

Faithful Consistories
Office, Ministry, and Mission in
the Reformed Church in America

Leaders Guide

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Faithful Consistories

Office, Ministry, and Mission in the Reformed Church in America

Introduction

In 1997 and 1998 the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America requested task forces to take a fresh look at the roles and responsibilities of the consistory of a local congregation, especially in light of “the role of elders and deacons and the consistory’s calling to give spiritual leadership in the ministry and mission of congregations.” That task force, composed of a diverse group of elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and sacrament, presented its report to the 2000 General Synod.

Key to that report was the preparation of a paper, “Faithful Consistories: Office, Ministry, and Mission in the Reformed Church in America,” which explores the Reformed understanding of the offices of the church (elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament), their assembly in the congregation, and their role in the ministry and mission of the church. The paper renews for the church the basic foundations of the three offices and especially their relationship in carrying out the mission and ministry of the church. It is an important work, one every consistory should study as part of its ongoing life together.

That is the purpose of this study guide: to provide a basic framework by which consistories and other leadership groups within a congregation can explore the understandings of the “Faithful Consistories” paper and the Preamble of the RCA’s *Book of Church Order*, on which the paper is built.

Two presentations of the study material are provided: Study Guide Option 1 and Study Guide Option 2. One focuses the presentation in a single four-hour session; the other provides nine shorter sessions

to be presented over a period of time, perhaps as the opening time at a series of consistory meetings.

Each of the two presentations clearly lists its purpose and the means by which that purpose can be accomplished. Neither is intended to be a comprehensive examination of the individual roles of elders and deacons. If that is a key need in your congregation, we encourage you to use Branches on the Vine: A Consistory Orientation Workshop, which has been produced by the RCA's Office of Diaconal Ministries and made available through the RCA Distribution Center (1-800-968-7221 or orders@rca.org). You might also consider one of the consistory workshops available through your regional synod.

Enjoy your study as together we answer the call of God to ministry and mission locally and globally.

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The Faithful Consistory

Study Guide Option 1

To be presented as one four-hour session.

Purpose: To reflect on the purpose, make-up, and work of the offices and assemblies of the Reformed Church in America, so that church leaders may see themselves and function as agents of mission and ministry.

Participants: Members of consistories or other congregational leadership groups; this study could also be used in a classis or a regional synod setting.

Leadership: One large-group facilitator and small-group leaders.

Objectives:

1. To identify the biblical and theological qualities that contribute to the faithful and effective work of a consistory.
2. To measure the actions and effectiveness of our consistory(ies) against those qualities.
3. To identify specific means by which our consistory(ies) can act in the future consistent with the biblical and theological qualities of a faithful consistory.

Materials: Bibles
Copies of the study paper “Faithful Consistories”
Newsprint or chalk/dry-erase board
Markers

Setting: Comfortable room for a large-group gathering, plus breakout space for participants in groups of three, five, or seven.

Preparation: At least one week before the event, make available to participants copies of the “Faithful Consistories” booklet, which includes the Preamble to the *Book of Church Order*. Encourage them to read the paper with enough lead-time to allow them to reflect on its contents. Also, provide participants with the following questions about their experiences of leadership, both inside and outside the church. (Note: these questions will be used in an opening exercise during the study.)

- What leadership models are used in the secular world?

- What biblical images and characteristics of leadership can you think of? (Name individual people, groups, etc., and list their biblical references.)
- What are your congregation's principal activities?

Introduction (20 minutes)

Prayer and Opening Scripture

Introductions

Allow attendees to introduce themselves in the context of a common format, for example, name, office (elder, deacon, minister of Word and sacrament), how long he or she has been a member of the congregation and of the RCA, or something similar. You may also want to allow time for attendees, as they wish, to talk a bit about why they are attending and what they hope to learn. This may also be a time to draw out some of the joys and frustrations of their service in the church. (Caution: you don't want to begin with a gripe session; it will color your whole time together. Use this last suggestion at your own discretion.)

Opening Gathering

Have members of the large group share their responses to the three questions below (which are based on the preparation questions mentioned above). Record their responses on the newsprint or marker board, asking only for minimal clarification if needed. The idea is to have many images for and characteristics of leadership and the church as we approach the paper.

- What models and expectations for leadership and the use of power do we get from the political and social worlds in which we live?
- What biblical models and images do we have for leadership?
- What are the principal activities of your congregation?

