

Temporary Shepherds?

Article 2 in our Canadian Reformed Church Order reflects the three offices view. In Reformed churches we have ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons. I will skip the debate on whether Scripture teaches three or two offices.¹ The second view considers a minister to be an elder with a special task. Our OPC brothers speak about “ruling elders” versus “teaching elders.”

In the previous article, we explored what it means that a minister of the Word is bound to the service of the church for life (Art. 12). In contrast with this, the churches have agreed in Article 24 that our other office bearers, elders and deacons, “shall serve two or more years, according to local regulations.” The word “more” is as such open ended, of course. In the Canadian Reformed Churches it is usually three years; in the Netherlands the rule is 4. In theory you could make it five, or ten, or even twenty-five. Although, it is obvious that the more years you add, the more you stretch the intention of Article 24. In this article, the CanRC has clearly chosen what is called “term-eldership.”²

DEFINITE OR INDEFINITE?

Why is that? Does that contrast make sense? After all, when the brothers enter into their respective offices, the first question for

all of them, ministers, elders, and deacons alike, is: “Do you feel in your heart that God himself, through his congregation, has called you”

In Presbyterian churches elders usually serve for life. They have, as they say, “indefinite tenure.” That’s understandable. Holding the view that the office of minister or pastor is fundamentally the same as the office of elder makes it more difficult to defend the idea that the one kind of elder must serve for life, whereas the other can serve only for a limited number of years.

It is good to realize a few things about churches that have elders serving for life: First, in Presbyterian churches the office can still be terminated. If you move away, you will lose your office. Just as we saw in the previous article about ministers, the office of elder is tied to a person serving the local church, and not just to that individual. Second, in these churches not all those who are ordained for life will always serve simultaneously or continually. An elder can be given the opportunity to step back from active service for a while. But he will continue to be an office bearer. For instance, during his time of respite he could still be delegated to a general assembly. And when he returns to active service, there is no need for re-election or another ordination.

¹ For those interested: Arguments for three offices are given by Dr. Jack DeJong in *Two or Three, A look at the Reformed view of office* (Clarion Vol 43, 280–283, 304–306, 1994). Arguments for two offices are given by Dr. Benjamin L. Merkle in *The organization of the Church* (thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-organization-of-the-church).

² The same is true for deacons. But it gets a bit convoluted to add this all the time. When I use the expression “term-eldership” in this article, it also refers to deacons.

Since the Reformation, the continental Reformed churches have chosen to ordain elders and deacons with a limited tenure. Beginning with John Calvin in Geneva, in the early years, elders were appointed for a term of one year. For us, in the twenty-first century, a one-year term of office does not sound very effective. But then, in those years persecution took its toll. It could be dangerous to serve as elder. And the demands were heavy and intense. There was a lack of ministers, and elders were expected to make many more home visits than we are used to today. Then, with all of that, they still had to provide for their families.

Another reason for short terms of service was that the churches, which had come out of the Roman Catholic abuse of power, wanted to avoid the dangers of clericalism and hierarchical leadership.

When the circumstances changed, with more and better educated ministers as well as religious freedom for the churches, gradually the rule became accepted as we still have it today, that elders and deacons serve for two or more years.

At the same time, throughout the centuries, synods have acknowledged the need for flexibility. Consistories could and can determine shorter or longer terms, depending on local circumstances, and on what is at some point in time beneficial for the wellbeing of that church. That's why we have the provision in Article 24, "according to local regulations."

SCRIPTURE OR PRACTICE

The important question is, of course: does the Bible say anything about this matter? It is interesting to note that defenders of both views, term-eldership or eldership-for-life, have tried to back up their position with Scripture.

Some have pointed out that in the NT (or in the OT) we read nothing about a temporary office or periodic retirement. There is no indication that someone was released from office. Also, the gifts of the Holy Spirit to serve as elder or deacon do not suddenly expire after three or four years, so why should a man lose his office?

All of this is true. Yet, others have argued that nowhere does Scripture demand life-eldership. In addition, retired office bearers can continue to use the gifts the Holy Spirit has equipped them with, for the good of the congregation in different ways.³

What's the implication? The most one can say is that Scripture is leaning towards office bearers serving the church for life. But the fact remains that the Bible does not give us any specific rules

or commands either way. This leaves us with the practical reasons that became decisive for the regulation we have agreed on in Article 24 of the Church Order.

However, as it turns out, also when it comes to practical arguments, they can go either way.

In favour of eldership for life:

1. It takes time to build up expertise and skills to serve fruitfully.
2. It leads to greater continuity, which makes for stable and consistent leadership.

In favour of term-eldership:

1. Very few can continuously give this much of their time for the work in the church, while holding a full-time day job and taking care of their family.
2. It avoids misuse of power and influence by a few domineering individuals.

The practical reasons given in favour of life-eldership, like accumulating experience and skills, continuity, stability, and consistency, are certainly valid. Such things are valuable to strive for. But these can also be achieved when capable brothers, after they have retired, are re-elected for another term. We all know that this happens quite frequently.

In the meantime, a limited term for elders and deacons does also allow for regular input of the congregation when it comes to the question: who are and who are not going to serve as elders and deacons.

To sum it up: Within the framework of Article 24, the local church has much freedom to regulate this matter in a way that is most beneficial for the well-being of that congregation. At the same time, the rule that "the place of the retiring office bearers shall be taken by others, unless . . ." makes clear that, with all the flexibility built in, the principal choice of our churches has been for term-eldership and not for elders-for-life.

And if anyone still thinks that our elders should serve for life—talk to their wives. 



Jan DeGelder

Minister Emeritus

Redemption Canadian Reformed Church

jdegelder@cogeco.ca

³ "Everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members [of the church]," (LD 21.55). This is also valid for retired office bearers.