

# Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers

## I. Introduction

### A. Background

The original request for the formation of this task force came through an overture from Classis Hackensack in 2022 (Overture 76). That overture was deferred in 2022 and in 2023 and then acted upon in 2024. The overture requested that synod “appoint a task force to develop Church Order procedures to discipline officebearers, including disaffiliation of a council or classis initiated by a major assembly” (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 408-10). Synod 2024 acceded to this overture (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 929-31, 943), and the approved grounds are as follows:

1. There is confusion in our churches and classes over the application of discipline, one of the marks of the true church (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). This confusion leads to serious difficulties that can be addressed only by developing biblical principles of church discipline and Reformed polity, then applying these principles to our Church Order.
2. The Church Order lacks a clear mechanism for discipline and disaffiliation initiated by a broader assembly. Such a mechanism would assist churches, classes, and synod to respond to error. This lack is significant enough to merit the attention of a task force.
3. The practice of the church and past synodical decisions affirm the authority of broader assemblies to depose officebearers or councils (see Overture 76 for examples).
4. The authority of church visitors, counselors, and those appointed to advisory roles by synod is not delineated in our Church Order.
5. Clear guidelines would protect classes, councils, and officebearers from inconsistent application of discipline.
6. Such a task force and the report it would produce was something requested by the Neland Avenue CRC *In Loco* Committee appointed by Synod 2022 (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, Rec. E, p. 325-26).

Synod 2024 noted the similarity of another overture presented that year (Overture 75—a request from Classis Zeeland to form a study committee to clarify the relationship between church assemblies) but deferred that request to Synod 2025. Synod 2025 deferred that overture again, suggesting that Synod 2026 would be in a position to determine whether further study will be warranted on that subject, or whether the work of this task force will have sufficiently addressed the issues raised by Classis Zeeland (see *Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 407-8; *Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 928-29; *Acts of Synod 2025*, pp. 665-66).

Following the parameters of composition and membership delineated by synod, this task force includes the following members: Ken Benjamins (chair), Barb Bulthuis (reporter), Shaun Jung, William Koopmans, Petr Kornilov, Cindy VanderKodde (adviser), Charles Veenstra, Beverly Weeks, and Andrew Zomerma. John Tamming, who was recommended to serve on the task force in the original mandate from synod, stepped down early in the process of our work. Mirtha Villafane also served until she had to step down in May 2025. The task force was also assisted by denominational staff, including Zachary King, Ashley Medendorp, and Joel Vande Werken. The committee met as a whole once in person and eight times via Zoom; subcommittees and the leadership team had additional meetings.

The issue of the authority of broader assemblies is a challenging topic. It involves the following questions:

- What is the nature of the authority of broader assemblies?
- Do they have the right to intervene in the governance of the local church?
- Can broader assemblies apply discipline?
- Can they depose officebearers?
- If so, what guidance can one find in Scripture to support this?

In CRC history we have not always seen eye to eye on these matters. Sometimes we have emphasized more the autonomy of the local church, and at other times we have emphasized more the authority of the classis and synod. Henry DeMoor writes about this tension within the CRC in his dissertation, “Equipping the Saints.”<sup>1</sup>

### *B. Methodology*

To organize its work, this task force decided to focus on the following five areas of study, recognizing that these areas would overlap and yet anticipating that the focus from each perspective would bring valuable insights:

- *Biblical*: What scriptural principles can be discerned about major assemblies disciplining minor assemblies?
- *Theological*: What have Reformed theologians said about this topic?
- *Historical*: How has the Christian Reformed Church acted in the past when situations have arisen?
- *Church Order*: What do our documents currently say, and how has that been explained and interpreted by Church Order experts?
- *Other denominations*: How have other churches<sup>2</sup> chosen to address the relationships between major and minor assemblies?

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<sup>1</sup> Henry DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints” (D.D. diss., Theologische Academie Uitgaande van de Johannes Calvijn-Stichting te Kampen, 1986); see chap. 7, “May Broader Assemblies Depose a Consistory?” pp. 156-74.

<sup>2</sup> This area of study included particular attention to other Reformed denominations, as well as to others with a similar polity.

Based on its study of these focus areas, the task force was able to discern a way forward.

## II. Overview of general findings on discipline and broader assemblies

### A. Biblical foundations and principles for the exercise of church discipline

A review of both Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) passages, as well as books on church discipline that interpret biblical texts, shows a range of focus on various aspects of discipleship, encouragement, and confrontation as well as formal steps of church discipline. It is imperative to seek clarity on the essential foundations and scope of the biblical principles regarding “discipline,” since that term is at times used narrowly and at other times more broadly. In a broader sense, the term “discipline” is often connected with various biblical texts regarding discipleship, while in a narrower sense it is frequently connected with an understanding of the keys of the kingdom entrusted to church leadership.

In the Old Testament, discipline is to be understood in the context of the covenant relationship between God and his people. The OT frequently addresses the contrast between the righteous and the unrighteous (e.g., Psalm 1; 7:9-11; 11:5-7; 37:9-17). There is a close connection between the covenant relationship that God establishes with his people and the exercise of discipline. Within the covenant relationship, God expects and requires his children to live in ways that are correct, upright, and true. While God places a primary responsibility upon individual members of his covenant to live in righteousness, he also establishes provisions for communal guidance, encouragement, and accountability. To assist and ensure that his children live in a way that is upright, God uses various agents to provide guidance and correction. A significant role of guidance and discipline is assigned in the OT to parents.

Further, within the covenantal context of theocracy, the following leaders were all intended to have a significant role in encouraging righteous living and holding others accountable:

- *Tribal elders*: The book of Deuteronomy describes the service of the elders, for example, in the trial of accused murderers, implementing punishment for disobedient children (Deut. 21:18-19), penalizing slander (22:13-15), disobeying Levirate marriage laws (25:7), and generally enforcing the law (27:1).
- *Priests*: OT priestly duties included the teaching of the law to the people (Lev. 10:8-11).
- *Prophets*: Prophets in the OT were frequently entrusted with words of correction, rebuke, reproof, and announcements of divine judgment and punishment (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:1-12; Isa. 7:10-25; Jer. 28:12-17; 44:4-6; Ezek. 2:3-9).
- *Specially appointed leaders*: Moses, for example, served as a judge among the people but could not do so alone and needed to be assisted by other leaders to provide the necessary judgments (Ex.

18:13-27). Following the leadership of Moses and Joshua, there was a period of leadership by judges in Israel, though they appear to have exercised a primary role of military support rather than judgment and discipline of the general population.

- *Kings*: The biblical record of the life and influence of the kings in Judah and Israel typically describes whether they influenced the people to do wrong or right in the sight of the Lord.

It is noteworthy that the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel both presented indictments of covenant leaders who did not properly exercise the disciplinary office of their anointing.<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament, numerous texts call followers of Christ to exercise forms of self-discipline (cf. Matt. 23:25; Acts 24:25; 1 Cor. 7:5, 9; 9:25; Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Tim. 3:3) to live a life that is pleasing to God. The NT call to practice self-discipline and to live an upright life may be compared to the OT emphasis on a life that is upright and righteous. As in the OT context, the call to pursue holiness in the NT is not restricted to individual endeavor. The communal component of discipline comes to expression in a significant variety of ways within the covenant family of God, as God disciplines the children he loves (Heb. 12:6-8). Procedures of NT discipline include interpersonal dialogue and accountability (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 2:11-14; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). When necessary, the local church leaders are instructed to become involved in discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5; Titus 3:10; Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 4; Heb. 13:17). Officebearers are called to standards of accountability (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; see also Matt. 7:15-20).

Further, the narrative of Acts 15:1-29 provides a precedent in which a broad assembly of elders and apostles places requirements on the membership of local churches (cf. Acts 21:25) in keeping with the authority granted by Christ (Matt. 16:19).

#### *B. Theological foundations and principles for the exercise of church discipline*

The theological starting point for Reformed church government is that Christ is Lord and is head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18). The source of the church's authority is found in Christ alone.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is important to remember that the authority of officebearers in local congregations is *vested* authority that originates from Christ.<sup>5</sup> In the Reformed understanding of church governance, this vested authority resides first of all in

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeremiah 23 regarding false teaching and prophecy, and Ezekiel 34:1-10 regarding shepherds of Israel being rebuked for dereliction of duty.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 581ff., 593. Cf. Belgic Confession, Articles 29, 31; see also Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> R.J. Danhof, "May a Classis or a Synod Depose a Consistory?" quoted in Henry DeMoor, "Equipping the Saints," p. 119 (see footnote 1).

the local council and is then “transferred” to the major assemblies—classes and synods.<sup>6</sup>

Though delegated by minor assemblies, the authority of major assemblies does not come from local councils but from Christ.<sup>7</sup> Further, as “combined consistories,” the authority of a major assembly is the “cumulative authority of all the churches present in their delegated officebearers.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the authority of the major assembly is “greater in degree and wider in extent” than local councils.<sup>9</sup> It does not mean that the authority of the major assembly holds a *higher* kind of authority over local councils but that it is *greater*, as the gathering of many councils represent a greater measure of authority than a single council.<sup>10</sup>

Also, given that the major assemblies are “combined consistories” of many councils and not simply gatherings of individual delegates, major assemblies are the ruling agency of the minor assemblies.<sup>11</sup> Just as a council serves as a ruling agency of the local congregation, the classis serves as a ruling agency of the regional group of councils, and synod that of the entire denomination.

As such, the decisions of a major assembly carry greater weight and can never be set aside at will by minor assemblies. They are “settled and binding,” except in cases where the decisions may be explicitly declared as advisory or are shown to be contrary to the Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, we must remember that as part of a denomination, local congregations are not autonomous. Local councils willingly surrender a measure

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<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 584; see also Ryan Faber, “Dordrecht, *Doleantie*, and Church Order,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2020): 241.

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 584; see also DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints,” p. 240. DeMoor notes that H. Bavinck acknowledged that there is no essential difference between consistories and broader assemblies in regard to their authority because they both receive their authority from Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Danhof, “May a Classis or a Synod Depose a Consistory?” quoted in DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints,” p. 245; see also Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary: A Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1941), p. 343. While these authors use the term “combined consistories,” we would probably describe them today as “combined councils” to emphasize the way the authority of the most local assembly—the council—is then delegated to the major assemblies.

<sup>9</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 592; see also Faber, “Dordrecht, *Doleantie*, and Church Order,” p. 244. Faber notes that the failure to recognize the authority of major assemblies deviates from the principles of Reformed church polity.

<sup>10</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 592.

<sup>11</sup> DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints,” p. 240; see also Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 591, 598-600.

