

Commissioned Pastor Handbook

This booklet is a compilation of information on the office of Commissioned Pastor. It 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.

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2. Statement to be inserted in the supplement for Church Order Art 23 – relative to assistance in process available upon termination of a position or a commissioned pastor's service.
3. Insertion into the Commissioned Pastor Handbook relative to a protocol for transferring credentials from one calling church to another
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General Description of the Office of Commissioned Pastor

The office of Commissioned Pastor is recognized in the Christian Reformed Church as a flexible, very localized alternate ordination into ministry. Commissioned Pastor is an “umbrella term” for a variety of ministry positions where this ordination may occur: Evangelist, Chaplain, Minister of Outreach, Youth Pastor, Minister of Congregational Life, and many more. As the Church Order Supplement to Article 23-a says, “The office of Commissioned Pastor is applicable to a variety of ministries, provided these ministries fit the guidelines adopted by Synod 2001 and that the other Church Order and synodical regulations for the office of Commissioned Pastor are observed. These include ministries such as education, evangelism, pastoral care, music, ministries to children, youth, adults and others within or outside of the congregation.”

Ordination to the office of Commissioned Pastor arises out of a local ministry context. That ministry will a) show the need for such ordained leadership and b) create a job description. The job description will then 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 can continue. This process involves verifying relevant ministry skills, designing and engaging in a learning plan where appropriate, gathering appropriate 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 that 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 a 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 CMLT. Together as a church we are actively praying to the Lord of Harvest, that workers will be sent into his harvest field. (c.f. Luke 10:2)

Flow Chart Summarizing the Process of Ordaining a Commissioned Pastor

RECOGNITION OF A MINISTRY NEED FOR ORDAINED LEADERSHIP

DEVELOPMENT OF A JOB DESCRIPTION

APPROVAL OF A JOB DESCRIPTION

PREPARATION FOR ORDINATION

EXAMINATION BY CLASSIS

Church Order Article 23 and 24 Statements

Describing the Office

Article 23

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. 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.
- d. Commissioned Pastors may be called to serve as solo pastors in organized congregations if the classis, with the 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.
- e. Commissioned Pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure the approval of their consistories and classes.

Church Order Supplement

Article 23-a

General Regulations

The office of Commissioned Pastor is applicable to a variety of ministries, provided that these ministries fit the guidelines adopted by Synod 2001 [see p. 6 of this handbook] and that the other Church order and synodical regulations for the office of Commissioned Pastor are observed. These include ministries such as education, evangelism, pastoral care, music, and ministries to children, youth, adults, and others within or outside of the congregation. 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 called.

[*Note:* for the remainder of C.O. Supplement, Article 23-a, see page 6-7 and 8-9 of this handbook.]

Church Order Supplement

Article 23-c

The mandate, characteristics, and guiding principles that define chaplains ordained as ministers of the Word are applicable to chaplains ordained under Article 23.

Article 23-d

Guideline for calling a Commissioned Pastor to a senior or solo position in an organized congregation

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.

Article 24

- 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.

Synodical Guideline to Determine Whether a Job Description Fits the Office of Commissioned Pastor

The following statement was adopted by Synod 2001 as a guideline for classes and synodical deputies as they decide whether a job description is appropriate for the office of Commissioned Pastor*:

“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 (Cf. 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 or 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 the Synod of 2003, and to “Commissioned Pastor” by the Synod of 2012.

Note also that Church Order Article 24 offers some guidelines regarding the nature of the work that can be done under the “Commissioned Pastor” ordination. (See page 4 of this handbook)

The Synodical Services office has received inquiries from Synodical Deputies seeking help in the task of determining what is an acceptable job description. The Candidacy Committee office has received occasional similar requests from classes and local ministries. Synod 2012 therefore added the following statement to the Church Order Supplement Art 23, and to the Ministry Associate Handbook:

Elements of a good job description include:

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

Qualifications for a Commissioned Pastor

This section of material is found in the CRC Church Order, Supplement Article 23a (p. 47-50), and is intended to give applicants, churches and CMLTs an idea of the sought for qualifications of a candidate for ordination as a Commissioned Pastor.

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 Peter 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 & 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 and *Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 373-75)

Requirement for Learning Plans, and Guidelines for Examining a Person for Ordination as a Commissioned Pastor

I. Required Learning Plans:

Synod 2013 approved that the following requirement be added to the Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

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.

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.

The grounds indicate a growing regard that the church has for the office of Commissioned Pastor. Those in positions not specified by this 2013 addition may still be required by classis to engage in a learning plan consistent with the job description that is approved. All learning plans originate at the classical level, with significant planning done by the person involved, and the classis team. In the case of those who fit the 2013 church order supplement requirement, material for developing a learning plan is available from the Candidacy Committee office. (Contact dkoll@crcna.org)

II. Guidelines for Examination:

The Synod of the CRC has adopted and placed in the Church Order a set of guidelines for the examination of those being ordained to the office of Commissioned Pastor. This material is presented in Church Order Supplement Article 23a, p 46-47, and is printed below:

The candidate shall also sustain a classical examination. The concurrence of synodical deputies is not required for the examination of a candidate for the office of Commissioned Pastor. The classical examination shall include the following elements:

- 1) 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
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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

The classis shall ensure that the candidate meets the standards of character, knowledge, and skill adopted by Synod 2004 (*Acts of Synod 2004*, p. 619) and inserted below.

The classis shall also ensure that Commissioned Pastors, especially those working at some distance from their calling congregations, will have proper supervision and support for their ministry.

When the 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.

Standards to be Met by Those Seeking to be Ordained as a Commissioned Pastor

An examination for the office of Commissioned Pastor will require that all Commissioned Pastors meet the church's standards for character and knowledge, whereas the standards for skill competence will relate specifically to the particular Commissioned Pastor's area of calling and expertise.

[See also the continuation of Church Order Supplement Article 23, printed in the Church Order]

Rules and Resources for Commissioned Pastor

(Titles, Moving, Concluding Service, Retirement, Insurance, Taxes and Salary)

The CRC denominational Candidacy Committee, in its 2007 report to synod, called the church to give the office of Commissioned Pastor “more use, more status, and more support”. This goal was offered in the context of the decision to return to a more historical use of Article 7 entry into ordination of Minister of the Word, and to utilize Article 23 as the route to ministry for those who do not have the academic training required for ordination as Minister of the Word.