Following this discussion, invite the group to join you in reading Acts 2:37-47. Compare their responses to the questions with the text of the Scripture. Are there overlaps? Should there be?

Part 1—The Nature of the Church and the Function of Government

Small-Group Discussion (60 minutes)

The focus of Part 1 is the nature of the church, especially as expressed in the order and government of the Reformed Church in America as presented in the Preamble to the *Book of Church Order*. It may be that few consistory members have ever read the Preamble. Fewer than three pages in length, it has for centuries provided the Reformed Church in America with a sense of purpose, vision, and direction for ministry and mission. The paper “Faithful Consistories” calls the Preamble “an elegant and profoundly Reformed statement concerning the church and its Lord” and takes its theological underpinnings from it. You may even consider having someone read the entire Preamble out loud to the whole group; at minimum, make sure each participant has a copy of the “Faithful Consistories” booklet, which includes the Preamble.

This part of the workshop encourages attendees to dig deeper into their biblical purpose and role as consistory members or church leaders through reflection and dialogue around key phrases from the Preamble. Dividing into small groups ensures that everyone has a better chance to speak to the issues being raised and thus feel a part of the dialogue. The teaching role of the workshop is also expanded by making everyone a teacher and everyone a learner. Use some or all of the statement/question pairs that follow the Preamble below. They take participants right through the Preamble. Assign one or two statement/question pairs to a group, but no more than two; there simply isn't time for more than two. Encourage each group to name a recorder who can report key reflections back to the whole group. Spend thirty minutes in small-group discussion, and another thirty minutes having the small groups report back to the whole group.

The Preamble is reproduced below for your convenience. Key phrases are in boldface type. The small groups should focus their discussion on these phrases.

Preamble to the *Book of Church Order*

The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices,

governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. Its *Constitution* consists of the *Doctrinal Standards* (which are the *Belgic Confession of Faith*, the *Heidelberg Catechism* with its *Compendium*, and the *Canons of the Synod of Dort*), the *Liturgy* with the *Directory for Worship*, the *Government of the Reformed Church in America*, and the *Disciplinary Procedures*.

The four basic or focal governmental units in the Reformed Church in America are the consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod. The consistory is divided further into a board of elders and a board of deacons. The board of elders, the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod exercise judicial as well as legislative powers. A governmental unit exercising its judicial powers is called a judicatory, and at all other times the governmental unit is known as an assembly. Deacons exercise a legislative function only in the circle of the whole consistory. Three offices are employed in the governmental functions of the Reformed Church, namely, the minister of Word and sacrament (hereinafter referred to as “minister”), the elder, and the deacon. A fourth office, that of the General Synod professor of theology (hereinafter referred to as “professor of theology”), is employed in the seminaries of the church for the training of students for the ministry.

The governmental functioning of these offices takes place, not apart from, but in harmony with the understanding of the mission of the church and the nature of its ministry. This basic affirmation has three consequences. First, the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its Head—to announce the good news of his Saviorhood and extend his Lordship throughout the world. Second, there is only one ministry and that ministry is shared by all Christians. The particular ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to serve it. Third, the ecclesiastical offices which the Reformed Church deems necessary for its ordering are understood to be essentially functional in nature, and the term “office” is everywhere viewed in terms of service.

The Reformed Church in America is organized and governed according to the presbyterial order. That order is inspired and directed by certain basic principles. They are as follows:

The Nature of the Church on Earth. **The church, which can be defined in many ways and be represented by many images, may be described as that body of people in the world which professes faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.**

The Reformed churches confess that the church of Jesus Christ in the world is one church, the “Holy Catholic Church.” The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head. Their oneness in him is a “communion of the saints” with Christ and with one another in the divine blessings.

The Head of the Church. The Reformed churches confess that Jesus Christ is the only Head of his church. The Scriptures call the church his body, and our Lord the Head of that body. He is therefore in the closest and most vital relationship to his church. As the church’s true Head, he has complete authority over its life, and therefore the church must ever yield to him a ready obedience and faithfulness. Christ’s headship is one of righteousness, love, and tenderness toward his people.