<sup>12</sup> Church Order Art. 29; see also Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 592, and Clowney, *The Church*, p. 203.

of authority to the major assemblies in order to give expression to a denominational fellowship based on a commonly held confession.<sup>13</sup> Thus the authority of the local council is limited by its association with other churches in one denomination.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, officebearers are appointed as stewards of Christ's church and are granted the authority to uphold the purity and holiness of the church through the preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and exercise of discipline.<sup>15</sup> As such, when the welfare of a congregation is at stake, a major assembly, as the ruling agency of minor assemblies, has the authority to discipline a minor assembly.<sup>16</sup>

It is also worth noting that while many Reformed theologians talk about the authority of major assemblies to exercise discipline on minor assemblies, very few of those theologians talk about *how* discipline is to be exercised by a major assembly on a minor or local assembly. The task force notes, as well, the challenge of how a major assembly could exercise its authority through discipline when there is disagreement between the major and minor assemblies about what the Word of God says on matters that require discipline.

### *C. Historical examples of church discipline exercised by major assemblies*

The issue of whether a broader assembly may depose a council has been treated at length by DeMoor in *Equipping the Saints*.<sup>17</sup> In the early stages of CRC history, the deposition of a council seems to have been a relatively noncontroversial occurrence. Classis Michigan saw it as the only way out of an intolerable situation in Grand Rapids surrounding the person of Gysbert Haan in 1861 (*Minutes of Classis 1861*, pp. 33-37). Similar action was taken with respect to the council of Zeeland (*Minutes of Classis 1864*, p. 98). DeMoor also briefly describes Classis Hackensack deposing the council of Ramsey, New Jersey, and Synod 1900 overruling the classis in that case (*Acts of Synod 1900*, pp. 23-28). The feeling was, as the 1877 General Assembly (predecessor of the CRC's synod) articulated it, that a classis stands above a council; it has every right to act if the welfare of the congregation is served (*Acts of Synod 1877*, p. 398).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> DeMoor, "Equipping the Saints," pp. 236, 240; see also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 619, 637.

<sup>14</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 584; see also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 639.

<sup>15</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 584, 595-601; see also Clowney, *The Church*, pp. 101, 114, and G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 365.

<sup>16</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 591; see also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 639.

<sup>17</sup> DeMoor, "Equipping the Saints," pp. 107-120.

<sup>18</sup> DeMoor, "Equipping the Saints," pp. 108-9.

After Synod 1918, Classis Muskegon deposed the council of First CRC of Muskegon amid a great deal of controversy.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the clearest explanation of the relation of the assemblies is given by Henry Beets: the denomination is a “federation of free Reformed churches,” quite analogous to the federation (not confederacy) which is the United States of America.<sup>20</sup> Already around 1920 some voices emphasized the importance of denominational ties and warned against excessive individualism. Churches that depart from the confession, Gabriel D. De Jong said, should be honest enough to withdraw from the denomination.<sup>21</sup>

The story of Sioux Center in the 1920s has been told in detail by Lou Van Dyke.<sup>22</sup> Synod 1922 did not establish principles for the authority of synod over classis and classis over council. Rather it dealt with the material issues at hand and gave pastoral advice to the parties. Classis Sioux Center asked synod to set up a study committee to clarify the matter of the relation of broader assemblies to councils (*Acts of Synod 1924*, pp. 15-16),<sup>23</sup> but the four members of the study committee couldn’t agree and wrote two different reports, one emphasizing the authority of the local church and the other the authority of synod (*Agenda for Synod 1926*, pp. 125-47).

In summary, as stated in Overture 76 in the *Agenda for Synod 2023* (pp. 597-98), while the CRC may have some *precedents*, the *principles* are not spelled out in the Church Order itself. The principle that seems to arise from history is that discipline must include the larger church assemblies in order to get past the individualism that runs rampant in our society. This means that councils cannot simply act on their own but are accountable to the larger part of the church—that is, to classis. In the same manner, a classis cannot simply act on its own without being accountable to the larger denomination, of which synod is the representative assembly.

#### *D. Church Order considerations*

Section IV of the Church Order lays out “The Admonition and Discipline of the Church.” In our current Church Order this section consists of Articles 78-84 (in earlier editions the numbers varied). Section IV tells us that the goal of admonition and discipline is to help “restore those who err . . . maintain the holiness of the church, and . . . uphold God’s honor” (Art. 78). This section outlines that we are accountable to each other as members and

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Beets, “Church News: Classis Muskegon,” *The Banner* (Jan. 1, 1920), p. 14; cf. *Acts of Synod 1918*, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church: Its Roots, History, Schools, and Mission Work, A.D. 1857-1946* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1946).

<sup>21</sup> DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints,” p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Y. Van Dyke, *Breaching the Dam: How One Sioux Center Congregation Became Two*, unpublished (accessed in the office of First Christian Reformed Church, Sioux Center, Iowa).

<sup>23</sup> See DeMoor, “Equipping the Saints,” p. 113.

as officebearers. It also lays out steps of admonition, discipline, and potential readmission for members—and separately for those who have been installed into office.

Several other articles in the Church Order also have a bearing on discipline. Article 5 discusses officebearers signing the Covenant for Officebearers. Some material in Section II outlines the assemblies of the church (Art. 26-50)—particularly Article 29, which outlines that the decisions of the assemblies of the church are settled and binding. Article 30 deals with appeals.

