

**Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America
Tenth Edition, Ratified AD 2024**

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Ecclesiastical Offices (Articles 1-15);
- Ecclesiastical Assemblies (Articles 16-36);
- Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks (Articles 37-50);
- Ecclesiastical Discipline (Articles 51-66).
- Appendix 1 – Guidelines for a Thoroughly Reformed Theological Education
- Appendix 2 – Guidelines for a Licensure Exam
- Appendix 3 – Guidelines for a Candidacy Exam
- Appendix 4 – Guidelines for an Ordination Exam
- Appendix 5 – Guidelines for a Colloquium Doctum
- Appendix 6 – Example of Procedure for Examinations
- Appendix 7 – Guidelines for Appeals
- Appendix 8 – Pastoral Advice Regarding Membership Departures (8.4 amended Oct. 2022)
- Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government

Introduction

We as a federation of churches declare complete subjection and obedience to the Word of God delivered to us in the inspired, infallible and inerrant book of Holy Scripture. We believe and are fully persuaded that the Reformed Confessions do fully agree with this Word of God and therefore do subscribe to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. We acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the supreme and only Head of the Church. This headship is exercised in the churches by His Word and Spirit through the God-ordained offices, for the sake of the purity of doctrine and the holiness of life. The churches of the federation, although distinct, voluntarily display their unity by means of a common confession and church order. This is expressed as they cooperate and exercise mutual concern for one another. Since we desire to honor the apostolic command that in the churches all things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40), we order our ecclesiastical relations and activities in the following articles covered under the following divisions:

- Ecclesiastical Offices (Articles 1-15);
- Ecclesiastical Assemblies (Articles 16-36);
- Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks (Articles 37-50);
- Ecclesiastical Discipline (Articles 51-66).

I. Ecclesiastical Offices

Article 1 – The Three Offices

Christ has instituted three offices in the church: minister of the Word, elder and deacon.

Article 2 – The Duties of the Minister

The duties belonging to the office of minister of the Word consist of continuing in prayer and in the ministry of the Word, administering the sacraments, catechizing the youth, and assisting the elders in the shepherding and discipline of the congregation.

Article 3 – Preparation for the Ministry

Competent men should be urged to study for the ministry of the Word. A man who is a member of a church of the federation and who aspires to the ministry must evidence genuine godliness to his Consistory, which shall assume supervision of all aspects of his training, including his licensure to exhort, and assure that he receives a thoroughly reformed theological education. The council of his church should help him ensure that his financial needs are met. *(See Appendix 1 and 2)*

Article 4 – The Candidacy Examination

At the conclusion of such training, a student must approach his Consistory to become a candidate for the ministry of the Word, which shall arrange for his examination at a meeting of the classis of which his Consistory is a participant. No one shall be declared a candidate for the ministry until he has sustained an examination at a meeting of this classis, in the presence of his Consistory, of his Christian faith and experience, of his call to the ministry, of his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, both in the original languages and in English translations, of the Three Forms of Unity, of Christian doctrine, Christian ethics and church history; of the Church Order, and of his knowledge and aptitude with regard to the particular duties and responsibilities of the minister of the Word, especially the preparation and preaching of sermons. Upon sustaining this exam in the presence of his Consistory and with the concurring advice of the delegates to this meeting of classis, his Consistory shall declare him a candidate for the office of minister of the Word. *(See Appendix 3 and 6)*

Article 5 – Candidacy from Outside the Federation

A man who is not a member of a church of the federation who seeks candidacy shall place himself under the supervision of a Consistory which shall make provision for his candidacy examination. *(See Appendix 3 and 6)*

Article 6 – Calling a Candidate

The lawful calling to the office of minister of those who have not previously been in that office consists of:

First, the election by the council of one who has been declared a candidate according to the regulations prescribed herein, after having prayed and received the advice of the congregation;

Second, the examination of both doctrine and life, which shall be conducted to the satisfaction of the delegates to the classis of which the calling church is a participant, according to the regulations adopted by the federation *(see Appendix 4 and 6)*;

Finally, the public ordination before the congregation, which shall take place with appropriate instructions, admonitions, prayers and subscription to the Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form of Subscription, followed with the laying on of hands by the ministers who are present and by the elders of the congregation, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

Article 7 – Calling a Minister within the Federation

Those who are already ordained ministers within the federation may be called to another congregation in a manner consistent with the above rules, without the examination or the laying on of hands. Any minister receiving a call shall consult with his current council regarding that call. He may accept the call only with their consent. Upon receipt of proper credentials from the church he last served, he shall be installed with the use of the appropriate liturgical form and shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form of Subscription.

Article 8 – Calling a Minister from Outside the Federation

A minister who has been ordained in a church outside the federation shall not be admitted to serve in a church within the federation without an examination conducted to the satisfaction of the delegates to the classis, according to the regulations adopted by the federation, whereupon the classis shall declare him eligible to be called by the sponsoring Consistory. *(See Appendix 5 and 6)*

Article 9 – The Term of Service

A minister of the Word is bound to the service of the churches for life and may change the nature of his labor only for weighty reasons, upon approval by his council with the concurring advice of classis.

Article 10 – Support and Emeritation of Ministers

Each church is to provide honorably for the minister of the Word and his family while he is serving that church, and should contribute toward the retirement and disability needs of its minister. In the event of a minister's death, adequate provision shall be made for the support of his dependent wife and children.

A minister who has emeritated due to age or who is unable to perform the duties of his office due to age, sickness, or other personal disabilities, shall retain the honor and title of Minister of the Word, and his ministerial credentials shall remain with the church he last served, which shall provide honorably for his support, with the assistance of the churches of classis if necessary.

The emeritation of a minister shall take place with the approval of the council, and with the concurring advice of the classis. After emeritation a minister's credentials may follow a membership transfer but only with the consent of both councils that are involved.

In the event of a dissolution of the church to which the minister (emeritus or otherwise) is officially bound, the Consistory and the minister shall promptly request the advice of classis for the purpose of having his credentials held by another church of the classis in a manner consistent with Article 7 of the Church Order.

Article 11 – Exceptional Release of a Minister

When for weighty reasons and in exceptional circumstances a pastoral relationship has been irreconcilably broken, and a minister of the Word or the council of the congregation he is serving desires to dissolve their pastoral relationship, that dissolution may occur only when all the following conditions have been met:

- a. this dissolution shall not occur for delinquency in doctrine or life, which would warrant church discipline;
- b. this dissolution shall occur only when attempted reconciliation, with the involvement of both the church visitors and the classis, has been unsuccessful, resulting in an intolerable situation;
- c. this dissolution shall occur only with the concurring advice of the classis;
- d. the council's provision for the adequate congregational support of the minister and his family shall require the concurring advice of the classis.

The council of the congregation with which the pastoral relationship is dissolved shall announce his eligibility for call. This eligibility shall be valid for no more than two years, whereafter he shall be honorably released from office.

Article 12 – The Nomination of Elders and Deacons

The council shall present to the congregation nominations for the offices of elder and deacon. Only male communicant members who meet the biblical requirements for office and indicate their agreement with the Form of Subscription shall be nominated by the council. Prior to making nominations, the council may give the congregation opportunity to direct attention to suitable men.

Article 13 – The Election, Term, and Ordination / Installation of Elders and Deacons

Elders and deacons shall be elected to a term specified by the Consistory, and upon subscribing to the Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form of Subscription, shall be ordained or installed with the use of the appropriate liturgical form before entering upon their work.

Article 14 – The Duties of Elders

The duties belonging to the office of elder consist of continuing in prayer and ruling the church of Christ according to the principles taught in Scripture, in order that purity of doctrine and holiness of life may be practiced. They shall see to it that their fellow-elders, the minister(s) and the deacons faithfully discharge their offices. They are to maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments, assist in catechizing the youth, promote God-centered schooling, visit the members of the congregation according to their needs, engage in family visiting, exercise discipline in the congregation, actively promote the work of evangelism and missions, and ensure that all things be done decently and in order.

Article 15 – The Duties of Deacons

The duties belonging to the office of deacon consist of continuing in prayer and supervising the works of Christian mercy among the congregation; acquainting themselves with congregational needs; exhorting members of the congregation to show mercy; gathering and managing the offerings of God's people in Christ's name, and distributing these offerings according to need; and encouraging and comforting with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's mercy. Needs of those outside the congregation, especially of other believers, should also be considered as resources permit. The deacons shall ordinarily meet at least once a month to transact the business pertaining to their office, and they shall render an account of their work to the Consistory.

II. Ecclesiastical Assemblies

Article 16 – The Three Assemblies

Among churches belonging to the federation, three assemblies shall be recognized: the Consistory, the classis and the synod. Classis and synod are broader assemblies that exist only when meeting by delegation. Only the Consistory is a continuing body.

Article 17 – The Matters and Manner of Assemblies

In all assemblies only ecclesiastical matters shall be transacted, only in an ecclesiastical manner.

Article 18 – Prayer in Assemblies

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with prayer.

Article 19 – The Officers and Order of Assemblies

In every assembly there shall be a chairman, assisted by a vice-chairman. It is the chairman's duty to state and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with, and to ensure that the stipulations of the Church Order are followed and that every delegate observes due order and decorum in speaking. In all delegated assemblies the above-named functions shall cease when the assembly adjourns.

Article 20 – The Duties and Supervision of Clerks

In every assembly there shall be a clerk whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of the proceedings. A clerk serving a broader assembly shall keep a record of all decisions of the assembly, which shall be released publicly in a timely manner. In the broader assemblies the clerk shall serve for a term to be specified by the body. Between broader assemblies, the clerk shall perform his duties under the supervision of the next convening Consistory.

Article 21 – The Consistory

In each congregation there shall be a Consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders, which shall ordinarily meet at least once a month. The Consistory is the only assembly in the church(es) whose decisions possess direct authority within the congregation, since the Consistory receives its authority directly from Christ, and thereby is directly accountable to Christ.

Article 22 – Organizing a New Church

When a church is organized within the federation, this shall take place under the supervision of a neighboring Consistory and with the concurring advice of the classis.

Article 23 – The Council

When the deacons meet together with the Consistory, the body is referred to as the council. The council shall exercise such duties described in the Church Order or such duties delegated to it by the Consistory. The council shall operate under the authority of the Consistory.

Article 24 – Parity and Unity of Congregations

Although congregations are distinct and do not have dominion over each other, they ought to preserve fellowship with each other because they are all united with Christ, the spiritual and governing Head of the church. Congregations manifest this unity when they meet together in the broader assemblies.

Article 25 – Delegates and Matters of Broader Assemblies

Those delegated to the broader assemblies shall be seated only with properly signed credentials, and each delegate shall have only one vote. In the broader assemblies only those matters that could not be settled in the narrower assemblies, or that pertain to the churches of the broader assembly in common, shall be considered. All such matters shall originate with a Consistory and be considered by classis before being considered by synod. No broader assembly shall have the authority to depose an office-bearer or otherwise exercise church discipline, since this authority belongs to the Consistory.

Article 26 – Classis

A classis shall consist of neighboring churches whose Consistories delegate two of their members with proper credentials to convene at a time and place determined at the previous classis meeting, within the next twelve months. If three Consistories in the classis deem it necessary that a classis convene earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur. The consistories shall take turns providing a chairman and acting as the convening consistory.

Furthermore, the classis shall inquire of each Consistory whether Consistory and deacons' meetings are held, the Word of God is faithfully preached, the sacraments are faithfully administered, church discipline is exercised, the poor are cared for, and God-centered schooling is promoted; and whether the Consistory needs the advice and help of the classis for the proper government of the church.

Each classis shall inform the other classes regarding matters of mutual concern by forwarding its complete minutes to them in a timely manner.

Article 27 – Church Visitors

Each Consistory of the classis shall invite two experienced office-bearers appointed by classis, either two ministers or a minister and an elder, to visit the council once every two years, who shall give account of their visit to the classis. These visitors shall inquire whether the office-bearers faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe in all things the adopted order, and properly promote as much as lies in them, by word and deed, the edification of the congregation, including the youth, to the end that these visitors may fraternally admonish those office-bearers who have in anything been negligent, and may by their advice and assistance help direct all things unto the peace, edification and greatest profit of the churches.

Article 28 – Synod

The churches shall meet as a synod at least once every three years. Each Consistory shall delegate two of its members to this meeting. Each synod shall determine a time and place for the subsequent synod and shall authorize a Consistory to convene that synod. If a majority of the classes deem it necessary that a

synod meet earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur.

Article 29 – Appeals by Assemblies

If any assembly complains of having been wronged by the decision of another assembly, it shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. All decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order. Consistories who are convinced that they cannot comply with a decision of a broader assembly because it does not agree with the Word of God cannot be compelled to do so, provided that they state to the classis the points at which the decision of the assembly disagrees with the Word of God. If a Consistory refuses to comply with the final decision of the synod and a subsequent synod rules by majority vote that submission in the matter is essential for the unity of the churches, the congregation is no longer eligible for membership in the federation. *(See Appendix 7)*

Article 30 – Withdrawing from the Federation

Having availed herself of the avenues for appeal, a church through its Consistory may withdraw from the federation at any time by submitting a written statement to the classis to which the church belongs.

Article 31 – Appeals by Church Members

If any church member complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a narrower assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. An individual's appeal must proceed first to the Consistory, and only then, if necessary, to a broader assembly. Until a decision is made upon such appeal, the church member shall conform to the determination and judgment already passed. *(See Appendix 7)*

Article 32 – Admitting a Church

Any church may be admitted into the federation upon the recommendation of a consistory and provided that its office-bearers subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity and agree with this Church Order. Any such church shall be provisionally accepted into membership in the federation by the classis, pending ratification by the following synod. Any of these office-bearers who are ministers shall be examined before being declared a minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America, according to the regulations adopted by the federation. *(See Appendix 5 and 6)*

Article 33 – Property

Whereas it is the sole right of a congregation to hold title to its property, the ownership of all property, real and personal, held by a congregation of this federation is vested exclusively in that congregation, and title shall be taken in its name alone. Each congregation shall have exclusive control over all of its temporalities, nor shall the exercise of its property rights, through the decisions of its Consistory, be subject to the supervision of the broader assemblies, nor shall the broader assemblies have the right to revise those decisions. The broader assemblies of the federation shall not attempt to secure possession of the property of any congregation, whether or not such congregation remains within, chooses to withdraw from, or is removed from the federation.

Article 34 – Ecumenical Relations on a Church Level

Churches are encouraged to pursue ecumenical relations with Reformed congregations outside of the federation which manifest the marks of the true church and demonstrate faithful allegiance to Scripture as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity. Each church is to give an account of its ecumenical activities to classis. Fraternal activities between congregations which need not be reported to classis may include occasional pulpit exchanges, table fellowship, as well as other means of manifesting unity.

Article 35 – Ecumenical Relations on a Classis Level

The churches of a classis may, as a group, enter into ecumenical relations with an individual church or group of churches such as a classis or presbytery. The classis shall keep the federation informed of such ecumenical relations, thereby honoring our federative bond.

Article 36 – Ecumenical Relations on a Federation Level

The federation may enter into ecumenical relations with other federations by synodical decision. Such a decision with respect to ecclesiastical fellowship shall require ratification by a majority of the synodically-approved Consistories in the federation. Such a decision with respect to church union shall require a two-thirds vote of a synod and shall require ratification by two-thirds of the synodically-approved Consistories in the federation.

III. Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks

Article 37 – Corporate Worship and Special Services

The Consistory shall call the congregation together for corporate worship twice on each Lord's Day. Special services may be called in observance of Christmas Day, Good Friday, Ascension Day, a day of prayer, the national Thanksgiving Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, as well as in times of great distress or blessing. Attention should also be given to Easter and Pentecost on their respective Lord's Days.

Article 38 – Regulation and Nature of the Worship Service

The Consistory shall regulate the worship services, which shall be conducted according to the principles taught in God's Word: namely, that the preaching of the Word have the central place, that confession of sins be made, praise and thanksgiving in song and prayer be given, and gifts of gratitude be offered.

Article 39 – Psalms and Hymns

The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.

Article 40– Catechetical Preaching

At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, with special attention given to the Heidelberg Catechism by treating its Lord's Days in sequence.

Article 41 – Baptism of Covenant Children

The covenant of God shall be signified and sealed to the children of communicant members in good standing through holy baptism administered by the minister of the Word in a service of corporate worship, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. The Consistory shall properly supervise the administration of the sacrament, which shall be administered as soon as feasible.

Article 42 – Baptism of Adults

Adults who have not been baptized shall receive holy baptism upon public profession of faith in a service of corporate worship, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form, and be thus received as communicant members. They shall be obliged to persevere in the fellowship of the church, not only in hearing God's Word, but also in partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Article 43 – Public Profession of Faith

Baptized members who have been instructed in the faith and who have come to the years of understanding shall be encouraged to make public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Those who wish to

profess their faith shall be interviewed to the satisfaction of the Consistory concerning doctrine and life, and their public profession of faith shall occur in a service of corporate worship after adequate announcement to the congregation and with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. Thereby baptized members shall receive all the privileges of membership in the congregation and shall be obliged to persevere in the fellowship of the church, not only in hearing God's Word, but also in partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Article 44 – Reception from Outside the Federation

Persons coming from denominations other than those with which we have ecclesiastical fellowship shall be received as communicant members only after the Consistory has examined them concerning doctrine and life. The Consistory shall determine in each case whether public profession of faith shall be required. Their names shall be announced to the congregation two weeks prior to reception, in order that the congregation may have opportunity, if necessary, to bring lawful objections to the attention of the Consistory.

Article 45 – Admission to the Lord's Supper

The Consistory shall supervise participation at the Lord's Supper. No member shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper who has not first made public profession of faith and is not living a godly life. Visitors may be admitted provided that, as much as possible, the Consistory is assured of their biblical church membership, of their proper profession of faith, and of their godly walk.

Article 46 – Administration of the Lord's Supper

The Consistory shall ordinarily administer the Lord's Supper at least every three months in a service of corporate worship, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. This administration shall conform to the teaching of God's Word and the regulations of ecclesiastical order, in such a manner as is most conducive to the edification of the congregation.

Article 47 – The Church's Mission Calling

The church's missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted. When this task is to be performed beyond the field of an organized church, it is to be carried out by ministers of the Word set apart to this labor, who are called, supported, and supervised by their Consistories. A local Consistory shall seek the advice of classis before sending a foreign or home missionary to a field or removing a foreign or home missionary from a field. The churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries.

Article 48 – Marriage

Scripture teaches that marriage is designed to be a lifelong, monogamous covenantal union between one man and one woman. Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care who are considering marriage to marry in the Lord. Christian marriages shall be solemnized with appropriate admonitions, promises, and prayers, under the regulation of the Consistory, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. Ministers shall not solemnize marriages that conflict with the Word of God.

Article 49 – Funerals

A Christian funeral is neither a service of corporate worship nor subject to ecclesiastical government, but is a family matter, and should be conducted accordingly.

Article 50 – The Church Records

The Consistory shall maintain accurate membership records which include names and dates of baptisms, professions of faith, marriages and deaths of members of the congregation.

IV. Ecclesiastical Discipline

Article 51 – The Nature and Purpose of Discipline

Since Christian discipline is spiritual in nature and exempts no one from trial or punishment by the civil authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censure, that God may be glorified, that the sinner may be reconciled with God, the church and his neighbor, and that offense may be removed from the church of Christ.

Article 52 – Private Sins

In case anyone errs in doctrine or offends in conduct, as long as the sin is of a private character and does not give public offense, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.