The Nature of the Church’s Authority. All authority exercised in the church is received from Christ, the only Head of the church. **The authority exercised by those holding office in the church is delegated authority.** Their appointment to their special tasks is by the Spirit of the Lord, and they are responsible first of all to the Lord of the church. Their authority is of three kinds: ministerial, declarative, and spiritual. Ministerial authority is the right to act as Christ’s servants. Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this. Spiritual authority is the right to govern the life and activity of the church and to administer its affairs. The church shall not exercise authority over the state, nor should the state usurp authority over the church.

Membership Categories and Definitions. Membership in congregations of the Reformed Church in America includes “confessing” members, “baptized” members, and “inactive” members. Reformed Church in America congregations also include “adherents.”

“Confessing” members are members who have received Christian baptism and have been received by the board of elders through profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or presentation of a satisfactory certificate of transfer of membership from another Christian church, and who make faithful use of the means of grace, especially the hearing of the Word and the use of the Lord’s Supper.

“Baptized” members are members who have received Christian baptism, who may or may not participate at the Lord’s Table, and who have not been received by the board of elders as confessing members.

“Inactive” members are members who have been removed by the board of elders from the confessing membership list.

“Members” are all confessing members, baptized members, and inactive members.

“Adherents” are all who participate in the life, work, and worship of the church, but are not members.

The Representative Principle. The power which Jesus Christ bestows upon his church is mediated by the Holy Spirit to all the people. Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. **Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels.** The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.

Government by Elders. The Reformed churches have sought to follow the practice of the churches whose experience is recorded in the New Testament. The churches then were ruled by “presbyters” or “elders,” just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the “teaching elder.” Ministers and elders therefore govern the church together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church. Thus also the lines of authority in the Reformed churches move from the local church to the General Synod. This is so since Christ, according to the New Testament, has appointed officers to govern the church under himself. Their authority to govern derives from him even though they are elected by the people. The local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern.

The Equality of the Ministry. The Reformed Church in America uses the term “parity” to describe its concept of the equality of ministers. It is not meant that authority can never be exercised by one over the other. But in every instance this authority will be delegated by the proper body, and the authority will cease to be exercised when the need for it is no longer demanded. The principle of equality pertains also among churches, among elders, and among deacons. The principle of the equality of the ministry, conceived now in its broadest sense as including the functions of the elder and the deacon, is based upon the fact that the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself in such a way that he is, in a

sense, the only one holding that office. Every ministerial function is found preeminently in him. By his Holy Spirit he distributes these functions among those whom he calls to serve in his name.

* * * * *

Questions for Discussion on Key Statements from the Preamble

Allow each group a chance to report on the highlights of its discussion. The time frame does not allow for in-depth discussion. If there are key issues that you feel need further discussion, flag them for the group; you may need to come back to them later or simply hold them for a future consistory or leadership group meeting.

Statement 1: “The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works.” **Reflection questions:** *This has long been the mission of the Reformed Church. What biblical images does it raise for you? Is it congruent with your congregation’s understanding of its mission and with the RCA’s Statement of Mission and Vision? Rephrase it in your own words.*

Statement 2: “The governmental functioning of these offices” (minister of Word and sacrament, elder, deacon, professor of theology) “takes place, not apart from, but in harmony with the understanding of the mission of the church and the nature of its ministry. This basic affirmation has three consequences.” **Reflection questions:** *What are the three consequences? State them in your own words. How is this understanding of leadership and government different than in secular society? Does your consistory reflect these differences?*

Statement 3: “The church, which can be defined in many ways and be represented by many images, may be described as that body of people in the world which professes faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” **Reflection questions:** *Is this definition consistent with the passage you read from Acts 2? Is it consistent with the understanding of your church? The sentences following this statement attest to Christ as the head of the church. What implications does that have for the nature of ministry?*

Statement 4: “The authority exercised by those holding office in the church is delegated authority.” **Reflection questions:** *How do you understand the concept of authority? How would you define it? Is authority different than power? How so? How is authority delegated*

by Christ different from the authority of the president of the United States or the CEO of a major corporation?

Statement 5: “Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels.” **Reflection questions:** *Representative government is most well known as the foundation of a democracy. Reflect on your understanding of the principles of representative government. What’s important? What then might be the difference between a democratic government and a “Christocratic” government, to use the language of the “Faithful Consistories” paper?*

Statement 6: “The principle of equality of the ministry, conceived now in its broadest sense as including the functions of the elder and the deacon, is based on the fact that the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself.” **Reflection questions:** *How would you define the equality of offices in the local church (elder, deacon, minister of Word and sacrament)? What does that mean to you? What does it look like in real life? Is it what you experience in the government of your church, or are some of the offices emphasized more than others?*

Closing

Close this time together with the following question as a lead-in to the next session:

“As an elder/deacon/minister of Word and sacrament, I feel I am most fulfilling my call from God when _____.”

