

More About ATTESTATIONS

In the previous installment we looked at Article 62 of the Church Order: “Attestations”—or, as I would prefer, “Testimonies.” At that time I promised to come back to this topic. Consistories sometimes struggle with specific questions about issuing and receiving such testimonies. It is also good that as church members we know what to expect when it comes to asking for, receiving, and presenting such a testimony as meant in Article 62.

For a better understanding of the rest of this article, it might be helpful to emphasize that Article 62 functions within the agreement we have adopted as federated churches. The testimonies that Article 62 refers to serve a particular purpose within a group of churches that have recognized and publicly acknowledged that they are united in faith by subscribing to the Reformed confessions: the Canadian Reformed church federation and its sister churches. These churches have agreed to this process.

As a pastor I was sometimes asked to write a testimony for a church member who wanted to enroll in a Christian college or university, or who had applied to work as volunteer for a Christian charity. Usually, the organization that asked for such a document had specific questions about that person’s faith and church involvement. Anyone can do this for anyone, provided you know the person. But that’s not what Article 62 is about.

YOU WON’T GET AN ATTESTATION

Can or should a consistory ever refuse to issue an Article 62 testimony?

The short answer is “no.” When a member is actually moving and has expressed his intention to join a sister church elsewhere, he has the right to be given a truthful testimony to support his request for membership in that church. That’s why this testimony is addressed

to that particular church, with the request to admit him as a member and take him under their pastoral supervision and care, honouring what they read in the testimony about him.

But what if someone does not move? What if he wants to leave his local church and go elsewhere out of spite or frustration, because of a conflict, or just because he thinks he’d feel more at home there? In that case, a consistory should be very hesitant to accede to the request. Are we not called to face those problems and deal with them, instead of walking away from a conflict just out of frustration? That being said, with the (in my view) unfortunate and apparently increasing lack of respect for geographical church boundaries, it may be difficult for a consistory to refuse if someone insists.¹

WE DON’T ACCEPT YOUR ATTESTATION

Can a consistory ever refuse to accept an Article 62 testimony from a sister church?

Language is significant here. It is not a matter of refusing or accepting a testimony. A testimony is something you take note of. The real question is: can a consistory refuse to admit someone as member, based on the testimony he presents, issued by a sister church within the federation? The answer is “no,” except in one specific situation.

As mentioned earlier, the unity of faith among the churches is rooted in submission to God’s Word and mutual acceptance of the Reformed confessions. When that unity is so broken that we can no longer trust the testimony of other churches in the federation to be reliable, such a testimony becomes invalid, and cannot serve as basis for admission as members. In that case the consistory can still receive into membership people that present

¹ In a previous column I explained why I think this is not a good development. See *Clarion*, Vol. 73, No. 08, p. 338–339.

such a testimony, but then based on its own research and examination of their doctrine and Christian life, and not based on the testimony they presented.

But, apart from this rare scenario, a consistory can never refuse membership when someone presents an attestation given by a sister church. Even if the testimony is unfavourable, even if the brother or sister is under discipline, every request for membership, supported by a testimony, regardless of how positive or negative, from a church within the federation must be accepted. No consistory is looking for more work; refusing membership of a brother with a testimony that signals trouble as the easy way out can be tempting. However, a consistory that would decide to do so is in fact excommunicating this brother without due process, conveniently skipping all the steps we have agreed upon in Article 68. As consistories of sister churches, we accept pastoral responsibility and extend pastoral care when someone in trouble arrives with an attestation.

The reality is that not all the sheep of Christ's flock are equally loveable. They can be difficult and cause trouble. Sometimes they need to be admonished and even disciplined. But, without any exception, they all need to be shepherded with the love of Jesus Christ.² After all, the goal in the church he joins remains the same: reconciliation and forgiveness.

AN ATTESTATION IN THE SHREDDER

What should be done when someone who has been given an attestation never presents it to the elders of the church where he was going? This can be rephrased as the pastoral question: How can we prevent people just leaving the church in this way, without anyone noticing it? Unfortunately, this can be intentional sometimes. If someone simply wants to disappear without causing a stir, he can request a testimony, get it, move away, put it through the shredder, and never ask for membership elsewhere.

I think our churches would do well to adopt the practice that is explicitly stipulated in Article 59 of the church order of our Australian sister churches: that the consistory of the receiving congregation shall be notified in due time that an attestation had been given. In the end, when someone wants to withdraw from the church and the supervision of the elders, no one can stop him or her from doing so. But there is much spiritual benefit when there is good communication between sister churches, so that pastoral care can be passed on from one church to the other. Again, even those who try to get away need to be shepherded by the elders with the love of Christ.

YOUR ATTESTATION EXPIRED

How long is an Article 62 testimony valid?

Given the idea of an attestation, not just as a document that gives the dates of your baptism and profession of faith, but as a testimony of what you believe, and how this shows in your lifestyle, it makes sense that this kind of testimony has a limited "shelf life," so to speak. It captures what can be said about these things at some point in time in your life, but it is impossible to predict what this will look like a few years from the date it was issued, or even less than a year. It is being issued to serve a specific purpose, which is indicated in the document: it is meant to support a request for membership in another Reformed church, or a sister church where you want to join at that time.

All this means that after a while such a testimony will be outdated. But there is no general rule in the Church Order, or made by synods, for how long it should be valid. Your attestation does not come with a "best-before-date" stamped on it. In practice, it varies between three months and half a year. But it's not a law. There can be extenuating circumstances that call for pastoral wisdom in dealing with an "old" attestation. However, under normal conditions, why would anyone keep such a testimony somewhere in a drawer? In fact, a delayed attestation becomes a matter of pastoral concern. Why was it presented more than half a year after it was issued?

AN OPEN ATTESTATION

Can an Article 62 testimony be issued without being addressed to a specific church?

That's only possible if someone moves to a country where our churches don't have a sister church. The fact that the Canadian Reformed churches do not have sister churches in Paraguay, Laos, or The Gambia does not mean that there is no faithful church in any of these (or other) countries.

It then becomes the responsibility of the member(s) that move there to do their own research and by God's grace find and join a faithful church of the Lord Jesus Christ. In that context, a request for a testimony about people's doctrine and Christian lifestyle cannot be refused on the grounds that we don't have sister-churches in that country. It can be called an "open attestation" in the sense that it is not addressed to a particular church.



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² VanDellen/Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids 1941), p. 337