Relevant information from Church Order commentaries follows:

1. Monsma and Van Dellen;<sup>24</sup> Brink and De Ridder;<sup>25</sup> Both of these commentaries consistently show that discipline ought not to be a rare thing but, rather, seen as a positive and useful means of guiding and correcting the church.
2. Engelhard and Hofman;<sup>26</sup> Borgdorff;<sup>27</sup> DeMoor;<sup>28</sup> All of these Church Order commentators also hold up discipline as a good and necessary thing but note the challenge of discipline as our society becomes increasingly litigious. DeMoor also includes in his commentary helpful real-life situations (often with a name or detail changed to retain confidentiality) in which he has counseled churches in regard to specific questions, also in regard to discipline.

There seems to be a move from viewing discipline as a duty and obligation that the church and the councils have to exercise, to something that is increasingly distasteful and applied only in especially egregious situations. Rather than being viewed as an expression of the church's loving concern for its members, discipline is increasingly viewed as judgmental. And in our litigious society today, councils have to acquiesce to people resigning their membership rather than moving through the discipline process.

#### *E. Other denominations and how they address relationships between assemblies*

The task force attempted to identify answers to questions such as the following with regard to other denominations through interviews, emails, and a review of published documents:

1. What is their perception of the Church Order and polity of the CRC? How is their polity different from ours? What are the distinctives of their polity?

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<sup>24</sup> Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *Church Order Commentary: A Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1941).

<sup>25</sup> William P. Brink and Richard De Ritter, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1979).

<sup>26</sup> David H. Engelhard and Leonard J. Hofman, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Borgdorff, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2008, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Henry DeMoor, *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010, 2020).

2. What is the relationship between council, classis, and synod in other denominations? Do they use the language of *original* authority (in council) and *delegated* authority (given to the broader assemblies)? What is the nature of the authority of broader assemblies? Is it mostly “advisory”? How do broader assemblies maintain accountability? To what extent must churches “submit” to synodical decisions? Must they “believe” them or simply “abide” by them?
3. Can churches disaffiliate from the denomination on their own initiative? Are there recognized procedures for this?

These are the denominations reviewed/consulted:

Canadian Reformed Churches	Protestant Reformed Churches
Church of the Nazarene	Reformed Church in America
Episcopal Church (USA)	United Methodist Church
Evangelical Covenant Church	Southern Baptist Convention
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	

We noted through this process that some denominations have significantly hierarchical or congregationalist polities that are not really relevant to the CRC and its Church Order. Alternatively, denominations with polities similar to ours seem to be wrestling with the same issues that the CRC is facing.

### III. The polity of Dort and the Reformed tradition

#### A. Theological underpinnings of the Church Order of Dort

Although we are a task force and not a study committee, there are basic polity issues we need to affirm from the outset. In some ways the polity that arose from the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), on which the current Christian Reformed Church Order is based, is between hierarchy and congregationalism (practiced in various independent evangelical churches). Roman Catholic polity of hierarchy is largely based on the authority of church tradition. As Protestants, we do not grant church tradition that kind of authority. Church polity must be based on the principles of Scripture alone. Strict congregationalism, on the other hand, claims that since Scripture (which is our sole authority) provides no example of a polity involving multiple levels of church government, we ought not to practice such polity either.

The polity of Dort falls between the hierarchical and congregational models in that it makes the case for *delegated* authority (CRCNA Church Order, Art. 27). The rationale goes as follows: Christ rules directly in the local church by his Word through the appointed officebearers. In that sense, Christ’s authority is indeed *original* in the local church. But for the protection of itself and the blessing of other churches, the churches agree to work together. To make this happen, each local council grants—or *delegates*—a certain authority to the broader assemblies. The local council is not forced to follow such a polity; it agrees to do so. In this way the local councils *covenant* to work together on the basis of a Church Order.

It is true that the Church Order, which binds the churches together, is a human-made document. Many of its details are not in Scripture. But this ought not to be perceived as a problem. Nothing forbids churches from working together in this way for the blessing of everyone involved. Local church authority is established through human-made rules in the same way the government can set highway speed limits. Church authority is delegated to the broader assemblies in the same way that parents delegate their God-given authority to a babysitter to help care for their kids. The Church Order is our human-made rule book to ensure decency and good order in the covenant that we agree to and share together.

Working together as churches in this way serves four generally accepted purposes:

1. It allows the church to complete what is unfinished at the local level.
2. It provides opportunities to do more ministry in the areas of evangelism, disaster relief, leadership training, and the like.
3. It serves better to express the unity of the church.
4. It provides better accountability for the churches individually and collectively.

#### *B. Ambiguities in the Church Order of Dort*

The Church Order of Dort leaves some unanswered questions. It contains a certain ambiguity or tension between a leaning toward federation (a more congregationalist model) and a leaning toward stronger central authority (a more hierarchical model). This has caused many disagreements—even divisions—among churches that adhere to the Church Order of Dort. To this day, the Protestant Reformed Church, for example, which came out of the CRC in 1924, identify themselves as a federation. They see themselves as a collection of churches. In fact, they call themselves the “Protestant Reformed Churches.” The “Canadian Reformed Churches” also see themselves in this way.<sup>29</sup> These churches reject what they call “synodocracy.” The real church, for them, is the local church. Because that is so, they do not believe the Church Order grants broader assemblies the authority to depose officebearers. That right belongs to the local council alone. When a local council breaks covenant, the only and final recourse is to remove the congregation from the federation.