Over the past four years the Candidacy Committee has spoken to a number of persons ordained as Commissioned Pastors and a number of leaders of LDNs (Leadership Development Networks which offer training that has equipped a number of those ordained as Commissioned Pastors). In addition, the Candidacy Committee has taken careful note of the comments made at synod during the past four years and the proposals offered on behalf of Commissioned Pastors.

A variety of issues have been identified. What follows is a number of areas in which clarification of the rules and resources pertaining to Commissioned Pastors may be helpful.

1. Title of the Office

Numerous concerns have been raised over the very title of the office that is being used. “Ministry Associate” felt to some to be a “2nd class” designation. The attempt of synod 2012 was to address this experience of discouragement, and to offer a title, “Commissioned Pastor,” which would feel more honoring of the work done by these servants. Synod 2012 approved this name change.

The Candidacy Committee reminds the churches that 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 matter of 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 a second class elder, but as a distinct office with a different focus than the office of elder, the church must squarely challenge negative misperceptions of the office of Commissioned Pastor.

The Candidacy Committee also would like to observe that “Commissioned Pastor” and “Minister of the Word” are both only church order terms. In practice the churches use a variety of other terms to designate those serving in pastoral and staff roles: i.e. 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 (506):

“The office of evangelist [term used in 2001] 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 (Cf. 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 ministry 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.”

2. Moving from Classis to Classis

Concerns have been raised regarding the need for a new classical examination for Commissioned Pastors who move from classis to classis. Those ordained in the office of Minister of the Word may move throughout the denomination without being re-examined, but Commissioned Pastors require a new examination each they take a new position.

It is important to observe that 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 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 often a different role. A new congregation and classis contemplating the call of a Commissioned Pastor is only being responsible in making a fresh assessment of a Commissioned Pastor's qualification *for this new congregation and position*.

However, the committee also wishes to point out that the wording of the Church Order allows for classis discretion in this area. Note this statement in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

"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." [Words underlined only for this report]

In practice, many classes have accepted as sufficient the examination of a "previously ordained Commissioned Pastor." In these 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.

The Candidacy Committee judges that 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.

3. Concluding (or Dismissing) Service as a Commissioned Pastor

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) As the office of Commissioned Pastor has been developing, concern has been raised that some degree of "protection" or "guidance" be given regarding a congregation which wishes to conclude (or dismiss) the service of an approved Commissioned Pastor, or regarding a commissioned pastor who wishes to voluntarily conclude service.

However, we are not entirely lacking such guidance. Synod 2009 inserted the following statement into the Church Order Supplement for Article 23-a: "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." The ground given was 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." 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 is being shown by both parties (a ministry and a commissioned pastor) as a relationship is concluded.

Some classes are finding that 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 so unique (**such as, the length of service, whether or not 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 then 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.

4. Retirement Plans

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 those ordained as Commissioned Pastors and Ministers of the Word already exists.

While the denomination has a retirement 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 non-ordained 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 US these include IRA plans and 403b plans. In Canada these include RRSPs (Registered Retirement Savings Plans). Such plans are "defined contribution plans" (as opposed to the "defined benefit plan" in place for Ministers of the Word) and, in the opinion of many, actually have advantages for the participant because of this.

A suggested contribution to such a plan is 10% of the offered salary and housing allowance, within limits allowed by the law. For the sake of reference it can be noted that the RCA recommendation to churches is 11%, and the CRC denomination, for its staff, contributes 6% of salary plus up to a 4% match for a total of 10%.

Commissioned Pastors and representatives of the ministries that support them are welcome to contact the CRCNA pension office. Contact Sheri Laninga, 616-224-0722 (pension@crcna.org). She will be happy to provide advice and resources in setting up a Commissioned Pastor pension plan.

5. Insurance Plans

As was stated above, 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. As churches and ministries seek to support their ordained Commissioned Pastors by providing a health care insurance plan there may be local resources and plans that prove to be very beneficial. Information about the denominational insurance plans available for those ordained as Commissioned Pastors can be obtained by contacting the Personnel Office of the CRCNA.

6. Tax Benefits

Concerns have been raised that Ministers of the Word have benefits with the IRS and Revenue Canada that Commissioned Pastors do not have, or are not aware of. As a matter of fact, in the policies of the IRS and Revenue Canada, ordination is the key factor, not the ordination called "Minister of the Word".

Our denominational office, through the Director of Finance and Administration, John Bolt, is happy to consult with and give guidance to any ministry that wants to know how to best make use of the tax benefits that pertain to their Commissioned Pastor or Minister of the Word. Their material is available on request.

7. Salary Scale

Concerns have been raised that Commissioned Pastors are "under-paid" and "under-valued." 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 Ministers 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 spoke to this issue as recently as 2004 when it defined proper support this way: "Proper support of a church's minister is to include an adequate salary, medical insurance, a housing provision, payment to the denomination's minister's pension plan, a continuing education stipend, and other employment-related items" (Acts of Synod 2004, p. 611).

Although these particular exhortations apply to those serving as Ministers of the Word, the principle behind these exhortations also applies to those serving as Commissioned Pastors, especially those in full time service. Since educational requirements for Ministers of the Word exceed those of Commissioned Pastors, it is likely and defensible that the pay scales will vary some between the two. However, this does not justify the underpaying of Commissioned Pastors. The church is called to provide a "living wage" for Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors alike.

Initiatives the Church Can Take to Support and Honor Commissioned Pastors

In its report to Synod 2009 the Candidacy Committee offers the Christian Reformed Church a variety of suggested initiatives to support and honor those serving as Commissioned Pastors. A number of these initiatives are articulated here with the hope that they will spur congregations, classes, and the denominational ministries as a whole to give appropriate honor and support to Commissioned Pastors.

1. Acknowledging Retirement

Our church order has an entire Article (Article 18) that deals with giving honor to those who retire as Ministers of the Word and regulates their care and service. Although it is likely not necessary to make an exactly similar set of denominational rules and regulations in this area for Commissioned Pastors, the Candidacy Committee does believe it would be fitting to honor retiring Commissioned Pastors in some way. Thus, the Candidacy Committee encourages classes to acknowledge and honor those completing service as a Commissioned Pastor when such a person reaches retirement age, or who because of physical or mental disability is incapable of performing the duties of the office. Appropriate announcements can also be made to the rest of the denomination through our denominational publications.