Article 53 – Private Repentance

Secret sins from which the sinner repents after being admonished in love by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be made known to the Consistory.

Article 54 – Consistory Involvement

If anyone has been admonished in love in the presence of two or three witnesses concerning a secret sin and does not repent, or if he has committed a public sin, the matter shall be made known to the Consistory.

Article 55 – The Discipline of a Member

A communicant member whose sin has been properly made known to the consistory, and who then obstinately rejects the loving admonitions of the consistory, shall, in agreement with the Word of God, be subject to church discipline in the following three stages:

A. Silent Censure:

A member who persists in sin shall be suspended by the consistory from all the privileges of church membership, including using the sacraments. Such suspension shall not be made public by the consistory.

B. Public Discipline:

If the silent censure and subsequent admonitions do not bring about repentance, and before proceeding to excommunication, the sinner's impenitence shall be made known to the congregation by indicating both the member's offense and failure to heed scriptural admonitions, so that the congregation may speak with and pray for this member. Public discipline shall be done with the use of the appropriate liturgical form, in the following three steps, the interval between which shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.

1. In the first step, the name of the sinner need not be mentioned so that he may be somewhat spared.
2. In the second step, the consistory shall seek the advice of classis before proceeding, whereupon the member's name shall be mentioned to the congregation.
3. In the third step, the congregation shall be informed that unless there is repentance, the member will be excommunicated from the church on a specified date.

C. Excommunication: If these steps of public discipline do not bring about repentance, but rather harden the sinner in his ways, the consistory shall proceed to the extreme remedy, namely excommunication, in agreement with the Word of God and with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

Article 56 – The Discipline of a Member Due to Resignation

In the event a member seeks to resign while under church discipline, the consistory need not proceed further with the aforementioned three steps of discipline while they warn the member against resignation. If the member remains impenitent and persists in resigning, the consistory shall seek the advice of classis before acting to exclude him from membership. The consistory need not seek advice if classis has previously advised that it may proceed to the second step of public discipline. Having been advised by classis, the consistory may proceed to exclude from membership the one who is forsaking Christ's church. The consistory should notify the person of this action, admonishing him and calling him to repentance. The

consistory should also inform the congregation of this action and solicit their prayers for the former member. (See Appendix 8)

Article 57 – The Restoration of a Communicant Member

The restoration of a sinner whose sins are public, or have become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place upon sufficient evidence of repentance, in such manner as the Consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of the church. Whether in particular cases this should take place in public shall, when there is a difference of opinion about it within the Consistory, be decided with the advice of two neighboring consistories of the classis.

Article 58 – The Readmission of Disciplined Communicant Members

Whenever any former communicant member who has been excluded or excommunicated desires to become reconciled to the church by way of penitence, it shall be announced to the congregation in order that, insofar as no one can allege anything against him to the contrary, he may, with profession of his repentance, be publicly readmitted with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.

Article 59 – The Exclusion of a Mature Baptized Member

Mature baptized members who are delinquent in doctrine or life shall be admonished and, if they persist, shall be excluded from the church of Christ. The Consistory shall seek the advice of classis before proceeding to such exclusion. (*See Appendix 8*)

Article 60 – The Readmission of Disciplined Baptized Members

Whenever any baptized member who has been excluded from the church desires to be reconciled to the church by way of penitence, he shall be readmitted only upon public profession of faith.

Article 61 – The Suspension and Deposition of an Office-Bearer

When a minister, elder, or deacon has committed a public or gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions of the Consistory, he shall be suspended from his office by his own Consistory with the concurring advice of two neighboring Consistories. Should he harden himself in his sin, or when the sin committed is of such a nature that he cannot continue in office, he shall be deposed by his Consistory with the concurring advice of classis.

Article 62 – Gross Sins

Included among the gross sins, but not to the exclusion of all others, which are worthy of suspension or deposition from office, are these: false doctrine or heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, filthy lucre, in short, all sins and gross offenses which render the perpetrators infamous before the world and which in any other member of the church would occasion church discipline.

Article 63 – Mutual Censure

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall exercise mutual censure regularly, whereby they exhort one another in an edifying manner regarding the discharge of their offices.

Article 64 – Departure of Members

Those who seek the transfer of their membership to another congregation within the federation or one in ecclesiastical fellowship shall request in writing that their current Consistory send to the receiving Consistory an official letter including pertinent membership information and testimony concerning doctrine and life, requesting the receiving Consistory to accept them under its spiritual care. The Consistory may release members in order to affiliate with congregations not in ecclesiastical fellowship when the Consistory judges that doing so may aid the spiritual growth of the members. The Consistory may, with concurring

advice from classis, erase the membership of those with whom they have not been able to communicate for at least two years. (*See Appendix 8.*)

Article 65 – Parity of Consistories and Office-Bearers

No consistory shall in any way lord it over other consistories, and no office-bearers shall lord it over other office-bearers.

Article 66 – The Observance and Revision of the Church Order

These articles, relating to the lawful order of the church, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they ought to be observed diligently. If it be found that God may be more honored and the churches better served by changing any article, this shall require a two-thirds vote of a synod and shall be ratified by two-thirds of the synodically-approved Consistories of the federation, after which they shall take effect. The time-frame for ratification shall be determined by synod.

Appendix 1
Guidelines for a Thoroughly Reformed Theological Education

1. Old Testament Biblical Languages and Studies
 - 1.1 Language competency as demonstrated by a working knowledge of Hebrew in all genres and literary categories of the Old Testament.
 - 1.2 Knowledge of Old Testament background and canonicity; hermeneutics/textual criticism.
 - 1.3 Course in the main sections of the Old Testament: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Poetry, and Prophets.
2. New Testament Biblical Languages and Studies
 - 2.1 Language competency as demonstrated by a working knowledge of Koine Greek in all genres and literary categories of the New Testament.
 - 2.2 Knowledge of New Testament background and canonicity; hermeneutics/textual criticism.
 - 2.3 Course in the main sections of the New Testament: Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, and Revelation.
3. Church History
 - 3.1 Courses which cover the Ancient, Medieval, Reformation, and Modern Church, and URCNA Federational history.
4. Systematics and Apologetics
 - 4.1 Courses in the six loci: Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology.
 - 4.2 Courses in symbolics and the study of the Reformed confessions, with an emphasis on the Three Forms of Unity.
 - 4.3 At least one course in Ethics.
 - 4.4 At least one course in Apologetics
5. Practical Theology
 - 5.1 Four preaching courses, including a course in catechism preaching.
 - 5.2 Courses in teaching, catechetics, counseling, pastoral care, evangelism, polity, missions.
 - 5.3 Church polity/ecclesiology (both theory and application of the URCNA Church Order).
 - 5.4 Successful completion of at least ten weeks of pastoral internship, supervised through his home consistory or his theological seminary.