But is the CRC a federation, like the Protestant Reformed and the Canadian Reformed Churches? It is noteworthy that we have hesitated to use that word in our history. Even our name hints at this caution. We are not the “Christian Reformed *Churches*”; we are the “Christian Reformed Church.” But “federation sympathies” have never been far outside of the CRC’s polity. This is partly due to the influence of Abraham Kuyper and the *doleantie*

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<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that the Canadian Reformed Churches acknowledge the right of broader assemblies to approve candidates for the ministry, for example. Even they admit a certain tension here between the major and minor assemblies.

tradition he represented.<sup>30</sup> Kuyper clearly put the emphasis on the autonomy of the local church. Monsma and Van Dellen, well-respected Church Order specialists in the CRC, also favored a more *federational* interpretation and/or application of the Church Order. But never was the CRC strictly bound to such a view of the church. When circumstances required it, the CRC granted broader assemblies a wide range of powers—including the authority to depose officebearers. We’ve done it more than once. Many in our history have defended this.

Perhaps the practical implication of these issues may be summarized in this way: according to the Church Order of Dort, what is the purpose of major assemblies? One of the roles of major assemblies is to offer advice. When a local council proceeds with discipline (Church Order Supplement, Art. 78-81, c), for example, it must seek the advice of the classis. Church visitors also offer advice on behalf of the classis to the local council. But offering advice is not all that major assemblies do. For a local council to proceed with the final act of discipline, for example, it must receive the *concurrence* of classis. Classis must *approve*. Major assemblies are also involved in the examination and approval of candidates for ministry of the Word. A local council cannot ordain a pastor without the *approval* of classis and synod. All of this suggests that major assemblies have more than just advisory power. And as for discipline by major assemblies? Did the original architects of the Church Order of Dort believe that major assemblies have the authority to depose officebearers in the local church? Evidently, yes, for the Synod of Dort and other provincial synods subsequently deposed countless officebearers with Remonstrant sympathies. This is in our history.

Such is our history in the CRC as well. In 1982 synod declared that “it is indeed proper according to Reformed church polity for either classis or synod to intervene in the affairs of a local congregation, if the welfare of the congregation is at stake” (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 55). Synod declared this after a classis was charged a few years earlier with abusing its “God-given authority . . . by lording it over . . . [a local council] and by exercising ecclesiastical authority in a hierarchical manner not in keeping with the domain and character of the authority entrusted to it by delegation.” The first three of the six grounds given to support synod’s decision are as follows:

- a. . . . Christ gave authority to the church as a whole and entrusted authority to the occasions of its exercise in classis and synod as gatherings of the churches to maintain the unity of the congregations in both doctrine and discipline.
- b. The gathering of churches and their representatives in Jerusalem set a pattern of authoritative decisions, which pattern is followed in principle in the deliberations and decisions of the major assemblies;

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<sup>30</sup> See Faber, “Dordrecht, *Doleantie*, and Church Order,” pp. 235-52.

- c. To contend that [a classis] . . . had no proper jurisdiction over the . . . [council] proceeds on a mistaken conception of the relation of the minor assembly to the major assembly.

*(Acts of Synod 1980, pp. 28-29)*

In the history of the CRC there has always been a general desire to protect the autonomy of the local church as much as possible—but not at all costs. If the welfare of a congregation or of the churches in common was at stake, synods cautiously used the authority of major assemblies to protect all parties involved. Synod 1988 (*Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 542-43) was willing to hear and even sustain an appeal of one classis against a decision of another, pointing to our denominational covenant and to the need to avoid congregational individualism. Synod 2015 (*Acts of Synod 2015*, p. 674), on the other hand, argued that a broader assembly cannot instruct a minor assembly to exercise discipline, except on appeal. Synod 2018 (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 516) further declined to adopt procedures for classes to appeal to other classes. Then at Synod 2023, Neland Avenue CRC (Grand Rapids, Mich.) submitted an appeal to synod, suggesting in part that the actions of synod in 2022 were inappropriate with regard to procedures of Church Order (*Agenda for Synod 2023*, pp. 622-27). The most relevant parts of synod’s response are as follows (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 1024-25):

- b. “The Synod of 1980 declared that it is indeed proper according to Reformed Church polity for either classis or synod to intervene in the affairs of a local congregation, if the welfare of that congregation is at stake” (*Acts of Synod 1982*, p. 55). Synod also has the authority to intervene in a lower assembly if the well-being of the churches in common is at stake (Church Order Art. 27-b and 28-b).
- c. According to the Rules for Synodical Procedure, section V, B, 12, “All other matters may be considered which synod by a majority vote declares acceptable.”

#### **IV. Affirming our historic practice of applying the Church Order of Dort**

##### *A. Fundamental principles*

The concern of Overture 76 from Classis Hackensack in 2022 is that there remains confusion regarding the nature of the authority of the major assemblies in the CRC, especially as it relates to discipline. The most pressing question is this: Do major assemblies have the authority to initiate and practice discipline? Our answer is yes—when the appropriate qualifications are properly understood. To bring clarity to the issues involved, we lay out what we believe are the basic biblical principles that undergird the Church Order of Dort.

1. Christ is the head of the church. This needs to be acknowledged—indeed celebrated—from the beginning. Christ is King. He rules through his Word.

