure that the pastor has been treated fairly when terminated. We are all well served by the reminder that, since commissioned pastors are ordained to office, they may not be simply dismissed as at-will employees. People serving in ordained ministry positions, whether ordained as a minister of the Word or as a



commissioned pastor, deserve respect and just action regarding matters pertaining to their continuing service. At stake are the morale of our ordained pastors and also the reputation of the church as an agency of justice and mercy.<sup>39</sup>

The protocol used in Church Order Article 17 for ministers of the Word offers some helpful principles for determining behavior that honors the ministry, the departing commissioned pastor, and the Lord. Because each situation in the ministry setting of a commissioned pastor is unique (i.e., the length of service, whether the person serves part-time or full-time or is a volunteer, etc.) and because the office of commissioned pastor is still evolving, a more precise protocol in this area has not been formed and, indeed, may not be needed. Classes, rather, are called to bear in mind the learned wisdom of Article 17 and to discern and decide in each circumstance what factors should come into play as they concur with the conclusion or dismissal of the service of a commissioned pastor.

### **Synodical guidelines regarding the termination of commissioned pastors<sup>40</sup>**

1. "A calling church that terminates the service of a person in an approved commissioned pastor position must seek the concurrence of the classis in which approval was given."<sup>41</sup> The ground given for this statement is as follows: "This provision is consistent with the frequent practice in our polity of the ecclesiastical body's involvement in the beginning and ending of a ministry position or a person's service in that position" (*Acts of Synod 2009*, pp. 583-84). The intent is to create a conversation within the classis (the body that approved the person in the position) that will ensure that appropriate care and respect are being shown by both parties (a ministry and a commissioned pastor) as a relationship is concluded.
2. Classes are instructed to make a determination of the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. Note the following comment in Church Order Supplement, Article 24-d:

Synod has offered, on various occasions, guidelines regarding the conclusion of an approved commissioned pastor position, the resignation of a commissioned pastor, and the release of a commissioned pastor. Synod also instructs classes to make an appropriate declaration reflecting the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. These guidelines and options regarding status are the same as those for minister of the Word and can be found in Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2 or in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

The intent here is that a public record is created with regard to the service of all commissioned pastors. When they conclude service, whether the reasons are positive or negative, the church will be well served by being able to know the general disposition of classis toward that service. Commissioned pastors will also be well served by such a

- public record. For ministers of the Word who conclude service before retirement, there are four categories of designation: *honorably released*, *released*, *dismissed*, and *in the status of one deposed* (see Church Order Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2). Synod suggested that classes use and note in their minutes one of these designations each time a commissioned pastor concludes service before retirement (see also section IV, L of this handbook).
3. “A commissioned pastor who is released from a calling church may, upon the request of the commissioned pastor or the calling church, and with the approval of the classis, be assisted by the classis with a system of evaluation and assistance analogous to that described in Church Order Article 17 for ministers of the Word.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Helpful advice from the Candidacy Committee<sup>43</sup>**

- It is important to recognize the potential damage that could be done to the spirit of a commissioned pastor who is told that after leaving a ministry position they are no longer ordained. Though this should not come as a surprise, it may well be experienced as such. Such cases require much gentleness, and we urge that they be treated tenderly.
- It is also important to recognize the commitment we have made to tie ordination to a ministry calling, making it rather hard to comprehend the situation of a commissioned pastor without an active call.
- It is possible for classis leaders to pastorally provide time by declaring that the official conclusion of the ministry does not occur until classis has declared it concluded. Thus, there can be a period of adjustment between the action of leaving a ministry and classis’ approving the conclusion of that ministry assignment. This is in keeping with the statement “A calling church that terminates the service of a person in an approved commissioned pastor position must seek the concurrence of the classis in which approval was given.”
- Particularly for a person in a chaplaincy position as commissioned pastor, it may happen that the position is terminated but the commissioned pastor may actively search for and be able to find a new chaplaincy position. In such a case the commissioned pastor in question, the calling church, and the classis leaders need to be in conversation regarding whether the original call is still in place, adjusted, or terminated. Such a process would not be concluded until completion is affirmed by classis. The ordination of the commissioned pastor could thus be assumed to remain in effect until both the church and the classis rule it otherwise.
- Any commissioned pastor who leaves a ministry assignment and who intends to begin another ministry assignment should be encouraged to express their intentions and desires to the classis leadership. The classis leaders may then decide to postpone their declaration of a “ministry conclusion” for an agreed-upon period of time while the

commissioned pastor involved searches for a new ministry assignment. Should this raise issues regarding title or compensation during a period of transition, we trust that such matters would be handled by the classis.

