

Role of Classis-Appointed Counselors

I. Background

The synod of the Christian Reformed Church has over the years identified the role of a classis-appointed counselor to congregations in transition—in the calling of a minister of the Word, in situations following the separation between church and pastor, and for those seeking affiliation with the CRC. The Church Order describes the role of the counselor in Articles 9 and 42-c.

Article 9

In nominating and calling a minister, the council shall seek the approval of the counselor who acts on behalf of classis to see that the ecclesiastical regulations have been observed. The council and counselor shall sign the letter of call and the counselor shall render an account of all matters processed to classis.

Article 42-c

The classical counselor's task is to ensure that a church in the process of calling a minister of the Word observes ecclesiastical regulations and sound process. The counselor shall be an officebearer, normally a minister of the Word, whose ministerial credentials or membership resides in a congregation other than the church in the process of calling a minister. The classical counselor shall provide classis a written report during and after the calling process.

II. Function of a classis counselor

A. *Appointment of a counselor*

When a church is without a pastor and initiates the procedure for calling a minister, the council is required to ask the classis to appoint a counselor or adviser and may request the services of a specific pastor for this purpose. The classis or the interim committee then appoints a minister, acting on behalf of classis, to counsel that church in all matters pertaining to the calling of a new minister. (*Note:* The ministerial credentials or membership of the counselor should reside in a congregation other than the church in the process of calling a minister.) Upon request, the counselor should attend council meetings to advise the calling church with respect to proper procedure and ecclesiastical regulations involved in calling a minister. The classis and the counselor of a vacant church are responsible for seeing that the synodical regulations governing the calling of ministers are observed and that, when exceptions are made, the classis is informed so that it may add its approval.

Counselors, in order to fulfill their responsibilities, should be fully aware of the ecclesiastical regulations for calling a minister of the Word adopted by synod, including permission to call, period of consideration, and financial arrangements. These are contained in the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* in the commentary on Church Order Article 8.

The appointment of a minister as a counselor involves no obligation to perform pastoral services for the calling church. If a council desires pastoral help for worship services, teaching, pastoral counseling or calling, funerals, weddings, or other services, the council must make such arrangements with a minister of its choice regardless of whether or not that minister is the classically appointed counselor.

The term of a counselor ends when the vacancy in the congregation is filled and his or her report is presented to classis or when the classis replaces the counselor for other reasons.

B. The counselor's reports

Because counselors represent the classis, they must present an account of all their work to classis. This normally is done in the form of a written summary report of the work performed.

C. The letter of call

The calling of a minister must be certified by the sending of an official "letter of call." The letter of call should be in accord with the stipulations of the Church Order and the decisions of synod pertaining to the work and proper support of the minister of the Word. A council may not proceed with the calling of a minister without the approval of the counselor. Such approval includes a review of the compensation being offered and any other provisions or conditions attached to the extending of a call. If a difference of judgment between the council and the counselor cannot be resolved, the council may appeal to classis or its interim committee. The letter of call must be signed by the council as representatives of the congregation and by the counselor as a representative of the classis in which the calling church is located. You may download a copy of the "Letter of Call" at no charge from the Faith Alive Christian Resources website at www.faithaliveresources.org (search "letter of call" and select "See sample").

D. Calling a minister of the Word under special circumstances

The counselor is also called to assist classis in discerning the weighty reasons for calling a pastors who have served in their present church less than two years or when a term call is extended. Synod has adopted the following guidelines found in Church Order Supplement, Article 8:

1. Nominating ministers who have served their present churches less than two years

The synod judges that councils of vacant churches, when nominating, should not place in nomination the names of ministers who have served their present churches less than two years, unless there are very special and weighty reasons. And if the counselor deems it necessary, in the name of classis, to approve a nomination bearing the name of a minister having served the present church less than two years, the counselor shall give an account of such action to the classis.

—*Acts of Synod 1916*, p. 29

2. Calling ministers for a specified term of service

1. If the letter of call designates a specific term, the letter shall also include a statement concerning the possibility and method for reappointment and the financial arrangements which will be made in the event that the appointment is not extended beyond the specified term.

2. The church's counselor, on behalf of classis, shall make sure the termination procedures and arrangements stated in a letter of call are fair and reasonable.

E. Counselor's role prior to the installation of a minister of the Word

The classis to which the minister has been called must approve the minister's credential, forward the testimony with its endorsement to the council, and notify the classically appointed counselor. Only after the testimonial has been received by the new council may the installation take place. *Note:* A copy of the "Ecclesiastical Credential for a Minister" may be downloaded at

no charge from the Faith Alive Christian Resources website at www.faithaliveresources.org (search “minister credentials” and select “See sample”).

Synod 1991 decided that the following instructions be attached to the Minister’s Ecclesiastical Credential (see *Acts of Synod 1991*, pp. 516, 793):

1. The clerk of the releasing church council is to forward the credential to the secretary of the interim committee of the local classis.
2. After the interim committee has signed the credential, it is to be sent to the secretary of the interim committee in which the pastor’s new church is located.
3. After this interim committee has signed the credential, it is to be sent to the counselor of the church which issued the call, enabling the counselor to be responsible for the proper installation of the new pastor.

F. Role of a counselor following separation of congregation and minister of the Word

Church Order Supplement, Article 17-a also indicates that a counselor appointed by classis should be involved in the evaluation and oversight of the process following a separation between a congregation and its pastor if classis deems it necessary.

- b. If a classis decides a congregation that has been separated from its minister needs a time of evaluation and assistance before extending another call, it shall specify at the time of separation what is required before the congregation calls another minister.

The classis shall appoint an oversight committee composed of the council’s classical counselor and at least two other persons to plan and monitor the evaluation process.

G. Role of a counselor during the affiliation process

Basic to the process of getting acquainted with a congregation interested in affiliating with the CRC is the exploration of a common Reformed theological perspective and values, as well as a mutual commitment to being in a ministry together. If this phase goes beyond initial contact and preliminary discussions (done by an appointed facilitator) then classis should appoint one of its members to be an official counselor to represent the classis in further conversations. The goal of this phase is to determine whether the group wants to proceed to a phase of meaningful fellowshiping with a view toward joining the CRC denomination as well as exploring whether the classis wants to receive the congregation (and its pastor if applicable) into the CRC.

The final phase in the affiliation process leads into a formal decision about affiliation either as an organized or an emerging congregation. The affiliation phase is the most formal of the three phases and includes participation of the counselor in the following:

1. A letter from the church leadership addressed to classis reaffirming the church’s desire to affiliate with the CRC.
2. A letter from the pastor requesting to be examined for admission (Article 7 or 8) to the ministry of the Word in the CRC.
3. Appoint a counselor to oversee the reception of the congregation.

Note: In the affiliation process of the pastor, the denominational Candidacy Committee should be consulted (dkoll@crcna.org).

References:

2010 Church Order and Its Supplements

Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government (2008), pp.28, 47-48, 52, 55-56, 61, 67, 87, 183, 185-86

Please feel free to contact the Office of the Executive Director of the CRCNA if you have any questions related to the role of counselor (executive-director@crcna.org or drecker@crcna.org).