Appendix 2
Guidelines for a Licensure Exam

1. CREDENTIALS

- a. A seminary faculty recommendation
- b. A brief statement of personal faith and confessional commitment

2. PROCEDURE

- a. The prospective licentiate must apply to his Consistory for the exam, securing the required credentials. At least thirty days before the exam, the Consistory is to announce publicly its intention to examine the prospective licentiate, providing opportunity for other Consistories to render observation and/or objections.
- b. The prospective licentiate must be examined by his Consistory, who must make known that the licentiate has sustained his licensure exam.
- c. An exhorting license is normally valid for one year, and extension may be requested annually in writing and may require another interview.

3. CONTENT

- a. The prospective licentiate must submit two written sermons for review by his Consistory.
- b. The oral exam should investigate the following specific areas:
 - first, the licentiate's godly walk;
 - second, his commitment to the Reformed faith;
 - third, his understanding of public worship;
 - and fourth, matters of exegetical and homiletical method.

Appendix 3

Guidelines for a Candidacy Exam

1. CREDENTIALS

- a. A recommendation from the prospective candidate's council
- b. A medical evaluation of health
- c. A diploma certifying reception of a Master of Divinity degree or an equivalent academic degree
- d. A transcript of all seminary grades
- e. A statement of testimony from the prospective candidate

2. PROCEDURE

- a. The prospective candidate's Consistory must invite classis to participate in a candidacy exam.
- b. The inviting Consistory must circulate copies of the required credentials among the Consistories of classis.
- c. The inviting Consistory must make known that the candidate has sustained his candidacy exam and is available for call to the churches.
- d. A declaration by the consistory that the candidate has sustained the exam shall be made based upon each specific area of the exam having received a particular vote of approbation from the consistory, along with the delegates to classis.
- e. If the candidacy exam is sustained, and should the candidate accept a call within the same classis, the ordination exam is ordinarily waived, to avoid duplication of work within the classis. Taking note of this possibility, delegates hearing the candidacy exam should determine whether the performance is sufficient to warrant such a waiver.

3. CONTENT

- a. The prospective candidate must submit three written sermons for evaluation. Two of these must be on an assigned Old Testament text and an assigned New Testament text. The third sermon must be a catechism sermon on a Lord's Day or question and answer of his choosing. One of these sermons must be preached in a public worship service.
- b. The two areas to be covered in this exam are (1) biblical and confessional commitment, and (2) ministerial competence. The former regards the prospective candidate's knowledge of and loyalty to Scripture and the Confessions; the latter investigates his theological and ministerial knowledge and ability. This exam should, therefore, investigate the following specific areas:
 - (1) Practica: the prospective candidate's personal and spiritual life, his relationship with the Lord, his growth in faith, his background and preparation for ministry, his understanding of ministerial office and his motives for seeking entrance thereto, liturgics, homiletics, pastoral care, evangelism.
 - (2) Bible knowledge: the prospective candidate's doctrine of Scripture, canonicity, hermeneutics, etc., and familiarity with the contents of the various books of the Bible.
 - (3) Biblical exegesis: an Old Testament and a New Testament passage should be assigned to the prospective candidate at least three weeks in advance (one of them in connection with one of his assigned sermons); the examiner should inquire concerning the meaning of the text and the prospective candidate's ability to work with the original languages and with a suitable exegetical method.
 - (4) Confessional knowledge: the history and content of the Three Forms of Unity, the prospective candidate's willingness to subscribe to them by signing the Form of Subscription.
 - (5) Reformed doctrine: the teaching of Scripture and the Confessions regarding the six major areas of Reformed doctrine (Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology).

- (6) Church history: the flow of church history, in terms of major persons, heresies, etc., with special emphasis on the Reformation and the history of the Reformed churches.
- (7) Ethics: the meaning and function of the Decalogue, also in relation to Christian motivation and character, and to contemporary moral problems.
- (8) Church Polity: the history and principles of Reformed church polity, and the content of the Church Order.

Appendix 4
Guidelines for an Ordination Exam

1. CREDENTIAL: A valid letter of call

2. PROCEDURE

- a. If the ordination exam would occur in the same classis in which the candidacy exam was sustained, then the ordination exam shall ordinarily be waived by the delegates hearing the candidacy exam. This shall apply to both a fully or partially sustained exam.
- b. The candidate's calling Consistory must invite classis to participate in an ordination exam.
- c. The candidate is to preach a sermon in a public worship service which he conducts under the auspices of his calling Consistory.
- d. A determination that the candidate has sustained this exam shall be made based upon each specific area of the exam having received a particular vote of approbation from the delegates to classis.
- e. Upon sustaining the exam, the classis shall declare the candidate eligible to be ordained as a minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America.

3. CONTENT

The two areas to be covered in this exam are (1) biblical and confessional commitment, and (2) ministerial competence. The former regards the prospective candidate's knowledge of and loyalty to Scripture and the Confessions; the latter investigates his theological and ministerial knowledge and ability. This exam should, therefore, investigate the following specific areas:

- (1) Practica: the prospective candidate's personal and spiritual life, his relationship with the Lord, his growth in faith, his background and preparation for ministry, his understanding of ministerial office and his motives for seeking entrance thereto, liturgics, homiletics, pastoral care, and evangelism.
- (2) Church polity: the history and principles of Reformed church polity, and the content of the Church Order.
- (3) Confessional knowledge: the history and content of the Three Forms of Unity, the candidate's willingness to subscribe to them by signing the Form of Subscription.
- (4) Reformed doctrine: the teaching of Scripture and the Confessions regarding the six major areas of Reformed doctrine (Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology).
- (5) Ethics: the meaning and function of the Decalogue, also in relation to Christian motivation and character, and to various contemporary moral problems.

Appendix 5

Guidelines for a Colloquium Doctum

For ministers who have been ordained outside the federation and are seeking to be admitted to serve a congregation within the federation (Article 8).

1. CREDENTIALS: two letters of request and information relating to the background and circumstances of the relationship, one from the minister to be examined and one from the sponsoring Consistory.
2. PROCEDURE
 - a. The sponsoring Consistory must invite classis to participate in a colloquium doctum.
 - b. The minister is to preach a sermon in a public worship service which he conducts under the auspices of his sponsoring Consistory.
 - c. A determination that the minister has sustained this exam shall be made based upon each specific area of the exam having received a particular vote of approbation from the delegates to classis.
 - d. Upon sustaining the colloquium doctum, the classis shall declare the minister eligible to be called by the sponsoring Consistory as a minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America.
3. CONTENT (see below)

For ministers who have been ordained outside the federation and are office-bearers of a congregation which has been provisionally accepted into the federation (Article 32).