2. Advocate for More Exposure

Those serving as Commissioned Pastors and the ministry they represent are often anonymous and un-noticed. Certainly this is a characteristic of any "servant calling", yet there are opportunities to encourage and support Commissioned Pastors and their ministries that are worthy and proper. Well written articles in the Banner, a celebration at the classical or congregational level, a prayer moment on the floor of synod – all these and more are simple yet meaningful ways that Commissioned Pastors can be supported. The Banner is likely to allow classes to announce the ordination of Commissioned Pastors into ministry in the same way they announce the ordination of Ministers of the Word.

The Candidacy Committee, therefore, encourages synodical ministries, classes, and local churches to make a concerted effort to highlight the work being done by Commissioned Pastors who serve among us, through use of publications and corporate moments of celebration.

3. Creation of a denominational "Commissioned Pastor Profile Information Service"

Those serving as Commissioned Pastors and those who wish to serve lack a formal "networking" mechanism within our denomination. Such a network would be of help to potential and existing Commissioned Pastors, and also to ministries who are seeking such persons. The Candidacy Committee feels this could be a project assigned by Synod to the Pastor-Church Relations Office, which handles the current Minister Information Service, and to the Staff Ministry Committee, which is already gathering information about existing persons serving as Commissioned Pastors. The Director of Candidacy is in discussion with the Director of Pastor Church Relations regarding the feasibility and implementation of this profile and information database. Those interested in the progress being made in this initiative can contact the CRC Pastor-Church Relations office.

4. A Summary Report at Synod

Finally, Commissioned Pastors can be more "honored" at Synod. As Synod's practice of recognizing the candidates for Ministry of the Word each year is a highlight for candidates as well as for many synodical delegates, similar recognition can be given to those ordained to the office of Commissioned Pastor. With the conscientious help of the clerks of each classis, a list could be made each year listing all those who have been ordained to the office of Commissioned Pastor in the past year, along with the task to which they have been ordained. This same report could note those who have retired in the past year. Such a report could be received as information, accompanied with a moment of celebration and prayer for any new or retiring Commissioned Pastors who are present. By doing so we would do a more effective job of celebrating the work God is doing through Commissioned Pastors.

Clarification Regarding Church Order Article 23

(From 2016 Agenda for Synod, p. 262-275)

I. Introduction and Observations

Synod 2015 received an overture from Classis Hamilton requesting that synod provide further explanation and clarification regarding five areas associated with Church Order Article 23 (see *Agenda for Synod 2015*, pp. 434-436). In response Synod 2015 instructed the executive director “to work with the Board of Trustees and the Office of Candidacy, including Rev. David Koll, to provide clarification regarding Article 23 and report to Synod 2016 with recommendations” (*Acts of Synod 2015*, pp.640-641).

This document, written in response to this instruction of Synod 2015, seeks to offer the clarification requested. At the outset, we wish to make some observations:

1. We note that the request of the overture, and of synod, is for “explanation and clarification,” not for proposed changes to the Church Order. This document will seek, then, to honor the mandate of providing explanation and clarification. At the end of the report, however, we do include some suggestions for potential areas of modification to the Church Order, should Synod 2016 wish to commission such modifications.
2. We observe that although five areas are specified in the overture from Classis Hamilton, some of the areas specified actually raise more than one question. Further, there are at least two other areas of confusion that have been identified in recent months, as expressed through questions to the Office of Synodical Services and the Candidacy Committee. Thus, more than five items will be discussed in order to serve the church with the clarification it has requested.
3. We recognize that our usage of Article 23 continues to evolve. The report of the Candidacy Committee (then called the Synodical Ministerial Candidacy Committee) to Synod 2007 stated, “The SMCC believes that the CRC is blessed to have the highly versatile office of ministry associate [now called “commissioned pastor”] and can more effectively meet its congregational leadership needs if the office of ministry associate is more valued, used, and supported” (*Agenda for Synod 2007*, p. 299). As Synod 2007 approved the Candidacy Committee report, it committed itself to a strategy in which the value, use, and support for Church Order Article 23 would grow as it applied to persons who might otherwise seek ordination to the ministry of the Word by way of Church Order Article 7. (See *Agenda for Synod 2007*, pp. 294-303; *Acts of Synod 2007*, pp. 651-53, 664-67.)
4. We see the current request and this document as one more step in shaping the office of Commissioned Pastor in the light of Synod 2007’s guidance to give this office greater value, use, and support.

II. Areas of Clarification

1. Regarding the intended purpose of Article 23

The overture from Classis Hamilton observes that some 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 as a “mini-minister” or a “minister lite.”

The reality is, as the Hamilton overture observes, synod intended “to provide *limited* but *real* ecclesiastical authority for a *specific* ministry role . . . for a *particular* area of ministry in God’s kingdom (be it the local church, mission field, educational institution, etc.)” (*Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 434). The grounds for the decision of Synod 2012 speak to this matter with clarity:

- a. Such a change [in naming the office] 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.

(*Acts of Synod 2012*, pp. 741-742)

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.

Observations for our practice

It seems wise for each classis, each office-bearer, and each ministry context to recognize the affirmations of Synods 2007 and 2012 relative to the office of commissioned pastor.

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.

These differences delineate what the overture is asking synod to reaffirm—that commissioned pastors are not the same as ministers of the Word.

2. Classis approval relative to timing

The overture from Classis Hamilton reports a lack of clarity in how a classis approves the 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 suggests 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 goes 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, our committee observes 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, Article 23-a (General Regulations), states, “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.

Observations for our practice

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. Frequently the proposed job description is intimately tied to an individual. In such cases the approval process can unavoidably get personal and potentially awkward.
- d. 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.
- e. 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.
- f. 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. The coaching practice can mitigate some of the awkwardness described by the overture of Classis Hamilton. (See also section II, 11 below.)

3. Classis approval relative to job descriptions

The next issue articulated by the overture from Classis Hamilton has to do with assistance in evaluating a proposed job description for a commissioned pastor position. The overture requests such assistance, and the Candidacy Committee refers the church to existing statements that offer such assistance.

The following statement was adopted by Synod 2001 as a guideline for classes and synodical deputies in deciding whether a job description is appropriate for the office of commissioned pastor*:

The office of evangelist [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 (cf. 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)

**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.

Note also that Church Order Article 24 offers some guidelines regarding the nature of the work that can be done under the “commissioned pastor” ordination.