Invite each participant to answer in the large-group setting, then take a well-deserved break. And make sure the coffee is on!

Stretch/Coffee break (15 minutes)

Part 2—The Offices

Large-Group Teaching Session (40 minutes)

Teaching this section is a significant undertaking for you as leader. Covering all of the material thoroughly could easily take more than a full day. The key is to pick out a few important concepts on which to focus.

For members of the group to fully understand the key conclusions of the “Faithful Consistories” paper they must first understand:

the offices,
their relationship to each other, and
their dependence on Christ.

As the leader of the group, you may want explain this foundational background yourself, or you may want to delegate part or all of the task to others—micro-experts, if you will.

The following resources will help you in your preparation:

- The *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. Chapter 1, Part I defines the consistory and its responsibilities, and those of the boards of elders and deacons.
- “Faithful Consistories.” The paper that is the focus of this study includes an excellent discussion of the Reformed understanding of offices.
- The *Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*. The liturgies for the ordination and installation of persons to the three offices also provide good summaries of the theological understandings and duties of the offices. Reading phrases from those liturgies, especially out of the context of worship, can be powerful in word and image.
- *Branches on the Vine*. This consistory orientation workshop provides basic information and a thorough discussion of the offices and duties of elders and deacons. This resource is available from the RCA Distribution Center (1-800-968-7221 or orders@rca.org).
- *The Ministry of the Elder* and *The Ministry of the Deacon*. These booklets define the duties of these two offices and provide good background information. They are also available from the RCA Distribution Center (1-800-968-7221 or orders@rca.org).

Finally, remember people learn in a variety of ways. If you decide to present this material primarily in lecture form, think about using a variety of methods to aid learning: using a visual; writing ideas and concepts on a board or flip chart; asking persons to read from the liturgy or other sources; asking questions of participants; or pausing for questions from participants. You’ll develop your own ideas as well.

Be sure to provide a session outline for participants, and pause frequently for questions of clarification—understanding a few concepts well is better than incomplete knowledge of many concepts.

Key Concepts

In its governance the Reformed Church in America has long held to the offices of minister of Word and sacrament, elder, and deacon. As our study of the Preamble taught, Reformed theology describes these offices as equal; as representing Christ to the people (not as representatives of the people's will); as having authority from Christ and Christ alone, as head of the church.

"Faithful Consistories" includes an excellent discussion of the nature of the offices in a representative form of government. Below are the key concepts to cover, as taken from the *Book of Church Order* and the "Faithful Consistories" paper, along with related questions:

1. **Minister of Word and sacrament.** "The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments, shares responsibility with the officers and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline with the elders, and is careful that everything is done in a proper and orderly way" (*BCO*, 1.1.1.4). *What are the duties of this office? What is the authority? How are those duties typically carried out? Who assists in those duties?*
2. **Elders.** "Elders guide and nurture the ministry of the church through government, discipline, spiritual growth, and pastoral care" (*BCO*, 1.1.1.8). *What are the duties of this office? What is the authority? How are those duties typically carried out? Who assists in those duties?*
3. **Deacons.** Deacons are called by God and the church to provide "a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach" (*BCO*, 1.1.1.10). *What are the duties of this office? What is the authority? How are those duties typically carried out? Who assists in those duties?*
4. **The relationship of the offices.** Here, the "Faithful Consistories" paper is a key resource. Note these concepts as you review it: "Christocratic"; the threefold understanding of office and governance; the pastorate; authority and power; the equality of offices; and the relationship of office to the ministry of all Christians.

Break (15 minutes)

Part 3—The Faithful Consistory

Small- and Large-Group Sessions

(60 minutes)

Right about now participants may be asking “So what? While all this information is obviously important, how does it specifically apply to my calling as an elder or deacon or minister of Word and sacrament, and what does it mean for a consistory that is striving, as the paper suggests, to be faithful?”

