

WELCOME HIM

in the Lord

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Most of our readers will be familiar with the practice our churches have agreed upon in Article 62 of the Church Order. Br. X is going to move from A to B, and so he says to the clerk of the church in A: “I’ll be moving soon, and I’ll need my attestation.” After he has handed it in, he might say: “I now have my attestation in the church in B.” Or he just wants to leave, and says: “Can I get my attestation back?” However—there is no such thing as “my attestation.” It suggests that somewhere the consistory has a pile of membership certificates of all the church members, called “attestations.” You hand it in when you come and get it back when you leave. However, it is good to have a critical look at our terminology here.

An attestation is not a membership certificate or a notice of transfer. It is a testimony. The consistory that issues it testifies to your spiritual faithfulness in what you believe and how you live your Christian life at that time. The purpose of such a testimony

is that it supports your request for membership in the church you want to join. After you have been received as a new member there, this testimony no longer functions. It can be destroyed.

WHOSE TESTIMONY?

The practice of testifying to the faith of people who move or travel and asking other churches to welcome them in the Lord is found in Scripture (Acts 18:27; Rom 16:1–2; 2 Cor 8:16–24; Phil 1:26–30; Col 4:7–9). In the following centuries, letters of recommendation were very important for the growth, spread, and development of the Christian church (*The Function of Christian Letters of Recommendation; from Paul to Julian*, Jason File). Early in the Reformation people were often accepted on the basis of their own verbal testimony about themselves. Refugees fleeing persecution had lost everything and needed support wherever they came. But it quickly became clear that this was not sufficient. Soon tramps

and scoundrels abused the generosity of the churches. Looking for money, they would travel from church to church and with sad and pious stories gain the trust of the believers.

Starting with the first synod (Emden 1571), successive synods stressed the need for a written testimony in order to be accepted as members and to qualify for support. For centuries this became, with minor modifications, the rule in Article 82 of the Reformed church order: “To those who depart from the congregation, an attestation or testimony concerning their profession and conduct shall be given by the consistory, signed by two, or in the case of attestations given under the seal of the church, signed by one.”

In our current church order (as revised in 1983) it has become Article 62. In the process, the “seal of the church” has disappeared,

which is okay. Churches don’t use seals anymore. New is the provision that attestations shall be given “after previous announcements to the congregation.” It has been said that this allows the congregation to raise objections. Some church members may know more than the elders do. But then—even if that is the case, what is a consistory going to do with that information, as they prepare to write their testimony? Rev. Van Oene clarifies why such a requirement is problematic (*With Common Consent*, p. 283–4). Also, whereas old Article 82 speaks about “an attestation or testimony,” our Article 62 uses only “attestation” and eliminated the word “testimony.” That’s unfortunate. For reasons I mentioned earlier, it would have been helpful if it was done the other way round: that we had retained the word “testimony” instead of “attestation.”



MUTUAL TRUST

Working with such testimonies when people move from one church to another within the same federation, or among sister churches, reflects two important principles when it comes to the church. It stresses that our churches are not just local chapters of one national church, but that we are a federation of autonomous local churches. And it also confirms what we confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, that each and every believer is personally responsible for joining the (local) church in the place where he lives. Because of this, our churches do not simply transfer membership directly from one church to another. The one who departs must ask for the testimony of Article 62. The consistory does not even have the authority to do this unsolicited but can only issue it upon request. And then it must be given to the person who asked for it, because it is his responsibility to present it together with his request to be admitted as member of the church he wants to join. And finally, whether he is then going to be admitted or not is the decision of the consistory of that church, after reviewing the testimony.

The usual expectation of anyone (not currently a member in any sister church) who asks to become a member of a (local) church is that he is willing to make profession of the Reformed faith and has shown that he leads a godly life, in line with Article 61 of the Church Order. But that's different than when someone comes from a church within the same federation or a sister church. This is not to say that the requirements for membership are different, or that the receiving consistory does not have to make a decision in response to the request to be admitted as a new member. But as sister churches we have agreed to trust each other's testimonies and admit those who present such a testimony without re-examining their godly life and have them repeat profession of faith (similar to the churches' agreement to acknowledge each other's examination of ministers). This is possible because our relationship of trust as churches is built on the unity of faith, expressed in our confessions and confirmed in the fact that all office bearers have signed the Form of Subscription (Art. 26 CO).

A TRUTHFUL PICTURE

All of this makes it an important question: what should a consistory put in such a testimony? I think that in practice almost all attestations come with the general formula that someone is sound in doctrine and leads a god-fearing life. There is nothing wrong with that, but it does not give the elders of the receiving church much to go by as shepherds of God's flock. Given the character and purpose of an attestation as a testimony, it would be much better to get away from an identical fit-for-all formula and provide

relevant information which the elders of the receiving church can work with and build on in their pastoral care for this person or family. This also implies that such a testimony must give a truthful and honest picture. That can be positive or negative.

Perhaps the elders have noticed special evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in how people have served. Or they can point at church activities the person(s) has been involved in.

But nowhere does it say that it always has to be a positive testimony. There can be serious concerns about someone's doctrine or lifestyle. Perhaps there is the fact that he or she is under discipline. This way of preparing a personalized testimony for members who are moving to a sister church is extra work for the office bearers, but it does more justice to the intention of such a testimony. It also requires more pastoral wisdom than filling in and signing the one-liner mentioned above.

Therefore, it is important to remember two things to watch out for:

1. A testimony is not a judgment on someone's regeneration, personal piety, or spiritual status before God. He might be a hypocrite. Those things ministers and elders cannot judge. That is for God alone. The testimony that Article 62 speaks of must be about factual information and verifiable observations.

2. Such a testimony should never contain information the person is not aware of. And especially if it is negative or critical it should contain nothing the elders have not addressed with him or her. An attestation should always be given in an open envelope, with no surprises for the persons involved. They have the right to know what the consistory testifies about them. There is nothing to hide here.

There are a number of questions about issuing and receiving attestations/testimonies that come up regularly. I would like to interact with some of those, but since the length of this piece is already close to the maximum word count for this column, I plan to come back to those next time.

In the meantime, for the interested reader—many aspects of the matter of attestations are extensively dealt with by the late Rev. G. VanDooren in a series of three articles in *Clarion* (Vol. 26, p.199, 204–205; 226–228; 242–243 [1977]); available at clarion-magazine.ca). 



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