Leading up to Synod 2012 the Office of Synodical Services received inquiries from synodical deputies seeking help in the task of determining the elements of an acceptable job description. The Candidacy Committee office occasionally received similar requests from classes and local ministries. Synod 2012 therefore added the following statement to the Church Order Supplement, Article 23, and to the Ministry Associate Handbook:

Elements of a Good Job Description

1. A description of the functions and responsibilities that are ministerial in nature (see the first paragraph of Church Order Supplement 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.

Observations for our practice

The candidacy committee observes that the material already provided the church is more than sufficient for the evaluation of appropriate job descriptions. The material cited above already has been gathered into a document called “The Commissioned Pastor Handbook,” available through the Candidacy pages of the denominational website (crcna.org).

Having said this, we also believe that the church will be well served if a few particular concerns about job descriptions are also addressed in this current document. This advice is 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.

- a. 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. World Missions 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.
- b. 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 Ministries. 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.

- c. 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 Art 23-e states that “commissioned pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure approval of their consistories 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.
- d. 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.

4. Classis approval relative to changing job descriptions

The overture from Classis Hamilton observes that after a job description has been approved by classis, the position approved sometimes begins to change and evolve into something different. The overture correctly states that neither the Church Order nor the Supplement provides guidelines for how classis should be involved in such a transition.

Observations for our practice

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.”

5. Supervision of commissioned pastors

The overture from Classis Hamilton stated that there is “lack of clarity over how a commissioned pastor is supervised with integrity” (*Agenda for Synod 2015*, p. 435). The potential lack of clarity is attributed to confusion that arises when a commissioned pastor serves outside the boundaries of a local church (in a parachurch agency, or even with multiple ministries). The overture also suggests that local churches need help in understanding their role in supervision. Specifically cited is the challenge of supervising a missionary living in a foreign country.

The Candidacy Committee recognizes the need for clarity in supervision. As is recognized by the overture of Classis Hamilton, such complication in supervision is faced in certain ministry assignments of ministers of the Word as well as in those of commissioned pastors. 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. Such challenges should be embraced in the spirit of Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, which gives us the following direction: “The classis shall also ensure that commissioned pastors, especially those working at some distance from their calling congregations, will have proper supervision and support for their ministry.”

Observations for our practice

Here are a few thoughts intended to lead toward good practice:

- a. 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. The Church Order article offering direction for ministers of the Word calls for an implied communication as required by circumstances between the council of the calling church and the supervising agencies that may be involved. We suggest that this very 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.
- b. 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. 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.” 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 Ministries has a template for such a letter, called a “Covenant of Joint Supervision,” and it is available on their website.

6. Termination of ministry for a commissioned pastor

The next concern cited in the overture from Classis Hamilton pertains to the termination of a commissioned pastor. Termination, or the conclusion of service in a ministry, can happen either voluntarily or involuntarily. The overture seeks clarity regarding the change of status that occurs when a commissioned pastor leaves a ministry.

The assumption of the Church Order is that immediately upon the conclusion of a ministry position, the commissioned pastor is no longer ordained. In contrast, a minister of the Word is normally given one or two years to find a new ministry position, with the possibility of yearly extension. (See Article 14-d for the case of ministers of the Word who leave ministry entirely, and see Article 17-c for those who leave a ministry assignment hoping to enter a different ministry assignment.)

Observations for our practice

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. Here are some thoughts that may be helpful:

- a. It is important to recognize the potential damage that could be done to the spirit of a commissioned pastor who is told that the very next day 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.
- b. 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.
- c. 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 a statement in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, which says, "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."
- d. 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.
- e. 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.

7. Further concern regarding termination of ministry

It is good to reflect further on the statement cited above, added to Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, by Synod 2013: "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." 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.

Observations for our practice

What follows are some further observations and suggestions regarding the practice of approving a release or termination of ministry service for a commissioned pastor:

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. 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.

8. Transfer of ministry for a commissioned pastor

Another matter raised at this point by Classis Hamilton's overture has to do with "transfer" of service and ordination in a new ministry. Classis Hamilton asks, "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). Technically, 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.

This is another area in which the development of use in the office of commissioned pastor brings questions that test our integrity and creativity. Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, suggests that a classis has some latitude in deciding whether or not to reexamine a commissioned pastor who has previously served in a different ministry: "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."

The Supplement to Article 23-a also says, "When the 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." Notice that this statement refers to ordination in the new position. Ordination does not transfer; the person can bring testimonies, but ordination is new with the commissioning to each position. We trust that these reminders from the Supplement will help us to manage whatever uncertainties classes may face from case to case.

Observations for our practice

Rather than design or offer a blanket process or recommended procedure in response to this question, the Candidacy Committee suggests that the appropriate leaders of classis weigh each given case of "requested transfer" and decide how best to proceed. Here are a few words of guidance:

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. A letter of recommendation (see the reference to “good ecclesiastical testimonies of doctrine and life” in Supplement, Article 23-a) 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.
- d. Keep in mind that the “default practice” is that of examining a person for each commissioned pastor assignment.
- e. Recognize the option that a more brief 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. It occurs to the Candidacy Committee that 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.

9. Moving credentials from one calling church to another

Classis Hamilton asks through its overture to clarify the conditions under which a transfer of credentials can take place for a commissioned pastor who changes calling churches, presumably keeping the same ministry assignment. The overture describes a three-step protocol that could be followed. The cases being addressed here are presumably those in which a given commissioned pastor is serving a ministry outside of a local church, and this pastor desires to have a new church of membership and a new council to whom there will be accountability in doctrine and life.

The cases in which such a protocol may be needed are rather rare, but with the evolving use of the office of commissioned pastor they may become more common. The protocol suggested in the overture of Classis Hamilton mirrors the accepted practice of 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 record-keeping, awareness, and accountability).

Observations for our practice

The Candidacy Committee observes that the protocol for commissioned pastor transfers described by Classis Hamilton is appropriate. It is indeed normally followed throughout the denomination in cases of ministers of the Word transferring from one calling church to another while retaining their same ministry assignment. Our hope and expectation as a committee is that other classes, faced with this issue, would implement the very same protocol. This would honor the covenants and responsibilities entrusted to calling churches relative to commissioned pastors who wish to transfer their credentials.

10. Retirement status for commissioned pastors

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 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 they 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.

Observation for our practice

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.

11. Supervision of learning plans and preparation for classis examination

The next area of discussion and comment has to do with preparation for examination of a commissioned pastor. The Candidacy Committee has received questions over the past years regarding the nature, the design, the implementation, and the timing of learning plans. Relevant questions have to do with who supervises the construction and implementation of a plan, and how a classis can be assured that a potential commissioned pastor is prepared to do well when brought to classis for examination.