In this final part of the study, the focus turns directly to the “Faithful Consistories” paper itself, and even more specifically to the conclusions in the paper’s final section. This is an opportunity for consistory members or other leadership persons participating in this study to put their newly-acquired knowledge into action, to answer the question “So what?” Here’s how:

The “Faithful Consistories” paper draws out nine qualities, or common elements, of a “faithful consistory in a missional church [that] is also faithful to the Reformed understanding of the gospel.” Each element is theological in nature and specific in practice. In order to foster an understanding of these common elements and their implications for mission and ministry, use the following method of teaching:

- Divide into nine small groups. That may mean only two or three persons will be in each group. Don’t create one-person groups, however; if you have fewer than eighteen persons attending this study, simply create fewer than nine groups.
- Assign each of the nine elements to a group. Ask them to focus on two key assignments for their item. First, to read the item, to work for clarity around its meaning, and then to be able to summarize the item in their own words, which they will share with the whole group. Then secondly, to identify one or two specific ways in which the congregation or consistory is faithfully living out this element, or could live out this element more faithfully with a change in behavior or structure. “What difference will (this element) make in the way we do...?” The group should also be ready to report this finding to the whole group. You can find additional guidance on possible questions for each group in Study Guide Option 2, which focuses exclusively on these nine common elements.
- Allow each small group to work together for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then call them together for reporting. Allow each group four or five minutes to share their understandings and discoveries with the others. Record these on newsprint or in some other way

that preserves these learnings; you'll likely want to come back to many of them in the future.

Be prepared for the presence of the Spirit and the significant new insights that presence can produce.

Wrap-Up Session (10 minutes)

You've done enough for one day! The participants will be tired by now, filled with new knowledge, challenging insights, and, hopefully, a new understanding of and commitment to their calling of God. Close with prayer and the following litany of support and affirmation:

Ministers and elders pray together for the deacons of the church:

God of love and compassion, you poured out your life in service in your Son, Jesus Christ. By word and example he taught us to find fulfillment in giving ourselves and to find greatness in serving others. Bless those called to be deacons, who lead us in serving and caring. Empower them by the grace of your Spirit, that your whole church may give its life for the sake of the world, in the name of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. Amen.

Elders and deacons pray together for the minister(s) of Word and sacrament:

Almighty God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, you gave the apostles many gifts and commanded them to feed your flock. Inspire our pastor(s) to preach your Word diligently and your people to receive it willingly, that finally we may receive the crown of eternal glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Deacons and ministers pray together for the elders of the church:

God of righteousness and truth, you brought us into your church to show in our life together something of the orderliness of your creation and the love of Jesus Christ. Bless those called to be elders, that they may govern wisely and fairly. Give them the full measure of your Spirit, that they may refresh your people along the journey of faith, discerning, teaching, and sharing the Word of life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

All pray together:

Eternal God, you called us to be a special people, to preach the gospel and to show mercy. Keep your Spirit with us as we minister together, so that in everything we may do your will. Guide us lest we stumble or be misguided by our own desires. May all we do be done for the reconciling of the world, for the upbuilding of the church, and for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Faithful Consistory

Study Guide Option 2

Nine thirty-minute sessions, each based on one of the nine elements of a faithful consistory, to be held as opening devotions/reflection in regular consistory meetings.

Purpose: To reflect on the purpose, make-up, and work of the offices and assemblies of the Reformed Church in America, so that church leaders may see themselves and function as agents of mission and ministry.

Participants: Members of consistories—pastor(s), elders, and deacons.

Leadership: A large-group facilitator.

Objectives:

1. To identify the biblical and theological qualities that contribute to the faithful and effective work of a consistory.
2. To measure the actions and effectiveness of our consistory against those qualities.
3. To identify specific means by which our consistory can act in the future consistent with the biblical and theological qualities of a faithful consistory.

Preparation: Distribute copies of the “Faithful Consistories” booklet to consistory members with an explanation of the role the study of this document will take in the next nine consistory meetings. The consistory should own the purposes and the process. A schedule identifying the portion of the document to be discussed for each meeting should be distributed to participants.

For each meeting:

1. For each session reproduce the corresponding section of text (below) in handout form for each participant.
2. Open with prayer; divide the consistory into groups of three to discuss the common element and the questions.
3. After twenty minutes, call the small groups back to report their conclusions to the other participants. Note: Be aware that additional consistory time may be necessary to take action on any conclusions reached during these discussions.