- Our Church Order specifies a protocol to be followed when a minister of the Word is released from a ministry assignment. This protocol is described in Church Order Supplement, Article 17-a, and it involves both the local ministry leaders and the classis in a conversation and journey that seeks to lead toward honorable treatment of a released minister of the Word as well as healing for the congregation. The Candidacy Committee views this protocol as containing elements that can wisely guide a commissioned pastor's release from service.
- Certainly the circumstances in each case will vary, including the needs of the commissioned pastor, the responsibilities that were given to the commissioned pastor, the length of service, and other factors. For example, a full-time ministry position is likely more appropriately offered a severance package than is a part-time position. These issues need to be weighed as severance is discussed, and as readiness to recommend for future ministry is decided upon. A well-worded note in the minutes of classis describing the reality of concluded service and any appropriately public provisions will serve both the church and the commissioned pastor. This will also provide helpful documentation for denominational records and for potential future ministry.
- In all cases of "termination" (conclusion) of a commissioned pastor's service it is assumed that classis will take note of the change in status through its official minutes.

## **G. Discipline of commissioned pastors**

The Church Order contains the following instructions regarding the discipline of commissioned pastors (Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84, section e, 1-3):

1. "The suspension or deposition of a ... commissioned pastor shall be imposed by the council with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis."
2. "If the neighboring council fails to concur in the position of the council of the ... commissioned pastor involved, the latter council shall either alter its original judgment or present the case to classis."
3. "The deposition of a commissioned pastor shall not be effected without the approval of the classis in which the commissioned pastor was approved for ordination."<sup>44</sup>

## **H. Status of commissioned pastor emeritus<sup>45</sup>**

Church Order Article 24-e:

A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of classis, be given the title of *commissioned pastor emeritus*.

Church Order Supplement, Article 24-e:

A commissioned pastor emeritus may, upon the judgment of classis, retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry in ways consistent with their ordination prior to retirement. Supervision of a commissioned pastor emeritus shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation under the authority of the classis(es) involved.

It is appropriate to note here that when classis receives notice of the retirement of a commissioned pastor, the act of granting the title *commissioned pastor emeritus* need not be automatic. Surely a commissioned pastor who had not been authorized to preach or to administer sacraments would not be authorized to do so upon retirement. A judgment needs to be made by the classis and the calling church regarding what types of service are appropriate for a given individual in retirement, and that judgment will be influenced by the types of experience and the gifts the person possesses and is desirous of offering. The minutes of classis should reflect any case of a person being given the title *commissioned pastor emeritus* and also the nature of the authority given regarding official acts of ministry. All other commissioned pastors whose retirement is celebrated by classis should be noted in the minutes of classis.

## **VII. Tools Available for Administering the Office of Commissioned Pastor**

The Candidacy Committee website of the Christian Reformed Church in North America offers a variety of tools and resources related to the administration of the office of commissioned pastor. These include forms and instructions for the various routes to ordination (see [crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources](http://crcna.org/candidacy/forms-and-resources)).

Please contact the Candidacy office ([candidacy@crcna.org](mailto:candidacy@crcna.org)) if you need any help finding your way to these resources, or if you have any questions regarding the office of commissioned pastor.

## **VIII. Invitation to Share Resources and Concerns regarding the Office of Commissioned Pastor**

The Candidacy Committee is well aware that our use of the office of commissioned pastor is still evolving. Although by definition the office has a local focus and the responsibility for the office needs to remain localized, the Candidacy Committee is open to serving the CRC, its

congregations, and its classes as a resource center that can help gather and distribute ideas, practices, and concerns regarding this office. This handbook is one effort at performing that task. If you have any further questions or suggestions that may be of benefit to local congregations and classes, please contact the director of Candidacy so that your suggestions and concerns can be recorded and passed along to other ministries as appropriate.

**Contact:**

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> An overview of the development of the office of commissioned pastor and the use of this handbook:

The CRC denominational Candidacy Committee, in its 2007 report to synod, called upon the church to give the office of commissioned pastor “more use, more status, and more support.” The committee suggested this goal in the context of aiming to return to a more historical use of Church Order Article 7 entry into ordination as minister of the Word, and to use Church Order Article 23 as the route to ministry for persons who do not have the academic training required for ordination as a minister of the Word.