2. Christ rules directly in the local church. In that sense the authority of Christ is indeed *original* in the local church. We must affirm the local church's right and responsibility to govern its own affairs. What is especially unique to the local council is the use of the means of grace and the keys of the kingdom. Preaching, sacraments, and discipline rightly belong first to the local church. Here ministry takes place on the ground. As much as possible, the major assemblies ought not to interfere with these matters unique to the local congregation. We believe this point honors the principles of Kuyper and the *doleantie* tradition.
3. Minor assemblies *delegate* authority to the major assemblies. It is important to acknowledge the nature of this delegated authority.
  - a. Delegated authority is more than just advice. Church Order Article 27-b says that "the classis *has the same authority* over the council as the synod has over the classis." This point cannot be overlooked. If the authority of the major assemblies is only advisory, then we are essentially no different from a convention of congregationalist churches.
  - b. The things that major assemblies have authority over are "those matters which concern its churches in common" (Church Order Art. 28-b). This refers to matters related to our shared creeds, confessions, Church Order, and ministry. There is undoubtedly a gray area here. But some things are clear: picking the carpet color for a sanctuary is clearly a local matter; discerning what ministry to support as a classis has to do with "matters . . . in common." Nothing in the Church Order speaks against the full authority of the major assemblies in this area.
  - c. As explained earlier, major assemblies also have authority to intervene when the well-being of a local congregation is at stake. It has, at times, been argued that Article 85 of the Church Order forbids this. This article says, "No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no officebearer shall lord it over another officebearer." However, the intent of Article 85 is not to preclude the authority of the major assemblies. What it speaks against is a hierarchical dominance of one congregation over another, or one officebearer over another.<sup>31</sup>
  - d. The matters that major assemblies do not have authority over are those that rightfully belong to the local council. Article 27-a says, "Each assembly exercises, *in keeping with its own character and domain*, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the church by Christ" (emphasis added). In the matters that are "in common," or that threaten the well-being of the local church, however, the major assemblies wield the full authority of Christ over a local council. According to

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<sup>31</sup> See Borgdorff, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, p. 281.

Article 29 of the Church Order, the decisions of the major assemblies “shall be considered settled and binding.” No minor assembly has any right to dismiss the decisions of the major assemblies. They have *covenanted* to abide by those decisions.

*B. Practicing our principles when there is disagreement*

The principles of the Church Order are clear enough. The challenge is in determining what assemblies should do when there is disagreement within the denomination. What is a minor assembly to do when it fundamentally disagrees with a decision of a major assembly? Our task force considered creating various procedures for the Church Order that would effectively address the different scenarios that churches might face. In the end, we decided that this is not possible—or even wise. The problems and disagreements churches face are often varied, multilayered, and complex. For every Church Order article we create, we could envision an “exception” to the rule. The fact of the matter is that different situations call for different actions. Take, for example, how the CRC responded to those pastors and churches that could not accept the three points of common grace in 1924. Because Herman Hoeksema and the council members of Eastern Avenue CRC declared separation from the CRC, Classis Grand Rapids East felt it essentially had one choice, and that was to acquiesce to their departure while recognizing a minority of the congregation as continuing in the CRC. A month later, in a separate situation, Classis Grand Rapids West took a different approach. Because the councils of First CRC of Kalamazoo and Hope CRC of Grandville refused to submit to synod’s decisions, the classis felt it had no other option but to depose the councils of those two churches.<sup>32</sup> Different situations call for different actions. This explains why we propose only minimal Church Order changes. What serves the churches better are working guidelines. To that end we offer the following:

1. When a minor assembly disagrees with a decision of a major assembly, the minor assembly ought to be reminded of the right of appeal—all the way up to synod. If the major assemblies do not sustain the appeal, the minor assembly has the following options:
  - a. It can learn to accept and live with the decision.
  - b. It can protest the decision—while not agitating against it.
  - c. It can disaffiliate from the denomination.
2. Minor assemblies do retain the right to disaffiliate from the denomination. This freedom is in line with the principles of Dort. If a minor assembly has the right to delegate authority to the major assemblies, it

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<sup>32</sup> The different approaches to these two cases are seen clearly in the *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 138-39. The report of the December 1924 meeting of Classis Grand Rapids East is published in *The Banner* (Jan. 23, 1925; pp. 56-60), and so is the report of the January 1925 meeting of Classis Grand Rapids West (*The Banner*, Feb. 13, 1925; p. 98). Both classes’ actions were upheld by synod (*Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 131-40).

also has the right to rescind that authority. Rescinding such authority, however, amounts to leaving the denomination. The CRC has a process for congregations to follow under Article 38-f of the Church Order. Decency and good order dictate that congregations that leave should do so in an orderly way with respect, civility, and love.

3. Councils open themselves to discipline if they do not follow the decisions of the major assemblies but choose not to disaffiliate. It must be acknowledged that such discipline is different from the kind of discipline practiced by the local council. As a rule, major assemblies ought not to administer the keys of the kingdom. Opening and closing the kingdom rightly belongs to the local council alone. But administering the keys of the kingdom is not the only form of discipline practiced in the church. There is also a form of discipline that protects the integrity of the churches in common. Such discipline should be carried out with love, care, and patience. It should follow the principles of Matthew 18 as much as possible.

If a charge has been raised alleging the noncompliance of a local council, the classis or synod would decide whether that church is in violation of the covenant we all agree to uphold (Church Order Art. 29, 86). If so, the council would be given a timeframe to bring its practices in line with that covenant or to follow the process to disaffiliate. During that time the council would also have the right to appeal a decision of classis to synod. Once synod's decision is made and the given timeframe has passed, if the council chooses not to agree or disaffiliate, the classis or synod may declare the council/congregation as having de facto disaffiliated from the denomination. In this case, the steps of disaffiliation as laid out in Article 38-f should be followed as closely as possible. Those faithful to the denomination may request pastoral care and assistance from classis.