Session/Element 1—The Call of Jesus Christ

Read the description of the element:

“The only proper basis for ordination and installation into an office of the church is the call of Jesus Christ. The call of Christ is a call from the church confirmed by an inner call. The recognition of gifts and abilities are of great importance, but they are not the basis of the conferring of an office; they rather serve as a confirmation of the Lord’s call. Thus the selection of those for nomination to one of the offices is a matter of spiritual discernment and prayer.”

Questions for study and action:

1. What does “the call of Jesus Christ” mean to you and to your service on the consistory? Share your answer with the group.
2. In what one or two specific ways is your consistory discerning and responding to “the call of Jesus Christ”? What would a more careful discerning of this call look like? What difference could faithfully living out “the call of Jesus Christ” make in the way you do ministry?

Session/Element 2—The Authority of Christ

Read the description of the element:

“The authority of the office derives from Christ and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. The *Book of Church Order* of the RCA states, ‘Christ, according to the New Testament, has appointed officers to govern the church under himself. Their authority to govern derives from him even though they are elected by the people.’ Those holding office must be men and women of deep spirituality, and the consistory must be a community of scriptural reflection, worship, and prayer so that those in leadership discern the mind of Christ. Those who are not constantly engaging Christ cannot engage Christ’s mission. Moreover, such a high view of office can lead to abuses when officeholders are not humbly faithful to the Lord of the church.”

Questions for study and action:

1. What does “the authority of Christ” mean to you and to your service on the consistory? Share your answer with the group.
2. Identify one or two specific ways in which your congregation or consistory is faithfully living under the authority of Christ. How do you know this is true? How have you identified it? What are one or two ways in which your consistory can more consistently place itself under Christ’s authority?

Session/Element 3— Governance by Servants

Read the description of the element:

“Church governance is provided by an assembly of those who serve in and through the three offices. Each of the offices has its set of responsibilities and tasks within the congregation, and thus each office brings a particular evangelical perspective to the deliberations attendant to the governance of the church. The teaching that the church is governed by those who serve through the offices is one of the great contributions of the Reformed reformation to the church. It is deeply rooted in the biblical teaching that only those who serve are fit to rule.”

Questions for study and action:

1. What does “governable by servants” mean to you and to your service on the consistory? Share your answer with the group.
2. Identify one or two specific ways in which your consistory models a servant’s heart in governance. Are there obvious places where a servant’s heart is not being modeled? If the focus is on being a servant, how might the way your congregation does ministry change?

Session/Element 4—Missional Understanding of the Offices

Read the description of the element:

“The offices are essentially missional, instruments by which Christ transforms the people of God (regeneration and sanctification) and equips them for the ministry of the kingdom in the world (witness in word and deed). The polity and liturgies of the RCA should be revised to highlight the missional character of the offices and their responsibilities. How does each office individually and as part of the pastorate represent Christ in the community of faith so that the community pictures the kingdom? How does each office individually and as part of the pastorate represent Christ in the community of faith so that members of the community are prepared to be sent out as agents of the kingdom?”

Questions for study and action:

1. What does “missional understanding of the offices” mean to you? Share your response with the group.

2. Would you identify your consistory as primarily “missional” or “administrative”? What do you see as the differences? In what specific areas or actions might a “missional understanding of the offices” make a difference in the way you do ministry?

Session/Element 5—*Kerygma*: The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament

Read the description of the element:

“The Greek word *kerygma* refers to the proclamation of the good news of God’s promised salvation in Jesus Christ. It goes beyond preaching to include all that announces God’s saving action. Through the office of the minister of Word and sacrament Jesus spiritually communicates himself through the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and the leading of the congregation in its liturgical worship. By the function of this office, working in concert with the other offices, the baptized people of God are drawn into a community that discloses the faith, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and joy of the kingdom—they are formed into a preview of the new creation. By the function of this office, in concert with the other offices, the congregation is called to and prepared for the work of representing Christ and his kingdom in the world. Among the many responsibilities of this office, those of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, inviting men, women, and children to citizenship in it through faith and repentance, drawing them into the service of worship, and sending the people of God into the world as ambassadors of the kingdom are of paramount importance.”

Questions for study and action:

1. How do you see this being lived out in your congregation?
2. Identify one or two specific ways (other than the worship service) in which your pastor and congregation proclaim the good news of God’s promised salvation in Jesus Christ. Could you do so more faithfully? Are there creative, new ways in which your congregation could be intentional in proclaiming the good news?