Over the subsequent decade a variety of issues were identified through various formal and informal conversations among leaders, councils, classes, the Candidacy Committee, and synod. A brief review of that discussion, especially at the formal level of synod, would include the following:

- a. In its report to Synod 2009 the Candidacy Committee suggested a variety of initiatives to support and honor persons serving as commissioned pastors, and a number of those initiatives have now been implemented. Many classes now formally acknowledge the retirement of commissioned pastors, and synod acknowledges them in its yearly meeting as classes report information to the Synodical Services office. The denomination’s official magazine, *The Banner*, often highlights the ministries served by commissioned pastors and includes commissioned pastors as contributors. Numerous leaders in the CRCNA are currently ordained as commissioned pastors.
- b. Synod 2015 received an overture from Classis Hamilton requesting clarification in a number of areas regarding the practice, process, and use of the office of commissioned pastor. Synod referred the overture to the Candidacy Committee, prompting key contributions to the discussion via Candidacy Committee reports to Synods 2016, 2017, and 2018. A number of the statements in this handbook reflect actions of synod in response to those Candidacy Committee reports.
- c. More specifically, Synod 2016 approved “observations for our practice” related to twelve areas of clarification regarding the use and practice of the office; Synod 2017 approved statements regarding a number of follow-up matters; and Synod 2019

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approved a reformatting of Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and their Supplements as well as an update to this handbook in connection with those changes.

<sup>2</sup> This statement from the report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2016 was among the “observations for our practice” that synod received and recommended to the churches and classes as helpful advice (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 263; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848).

<sup>3</sup> Numerous concerns have come up over the title of this office. *Ministry associate* seemed to some to be a “second class” designation. Synod 2012 addressed this experience of discouragement and approved the current title, *commissioned pastor*, noting the intent to “give encouragement and support to those serving in this office” (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 741-42). An overture from Classis Hamilton to Synod 2015 observed that some people have the impression that the change of the name of the office by Synod 2012 (from *ministry associate* to *commissioned pastor*) indicated a desire to keep commissioned pastors marginalized in some sense. In the words of the overture from Classis Hamilton, some believe the intent was to see the commissioned pastor role as a “mini-minister” or a “minister lite” position. Synod tasked the Candidacy Committee with responding to this overture through its report to Synod 2016 (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 262-275). The committee response is noted there. The grounds for the decision of Synod 2012 to change the title of this office were as follows: “a. Such a change [from *ministry associate* to *commissioned pastor*] will give encouragement and support to those serving in this office. b. Such a change will show a positive response to many who have expressed a feeling of marginalization because of the current title [ministry associate]” (*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 741-42). The committee also noted: “The grounds of synod’s action in 2012 go on to cite the statement of Synod 2007 regarding giving ‘more value, more use, and more support’ to those serving in the office.” Thus the report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2016 included a few “observations for our practice” that synod received and recommended to the churches and classes as helpful advice (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 263; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848). The first of those observations states, “It seems wise for each classis, each officebearer, and each ministry context to recognize these affirmations relative to the office of commissioned pastor.”

<sup>4</sup> Until 2019 the Church Order Supplement for Articles 23 and 24 was quite lengthy. Synod 2018 approved the concept of making greater use of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook as a vehicle to communicate the various detailed rules and practices regarding the office of commissioned pastor. Synod 2019 approved this measure, with the understanding that updates will be made as time continues, with appropriate related notations included in the handbook. This section of the handbook contains numerous statements previously included in the Church Order Supplement. Relevant additional statements received and approved by synod are included under many of the topic areas. The expectation of synod is that these statements remain esteemed and useful in the administration of the office of commissioned pastor. As is stated in Church Order Article 29, decisions of ecclesiastical bodies, including synod, shall be considered “settled and binding.”

<sup>5</sup> In the past, the Synodical Services office received inquiries seeking help in determining the elements of an acceptable job description. The Candidacy office also received occasional similar requests from classes and local ministries. Synod 2012 therefore added to the Church Order Supplement the following statement now appearing in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

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<sup>6</sup> The Candidacy Committee, in its report to Synod 2016, offered “observations for our practice” in connection with various concerns about job descriptions (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 265-66; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848). This advice was offered in the context of parallel guidance for approval of job descriptions for minister of the Word as presented in Church Order Articles 12-b, 12-c, 13-b, and 13-c.

<sup>7</sup> The CRC’s Chaplaincy and Care ministry was instrumental in the 2003 change of the office title from “evangelist” to “ministry associate.” Their concern was that the title of the office appropriately honor the unique ministry of the chaplain. Synod 2003 also approved the key statement that validates the work of chaplains ordained as commissioned pastors (see *Acts of Synod 2003*, p. 613); that statement now appears in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a.

