PREACH THE WORD! *Anywhere?*

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You are most likely used to seeing ministers other than your own minister on the pulpit from time to time. Ministers sometimes have pulpit exchanges or go away on vacation. If your church happens to be vacant, you'll see guest preachers all the time. We are all familiar with these scenarios, and probably take it for granted. Are there any rules for this?

Well, yes. As federated churches we agree in Article 15 of the Church Order that "no one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church."

The rule is simple: based on what we have adopted in Articles 6 and 16, your minister has the responsibility to preach the Word and administer the sacraments in the church he is bound to, and under the supervision of the elders of that church. However, the authority of the consistory is restricted to that particular church only. And thus, the minister of church A who leads worship in church B places himself for that service under the authority and supervision of the consistory of church B. Therefore, we have the stipulation that he can only preach the Word and administer the sacraments in church B with the consent of that consistory. After all, only the elders in church B have authority to control access to their pulpit. As a guest preacher I cannot claim such authority, just because I am an ordained minister.

TACIT CONSENT

From a Reformed church polity perspective this is actually so self-evident that you might wonder why we need such a rule. But it is good to recognize that a simple rule like this reflects the same biblical principles as we have seen earlier. The Reformed Church Order protects the autonomy of the local church and, at the same time, through the local elders, safeguards the faithful submission to God's Word in the proclamation of the gospel.

All of this does not mean that every Canadian Reformed (CanRC) minister who is scheduled to preach in a CanRC congregation other than his "own" is going to be examined by the receiving consistory before the consent of Article 15 is granted. We know how it works. The person appointed by the consistory to take care of pulpit supply invites guest preachers with the assumption that, within the federation, there is tacit consent, so to speak.

That's not a matter of carelessness, but it is because as churches we have also adopted Article 26. And as long as there is the mutual trust among the churches that we all maintain and defend the true doctrine of God's Word, reject false teaching, and act as reliable partners in the federation by wholeheartedly upholding the agreement we have adopted in the Church Order, there is no need to question or double-check this all the time.

It works the same way for ministers from churches we enjoy ecclesiastical fellowship with. One of the rules for this sister-church relationship is that "the churches shall in principle open their pulpits for each other's ministers."[1] This does not imply that those ministers do not need the consent mentioned in Article 15, but it confirms that we treat them the same way as ministers within our federation. To be sure, if a minister has a free Sunday, he does not need the permission of his own consistory to go and preach elsewhere. That would not make sense. Then church A could determine who church B can invite to preach, which is in conflict with Article 74. Only the consent of the receiving church is required.

[1] See Acts GS Guelph Emmanuel 2022, Appendix 30, p. 201.

CONSENT WITHHELD

Again—this stipulation seems pretty straightforward. But there are still a few questions that can come up in connection with Article 15.

One of the questions is: how far can a consistory go with giving consent to preaching God's Word from its pulpit? Would a local consistory have the freedom to go beyond the churches in the federation and the sister churches, and give consent to an ordained minister from another denomination, after having ascertained that this man wholeheartedly believes the doctrine of God's Word and has promised not to teach anything but the pure Word of God?

Article 15 does not address this, simply because its main focus is not the responsibility of the consistory, but the accountability of the minister. Still, the question can come up, for instance within the framework of our connections with churches that are fellow members of NAPARC or the ICRC. What are the boundaries?

The issue here is that the "consent" of the consistory as per Article 15 is not based on its own examination of potential guest preachers, but on examinations done in cooperation with other churches within the federation. We have agreed that access to the pulpit is given after examination(s) by a classis, sometimes with concurring advice of deputies of regional synod (Art 5). And this access is confirmed by subscribing to the Reformed confessions (Art 26), which is also done at classis. A consistory would dismiss the significance of this process and so challenge the mutual trust among the churches they are federated with if it would invite ministers to preach God's Word from churches other than the ones they are federated with in the unity of faith. Personal feelings and a local interview do not suffice here.

WHICH OTHER CHURCH?

Another question is: can I, as a CanRC minister, accept an invitation to proclaim the gospel in a church outside of our federation, obviously with the consent of the leadership of that church? In his Church Order commentary, Rev. Van Oene is adamant that this is an absolute "no." Article 15 may not specify the term "another church," but "our Church Order speaks only of the obligations which we have within the federation towards one another, of the duties we have taken upon ourselves within our bond as churches." And thus "another church" in Article 15 can only refer to another member of the federation of churches.[2] This is correct. But does that answer the question?

I assume it won't happen often, but imagine that a (local) church that is not part of our federation and does not belong to one of our sister churches requests one of our ministers to come and preach the gospel—does he have to decline right away and categorically? Or does he have other options?

It might be helpful to ask why they want to hear you preach. They may say: "We like to invite all the clergy in town, just to get to know each other." But for that purpose, a social gathering of all the clergy in town would work too.

But what if they say: "We hear that you are proclaiming the truth of God's Word, repentance from sin and salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone and through faith alone. The problem we have is that, in our denomination, this message is hard to get. But this is exactly what we are looking for."

Would that not make a difference? It would be an unusual request, which makes it important for a minister to consider this in consultation with his consistory and seek the approval of the elders. After all, he is bound to the service of the church that called him. It would also be wise to ask for the advice of classis, or at least inform classis about what is happening.

WHAT ABOUT THE SACRAMENTS?

If bringing the message of God's Word would be possible in such a context, should this then also include the administration of the sacraments? Word and sacraments are often mentioned together,[3] and are both listed among the duties of the minister in the Form for Ordination. At the same time, it is good to remember that they are not identical. Celebrating Holy Supper in that situation may suggest a unity of faith that is not there. However, in our Church Order we do have a provision that allows for preaching the Word, without the "right" to administer the sacraments. Article 21 speaks about "speaking an edifying word," also called "preaching consent" or "licensure." This is usually granted to seminary students, who are preparing for the ministry. It might be an option to qualify a minister's preaching in a church outside of the federation as "speaking an edifying word." For the message it does not make a difference, and it may help to explain to the leadership of the church that invited him that in this case administering the sacraments is not included.

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[2] W. W. J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, Winnipeg 1990, 76.

[3] See Lord's Day 25, Q/A 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism