



To: Congregations and Classes of the CRCNA
From: Steven Timmermans, Executive Director
Date: July 2016
RE: Synod's Adoption of Changes to Church Order Articles 82-84 and Their Supplements

In 1992, a study committee about abuse within the CRC made its report to synod. The report included an acknowledgement that church councils and church leaders had not always responded well to allegations of abuse. As a result, in 1994, the Office of Abuse Prevention, now known as Safe Church Ministry, was formed and began its work. Safe Church trains team members, and provides online resources, to equip congregations in abuse awareness, prevention, and response. Now, decades later, church councils and church leaders continue to struggle with providing an effective response to allegations of abuse. And it's no wonder—abuse is not something we are prepared to discuss. And when allegations of abuse arise, they are complicated; it can seem like trying to untangle a spider's web. Church Order becomes vitally important, as it provides guidance to churches and councils about how to respond in these difficult situations. Additional resources are also available from Safe Church Ministry (crcna.org/SafeChurch).

Studies show that church leader misconduct continues to be more widespread than most people realize; and the impacts are devastating for individuals as well as church communities. Synod 2015 responded to Overture 8, instructing the Board of Trustees to ask Safe Church Ministry, along with others, to review and recommend possible revisions to Church Order Articles 83-84 and their Supplements.

Earlier this month synod received a series of recommendations and adopted them. The changes—effective immediately—are attached. Let me close this memo by bringing three things to your attention.

1. You'll find in these changes reference to power differentials, a key concept forwarded in the original overture and one that Synod 2015 took special note of when it asked for possible revisions.
2. In adopting the report and these recommendations, Synod 2016 decided to refer this report, including the adopted recommendations, to the churches for study and for awareness. The report can be found in the *Acts of Synod 2016*, pp. 699-717, to be accessible on the CRC website **August 1**, at www.crcna.org/SynodResources. Unlike some synodical requests for study that ask for responses to be returned prior to a forthcoming decision, this request is for study that will build greater awareness within your congregation. Even though no response has been requested, I trust your congregation will discover whether it needs to develop internal responses.
3. Synod asked me to communicate these changes to the churches and classes directly—separate from the summary letter of decisions of Synod 2016—in order to emphasize the importance of these changes.

Dr. Steven R. Timmermans
Executive Director
616-224-0832
executive-director@crcna.org

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids MI 49508-1407
616-241-1691
616-224-5895 fax

3475 Mainway
PO Box 5070 STN LCD I
Burlington ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
905-336-8344 fax

In closing, please know that it is my fervent prayer, as I trust it is with all, that you will find no need for this information. But if the situation arises, I believe that the Holy Spirit will use these measures in a way that will build the church, providing a safe sanctuary for all.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven Timmermans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Steven Timmermans
Executive Director of the CRCNA

Synod 2016 Decisions re Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84

Changes to Church Order Supplement, Articles 82-84

New sections a and b (the former sections a-g remain unchanged and have been relettered as sections c-i):

a. *An administrative leave may be imposed without prejudice by the council in order to investigate allegations of deviation from sound doctrine or godly conduct. Compensation and benefits would continue, and any duties to be performed during the leave would be specified by the council. All suspensions and administrative leaves are temporary.*

Ground: This statement offers administrative leave as an option for cases in which an allegation has been made but guilt or innocence has not yet been established. In addition, it explains the temporary nature of these actions.

b. *Officebearers who confess to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct will be considered guilty of serious deviation from godly conduct and worthy of discipline.*

Ground: This statement acknowledges the serious nature of sexual misconduct by a church leader and the damaging impacts it brings to individuals and to church communities.

A new section j:

j. *When a minister resigns under discipline or to avoid discipline, he or she should be released from office per Article 14-c, noting that the provisions of Supplement, Article 14-b also apply to Article 14-c, especially in these situations.*
—Cf. Supplement, Article 14-c

Ground: This addition provides a cross-reference to Supplement, Article 14 and will aid churches in dealing with situations of resignation.

New Supplement, Article 83

One of the key dynamics in considering abuse of office is the imbalance and misuse of power. The power inherent in the role of officebearer represents a sacred trust and must not be misused.

Ground: Power is a foundational dynamic in ministry and in other professional relationships. Adding this statement to the Supplement will help ensure that the power dynamic is understood and is not ignored in considering these issues.

Changes to Church Order Supplement, Article 84

A new "Examples" paragraph replaces the earlier paragraph under section 1, d:
Examples of related ungodly conduct include, but are not limited to, participation in pornography, engaging in sexual contact in return for payment or any other favor, or voyeuristic behavior, displays of sexually offensive material, suggestive gestures and remarks, and other sexually intimidating behavior.

Ground: The committee believes that this paragraph should be more comprehensive and be updated to more current language.

A definition of sexual misconduct replaces the previous Note under section 2 (indicated by italics): Sexual misconduct should never be viewed as a lesser offense than sexual abuse. Rather, sexual misconduct is broader than sexual abuse, so sexual abuse is a subset of sexual misconduct (cf. BOT Supplement I, Appendix B, section II, B. Differentiate sexual misconduct from sexual abuse).

The “Guidelines for Handling Abuse Allegations Against a Church Leader” adopted by Synod 2010 (cf. Agenda for Synod 2010, pp. 503-504) define sexual misconduct as

- exploiting or grooming (preparing) a minor or an adult—regardless of consent or circumstances—for the purpose of sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy, with the result of either sexual gratification or power and control over the minor or adult;*
- unwelcome touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between co-workers, co-volunteers; or*
- sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between a supervisor and a subordinate who serve together in a church program or church ministry.*

Ground: The most recent definition of sexual misconduct approved by synod should be used.

The following additional Note is now included:

Note: These rules that prevent the reinstatement of deposed officebearers in particular situations also apply to those ministers who have been released by way of Article 14 and have been declared “dismissed” or “in the status of one deposed” due to those situations.

Ground: If these former officebearers confessed to or are determined to be guilty of sexual misconduct, as per the parameters defined in the Supplement to Article 84, they should not be allowed to serve again in office.

New Supplement, Article 14-e

The provisions of Supplement, Article 84 related to reinstatement of ministers who have been deposed also apply to ministers who resign under discipline or to avoid discipline and later seek reordination by way of Article 14-e.

Ground: Just as deposed officebearers are not allowed reinstatement to office in certain circumstances related to sexual misconduct, so also ministers who resign from office in certain cases of sexual misconduct should not be allowed to be reordained in those same circumstances. This procedure is included in the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* as a recommended practice.