<sup>8</sup> The office of commissioned pastor began in the CRCNA as a way to ordain persons who had not had the required academic training for ordination as a minister of the Word and were doing evangelistic work in church planting. The office soon expanded to cover a variety of potential ministry positions, as guided by the statement of Synod 2001 quoted in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a. The phenomenon of commissioned pastors serving as lead or solo pastors in organized (established) congregations has been noted numerous times by the Candidacy Committee, by synod, and by others. There have been some cases in the past few years in which an organized congregation has developed a close relationship with a current commissioned pastor or a current seminary student. The relationship between congregation and potential pastor has been so compelling that the congregation has sought ways to engage the person’s service before the person has become eligible for candidacy as a minister of the Word.

<sup>9</sup> Synod 2010 received an overture requesting that the phrase “reasonable period of transition” be quantified for clarity. The Candidacy Committee suggested, and synod agreed, that flexibility is a virtue in this matter and that the words should remain unchanged (see *Agenda for Synod 2011*, pp. 328-30; *Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 836). It is important to note, however, that these are exceptional situations and that ordinarily ministers of the Word are called to serve as pastors of organized congregations.

<sup>10</sup> Former Church Order Article 23-b

<sup>11</sup> Former Church Order Article 23-c

<sup>12</sup> Former Church Order Article 23-d

<sup>13</sup> Former Church Order Supplement, Article 23-d (see *Acts of Synod 2008*, p. 520)

<sup>14</sup> The Candidacy Committee, in its report to Synod 2017, proposed a new Church Order article that would allow the office of commissioned pastor to be used as a “bridge ordination” while a person completes the requirements for candidacy as a minister of the Word (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 322-23; *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 689). The proposed article was adopted by Synod 2018 (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 465) and now appears as Article 24-b of the Church Order.

<sup>15</sup> The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 273-74; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848) addressed the practice of established churches calling persons as commissioned pastors. The report offered the following “observations for our

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practice,” received by synod and recommended to churches and classes as helpful advice.

<sup>16</sup> Synod 2004 approved a document to guide classes in defining the qualifications of a person being considered for ordination as a commissioned pastor. The document was included in the Church Order Supplement for a number of years, and it remains here as a synodically endorsed description of the standards for pastoral ministry.

<sup>17</sup> These items of helpful advice were received from the Candidacy Committee by Synod 2016 (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 272-73).

<sup>18</sup> A consult meeting sponsored by the Candidacy Committee in fall 2011 resulted in this agreement that it is wiser for classes not to proceed too quickly toward ordination of a commissioned pastor but to prescribe a series of steps.

<sup>19</sup> The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 observed that the grounds of this approved motion indicate the growing regard that the church has for the office of commissioned pastor.

<sup>20</sup> The Candidacy Committee reported to Synod 2017 that this occurred in connection with the 2013 adjustment to the requirement for learning plans.

<sup>21</sup> The Candidacy Committee called synod’s attention to the limited nature of the role of synodical deputies in this matter of examination for a solo pastor position. The stated hope of synod and the Candidacy Committee is that this approach will mitigate concerns regarding denominational overreach while still ensuring that the interests of the denomination are served (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 318-28; *Acts of Synod 2017*, pp. 685, 688-90).

<sup>22</sup> The Classis Hamilton overture to Synod 2015 also reported a lack of clarity in how classis approves a commissioned pastor position and the person seeking ordination under Article 23. In our use of Article 23 two actions are required by classis (approval of the position, and examination and approval of a person to fill the position). Classis Hamilton’s overture suggested that a proper approval process should ordinarily involve two classis meetings in order to avoid an awkward situation in which a position is not approved but a candidate is standing ready to be examined to fill the position. Classis Hamilton went on to request in the overture “that synod clarify that a candidate cannot be called to a position that has not been approved by classis with the concurrence of the synodical deputies” (*Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 435). In offering advice, the Candidacy Committee observed that the Church Order is clear in the area of a two-step process of approval but is perhaps not clear in the way some persons would like. The Church Order Supplement at the time stated, “Before examining a person for the office of commissioned pastor or granting permission to install a previously ordained commissioned pastor in a new position, the classis, with the concurring advice of synodical deputies, will determine whether or not the position to which the person is being called fits the guidelines adopted by Synod 2001.” The two steps are clearly defined, although there is no reference to two meetings being required. The Candidacy Committee therefore offered to Synod 2016 the following “observations for our practice,” which synod received and recommended to the churches and classes as helpful advice (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 263-65; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848).



