Responding to God’s gracious call.
Commissioned Pastor Handbook

This handbook of information on the office of commissioned pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America 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. This volume reports actions synod has taken and policies synod has approved. It also offers commentary on these actions and policies (noting appropriate sources).

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I. An Overview of the Development of the Office of Commissioned Pastor and the Use of this Handbook

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.” The committee suggested this goal in the context of aiming to return to a more historical use of Church Order Article 7 entry into ordination as minister of the Word, and to use Church Order Article 23 as the route to ministry for persons who do not have the academic training required for ordination as a minister of the Word.

Over the past decade a variety of issues have been identified through various formal and informal conversations among leaders, councils, classes, the Candidacy Committee, and synod. A brief review of this discussion, especially at the formal level of synod, would include the following:

1. In its report to Synod 2009 the Candidacy Committee suggested a variety of initiatives to support and honor persons serving as commissioned pastors. As of 2019, a number of those initiatives have been implemented.
   a. Many classes now formally acknowledge the retirement of commissioned pastors, and synod acknowledges them in its yearly meeting as classes report information to the Synodical Services office.
   b. The denomination’s official magazine, The Banner, often highlights the ministries served by commissioned pastors and includes commissioned pastors as contributors. In fact, the current Banner editor is an ordained commissioned pastor.
   c. Numerous leaders in the CRCNA are currently ordained as commissioned pastors, including the executive director, the director of ministries and administration, and a number of lead staff in Resonate Global Mission.

2. Synod 2015 received an overture from Classis Hamilton requesting clarification in a number of areas regarding the practice, process, and use of the office of commissioned pastor. Synod referred the overture to the Candidacy Committee, prompting key contributions to the discussion via Candidacy Committee reports to Synods 2016, 2017, and 2018. A number of the statements in this handbook reflect actions of synod in response to those Candidacy Committee reports.

3. More specifically, Synod 2016 approved “observations for our practice” related to twelve areas of clarification regarding the use and practice of the office; Synod 2017 approved statements regarding a number of follow-up matters; and Synod 2018 approved for recommendation to Synod 2019 a reformatting of Church Order Articles 23 and 24 regarding the office of commissioned pastor. This action of Synod 2018 also acknowledged an initial draft of updated supplements to Articles 23 and 24 and greater use of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook in anticipation of proposals to Synod 2019 to update these supplements and the handbook in connection with the proposed changes to Articles 23 and 24.
As the office of commissioned pastor has been evolving over the past two decades and in anticipation of its continuing evolution, this handbook is intended to be a helpful guide to and reminder of the rules and statements of synod related to the office of commissioned pastor. It serves alongside the Rules for Synodical Procedure, the Journey Toward Ordination, and other approved statements of practice providing guidelines for ministry and life within the CRCNA.

II. 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 ordination into pastoral ministry. *Commissioned pastor* is an “umbrella term” for a variety of ministry positions such as evangelist, chaplain, pastor of outreach, of youth, of congregational life, and more. As the Church Order Supplement to Article 23-a says, “The office of [commissioned pastor] may be understood to have the character of pastoral extension.” Quoting guidelines adopted by Synod 2001, the supplement explains that this office serves to extend “the ministry of organized congregations into specialized areas, including, but not limited to, youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and evangelism.”

Ordination to the office of commissioned pastor arises out of a local ministry context in which a ministry will (a) show the need for ordained leadership and (b) create a job description. The job description will 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 will continue. This process involves verifying relevant ministry skills, designing and engaging in a learning plan (where appropriate), gathering necessary 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 who 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 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 Classical Ministerial Leadership Team. Together as a church, we are actively asking “the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2).
III. Church Order Articles 23 and 24 and Their Supplements

Article 23
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.
   — Cf. Supplement, Article 23-a

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.

c. 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.

Supplement, Article 23-a
(general notes regarding the administration of the office)

The office of commissioned pastor is applicable to a variety of ministries, provided that these ministries fit the following guidelines adopted by Synod 2001:
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. . . . 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.]

All commissioned pastor positions must be approved by classis, with the concurrence of synodical deputies, to determine whether or not the position fits these guidelines adopted by Synod 2001. All commissioned pastors must demonstrate through an examination their ability to function in the ministry to which they are being called.

Examinations for the office of commissioned pastor must follow the guidelines established by synod as described and recorded in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

The Commissioned Pastor Handbook shall be consulted regularly, as it offers guidelines and regulations approved by synod. These include the protocol for examination, the creation of job descriptions, and the standards and qualifications to be met by those seeking to be ordained as commissioned pastors.

(Acts of Synod 2019, p. 783)

Commissioned pastor job descriptions related to the ministry of chaplaincy must be approved in consultation with Chaplaincy and Care Ministry. The mandate, characteristics, and guiding principles that define chaplains ordained as ministers of the Word are applicable to chaplains ordained under Article 23.