Session/Element 6—*Koinonia*: The Office of Elder

Read the description of the element:

“The words ordinarily used to translate the Greek term *koinonia*, ‘fellowship’ or ‘community,’ do not capture the richness of the biblical

concept. *Koinonia* refers to a community woven together by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, a communion with Christ and fellow believers, which points to the fellowship of the kingdom. The traditional duties of the elder—oversight and discipline—when viewed in terms of the missional office, may be seen as responsibility for *koinonia*. Since *koinonia* depends on a continuing and dynamic relationship with Christ, the elder attends to sound teaching and discipline within the church. False doctrine threatens faith, and discipline is exercised when the relationship of a member of the congregation with Christ is compromised by sin. The elder takes responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the congregation in a missional church, ascertaining that its members are nurtured through Scripture, worship, the sacraments, and prayer.”

Questions for study and action:

1. Is “a community woven together by Jesus Christ” descriptive of your congregation? Give some examples.
2. Identify one or two new ways in which your congregation could experience *koinonia*. How could your elders encourage this? What difference might it make?

Session/Element 7—*Diakonia*: The Office of Deacon

Read the description of the element:

“Here, too, the original Greek word, meaning ‘service’ and giving us our English word deacon, helps to identify the special qualities of this office. To speak of this office in general terms of compassion and material maintenance sells the office short, as indeed in many congregations the chief task of deacons seems to be finances and buildings and grounds. It is questionable in the light of the biblical notion of service whether either should be the exclusive responsibility of the board of deacons. Deacons should rather lead the people of God into servant ministry within the congregation as members learn to serve one another and beyond the congregation—as members engage in ministries of witness, justice, mercy, and reconciliation in the world. Deacons enlist Christians for the front-line ministry, recruiting and helping to equip men and women to be agents of the kingdom in the world. Since all Christians are called to be servants of Christ and one another, the deacon represents the most fundamental quality of Christian life; and when leading the congregation into diaconal ministry, teaches the meaning of the gospel no less than the minister of Word and sacrament and the elder.”

Questions for study and action:

1. In what one or two specific ways could your deacons lead your congregation into servant ministry?
2. How could your deacons better recruit and equip congregational members to become servants of Christ and one another? What difference does/will it make if your deacons are intentional in modeling the most fundamental qualities of Christian life?

Session/Element 8—The Mutuality of the Offices

Read the description of the element:

“Identifying missional church foci for each of the offices does not suggest that the office has only one function, nor does this mean that the responsibilities of one office are not also borne by the others. Each office participates in the others and serves their causes. The elder does not serve without the minister of the Word and neither without the deacon. The proclamation of the word of God (*kerygma*) draws men and women into community (*koinonia*), prepares them for ministry, and sends them in service into the world (*diakonia*). The elder’s work of *koinonia* is itself a proclamation (*kerygma*) of unity in Christ and requires the willingness of the members of a congregation to serve one another (*diakonia*). The deacon’s concern for service depends on a congregation unified in Christ (*koinonia*) willing to respond to the Lord’s mission, and thus proclaims the message of the kingdom (*kerygma*). Each office serves the purposes of the others, and together they form a pastorate that represents Christ, the original prophet who proclaims God’s truth, the true elder who by the Spirit binds the faithful to himself and to one another, and the incarnate divine servant who surrendered his life in the service of those whom he loves.”

Questions for study and action:

1. Why is this concept important to ministry and mission?
2. Identify one or two specific ways in which the pastor(s), elders, and deacons of your congregation work together to form a pastorate. How could your consistory better live out the mutuality of the pastorate? What difference does/will it make if your consistory is intentional in modeling this?

Session/Element 9—The Mission of the Church

Read the description of the element:

“Through the offices Christ is represented to the community of faith, which is transformed to be transforming, so that each member according to his or her gifts and situation in life, is sent out by Christ in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the gospel, seek reconciliation, and engage servant ministry. Thus the baptized people of God represent Christ’s kingdom and serve it according to their calling and to the best of their abilities until he comes again.”

Questions for study and action:

1. In your own words, can you state the mission of the church? Of your congregation? Are those two missions the same?
2. Identify one or two specific ways in which your congregation has been “transformed to be transforming.” Has that made a difference in how you live out your mission? What other transformational activities should you be doing?