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<sup>23</sup> Synod 2018 approved that a criminal background check and a psychological evaluation be done for those who are examined for positions involving solo or senior leadership in a given ministry. This is in addition to the requirement that such individuals complete an approved learning plan for orientation in denominational matters (see *Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 465).

<sup>24</sup> Synod 2018 instructed the Candidacy Committee to provide guidelines for exams done by video (see *Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 488). The Candidacy Committee consulted classes that had already used video in conducting examinations. In one case, a classis had examined a candidate who was living in Korea. In another case a candidate who was in the military had been examined while on a base in Alaska. The Candidacy Committee also spoke to persons who had technological expertise.

<sup>25</sup> The following discussion draws from and expands on the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2009 (see *Agenda for Synod 2009*, pp. 218-19; *Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 583). Also regarding retirement plans, Synod 2018 received an overture from Classis Niagara seeking to establish a defined-contribution pension plan for commissioned pastors. While affirming the “intent and need to establish defined-contribution pension plans for commissioned pastors,” synod did not accede to the overture, citing the following grounds: (1) Centralized administration of multiemployer defined contribution plans require a level of uniformity and coordination not available within our denominational structure. (2) For churches that decide to provide such a plan, the denomination’s pension office has information and resources available to local congregations to assist in establishing individual plans. (3) Assistance in meeting the cost of establishing such plans is available through the Financial Shalom Project (see *Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 460).

<sup>26</sup> This statement was included in the Church Order Supplement to Article 23-a prior to 2019. Some issues of accountability, supervision, and even discipline concerning commissioned pastors have been dealt with by synod at various times (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 262-75; *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 848-49). Complication in supervision is faced in certain ministry assignments of ministers of the Word as well as in those of commissioned pastors.

<sup>27</sup> These observations by the Candidacy Committee were received and recommended by Synod 2016 as helpful advice.

<sup>28</sup> This point is stated rather explicitly in the 2012 addition to the Church Order Supplement to Article 23-a dealing with “elements of a good job description” (see section IV, A of this handbook).

<sup>29</sup> Synod 2013 made adjustments to Church Order Article 23-a, removing a reference to commissioned pastors as “elders” (*Acts of Synod 2013*, pp. 556-57). The same synod made clear that commissioned pastors may be delegated to synod and may be appointed to serve on denominational boards and committees, adding this statement as Church Order Supplement, Article 45, b, 3.

<sup>30</sup> This statement was in the former Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a.

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<sup>31</sup> The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2009 addressed concerns regarding the need for a new classical examination for commissioned pastors who move from classis to classis, and synod accepted this report (see *Agenda for Synod 2009*, p. 218; *Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 583).

<sup>32</sup> The statement here, formerly included in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, was part of the General Regulations preceding the material that now appears in section IV, A-D of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

<sup>33</sup> This matter came up again in 2015 through an overture from Classis Hamilton. The overture was referred to the Candidacy Committee, which responded via its report to Synod 2016 (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 262-75; *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 848-49). In their overture Classis Hamilton asked, “Under what circumstances should a commissioned pastor be reexamined in order to enter a different position under Article 23?” (*Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 436). The Candidacy Committee responded by observing that the Church Order does not allow for a “transfer” of ordination for a commissioned pastor. Ordination in each position is linked only to that position. Yet the committee report went on to observe that the Church Order Supplement suggested that a classis has some latitude in deciding whether or not to reexamine a commissioned pastor who has previously served in a different ministry.

<sup>34</sup> See *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 270-71.

<sup>35</sup> The Candidacy Committee reports to Synods 2016 and 2017 dealt with this issue, prompted by the helpful 2015 overture from Classis Hamilton. Classis Hamilton suggested a procedure for the transfer process, and the Candidacy Committee adapted that into a set of guidelines it presented to Synod 2017, which approved them for inclusion in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook. The Candidacy Committee observed that the cases in which such guidelines may be needed are rather rare but that with the evolving use of the office of commissioned pastor such cases may become more common.

<sup>36</sup> See *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 320-21; *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 688.

<sup>37</sup> These matters are discussed in detail in the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 (Appendix A, sections 6-8; *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 268-71). The Candidacy Committee did not believe it to be wise to add a new layer of Church Order direction in this matter; however, they suggested that Synod 2017 address these issues by approving for insertion in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook the following statements of guidance for churches and classes as they deal with persons who are ordained as commissioned pastors and are experiencing a transition of ministry assignment and vocation (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 321-22; *Acts of Synod 2017*, pp. 688-89).