(Acts of Synod 2003, p. 613)

Article 24

a. Commissioned pastors may serve in a solo or senior pastor position in an organized church only with the permission of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies, following the synodically approved rules for such an arrangement, which are explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 24-a
b. 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.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 24-b

c. Commissioned pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure the approval of their councils and classes.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 24-c

d. A commissioned pastor position may be concluded and a commissioned pastor may be released only with the concurrence of the classis that approved the position, with attention to the rules and processes approved by synod.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 24-d

e. A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of classis, be given the title of commissioned pastor emeritus.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 24-e

Supplement, Article 24-a

Commissioned pastors may serve in positions of solo leadership in an established church only in specified circumstances. These circumstances were specified before 2019 in Church Order Articles 23-b, 23-c, and 23-d and are now presented and explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook. A classis may decide to make such appointments contingent upon implementation of a learning plan leading toward meeting the qualifications for minister of the Word, as described in Church Order Article 24-b. In all cases in which a commissioned pastor serves in a solo leadership position in an emerging or organized church, it is mandatory that such a person, in cooperation with classis, shall develop and complete a contextualized learning plan for denominational orientation, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee, as described in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

Supplement, Article 24-b

In various cases a commissioned pastor may desire or be encouraged to seek ordination as a minister of the Word, following the process prescribed in Article 6, including the required education. Though not expected in all circumstances of persons serving as commissioned pastors, a plan toward candidacy as a minister of the Word may be beneficial for the pastor and the church. Local ministries in partnership with their classis and synodical deputies may consider the advisability of constructing such a plan, and of using a
renewable “term call” for such cases as a way to hold the commissioned pastor accountable to making progress in the plan.

Supplement, Article 24-c

On occasion a commissioned pastor working in a position outside of a local congregation may desire to transition to a different calling church. This scenario and other transitions for commissioned pastors are addressed in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

Supplement, Article 24-d

Synod has offered, on various occasions, guidelines regarding the conclusion of an approved commissioned pastor position, the resignation of a commissioned pastor, and the release of a commissioned pastor. Synod also instructs classes to make an appropriate declaration reflecting the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. These guidelines and options regarding status are the same as those for minister of the Word and can be found in Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2 or in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

Supplement, Article 24-e

A commissioned pastor emeritus may, upon the judgment of classis, retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry in ways consistent with their ordination prior to retirement. Supervision of a commissioned pastor emeritus shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation with the approval of the classis(es) involved.

(Acts of Synod 2019, p. 783)

IV. Material Previously Contained in Supplement, Article 23

Until 2019 the Church Order Supplement for Articles 23 and 24 was quite lengthy. Synod 2018 approved the concept of making greater use of the Commissioned Pastor Handbook as a vehicle to communicate the various detailed rules and practices regarding the office of commissioned pastor. Synod 2019 approved the handbook in its current form, with the understanding that updates will be made as time continues, with appropriate related notations included in the handbook. This section of the handbook contains numerous statements previously included in the Church Order Supplement. Relevant additional statements received and approved by synod are included under many of the topic areas. The expectation of synod is that these statements remain esteemed and useful in the administration of the office of commissioned pastor. As is stated in Church Order Article 29, decisions of ecclesiastical bodies, including synod, shall be considered “settled and binding.”
A. Job Descriptions

In the past, the Synodical Services office received inquiries seeking help in determining the elements of an acceptable job description. The Candidacy office also received occasional similar requests from classes and local ministries. Synod 2012 therefore added to the Church Order Supplement the following statement (now appearing here in the Commissioned Pastor 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, Article 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.

The Candidacy Committee, in its report to Synod 2016, offered “observations for our practice” in connection with various concerns about job descriptions (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 265-66; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848). This advice was 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. The following observations were received and recommended to congregations and classes as helpful advice in the administration of Church Order Articles 23-24:

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 mission agency. [Resonate Global Mission] 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 mission 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 Ministry. 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 Article 24-c states that “commissioned pastors who desire to serve beyond their specific field of labor must secure the approval of their councils 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.

The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 also addressed the phenomenon of ministry positions evolving over time beyond their stated job descriptions and the responsibility of classes with regard to such changes. The Candidacy Committee offered the following “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.”

(Agenda for Synod 2016, p. 267)

B. Learning Plans

The next area of discussion has to do with preparing for the examination of a commissioned pastor. The Candidacy Committee has often received questions regarding the nature, design, implementation, and timing of learning plans. Relevant questions have to do with who supervises the design and implementation of a plan, and how a classis can be assured that a potential commissioned pastor is prepared to do well when examined by classis. (See the Candidacy Committee report in the Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 272-73.)

One particular concern of the denomination regarding learning plans and the preparation of those seeking ordination to the office of commissioned pastor is that any person serving in a lead role (senior or solo pastor) in a congregation identified with the CRCNA is going to in some way represent the CRCNA. Note, then, that Synod 2013 approved the following requirement (Acts of Synod 2013, p. 557):

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 Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 observed that the grounds of this approved motion indicate the 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 an approved job description. All learning plans originate at the classis level, with significant planning done by the person involved as well as the classis team. In the case of those who fit the 2013 requirement, material for developing a learning plan is available from the Candidacy Committee office (email: candidacy@crcna.org).

The following “observations for our practice” were received and recommended as helpful advice by Synod 2016 (Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 272-73):

a. Note that Synod 2013 [approved the requirement of] “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 . . . an extended description of ministry standards [has been available for classes to] use in judging readiness for ministry as an ordained commissioned pastor [see Agenda for Synod 2004, pp. 373-75; Acts of Synod 2004, p. 619; see also section “C. Qualifications for a Commissioned Pastor” below]. 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.

Synod 2018 also approved the requirement that the learning plans for commissioned pastors serving in a senior or solo pastor role include notice of a criminal background check and a psychological assessment (see Acts of Synod 2018, p. 465).

Synod has also addressed one further matter regarding learning plans for commissioned pastors in recent years. In the adjustment to the 2013 requirement for learning plans, the Candidacy Committee reported to Synod 2017 that in a number of cases classes have proceeded with an examination for a commissioned pastor serving in a solo pastor role without consulting the Candidacy Committee. The Candidacy Committee observed that “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” (Agenda for Synod 2017, p. 324).

In its 2017 report to synod the Candidacy Committee pondered this matter and considered a few possible solutions. In the end, the committee proposed the following statement for approval by synod:

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. (Acts of Synod 2017, p. 689)

The Candidacy Committee’s report called synod’s attention to the limited nature of the proposed role of the synodical deputies and the new step being required for classes. A classis acts only 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 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 stated hope of synod and the Candidacy Committee is that this approach will mitigate concerns regarding denominational overreach while still ensuring that the interests of the denomination are served (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 318-28; Acts of Synod 2017, pp. 685, 688-90).

C. Qualifications for a Commissioned Pastor

Synod 2004 approved a document to guide classes in defining the qualifications of a person being considered for ordination as a commissioned pastor. The document was included in the Church Order Supplement for a number of years, and it remains as a synodically endorsed description of the standards for pastoral ministry. The statement is included here to give applicants, churches, and classes an idea of the sought-for qualifications of a candidate for ordination as a commissioned pastor.

Character

The commissioned pastor is mature in Christ. “Christlikeness” 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 Pet. 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 and 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; *Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 373-75)
(Amended *Acts of Synod 2009*, pp. 583-84)

**D. Examination Protocol**

The Synod of the CRC has adopted guidelines for the examination of persons being ordained to the office of commissioned pastor. A general guideline adopted in coordination with the standards noted in section IV, C above states, “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).” It is important to note that these standards were adopted with the presumption that what has been called “the principle of proportionality” would be applied. In other words, a potential commissioned pastor should
demonstrate ministry skill “in proportion to” what the proposed and approved job description would require.

Synod has also specified a set of documents that should be presented prior to any examination. These documents were listed in the Church Order Supplement and are now noted in this handbook as follows:

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

Note that Synod 2018 also approved the requirement that a criminal background check and a psychological evaluation be done for those who are examined for positions involving solo or senior leadership in a given ministry. This is in addition to the requirement that such individuals complete an approved learning plan for orientation in denominational matters (see Acts of Synod 2018, p. 465).

This list of required documents does not need to be seen as exhaustive from a classis point of view. A given classis is free to broaden their list of required documents as the context of their classis and of a given ministry might require. The Candidacy Committee website includes some tools that a classis may want to consider as templates in the process of preparing a person for an examination as a commissioned pastor.

Synod has specified that the following elements shall also be included in the classical examination:

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.

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

**Some additional observations**

1. By rule of synod the concurrence of synodical deputies is not required for the examination of a candidate for the office of commissioned pastor.

2. There is greater flexibility for a classis in the examination for the office of commissioned pastor than there is in the examination for the office of minister of the Word (see the careful protocol for those examinations as articulated in Church Order Article 10). Classes are free to contextualize their examinations for commissioned pastor relative to the number of questioners, the time set aside, the timing of the exam in relation to the rest of the process for ordination, etc.

3. See section V, A, 3 in this handbook for further thoughts about the practice of examining commissioned pastors.

**E. Accountability and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors**

Synod has declared that the classis shall ensure that commissioned pastors, especially those working at some distance from their calling congregations, will have proper supervision and support for their ministry (a statement in the former Church Order Supplement). Through the past decade some issues of accountability, supervision, and even discipline concerning commissioned pastors have been dealt with by synod at various times.

First, we consider some comments relative to the supervision of commissioned pastors working in a setting outside of a local congregation (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 262-75; Acts of Synod 2016, p. 849). A 2015 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 was 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 suggested that local churches need help in understanding their role in supervision. Specifically cited was the challenge of supervising a missionary living in a foreign country.

In their 2016 response to this overture, assigned by Synod 2015 to the Candidacy Committee, the committee recognized 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.

The Candidacy Committee then proceeded to offer some “observations for our practice” that were received and recommended by Synod 2016 as helpful advice:

- 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 Ministry has a template for such a letter, called a “Covenant of Joint Supervision,” and it is available on their website (crcna.org/chaplaincy).

F. Discipline of Commissioned Pastors as Officebearers

The issue of accountability in discipline came before Synod 2018 in a number of contexts. As it relates to commissioned pastors, two actions of Synod 2019 should be noted in response to concerns raised at Synod 2018 (see Acts of Synod 2019, p. 783):

1. In Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84, a line was added in section e to clarify that the classis must be involved when a commissioned pastor is deposed. The statement says, “The deposition of a commissioned pastor shall not be effected without the approval of the classis in which the commissioned pastor was approved for ordination.”

2. Relative to Church Order Supplement, Article 24-d, a provision was added in which classes are instructed to make a determination of the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. Note the following comment in Church Order Supplement, Article 24-d:

   Synod has offered, on various occasions, guidelines regarding the conclusion of an approved commissioned pastor position, the resignation of a commissioned pastor, and the release of a commissioned pastor. Synod also instructs classes to make an appropriate declaration reflecting the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. These guidelines and options regarding status are the same as those for minister of the Word and can be found in Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2 or in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

   The intent in this second action is that a public record is created with regard to the service of all commissioned pastors. When they conclude
service, whether the reasons are positive or negative, the church will be well served by being able to know the general disposition of classis toward that service. The commissioned pastor will also be well served by such a public record. For ministers of the Word who conclude service before retirement there are four categories of designation: *honorabley released, released, dismissed*, and *in the status of one deposed* (see Church Order Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2). Synod suggested that classes use and note in their minutes one of these designations each time a commissioned pastor concludes service before retirement (see also section IV, L of this handbook).

**G. Moving and Transitions**

When 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 (a statement in the former Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a).

This statement approved by synod is still operative, and it has raised a variety of questions that synod has addressed in the past decade:

1. **Do commissioned pastors who move need to be reexamined?**

   The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2009 addressed concerns 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 reexamined, but commissioned pastors require a new examination each time they take a new position.

   The committee report observed 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 also as a matter 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 likely a different role. A different congregation and classis contemplating the call of a commissioned pastor is only being responsible in making a fresh assessment of a commissioned pastor’s qualifications for this particular congregation and position.

   However, the committee also pointed out that the wording of the Church Order allows for classis discretion in this area. Note this statement approved by Synod 2001 for inclusion in Church Order Supplement, Article 23 and now appearing here (italics in first sentence added for emphasis):

   "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 these 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.

In practice, many classes have accepted as sufficient the examination of a “previously ordained commissioned pastor.” In such 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 reported to synod that it 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. Synod accepted this report of the Candidacy Committee (see Agenda for Synod 2009, p. 218; Acts of Synod 2009, p. 583).

This matter came up again in 2015 through an overture from Classis Hamilton. The overture was referred to the Candidacy Committee, which responded via its report to Synod 2016 (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 262-75; Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 848-49).

In their overture Classis Hamilton asked, “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). The committee responded by observing that 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. Yet the committee report went on to observe that Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a suggested that a classis has some latitude in deciding whether or not to reexamine a commissioned pastor who has previously served in a different ministry, citing the reference used in 2009 regarding installation of “a previously ordained commissioned pastor in a new position.”

The Candidacy Committee report of 2016 noted further that considering the reality that ordination in this office does not transfer, “the person can bring testimonies, but ordination is new with the commissioning to each position” (Agenda for Synod 2016, p. 270).

The 2016 Candidacy Committee report went on to offer some “observations for our practice” that can help classes weigh each given case of “requested transfer” and decide how best to proceed (Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 270-71):

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 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 briefer 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.

2. Is it possible to move a commissioned pastor’s credentials from one calling church to another?

Another issue dealt with via the Candidacy Committee reports to Synods 2016 and 2017, prompted by the helpful 2015 overture from Classis Hamilton, was the consideration of occasions in which it might be appropriate to transfer the credentials (and supervision in doctrine and life) of a commissioned pastor while the commissioned pastor continues in the same ministry assignment. The cases being addressed here are presumably those in which a commissioned pastor is serving in a ministry outside of a local church and desires to move his/her membership to another church, whose council would then supervise the pastor’s doctrine and life.

Classis Hamilton suggested a procedure for the transfer process, and the Candidacy Committee adapted that into a set of guidelines it presented to Synod 2017, which approved them for inclusion in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook. The Candidacy Committee observed that the cases in which such guidelines may be needed are rather rare but that with the evolving use of the office of commissioned pastor such cases may become more common. The protocol approved by synod mirrors the accepted practice for 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).

The approved protocol is as follows (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 320-21; Acts of Synod 2017, p. 688).

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

a. 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.
b. 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.

c. The call must be approved by the classis and duly noted as part of the history of the approval of the related job description.

d. The job description must remain unchanged, since alteration of the job description would require the approval of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies.

e. 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 an examination of the commissioned pastor.

3. **In what ways can our process encourage and support commissioned pastors as they face transitions in ministry?**

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.

In its report to Synod 2017 the Candidacy Committee observed that our Church Order gives clear, and sometimes complex, processes for ministers of the Word in transition (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 318-28). 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). That 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 may be 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 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.

As observed in the Candidacy Committee report to synod there can be, however, an inherent period of grace in the process even for commissioned pastors. The ordination status of a commissioned pastor may not be officially
considered as 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 nonministerial vocational assignment. These matters are discussed in detail in the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 (Appendix A, sections 6-8; Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 268-71).

The Candidacy Committee did not believe it to be wise to add a new layer of Church Order direction in this matter; however, they suggested that Synod 2017 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 commissioned pastors and are experiencing a transition of ministry assignment and vocation (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 321-22; Acts of Synod 2017, pp. 688-89):

a. 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).

b. 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).

c. 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.

d. 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).

H. Termination of Positions and Personnel

A painful part of church life for a commissioned pastor, for a ministry, and for a classis is any occasion in which a ministry position is eliminated or when a person serving in a ministry position is asked to leave. Synod has dealt with this matter on a number of occasions in the past decade.
The report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2009 observed that 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). The report noted that as the office of commissioned pastor has developed, concerns have arisen that some degree of “protection” or “guidance” be given regarding a congregation that wishes to conclude (or dismiss) the service of an approved commissioned pastor, or regarding a commissioned pastor who wishes voluntarily to conclude service.

Synod 2009 inserted the following statement into the Church Order Supplement, and this statement is now lodged here in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook (see Acts of Synod 2009, pp. 583-84):

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 in 2009 reads 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 are 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 unique (i.e., 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 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.

Synod 2016

Synod 2016 received from the Candidacy Committee and recommended as helpful guidance for churches and classes a few “observations for our practice” (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 268-69). The report noted that this is an area in our practice of commissioned pastor ordination in which 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 the observations synod has recommended for guidance in this regard (Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 268-69):

a. It is important to recognize the potential damage that could be done to the spirit of a commissioned pastor who is told that 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 the statement “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 that 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.

A further set of observations dealt more directly with termination at a local church (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 269-70). The committee report recognized that 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.

What follows are some further observations and suggestions considered and received as helpful by Synod 2016 regarding the practice of approving a release or termination of ministry service for a commissioned pastor (Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 269-70):

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.

