
“What if We Can’t Find a Pastor?”

January 2025



This is a question we’ve heard often from search committees, as they begin their work, and from church members as they watch the search process unfold. It can be very healthy for a church to spend an extended time prayerfully and diligently searching for the right candidate to serve in their open position. But it often becomes frustrating and discouraging when that time period stretches beyond two years and no viable candidate has been found. In those situations, the Candidacy Committee would like to offer the following advice and encouragements:

1. Utilize all the Resources & Supports Available

The best case scenario, of course, is that your church finds a fully qualified CRC Minister of the Word or a candidate who has been approved for CRC ordination. There are resources and supports available to aid a search committee’s search for the next minister.

- Ask your classis to assign you a counselor to advise you in the process
 - Consult Thrive’s excellent resource, “[More than a Search Committee](#)”
 - This [Network post](#) by Sean Baker also provides additional context and information about the pastor search process
 - Contact Thrive’s Administrative Coordinator, Kim Rankens (thrive@crcna.org), to help you navigate the pastor search database
 - Download the current candidate booklet on the [candidate page](#) of our website (don’t rule out a new candidate because you’re looking for someone with experience. Many of our candidates are older and/or have considerable ministry experience under their belts).
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2. Explore Alternative Routes

When a search committee has utilized the resources listed above for a sustained period of time and still has not found a qualified minister to serve their church, there are some alternate synod-approved options that could be explored.

If the position you are searching for is *not* a solo or senior pastor role, but a position of “pastoral extension”...

(children’s minister, youth minister, pastor of discipleship, etc.)

Consider who, in your congregation or community, has the gifts to fill this role then approach them to see if they sense a call to serve in this way. If someone rises to the surface who is interested in serving, ask your classis’ CMLT (Classis Ministerial Leadership Team) to assist you in getting a commissioned pastor job description approved by classis and designing a learning plan that is tailored to the individual. Your classis might develop an individualized learning plan for the person or guide them towards a [program of training](#) preferred by their classis. Starting in the fall of 2025, Calvin Theological Seminary will also be offering [“Commissioned Pastor Certificate”](#) options that will allow the individual to gain seminary credit that could transfer into an MA or MDiv degree if the person chooses to continue their theological education.

If the position you are searching for is a solo or senior pastor role...

1. You could call someone who is already ordained as a commissioned pastor (or has completed the training to become a commissioned pastor) through a process called “bridge ordination” (described in article 24b in the church order and further explained on pages 12-14 of the [Commissioned Pastor Handbook](#)).
 - Through this route, an organized church may extend a term call to a lead/senior role to such a person with the agreement that they will start making accountable progress towards completing their education to become ordained eventually as a minister of the Word. The term call is renewable upon demonstration that the individual has made that accountable progress. The process of ordaining a commissioned pastor is outlined on [this document](#).

2. You could consider calling an ordained minister from another (preferably reformed) denomination.
 - An ordained minister from another denomination could be called to serve your congregation if the individual is willing to relinquish their ordination in their denomination, and affiliate with the CRC. This process is described in Article 8c of church order and on pages 20-24 of the Journey Towards Ordination document. The Article 8c process is outlined step by step on [this document](#).

 3. Someone who is currently ineligible for ordination in the CRC (through [Church Order](#) article 6 or 24) but demonstrates the necessary knowledge and giftedness to serve as stated supply could be hired temporarily for a term contract on the following conditions:
 - Classis assigned counselor, CIC and Synodical Deputies approve of established need to hire unordained person as stated supply for a specified term (note: the main criteria for establishing need is a determination that the congregation has made a sustained, realistic effort to find an eligible candidate before considering this option, but other factors may also be considered).
 - Classis examines the individual and approves them for classical license to exhort (article 43b) OR, in some cases in which the individual is already well-known by the congregation, the council could ordain the person as an elder and give them permission to preach (and in some cases with permission of classis, administer sacraments—see CO article 55)
 - Within six months, if the congregation discerns that they would like to move this person towards ordination so that they can continue serving in this role, the individual and council should meet with the CMLT of their classis and/or the Director of Candidacy so that they can help discern the best educational path towards that goal, based on the individual's prior education and experience.
 - CP Ordination may be pursued as a step along the way in some cases (through CP Certificate program)
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3. Important Considerations

Keep these in mind before calling a pastor through one of the alternative or “non-traditional” routes

1. You should not select a candidate who is unfamiliar with reformed theology, unwilling to commit to teaching and preaching from a reformed perspective or unaligned with the positions of the CRCNA. Remember that your candidate will have to pass a classical examination before they can be ordained into the position. If some coaching is needed, your classis may be willing to assist with that.
2. Consider the qualifications listed on [this document](#) (it also contains some sample questions that could be useful in helping your candidate prepare for an examination).
3. For some time, the person who is preparing for ordination in the CRC will be engaging a steep learning curve and will need a lot of support. In the case of article 24b or article 8, the job description should include a reasonable amount of hours allotted for study and coursework until the person is ordained as a minister of the Word.
4. Your church should plan on supporting the person’s education financially as well, with the help of your classis CMLT (conversation about the percentage they will cover will be helpful for your budget planning).
5. Your church should also be aware of the emotional and mental strains that a pastor can face while transitioning into a role and embarking on a learning journey. Plan to support that pastor in whatever ways are needed.
6. Be aware that your classis and the Candidacy Committee are tasked to evaluate your candidate’s readiness for ordination in the CRC, and either entity could decide not to approve the person if they don’t deem them qualified. This could be very disappointing to the church and the individual, so please work with the classis ahead of time to make sure the expectations for knowledge, character and skills of a pastor are clearly understood. If, through the candidacy process, some growth points are highlighted by your classis or Candidacy Committee, the candidate should be receptive to such guidance, and responsive to doing the work recommended or required. Your council should also support the candidate in doing this work.

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