An Introduction to the
Book of Church Order

What is church order and why do we need it?
Church order provides a way for us to live and work together as the body of Christ, following the admonition that “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Order is a way to express our unity and achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as we seek to fulfill our mission. It is our theology lived out in the ways we live and work together.

How is our order unique?
Our representative, or presbyterial, order places authority in a series of representative assemblies of those elected and ordained to offices within the church. Our order is at the midpoint between two other forms of church government: the episcopal form that gives authority to bishops, and the congregational form that grants congregations individual autonomy and provides only loose associations with other churches.

What are the offices of our church?
We have four offices. Three offices are involved in the government of the church: minister of Word and sacrament, elder, and deacon. A fourth office, General Synod professor, is employed in the seminaries or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency for the training of students for the ministry. Those who are ordained to office act as servants who represent Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. The existence of offices in the church does not diminish the importance of the common ministry of all members of the church. The church has one ministry—the ministry of Christ.

What are the assemblies of our church?
The four assemblies, or governing bodies, are the consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod.
Why do we rely on assemblies?
Following the example of the early church, we believe that decisions should be made by gathering people together to discern the will of God. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to make decisions, representative governing bodies made of those who hold an office within the church are established to carry out the work of the church at various levels. The unity of the church is preserved when we accept the decisions made by those who serve in the assemblies of the church.

Is our church order the only guide for our church?
No, along with the Book of Church Order (BCO)—which includes the Government of the Reformed Church in America and the Disciplinary Procedures—we have the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession) and the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship. Our theology, liturgy, and government act like a skeleton to hold the church together, providing a framework for the ministry of the church.

Where can I find a copy of the Book of Church Order?
You can order the BCO from Faith Alive Christian Resources by calling (800) 333-8300, emailing sales@faithaliveresources.org, or visiting www.faithalive resources.org; or you can download it free from the RCA website at www.rca.org/bco.

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