



SHEPHERDS & SHEPHERDS

In this column we will have a look at Articles 16 and 22 of the Church Order: the specific duties of the office of minister and the specific duties of the office of elder. But it might be good to make clear first of all what this piece is *not* about. I will not get into the perennial debate on whether there are only two offices (deacons and elders, with ministers being a certain kind of elder) or three (ministers holding an office separate from that of elders). My starting point is simply what we have agreed upon in Article 2: “The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.” I will also not discuss in detail all the duties of elders and ministers as listed in Article 16 and 22. That could move us quickly away from church polity, and get us into areas like homiletics, liturgics, pastoral theology, etc. Everyone can read about it in more detail in the Forms of Ordination.¹ And finally, I will not entertain the dialogue about women serving in the office of minister or elder. That’s not a church political dispute but an exegetical one. Again, my starting point is the adopted rule in Article 3, that “only male members . . . shall be eligible for office.”

I want to reflect on the differences and similarities, the overlap, as well as the distinctions among the offices when we put Articles

16 and 22 beside each other. According to the Forms for Ordination we confess that “God himself, through his congregation, calls men to the offices of minister and elder.”² This makes them equal but that’s not the same as identical.

IN IT TOGETHER

Among the duties of the minister in Article 16 it says that “with the elders” he must govern the church, keeping her in good order, and exercise discipline according to God’s will. Visiting the members and comforting the sick is not listed here under the heading “with the elders,” but in practice this is also a responsibility shared with the elders. Such visiting is in line with Article 22 where visiting the members of the congregation in their homes is in the centre of what elders do “together with the ministers of the Word.” In Article 22 all the duties of the office of elder are things they do “together with the ministers of the Word,” except what is mentioned in the last line.

The picture is clear: ministers and elders are together in the business of tending the flock of the great shepherd Jesus Christ. Ministers and elders are both shepherds. Or to use another word

¹ Additionally, there is a large selection of books available about the work of ministers and elders.

² This is, of course, also true for the office of deacon, but that has to wait for another time.



for this job description: they are both *pastors*. We are used to reserving the word “pastor” for the minister. And when a church has a vacancy for minister, people might say: “we need a shepherd or pastor.” But with six, eight, or ten elders tending the flock, you already have a number of pastors. You just need one more. That’s not playing with words. Being a pastor is the very essence of being an elder.

This also means that elders and ministers come to you with the same authority. They are called by the Lord not to lord it over but to *serve* his people. Here Jesus himself is the role-model. Sometimes elders feel the need to stress their authority as office bearers. But you are accountable to God. Work faithfully with his Word to keep the sheep close to the great shepherd and then you won’t have to worry about your authority.

Both Articles 16 and 22 emphasize the duty to “visit the members of the congregation in their homes.” That’s important. Scripture calls us to care for each other as members of the body of Christ. But such mutual care cannot replace the pastoral work of ministers and elders. When churches discontinue the practice of shepherds regularly visiting members in their homes, it’s a loss for the congregation. After all, Jesus did not only teach crowds—he also pastored to individuals.

EACH IS UNIQUE

While ministers and elders share certain duties (as above), each office also has its unique aspects. This is especially spelled out for the minister: proclaiming the gospel, administering the sacraments, and leading in public prayer. Instructing the youth in the doctrine of salvation is also mentioned. This was inserted

in the 1983 revision of our Church Order although it was already common practice long before that. And there are good reasons for this. Sometimes others may help out with catechism teaching. But for the minister, it’s an invaluable opportunity to get to know and walk with the youth of the congregation in their faith journey. And they get to know him in a way few others in the congregation will.

It is interesting that the pre-1983 version of Article 16 mentions prayer *before* the ministry of the Word. This listing doesn’t demand a change in the liturgical order of a worship service, but it does indicate the significance of public congregational prayer. Think of it in this way. At that moment the minister is leading the whole congregation before the throne of God. And as he addresses the awesome and most glorious king of the universe, he is the mouth of all those people! That’s pretty intimidating, isn’t it? And it makes sense that ministers take time to prayerfully prepare for that.

The work of the minister is not restricted to what is listed in Article 16. He will receive some federational responsibilities (e.g. to serve as delegate to classis; he could also be assigned as an examiner at classis or a church visitor), and he might stimulate new beneficial activities in the congregation. However, what is mentioned in Article 16 must be his priority. Ministers are not project managers or activity coordinators. More than anything else he is preacher and teacher. When other things get in the way of that, perhaps it’s time to refocus on what he was called and ordained to do.

As for the elders, they have the unique duty to assist, advise, and supervise the ministers. That may sound a bit unnerving perhaps, especially the supervising part. But no office bearer is above the need for critical reflection. To make this go well, a good



level of mutual trust is crucial, so that there is no fear of “lording it over others” (Art. 74). This requires tact, humble wisdom, and above all love.

HELP NEEDED

The shepherds’ care for the flock of Jesus Christ is crucial for running the church. At the same time, there are also other things to take care of: property, finances, bulletin . . . you name it. For these things the shepherds need help, not only because they should be able to focus on the duties outlined earlier, but also because they can only do so much in the hours available. On top of that, being a shepherd does not necessarily qualify you to be a property manager or financial administrator. That’s why we are all familiar with committees of administration, treasurers, bookkeepers, bulletin editors, and archivists, as well as the occasional building committee. Usually those positions are filled by volunteers, and it is great to see male and female church members step forward and offer the gifts God has given them for the benefit and wellbeing of the body of Christ (HC Q/A 55). That being said, volunteers are available when it works for them. That’s the nature of voluntary commitments. In order to count on administrative stuff getting done regularly and timely, without loose ends being forgotten, more and more churches are choosing to hire a secretary or administrator as a part-time paid position.

However, there is more help the ordained shepherds can benefit from, especially when it comes to their pastoral responsibilities. What about a role for women with that purpose? According to some

of his letters, the apostle Paul benefitted greatly in his ministry from the service of women. Several of them are mentioned in Romans 16, and some in Philippians 4, while Priscilla (with her husband Aquilla) is mentioned six times. What we have agreed upon in Article 3 does not imply that women cannot or should not play a role in the pastoral care in the church. And then to do so in a way that goes beyond what could be called “general mutual care.”

Ministers and elders, either past or present, know that you will run into pastoral situations where you think: “Here the comfort or advice of a wise woman would be invaluable.” Sometimes you realize that for a male it just doesn’t work. Perhaps it is dealing with an abusive relationship, domestic violence, or just having a heart-to-heart conversation with a single woman.

In those situations a minister or elder can bring his own wife, assuming these ladies feel comfortable with that. But perhaps appointing a team of qualified women in the church that can be called upon to assist the elders when female pastoral support is needed would be more effective. They would be under the supervision of, and also accountable to the consistory. After all—the specific duties listed in Articles 16 and 22 are entrusted to the ordained office bearers. 



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