- a. Things become more difficult if there is division within the local congregation itself regarding compliance with denominational commitments. We suggest the following guidelines:
  - 1) If the majority in council favors breaking the shared denominational covenant (and this is the position of council) in such a way that a classis or synod deems that it jeopardizes the well-being of the congregation, the classis or synod has the right and responsibility to intervene.
  - 2) If a minority in council favors breaking covenant and in fact continues to do so, such officebearers may face special discipline according to Articles 82-84 of the Church Order.
  - 3) If all of the officebearers of a council are negligent in duty to the point that the welfare of the congregation is at stake, and the con-

gregation asks classis for assistance, the classis may, under extreme circumstances, depose the entire council and assist the congregation in appointing a new one.

- b. What if a classis refuses to hold a noncompliant local council to account? According to our polity, other assemblies from outside the classis may communicate their concerns to the council and the classis. We offer a word of caution here, however. We ought to discourage councils and classes from focusing on the “speck in the eye” of other councils and classes when they ignore “the log” in their own (Matt. 7:3-5). (As articulated in the *Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 544, we encourage the balance between investigating suspicion while also protecting the “suspect” from unfair treatment.) On the other hand, the case with Neland Avenue CRC and Classis Grand Rapids East in 2022 shows what happens when assemblies differ on how to address compliance with synodical decisions within their own spheres of jurisdiction. Councils and classes must have the right to overture synod to deal with councils and classes that openly break covenant. If an entire classis refuses to enact discipline upon a local council that breaks covenant, synod may exercise discipline in the place of classis by way of a committee *in loco* and may define the mandate of that committee.

## **V. Amending our Church Order**

Our task force was asked to review the Church Order and to suggest appropriate Church Order changes where necessary. We did a thorough review of the Church Order. We noted the areas that require strengthening—especially in regard to discipline by broader assemblies. We also considered some of the wording of the Church Order that might cause confusion.

We debated the merit of the words “major and minor assemblies.” It has been said that the word “major” leaves the impression that it is more important or carries more authority and power than the word “minor.” We toyed with finding better words (such as “broader,” which is used elsewhere in the Church Order), but in the end we were unsuccessful. We decided to leave these terms alone since they are simply part of our ecclesiastical language. It is to be noted that a major assembly is not more important or authoritative than a minor assembly. The authority of a major assembly is simply broader. All authority in the church is original in the minor assembly, and from there it is delegated to the major assemblies for the common good of the broader church.

We also discussed the word “disaffiliation.” It has been said that this word suggests negative connotations. We toyed with replacing it with another word, but, again, in the end we agreed to leave it alone. The word is sufficient. When a congregation disaffiliates, this means it is no longer part of the denomination and has no legal ties. Words like “separation” don’t seem to carry enough weight for this situation.

Other matters were brought to our attention. Do the recent synodical decisions regarding gravamina affect our work? We didn't think so, since these are matters internal to local councils, whereas our mandate was to deal with the authority of major assemblies. It goes without saying that officebearers who have difficulty subscribing to the Covenant for Officebearers must follow the appropriate articles of the Church Order designed for issues related to confessional subscription.

On another topic, Synod 2024 made some decisions regarding "limited suspension" (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 891-93). This was in response to recent events in the life of the denomination. We do not believe that this precedent was meant to create a new category of discipline in addition to the already established categories of suspension and deposition. Synod's decisions address the unique situation faced in 2024. One of our recommendations is that synod take note of that.

There was also brief discussion regarding Articles of Incorporation. Some congregations have Articles of Incorporation that commit them to advancing the purposes of the denomination (cf. Supplement, Church Order Art. 32-d). The task force is aware that some churches and classes have questioned the right of a major assembly to restrict a minor assembly's right to choose its own delegation, or to remove officebearers in a local congregation. While this is a legal rather than an ecclesiastical question and therefore is outside the scope of this task force, we would argue that the Articles of Incorporation should not be used to handcuff or supersede the weightier constitutional documents of the church. According to the Church Order, our prioritized authoritative documents are as follows: Scripture, the creeds and confessions, the Church Order, synodical statements—and then finally Articles of Incorporation.<sup>33</sup> Congregations that disaffiliate should use the procedures outlined in the supplement to Church Order Article 38-f. We identify this as a problem area that is outside the scope of this task force.

As stated earlier, changing many things in the Church Order would not be wise. Because situations can be so different depending on the contexts, trying to create a Church Order rule for every scenario would be virtually impossible. There are too many exceptions to every rule. What the church needs are guidelines as presented in this report. It is our prayer that the churches use these guidelines in a wise and gracious way.

What is especially crucial at this time is that synod make explicit what has always been implied: major assemblies do have the authority to ensure accountability. We suggest two changes in the Church Order and Its Supplements to make this clear: by way of adding a supplement to Article 27-b

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<sup>33</sup> See the list under "Important Distinctions" in the introduction to the Church Order and Article III of the Model Articles of Incorporation in Supplement, Church Order Article 32-d, as well as the report of the Team to Clarify Distinctions in Synodical Pronouncements, Decisions, Reports, Positions, and Advice and synod's comments (*Agenda for Synod 2025*, pp. 322-30; *Acts of Synod 2025*, pp. 690-91).

(which deals with the authority of major assemblies) and adding a statement to Article 83 (which deals with the special discipline of officebearers).

To Article 27-b we suggest adding a supplement consisting of three paragraphs that essentially allow major assemblies to guide processes of discipline within the minor assemblies. The proposed addition concludes with a recommendation that if a council chooses not to follow denominational commitments within a reasonable period of time, the major assembly may declare the church as having de facto disaffiliated from the denomination. This recommendation does not speak about removing the leadership of the church. It only declares the local congregation outside of the denomination. This recommendation aims to protect the “autonomy of the local church” as much as possible.