1. CREDENTIALS: three letters of request and information relating to the background and circumstances of the relationship, one from the minister to be examined, one from the minister's consistory, and one from the sponsoring Consistory.
2. PROCEDURE
 - a. The sponsoring Consistory must invite classis to participate in a colloquium doctum.
 - b. The minister is to preach a sermon in a public worship service which he conducts under the auspices of the sponsoring Consistory.
 - c. Upon sustaining the colloquium doctum, the classis shall declare him a minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America.
3. CONTENT

The two areas to be covered in this exam are (1) biblical and confessional commitment, and (2) ministerial competence. The former regards the minister's knowledge of and loyalty to Scripture and the Confessions; the latter investigates his theological and ministerial knowledge and ability. This exam should, therefore, investigate the following specific areas:

 - (1) Practica: the minister's personal and spiritual life, his relationship with the Lord, his growth in faith, his background and preparation for ministry, his understanding of ministerial office and his motives for seeking entrance thereto, liturgics, homiletics, pastoral care, and evangelism.
 - (2) Church polity: the history and principles of Reformed church polity, and the content of the Church Order.
 - (3) Confessional knowledge: the history and content of the Three Forms of Unity, the minister's willingness to subscribe to them by signing the Form of Subscription.

- (4) Reformed doctrine: the teaching of Scripture and the Confessions regarding the six major areas of Reformed doctrine (Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology).
- (5) Ethics: the meaning and function of the Decalogue, also in relation to Christian motivation and character, and to various contemporary moral problems.

Appendix 6
Example of Procedure for Examinations

- A. For Candidacy Examinations:
1. Following the examination and the decision of the man's consistory, the delegates will enter executive session. The following motion will be made at the appropriate time: "We are satisfied that the examinee has sustained the _____ area of the examination."
 2. After discussion of each area, a vote will be taken. If the delegates are satisfied with all of the areas, the man may continue the process toward admission to the Ministry of the Word in the URCNA.
 3. If the delegates are not satisfied with any particular area(s) of the examination, the examinee may return to classis within 13 months to be examined in that/those area(s) only. He need not undergo the entire examination again if he returns within that time period.
- B. For Ordination Examinations and Colloquia Docta:
1. Following the examination, the delegates will enter executive session. The following motion will be made at the appropriate time: "We are satisfied that the examinee has sustained the _____ area of the examination."
 2. After discussion of each area, a vote will be taken. If the delegates are satisfied with all of the areas, the man may continue the process toward admission to the Ministry of the Word in the URCNA.
 3. If the delegates are not satisfied with any particular area(s) of the examination, the examinee may return to classis within 13 months to be examined in that/those area(s) only. He need not undergo the entire examination again if he returns within that time period.
- C. In the event that a man does not sustain an entire examination at classis:
1. The classis shall remain in the Executive Session declared for the purpose of discussing and voting on the examinee's performance in his examination.
 2. A delegate from the examinee's Consistory shall be sent to explain what is going to happen next (see #3 below), and accompany the examinee back into Executive Session and to the front of the assembly.
 3. The Chairman, on behalf of Classis, shall acknowledge and give thanks to God for the examinee's success by identifying that/those area(s) of the examination that he may have sustained; and encourage and instruct him in how he may proceed.
 4. The accompanying delegate from his Consistory shall offer a prayer of thanksgiving and supplication on behalf of the examinee.
 5. The Chairman, before ending Executive Session, shall ask the examinee if he would prefer to remain as an observer when General Session is resumed, or be excused from the Classis before the General Session is resumed.
 6. Upon resuming General Session, the Chairman shall announce the outcome of the examination and the broad outlines of the Classis' dealings with the examinee (see #3 above).

Appendix 7 **Guidelines for Appeals**

(also found as Appendix B in the *Regulations for Synodical Procedure*)

Introduction

In accord with *Church Order*, Articles 29 and 31, the following guidelines must be observed in preparing and adjudicating an appeal. These guidelines shall serve as the standard for admissibility of an appeal.

Definition of an Appeal

An appeal is a written complaint of having been wronged by a decision of an assembly within the federation. The appeal is made to an assembly by a consistory or an individual within the federation. An appellant is either a consistory or an individual who submits and defends such an appeal either on his own behalf or through a representative.

Guidelines

1. Appellant: An appeal may be made by a consistory; a classis; or an individual who is a member of a church within the federation. The appeal may be submitted by the appellant himself or by a representative. An individual member may only appeal a decision originating in his own consistory. However, any consistory or classis may appeal against a decision of any assembly of the federation.
2. Origination:
 - a. An appeal must first be made to the assembly whose decision is being appealed before appealing to broader assemblies. The assembly whose decision is being appealed is the respondent to the appeal.
 - b. If a classis appeals the decision of an assembly, the appeal of classis must originate from a consistory by way of overture.
3. Counselor for an Appellant: The consistory of an appellant shall explain to the appellant the process of an appeal and, if desired by the appellant, shall facilitate the identification of a counselor who can assist in ensuring that the appeal is written and submitted in a proper form and timely manner.
4. Timeliness of an Appeal:
 - a. Notification of an Appeal:
 - i. Notice of intent to appeal by a consistory or an individual must be filed with the clerk of the adjudicating assembly within 60 days of the announcement of the decision. This applies each time the appeal advances to the next broader assembly. For appeals advancing from one synod to the next synod, the notice shall be filed with the clerk of the convening consistory of the next synod.
 - ii. A classis must appeal a decision at its first possible opportunity to do so. Notice of intent to appeal by a classis must be filed by the clerk of classis with the clerk of the adjudicating assembly within 30 days of the adjournment of the appellant classis meeting.
 - b. Submission of an Appeal: The appeal must be submitted by the deadline for submitting materials for the agenda of the adjudicating assembly.

- c. If a member alleges error(s) in a decision of a consistory, classis, or synod regarding a matter pertaining to the churches in common, he shall bring the matter to his consistory, urging it to appeal the decision of the assembly in question.