Observations for our practice

- a. Note that Synod 2013 added a paragraph to Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a (second paragraph), that requires “a contextualized learning plan, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee,” for all persons who will be examined for a position involving solo pastoral work in an emerging or organized church. For these persons the learning plan needs to be completed before an examination takes place, and the learning plan is to be developed in consultation between appropriate classis leaders and the Candidacy Committee.
- b. Note also that since 2004 Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, has included an extended description of ministry standards that classes can use in judging readiness for ministry as an

- ordained commissioned pastor. These can surely guide the preparation phase for anyone contemplating this ordination.
- c. 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.
 - d. The Candidacy Committee has created a list of training programs and ministries aimed at potential commissioned pastors. The list is included in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook on the Candidacy pages of the denominational website (crcna.org). 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.
 - e. A consult meeting sponsored by the Candidacy Committee in the fall of 2011 resulted in the agreement by various advocates of the commissioned pastor office that classis has often proceeded too quickly toward an examination for ordination. It is much more wise, the group decided, for 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.

12. Commissioned pastor ordination as a “bridge ordination”

Finally, we seek to name a practice and use of Article 23 that we are noticing as a Candidacy Committee. The office of commissioned pastor is in some cases serving as a “bridge ordination” for persons who are preparing for ordination as minister of the Word but who also want to be involved in active ministry as they study. The practice is not really in conflict with the Church Order, but it bears some purposeful reflection and perhaps some advice.

There have been a few cases in the past few years in which an organized congregation has become connected to 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 for ways to engage the person’s service before they are eligible for candidacy as minister of the Word.

Church Order Article 23-d and its Supplement allow for an organized congregation to call a commissioned pastor to serve them, under a specific set of circumstances, requiring classis approval and concurrence of synodical deputies.

Observations for our practice

As the Candidacy Committee has been consulted in cases of this nature, it has offered a few suggestions:

- a. 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.
- b. Further, the church counselor is responsible to direct the congregation to the unique criteria cited in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-d. 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.

- c. 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 23-d, 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. We continue to monitor how such arrangements are faring, and, should they prove beneficial to both the commissioned pastor and the congregation, our committee may eventually recommend that they be codified as a provision in the Church Order.

III. Suggestions for potential areas of modification to Church Order Article 23

As we stated at the beginning of this document, we wish to specify some particular areas in which modification of the current Church Order might be helpful. The Candidacy Committee does not wish at this point to propose any of these modifications, but we do wish to lay them before the churches and before synod for their consideration. We at this point do not have investment in seeing these changes come about, but we do recognize the potential that the church may desire these changes. The Candidacy Committee would gladly accept an assignment to develop more specific proposals for synod to consider, with rationale and grounds, relative to any of the following areas. Overtures from the churches could also be recommended, if these changes seem advisable.

1. Create a provision for an “emeritus” status of retired commissioned pastors, so that those approved for such a status can continue to serve the church as is the case for retired ministers of the Word. Church Order Article 18 would serve as a guide for such a provision.
2. Provide more explicit help and required guidance for classes and ministries as they deal with terminations of commissioned pastors so that healthy termination of service may be better assured. The concern may not apply to all commissioned pastor positions, but at least full-time ministry positions at a local church would be considered. Church Order Article 17, which pertains to this matter for ministers of the Word, would serve as a guide.
3. Provide clarity in the Church Order Supplement regarding a protocol for transferring a commissioned pastor’s credentials from one classis to another, as discussed in section II, 9 above.
4. Recognize a new use of Church Order Article 23 (called Article 23-f?) which would more explicitly allow the use of the office as a “bridge ordination” toward ordination as a minister of the Word. This use would not pertain to all commissioned pastor positions but would offer appropriate guidance for cases in which it may be desired.
5. Offer proposals for editing Church Order Supplement, Article 23. As Article 23 and its Supplement have evolved over the past thirty years, the Supplement has become extremely long. It may be desirable to remove some of the material in the Supplement and include it, instead, in the document called “The Commissioned Pastor Handbook,” which is currently available on the Candidacy pages of the denominational website (crcna.org).

The Candidacy Committee submits this report to Synod 2016 in response to Article 42 in the *Acts of Synod 2015* (see pp. 640-41). It is our hope and prayer that the observations and reflections offered serve the church and fulfill the mandate given us.

Recommendations

We would request that the following two motions be presented to Synod 2016, considering the request for clarification regarding Church Order Article 23 (see *Acts of Synod 2015*, pp. 640-41),

1. That synod receive this report on Clarification Regarding Church Order Article 23 as presented by the Candidacy Committee, and recommend it to congregations and classes for review as helpful advice in the administration of Church Order Article 23.
2. That synod call attention to the list of suggestions for potential areas of modification to Church Order Article 23 and invite continued reflection and potential overtures in order to enable our Church Order to serve us well in the administration of the office of commissioned pastor.

Action of Synod 2016 (See Acts of Synod 2016, p. 848-849)

C. *Recommendations*

1. That synod, considering the request for clarification regarding Church Order Article 23 (see *Acts of Synod 2015*, pp. 640-41),

a. Receive the report on Clarification Regarding Church Order Article 23 (Appendix A) as presented by the Candidacy Committee and recommend it to the congregations and classes for review as helpful advice in the administration of Church Order Article 23.

—*Adopted*

b. Instruct the Candidacy Committee to bring recommendations and, if necessary, modifications to Church Order Article 23 and its Supplement that address the five areas of concern raised in Appendix A, section III, and report to Synod 2017. Churches and classes are encouraged to freely communicate related ideas and concerns to the Candidacy Committee by November 1, 2016.

Ground: These five areas of concern emerge from the ongoing work of the Candidacy Committee with churches and classes across the denomination.

—*Adopted*

Report and Actions of Synod 2017 relative to the Development of Church Order Article 23
(This material is from the Agenda of Synod 2017, pages 318-328. Note that the actions of synod 2017 are cited after the Agenda pages are presented – see page 40ff in this Handbook)

I. Introduction

The office of commissioned pastor has been evolving over the past two decades. With new and broader uses of the office have come various challenges. Synod 2016 received a report from the Candidacy Committee with reflections on many of these challenges (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 262-75). The report was received and recommended to congregations and classes for review as helpful advice in the administration of the office of commissioned pastor (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848). A section of the report was also referred back to the Candidacy Committee with the instruction to “bring recommendations and, if necessary, modifications to Church Order Article 23 and its Supplement that address the five areas of concern raised in Appendix A, Section III, and report to Synod 2017” (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 849).