There are times, however, when things are at such a state at the local leadership level that the well-being of the local congregation is at stake. In such rare situations, the only reasonable course of action is to allow the major assembly to get involved—and to depose officebearers if necessary. To make this clearer, we recommend adding a statement to Article 83: “In exceptional circumstances, when necessary for the well-being of a congregation, a major assembly may suspend and depose officebearers even when such action has not been initiated by the council.” Some of the text of the Church Order Supplement would also have to be adjusted slightly to reflect this change.

It cannot be emphasized enough that no matter how many articles are changed or added, no Church Order can fully protect and/or save a denomination when there is disagreement. For the church to function well, it requires a basic sense of trust, respect, and love by all. We strongly warn against using the Church Order in a legalistic fashion or as a club to coerce wayward officebearers into compliance. May we all look to Christ and walk in his way!

## **VI. Recommendations**

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Ken Benjamins (chair) and Barb Bulthuis (reporter) when the report of this task force is discussed.
- B. That synod recommend the task force report to the churches as a helpful guide in the application of discipline by the major assemblies.
- C. That synod affirm that although Synod 2024 made decisions regarding “limited suspension” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, pp. 891-93), that precedent should not be deemed to create a new category of discipline (“limited suspension”) in addition to the already established categories of suspension and deposition.

### *Ground:*

The measures taken by synod were under unusual circumstances, in which the aspect of “limited” suspension was intended to implement a measure of grace, considering the short time frame within which deci-

sions with major consequences for officebearers, councils, and congregations had been proposed and implemented. Continuing to maintain a category of “limited suspension” beyond the time frames set out by Synod 2024 would needlessly complicate the procedures of discipline available in the existing categories of suspension and deposition.

D. That synod add the following proposed Supplement to Church Order Article 27-b (which reads, “The classis has the same authority over the council as the synod has over the classis”):

When necessary for the well-being of the churches, classes, or the denomination at large, classes and synod may guide procedures of discipline at the levels of local councils and classes, respectively, even if not requested by the minor assembly. Major assemblies are expected to hold councils or classes within their constituency accountable to the ecclesiastical covenant implied in denominational membership.

The means of maintaining accountability may include the steps of special discipline described in Church Order Articles 82-84 and their Supplements.

If a council chooses not to follow the decisions of classis or synod within a period of time determined by classis or synod, that assembly may declare the church as having de facto disaffiliated from the denomination. In this case, the steps described in Supplement, Article 38-f should be applied as closely as possible.

*Grounds:*

1. Although the authority of the local council is original, the delegated authority of classis and synod carries weight and must be allowed to be used for purposes of accountability to our shared covenant.
2. Accountability is one of the primary values of working together rather than solely as independent local churches. Councils accept this accountability when they choose to join the denomination.
3. Councils that are not willing to live within the bounds of our shared covenant cannot rightly remain part of that covenant.

E. That synod make the following amendments to Church Order Article 83 and to Supplement, Articles 82-84 so that they read as follows (with additions indicated by underline and deletions by ~~striketrough~~):

*Article 83*

- a. Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the Covenant for Officebearers, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.
- b. In exceptional circumstances, when necessary for the well-being of a congregation, a major assembly may suspend and depose officebearers even when such action has not been initiated by the council.

Supplement, Articles 82-84

*The Admonition and Discipline of Officebearers*

- a. An administrative leave may be imposed without prejudice by ~~the council~~ an assembly (ordinarily the council) in order to investigate allegations of deviation from sound doctrine or godly conduct. Compensation and benefits would continue, and any duties to be performed during the leave would be specified by the council. All suspensions and administrative leaves are temporary.
- b. *[unchanged]*
- c. *[unchanged]*
- d. *[unchanged]*
- e. Suspension/deposition of elders, deacons, and commissioned pastors
  - 1) The suspension or deposition of an elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor shall ordinarily be imposed by the council with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis.
  - 2) *[unchanged]*
  - 3) *[unchanged]*
- f. Suspension/deposition of ministers
  - 1) The suspension of a minister of the Word shall ordinarily be imposed by the council of the minister's church with the concurring judgment of the council of the nearest church in the same classis.
  - 2) *[unchanged]*
  - 3) *[unchanged]*
- g. *[unchanged]*
- h. *[unchanged]*
- i. ~~The council of the church~~ assembly which deposed the minister shall declare the deposed minister eligible to receive a call upon the affirmative judgment of the classis which approved the deposition, together with the concurrence of the synodical deputies. Upon acceptance of a call, the previously deposed minister shall be reordained.
- j. *[unchanged]*

*Grounds:*

1. Officebearers have a high level of responsibility to the church and therefore a high level of accountability as well. In situations where officebearers are violating the covenant they agreed to follow, they must be held accountable for the good of the church.
2. Leadership comes with the temptation to abuse power, as has often been demonstrated in churches across the world. Sometimes the dynamics are such that the officebearers inside a church are not able to see or appropriately address such situations.

3. If the accountability of the local leadership is not addressed at the local church level, the broader assembly has an obligation to step in for the good of the congregation to avoid the perpetuation of neglect, abuse, or heresy.
- F. That synod accept this report as fulfilling the mandate of this task force and dismiss the task force with thanks.

Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures  
to Discipline Officebearers

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