Synod 2017

Synod 2017 looked again at the issue of ways to provide fair treatment of and good practice in cases where a commissioned pastor is terminated. The report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2017 observed that the vulnerability of ordained commissioned pastors has been recognized by previous synods. Synod 2009 approved an addition to the Church Order Supplement (which in 2019 transferred to this handbook). This statement of synod has proved to be helpful; however, the Candidacy Committee asserted that it is necessary to speak with greater strength and clarity regarding this matter. People serving 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.

Thus the Candidacy Committee presented 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.

As Synod 2017 approved this statement, it noted the intention of the Candidacy Committee 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 (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 319-20; Acts of Synod 2017, p. 685.)

Synods 2018 and 2019

The issue of accountability in discipline came before Synod 2018 in a number of contexts. In relation to commissioned pastors, two actions of Synod 2019 should be noted in response to concerns raised at Synod 2018 (see Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 783; see also Section IV, F of this handbook).

1. In Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84, a line was added in section e to clarify that the classis must be involved when a commissioned pastor is deposed. The statement says, “The deposition of a commissioned pastor shall not be effected without the approval of the classis in which the commissioned pastor was approved for ordination.”

2. Relative to Church Order Supplement, Article 24-d, a provision was added in which classes are instructed to make a determination of the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. Note the following comment in Church Order Supplement, Article 24-d:

   Synod has offered, on various occasions, guidelines regarding the conclusion of an approved commissioned pastor position, the resignation of a commissioned pastor, and the release of a commissioned pastor. Synod also instructs classes to make an appropriate declaration reflecting the status of any commissioned pastor who concludes service. These guidelines and options regarding status are the same as those for minister of the Word and can be found in Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2 or in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

   The intent in this second action is that a public record is created with regard to the service of all commissioned pastors. When a commissioned pastor concludes service, whether the reasons are positive or negative, the church will be well served by being able to know the general disposition of classis toward that service. The commissioned pastor will also be well served by such a public record. For ministers of the Word who conclude service before retirement, there are four categories of designation: honorably released, released, dismissed, and in the status of one deposed (see Church Order Supplement, Article 14-b, c, 2). Synod suggested that classes use and note in their minutes one of these designations each time a commissioned pastor concludes service before retirement (see also section IV, L of this handbook).

I. Appointment to Service in an Established (Organized) Congregation

The office of commissioned pastor began in the CRCNA as way to ordain persons who had not had the required academic training for ordination as a minister of the Word and were doing evangelistic work in church planting. The office soon expanded to cover a variety of potential ministry positions, as
guided by the statement of Synod 2001 quoted in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a.

Three Scenarios
Prior to 2019 the Church Order cited three scenarios in which a commissioned pastor could serve as a lead or solo pastor in an established (organized) church:

1. Commissioned pastors who are planting a church may continue to serve for “a reasonable period of transition” after the church becomes an organized congregation.
2. Commissioned pastors who serve in an organized church alongside a minister of the Word may, in exceptional circumstances, move into the senior/solo role if the minister of the Word leaves.
3. In unique ministry contexts a commissioned pastor may be called to serve in an organized congregation.

The Church Order as approved in 2019 refers to these three circumstances in Article 24-a:

Commissioned pastors may serve in a solo or senior pastor position in an organized church only with the permission of classis and the concurrence of synodical deputies, following the synodically approved rules for such an arrangement, which are explained in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

The Synodically Approved Rules
The synodically approved rules, previously cited in the Church Order itself, remain valid and are stated below:

Regarding scenario 1 above:
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.

(Former Church Order Article 23-b)

Regarding scenario 2 above:
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.

(Former Church Order Article 23-c)
Regarding scenario 3 above:
Commissioned pastors may be called to serve as solo pastors in organized congregations if the classis, with 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.

(Former Church Order Article 23-d)

Synod 2008 approved the following note to offer guidelines related to this third scenario:
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.

(Former Church Order Supplement, Article 23-d)

Reflection on the Rules of Synod
It is obvious that great wisdom is needed in decisions regarding approval of a commissioned pastor for service as a solo or lead pastor in an organized congregation. In all three scenarios above, the deliberation of classis and the advice of synodical deputies are required. Terms used in these statements of synod have a purposeful flexibility allowing for a contextual decision. Synod 2010 received an overture requesting that the phrase “reasonable period of transition” be quantified for clarity. The Candidacy Committee suggested, and synod agreed, that flexibility is a virtue in this matter and that the words should remain unchanged (see Agenda for Synod 2011, pp. 328-30; Acts of Synod 2011, p. 836). It is important to note, however, that these are exceptional situations and ordinarily ministers of the Word are called to serve as pastors of organized congregations.

Required Learning Plans
It should be noted that a learning plan is to be approved and completed in all cases in which a commissioned pastor is approved for service in a solo leadership position, whether in an emerging church or in an established (organized) church. As discussed in section IV, B of this handbook, it is in the interest of the pastor, the ministry, and the denomination for solo and lead commissioned pastors to be well acquainted with denominational distinctives. Thus, Church Order Supplement, Article 24-a says:

Commissioned pastors may serve in positions of solo leadership in an established church only in specified circumstances. These circumstances were specified before 2019 in Church Order Articles 23-b, 23-c, and 23-d and are now presented and explained in the Commissioned
Pastor Handbook. A classis may decide to make such appointments contingent upon implementation of a learning plan leading toward meeting the qualifications for minister of the Word, as described in Church Order Article 24-b. In all cases in which a commissioned pastor serves in a solo leadership position in an emerging or organized church, it is mandatory that such a person, in cooperation with classis, shall develop and complete a contextualized learning plan for denominational orientation, adopted by classis and approved by the Candidacy Committee, as described in the Commissioned Pastor Handbook.