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix A, section 8 of the Candidacy Committee report, *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 270-71.

<sup>39</sup> Synod 2017 looked at the issue of ways to provide fair treatment of and good practice in cases where a commissioned pastor is terminated. The report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2017 observed that the vulnerability of ordained commissioned pastors has been recognized by previous synods. Synod 2009 approved an addition to the Church Order Supplement (which in 2019 was transferred to this handbook). This

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statement of synod has proved to be helpful; however, the Candidacy Committee asserted that it is necessary to speak with greater strength and clarity regarding this matter.

<sup>40</sup> The issue of accountability in discipline came before Synod 2018 in a number of contexts. As it relates to commissioned pastors, two actions of Synod 2019 should be noted in response to concerns raised at Synod 2018 (see Section IV, F of this handbook; see also *Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 783).

<sup>41</sup> The report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2009 observed that our denominational regulations for ministers of the Word provide a detailed protocol for ending a relationship between a minister of the Word and a congregation (see Church Order Article 17). The report noted that as the office of commissioned pastor has developed, concerns have arisen that some degree of “protection” or “guidance” be given regarding a congregation that wishes to conclude (or dismiss) the service of an approved commissioned pastor, or regarding a commissioned pastor who wishes voluntarily to conclude service. Synod 2009 inserted this statement into the Church Order Supplement, and this statement is now included here in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook (see *Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 583-84).

<sup>42</sup> As Synod 2017 approved this statement, it noted the intention of the Candidacy Committee that decisions regarding this area of managing the office of commissioned pastor stay, as much as possible, within the authority of the classis. The statement is carefully worded to apply only to those who express a desire for such support and to those cases that the classis may judge would benefit from such review and support. The protocol of Church Order Article 17, with its supplemental material, is rather extensive and provides wise guidance that can serve as a template for the classis, should it wish to apply that material to a case involving the release of a commissioned pastor (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 319-20; *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 685).

<sup>43</sup> See *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 268-70.

<sup>44</sup> In Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84, a line was added in section e to clarify that the classis must be involved when a commissioned pastor is deposed (see *Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 783).

<sup>45</sup> In recent years synod has reviewed and considered the matter of ordination status for persons who retire from service as a commissioned pastor. The Candidacy Committee first formally mentioned this issue in its report to Synod 2016 (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 272, 274). Note the reflections in the report:

Under our current Church Order there is no provision of a “ministerial status” for a commissioned pastor who retires. Church Order Article 18 offers provision for “emeritus” status for ministers of the Word who retire, allowing them to continue performing official acts of ministry.

As we seek to place more value on the office of commissioned pastor and offer more support to those who serve in this office (remember the words of Synod 2007), we recognize that it is a worthy challenge to look for ways to honor and continue to make use of commissioned pastors who retire after having served

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well. Perhaps not all job descriptions or all persons serving in the office would appropriately lead toward some sort of “emeritus” status. Yet surely those who have served in a solo pastor role, and those who have served in a full-time capacity for a number of years would be appropriately honored in this way. The church could be blessed by their ability to continue as ordained pulpit supply, and those commissioned pastors would be blessed as they retained a pastoral identity.

At least two of our classes have taken the step of creating a category called *commissioned pastor emeritus*. In doing so, they confer this title on respected commissioned pastors in their retirement. The minutes of the classis record this status and indicate that the commissioned pastor has authority to do the official acts of ministry (preaching, administration of sacraments, officiating at weddings, etc.) as long as they are mentally and physically able. These classes are extending the intent of Church Order Article 18 to their treatment of commissioned pastors.

Although this practice is not currently in the Church Order, the Candidacy Committee judges that the practice of conferring *commissioned pastor emeritus* status on a retiring commissioned pastor is within the classical scope of authority and that a classis might well consider doing so. It may well be that the practice may increase and may result in an eventual overture to synod that more officially recognizes the practice.

Synod 2017 considered and approved a formal motion that would establish in our Church Order the practice of conferring on certain commissioned pastors the title *commissioned pastor emeritus* (see *Agenda for Synod 2017*, pp. 318-19, 326-27, and *Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 685). The motion was recommended for approval by Synod 2018. With major refinement of the format of Church Order Articles 23-24 also being considered by Synod 2018, those statements were presented and approved by Synod 2019 as Church Order Article 24-e and its Supplement (*Acts of Synod 2019*, p. 783).