5. Format of an Appeal:

- a. The notice of intent to appeal shall:
 - i. address the clerk of the adjudicating assembly,
 - ii. cite the decision being appealed and the date the decision was announced, and,
 - iii. identify the name and church membership of the appellant.
- b. The appeal shall:
 - i. be submitted in writing, providing a copy of and reference to the specific decision of the assembly which is being appealed,
 - ii. provide a brief history or background of the appeal,
 - iii. specify the alleged error(s) of the decision being appealed, and include supporting grounds for each alleged error, and,
 - iv. include written evidence to substantiate the allegations being made.
- c. An appeal that proceeds from a narrower to a broader assembly must remain the same in substance, with the following provisions:
 - i. documents relaying the disposition of the appeal by the narrower assembly must be included,
 - ii. new evidence shall not be added to the appeal, nor shall the appeal be altered when advancing the appeal to a broader assembly, and,
 - iii. the appellant may respond to the arguments, decisions, and grounds used by the narrower assembly in its disposition of the appeal. Such response does not alter or add to the appeal under consideration, but shall be treated as a communication under Regulations for Synodical Procedure 3.5.

6. Oral Presentations:

- a. The appellant or his representative shall be given opportunity to present a concise oral summary and defense of the appeal to the adjudicating assembly, as well as to any advisory committee tasked with advising the adjudicating assembly. Such summary and defense shall not introduce new evidence not previously presented through written submissions.
- b. One delegate from each of the narrower assemblies that have previously adjudicated the appeal shall also be afforded the opportunity to present a concise oral defense of its decision to the adjudicating assembly, as well as to any advisory committee tasked with advising the adjudicating assembly, without introducing new evidence not previously presented.
- c. The adjudicating assembly shall set a time limit for oral presentations.

7. Adjudicating the Appeal:

- a. In order to advance an environment of truth and fairness, the adjudication of an appeal shall take place in open session, unless the assembly decides for weighty reasons to enter executive session by a two-thirds majority of the delegates.
- b. For delegates who have been previously involved in the adjudication of the appeal:
 - i. These delegates may not be assigned to any advisory committee dealing with the appeal.

- ii. In the plenary session dealing with the appeal, these delegates may not make motions or vote on them. If the appeal is from the decision of a classis, this shall apply to the delegates from that classis. A synod may suspend this particular rule (Guideline 7.b.11.), either in part or in full, by a two-thirds majority of the delegates.
 - c. The assembly shall consider and render a judgment to sustain or not to sustain each of the specified errors, giving grounds for its judgment.
 - d. If the adjudicating assembly does not sustain any of the specified errors, the judgment of the narrower adjudicating assembly shall be affirmed.
 - e. If the adjudicating assembly sustains any of the specified errors, it shall determine if the error is of such importance as to sustain the appeal and require a re-adjudication, modification, or reversal of the judgment of the narrower adjudicating assembly.
- 8. Disposition of the Appeal:
 - a. If the adjudicating assembly decides to sustain the appeal, it shall direct, with grounds, the narrower assembly:
 - i. to re-adjudicate the appealed judgment, or,
 - ii. to modify the appealed judgment, or,
 - iii. to reverse the appealed judgment.
 - b. Judgments of the adjudicating assembly shall be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proven that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (CO, Art. 29).
 - c. This does not preclude appealing the decision further to the next broader assembly.
 - d. If a synod does not sustain an appeal, the appellant may file that appeal for a final adjudication only once and to the next synod.
 - e. If the appellant is not present for the adjudication of the appeal, an edifying communication regarding the decision of the assembly shall be given to the appellant by the clerk of the assembly within ten days.

Attachment 1

NOTICE OF INTENTION TO APPEAL

To _____, Clerk of _____ [insert title of the assembly from which the appeal is to be taken] of the United Reformed Churches:

And now, this _____ day of _____, AD _____, comes _____ [appellant] and gives notice of intention to appeal to _____ [insert name of assembly] from the judgment of _____, made on _____ [insert date] regarding _____

_____ [insert description of decision/judgment]

Date: _____, Appellant

Attachment 2

APPEAL

To _____, Clerk of _____ [insert title of the assembly to which the appeal is taken] of the United Reformed Churches:

And now, this _____ day of _____, AD _____, comes _____ [appellant(s) name] and appeals the judgment or decision of _____ [insert title of assembly from whom appeal is taken] in the matter of _____ [insert description of the judgment or decision appealed], and in support of said appeal states that _____ [insert title of the assembly from which the appeal is taken] committed the following errors:

1. Specification of Error #1: _____ [state concise description of the error].

Ground(s):

a) _____ [state ground supporting the Specification of Error].

[Additional specifications of errors and ground(s) for each error may be listed]

Date: _____, Appellant

Appendix 8 Pastoral Advice Regarding Membership Departures

1. Membership Transfer

A consistory may transfer a person's membership only to churches with whom the URCNA has established Ecclesiastical Fellowship¹ or with whom we share membership in NAPARC.² Therefore, when a member asks the consistory for transfer to such a church, he or she should clearly identify the receiving church (see URCNA Church Order Article 64).

When the consistory accedes to the member's request, it should send appropriate membership information (i.e. the dates for birth, baptism, profession of faith, and/or marriage, as applicable) directly to the elders of the receiving church, including an attestation to the member's good standing or disciplinary status. Attestations should be written to orient the receiving elders to the member we are asking them to receive and oversee.³

The consistory should request the elders of the receiving church to provide confirmation that the person has been received into their membership by use of the synodically approved Certificate of Membership.⁴ The consistory should not consider the member transferred until it has received the requested confirmation. Once confirmed, the consistory should inform the congregation that the member has been transferred to another church, giving the name of the church.

2. Membership Release

A consistory may release a person's membership to churches that have neither Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the URCNA nor membership in NAPARC. Apart from Synodical actions (see URCNA Church Order Articles 34, 35 and 36), a consistory may charitably consider another church to be a true church (Belgic Confession Article 29) if therein the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the two sacraments Christ instituted are administered under the oversight of elders who exercise church discipline. Therefore, a member who asks the consistory for release to affiliate with such a church should not only identify the particular church (see URCNA Church Order Article 64), but also should allow time for the consistory to carefully consider it. The consistory should then act in the way it is convinced will best serve the Lord's honor, the purity of the church, and the member's welfare.

If the consistory accedes to the member's request, it should send appropriate membership information (i.e. the dates for birth, baptism, profession of faith, and/or marriage, as applicable) directly to the elders of the receiving church, including an attestation to the member's good standing or disciplinary status.

A member should be disciplined rather than released if he or she has embraced heretical doctrines or is seeking to join a false church.

Many churches not in Ecclesiastical Fellowship function with a different understanding of church membership, and these may not acknowledge the reception of members released to their care. Even so, the consistory should request the elders of the receiving church to provide confirmation of the person's affiliation there. The consistory need not await a confirmation before informing the congregation that the member "has been released in order to affiliate" with another church, giving the name of the church.

If the consistory has publicly announced the name of a member under discipline, prior to releasing them, then the consistory should not only inform the congregation that the member "has been

¹ Acts of Synod London 2010, Art. 68.1, pp. 39, 213-215

² See *NAPARC Agreement on Transfer of Members and Congregations*; adopted at the 13th (1987) meeting of NAPARC (North American Presbyterian & Reformed Council); <http://www.naparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/InfoDoc-10-NAPARC-Agreement-on-Transfer.pdf>.