J. Use of the Commissioned Pastor Office as a “Bridge” to Becoming a Minister of the Word

The phenomenon of commissioned pastors serving as lead or solo pastors in organized (established) congregations has been noted numerous times by the Candidacy Committee, by synod, and by others. There have been some cases in the past few years in which an organized congregation has developed a close relationship with a current commissioned pastor or a current seminary student. The relationship between congregation and potential pastor has sometimes been so compelling that the congregation has sought ways to engage the person’s service before the person is eligible for candidacy as a minister of the Word.

The rules of synod 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 (see scenario 3 in section IV, I above). Yet, according to the note approved by Synod 2008 (also cited with scenario 3 above), the congregations eligible for this scenario are very specific and unusual. They are related to particular ministry contexts that are different from the dominant culture of the denomination and its seminary.

The Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2016 (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 273-74; Acts of Synod 2016, p. 848) addressed the practice of established churches calling persons as commissioned pastors. The report offers some “observations for our practice,” received by synod and recommended to churches and classes as helpful advice:

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 [now presented in this handbook as “scenario 3” in section IV, I above]. 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 [now Article 24-b], 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.

**An Approved Practice of Commissioned Pastor as a “Bridge Ordination”**

The Candidacy Committee advanced this practice further in its report to Synod 2017, proposing a new Church Order article that would allow the office of commissioned pastor to be used as a “bridge ordination” while a person completes the requirements for candidacy as a minister of the Word (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 322-23; Acts of Synod 2017, p. 689). The proposed article was adopted by Synod 2018 (Acts of Synod 2018, p. 465) and now appears as Article 24-b of the Church Order:

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.

It should be noted that this article is not intended to apply to all cases in which a commissioned pastor is approved for a lead or solo position in an established congregation (under one of the three scenarios described in section IV, I above). The statement uses the qualifier “may,” not “shall.” Individual circumstances will vary. Yet this highlights an opportunity that the classis and synodical deputies have to encourage accredited theological education toward meeting the expectations for the office of minister of the Word. In many cases the pastor, the congregation, the classis, and the church at large will be blessed by such effort. Note the following words of Church Order Supplement, Article 24-b as it speaks to this:

In various cases a commissioned pastor may desire or be encouraged to seek ordination as a minister of the Word, following the process prescribed in Article 6, including the required education. Though not expected in all circumstances of persons serving as commissioned pastors, a plan toward candidacy as a minister of the Word may be beneficial for the pastor and the church. Local ministries in partnership with their classis and synodical deputies may consider the advisability
of constructing such a plan, and of using a renewable “term call” for such cases as a way to hold the commissioned pastor accountable to making progress in the plan.

The Candidacy Committee is eager to serve the church through consultation with local pastors, synodical deputies, and classis functionaries as these conversations are conducted.

K. Special Mention regarding Chaplaincy and the Office of Commissioned Pastor

It bears special mention that one of the most productive uses of the office of commissioned pastor has been in the area of chaplaincy. The Office of Chaplaincy and Care was instrumental in the 2003 change of the office title from “evangelist” to “ministry associate.” Their concern was that the title of the office appropriately honor the unique ministry of the chaplain.

Synod 2003 also approved a key statement that validates the work of chaplains ordained as commissioned pastors (see Acts of Synod 2003, p. 613). This statement now appears in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

Commissioned pastor job descriptions related to the ministry of chaplaincy must be approved in consultation with Chaplaincy and Care Ministry. The mandate, characteristics, and guiding principles that define chaplains ordained as ministers of the Word are applicable to chaplains ordained under Article 23.


L. Status of Commissioned Pastor Emeritus

In recent years synod has reviewed and considered the matter of ordination status for persons who retire from service as a commissioned pastor. The Candidacy Committee first formally mentioned this issue in its report to Synod 2016 (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 272, 274). Note the reflections in the report:

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.

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.

Synod 2017 considered and approved a formal motion that would establish in our Church Order the practice of conferring on certain commissioned pastors the title commissioned pastor emeritus (see Agenda for Synod 2017, pp. 318-19, 326-27, and Acts of Synod 2017, p. 685). The motion was recommended for approval by Synod 2018. With major refinement of the format of Church Order Articles 23-24 also being considered by Synod 2018, the following statement was presented and approved by Synod 2019 as Church Order Article 24-e (Acts of Synod 2019, p. 783):

A commissioned pastor who has reached retirement age may, upon the judgment of classis, be given the title of commissioned pastor emeritus.

The following Church Order Supplement to Article 24-e was also approved:

A commissioned pastor emeritus may, upon the judgment of classis, retain the authority to perform official acts of ministry in ways consistent with their ordination prior to retirement. Supervision of a commissioned pastor emeritus shall remain with the church last served unless transferred to another congregation under the authority of the classis(es) involved.

It is appropriate to note here that when classis receives notice of the retirement of a commissioned pastor, the act of granting the title commissioned pastor emeritus need not be automatic. Surely a commissioned pastor who was been authorized to preach or to administer sacraments would not be authorized to do so upon retirement. A judgment needs to be made by the classis and the calling church regarding what types of service are appropriate for a given individual in retirement, and that judgment will be influenced by the types of experience and the gifts the person possesses and is desirous of offering. The minutes of classis should reflect any case of a person being given the title commissioned pastor emeritus and also the nature of the authority given regarding official acts of ministry. All other commissioned pastors whose retirement is celebrated by classis should be noted in the minutes of classis.
V. Other Matters Addressed by Synod

The Candidacy Committee, in its 2007 report to synod, urged the church to give the office of commissioned pastor “more use, more status, and more support.” This goal emerged in the context of aiming 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. (See Agenda for Synod 2007, pp. 292-311; Acts of Synod 2007, pp. 651-53, 664-67.)

