

JOB SECURITY

In our series on running the church according to the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches, we are going to have a closer look at some of the articles. After the Church Order's introductory article, we encounter the lengthy articles about entering the ministry of the Word. Articles 4 and 5 outline the road between graduating from seminary and being ordained as minister. It may sound a bit like checking off a list of formalities, but it makes clear that the churches are firmly in control of the conditions to be met by those who are going to proclaim and teach God's Word.

TWO GATES

Besides the required documents, these articles also mention two examinations: the *preparatory* exam (Art. 4.B.1) and the *peremptory* exam (Art. 5.A.1.b). These are like two gates on the road mentioned above. Going through the first gate makes a man eligible for call. Then, after he has accepted a call, he has to go through the second gate to be ordained.

These CO articles do not give any specifics as to what these exams should look like or how they should be done. Those things have been stipulated in what are called "General Ecclesiastical Regulations." The second general synod of the CanRC (Carman-Homewood, 1958) formulated those regulations in Article 188 of its *Acts*. These acts are in Dutch, but an English translation of Article 188 is now available in the *Acts of Synod 2022* (Guelph-Emmanuel).¹ Since in both cases the men involved are examined by a classis, classical regulations often contain more detailed arrangements for those exams.

According to GS 1958, the preparatory exam should test a student's ability to preach, to exegete both Old and New Testament, and to recall his knowledge of the doctrine of the church. An interesting detail is GS 1958's note added to its decision: "Synod is of the opinion that the so-called 'inquiry into the motives for seeking

the ministry' should not be treated as a separate matter, but should take place during and through the manner of examining" (*Acts of Synod 2022*, p.180–181).

At my own preparatory exam, way back in 1977 in the Netherlands, a committee of two or three members of Classis interviewed me, in a separate room, about why I wanted to become a

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minister. They then reported back to Classis. The suggestion of GS 1958 that this should not take place separately, but during and through the manner of examining, was maintained by GS 2022.² I wonder how effective that is. There are good reasons to give this inquiry more intentional attention during the exam. And then not in a separate room by two or three people, but in the full meeting, with everyone present. What is there to hide when a young man testifies about his motivation and desire to serve God in the ministry of the gospel?

The peremptory exam is quite lengthy, covering almost all the subjects of the theological curriculum which the candidate was faced with during his years in seminary. That makes it extra important for the examiners to keep in mind that an ecclesiastical exam is not just a copy of an academic exam. When the churches undertake to examine a man at classis the focus is more on how the candidate sees all these subjects functioning in the practice of the ministry.

This exam also requires the presence and the concurring advice of the deputies appointed by regional synod (CO Art. 48). These men represent the rest of the federation. Why should the rest of

¹ Appendix 23 of the *Acts of GS 2022*, available online at www.canrc.org

² *Ibid*

the churches have a say in such an exam? Because when a man is admitted to the office of minister, he becomes active in that capacity within the federation of churches. Thus all the churches are (potentially) affected by and have a shared interest in the outcome of the peremptory examination.

WHY SUCH A HIGH BAR?

All together the regulations of Articles 4 and 5 of the Church Order sound pretty rigorous. And sometimes people wonder: why? Why is the bar so high? Why do we make it so difficult to get into the ministry? There are basically two reasons for this.

First, it is difficult to get in because it is difficult to get out. This is different from most other callings. If you apply for a job, you hand in a resumé, sit through a job interview, and if everything goes smoothly you could start next Monday. It's relatively easy to get in. But then, if your boss is not happy with how you perform, he can say: "smarten up, or by next week you're out!" And if you don't like your work, you can say: "by next week I'm out of here!" It's also relatively easy to get out.

But the ministry doesn't work that way. The way out (so to speak) is narrow and difficult, whether such desire comes from the side of the minister or the side of the consistory. If, after a while, a minister would conclude that the pastoral ministry is not for him, he will find the way out outlined in Article 12. And if, after a while, a consistory would conclude that their minister no longer serves fruitfully, they will find the way out outlined in Article 11. In both scenarios it's not impossible to dissolve the relationship between church and minister, but either way it is an elaborate and lengthy process. It can get messy and will often leave the people involved with feelings of frustration and hurt that can last for a long time. It's indeed not easy to get out. The ministry in our federation has a high level of "job security." Therefore, we had better make sure, to the best of our ability, that those who do get in are up to it.

But then, why is it so difficult to get out of the ministry? It hinges on the unique character of the relationship between the church and its office bearers, particularly the ministers. For tax purposes the minister is listed and treated as an employee of the church,

but it is different from any other paid position in the church, like an administrator or a caretaker. We believe that ministers are called by our holy God himself to their office, through the call of the congregation³—and this for life (Art. 12). That's a big deal!

STAND FOR THE TRUTH

The second reason why the churches don't make it easy to enter the ministry has to do with one of the goals of the Church Order, mentioned in a previous article.⁴ It is the church's responsibility, emphasized throughout the New Testament, to protect true doctrine and guard against false teachings. That's why we maintain thorough seminary training and rigorous screening of men who desire to become ministers. And even after they have been ordained, we do not automatically assume that everything will always be fine. Office bearers are called to uphold Article 27 (re: warding off false doctrine and errors), and therefore they are also required to submit to the rule of Article 26 (re: signing the form of subscription).

Many years ago, on a family vacation on Prince Edward Island in the fishing village of North Rustico, we came to talk with an old fisherman about faith and church. He was Baptist, and when he heard that I was a pastor, he said to me: "That's a big responsibility, young man. If you don't go by the truth for yourself or in your family—that's bad enough. But if you don't tell them the truth in your church, there is a whole congregation you are leading in the wrong direction. Think of what you're doing."

He was right! That's why in the Church Order our churches have committed themselves to support each other in making sure that those who are called to be spiritual leaders as preachers and teachers of the truth, are committed to speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. **C**



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³ Form for Ordination of Ministers, first question, *Book of Praise*, p. 620

⁴ *Clarion*, November 25, 2022, Vol 71, No 24, p. 715