Various churches and classes have communicated with the Candidacy Committee on this matter as encouraged by Synod 2016. The Candidacy Committee has also identified two additional matters that are relevant to the administration of the office of commissioned pastor and can be addressed at this time. The following report and recommendations are presented to Synod 2017 in the context of this continuing discussion.

II. Creation of a status of “commissioned pastor, emeritus”

The Christian Reformed Church has been, and continues to be, blessed by a number of persons serving as commissioned pastors in pastoral roles. Unlike those ordained as ministers of the Word, whose ministerial status may continue after they retire (Church Order Art. 18), a retired commissioned pastor currently has no ecclesiastical authority to continue doing official acts of ministry or to retain a continuing title.

A number of classes have felt that such an honor should be given to retiring commissioned pastors. The status of “commissioned pastor, emeritus” has been created in at least three classes that we are aware of. Such a status offers what the Candidacy Committee judges to be appropriate honor and appreciation to the retiring commissioned pastor, and such a status also allows the church to be blessed with the gifts and service of a retired commissioned pastor.

One concern considered by the Candidacy Committee relative to this matter is that it is important to recognize that the ordination of a commissioned pastor is in the context of a single ministry, overseen by a single classis. As emeritus status is given, a question may well arise for the cases of retired commissioned pastors who move to a new region and become members of a new local church. The proposal we offer allows for such retired commissioned pastors who relocate to remain available for service in ordained ministry during retirement, given the approval of the new local church and classis they select when they relocate.

The Candidacy Committee therefore offers the following addition to Church Order Article 23 (signified by a new lettered section) for consideration by synod:

A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of the classis in which the ordination was approved, be given the title of *commissioned pastor, emeritus*, and may retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry. Supervision of a commissioned pastor, emeritus, shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation under the authority of the classes involved.

Not all persons concluding service as a commissioned pastor should be offered the status of “commissioned pastor, emeritus.” Those who serve for only a brief time and in roles not connected to preaching and the administration of sacraments would not likely be considered for such a designation. As in many other areas of the office of commissioned pastor, the Candidacy Committee believes synod would be wise to leave judgment on specific decisions and criteria up to the classis.

III. Guidance regarding termination of commissioned pastors or their positions

One area of tension discussed in the report to Synod 2016 has to do with vulnerability experienced by commissioned pastors regarding their relationship with and employment by the churches. Ministers of the Word are protected by Church Order Article 17. The action of releasing a minister of the Word by a church from a ministry position requires the approval of the classis by means of a protocol that involves a review by synodical deputies. Such a protocol is a blessing to the churches as well as to the ministers of the Word, for a variety of reasons.

The vulnerability of ordained commissioned pastors has been recognized by previous synods. Synod 2009 approved an addition to Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, declaring, “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” (*Acts of Synod 2009*, p. 583). This addition to the Church Order Supplement has been helpful; however, the Candidacy Committee believes that it is time to speak with greater strength and clarity regarding this matter. Those 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.

Church Order Article 17 represents the attempt of the church to provide for justice and mercy regarding ministers of the Word. The Candidacy Committee presents the following proposed addition to Church Order Supplement, Article 23 in order to offer such provision to commissioned pastors:

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.

The intention of the Candidacy Committee here is that decisions regarding this area of managing the office of commissioned pastor stay, as much as possible, within the authority of the

classis. The proposed 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.

IV. A protocol for transferring a commissioned pastor's credentials

Classis Hamilton contributed to the discussion and development of the office of commissioned pastor in a helpful way when it presented an overture to Synod 2015. One specific matter raised in that overture was a request for clarity regarding guidance for transferring the credentials of a specific type of commissioned pastor.

A commissioned pastor who serves in a ministry assignment outside of a local congregation may wish to transfer membership and ordination supervision from one congregation to another while continuing in the same ministry assignment. Such a practice occurs occasionally for ministers of the Word who serve in a mission enterprise, a chaplaincy assignment, or even a denominational role. Such cases for those ordained as commissioned pastors may be rather rare, but with the increasing use of the office, the Candidacy Committee agrees that it would be helpful to provide guidance for such a scenario.

For ministers of the Word who make such changes, a normal protocol is required. The original calling church, the classis of that church, the classis of the receiving church, and the new calling church must all note and approve of such a transfer. The transfer is noted in the minutes of each assembly. The new calling church, by definition, offers a call to the pastor for the continuing position. A similar scenario is conceivable for those who make such a change as an ordained commissioned pastor.

We do not believe that providing a guideline or protocol for such a scenario would require a Church Order change, but we do believe that an official guideline placed in the commissioned pastor handbook would provide helpful assistance in facing this question. We therefore propose that synod direct the Candidacy Committee to place the following guideline in the handbook of synodical decisions related to the office of commissioned pastor:

Protocol for Transferring Credentials of a Commissioned Pastor from One Calling Church to Another

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.

V. Supporting transitions for commissioned pastors

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.

Our Church Order gives clear, and sometimes complex, processes for ministers of the Word in transition. 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). This 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 is 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 year 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. In this respect the two offices are different.

As observed in the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016, there is, however, an inherent period of grace in the process even for commissioned pastors. The ordination status of a commissioned pastor is not officially 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 non-ministerial vocational assignment. These matters are discussed in detail in the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 (Appendix A, sections 6, 7, and 8; *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 268-71).

The Candidacy Committee does not believe it is wise, at this time, to add a new layer of Church Order direction in this matter; however, we believe it would be wise for Synod 2017 to 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 a commissioned pastor and are experiencing a transition of ministry assignment and vocation:

1. 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).
2. 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).
3. 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.
4. 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 (see Appendix A, section 8 of the Candidacy Committee report, *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 270-71).

VI. Use of Church Order Article 23 as a bridge ordination

Synod 2007 decided to return to what was referred to as the “historical use” of Church Order Article 7. This Church Order article provides, “by way of exception,” a way for “singularly gifted” persons to enter ordained ministry even though they have not earned an M.Div. degree at an accredited theological seminary. Synod 2007 also decided to provide more support, more use, and more respect for the office of commissioned pastor as persons without the required theological education were directed to Article 23. The two decisions together were intended to allow for the ordained ministry of those not formally trained while also retaining the historic denominational commitment for ordained pastors to meet a standard of accredited theological education.

