

TASK FORCE TO DEVELOP CHURCH ORDER PROCEDURES TO DISCIPLINE OFFICEBEARERS

Executive Summary

This task force was formed in response to an overture from Classis Hackensack that was deferred by Synods 2022 and 2023 and adopted by Synod 2024. The main reasons for establishing this task force had to do with widespread confusion and significant difficulties in applying church discipline within the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), specifically due to a lack of clear mechanisms for discipline initiated by broader assemblies. In addition, though past synodical decisions and historical practice have affirmed the authority of broader assemblies to depose officebearers or councils, clear guidelines have been deemed necessary to prevent inconsistency.

The task force focused its work on five areas of study:

- *Biblical foundations:* Discipline is rooted in God's covenant relationship with his people. In the Old Testament various leaders (elders, priests, prophets, kings) are called to provide guidance and correction to live in ways that are correct, upright, and true. The New Testament emphasizes self-discipline and communal accountability, involving interpersonal dialogue and the involvement of local church leaders.
- *Theological foundations:* Christ is the Lord and head of the church, and the authority of officebearers originates solely from him. In the Reformed understanding of church governance, this authority is initially vested in the local council and then delegated or “transferred” to major assemblies (classes and synods). While delegated, the authority of major assemblies is considered “greater in degree and wider in extent” because those assemblies function as “combined councils,” representing the collective authority of many churches. Their decisions are “settled and binding” unless explicitly advisory or contrary to the Word of God. Local congregations are not autonomous but willingly surrender a measure of authority to major assemblies to express denominational fellowship. Thus major assemblies have the authority to discipline minor assemblies when the well-being of a congregation is at stake.
- *Historical context:* The deposition of councils by classes was relatively uncontroversial in the early years of the CRC. The CRC has precedents for broader assembly intervention, especially when the well-being of a congregation or “churches in common” is at stake, though explicit principles are not detailed in the Church Order itself. There has been a historical tension between emphasizing local church autonomy and the authority of the classis and synod.
- *Church Order considerations:* Section IV of the Church Order, “The Admonition and Discipline of the Church” (Art. 78-84), states that

the goal of discipline is restoration, maintaining holiness, and upholding God's honor. Commentaries consistently view discipline as a positive and necessary means of guidance, although its application has become more challenging in today's litigious society.

- *Other denominations and their polity:* The task force considered how other denominations view and practice church polity, focusing on Church Order, relationships between assemblies (council, classis, synod, or their equivalents), authority, accountability, and rules for disaffiliation. The task force consulted nine groups: Canadian Reformed, Nazarene, Episcopal, Evangelical Covenant, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Protestant Reformed, Reformed Church in America, United Methodist, and Southern Baptist. Some have polities that are either highly hierarchical or strongly congregational, so those are not relevant for the purpose of this study. The task force also found that denominations with structures similar to the CRC's seem to be wrestling with the same issues the CRC is facing with regard to authority, accountability, and relationships between assemblies.

The task force affirms that major assemblies *do* have the authority to initiate and practice discipline within minor assemblies when their relationships are properly understood. While Christ's authority is original in the local church and local councils are primarily responsible for the means of grace and the keys of the kingdom, minor assemblies delegate more than merely advisory authority to major assemblies. Major assemblies hold authority over "things in common" (shared creeds, confessions, Church Order, ministry) and can intervene when a local congregation's well-being is at risk. The decisions of major assemblies are "settled and binding," and no council or classis has the right to dismiss those decisions, having covenanted to abide by them.

When a minor assembly disagrees with a major assembly's decision, it has the right to appeal. If the appeal is not sustained, the minor assembly can choose to accept the decision, protest it without agitation, or disaffiliate from the denomination. Minor assemblies retain the right to disaffiliate in an orderly manner, consistent with the principles of the Church Order of Dort.

However, if councils do not follow major assembly decisions and choose not to disaffiliate, they open themselves to discipline. This form of discipline protects the integrity of the "churches in common." If a local council remains noncompliant after a set timeframe and appeal process, the classis or synod may declare the congregation as having *de facto* disaffiliated. In cases of internal congregational division, in which the majority in council jeopardizes the congregation's well-being by breaking covenant, the classis or synod has the right to intervene. Under extreme circumstances, in which all officebearers are negligent and the congregation seeks assistance, a classis may depose the entire council and help appoint a new one. If an entire

classis fails to hold a noncompliant local council accountable, synod may exercise discipline through a committee *in loco*.

The task force proposes minimal Church Order changes, preferring the use of guidelines rather than trying to create a Church Order rule for every scenario—which would be virtually impossible. Nonetheless, the task force recommends making explicit what has always been implied: that major assemblies have the authority over minor assemblies to ensure accountability. Specifically, the task force proposes adding a supplement to Church Order Article 27-b to allow major assemblies to guide discipline processes within the minor assemblies and to declare a minor assembly as having de facto disaffiliated if it does not comply with denominational commitments. Additionally, an amendment to Article 83 is proposed to explicitly permit a major assembly, in exceptional circumstances and for the well-being of a congregation, to suspend and depose officebearers even when not initiated by the local council, emphasizing the high level of accountability for officebearers. The report also clarifies that the “limited suspension” enacted by Synod 2024 was for unique circumstances and should not be deemed to establish a new category of discipline.

Ultimately the report cautions against using the Church Order in a legalistic manner and emphasizes that for the church to function well, it requires a fundamental sense of trust, respect, and love among all parties.