³ Scripture provides many examples of such attestation by the apostles; e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, Ephesians 6:21-22, Colossians 4:7-9, 2 Timothy 4:10-15, 1 Peter 5:12, and 3 John 12.

⁴ Acts of Synod 1997, Article 50.B.3, synodically approved Certificate of Membership, p.53.

released under discipline in order to affiliate” with the named church, but also urge the congregation to continue to pray for his or her repentance.

In the event that a member becomes affiliated with a church without first asking the consistory to release his or her membership, the consistory should initiate correspondence with the other church to confirm whether the elders there have assumed, or are willing to assume, responsibility for the person’s spiritual care. Upon confirmation, the consistory should release the member to affiliate and inform the congregation.

3. Membership Exclusion

Consistories may exclude from membership those who persist in separating from the church by way of resignation, recognizing them to be outside the communion of the saints.

A member seeking resignation is taking premeditated and deliberate action. It is a grievous sin to forsake Christ’s church by resigning one’s membership in order to escape church discipline or to openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Day 21) and the Belgic Confession (Articles 28 and 29) rightly condemn this sinful attempt to escape the spiritual oversight of elders and mutual accountability in the communion of saints.⁵ The consistory must warn members against it, not encourage anyone to resign in order to avoid church discipline, and not infer from one’s mere absence that a member has resigned.

Church members cannot escape the authority and oversight of the consistory by an act of resignation. Jesus Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to the church.⁶ He ordains elders to establish and terminate membership in the church, welcoming believers to commune with Christ at his table and excommunicating those bound by unbelief or hypocrisy. Therefore, the consistory should not refer to resignation as “self-excommunication.”

Some may seek to resign membership in the church for very clear reasons: e.g. to escape the discipline of the church for what they profess and/or how they live; or to openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church. Others may do so because they lack understanding and/or maturity to recognize their obligation to join and unite with the true church (see Belgic Confession Articles 28 and 29) and/or to recognize the ramifications of resignation.

Those acting out of ignorance and/or immaturity should be instructed in the doctrine of the church and warned at least twice (Titus 3:10) against the grievous sin of separating from Christ’s body. Members that heed the consistory and desist from resignation should continue to receive appropriate instruction and care. Those who persist in resignation by refusing and/or disregarding the consistory should be treated in the same manner as those who resign in order to escape church discipline or who openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church.

If a member seeks to resign while under church discipline, the consistory needs not advance in the discipline process while warning the member against resignation. If the member remains impenitent and persists in resigning, the consistory shall seek the advice of classis before acting to exclude him or her from membership. The consistory needs not seek advice if classis has previously advised that it may proceed to the second step of public discipline.

Having been advised by classis, the consistory may proceed to exclude from membership someone who forsakes Christ’s church. The consistory should notify the person of this action, admonishing him or her and urging repentance. The consistory should also inform the congregation of this action and solicit their prayers for the former member. In this way, the congregation is also warned against this grievous sin.

4. Membership Erasure

Consistories may erase the membership of those with whom they have had no contact for at least two years, thus rendering consistories unable to assess that member’s doctrine or life. Lack of contact

⁵ Acts 2:42, 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12; Hebrews 10:24-25, 13:7; 1 Peter 5:1-5

⁶ Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 16:19, 18:18

must not be for lack of effort on the part of the consistory, but may be because the consistory cannot locate the member, or because the member is too distant to visit and will not respond to communication attempts. Consistories may, with the concurring advice from classis, erase a membership, demonstrating due diligence in its efforts to contact and give pastoral care to the member. The consistory should inform the congregation of this action and the reasons for it.

Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government

1. The church is the possession of Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant.
Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27
2. As Mediator of the New Covenant, Christ is the Head of the church.
Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18
3. Because the church is Christ's possession and He is its Head, the principles governing the church are not a matter of human preference, but of divine revelation.
Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18
4. The universal church possesses a spiritual unity in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures.
Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20; I Timothy 3:15; II John 9
5. The Lord gave no permanent universal, national or regional offices to His church. The office of elder (presbyter/episkopos) is clearly local in authority and function; thus, Reformed church government is presbyterial, since the church is governed by elders, not by broader assemblies.
Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5
6. In its subjection to its heavenly Head, the local church is governed by Christ from heaven, by means of His Word and Spirit, with the keys of the kingdom which He has given it for that purpose; and it is not subject to rule by sister churches who, with it, are subject to the one Christ.
Matthew 16:19; Acts 20:28-32; Titus 1:5
7. Federative relationships do not belong to the essence or being of the church; rather, they serve the well-being of the church. However, even though churches stand distinctly next to one another, they do not thereby stand disconnectedly alongside one another. Entrance into and departure from a federative relationship is strictly a voluntary matter.
Acts 15:1-35; Romans. 15:25-27; Colossians 4:16; Titus 1:5; Revelation 1:11, 20
8. The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession.
I Corinthians 10:14-22; Gal. 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:16-17
9. Member churches meet together in consultation to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of a multitude of counselors in the broader assemblies. The decisions of such assemblies derive their authority from their conformity to the Word of God.
Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35; I Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:16-17
10. In order to manifest our spiritual unity, local churches should seek the broadest possible contacts with other like-minded churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world.
John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6
11. The church is mandated to exercise its ministry of reconciliation by proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.
Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; II Corinthians 5:18-21
12. Christ cares for His church through the office-bearers whom He chooses.
Acts 6:2-3; I Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17
13. The Scriptures encourage a thorough theological training for the ministers of the Word.
I Timothy 4:16; II Timothy 2:14-16; 3:14; 4:1-5
14. Being the chosen and redeemed people of God, the church, under the supervision of the elders, is called to worship Him according to the Scriptural principles governing worship.
Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Psalm 95:1,2,6; Psalm 100:4; John 4:24; I Peter 2:9

15. Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through the teaching ministry to build up the people of God in faith.
Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Timothy 4:6; II Timothy 2:2; 3:16-17
16. Christian discipline, arising from God's love for His people, is exercised in the church to correct and strengthen the people of God, maintain the unity and the purity of the church of Christ, and thereby bring honor and glory to God's name.
I Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; Hebrews 12:7-11
17. The exercise of Christian discipline is first of all a personal duty of every child of God, but when discipline by the church becomes necessary, it must be exercised by the elders of the church, the bearers of the keys of the kingdom.
Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 5:13; I Peter 5:1-3

Copyright © 1996, 1997, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2018, 2023, 2024 United Reformed Churches in North America