The Candidacy Committee believes these two decisions and the strategy they present are serving the church well. We observe that as the use of the office of commissioned pastor has increased, the denominational culture of support and respect for those serving in the office has also increased. There also continues to be a vibrant support for theological education, as is

evidenced, in part, by the generous and continuing financial support of those who attend seminary.

The Candidacy Committee has reflected in recent years on a new phenomenon in the church relative to the two offices. Churches are seeking to make use of persons in ministry and ordaining them through Church Order Article 23 while also requesting or even requiring that they work toward an accredited degree in theological education. Under the appropriate authority of the elders supervising ministry where the person is serving, and with the assistance of the classis, which is aware of this arrangement, the commissioned pastor actually moves over a period of time toward eligibility for ordination as minister of the Word. The net effect is that the office of commissioned pastor serves as a “bridge ordination” and mirrors a pathway toward ordained ministry that has been used for a number of decades in other denominations and faith communities.

This practice was described most recently to Synod 2016 via the Candidacy Committee report (Appendix A, section 12; *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 273-74). The Candidacy Committee recognizes the wisdom and benefit of this practice. Although discernment must be applied relative to the specific circumstances and locations in which the practice is approved, the judgment of the Candidacy Committee is that the practice has great benefit in the process of forming competent pastors.

The use of the office of commissioned pastor as a “bridge ordination” flows logically in Church Order Article 23 as a statement following the current Article 23-d. This practice may, in some cases, be useful for instances in which Church Order Articles 23-b, -c, and -d are applied. The Candidacy Committee therefore wishes to propose to Synod 2017 adoption of the following statement, potentially as Article 23-g:

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.

Congregations, classes, church counselors, and synodical deputies seeking to make use of this provision can be served by reviewing Appendix A, section 12 in the report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2016 (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 273-74).

VII. Ensuring commissioned pastors in solo positions complete a learning plan

Synod 2013 approved the addition of a statement to Church Order Supplement, Article 23 that requires a learning plan be developed and completed in cooperation with the Candidacy Committee if the person will serve as the solo pastor of an emerging or organized church (*Acts of Synod 2013*, p. 557). This provision was added in order for the denomination to ensure that sufficient exposure to denominationally valued material is given to those who are entrusted with primary leadership in an emerging or organized congregation.

The experience of the Candidacy Committee since 2013 has been that in a number of cases classes have proceeded with an examination for a commissioned pastor serving in a solo pastor position without consulting the Candidacy Committee. Although the Candidacy Committee is committed to allowing the office of commissioned pastor to be administered at the classis level as much as possible, 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.

As the Candidacy Committee has pondered this matter, it has considered a few possible solutions. Each solution has advantages and disadvantages. We provide them as follows so that synod can give wise direction in these matters:

1. Solution 1: Leave the Church Order as it is and hope that classes will more and more adopt the new protocol requiring that commissioned pastors ordained as solo pastors in emerging and established churches have a learning plan developed and completed in coordination with the Candidacy Committee.
 - The advantage of this approach is that it does not add any further elements to a process that is already complex, and it expresses trust that those classes that have not conformed will begin to conform to this practice.
 - The disadvantage of this approach is that it may allow a valuable practice to continue to be ignored.
2. Solution 2: Add to the Church Order Supplement the expectation that classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, ascertain that a learning plan is in place when they approve the job description.
 - The advantage of this approach is that it affirms the importance of the learning plan and fits in with a current practice, since synodical deputies already engage classis at this point of the process.
 - The disadvantage of this approach is that often a job description is created or approved without a specific person in mind and the learning plan, as approved, might then not fit the person who is eventually appointed to the position.
3. Solution 3: Have classis and the synodical deputies ascertain that approval of a learning plan, as developed by the classis and the Candidacy Committee, has occurred at some point before the examination. This would be a new step, completed when the job description is approved, or immediately before the examination, or at some time between those two actions of classis. If a learning plan approval is not verified in a classis minute, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, the examination would not be valid.
 - The advantage of this approach is that it affirms the importance of the learning plan and requires more overtly that classis, with synodical deputy concurrence, support this requirement in each appropriate case.
 - The disadvantage of this approach is that it adds a new step to the process and potentially complicates the journey.

4. Solution 4: Require that synodical deputies attend the examination for ordination of a commissioned pastor being considered for a solo pastor position in an emerging or established church. Synodical deputy concurrence with the decision to approve the examination would be required.
- The advantage of this approach is that it affirms the important nature of the role of solo pastor relative to the interests of the denomination and the local church.
 - The disadvantage of this approach is that it brings the denominational engagement relative to specific commissioned pastor approval into new territory, threatening the local nature of the process.

Having pondered these options, the Candidacy Committee is drawn to solution 3, although we sincerely look to synod for direction on this matter in view of the other potential approaches. We therefore propose that the following statement be added to Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a, recognizing that synod through its deliberation process has the prerogative of addressing this matter in a different way:

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.

We call synod's attention to the limited nature of the proposed role of the synodical deputies and the new step being required for the classis. Classis only acts 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. The Candidacy Committee believes this approach mitigates the concern regarding denominational overreach while still ensuring that the interests of the denomination are served.

VIII. Reformatting the Church Order relative to the office of commissioned pastor

As had been noted in the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016, the Church Order Articles pertaining to the office of commissioned pastor have grown significantly in the past three decades. Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and their Supplements have become quite extensive. The Candidacy Committee believes synod will be well served by an effort to bring greater focus and a clearer structure to this section of the Church Order.

One option is to make greater use of a document similar to the current commissioned pastor handbook. This strategy would be similar to the one adopted for prescribing and describing the processes for candidacy (see Church Order Article 6 and its Supplement). In this section of the

Church Order the text is rather brief. Mention is made of a program, the Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy, without specifically describing the elements of the program. Recommendations for candidacy are required by Calvin Theological Seminary faculty, and yet the details of the faculty recommendation process are not specified. A document called “Journey Toward Ordination,” created under synod’s authority, is administered by the Candidacy Committee. Slight modifications to this document may be implemented as the committee sees fit. Thus, much of the detail of the candidacy process is administered at the seminary and denominational committee levels. Changes to the process and the documents used are reported to synod if significant. Any substantive change is offered for synod’s approval, but these changes do not necessarily appear in the Church Order or its Supplements. One positive result of this strategy is that we can keep the Church Order from becoming unnecessarily complicated.