Since then the Candidacy Committee has spoken to a number of persons engaged in various roles related to the office of commissioned pastor. This section notes issues that have been identified and addressed but have not yet been mentioned in this handbook.

A. Practical Issues Pertaining to Titles, Purpose of the Office, and Timing

1. Title of the office

Numerous concerns have come up over the title of this office. Ministry associate seemed to some to be a “second class” designation. Synod 2012 addressed this experience of discouragement and approved the current title, commissioned pastor, noting the intent to “give encouragement and support to those serving in this office” (Acts of Synod 2012, pp. 741-42).

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 “second class” to the office of elder, but as a distinct office with a different focus than that of the office of elder, the church must squarely challenge negative misperceptions of the office of commissioned pastor.

The Candidacy Committee has observed that both commissioned pastor and minister of the Word are mainly Church Order terms used to designate the two offices. In practice the churches use a variety of other terms to designate those serving in pastoral and staff roles (e.g., 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 (p. 506) and now in Church Order Supplement, Article 23-a:

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 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. **Regarding the intended purpose of Article 23**

   An overture from Classis Hamilton to Synod 2015 observed that some people 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 role as a “mini-minister” or a “minister lite” position.

   Synod tasked the Candidacy Committee with responding to this overture through its report to Synod 2016 (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, pp. 262-75). The committee response noted,

   The reality is, as the Hamilton overture observes, that 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.


   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.

   Thus the report of the Candidacy Committee to Synod 2016 included a few “observations for our practice,” which synod received and recommended to the churches and classes as helpful advice (see *Agenda for Synod 2016*, p. 263; *Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 848).

   It seems wise for each classis, each officebearer, 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.
3. Classis approval relative to timing

The Classis Hamilton overture to Synod 2015 also reported a lack of clarity in how classis approves a commissioned pastor 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 suggested 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 went 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, the Candidacy Committee observed 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 at the time stated, “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.

The Candidacy Committee therefore offered to Synod 2016 the following “observations for our practice,” which synod received and recommended to the churches and classes as helpful advice (see Agenda for Synod 2016, pp. 263-65; Acts of Synod 2016, p. 848):

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.

B. Service of Commissioned Pastors at Synod and on Denominational Boards, Committees, and Task Forces

Synod 2007 decided that a commissioned pastor serving as a solo pastor in an organized congregation may be delegated by a classis to synod as a ministerial delegate. Note the following statement added to Church Order Supplement, Article 45, b, 2: “A commissioned pastor 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” (see Acts of Synod 2007, p. 665).

Synod 2013 made adjustments to Church Order Article 23-a, removing a reference to commissioned pastors as “elders” (Acts of Synod 2013, pp. 556-57). The same synod made clear that commissioned pastors may be delegated to synod and may be appointed to serve on denominational boards and committees, adding the following statement 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” (Acts of Synod 2013, pp. 559-60).

Thus, ministry leaders ordained as commissioned pastors are offered the full range of opportunity to serve the broader church as delegates to synod or as appointees to a denominational board or committee. Where the appointment is dependent on a designation as a “minister delegate,” only a commissioned pastor serving as a solo pastor in an organized congregation would be eligible. In appointments where an “elder designation” is required, or no designation is required, all other commissioned pastors would be eligible.

C. Compensation and Benefits

The following discussion is adapted from the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2009 (see Agenda for Synod 2009, pp. 218-19; Acts of Synod 2009, p. 583).
Insurance 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. 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.

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 available to consult with and give guidance to any ministry that wants to know how best to make use of the tax benefits that pertain to their commissioned pastor or minister of the Word.

Salary Scale

Concerns have been raised that commissioned pastors are underpaid and undervalued. 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 a minister 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 in 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 somewhat between the two. However, that does not justify any underpaying of commissioned pastors. The church is called to provide a living wage for ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors alike.

The following discussion on salary matters draws from Synod 2018 (see Acts of Synod 2018, pp. 459-60).

Synod 2018 received an overture from Classis Niagara seeking to establish an annual compensation survey for commissioned pastors. Synod did not accede to the overture, citing the following grounds:

1. The role of commissioned pastors encompasses many diverse roles and responsibilities that limit the validity of any survey within the CRCNA.
2. The churches can access resources such as the 2018 Compensation Handbook for Church Staff by Richard Hammar, which provides detailed compensation analyses for most ministry positions.

D. Retirement and Pension Issues

The following discussion draws from and expands on the Candidacy Committee report to Synod 2009 (see Agenda for Synod 2009, pp. 218-19; Acts of Synod 2009, p. 583).

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 persons ordained as commissioned pastors and as ministers of the Word already exists.

While the denomination has a defined-benefit retirement plan (pension 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 nonordained 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 United States these include IRA (Individual Retirement Account) plans and 403b plans. In Canada these include RRSPs (Registered Retirement Savings Plans). Such plans (in comparison to the defined-benefit plan in place for ministers of the Word) are defined-contribution plans, and these plans are actually preferred by many for the advantages they offer participants.

A suggested contribution to such a plan is 10 percent of the offered salary and housing allowance, within limits allowed by law. For the sake of reference it can be noted that the Reformed Church in America recommendation to churches is 11 percent, and in the CRC denomination staff who are not ordained ministers of the Word can contribute 6 percent or more of salary within legal limits and will receive up to a 4 percent match for a total of 10 percent or more.