The Candidacy Committee recognizes that similar dynamics are at play in the administration of Church Order Article 8, which deals with the transfer of ordination from other denominations into the CRCNA.

Although Synod 2016 asked the Candidacy Committee to offer proposals for modifying Church Order Supplement, Article 23 (*Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 275, and *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 848-49), the Candidacy Committee, at this time, is not offering any proposals beyond those made earlier in this report. We are concerned that the process of change occur at a rate that can be sensibly absorbed by the church. Considering that significant changes to Church Order are already being offered in this report, we would like to see the reaction of the church and synod to these proposals before making further recommendations. The decisions and actions of synod on these matters will provide important context and guidance for us before we embark on the major task of constructing a proposed conversion of the current articles and their supplements into a new format. We also recognize that synod may want to commission an update of Church Order Article 8. Both Church Order Articles 23 and 8 show evidence of evolving practice over the years. It may well be the judgment of synod that these articles will be enhanced by means of reformatting their content, removing redundancies, refocusing on what is of primary concern, and making use of supplemental and “handbook level” material where appropriate.

We therefore present this final proposal for synod’s evaluation, offered in the context of a willingness to serve the church in a way that will facilitate healthy administration of our pastoral offices:

That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee to propose a reformatting of Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and their Supplements, also making appropriate use of a document called the Commissioned Pastor Handbook, in order to enhance the clarity and brevity of the Church Order.

If Synod 2017 sees fit, a request to reformat Church Order Article 8 can be integrated into this instruction.

IX. Recommendations

A. That synod adopt the following addition to Church Order Article 23 (signified by a new lettered section):

A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of the classis in which the ordination was approved, be given the title of *commissioned pastor, emeritus*, and may retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry. Supervision of a commissioned pastor, emeritus, shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation under the authority of the classes involved.

B. That synod adopt the following statement to be added to Church Order Supplement, Article 23:

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.

C. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee to include the following guideline in the handbook of synodical decisions related to the office of commissioned pastor:

Protocol for Transferring Credentials of a Commissioned Pastor from One Calling Church to Another

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.

D. That synod approve 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:

1. 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).
2. 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).
3. 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.
4. 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 (see Appendix A, section 8 of the Candidacy Committee report, *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 270-71).

E. That synod adopt the following addition to Church Order Article 23 (signified by a new lettered section):

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.

F. That synod adopt the following statement to be added to the Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

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.

G. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee to propose a reformatting of Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and their Supplements, also making appropriate use of a document called the Commissioned Pastor Handbook, in order to enhance the clarity and brevity of the Church Order.

Candidacy Committee
David R. Koll, director

Action of Synod 2017 (See Acts of Synod 2017, p. 685, pp 688-690)

C. *Recommendations*

1. That synod propose to Synod 2018 the following additions to Church Order Article 24 (signified by new lettered sections):

- c. A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of classis, be given the title of *commissioned pastor emeritus*.
- d. A commissioned pastor emeritus may, upon the judgment of classis, retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry. Supervision of a commissioned pastor emeritus shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation under the authority of the classis involved.

—*Adopted*

2. That synod adopt the following statement to be added to Church Order Supplement, Article 23:

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.

—*Adopted*

3. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee to include the following guideline in the handbook of synodical decisions related to the office of commissioned pastor:

Protocol for Transferring Credentials of a Commissioned Pastor from One Calling Church to Another

- 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 or neither of the commissioned pastor.

—Adopted

4. That synod approve 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:

- 1) 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).
- 2) 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).
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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 (see Appendix A, section 8 of the Candidacy Committee report, *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 270-71).

—Adopted

5. That synod propose to Synod 2018 the following addition to Church Order Article 23-f:

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.

—Adopted

6. That synod adopt the following statement to be added to the Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

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.

—Adopted

7. That synod instruct the Candidacy Committee to propose to a future synod a reformatting of and potential changes to Church Order Articles 8, 23, and 24 and their Supplements, also making appropriate use and mention of a document called the Commissioned Pastor Handbook, in order to enhance the clarity and brevity of the Church Order.

—Adopted

Commissioned Pastors as Chaplains

Church Order Article 23-c states that Commissioned Pastors “may serve as chaplains in institutional settings in the community.” Synod 2003 discussed this use of the office of Commissioned Pastor and gave its endorsement of the concept. Note the statement added to the Church Order Supplement, Article 23-c: “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, look at the appropriate report in the Acts of Synod 2003.

Commissioned Pastors Being Called to Serve as Solo Pastor in an Organized Congregation

Synod 2007 dealt with the issue of organized congregations seeking to call a Commissioned Pastor to serve as their solo pastor. Synod decided to allow such practice in certain ministry contexts. The guideline approved by synod as ratified in Synod 2008 reads as follows:

“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.” (Church Order Supplement Article 23-d)

Commissioned Pastors Being Delegated to Synod and Appointed to Serve on Denominational Boards and Committees.

Synod 2007 decided that Commissioned Pastors serving in solo ministry in an organized congregation can be delegated by a classis to synod as a ministerial delegate. Note the following statement added to Church Order Supplement Article 45.b.2: "Commissioned Pastors 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."

Synod 2013 made adjustments to Church Order Article 23-a, removing reference to Commissioned Pastors as "elders". This same synod made clear that Commissioned Pastors may be delegated to synod and may be appointed to serve on denominational boards and committees, as the following statement was added to Church Order Supplement Article 45.b.3: "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."

Invitation to Share Resources and Concerns Regarding Commissioned Pastors

The Candidacy Committee is very aware that our use of the office of Commissioned Pastor is relatively new and evolving. Although by definition the office has a very local focus and the responsibility for the office needs to remain localized, the Candidacy Committee also believes it may be able to serve the CRC, its congregations and classes by being a clearinghouse of ideas, practices and concerns regarding this office. This handbook is one effort at performing that task. Anyone with further questions or suggestions that may be of benefit to local congregations and classes is invited to contact the Director of Candidacy, Rev. David Koll. He will compile a record of the suggestions and concerns, and pass them along to other ministries as appropriate.

Contact:

Rev. David Koll

Director of Candidacy

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Invitation to Use the Commissioned Pastor Tools

The Candidacy Committee website of the Christian Reformed Church (www.crcna.org/candidacy) 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. Please contact the Director of Candidacy, Rev. David Koll, (dkoll@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.