Commissioned pastors and representatives of the ministries that support them are welcome to contact the CRCNA pension and employee benefits office for advice and resources on commissioned pastor retirement planning.

The following discussion on retirement plans draws from Synod 2018 (see Acts of Synod 2018, pp. 459-60).

Synod 2018 received an overture from Classis Niagara seeking to establish a defined-contribution pension plan for commissioned pastors. While affirming the “intent and need to establish defined-contribution pension plans for commissioned pastors,” synod did not accede to the overture, citing the following grounds:

1. Centralized administration of multiemployer defined contribution plans require a level of uniformity and coordination not available within our denominational structure.

2. For churches that decide to provide such a plan, the denomination’s pension office has information and resources available to local congregations to assist in establishing individual plans.
3. Assistance in meeting the cost of establishing such plans is available through the Financial Shalom Project.  

(Acts of Synod 2018, p. 460)

E. Guidance for Video Examination  

Synod 2018 instructed the Candidacy Committee to provide guidelines for exams done by video (see Acts of Synod 2018, p. 488). The Candidacy Committee consulted classes that had already used video in conducting examinations. In one case, a classis had examined a candidate who was living in Korea. In another case a candidate who was in the military had been examined while on a base in Alaska. The Candidacy Committee also spoke to persons who had technological expertise. The following notes are intended to offer some guidelines for use by classes in examinations of commissioned pastors according to Articles 23-24. These notes may also provide assistance as classes consider other uses of video technology.

The potential uses of video-conferencing technology cover a broad range:

- Sermon reviewers may observe a video of a preached sermon rather than being present in person.
- A pre-examination video conference may be conducted with a small team or even one appointed person interviewing the person who will be examined, and then a recording of the video could be distributed to classis delegates before the examination meeting. This process could allow the classis meeting examination to be more focused and perhaps more efficient.
- A video-conference option may be used for an examinee, a delegate, and/or a synodical deputy who is not present at the classis meeting (due to extreme distance or prohibitive cost of traveling to the classis meeting).
- A totally “virtual” meeting could be conducted by video conferencing, with all delegates participating from their individual computers/devices.

Other uses are likely possible and will be discovered as the use of technology in our daily lives continues to progress. At this point classes have reported using the first three examples described here, and at least one classis is thinking about experimenting with the final example.

As Synod 2018 has requested guidelines regarding the use of video for examinations, the Candidacy Committee offers the following suggestions:

- Meeting in person is always preferable to meeting via video conference—the use of video conferencing, at least for the near future, should be the exception rather than the norm. Especially in the setting of examinations and interviews, the nuances of a person’s expression and voice are much stronger in face-to-face settings, and both the person being examined and the other persons present will be best served with an in-person atmosphere. Video meetings are more useful once a relationship has been established.
- Synodical deputies have been advised in the past that their physical presence is highly recommended where classis deliberation needs to
occur. Yet there are certainly cases where routine matters such as approving a clearly presented job description, or a noncontroversial release of a pastor, or the retirement of a pastor can be done via video conference, or conference call, or email.

- Where distance and cost factors are prohibitive, and where a classis is of a unified mind to experiment, video conferencing may be a useful tool, especially in the first few examples described above. Such experimenting may indeed result in experiencing a learning curve that may bless the rest of the denomination.

- Any successful experiment and use of video-conference technology will depend on the following:
  - having adequate and experienced technical support available at the time of the classis meeting
  - ascertaining beforehand that the connections, bandwidth, and equipment will be suitable in advance of the meeting; online participants will also need to test their equipment ahead of time to ensure that the technology parameters will be adequate
  - anticipating and planning for the technical ability to facilitate questions from the assembly, and for managing any needed periods of executive session
  - assigning the technical functions (managing connections, chat questions, etc.) to someone at the meeting who does not already have responsibility for chairing or recording the minutes of the meeting

It should be noted that our CRCNA IT staff have gathered suggestions for well-functioning video-conference meetings and have placed them in a Network article: “Top 6 Tips for Improving Video Conferencing” (see network.crcna.org/church-communications/top-6-tips-improving-video-conferencing).

VI. Tools Available for Administering the Office of Commissioned Pastor

The Candidacy Committee website of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (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.

Section Five on the resource site offers useful documents in this regard. Each document is numbered in the upper right-hand corner for easy identification. The following list of documents is available as of June 2019:

**Section Five: Commissioned Pastor Resources (Church Order Art. 23-24)**

- **5.0.1 Commissioned Pastor Handbook**
- **Basic Tools**
  - **5.1.1 CP – Process Overview**
  - **5.1.2 CP – Checklist for Appointing and Ordaining a Commissioned Pastor**
  - **5.1.3 CP – Application Form for Classes in Appointing a Commissioned Pastor**
  - **5.1.4 CP – Learning Plan Design Template**
VII. Invitation to Share Resources and Concerns regarding the Office of Commissioned Pastor

The Candidacy Committee is well aware that our use of the office of commissioned pastor is relatively new and evolving. Although by definition the office has a local focus and the responsibility for the office needs to remain localized, the Candidacy Committee is open to serving the CRC, its congregations, and its classes as a resource center that can help gather and distribute ideas, practices, and concerns regarding this office. This handbook is one effort at performing that task. If you have any further questions or suggestions that may be of benefit to local congregations and classes, please contact the Candidacy office (candidacy@crcna.org). The director will compile a record of the suggestions and concerns and pass them along to other ministries as appropriate.

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